

Marder, Michael

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Failed Translations: Textuality of *Capital* against Walter Benjamin's »The Task of the Translator«

*Michael Marder**

In order to stage a sustained encounter between literary theory and Marxian political economy, this paper initiates a dialogue between Walter Benjamin's »The Task of the Translator« on one hand, and Marx's Capital, on the other. I will theorize the two-fold transition from the language of labor to value to price in the latter work as an exercise in economic translation haunted by and predicated upon the untranslatability of use-value, or pure difference. In light of this initial outline, I will contend that the specific intentionality of capital, the predominance of the »pure language« of value, and the discursive construction of mainstream economics violate the immanent grounding of economic and non-economic systems of signification.

JEL classifications: B14, B31, B51

»To move between languages, to translate [...] is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom.« (George Steiner, *After Babel*)

»[T]he translator, per definition, fails. The translator can never do what the original text did.« (Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*)

I. Introduction: Recourse to Method

Re-reading Marxian political economy in the post-structuralist vein, Spivak (1996: 110) observes that in the three volumes of *Capital* »Marx uncovered the economic *texts*« which became the proper object of his study. If, indeed, the economic is the textual, one should

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Correspondence address:

Michael Marder, e-mail: mardm926@newschool.edu

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be able to read and to write, to translate and to interpret the economic text and the »onomo-graphic« principle by the means of which it operates as a *system of named and written differences*. Further, if we are to begin to unravel the variegated implications of Spivak's weighty statement, we should be, first of all, willing and prepared to stage an encounter between contemporary literary theory and theories of textuality on one hand, and Marxian political economy, on the other.

Below, I conceptualize such an encounter in terms of the notion of literary and economic translation as it emerges in the three volumes of *Capital*, as well as in Walter Benjamin's »The Task of the Translator«. In fact, this article will follow the theoretical course of the latter work, moving from the untranslatable through life/after-life and intentionality to the dream of pure language. I will argue that in Marx's and Benjamin's texts, any advances in the direction of pure language (the unfettered self-valorization of value) are forced to simultaneously run the opposite course toward the untranslatable (use-value obstacles), producing languages on the verge of madness and a series of »failed translations« in the capitalist economy.

The homology of literary and economic translations neither operates on the level of comparisons, nor devises the ways in which the economic comes to approximate or mimic the textual, and *vice versa*. Beyond the infinite possibilities of analogies and parallels, I propose to trace the logic of the economic in and through the textual and the logic of the textual in and through the economic. In short, I begin with the supposition that political economy is a special kind of text, while the *modus operandi* of any text is predicated on basic economic principles.¹ This is not to suggest that the extra-economic or extra-textual elements do not disturb both the economic and the textual. Quite the opposite is true: the text always refers, if only negatively and elliptically, to the non-systematic context it has not succeeded to inscribe in its entirety, while the economic ultimately reaches a point of inflection into the non-economic (immeasurable and incalculable) »base of the base« embodied in use-value. For now, suffice it to say that materially, if not formally, the relation between the economic and the textual is irreducible to a metaphorical or allegorical homology, but contains the kernel of meaning around which these terms are constituted.

2. Use-Value and the Untranslatable

In order to address the untranslatability of use-value, we must first consider what translatability implies in the context of capitalist economy. Marx explicitly evokes translation in Volume III of *Capital*, writing that

»the vulgar economist does nothing more than translate the peculiar notions of the competition-enslaved capitalist into an ostensibly more theoretical and generalized language, and attempts to demonstrate the validity of these notions« (1981: 338).

¹ For more on this approach to the relation between the textual and the economic see Marder (2004).

And again near the end of the same volume:

»Vulgar economics [...] is nothing more than a didactic and more or less doctrinaire translation of the everyday notions of the actual agents of production.« (ibid.: 969)

Here Marx treats bourgeois economic translation as an ideologically motivated and fanatical *fidelity* to the »notions« of the capitalist actors situated exclusively on the plane of appearances, codifying and legitimizing the shallow and »immediate« understandings within the political-economic enunciations and descriptions. The alluring power that compels us to accept vulgar economic principles as true is precisely their empirical grounding in the »everyday notions« and the closed loop this grounding creates (i.e., the movement from everyday notions, through a rash abstraction, to strikingly similar everyday notions deduced from this false abstraction). Viewed from the vantage point of Marxian political economy, such fidelity to the economic phenomena creates one of the worst *mistranslations* imaginable.

On the other hand, in *Capital* translation operates on a different level. Proceeding systematically and, as it were, counter-archaeologically from the inner core of capital – »the hidden abode of production« (Marx 1976: 279) – toward the visible plane of circulation, Marx successively deciphers three economic sub-texts that belong to the superimposed textual and analytic surfaces, namely: labor, value, and price. Consequently, in its new role translation signifies a two-fold transition from labor to value (producing labor theory of value), and from value to price (resulting in the theory of price determination and its subsidiary, the transformation problem).

A brief glance at the first moment of translation – the transition from labor to value – will suffice for the introduction of the notion of the untranslatable. To represent value by the means of labor, one must abstractly conceive of the commodity as an embodiment of a certain quantity of (socially necessary) labor-time (Marx 1976: 131). In capitalist commodity production geared toward sale and exchange, the magnitude of value renders commodities interchangeable. Nonetheless, a number of qualities are sacrificed to this mode of representation, such as the singularity of use-values, as well as the modality of conceptualization that is inexpressible in the language of money. The radical heterogeneity, singularity, and unexchangeability of the product of labor are untranslatable into and incomprehensible from the standpoint of value-creation and valorization they enable. The absolutely »untranslatable use-value«, for instance, is not produced for exchange, but for use, and is therefore incommensurable with the language of equivalence.

Yet, on another level, use-value is always already untranslatable. We may describe use-value (if such a description is at all possible) neither as a signifier, nor as a signified, but as the unsignifiable property of life, constituting both the content and the means of human living. It »is« pure difference that underlies and foregrounds the system of differences later formalized and concentrated in the economic text. Marx's significantly underdeveloped concept of use-value has given rise to various misunderstandings, such as Baudrillard's and Böhm-Bawerk's comforting refuge in the identification of the »ambiguous« use-value with the certainty of utility (Böhm-Bawerk 1949: 75 f., Baudrillard 1988: 64 f.). Despite dan-

gerous confusions such as these, the fact that Marx left this evanescent concept rather untheorized is justifiable, for, in doing so, he repudiated the purely philosophical desire to treat it at a high level of abstraction and generalization, thereby losing the referent in the midst of the theoretical currency more appropriate for the concept of value. As Herbert Marcuse put it in a slightly different context of instrumental rationality, »positivistic analysis wishes to eliminate [the metaphysical character of things] by translation, but the translation eliminates that which was to be defined« (1964: 210).

The double meaning of the untranslatable as unexchangeable and untheorizable is echoed in Benjamin's notion of the inexpressible within expression: »In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated.« (1968: 79) The hallmark of a good translation is its ability to transfer to and preserve within the translator's language what was untranslatable in the original; it carries (*translatio*) the untranslatable within itself (ibid.: 78). To a certain extent, value must also preserve use-value as its indispensable »substratum«; it carries the untranslatability of use-value *underneath* itself. But a preservation of the concern for the inalienable and uniquely singular human need within the economic system is none of the capitalist business. Benjamin's messianic vision of the good translation applied to the realm of the economic is nothing short of communism, in which the singularity of the need and the ability of *each* glow with the new light of justice rendered to the untranslatable.

On the other hand, according to Benjamin, a poor translation pretends that there is nothing untranslatable. It lives in the veneration of technical fidelity to the text and »intends to perform a transmitting function«, transmitting nothing »but information – hence something inessential« (ibid.: 69). This, in fact, is capital's pure language, or the language of pure capital. Information is »info-value« that can be quantified in bits, and therefore, stored, accumulated, and exchanged, following the model provided by capital. Often precluding the qualitative singularity of experiential knowledge, the individual exchanges and social circulations of info-commodities constitute the privileged way of speaking and »relating« to others within the late capitalist mode of production.

Capital's most daring dream is to secure total transparency of »noiseless« information transmission by completely eliminating the interference of use-value and the untranslatable as its ineluctable substrata. Nonetheless, since the process of translation occurs precisely in the medium of the untranslatable, since the soul of value exists in the body of use-value (Marx 1976: 179), even a partial realization of capital's fantasy yields periodic crises that produce »the forcible establishment of unity between elements that have become independent and the enforced separation from one another of elements which are essentially one« (Marx 1963: 513). This entails a violent reaffirmation of value's dependence on use-value, despite capital's delusions to the contrary, and hence, of the indissoluble bond between translation and the untranslatable.

In light of Benjamin's differentiation between good and poor translations, Marx's evocation of translation in *Capital* assumes new significance. The doctrinaire, poor translation of vulgar economics is concerned with the empirical phenomena under the assumption that they exemplify universal laws. As a result, it gives rise to major economic categories,

such as rent, wages, interest, profit, etc., but treats them as isolated concepts that are independent from each other. The circle of poor economic translation closes when

»[c]lass empiricism turns into false metaphysics, scholasticism, which toils painfully to deduce undeniable empirical phenomena by simple formal abstraction directly from the general law« (ibid.: 89),

that is, when purportedly universal laws endeavor to explain empirical phenomena. On the other hand, Marx's translation fulfills Benjamin's criterion of goodness, on at least two counts. First, it maintains the untranslatability of use-value as an obstacle on the way of value's self-valorization. Marx uncovers the unavoidable »noise« in the otherwise ideal communication of capital with itself – the noise that may obstruct this communication and produce an economic crisis. Second, Marx is careful to translate in a way that incorporates the necessary inner connections between various economic categories into a qualitatively different theoretical language. Upon retracing these inner connections to the exploitation of labor, one experiences the *déjà vu* of having arrived on the threshold of the untranslatable.

3. *From Production to Circulation, from Life to After-Life*

One of the most original elements in Benjamin's meditation on translation is his use of the concepts of life and after-life in their relation to texts and works of art in general. In the context of Marxian political economy, I am interested in these concepts to the extent that they describe the dynamics of capitalist production and circulation. In this section of the paper, I will theorize the »lives« of value and of labor in their function as the original in translation. Further, I will apply Benjamin's notions of survival and criticism to various interactions of life and after-life, living and dead labor, in Marx's text. I will argue that in spite of the dialectical complementarity of labor and capital in the capitalist mode of production, the latter survives not only as a mode of domination over the former, but also as a threat to its own survival.

For Benjamin, life is characteristic of the original work of literature expressed as a pre-history of translation:

»Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.« (1968: 71)

But if a translation is to »issue from the original«, the life of the original must have already been supplanted with its after-life. The work of literature and its translation, the text's life and its after-life, are removed from each other in time, rendering the immediacy of life

absolutely untranslatable, since it occurs prior to translation, perhaps in a different epoch. Nonetheless, translation saves the life of the original, as it »marks [the original's] stage of continued life«.

In Marx's text a similar necessity obtains for the sequence of production and circulation. If value is *valorized* in the process of production, it cannot be *realized* before it reaches the sphere of circulation. Even though capital tends toward the increase of turnover efficiency, speeding up its pace in a desire to reduce circulation time to zero (Marx 1978: 203), the unavoidable gap separates the two spheres. This gap demarcates the rugged edges of what is untranslatable within the temporal fabric of the capitalist text and joins the list of other use-value obstacles that

»remain the bearers of perennial and self-valorizing capital value only insofar as they are constantly renewed, are replaced by new use-values of the same or another kind. Their sale in their finished commodity form [...] is however the constantly repeated condition for their reproduction [...]. It is only through this constant renewal of its body that the exchange value maintains itself.« (ibid.: 206)

Since the sale of the »finished commodity form« is the »constantly repeated condition for [...] reproduction«, it signifies a continuation of the life of value and is similar in its effects to the service rendered by translation to the original.

But the writing of labor always precedes value as »life« and as »the original«. In the process of production labor appears »on the side of the worker [...] in the form of unrest [*Unruhe*]« before its objectification »on the side of the product, in the form of being, as a fixed, immobile characteristic« (Marx 1976: 287). Such unrest refers to the life of labor, as it is subjectively experienced by the worker. To the extent that we witness the emergence of a capitalistically produced commodity, however, living labor's »unrest« is extinguished not only in the physical body of use-value, but also and in its soul made of value.

Commenting on »The Task of the Translator«, Paul de Man observes that the disappearance of unrest is already an aftereffect of translation: »The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice.« (1986: 82) Withstanding the test of time in the course of its »survival«, the work of literature reaches »the age of its fame« (Benjamin 1968: 72). With the notion of survival, Benjamin's language (German, in the original) becomes incredibly rich and nuanced, and here Jacques Derrida's essay »Des Tours de Babel« performs the invaluable service of unearthing the variants of this term from the depths of Benjamin's text. Derrida notices that after-life in the sense of survival appears in three distinct forms in »The Task of the Translator«. First, *Überleben* – literally over-life – indicates the literary work's survival *post mortem*, in the sense of the French *sur-vie* (Derrida 1985: 178). In Benjamin's text *Überleben* is the temporality of the rupture that separates the original from its translation. Second, Benjamin refers to *Fortleben* as the continuation of life in survival (ibid.). Here the after-life of the original appears as an extension (*fort*) of, rather than a rupture with its life. Finally, survival becomes *Aufleben*: »the infinite re-birth, [...] [the] perpetual reviviscence, [...] [the] constant regeneration« (ibid.: 202) by the means of translation. Thus, the rupture of

Überleben and the continuation of *Fortleben* are dialectically synthesized into a »ruptured continuation« of rebirth in *Aufleben*.

Nonetheless, what was fame in the Benjaminian scheme of things is economic tyranny and domination in Marxian political economy. In order to illustrate this point, I will examine the ways in which various significations of survival reverberate in Marx's economic theory. First, *Überleben* characterizes capitalist relations of production and appears as dead labor in the guise of constant capital, purchased by the means of previously valorized (already »translated«) surplus value. Dead labor is resurrected *post mortem* and employed in the exploitation of living labor, setting it in motion. As Marx put it: »Capital is the dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and *lives the more*, the more labor it sucks.« (1976: 342) Thus, capital sur-vives within the donor-vampire relation of production.

Second, in *Fortleben* the »social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction« (ibid.: 711). The continuity of *Fortleben* in capitalism implies the survival – physical and sexual reproduction – of the worker as a wage laborer, but only as the means for the survival of value advanced as capital. By perpetually recreating (and augmenting) the individual and productive consumption funds, the worker extends his life as a living-breathing body and as a classed subject, at the same time producing the means for the future exploitation of labor. Strangely enough, the worker's survival translates labor into value in such a way that the working class as a whole is increasingly divested of its vitality, stifled, robbed of the product of its labor, and reified, becoming »as much an appendage of capital as the lifeless instruments of labor are« (ibid.: 719).

Third, *Aufleben* combines the first two meanings of »survival« insofar as it designates the movement of capital in its totality based upon the continuous re-enactment of the relations of production, in which dead labor dominates living labor. The perpetual »rebirth« of capital occurs both within and outside of the sphere of circulation (ibid.: 302), with the essential, though contradictory, complementarity of production and circulation mirroring Benjaminian ruptured continuation. The value valorized in the process of production by the means of the »labor power [...] [that] [...] not only reproduces its own value, but produced value over and above this« (ibid.: 317) is realized in circulation with the sale of the commodity, after which it returns to the capitalist along with surplus-value. The circle of translation attains closure only to be recommenced over and over again.

But capital's survival implies more than the mere exploitation of labor. According to Marx, the longer capital survives, the more it undermines living labor's *access* to the means of survival, as well as its own *capacity* to survive. This tendency is enunciated in the discovery of the falling rate of profit and its flip side – the rise in the organic composition of capital. As living labor is gradually replaced by dead labor in the drive to maximize turnover efficiency, an increasing number of workers find themselves unemployed or semi-employed:

»The working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an ex-

tent which is always increasing. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production.» (ibid.: 783 f.)

Concomitantly with the decline in the mass of living labor, »surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied« (Marx 1981: 319), and the rate of profit must similarly fall.

What does the tendential fall in the rate of profit signify in the context of the three meanings of survival discussed above? First, at the level of *Überleben*, the vampire proclaims its self-sufficiency. Sucking proportionally less blood out of the body of living labor, it comforts itself with a delusion that it can revive itself with its own blood and fare much better than in the relation of dependence on its donor. But in the context of *Fortleben*, it becomes increasingly difficult to reproduce capital, since reproduction depends on the perpetual reinvestment of surplus value. The short-term solutions are: either speeding up the pace of production (increasing relative surplus-value) and circulation, or stretching the absolute surplus value – both of which meet the limits of untranslatability in the form of use-value obstacles (such as the length of the working day). Finally, at the level of *Aufleben*, the valorized value that the capitalist draws from the sale of her product is not sufficient enough to motivate further reinvestment, signaling the inability of the capitalist mode of production to self-resuscitate. Thus, Marx concludes that »[t]he *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*« (ibid.: 358).

Benjamin correctly points out that »[t]ranslation is a mode« (1968: 70). More precisely, it represents three economic »modes« at once, including the mode of production, the mode of circulation, and the overall mode of production-circulation. Benjamin maintains, however, that translation is not the only way of relating to the original in its after-life. In addition to reading and translating a work of literature, one can engage in literary criticism – »another, if a lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works« (ibid.: 76).

Literary criticism finds a unique parallel in the economic world of capital, particularly, in the concepts of productive and unproductive labor. From the standpoint of the capitalist, labor is productive not if it creates a product, even though such a »creation« is the requisite material precondition of valorization, but »if it directly valorizes capital, or creates surplus-value« (Marx 1976: 1038 f.). The certitude as to whether or not the investment has been productive of surplus-value, whether or not the literary work still sounds »fresh« in its after-life (Benjamin 1968: 73), is achieved only after the final realization of value and surplus-value in sale, that is, at the very end of the series of translations. If the capital advanced was in fact unproductive, this knowledge in its unambiguous certainty comes to the capitalist as a shock, since his very *raison d'être* – valorization – does not endure beyond production, and is already dead in circulation. Not unlike the criticism that evaluates the aesthetic value of a literary work, a confident judgment concerning the worthiness (profitability) of a capitalist investment is possible in hindsight alone. In other words, the attainment of the »critical« distance presupposes temporal distance from the time of literary or economic production, rendering the latter nothing but a gamble, as far as the capitalist is concerned.

4. *Translation and Intentionality*

In »The Task of the Translator«, Benjamin argues that a single language cannot realize its »intended effect«, and hence the role of translation is to supplement the *intentio* (the purpose) of the original (ibid.: 76, 79). Translation shows that the domesticated coziness of the original meaning has always been illusory, that one must come »to terms with the foreignness of languages« (ibid.: 75), including one's native language. But this function of translation requires a translator because languages are unable to relate to each other on their own. Thus, the translator's role is rather passive; in it he assumes the task not of his own choosing.

It is now clear that the process of exchange in a capitalist society mimics that of translation. Not unlike languages that cannot self-translate, »[c]ommodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right« (Marx 1976: 178). Consequently, the »guardian« of the commodity serves as its »conscious bearer [*Träger*]« (ibid.: 254), who becomes instrumental in the initiation of the intercourse between the commodities. As passive bearers of their economic roles, the parties in a capitalist exchange are translators of the languages belonging to their various commodities: German *Träger*, bearer, connotes Latin *translatio*, to carry over.

The conception of intentionality that operates in *Capital* and in »The Task of the Translator« is in no way to be associated with the subjectivity of (a free) will. Despite the undesirability of the translator's fidelity to the letter of the text, Benjamin requires that she remain faithful to its spirit, or »the mode of intention« (Benjamin 1968: 74). The transposition of the original's mode of intention onto translation is the true task of the translator, in which freedom exists side-by-side with unfreedom. Similarly in the ideal version of capitalism, workers have the choice of different employers before them, while capitalists are free to hire and fire at will. But capitalists must hire and exploit their labor force if they are to remain capitalists, while the workers are not free not to sell their labor power if they are to physically survive (Albritton 1999: 20). Neither will capitalists benefit from their right to translate freely, attaching any price whatsoever to their products in a market open to competition, since that market will objectively correct various price estimations, forcing them to conform to a »blindly operating« average (Marx 1976: 196).

The key distinction between Benjaminian translation and capitalist exchange is that in the former the original is always recuperable from the language-to-language relationship, whereas in the latter, the commodity is alienated without a trace. Benjamin argues that translation intends to raise the original into a »higher [...] linguistic air«; it lovingly glues the diverse fragments (languages) together to reestablish the wholeness of the vessel (1968: 75, 78). Therefore, the intention of translation is to recuperate to the greatest extent possible the pre-Babelian linguistic unity. In exchange, things are radically different. Money as the means of exchange homogenizes commodities, producing sameness that has absorbed all fragmentary difference. Once exchanged, the commodity departs from its owner forever, for it has always been foreign, always *intended* for exchange, rather than for use. Although value returns to the capitalist who advanced it at the end of a series of exchanges, it does

so as an undifferentiated mass in which value and surplus-value are qualitatively indistinguishable from one other (Marx 1978: 129).

In addition to its failure to preserve the original's mode of intention within the translated version, capitalist economic writing mystifies the original in the mistranslation from value into price. The closer Marx advances toward the plane of circulation, the more »transformed forms« he encounters on his path. To equate production prices with transformed forms of value, and profits with transformed forms of surplus-value (Marx 1981: 263) is to maintain that the language of price distorts and mistranslates the language of value, or to employ Benjamin's terminology, »blocks the light of the original« (Benjamin 1968: 79). Such a mistranslation works in the interest of the capitalist and his ideologue, the bourgeois political economist, because in collapsing the fundamental distinctions between production and circulation, it conceals the reality of profit derived from the exploitation of labor and subsumes the language of value underneath the language of price.

Whether generated in a conscious effort, or by the way of a structural limitation of »the economic imagination«, mistranslation understood as a transformed form of the original languages of labor and value betrays the true intention of the capitalist class. Likewise, the sphere of capitalist production harbors two different intentionalities that correspond to the two major classes: the abstractly universal labor process brought into effect by the workers and the historically specific valorization process. In the labor process, the purpose of humanity is realized in »the purposeful activity, that is work itself« (Marx 1976: 284), producing the original text of labor in the form of use-values. Use-values are the expressive manifestations of the working class's lived intentionality, for

»[a]ll purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposefulness [...] have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance« (Benjamin 1968: 72).

Conversely, in the valorization process, the particular purposes of the laboring activity are lost. Instead, the capitalist views the concrete forms of human labor on the plane of undifferentiated »expenditure of labor-power in general [...] in so far as it creates value« (Marx 1976: 296). From the stance of cold indifference toward the material expression of labor, translation into value (valorization) proceeds by way of *abstraction* from use-values, producing a »sterile equation of [...] dead languages« (Benjamin 1968: 73) far removed from a proper translation. Subjugating the lived intentionality of labor to the indifferent intentionality of valorization, the capitalist does not do justice to the original, failing the task of the translator.

In an interpretive essay Paul de Man writes that for Benjamin

»the translator, per definition, fails. The translator can never do what the original text did [...]. If [Benjamin's] text is called ›Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers‹, we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: *Aufgabe*, task, can also mean the one who has to give up.« (1986: 80)

The translation of labor into value fails not because it is impossible to abstract from use-values their universal character, but rather because such a translation refuses to preserve the

material untranslatability of the original within it. Consequently, the translation of value into price is doubly problematic, for (1) value has already mistranslated the original in its transition from labor, and (2) translations

»prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them« (Benjamin 1968: 81).

Putting aside a wide range of more or less successful Marxist attempts to solve the transformation problem that ensues from this complication, I consider its root, its radicalism, to be the extreme and irrecoverable loss of the original-labor determination in the sphere of circulation. Thus, Benjamin's discovery of the paralysis inherent in the translation of translation coincides with the cul-de-sac of the transition toward prices in which »any rational basis for political economy would fall away« (Marx 1981: 248).

5. *Toward Pure Language*

Benjamin's essay culminates with the emergence of pure language (*reine Sprache*) as »that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages« (1968: 79). For Derrida, pure language is

»the being-language of the language, tongue or language *as such*, that unity without self-identity, which makes for the fact that there are languages and that they are languages« (1985: 201).

From the definitions offered above, it follows that pure language is not merely an obscure and mystical concept, but a real, though invisible, force underlying the very possibility of effectuating, having, and employing a language that simultaneously transcends any particular language. Nonetheless, in his interpretation of Benjamin, Derrida reifies this force, picturing it as a *thing* (»the being-language of the language«, and »that unity«), and misrepresenting Benjamin's specification of pure language as a *process*, producing itself »in the evolving of languages«. Not coincidentally, Marx repeatedly criticizes vulgar political economists for committing a similar fateful blunder in their treatment of capital as a thing, rather than a social process.

Applying the concept of pure language to capital, one would make an unforgivable mistake if one substitutes pure language with money. Although money is the universal equivalent form by the means of which commodities enter into relations with one another, in itself it is not the motivating force that drives capital accumulation. The closest approximation to pure language in Marx's theory is not a specific incarnation of value, be it the isolated language of money or that of commodities, but value-in-*process*, in other words, capital itself, as money begetting money (Marx 1976: 256). The site of pure language is in the survival (*Aufleben*) of capital both within and outside of the sphere of circulation, whereas its mode of intending is the automatic valorization of value.

With this level of abstraction transferred onto the circuits of capital, the pure language of capital may be understood as

»the real connection between the metamorphoses of the various individual capital, in fact the connection between the circuits of individual capitals as partial movements of the reproduction process of the total social capital« (Marx 1978: 180).

In the context of such a total(izing) movement, every circuit already presupposes the other two circuits and, indeed, requires them in order to fulfill its own function. Correspondingly, Benjamin suggests that every language is incomplete in and of itself. As a result, it *a priori* compensates for this essential incompleteness by containing the seeds, the conditions of possibility, of its own translation into all the other languages (Benjamin 1968: 325). While each of capital's circuits conditions the continuity of the entire process of valorization, every human language properly realizes the purpose of language as such only by relating to another language with the assistance and mediation of a translator.

Nonetheless, the assumption that Benjamin's pure language and the movement of capital are procedurally and functionally identical is unwarranted. First, for Benjamin, pure language corresponds to the eschatological vision of the language of truth or the true language (1968: 82). Although in actual translations languages will never achieve the status of the pure language of truth, translated originals attain a certain degree of completion and realization of their purpose. In fact, they are nothing but miniature reversals of the destruction of the Tower of Babel. Conversely, the motions of the value-in-process are never completed, as long as surplus value is perpetually reinvested, recommencing the circuitry of economic mistranslations. The only certainty and »truth« familiar to the capitalist investor is the »eternal return« of value along with surplus-value to her pocket, and back into capital's reproduction again. Therefore, capital's Tower of Babel is doomed to chronic collapse within permanent incompleteness.

Second, whereas in Benjamin's text pure language overcomes the untranslatable, in the Marxian theory of capitalism the irreducible contradiction between the two persists and intensifies. On one hand, as I have mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the capitalist dream of either totally subsuming the untranslatable use-value under the pure language of value, or completely excluding the former from the latter, exemplifies a poor translation, whose failure results in ever-deepening economic crises. At very the height of the economic cycle, when it seems that the delusion of absolute translatability has become part of the empirical reality, use-value obstacles reaffirm themselves with a renewed forcefulness that disrupts the calculations, intentions, and purposes of capital's »conscious bearers«. Translation irretrievably misplaces that which it planned to translate.

On the other hand, Benjamin's theory welcomes a situation where the untranslatable seems to have yielded to the true (pure) language under the influence of which the text appears in the literalness and immediacy of the »unconditionally translatable« (Benjamin 1968: 82). This situation need not imply, however, a realization of capital's vision in the linguistic realm, guaranteeing a hitherto unimaginable destruction of use-value. Rather, one ought to read the concluding sentences of »The Task of the Translator« as the most

powerful avowal of use-value and the untranslatable, for in the absoluteness of pure language, translation becomes »one with the original«, while »literalness and freedom are united« (ibid). Signifying frankly and straightforwardly, a text written in the language of truth (the Holy Writ, for Benjamin) abolishes the equivocality of the language of value and the mistranslations that emanate from it. Thus, Benjamin's pure language *is* the language of use-value rescued from the status of untranslatability assigned to it by the linguistic regime subordinated to the law of value.

Yet, in both Marx's and Benjamin's versions of pure language a common danger awaits the translator – the fantastic/phantalasmal possibility of madness. The mad fantasies, the »grotesque ideas« that evolve out of its »wooden brain«, loom on the horizon of capital every time self-valorization of value comes to its fruition, divorcing the language of capital from the core functionality of language *in general* to such an extent that this language falls out of touch with its referent. As the rhythm and pace of turnovers increase, the monotonous chatter of capital's circuits grows louder without communicating anything qualitatively new or different. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan – capital's medium becomes its message; capital is transformed into an »automatic Subject« (Marx 1976: 255), that is to say, an economic system existing for its own sake. Thus, the two chief sources of madness ensuing from the pure language of value are: (1) its delusion that there is nothing outside of it – the delusion that parallels the thesis of self-referentiality all-too familiar in the circles of post-modernist semiotics, and (2) the extreme reification of all social relations, standing for the systems of inter- and intra-class communication that animate capital, with the subsequent apparition of

»the bewitched, distorted, upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things« (Marx 1981: 969).

According to Benjamin, translation is an *aporia* that may lead not only to pure language, but also to the vertigo of madness and to the terrifying silence. Whereas in the vertigo of madness »meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language« (Benjamin 1968: 82), the terrifying silence warns that »the gates of language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator« (ibid.: 81). That the gates of language slam shut is attributable to the radical impossibility (failure) of ever achieving what the original has done, which may lead to despair and resignation. Silence here signifies the limit of translation, the utter and impenetrable untranslatability of a literary work, and the total negation of the task of the translator. It announces bad news: the translator has entered Minos' Labyrinth – a veritable linguistic trap – from which only the select few will escape alive.

The madness of meaning that »plunges from abyss to abyss« may, on the contrary, facilitate translation. In the course of this uncontrollable movement, symbolic meanings, linguistic styles, and unconscious associations run wild, manipulating the translator. The madness of meaning becomes synonymous with Marx's definition of capital as an automatic Subject. Yet, however paradoxical this may seem, such linguistic ec-stasy – the translator's

stance *outside* of herself – may cunningly lead her toward the light of a good translation and of freedom, as it allows the otherness of the foreign tongue coupled with the ineradicable foreignness of the »native« tongue to touch and to transform that, which she judges to be »her own«, bringing it a step closer to pure language. Therefore, welcoming and admitting the Other as pure difference before its congealment into a system (of meanings, languages, texts, etc.), the madness of meaning in translation is fundamentally different from the ecstasy of a capitalist »possessed of money« (Marx 1976: 714) that serves to homogenize, standardize, and banish all otherness from its path.

6. Conclusion: The Ethical Practice of Translation

At a recent conference Susan Sontag stated that translation is and has always been an ethical task »invested with dignity and utmost moral importance« (Sontag 2002). This implies that a systematic mistranslation, such as the one Marx alludes to in the third volume of *Capital*, is not only inaccurate, but also unethical, doing tremendous violence to the original. But a more serious dilemma rears its head when de Man proclaims that the task of the translator is always already her failure. In light of de Man's remark, one discovers that the human spirit's thrust toward freedom (cf. the epigraph) and ethics through translation is already doomed before its commencement. Where does one turn next: toward the Scylla of inescapable mistranslation and actions always falling short of ethics, or toward the Charybdes of melancholic inaction and resignation punctuated with a cynical and mistrustful attitude to ethics?

Yet the picture is not as bleak as it first appears. For Levinas, for instance, the failure of completion is transformed into the very positivity of ethics:

»[t]he infinity of responsibility denotes [...] a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished« (Levinas 1969: 244).

Ethical actions, like the acts of translation, always fall short of perfection, but in their failure to measure up against the incommensurable both are instigated to persist, to do more, to surpass themselves in a never-ending ascent toward the Other and pure language. Marxian political economy is ethical theorizing, because translating the economic, it »carries over« the weight of the untranslatability of use-value. The untranslatable in *Capital* disrupts the smooth monotony of value's self-expansion, prompting periodic crises; it glows with the light of messianic justice in what is singular and unexchangeable; it sets the limit to the indifferent acceleration of capital's turnovers. But none of this is enough. For with a stronger emphasis placed on the economy of the untranslatable arises a greater realization of the radical incompleteness at the heart of Marxian »theory« of use-value and perhaps of theory in general.

The untranslatable enters the economic scene as a strain of resistance that traverses capital's mistranslations aiming toward the pure language of value. But it is also a strain

enmeshed with capital in the very notion of survival, a strain whose intentionality is both hijacked and fashioned by that of valorization, a strain whose right to have languages of its own – the languages of use-value – is usurped by the standardizing and homogenizing language of value. The infinite, ethical responsibility lies in a practice of reading the margins and the interstices of political economy: the practice of reading that is unfaithful to the orthodox protocols of translation, yet utterly devoted, despite and because of the failure inherent in its task, to the untranslatable that predicates these and other protocols. To »capitalize« on the ineffaceable-effaced difference within value and outside of it! This responsibility is the true task of the translator instantiating the rise of the original »into a higher [...] linguistic air« (Benjamin 1968: 75).

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