



Benjamin's "Afterlife": A Productive (?) Mistranslation In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni

La « survie » chez Benjamin, un contresens fertile (?). En mémoire de Daniel Simeoni

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Article abstract

The concept of "afterlife" constitutes a central theme in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, yet the German equivalent to "afterlife" does not appear once in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on translation. This article investigates the German term that Benjamin has in fact chosen and examines the highly problematic translation of his idea. Some of the resulting interpretations by translation theorists are presented, along with the potentially deleterious effects on the translation community.

Benjamin's "Afterlife": A Productive (?) Mistranslation In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni

Caroline Disler

Introduction

Afterlife. The word evokes visions of pyramids and gold coffins and shriveled mummies following arcane hieroglyph instructions from the *Book of the Dead*. Or perhaps Hades and Hell, with the Eleusinian fields and Valhalla reserved for the deserving. It may therefore seem somewhat puzzling to encounter the word "afterlife" so frequently in translation studies literature. Invariably the source of this word is attributed to Walter Benjamin from his seminal essay, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* [*The Task of the Translator*]. What is downright problematic, though, is that Benjamin never once used the German equivalent to the word "afterlife" in *Die Aufgabe*. In what is a rather ironic twist, the word "afterlife," as attributed to Walter Benjamin in so many erudite discussions about translation, is itself an outright mistranslation.

What exactly did Benjamin intend by the original concept underlying "afterlife"? How has it been subsequently translated and explained? Is Walter Benjamin's concept of "afterlife" misunderstood by the translation studies community because the mistranslation of the term has not been questioned?

His essay about translation was of central importance to Benjamin himself. In 1921, he wrote to his friend Gerhard

Scholem about *Die Aufgabe*, “But it concerns a topic that is so central for me, that I still don’t know if I, in the current stage of my thinking, can develop it with sufficient freedom, let alone that I am even able to succeed in explaining it.”¹ Since then, translators have given themselves to the task of translating *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* into dozens of languages. The sheer quantity of secondary literature and academic commentary surrounding *Die Aufgabe* is overwhelming and bespeaks its importance to translation theorists and enthusiasts. Paul de Man goes so far as to say, “in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text” (1985, p. 26). In 1997, an entire issue of *TTR* (*Traduction, terminologie, rédaction*) was dedicated to Benjamin’s essay. More recent publications such as Oseki-Dépré’s *De Walter Benjamin à nos jours : essais de traductologie* indicate that translation scholars’ interest in Benjamin and his essay has not abated.

“Afterlife”

Among Benjamin’s “chief preoccupations” throughout his writings, according to Paul Mattick, are the “transformations undergone by works of art [...] in the course of their ‘afterlife’” (1994, p. 498). Indeed, the “afterlife” concept is an essential theme of *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* and has elicited a multitude of interesting references. In his introduction to the 1997 issue of *TTR* dedicated to *Die Aufgabe*, Alexis Nouss points out that knowledge of Benjamin’s “afterlife” concept is by no means limited to the translation community: “Parmi les idées de l’essai de Walter Benjamin ayant trouvé large audience, au-delà de la lecture et du commentaire des spécialistes, l’une des plus connues est celle de la survie accordée à une oeuvre dans le devenir pluriel de ses traductions, d’un destin en traduction assurant la survie” (1997, p. 9).

1 “Nur handelt es sich um einen Gegenstand, der so zentral für mich ist, daß ich noch nicht weiß, ob ich ihn, im jetzigen Stadium meines Denkens, mit der ausreichenden Freiheit entwickeln kann, vorausgesetzt, daß mir seine Aufklärung überhaupt gelingt” (Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, 1985, p. 891).

[All English translations are my own, kept as literal as possible to facilitate comparison with the original German.]

As can be seen above, the usual French translation of the "afterlife" concept is "survie." Benjamin does use the German equivalent of "survival," but only once in *Die Aufgabe*, where it is explicitly distinguished by the use of quotation marks, "Just as the expressions of life are most intimately related to the living, without meaning anything to it, the translation issues forth from the original. Though not from its life so much as from its 'survival' [Überleben]."² The editors of Benjamin's collected works specifically state that his "characteristic peculiarities of orthography were retained."³ Hence the quotation marks are not accidental. Benjamin makes use of quotation marks several times in the beginning paragraphs of his essay. For example, on the opening page he asks, "Was 'sagt' denn eine Dichtung?" ["So what does a literary work 'say?']. Benjamin indicates with quotation marks that the enclosed expression is suspended, is not to be taken literally.⁴ With these quotation marks he is drawing attention to the very tentative nature of his choice of words as he introduces his concepts, his themes, his ideas. In his first mention of the concept that has come to be known as "afterlife" he deliberately chooses "Überleben," a common German word familiar to all his readers. A word that unequivocally means "survival"—"über-leben" "sur-vival"/"sur-vie." A word that can be found in any German dictionary. The word, however, is chosen tentatively, hesitatingly, distinguished by quotation marks, as if

2 "So wie die Äußerungen des Lebens innigst mit dem Lebendigen zusammenhängen, ohne ihm etwas zu bedeuten, geht die Übersetzung aus dem Original hervor. Zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem 'Überleben'" (1985, p. 10).

3 "[...]charakteristische Eigenheiten der Orthographie wurden bewahrt[...]" (Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, 1985, p. 884).

4 Discussing Benjamin's last work, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, Ian Balfour observes, "Too few commentators have drawn attention to the suspension of the term historical materialism inside quotation marks, which signal a possible discrepancy between what has been called historical materialism and what it might become" (1991, p. 627). Likewise, few have noticed the quotation marks surrounding "Überleben," and the possibility that there may be a "discrepancy" here between the literal meaning of "survival" and the concept Benjamin subsequently develops of "Fortleben."

to familiarize readers with a strange, novel idea by introducing it with a commonplace term. It appears only once in *Die Aufgabe*. In all subsequent treatment of this concept, Benjamin replaces “Überleben” with a new term, a very uncommon word: “Fortleben.” Obviously, he did not intend that the two be taken synonymously.

***Fortleben*—An Etymological Investigation**

It is unusual to find the verb *fortleben* (or noun *Fortleben*) in any but the largest German dictionaries, and almost impossible to find it in dictionaries predating the composition of *Die Aufgabe* (1921).⁵ This suggests that *fortleben* was not at all common currency at the time that Benjamin wrote his essay. Nor, for that matter, was the English word “afterlife,” which is also seldom to be found in older dictionaries. More recent, large, bilingual dictionaries such as the *Oxford-Duden*, do sometimes include *fortleben* (1991, s.v.). An English equivalent is not provided; the entry is simply followed by “s. *weiterleben*,” (where s. = *siehe*, “see”). The English equivalents for *weiterleben* are:

- a) continue or carry on one’s life;
- b) (*am Leben bleiben*) go on living;
- c) (*fig.*) live on

Not surprisingly, “afterlife” is also to be found in these post-New-Age dictionaries, but with the sole German equivalent of *Leben nach dem Tod(e)* [*life after death*].⁶ *Fortleben* is never included under

5 After perusal of dozens of older monolingual and bilingual German dictionaries, only one dictionary including *fortleben* was found: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s massive *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1878, s.v.) provides a few rare literary examples of the use of *fortleben* along with equivalents *pergere vivere, non interire*, and many others, including *fortdauern*.

6 For example, in *The Concise Oxford Duden German Dictionary*, 1991, s.v. In none of the more recent bilingual German dictionaries was an alternate equivalent for “afterlife” to be found! Benjamin himself used *Leben nach dem Tode* at least once, meaning precisely “life after death” (1977, p. 547). If he had intended “afterlife” as such, surely he would again have used *Leben nach dem Tode* and not *Fortleben*. Interestingly, in

the entry for "afterlife" and "afterlife" is never included under the entry for *Fortleben*. A century of lexicographers has not deemed *Fortleben* and "afterlife" to be equivalents yet, curiously, translation scholars persist in ignoring their professional colleagues' opinion in discussion of Benjamin's *Fortleben* idea.

As Hans Vermeer states, Benjamin's language is "hardly ever an exact, unambiguous technical terminology,"⁷ yet Benjamin's choice of *Fortleben* seems quite exact and intentional since it is never replaced by another term in the remainder of *Die Aufgabe*.⁸ Benjamin could have used the much more common *Weiterleben*, or *Nachleben* (literally "after-life"), or any one of a large number of familiar *leben*-compounds such as *ableben*, *aufleben*, *ausleben*, *beleben*, *durchleben*, *einleben*, *erleben*, and so on, all of which exist with due English equivalents in the above-mentioned *Oxford-Duden*. Despite its consistent and exclusive appearance throughout *Die Aufgabe*, this new, uncommon, enigmatic word remains a prime example of "l'opacité conceptuelle du lexique benjaminien" (Nouss, 1997, p. 10), for the question remains, "What exactly does *Fortleben* mean?"

Linguistically speaking, German as an Indo-European language is of course not agglutinative in its morphology. Realistically speaking, though, in its lexical wealth German is highly "agglutinative" for want of a better term. In fact, German is a *LEGO* language, full of morpheme and sememe blocks that can be attached together—like *Fliegerabwehrkanone* ("anti-aircraft gun" and the source of the English word "flak"). Or, one

a bilingual dictionary dated 1910, the German equivalents for "afterlife" were: "1. *späteres oder zukünftiges Leben*, 2. *das noch übrige Leben, spätere Jahre*." ["1. later or future life, 2. what remains of life, later years."] (Muret, *s.v.*) Had the word not yet acquired a meaning of "life after death?"

7 "[...] kaum je exakt-eindeutige Fachsprache [...]" (1996, p. 22).

8 Carol Jacobs also states, "It is an error to search Benjamin's work for stability in terminology" (1999, p. 7). Benjamin's consistent, "stable" use of *Fortleben* may therefore be all the more unusual, intentional and significant.

of Einstein's favourites: *Vakuumllichtgeschwindigkeit* ("the speed of light in a vacuum"). This agglutinative freedom of the German language is one of its many splendours as German authors and philosophers revel in lexic creativity; and one of its many miseries: the poor student who has to figure out *allgemeinwissenschaftliche Forschungseinrichtungen* will probably not be able to locate either word in most dictionaries!

Fortleben is a typical German compound: the second component is formed from *leben*, an unambiguous word meaning "to live" in its verbal form, or "life" in its substantive form (*Leben*). The first component is the somewhat problematic adverbial morpheme *fort*, cognate to the English "forth." An edition of *Trübners* dictionary, contemporaneous with Benjamin, offers a lengthy explanation of *fort* including the following:

[...] In accordance with its [etymological] descent, the word originally designates a forward motion. [...] Today, within the dimension of space, the notion of separation and distancing comes to the forefront; a man or an object, that is moving onwards or forwards, is distancing him/itself at the same time from the place in which he/it had previously found him/itself. [...] The old[er] meaning was more evident in the transfer from the dimension of space to actions taking place in time or conditions continuing in time. [...] The impression that there is no cessation to a matter [...] today one understands [...] as the prolongation of a thing [...]⁹

9 "[...] Seiner Abstammung gemäß bezeichnet das Wort ursprünglich eine Vorwärtsbewegung. [...] Heute tritt innerhalb des örtlichen Bereichs die Vorstellung der Trennung und Entfernung in den Vordergrund; ein Mensch oder Gegenstand, der sich weiter oder vorwärts bewegt, entfernt sich zugleich von der Stelle, an der er sich bisher befunden hat [...] Besser hat sich die alte Bedeutung behauptet bei Übertragung vom örtlichen Bereich auf zeitlich verlaufende Handlungen oder in der Zeit fortdauernde Zustände. [...] Die Vorstellung daß mit einer Sache nicht aufgehört wird [...] versteht man heute die [...]Verlängerung eines Dinges. [...]" (Götze, 1940, *s.v.*). Although many other more recent mono- and multilingual dictionaries also have comprehensive explanations of *fort*, I prefer to examine documents dating as closely as possible to Walter Benjamin's own time.

In other words, *fort* originally denoted a forward progression in space, had come by Benjamin's era to designate separation and distancing in space but had retained the connotation of progression and continuation in expressions involving time. It is thus tempting to conclude that *Fortleben* could mean "continuing life." Yet, had Benjamin simply wished to describe the concept of an identical life that continues unchanged then he could have chosen the much more common and familiar *Weiterleben*. If he had wanted to indicate "another life after" the (life of) the original, he could have chosen the more transparent *Nachleben*. If he preferred the implication of "survival," he could have maintained his use of the very common *Überleben*. To express the idea of "renewal," he could have (and has in a totally different context in *Die Aufgabe*, p. 14) chosen *Aufleben*. Why *Fortleben*?

It must be remembered that the meaning of a compound is quite often considerably more complex than a simple sum of its parts: for example the English "under-stand" or "aw(e)-ful" or Tyndale's brilliant neologism, "at-one-ment." In the case of *Fortleben*, the compound can suggest continuity like *Weiterleben*, but seems to encompass much more. It also suggests progress (*Fortschritt*), separation (*Fortgehen*), complementarity, supplementation, futurity, transformation. Given such subtle complexity it is perhaps best to follow Wittgenstein's aphorism, "The use of a word in language is its meaning,"¹⁰ and investigate Benjamin's own use of *Fortleben* in his essay.

The Use of *Fortleben* in *Die Aufgabe*

Benjamin begins *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* by quickly dispensing with the standard theoretical assumption that works of art and translations are produced for their readers, declaring that translation is a "form" or "mode."¹¹ He then embarks on a discussion of the relationship between translation and original; the connection between the two is "locked" within the notion of translatability. Benjamin claims that a translation, "no matter

10 "Der Gebrauch des Wortes in der Sprache ist seine Bedeutung" (1969, p. 60)

11 "Übersetzung ist eine Form" (1985, p. 9).

how good it is, can never mean anything for the original” yet this translation “stands in the closest connection with [the original] by virtue of its translatability.”¹² He thus establishes that a translation has no significance whatsoever to the original, has no effect on the original work. This rather odd insistence becomes clearer as Benjamin illustrates his view of the nature of the relationship between translation and original by reiterating independence: “[The connection] may be called a natural one, and rather, more precisely, a connection of life. Just as the expressions of life are most intimately connected with the living, without meaning anything to it, so the translation issues forth out of the original.”¹³ Benjamin specifies that the exact source of this issuing forth is “not so much from [the original’s] life as from its ‘survival’ [*Überleben*].”¹⁴ As explained above, the use of the quotation marks indicates that Benjamin’s choice of *Überleben* is tentative; the word is never repeated in *Die Aufgabe*. It must also be clarified that although the meaning of *Überleben* is unambiguously “survival,” at no previous point in his essay had Benjamin alluded to, implied, hinted at, or in any way indicated the death, destruction or any damage of the original. The idea of translation as a destructive process, or the translated text as a manifestation of “survival” of some catastrophe is therefore not within the tenor of Benjamin’s thought process.

12 “[...] eine Übersetzung niemals, so gut sie auch sei, etwas für das Original zu bedeuten vermag. Dennoch steht sie, mit diesem kraft seiner Übersetzbarkeit im nächsten Zusammenhang” (1985, p. 10). Cf. “L’intraduisible n’est pas une donnée empirique, c’est un effet de théorie” (Meschonnic, 1999, p. 79).

13 “Er darf ein natürlicher genannt werden, und zwar genauer ein Zusammenhang des Lebens. So wie die Äußerungen des Lebens innigst mit dem Lebendigen zusammenhängen, ohne ihm etwas zu bedeuten, geht die Übersetzung aus dem Original hervor” (1985, p. 10).

14 “Zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem „Überleben“” (1985, p. 10). Some scholars feel there is a connection between *Überleben* and *Übersetzen*, for example Jacques Derrida, “*Überleben* a un rapport essentiel avec *Übersetzen*” (1985, p. 22). Given that this is the only mention of *Überleben* in *Die Aufgabe*, I remain unconvinced that Benjamin intended a significant connection, especially since both words are rather common.

In his very next statement, Benjamin places the concept of the "connection of life" between original and translation within a time frame: "But the translation is later than the original, and yet for significant works, since they never find their chosen translators at the time of their formation, [the translation] denotes the stage of [the works'] *Fortleben*."¹⁵ This is the first time the word *Fortleben* appears; it denotes a stage in the life of significant works, a later stage in that it comes after the stage of formation of the original. Translation is a mark, an indication of this stage, that the significant work has reached this stage. Yet Benjamin insists that "the notion of the life and *Fortleben* of works of art" is to be understood "in fully unmetaphorical objectivity," and broadens the conception of life beyond the simple boundaries of organic existence, claiming that life itself is not to be attributed only to organic physical beings or to the soul, nor is life to be defined exclusively by "aspects of animality" such as "sentience."¹⁶

In Benjamin's thought system, literary works have a life of their own, a life with "stages." The relationship between translation and original is a "natural one," a "connection of life." When a literary work is translated, this indicates that it has reached a certain stage of life, its *Fortleben*. This "life" of literary works is to be understood neither metaphorically nor spiritually, but purely objectively, not limited to organic life, to the concept of soul or to sentience; he never implies that the "soul" of a literary work lives on. *Fortleben*, as it is used in today's German, frequently involves

15 "Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original, und bezeichnet sie doch bei den bedeutenden Werken, die da ihre erwählten Übersetzer niemals im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung finden, das Stadium ihres Fortlebens" (1985, p. 11).

16 "In völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit ist der Gedanke vom Leben und Fortleben der Kunstwerke zu erfassen. Daß man nicht der organischen Leiblichkeit allein Leben zusprechen dürfe, ist selbst in Zeiten des befangensten Denkens vermutet worden. Aber nicht darum kann es sich handeln, unter dem schwachen Szepter der Seele dessen Herrschaft auszudehnen, [...] geschweige daß Leben aus den noch weniger maßgeblichen Momenten des Animalischen definiert werden könnte, wie aus Empfindung, die es nur gelegentlich kennzeichnen kann" (1985, p. 11).

a human element of the type, “Beethoven continues to live on in his works.” Benjamin has removed the human element from his concept of *Fortleben*. Indeed, earlier in his essay he maintains that “certain concepts of relationship retain their good, perhaps best sense, when they are not from the outset exclusively oriented towards people.”¹⁷

Now that Benjamin has established the essence of the life of literary works, he makes a vital connection between life and the concept of history. The paradigm becomes clearly historical and remains this way throughout the remainder of his essay:

Rather, only when life is attributed to everything of which there is history and which is not just [history’s] stage, then [life’s] concept comes into its own right. For it is [based] on history, not on nature, let alone on something as shaky as sentience and soul that the boundary of life is ultimately to be determined. From this comes the task for the philosopher, to understand all natural life based on the more comprehensive [life] of history.¹⁸

In other words, for Benjamin history defines life. It is in this sense that he elucidates the historical framework of the life of works of art:

The history of great works of art realizes their descent from sources, their formation in the era of the artist, and the period of their fundamentally eternal *Fortleben* in the following generations. This last [aspect] is called, where it becomes apparent, fame. Translations, that are more than mediations [of information], arise when in [its] *Fortleben* a work has reached

17 “[...] gewisse Relationsbegriffe ihren guten, ja vielleicht besten Sinn behalten, wenn sie nicht von vorneherein ausschließlich auf den Menschen bezogen werden” (1985, p. 10).

18 “Vielmehr nur, wenn allem demjenigen, wovon es Geschichte gibt und was nicht allein ihr Schauplatz ist, Leben zuerkannt wird, kommt dessen Begriff zu seinem Recht. Denn von der Geschichte, nicht von der Natur aus, geschweige von so schwankender wie Empfindung und Seele, ist zuletzt der Umkreis des Lebens zu bestimmen. Daher entsteht dem Philosophen die Aufgabe, alles natürliche Leben aus dem umfassenderen der Geschichte zu verstehen” (1985, p. 11).

the era of its fame. [...] In them, the life of the original attains its ever renewed, latest and most comprehensive unfolding.¹⁹

Thus, fame is *Fortleben* manifest. *Fortleben* continues, eternally, whether or not "anyone" is ever aware of the work, whether or not the work is ever translated. There is, again, no human agency implied. On the other hand, awareness of a literary work in its *Fortleben*, through translation, is called "fame." When, during its *Fortleben*, a work of art has come into its own, has reached its stage of fame, then translations arise that are more than mere transmissions of information. Benjamin asserts quite boldly that no translation would be possible if it aspired to similarity with the original.²⁰ He justifies this startlingly counter-intuitive declaration by claiming that the original changes in its *Fortleben*, "*which would not be allowed to be called that if it were not transformation and renewal of the living*" (my italics).²¹ *Fortleben* is transformation and renewal of the living. This is one of the key phrases in attempting to comprehend this enigmatic word. There has been no death, no damage, no catastrophe to the original. There is no afterlife. There is no survival. Neither is there a simple continuation of the original that was. There is *Fortleben*, metamorphosis, evolution, transformation, renewal, renovation, supplementation. And, translation is a sign of this *Fortleben* stage. Herein lies one of Walter Benjamin's most revolutionary ideas. Not only has the origin of a literary work nothing to do with its creation or realization at the hands of its author or artist, but

19 "Die Geschichte der großen Kunstwerke kennt ihre Deszendenz aus den Quellen, ihre Gestaltung im Zeitalter des Künstlers und die Periode ihres grundsätzlich ewigen Fortlebens bei den nachfolgenden Generationen. Dieses Letzte heißt, wo es zutage tritt, Ruhm. Übersetzungen, die mehr als Vermittlungen sind, entstehen, wenn im Fortleben ein Werk das Zeitalter seines Ruhmes erreicht hat. [...] In ihnen erreicht das Leben des Originals seine stets erneute späteste und umfassendste Entfaltung" (1985, p. 11).

20 "[...] keine Übersetzung möglich wäre, wenn sie Ähnlichkeit mit dem Original ihrem letzten Wesen nach anstreben würde" (1985, p. 12).

21 "Denn in seinem Fortleben, *das so nicht heißen dürfte, wenn es nicht Wandlung und Erneuerung des Lebendigen wäre*, ändert sich das Original" (my italics, 1985, p. 12).

in its *Fortleben*, by definition, the original itself actually changes. The original is not a fixed, stable text.²² Because translation is a sign of this *Fortleben*, the clear implication is that the original and the translation cannot resemble each other. Striving for similarity is pointless because original and translation are inherently different. *Fortleben* implies constant, dynamic change of the original. *Weiterleben* and *Nachleben* are static continuations of what was. Through the concept of the *Fortleben* of the original, Benjamin has dissociated translation from the original. He has taken the primacy of resemblance, of similarity out of translating. Combined with Benjamin's vision of history, the chronological precedence of the original no longer presupposes superior status over its translation. Translation has been emancipated from the chains of the original. As Nicholas Rand eloquently states, "[n]on seulement elle [Benjamin's theory] arrache la traduction à l'esclavage de l'original, mais la situe au sein d'une progression de l'œuvre vers l'avenir. La nature du rapport original/traduction a été transformée. La domination de l'original appauvri par la traduction disparaît au profit d'un original qui s'enrichit par elle" (1989, p. 56 et seq.).²³

The implications of *Fortleben* are tremendous. Benjamin repeatedly dispenses with the basic tenets of translation theory,

22 Rosemary Arrojo explains a similar notion in Saussurian terms: "Se aceitarmos que a relação entre significante e significado é sempre contingente e inconstante - implícita na noção do signo saussuriano levado a sério -, não teremos que tentar encontrar uma resposta definitiva, algorítmica àquele "questão inevitável" ("qual é a melhor correlação entre o texto A na língua-fonte e o texto B na língua-alvo?") em que Steiner sintetiza as principais preocupações de todas as teorias de tradução. Se aceitarmos que o chamado "original" é composto de significados que são provisórios, dependentes da leitura de um sujeito - dotado de um inconsciente e sempre situado dentro de uma perspectiva - também podemos aceitar a posição autoral de qualquer tradutor, ao mesmo tempo em que podemos desistir da fantasia da "super-tradução," para que enfrentemos os desafios dessa atividade em termos mais realistas" (1993, p. 48).

23 Cf. "C'est la description et la déconstruction de ce mythe d'une présence de l'original sur la traduction qui est à l'œuvre chez un Benjamin ou chez un Goethe" (Mavrikakis, 1989, p. 61).

and his development of the unusual *Fortleben* concept can be seen as indicative of this break with traditional thoughts on translation. No small wonder that *Die Aufgabe* is so popular among translation theorists: in its *Fortleben*, a work of art undergoes transformation (*Wandlung*), subsequently translation, as evidence of the work's *Fortleben*, of the work's *Wandlung*, is independent of the original. Thus, *Fortleben* implies independent and elevated creative status for translators.

Traditional translation theory requires that the translator be invisible, that the translation be totally transparent. Norman Shapiro exemplifies this attitude: "I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself" (Venuti, 1995, p. 1). At first glance, Benjamin might seem to express a similar sentiment: "True translation is translucent, it doesn't cover up the original, it doesn't stand in its light, but rather it allows the pure language, as strengthened through its own medium, to fall all the more fully on the original."²⁴ Translation, however, is no longer to be considered a passive textual transposition that merely allows clear vision of the original. It is an active, dynamic process that deals directly with the relationship of languages to each other,

24 "Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen" (1985, p. 18). Cf. "There is no muse of translation,' declared Walter Benjamin. The Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos [...] counters with a fanfare: 'If translation has no muse, one could however say that it has an angel.' The angel, we learn, is Lucifer, and a good translation should by rights be called a 'transluciferation.' I think Benjamin would have approved of the angel of light in this function since his highest claim for translation was that it allows 'the light of pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully' [...]. Although I have difficulties with the construct of 'pure' language, I am happy to claim Lucifer for translation as bearer of light, as the father of lies, and as the one who says 'no,' who will not serve" (Waldrop, 1989, p. 225).

supplementing, strengthening pure language. The liberation of this pure language is the ultimate task of the translator (literally, *die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*), according to Benjamin.²⁵ Through translation, translators become creative agents within Benjamin's messianic paradigm. Benjamin's concept of messianism in *Die Aufgabe* refers to a time when languages, through the activity of translation, shall have complemented and completed each other and evolved into pure language. He explicitly confirms translation's vital role in this messianic fulfillment of languages:

But if [languages] grow like this until the messianic end of their history, then it is translation that catches fire on the eternal *Fortleben* of works and on the endless revival of languages, in order to test repeatedly that sacred growth of languages: [to determine] how far what is hidden within them is distanced from revelation, how present it may become with the knowledge of this distance.²⁶

Translation, the mark that a work of art in its *Fortleben* has reached its fame, is itself ignited, inspired by the eternal *Fortleben* of works. How very deliberate Benjamin's choice of *Fortleben* is can be seen by the parallel term *Aufleben*, which he specifically uses in conjunction with languages. *Fortleben* is used only of works of art. Languages grow, progress—linearly—through translation, to a messianic end of their history. Languages are historic entities; works of art are not. Works of art have an eternal, endless stage of *Fortleben*, whereas languages go through repeated revivals, hence *Aufleben*.

25 “Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die *Aufgabe des Übersetzers*. Um ihretwillen bricht er morsche Schranken der eigenen Sprache [...]” (my italics, 1985, p. 19).

26 “Wenn aber diese derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen *Fortleben* der Werke und am unendlichen *Aufleben* der Sprachen sich entzündet, immer von neuem die Probe auf jenes heilige Wachstum der Sprachen zu machen: wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei, wie gegenwärtig es im Wissen um diese Entfernung werden mag” (1985, p. 14).

Fortleben occurs one last time in *Die Aufgabe*: “[The Romantics] possessed, more than others, insight into the life of works, of which translation is one of the highest testimonies. Of course they hardly recognized it as such, rather they turned their entire attention to criticism, which likewise represents an albeit lesser element in the *Fortleben* of works.”²⁷ In other words, translation is not the only possible element of the *Fortleben* of works of art; there is also literary criticism. It is interesting that Benjamin, who is better known as a literary critic than as a translator himself, should relegate literary criticism to a lesser position than translation in the *Fortleben* of works. But it is quite understandable, given the importance Benjamin attaches to the translator’s role in liberating pure language. Lamy and Nous comment, “[...] aux yeux de Benjamin [...] critique et traduction sont liées. Elles se rejoignent dans leur dévouement commun à la survie de l’œuvre, notion qui s’éclaire de la possibilité même et de la nécessité de leurs exercices” (1997, p. 31).²⁸ This statement is problematic. Granted that criticism and translation are related, but *Fortleben* has been misunderstood. Criticism and translation are not activities that are dedicated to ensuring the survival of a literary work. Translation (and, by extension, criticism) ignites itself on the eternal *Fortleben* of works. There will be *Fortleben*,

27 “Diese haben vor andern Einsicht in das Leben der Werke besessen, von welchem die Übersetzung eine höchste Bezeugung ist. Freilich haben sie diese als solche kaum erkannt, vielmehr ihre ganze Aufmerksamkeit der Kritik zugewendet, die ebenfalls ein wenn auch geringeres Moment im Fortleben der Werke darstellt” (1985, p. 15).

28 Cf. “On sait que la traduction n’est pas moins nécessaire aux œuvres – à leur manifestation, à leur accomplissement, à leur perpétuation, à leur circulation – que la critique, sans parler du fait qu’elle possède une nécessité empirique plus évidente. Ce qui est important à noter, c’est que critique et traduction sont structurellement parentes. Qu’il se nourrisse de livres critiques ou non pour traduire tel livre étranger, le traducteur agit en critique à tous les niveaux. Lorsque la traduction est re-traduction, elle est implicitement ou non ‘critique’ des traductions précédentes, et cela en deux sens : elle les ‘révèle,’ au sens photographique, comme ce qu’elles sont (les traductions d’une certaine époque, d’un certain état de la littérature, de la langue, de la culture etc.), mais son existence peut aussi attester que ces traductions étaient soit déficientes, soit caduques [...]” (Berman, 1995, p. 40).

with or without translation and criticism. But not necessarily fame. Translation and criticism indicate that a literary work has reached “the era of its fame” [*das Zeitalter seines Ruhmes*].

Discussion of *Fortleben* in the Secondary Literature

Although *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* remained in relative obscurity after publication, it has now undeniably reached its own *Zeitalter seines Ruhmes*. The first English²⁹ and French translations did not appear until forty years after it was written, nevertheless there has been a flurry of academic activity centered on *Die Aufgabe* in the years following these translations. George Steiner’s short list of “those who have said anything fundamental or new about translation” (1998, p. 283) includes Walter Benjamin.

Not all the secondary literature surrounding *Die Aufgabe* deals specifically with *Fortleben* (or “afterlife”), despite the importance of this difficult concept to Benjamin’s essay. In certain academic works, neither *Fortleben* nor afterlife/*survie* are explicitly named, yet the concept is discussed. For example, one of the clearest expositions of *Fortleben* appears in Maurice Blanchot’s delightful short essay:

[...] la traduction n’est nullement destinée à faire disparaître la différence dont elle est au contraire le jeu : elle y fait allusion, elle la dissimule, mais parfois en la révélant et souvent en l’accentuant, elle est la vie même de cette différence [...] L’original n’est jamais immobile, et tout ce qu’il y a d’avenir dans une langue à un certain moment, tout ce qui en elle désigne ou appelle un état autre, parfois dangereusement autre, s’affirme dans la solennelle dérive des œuvres littéraires. La traduction

29 After pointing out many inaccuracies in the first English translation by Harry Zohn, Steven Rendall states, “it’s hard to say just where the line between pedantic exactitude and reasonable accuracy ought to be drawn. [...] This is a particularly serious issue when the text concerned is one that is subjected to the kind of intense interpretive and critical pressure to which Benjamin’s has repeatedly been subjected in an English-speaking world that has been depending largely on Zohn’s translation. [...] “accuracy” remains an indispensable regulative idea in translation that should not be abandoned for fear of being called a pedant” (1997, p. 202 et seq.).

est liée à ce devenir, elle le « traduit » et l'accomplit, elle n'est possible qu'à cause de ce mouvement et de cette vie dont elle s'empare [...] (1971, p. 70 et seq.).

Blanchot reiterates Benjamin's life connection between translation and original. Ideas inherent in *Fortleben* are illustrated in rapid succession: the original is not static, difference is fundamental to translation, translation is linked to the becoming of works of art, and, "la solonelle dérive des œuvres littéraires" is one of the most charmingly appropriate expressions of *Fortleben* that I have encountered. Likewise, in one of the most succinct and well-written surveys of recent translation theory, Kristjana Gunnars understands Benjamin's *Fortleben* as an indication of the possibilities of translation. The change that a work undergoes through translation "can be a form of maturation [...] texts evolve. Texts grow from each other in an evolutionary manner" (1997, p. 78).

Of the many commentators who do explicitly discuss the concept, Eliane Escoubas is almost alone in noticing that *Überleben* is mentioned once only, and then, suspended in quotation marks. Despite this seemingly exceptional acuity of observation, she interprets *Überleben* in a rather puzzling manner, "[...] *Überleben* [*sic*] qualifie quelque chose qui demeure, mais qui demeure alors que son temps est passé, quelque chose qui est suranné, qui n'est plus de son temps—et aussi quelque chose qui se situe hors du temps, qui se voudrait transcendant au temps; suranné et transcendant [...]" (1989, p. 131). The use of *überleben* as "outdated," *suranné*, is quite rare; there are other more commonly used terms, such as *abgebraucht* which Benjamin himself chose in *die Aufgabe*.³⁰ There is nothing in his language or context here that justifies such an unusual interpretation of *Überleben* as opposed to the more common "survival."

Escoubas continues, "*Fortleben*, c'est continuer à vivre, persévérer, et ce qui importe c'est cette *continuation* [...] Continuer, ce n'est pas seulement demeurer, c'est se développer—

30 "Was damals jung, kann später abgebraucht, was damals gebräuchlich, später archaisch klingen" (1985, p. 13). ["What once sounded youthful, can later sound outdated, what once sounded ordinary, later archaic"]

aussi *Fortleben* sera relayé, ou plutôt explicité, par *Entfaltung* : développement” (*ibid.*, p. 132). This analysis is correct, although it must be mentioned that *Entfaltung* follows *Fortleben* only once. From the preceding, Escoubas concludes, “C’est donc la notion d’histoire qui se fait jour dans le texte : *Fortleben* = *Geschichte*. [...] L’œuvre littéraire (la *Dichtung*) se déploie dans l’histoire et produit de l’histoire” (*ibid.*). Although it is true that a historical paradigm does inform *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin has stated elsewhere unequivocally that works of art are themselves essentially ahistorical.³¹ As such, *Fortleben* must be seen as an ahistorical term, eternal, beyond all human historical construction or agency. *Fortleben* cannot be equated to *Geschichte*. Nevertheless, Escoubas continues with a subtle interpretation of *Die Aufgabe*, which has in turn been summarized very sensitively by Laurent Lamy, “La poétique de l’œuvre, la *Dichtung*, est le nœud d’un développement ininterrompu, une matrice ouverte à la mutation [...] la croissance [...] et la maturation [...]. Comme le note Escoubas, [...] la traduction anticipe [...] l’avenir de l’œuvre, [...] s’inscrivant alors dans un rapport d’anticipation plutôt que sous la rubrique de la conservation ou de la thésaurisation[...].” (1997, p. 145 et seq.). The concept of this *rapport d’anticipation* once again dissociates translation from the primacy of resemblance. Lamy describes Escoubas’ interpretation of *Fortleben* as, “la continuation inespérée de sa vie, cet écart intime qui lie la transcendance de

31 In December 1923 shortly after publication of *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin wrote to a friend, “I am occupied by the thought of how works of art stand in relation to historical life. In this, I take it as given that art history does not exist. While the chain of temporal events for human life, for example, does not carry along only a causal essence, but without such a chain, in development, maturity, death among other categories, human life essentially wouldn’t exist at all, yet this stands totally differently with the work of art. It is in its essence ahistorical.” [“Mich beschäftigt nämlich der Gedanke, wie Kunstwerke sich zum geschichtlichen Leben verhalten. Dabei gilt mir als ausgemacht, daß es Kunstgeschichte nicht gibt. Während die Verkettung zeitlichen Geschehens für das Menschenleben beispielsweise nicht allein kausal Wesentliches mit sich führt, sondern ohne solche Verkettung in Entwicklung, Reife, Tod u. ä. Kategorien das Menschenleben wesentlich garnicht existieren würde, verhält sich dies mit dem Kunstwerk ganz anders. Es ist seinem Wesentlichen nach geschichtlos.”] (Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, 1974, p. 888).

l'œuvre, son autonomie absolue en regard de sa réception et de sa traduction, à sa loi immanente, celle de la traductibilité qui déjà l'extrade hors de son lieu de naissance et l'inscrit dans un ordre de croissance qui excède son aire de rayonnement" (1997, p. 140). This idea of translatability has been connected with *Fortleben* by others. For example, Deborah Cook claims, "Benjamin [...] considered that the translatability of a text is the consequence of its survival in history, its being read by successive generations of readers [...]" (1986, p. 147). This interpretation, however, seems to be diametrically opposed to Lamy's, who stated above that a work's immanent translatability leads to its growth (*i.e.*, to its *Fortleben*). Indeed, Cook's (again historical) claim runs counter to what Benjamin (1985, p. 9 et seq.) himself stated, namely that a literary work's translatability is an inherent quality, whether or not a translator is ever found for the work, whether or not the work itself is ever actually translated. Benjamin had specifically removed the absolute requirement for human agency from the concept of translatability, a quality inherent in the original work. A similar interpretation is to be found in Lawrence Venuti's introduction to *Rethinking Translation*, "what makes the foreign text original is not so much that it is considered the coherent expression of authorial meaning, but that it is deemed worthy of translation, that it is destined to live what Benjamin calls an 'afterlife' (*Überleben*) in a derivative form like translation [...]" A translation canonizes the foreign text, validating its fame by enabling its survival" (1992, p. 7). Once again, Benjamin clearly states that it is translation "that catches fire on the eternal *Fortleben* of works" (1985, p. 14). It is not translation that enables or is responsible for this "afterlife" or "survival," but *Fortleben* that may spark or cause or enable translation. An additional problem here is the ubiquitous "afterlife" attributed to Benjamin, and its incorrect back-translation to *Überleben*. This problem has exuded far beyond the realm of translatology, as geologist Scott Montgomery writes, "One of [Benjamin's] key concepts, one that has deservedly drawn a great deal of attention among scholars of literature and language, is that of the 'afterlife' (*Überleben*) of a work, brought to reality by the act and result of translation" (2000, p. 284). Susan Ingram decries the "disturbingly easy canonization of both translation and criticism which characterizes the story of 'The Task of the Translator'" (1997, p. 221). Uncritically

canonized, the term *Überleben* (most often without Benjamin's quotation marks) has been frequently quoted in the secondary literature,³² as above, with nary a thought granted to the term Benjamin actually, intentionally, consistently chose: *Fortleben*.

In notes accompanying their excellent French translation of *Die Aufgabe*, Lamy and Nouss explain their translation decisions concerning both *Überleben* and *Fortleben*. They give equal weight to both terms, without drawing attention to the quotation marks demarcating the single use of *Überleben*:

Nous tentons de reproduire par ces choix les termes différents quoique apparentés employés par Benjamin. La survie (*Überleben*) s'applique à l'original en tant que tel, la survivance (*Fortleben*) à l'original en tant qu'il se prolonge dans sa traduction. [...] il rattache le travail de la traduction à l'idée d'une « survie » (*Überleben*), ménageant l'aval d'une entité de l'ordre du vivant qui aurait une « vie devant soi », et ce, malgré soi, une vie hors de soi qu'elle appelle à son insu, qu'elle commande sans la solliciter—le passage de ce qui jouit d'une vie propre vers un seuil qui annonce une autre vie propre (*Fortleben*). (1997, p. 38)

Interesting as this is, there is no indication that Benjamin himself implied such a distinction, especially considering that *Überleben* was used only once, in quotation marks, in order to introduce the more obscure *Fortleben*. Similarly, Rand imposes onto Benjamin “la triade ‘*Leben-Fortleben-Überleben*’” (1989, p. 71), placing all three terms on equal footing, something that never occurs in *Die Aufgabe*. Rand, like Escoubas and Cook, also inscribes historicity into Benjamin's *Fortleben* concept: “L'historisation de l'œuvre permet d'en parler en termes de ‘survie’ (*Ueberleben*), de ‘vie continuée’ (*Fortleben*), et de ‘maturation après coup’ (*Nachreife*). Ces moments, décalés par rapport à la production de l'œuvre, lui prêtent une existence temporelle” (*ibid.*, p. 57). Again, *Überleben* (without quotation marks) is granted the same weight as *Fortleben*. Benjamin applies the term *Nachreife* only to words or

32 For example, John Johnston includes in his notes, “the word *überleben* [*sic*] which Benjamin frequently uses to refer to the artwork's ‘afterlife’” (1992, p. 55). This is an unfortunate error in an otherwise excellent essay on translation as the “becoming of language.”

language, never to literary works. As such, it is erroneous to place the three words in a temporal sequence for literary works that are ahistorical in Benjamin's thought system, as mentioned above. Despite these misunderstandings, Rand explains most lucidly, "Elle [la traduction] n'aura pas à imiter l'œuvre, à la copier mais à en *témoigner* – *témoigner* (*bezeugen*) de sa progression, de sa 'survie.'" (*ibid.*)

Writing copiously about Benjamin's "obtuseness," Henning Ritter claims, "Benjamin's intention to infuse his works with elements that were genuinely alien to him derives from his mistrust of the work's afterlife, as if its survival were itself something alien" (1996, p. 596). Unfortunately, Ritter does not develop this "mistrust" nor does he explain how he arrived at such a quixotic interpretation of Benjamin's "psychology." Thomas Pfau states in passing, "Translation is thus understood as the 'survival' (*Überleben*) of the original" (1988, p. 1083). Again, Benjamin's choice of *Fortleben* is ignored, as is the fact that Benjamin never equates *Fortleben* (or *Überleben* for that matter) with translation. He specifies that translation emerges from the life of the original, and designates (not constitutes) the stage of its *Fortleben*. A similar misreading of Benjamin and disregard for his carefully chosen terminology can be found in Yopie Prins' discussion of Sappho's poetry: "it is the performance of translation itself that ensures Sappho's afterlife. Here I follow Walter Benjamin's reflections on translation as *überleben* [*sic*], as a form of survival or "living on" within an original text that is only made manifest in its translations" (1996, p. 37). "Survival" of a text is not dependent on translation, according to Benjamin: "translations [...] arise when in *Fortleben* a work has reached the era of its fame."³³

Des Tours de Babel by Jacques Derrida is deservedly one of the most widely discussed interpretations of *Die Aufgabe*. He recognizes the difficulty in translating *Fortleben*. He introduces his choice, *survie*, in quotation marks, then refines his definition by specifying that *Fortleben* is "la survie comme continuation de

33 "Übersetzungen, die mehr als Vermittlungen sind, entstehen, wenn im Fortleben ein Werk das Zeitalter seines Ruhmes erreicht hat" (1985, p. 11).

la vie plutôt que comme vie post mortem” (1985, p. 222). Despite his defining *Fortleben* as a “continuation of life,” Derrida is adamant throughout his essay that this *survie* includes far more than a mere continuation of the life that was. Derrida bases his interpretation of *Die Aufgabe* largely on *Aufgabe* as duty of the translator, duty of an inheritor:

Il nomme le sujet de la traduction, comme sujet endetté, obligé par un devoir, déjà en situation d’héritier, inscrit comme survivant dans une généalogie, comme survivant ou agent de survie. La survie des œuvres, non pas des auteurs. Peut-être la survie des noms d’auteurs et des signatures, mais non des auteurs. Telle survie donne un plus de vie, plus qu’une survivance. L’œuvre ne vit pas seulement plus longtemps, elle vit plus et mieux, au-dessus des moyens de son auteur. (1985, p. 223)³⁴

His is a very sophisticated understanding of Benjamin’s *Fortleben* as “un plus de vie.” Derrida comprehends that there is far more than mere “survivance” at play here; translation entails a transformation of a literary work “au-dessus des moyens de son auteur.” Equally accurate and subtle is his understanding of Benjamin’s unusual conception of “translatability” and its connection to *Fortleben*:

Celui-ci exige la traduction même si aucun traducteur n’est là, en mesure de répondre à cette injonction qui est en même temps demande et désir dans la structure même de l’original. Cette structure est le rapport de la vie à la survie. [...] Si la structure de l’œuvre est “survie”, la dette n’engage pas auprès d’un sujet-auteur présumé du texte original—mort ou mortel, le mort du texte—mais à autre chose que représente la loi formelle dans l’immanence du texte original. Ensuite la dette n’engage pas à restituer une copie ou une bonne image, une

34 Cf. “Derrida turned again to Benjamin in his last interview for *Le Monde* in August 2004, with further thoughts about *Überleben*, surviving a death, and *Fortleben*, living on, noting that while the terms might take on a particular colouration for him at that moment, all of his work had been criss-crossed by both senses of ‘survival’ in its structural dimension, independent of both life and death. Survival, he emphasizes, is not concerned with death or the past, but with life and with the future [...]” (Hayes, 2007, p. 453).

représentation fidèle de l'original: celui-ci, le survivant, est lui-même en procès de transformation. L'original se donne en se modifiant, ce don n'est pas d'un objet donné, il vit et survit en mutation. (1985, p. 225 et seq.)

According to Derrida's description, translatability is a quality immanent within the original text, as was stated explicitly by Benjamin. Inherent in this interpretation is the understanding that the translation is not to be a copy or faithful image of the original, therefore the process of transformation, accretion, mutation is implicit in *Fortleben*, "Si le traducteur ne restitue ni ne copie un original, c'est que celui-ci survit et se transforme. La traduction sera en vérité un moment de sa propre croissance, il s'y complètera en s'aggrandissant" (Derrida, 1985, p. 232).

During the *Messenger Lecture* at Cornell University in 1983, Paul de Man provided one of the most influential and controversial interpretations of *Die Aufgabe*. Early in his lecture, de Man said, "We now then ask the simplest, the most naive, the most literal of possible questions in relation to Benjamin's text, and we will not get beyond that: what does Benjamin say? What does he say, in the most immediate sense possible?" (1985, p. 32). Despite this laudable intention, de Man interprets what Benjamin "said" with respect to the *Fortleben* concept in the most puzzlingly depressive manner:

It [*Nachreife*] is associated with another word that Benjamin constantly uses, the word *überleben*, [*sic*] to live beyond your own death in a sense. The translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus assuming and confirming the death of the original [...] The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original. Why is this? What are those death pangs, possibly birth pangs, of the original? (1985, p. 38)

Benjamin does not "constantly" use "*überleben*." He uses it once—and suspended in quotation marks. Benjamin never, in any way, "says," implies or hints at the death of the original. To the contrary, he repeatedly insists on the life of the original, on the

life of works of art, on their *Fortleben*. De Man seems to deny the very possibility of *Fortleben*: “What are the linguistic reasons which allow Benjamin to speak of a suffering, of a disarticulation, of a falling apart of any original work [...]?” (1985, p. 39). If the original work dies, or falls apart, there can be no *Fortleben*; nor does Benjamin speak of suffering and disarticulation in *Die Aufgabe*.

De Man does discuss *Fortleben* in the question period following his lecture. To the question, “what happens in terms of the original [...]” he replies, “First of all Benjamin says: take the notion of *Fortleben*, of survival, in the most literal sense possible, take it as literally as you can take it, it is the survival of the text, the text is kept in circulation, by the translation, circulation is augmented as such in the process [...] the original is disarticulated, the original is reduced to the status of prose, is decanonized, all that by the process of translation [...]” (1986, p. 97). Yet, in *Die Aufgabe* Benjamin makes it quite explicit that a text does not “survive” due to translation, nor does he state that the original is disarticulated, reduced or decanonized. Furthermore, De Man’s statements may be correct about “survival,” literally speaking, but *Fortleben*, “in the most literal sense possible” absolutely cannot mean “survival.” *Überleben* does, but Benjamin deliberately did not retain this word in his essay.

Needless to say, such controversial interpretations have occasioned much criticism. Dennis Porter feels that, “de Man discovers in Benjamin’s essay his own grand theme of the failure of language or what he refers to here as ‘an essential failure, an essential disarticulation’” (1989, p. 1071).³⁵ Klaus Müller finds that de Man’s attitude is often “not compatible with Benjamin’s writings” and that his interpretation “one-sidedly emphasizes references to negativity, foreignness, non-identity and fragmentation” (1995, p. 74 et seq.). Lamy and Nouss also comment on de Man’s negativity, “Il interprète de même négativement *Nachreife* (« post-maturation ») et

35 Porter also claims, “Part of de Man’s strategy in arguing for his reading of ‘The Task of the Translator’ involves the quotation of a number of mistranslations to be found in the translations of Benjamin’s very essay into French and English respectively” (1989, p. 1072).

überleben (« survivre ») [...] cette critique s'accorde avec la lecture déconstructrice qu'il fait de l'ensemble de l'essai et qui frappe par le nihilisme qu'il attribue à la pensée de Benjamin [...] Toute la philosophie de Benjamin, des premiers aux derniers écrits, est orientée par l'idée de rédemption [...] et par le maintien d'une espérance [...]» (1997, p. 42 et seq.). Eve Tavor Bannet elucidates de Man's critical methods, specifically using the concept of *Fortleben* as an example:

[He] makes it clear that he is translating Benjamin's text on translation directly from the original German, as someone who knows German better than anyone else, and as someone who can act as a corrector of translators like Derrida, Gandillac, and Zohn, who unlike himself, "don't seem to have the slightest idea of what Benjamin is saying." [...] The mechanism here is simple and de Man demonstrates it in his translation of Benjamin: one selects a word or a metaphor from the original text; one exiles it from its "burden of meaning" in the original; and one sets it wandering, erring, by translating it as one wishes. For instance, Benjamin speaks of poetic translation (*Übersetzung*) as issuing from the *Überleben* (literally, sur-vival) and *Fortleben* (living on) of the original [...] De Man, however, exiles the words *überleben* [*sic*] and *Nachreife* from their "burden of meaning" in Benjamin's text and sets them wandering, erring, by attaching to them opposite associations of his own. [...] As a result of this ploy, "what Benjamin is saying" in de Man's translation is that translations relate not to the life of the original, but to its death: [...] In de Man's translation of Benjamin, therefore, translations are harbingers of death: "they kill the original" by using language "destructively" and "nihilistically" to plunge the original "from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language." (1993, p. 582 et seq.)

Not everyone reads de Man's negativity so negatively. In Denis Donoghue's opinion, de Man is providing a "more lucid version" of Benjamin's theory of translation (1989, p. 257). Donoghue explains de Man's view of afterlife in appropriately mortal terms:

The translation can put the original "in motion" and question its claim to canonical authority by showing that it, too, is merely an afterlife, therefore an absence, a death. De Man values translation—or at least respects it—for the shadow of death it casts upon an original which was naive enough to think itself

buoyantly articulate. Translations, de Man takes a certain grim pleasure in reporting, “kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead.” (1989, p. 254)

He even goes to the extent of equating *Fortleben* with doom: “It is clear that Benjamin and, even more insistently, de Man think of translation not as transmission of meaning but as the exposure of a text to a more explicit stage of its doom. De Man regards the afterlife of a poem as proof not of its continuance but of its death” (*ibid.*, p. 256). Although de Man himself unequivocally perceives “afterlife” in this way, there is absolutely nothing in *Die Aufgabe* that would indicate Benjamin’s support for such a gloomy interpretation.

Many subsequent commentators continue walking in the valley of de Man’s shadow of death, profoundly influenced by his lugubrious reading of Benjamin. Richard Sieburth, for example, states, “not only does translation as *Fortleben* reveal the death (or deconstruction) of the original, but it also watches over its own inevitable demise, mournfully aware that its encounter with the original can never be definitive” (1989, p. 241). Even though, for once, *Fortleben* is used rather than *Überleben*, *Die Aufgabe* hardly warrants such “mournful” words. Prins also appears to follow de Man’s interpretation. She argues, “Benjamin’s essay defines translating as an *Aufgabe*, an impossible task that recognizes its own failure in recreating the original” (1996, p. 38). She completely disregards the aforementioned fact that Benjamin is adamant that translation would not be possible if it strove for similarity with the original.³⁶ According to Patrick Primavesi’s interpretation of *Die Aufgabe*, “Benjamin defines translation as a process of destruction and transformation, [...] The life of a text then is to be regarded as a discontinuous afterlife (*Fortleben*)” (1999, p. 54 et seq.). Where does Benjamin define translation as a process of destruction? Translation does not destroy the original. How can it? This would automatically preclude any possibility of the original work’s *Fortleben* which is *ewig* (“eternal”) in Benjamin’s own words. The original changes, yes, but never does

36 “[...] keine Übersetzung möglich wäre, wenn sie Ähnlichkeit mit dem Original ihrem letzten Wesen nach anstreben würde” (1985, p. 12).

Benjamin imply its destruction. To the contrary, he emphasizes eternal *Fortleben* for great works.

This failure, this impossibility of translation keeps emerging in discussions of *Die Aufgabe*, yet failure was never written into Benjamin's thought system in *Die Aufgabe*. Derrida has another interpretation, "La 'tour de Babel' ne figure pas seulement la multiplicité irréductible des langues, elle exhibe un inachèvement, l'impossibilité de compléter, de totaliser, de saturer, d'achever quelque chose qui est de l'ordre de l'édification" (1985, p. 209). Müller explains, "This fundamental, irreducible multiplicity is the most crucial problem of translation and of understanding, and it is the reason why both are ultimately impossible, or why it is, at least, impossible to ever come to an end of translating and understanding" (1995, p. 76). This is, in a sense, an open acknowledgment of *ewiges Fortleben*. Translation is not doomed to failure but blessed with glorious perpetuation. As long as great works exist, translation will be repeatedly sparked. And, in the words of Rand, "chaque traduction implique une lecture nouvelle—et de l'original et des traductions précédentes. Elles font appel, par conséquent, à un original chaque fois *différent* [*sic*]" (1989, p. 56). This then, in essence, is *Fortleben*: the original changes with each reading, calls forth new translations, new interpretations, new readings, endlessly. There is no death. There is constant calling forth, living forth—*Fortleben*.

"Afterlife"—A Destructive Choice

Afterlife. Connotations of hellfire and eternal damnation. It is a rather dangerous term, in fact. A death-trap. The metaphors of damage and destruction, devastation and sacrifice abound in the secondary literature, yet not all in *Die Aufgabe*.³⁷ Why are these

37 Irony in criticism is one of the topics Benjamin developed in his thesis, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. This earlier work does contain language of destruction (*Zerstörung*) and sacrifice (*das Opfer ironischer Zersetzung*) and—interestingly—survival (*Überleben*) (without quotation marks). In this context, the concept of the "survival of the work" (*das Überleben des Werkes*) is quite logical. (*Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 1.1, p. 86 et seq.) The context, language, intention and development of *Die Aufgabe* are quite different.

morbid metaphors being read into an essay that does not contain even a hint of mortality? Have these lugubrious interpretations been motivated by “afterlife,” that infelicitous word that Zohn chose to render *Fortleben* in the first English translation? Blindly canonized, Zohn’s choice of “afterlife” insidiously pervades the interpretations of the secondary literature with its deathly connotations. Most anglophone scholars quote Zohn’s translation.³⁸ And many fall into afterlife’s death trap, sweeping along their allophone colleagues, to wit:

Translation is a coroner’s report: the body is pronounced dead, and the cause of its death is disclosed. (Donoghue, 1989, p. 256)

Translating is more like wrenching a soul from its body and luring it into a different one. It means killing. [...] The ravages of time and translation will be visible. (Waldrop, 1984, pp. 42-43 and 47)

[...] translation [...] “transplants” a text into a new context, and in so doing both destroys and saves it. (Rendall, 1997, p. 171) According to Benjamin’s essay the text of the translation is marked by an inevitable failure. Thus, the translator enacts the ideal of translatability [...] by a deformation or even destruction of the work of literature [...] Benjamin defines translation as a process of destruction and transformation [...] demolition [...] each translation has to begin its destructive work again with the original text. (Primavesi, 1999, p. 54 et seq.)

[...] the original is sacrificed (or canceled or “sublated”) in the translation, just as the translation is in turn sacrificed back to

38 Zohn’s translation first appeared in 1968. The same year, another translation by James Hynd and E. M. Valk appeared in *Delos* (Vol. 2, pp. 76-99). Zohn’s translation contains certain problems (“glaring omissions” in the words of Rendall), absent from Hynd and Valk’s translation. Although their translation is more careful in rendering “Überleben” once by “surviving life” [in quotation marks] and *Fortleben*, consistently by “continuing life,” their version is not problem-free. (What translation is?) Nevertheless, according to Rendall, “[b]ecause of copyright restrictions, Zohn’s version continues to be the main form in which Benjamin’s famous essay is known to English-language readers” (2000, p. 23).

the original so that the latter, now renewed and transformed, may continue on its course. [...] Translations, Benjamin argues, are the crucial vehicles of this posthumous survival [...]. (Sieburth, 1989, p. 241)

Or pour Benjamin l'intention objective à laquelle la traduction devrait idéalement prêter son concours s'attache à la 'survie' de l'œuvre, à l'opportunité d'une vie posthume, autonome [...]. (Lamy and Nouss, 1997, p. 58)

Jede Übersetzung ist der Tod des Ausgangstexts. [...] Tod bedeutet, daß die Schöpfung via Übersetzung durch diesen Abgrund des Übersetzens hindurch muß. [...] den Sinn eines Texts [...] zerstören will (Vermeer, 1996, pp. 80-81 and 87). [Every translation is the death of the source text. [...] Death means that creation via translation must pass through this abyss of translation. [...] wishing to annihilate [...] the meaning of a text.]

La vie d'une œuvre, sa rédaction originale et ses diverses traductions [...] ne renvoie donc pas à un développement spontané et naturel, mais bien à la confrontation entre l'origine et l'histoire des langues. Cette histoire n'est pas un mûrissement tranquille mais, au contraire, le processus violent, étrange, oui presque aliénant que les traductions font subir au texte original. (Gagnebin, 1994, p. 36)

Que la traduction soit un sacrifice, sans doute, [...] La traduction est *la mort* de l'intention, et c'est cette *mort* qui est la chance de *vie* de la *vérité* de l'œuvre. La traduction croit n'assurer que la *survie* d'une œuvre en permettant sa communication aux contemporains parlant une langue étrangère, [...] Au fur et à mesure que décline et meurt la signification de l'œuvre, croît sa vérité, que seule révèle sa traduction. (Proust, 1994, p. 133)

Post-Benjaminian speculation on the nature of translation, its object and its subject, would thus appear to mask a certain (sublimated) morbid sentimentality, expressed in admissions of failure [...]. (Humphries, 1997, p. 493)

De Campos translates Benjamin's word for reproduction, *Wiedergabe*, literally, a "re-giving" of form, and thus stresses in good Luciferian spirit that the original form has to be destroyed first in order to be reshaped. (Waldrop, 1989, p. 225)

The translation does not repeat the original or reflect it in another language but survives the original, even diminishes its importance, [...] diminishes the original, apparently, but does not quite kill it. Benjamin's text actually calls for the translation to produce its own momentum away from the original, even at the expense of it. (Fleche, 1999, p. 96 et seq.)

Qualquer tradução é, portanto, ao mesmo tempo, parricida e protetora na medida em que necessariamente toma posse do lugar e do texto de outro com o objectivo de fazê-lo viver numa língua e num momento diferentes. (Arrojo, 1993, p. 47) [Any translation is, therefore, at the same time parricidal and protective insofar as it necessarily takes possession of the place and the text of another with the goal of making it live in a different language and moment.]

It's only after the death of the original, during the time of its outliving or living on, that the translation goes forth from it; but at what point does it stop living and start outliving or onliving? (Robinson, 1996, p. 203 et seq.)

The afterlife of Sappho is predicated on the death of a living voice [...] The mediation between corpse and corpus in the remembering of Sappho defines her afterlife and has become the subject of *Nachleben* studies. [...] a broken tongue that speaks, through violent disjunction, of Sappho's afterlife in translation. (Prins, 1996, pp. 36-37 and 67)

Another curious consequence of Zohn's canonized equivalent for *Fortleben* is that several scholars, who elsewhere show great diligence in their research, have backtranslated "afterlife" with *Nachleben*—a word that does not appear at all in *Die Aufgabe*. For example, in her otherwise scholarly treatment of Sappho's fragment 31, Prins uses "afterlife," *Nachleben*, and *überleben* [*sic*] frequently and interchangeably, but never *Fortleben*. She even attributes the term *Nachleben* directly and very incorrectly to Benjamin: "What is revealed [...] is a structure of survival within the text itself, as a formal principle that exceeds biological life and death and is best understood in Walter Benjamin's sense of a *Nachleben*: the 'renewal of something living' [...]" (1996, p. 52). The idea of "renewal of something living" is expressed in German by *Aufleben*, never by *Nachleben*. Sieburth

also ascribes *Nachleben* to Benjamin: "Walter Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator' [...] speaks of this process in terms of the essential historicity of literary works—their *Fortleben* or *Ueberleben* or *Nachleben*, that is, the way in which works of the past, despite (or precisely because of) the fact that they are no more, continue to survive or pursue an afterlife" (1989, p. 241). Not only does Sieburth fail to recognize that, for Benjamin, literary works are ahistorical, but in his implication that the three German terms are synonymous, he fails to understand *Fortleben* as a precise term indicating this ahistoricity. Samuel Weber also treats these three German words as synonymous, implying that Benjamin used them as such: "Translatability is not simply a property of the original work, but rather a *potentiality* that can be simply realized or achieved, and that therefore has less to do with the enduring life usually attributed to the work than with what Benjamin calls its "after-life" or its "survival" (*Nachleben*, *Fortleben*, *Überleben*)" (2005, p. 74). Rendall's translation of *Die Aufgabe* shows an impressive command of the German language, yet even he writes elsewhere, "translation is a mode of the continuing life—the *Überleben* or *Nachleben*—of art works" (1997, p. 167). Neither *Überleben* nor *Nachleben* can mean "continuing life." *Nachleben* is indeed a direct morphological equivalent of "after-life" = *nachleben*, however, as explained above, *Nachleben* and *Fortleben* are far from synonymous in German; and, once again, the word *Nachleben* never appears in *Die Aufgabe*. Such unfortunate back translations only serve to distance interpretation even farther from the one term of Benjamin's own choice: *Fortleben*.

Conclusion

Sometime after 132 BCE, in the prologue to his Greek translation of the biblical book Ecclesiasticus, the author's grandson begged the forgiveness of his readers for any phrases that he "seemed incapable" of translating despite the great effort he made in his "labour of love." He was fearful that "what is said in Hebrew itself does not have equal power [ὄ γὰρ ἰσοδυναμεῖ] when translated into another language."³⁹ Since

39 My translations from the Greek text in: Rahlfs, Alfred, ed. (1971). *Septuagint*. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt. The book of Ecclesiasticus is accepted as part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox

then, two millennia of translators and translation theorists have struggled with inevitable differences in language, with issues of fidelity and translatability, with subordination of the translator's task to the original text, with accusations of failure and betrayal, with apologies for inadequacy. Walter Benjamin introduced a refreshingly novel approach to these age-old concerns in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*. Translatability is intrinsic to great works of art. The purpose of translation is not similarity to the original text, which is inherently impossible because the original enjoys constant transformation. Benjamin's *Fortleben* concept offers translators emancipation from the perennial feelings of inevitable failure and from inappropriate requirements of slavish adherence to the original text. Although most translators would probably agree with Benjamin that the word is "the fundamental element of the translator,"⁴⁰ it is indeed unfortunate that mistranslation of the word *Fortleben* has remained unchallenged. The impact of the "disturbingly easily" canonized equivalent "afterlife" on the collective conscience of the translation community is anything but positive, as the lugubrious interpretations of scholars in the secondary literature indicate. It is the height of irony that translation theorists have themselves canonized a mistranslation that can only augment the negative and destructive image of the profession. Benjamin himself was of the opinion that "bad translations" could have some value because of the resultant "productive misunderstandings."⁴¹ *Fortleben*, in its infelicitous incarnation as "afterlife," has certainly been productive, if not downright counterproductive. It is high time that this insidious "afterlife" be finally laid to rest, in order to allow a living forth of Benjamin's brilliantly innovative concept of *Fortleben*. The translation community deserves no less.

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biblical canon, but is not recognized within the Jewish or Protestant canon.

40 "[...] das Urelement des Übersetzers [...]" (1985, p. 18).

41 "Wert schlechter Übersetzungen : produktive Mißverständnisse" (1985, p. 159).

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ABSTRACT: Benjamin's "Afterlife": A Productive (?) Mistranslation. In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni — The concept of "afterlife" constitutes a central theme in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, yet the German equivalent to "afterlife" does not appear once in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on translation. This article investigates the German term that Benjamin has in fact chosen and examines the highly problematic translation of his idea. Some of the resulting interpretations by translation

theorists are presented, along with the potentially deleterious effects on the translation community.

RÉSUMÉ : La « survie » chez Benjamin, un contresens fertile (?). En mémoire de Daniel Simeoni — Le concept de « survie » est le thème central de *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* de Walter Benjamin, bien que l'équivalent allemand du terme « survie » n'apparaisse jamais tel quel dans cet essai fondateur pour la traductologie. Notre article se penche sur le terme allemand choisi par Benjamin pour rendre ce concept et examine les traductions de ce terme qui posent de sérieux problèmes. L'article présente aussi quelques-unes des interprétations qui découlent de ces traductions ainsi que leur effet possiblement dommageable pour le domaine de la traduction.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, “afterlife,” mistranslation, translation theory, literary translation

Mots-clés : Walter Benjamin, « survie », erreur de traduction, théorie de la traduction, traduction littéraire

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