

**Balázs Kántás**

# **BORDER-CROSSING**



## **THREE ESSAYS ON LITERARY TRANSLATION**



**BALÁZS KÁNTÁS**

**BORDER-CROSSING  
THREE ESSAYS ON LITERARY  
TRANSLATION**

**Editor and responsible publisher:  
Zoltán Zsávolya PhD**

**PUBLISHED BY  
THE  
SOCIETY FOR RESEARCH OF THE  
HORTHY ERA  
/  
HORTHY KORSZAK TÖRTÉNETÉNEK  
KUTATÁSÁÉRT TÁRSASÁG**

**ISBN 978-615-6250-26-1**

**BUDAPEST, 2021**



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PASSING THROUGH THE BORDERS OF  
LANGUAGE. ON THE THEORY AND  
PRACTICE OF POETRY TRANSLATION.....6

LOST IN TRANSLATION. POSSIBLE  
PROBLEMS AROUND THE TRANSLAT-  
ABILITY OF PAUL CELAN'S POEMS IN THE  
MIRROR OF JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH  
TRANSLATIONS.....21

FINDING WHAT IS LOST IN  
TRANSLATION. AN ATTEMPT OF  
READING OF WALTER BENJAMIN'S ESSAY  
'THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR' AND  
PAUL DE MAN'S COMMENTARY IN  
PARALLEL.....55

## **PASSING THROUGH THE BORDERS OF LANGUAGE ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POETRY TRANSLATION**

Since the practice of poetry translation is not homogeneous, that is, in fact it is dependent on language, historical age, culture and, above all, it is also translation-specific, views on the substance and the limits of its possibilities are very divided. Here and now, we shall attempt to briefly compare ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ poetry translation practices, insofar as it is possible to apply such an extreme typology to the boundaries, since, as we have already stressed, these boundaries often blur, they are practically very flexible.

In general, it is difficult to make definite statements about conservative and liberal translation practices, but at most some characteristics can be listed, some of which may or may not be true for a given translation of a given poem or other literary text. The essence of ‘conservative’ poetry translation is obviously that

the given translator tries to follow both form and content as faithfully as possible, and does not give much ground in this determination. Sometimes this is good, sometimes it is not good, as the balance between form and content is very difficult to strike and find, and in practice one is often at the expense of the other. In fact, it is perhaps superfluous to call a particular trend in poetry translation inherently conservative, since, on a case-by-case basis, it is possible to observe both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ features in a given translation, with almost total fidelity to the content being accompanied by a disruption of the original form.

The literary translator’s ‘liberalism’, on the other hand, can mean that the translator is free to use form and content, making more concessions to himself, breaking away from the original poem and using it only as a basis, or even creating a new artwork that is completely independent of the original text in all respects. Liberal translation can range from a minimal change in content and form to paraphrase or adaptation. As mentioned above, it is possible to produce a partly liberal and partly conservative translation of a given poem by the

translator making almost no concessions in one aspect, and being very permissive in another.

The literary translator's conservatism and liberalism may also clash in the case of what exactly does the poet–translator consider himself or herself to be? Does the translator define themselves as an author, or as a servant of the foreign-language author, who tries to translate the poem from one language into another, free of inspiration and without putting his own personality into the translation? Does the translator want to faithfully mediate from the source language to the target language, or intends to create a completely new creative literary text based on the original one?

Like other questions of poetry translation, it is also very difficult to find a complete and satisfactory answer. It might be a limitedly valid point of view that the poet–translator cannot in any case completely banish his own individuality from the text of the translation, since it is they who creates the translated text in the target language, and for this they must have the capacity of using language creatively and individually. The literary translator has to *create* a poem, which they is unlikely to be able to do independently of his own



tone, literary voice. A certain degree of liberalism is, therefore, essential if one is to translate a given poem from one language into another. Whether this should be done in a slavish, uninspired way, or whether one should strive to re-create in some way the same thing that the author wrote, while at the same time creating something new and independent of it, is again a matter of rather divided opinion...

As poetry translation is not a practice that can be defined by precise, exact guidelines, but it is rather art rather than simple craft, unlike traditional translation, there are arguments for and against its practitioners, both conservative and liberal. Settling the debate is by no means easy, and perhaps it is not even possible, and both trends of literary translation can and do have their legitimate place in the discourse.

There are undoubtedly many controversies surrounding the translation of poetry in any language, since there are concepts that cannot be translated from one language to another without paraphrasing it within the framework of a poem. This is not necessarily related to the conservative or liberal nature of the practice, but it is certainly

worth mentioning and is closely linked to the nature of translation practice. In fact, to simplify it, *everything can be translated* from any language into any language, but in the case of poems, because of the very strict length criteria in the majority of cases, this is in most cases not feasible without loss of content or the partial or total disruption of the original form. This is a point on which both conservative and liberal literary translators must agree with each other, at least in part.

Having roughly outlined the extremities between which the practice of translating poetry can move, the question still remains to us: is translating poetry an artistic activity, or is it no more than workshop work, a craft that can actually be learned? There are countless arguments for and against this question, and everyone who comes into contact with poetry translation in any form is forced to take a position on one side or on the other. We are forced to do the same, and the present essay will therefore treat poetry translation as rather artistic activity than craftsmanship. In the following sections, therefore, we will therefore discuss the arguments that can be made for the fact that poetry translation is not merely a

mechanical task and action of translation, but is artistic activity, part of which, like other artistic activities, can be learned, but without a certain artistic talent one may never become a good poetry translator. There are, therefore, several arguments for considering poetry translation as an artistic activity rather than as a set of partly schematic stages of mental work that are entirely similar to traditional translation practice and which depend on a knowledge of the source and the target language.

However, despite all of the arguments in its favour, the question arises again and again in the history of poetry translation, whether it is in fact an artistic work that creates an artefact, an artistic creation, or whether it is nothing more than a very difficult form of translation, which, although it requires a high level of training and a lot of practice, is somewhere below art in the hierarchy. Another frequently asked question is whether, in fact, translating poetry is more or less than writing original poetry, and if so, in what way is it more or less than creating poetic texts?

Well, first of all, since poetry translation is emphatically only learnable at a certain level and

judging whether it is 'good' or 'bad' is nearly a completely subjective judgement, it probably deserves to be called artistic activity. After all, most translators of poetry are usually practicing creative poets themselves, that is, artists who are unable to separate themselves and their talent of art from their own poetic voice. Therefore, they are forced, wittingly or unwittingly, to incorporate it into their translations. In the majority of cases, there is not much to be said about the mechanical character of literary translation, since every foreign-language poet and every foreign-language poem has a completely different content, atmosphere and literary world, and every poem is a new challenge for the translator who takes the task to translate it from a source language into a target language. Although the translator's scope is in some respects narrower than if they had to write their own poems without any guidance, they still cannot rely on knowledge of the source language and a dictionary alone. They have to have something more that cannot be grasped, cannot really be defined with scientific and scholarly notions. It is not really possible to *grasp* clearly how a poetry translator works and should work, since linguistics and

literary studies can at best only grasp and describe certain aspects of it clearly, as far as we believe. For example, editorial work, which in the case of translation in the traditional sense may be a guarantee of the quality of the translation, is no serious guarantee of anything in the case of poetry translation, except fidelity of content. Artistic quality, if it is possible to speak of artistic quality within any clear framework, cannot be guaranteed by editorial work, by the editor's taste, since the editor themselves is usually not a practicing artist, but is able to form an opinion on a given translation of a given poem on the basis of certain precise and clearly describable aspects of its content.

But can an editor simply check that form and content are in perfect, or at least in nearly perfect harmony in a given translation of a given poem? Perhaps only if they tries to examine the work in question not from an editorial, that is, professional point of view, but as a recipient of an artwork. After all, there have been no clear criteria for defining art since its existence, and the compilation of literary canons, including the canons of poetry translations, is nearly entirely

arbitrary, the product of subjective judgements of individuals who judge works of a given period to be good or bad according to certain criteria. And it is not uncommon that what is accepted by the literary canon is not appreciated by the reading public, and the reverse may also be true in certain cases. Since literature, like all human activities, is a social construction, it is full of subjective factors.

Obviously, the goals of each literary translator vary, and very often they are combined. Man by nature enjoys recognition, but the artist is almost always attracted by artistic challenges, and the practitioners of a given field of art are often also consciously seeking to delight the recipient through artistic creation.

Going even further, it could also be argued that poetry translation is in fact no less an artistic activity than writing poetry or making music. The analogy between the translator and the musician is often mentioned in professional literature. On this basis, music can also be considered a kind of translation, since the composer creates it in a form inaudible to the human ear, in the musical score, and the musician interprets it through the instrument in a form audible and enjoyable to the

recipient. Yet it is not usually argued that the act of making music in itself, without the musician himself being a composer, deserves the title of art. If the translator makes the work of the author of a poem in a foreign language intelligible in the target language, as it were, ‘rearranges’ it, then translation of the poem can be fully considered an activity fully equal to any other form of literature, and not even a lower form of art. Since the tradition of literary history testifies that, in general, and in a very large number of cases, the poet-translators who are (considered to be) significant have, in addition to their work as translators, also an outstanding poetic oeuvre, their oeuvre as translators is often considered to be part of their poetic oeuvre. Although there are some excellent poet-translators who have written very few poems and whose poetic work is not so significant in comparison with their translation work, the reverse is more likely to be the case: poets who are considered to be great in world literature can often boast a significant oeuvre as literary translators, but their translations are sometimes far fewer in number than their own poems.

Of course, there are very special cases, such as Jorge Luis Borges. The Argentine literary genius was legendary throughout his life, and he handled his mother tongue, Spanish, with the confidence of a poet, as well as Portuguese (which is very close to Spanish), and also French, German and English. Libraries are now filled with the critical reception of Borges's work, since he wrote outstanding poems in all the above mentioned languages, and also translated a large number of poems from one to another. For instance, it was him who translated Beowulf into Spanish, and this is just one example of the major works of his extensive oeuvre of literary translation. In Borges's case, there can hardly be done a clear distinction between poetry and poetry translation, and the work of an author who works in and within several languages and jumps between them with the dexterity of a cat is the evidence of how close writing creative poetry and poetry translation really are to each other.

We are talking about two similar, but in some ways two completely different artistic activities: writing creative poetry and poetry translation. It is undeniable, however, that poetry translation itself requires poetic skills from its



practitioner, and therefore it is no different, and cannot be considered anything other than an artistic activity in the strictest sense of the word.

Having argued that poetry translation is an artistic activity within the field of art of literature, and perhaps no less than writing creative poetry, it is now worth making a few remarks about its significance as a form of fiction, and thus as a form of art. Since poetry translation is essentially an attempt to introduce the audience of the culture of the target language into the work of an author who, without knowledge of the language, would be inaccessible to the majority of the audience, and its primary role may be to mediate poetry between, through languages. After all, most people who speak a foreign language usually know at most one or two languages at the level at which they can read fiction, let alone poetry, and even the most linguistically gifted people usually know at most four or five foreign languages at the very high level at which they can enjoy lyric poetry, which is usually a different genre to read and interpret. Therefore, only a small percentage of the world literature, without translation, is only accessible to

even those who have mastered a number of foreign languages at a fairly high level.

Therefore, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that without poetry translation, *world literature* as such does not exist, cannot exist, but only lyric poetry in national languages, separated from each other, creating no network, and this statement can also be extended to all forms and genres of literature. Poetry translation, in this view, has no less than a *role of constituting world poetry*, for without it, it is impossible to get to know the poetry of other nations to any degree. At the same time, poetry translation becomes, in a certain sense, part of the literature of poetry of the target language in the national culture as well, and therefore, it does not only create the world poetry, but also constitutes a significant part of the poetic literature of each nation. World poetry is not merely composed of the poetic literature of individual nations, but can perhaps be treated as something more than the sum of the national lyric poetic literatures, as something that exists above them.

In every historical age, every human society and in every literary environment, there has been,

is and possibly will be a great need to translate foreign-language literature, and within it, foreign-language poetry into the target language of a given nation. The poetry translator is, therefore, no less than a mediator between national literatures, and thus between cultures. Consequently, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the poetry translators deserves more recognition than they usually receive within the given national literatures. The credit usually goes to the author first, and the translator of the poem only second, but the translator does much more than simply translate a text from language A into language B. If poetry translation is a poetic, creative and artistic work, then perhaps we can also conclude that its importance should be given more attention in all respects than is generally given to it in contemporary discourses of literature and literary criticism...

## REFERENCES

Borges, Jorge Luis (2002): *The Craft of Verse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

De Man, Paul (1997): *Schlussfolgerungen. Walter Benjamins 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'*, In Alfred Hirsch (Hg.): *Übersetzung und Dekonstruktion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Derrida, Jacques (1997): *Babylonische Türme. Wege, Umwege, Abwege*. In Alfred Hirsch (Hg.): *Übersetzung und Dekonstruktion*, 119-165. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Madarász, Imre (2005): *Irodalomkönyvecske*. Budapest: Hungarovox.

Rába, György (1969). *Szép hűtlenek*. Budapest: Akadémiai.

Steiner, George (2005): *Bábel után – nyelv és fordítás I*. Budapest: Corvina.

Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály (2008): *Megértés, fordítás, kánon*. Bratislava-Budapest: Kalligram.

# LOST IN TRANSLATION POSSIBLE PROBLEMS AROUND THE TRANSLATABILITY OF PAUL CELAN'S POEMS IN THE MIRROR OF JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

The translatability of Paul Celan's poetry has been a current problem in literary studies arresting the attention of literary translators and scholars about since the 1980s, not only in Hungary and Europe, but also in the United States.

If we have a glance at George Steiner's opinion about the translatability of Paul Celan's poems, we may see that he approaches the issue with serious doubts. Steiner claims that it is also doubtful whether Celan himself wanted his readers to *understand* his poetry, conceiving his statement connected to the analyses of the poem entitled *Das gedunkelte Splitterecho – The darkened echo-splinter* (?). Steiner writes that meaning is a temporary phenomenon, and the poems can be understood only momentarily, since another interpretation of the same poem will decode the

text in a partly or completely different way, exploring different layers and structures of meaning. Literature wants to break out from the frameworks of everyday human language, becoming the authors own idiolect, heading for untranslatability, unrepeatability in another language (Steiner 2005: 158-159).

In her doctoral thesis Noémi Kiss refers to the approaches of Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin (Kiss 2003: 76-77). According to Benjamin, translation is only the temporary dissolution of the alienation of language; at the same time, historically it becomes more canonised, since in an optimal case a translated text cannot be translated further. Translation is a text that has its own identity, serving for *reading* together with the original artwork, constituting the metaphor of reading (De Man 1997: 182-228). However, according to De Man the situation of the translator is ironic, since the danger of mis-translation, misinterpretation is hiding in every single translation; i. e., translation itself automatically makes re-translation(s) necessary. Translation is not a progress that has a final goal, it has no final result, but each translation is a new

station towards the more complete understanding of a given text written in a foreign language, interpreted by the given translator.

According to Noémi Kiss in case of a translation the translator and the reader evidently have to consider the possible differences between the two languages, and in the analysis of a translated poem the text cannot automatically be treated as identical with the original source language poem, and the possible similarities and differences of the source text and the target text must also be examined in a literary analysis (Kiss 2003: 69). The question may arise how much Paul Celan is still *Paul Celan* in a given translation. Would be a more exact statement that a given translation is the common artwork of the poet and the translator, since the translator always necessarily adds something to the original text, and he or she also takes certain elements from the content and semantic structures of the source text, mainly if the literary translator is also a poet who forms the translated text according to his/her own notions, integrating it into his/her own artistic works.

Jacques Derrida claims that the radical differences between languages necessarily mean serious problems for literary translators (Derrida 1997: 119). Noémi Kiss, referring to Derrida quotes the so-called Babel-metaphor according to which translation, at least the exact translation saving every single element of the meaning from one language into another is almost impossible, since different human languages after their evolution constitute enclosed structures, and the passing between them is not completely possible. This approach is very similar to Paul Celan's concept of language – human language generally has its limits and is not able to express everything, then why would it be possible to *translate* something said or written in a given language into another, similarly imperfect and limited language?

However, if we accept the supposition that translation in the traditional sense is nearly impossible and we had better speak about interpretations, re-writings of a given poem, it may also be stated that translating poetry itself is also poetry, since it does not only transliterate the foreign authors work into the literature and culture of the target language, but it also re-thinks,



re-interprets, rewrites the given work, creating another poem that is close to the original one, but it is not identical to the source text. It raises the question whether or not poetry translation can be treated as an intertextual phenomenon, since the translated text evidently refers to the source text, a discourse evolves between them, but the two texts – and it may be agreed by most of literary scholars and translators – cannot be treated as identical structures.

Hans Georg Gadamer states that no-one can be bilingual in the hermeneutic sense of understanding – one's own native language plays a more serious role in understanding; that is, translation should necessarily be a kind of trans-coding of the source text into the mother tongue of the translator (Gadamer 1984: 269-273). Noémi Kiss states about Gadamer's and Benjamin's approach of translation that Gadamer describes understanding, our universal wish to defeat the alienation of language as a permanent act of translation – understanding and translation are a compromise with the alien character of language, recognising that everything can be *understood* only up to a certain degree (Kiss 2003: 155). According

to Gadamer's approach the task of the literary translator is to create a third language as a bridge between the source language and the target language, and this bridge language somehow should integrate both of them. Via this process, translation also becomes a historical phenomenon that makes it possible to understand a given text in a given historical age up to a certain degree (Gadamer 1984: 271). Walter Benjamin's concept of translation is very similar to Gadamer's notion – translation gives the chance to a given text to live on, not only to survive. As the sentences of life are harmonised with the living themselves, without meaning anything for them, the translation of a given text is evolving from the original one (Kiss 2003: 66).

Perhaps the above cited pieces of scholarly literature reveal that the translation Paul Celan's poetry into any language from German is not a simple task for a literary translator, and it may hinder the complete understanding of the texts that they were written in German, in the poet's mother tongue to which he had a controversial relationship and from which he wanted to break out. Is it possible to *translate* poems that intend to

destroy even the standards of their own language, heading for something outside human language?

Different scholarly literatures by and large agree that the translations made from Celan's poems, due to the multiple coding, the frequent intertextual references and the obscurity and hermetism ruling between them nearly always have some interpretative nature; that is, the translation of a given text written by Celan also necessarily becomes a reading of the poem.

Hungarian poet and literary historian György Rába states that a kind of beautiful faithlessness can be observed in certain poetry translations comparing them to their original source text, and the translator's own poetic voice frequently speaks from translated poem, combined with the poet's original voice (Rába 1969: 12). That is, a literary translator does not only mechanically transcribe words based on the use of a dictionary, but makes an attempt to decode and understand the text written in the foreign language. Since translation often involves interpretation, the translator has to make decisions – on these grounds, the result of the translation of Celan's or any other authors given poem can be considered as the result of

poetic activity, and the translation is not only the authors, but also the translator's artwork that may be integrated into the oeuvre of the translator. A poem can be understood differently by different translators, if a poem exists in several translations in parallel, then it is nearly necessary that the readings of the same poem in the target language shall also be slightly or completely different.

After examining some aspects of the possible problems around the translation of Paul Celan's poetry, now I attempt to examine some concrete examples of translation within the sphere of the English language – John Felstiner's English transcriptions, beginning with a few earlier poems by Celan, but mainly selecting from the authors more mature late poetry that may be more interesting for scholarly analysis. I would like to begin with one of Celan's emblematic poem entitled *Tenebrae*, which is a reference to the biblical darkness falling upon the world after Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

## **JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:**

### **Tenebrae**

Near are we, Lord,  
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,  
clawed into each other, as if  
each of our bodies were  
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,  
pray to us,  
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,  
went there to bend  
over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was  
what you shed, Lord.

It shined.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.

Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.

The blood and the image that was in the blood,  
Lord.

Pray, Lord.

We are near.

### **THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:**

Tenebrae

Nah sind wir Herr,  
nahe und greifbar.

Gegriffen schon, Herr,  
ineinander verkrallt, als wär  
der Leib eines jeden von uns  
dein Leib, Herr.

Bete, Herr,  
bete zu uns,  
wir sind nah.

Windschief gingen wir hin,  
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken  
nach Mulde und Maar.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,  
was du vergossen, Herr.

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr,  
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.

Wir haben getrunken, Herr.  
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.

Bete, Herr.  
Wir sind nah.

The above cited poem entitled *Tenebrae* is one piece of Celan's fairly early poetry, full of biblical and other religious references. First of all, the title probably refers to the darkness that fell upon the

world after Jesus Christ's death on the cross. It can be interpreted as a so-called counter-psalm or anti-psalm, since it is written in the traditional psalm form (a prayer to God), but it is turned upside down, since it is the poetic speakers, a group of people wandering in the desert who calls up God to pray to *them*. Probably, the poem intends to express the controversies of the world after the Holocaust and the Second World War, suggesting that the traditional order of the world simply turned upside down, and nothing can be considered as holy anymore.

Comparing Felstiner's translation and the original German poem written by Celan it can be seen that the first two lines of the poem are nearly literally identical in the original text and in the translation, the translator even preserves the inversion *Nah sind wir... – Near are we...* What can be spectacular as for comparison, in my opinion, at first appears in the seventh line of the poem. *Pray, Lord... – Bete, Herr...* in itself may mean in English that *We pray to us, God...*; i. e., in English this traditional form is not unconditionally imperative, whereas in German it is evidently a second person singular imperative form (or a first



person singular declarative form, but it lacks the obligatory grammatical subject *ich*). Furthermore, the verb *beten* in German does not only mean pray in the religious sense, but it also means beg to someone without even any religious connotation – *beten* and *beg*, since it is spoken about closely related Germanic languages, may also have some common etymology. In the ninth line of the poem, in my opinion, it can be questioned whether the German compound *windschief* is evidently wind-skewed in English, since it may also mean something like chased by wind or hindered by wind, but the translator had to make certain decisions. It may also be one of the remarkable characters of the translation that in the thirteenth line of the poem, while Celan wrote *Zur Tränke gingen wir...*, Felstiner wrote *Went to the water-trough...*, simply omitting the grammatical subject present in German, and it could certainly be also present in the English translation – i. e., the omission of the subject does not seem to be justified, although it may mirror the translator's intention to preserve Celan's fragmented poetic language. In the fourteenth and fifteenth line it seems also that the translator manages to remain faithful to the original version –

in German, the lines *Es war blut, es war, / was du vergossen*, Herr. may either refer to the blood of men that God shed as the punishing God of the Old Testament, or Gods, i. e. Jesus Christs blood that he shed for the salvation of men. As we can see in Felstiner's translation, *It was blood, it was, / what you shed, Lord.* makes the same interpretation possible, not deciding whether it is the punishing God who shed the blood of probably pagan / disobedient men, or it is God who shed his own blood for the salvation of men. In the twentieth line of the poem it is also interesting that the line *Wir haben getrunken, Herr.* is *We have drunk, Lord.* in Felstiner's translation; i. e. the translator even wants to preserve the tense of the original version of the poem – the so-called *Perfekt* is the German counterpart of the English Present Perfect Tense, although little differences may occur; e. g., in German where there is *Perfekt*, in English there may also be Simple Past in many cases. In the last line it is also interesting that although it is nearly the same as the first line of the poem, there is no inversion: *Wir sind nah.* Felstiner's translation also preserves this lack of inversion with the very simple sentence *We are near.*

It may be stated that Felstiner's translation of *Tenebrae* is a fairly exact, form- and content-faithful English transcription of the original poem that can rather be treated as a *translation* in the traditional sense than an interpretation / adaptation. The main reason for this fact may be that this poem is one of Celan's early, linguistically simpler works which I intended to use as an example of this period of the authors poetry, but henceforth I would like to examine with a few later, more mature poems by Celan, comparing them with their English translations.

## **JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:**

**IN RIVERS** north of the future  
I cast the net you  
haltingly weight  
with stonewritten  
shadows.

## **THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:**

**IN DEN FLÜSSEN** nördlich der Zukunft  
werf ich das Netz aus, das du  
zögernd beschwerst

mit von Steinen geschriebenen  
Schatten.

The above poem is one of Celan's much later and much more hermetic poetry that probably means a much larger challenge to any translator. It was published in the volume entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn* in 1967, only three years before the authors tragic suicide.

I am aware of the fact that the poem above cannot simply be *analysed* in the traditional way, since it has its own hermetic poetic world; therefore, I only mention that the poetic speaker symbolically casts his net in the rivers in some imaginary country where someone that he calls as you *weights his fishing net with stone-written shadows*. Stone is a traditional element of Jewish Mysticism that may have several connotations; e. g., Jewish people often put a stone on the grave of the dead to express their respect and memory felt for them. The shadows may refer to the fact that what appear in the net are not real, only their shadows can be perceived by the speaker – it can be a reference to one of the greatest dilemmas of Celan's poetry, the incapability of language to

communicate or express any explicit content. It can be mentioned German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer deals with the topic of the relation of you and I in Paul Celan's poetry, but in the present article I would rather concentrate on the similarities and differences between the original and the translated version of the poem (Gadamer 1993: 421).

It may be a spectacular difference between the original version and the translation of the poem that while Celan starts his poem with the beginning *In den Flüssen – In the rivers*, Felstiner translates it only as *In rivers...*, omitting the definite article present in German, annihilating (!) the definite character of the poem, placing it into an indefinite landscape. Seemingly it is only one little word, one little difference, but it may change the whole atmosphere of this otherwise very short poem. It is also questionable whether the German very *aus/werfen* meaning to *cast out* is simply *cast* in English, since as if in the German version it were stressed that the poetic speaker casts out his net in the rivers. Whether the German word *zörend* is the most appropriately translated into English with the word *haltingly* may also be a question. It is also

interesting that while Celan does not use a compound neologism in his original poem in the penultimate line while neologisms are very characteristic of his poetry, Felstiner translates the expression von Steinen geschriebenen literally meaning written by stones into a compound neologism stonewritten as if he would like to become *more celanian* than Paul Celan himself.

After the short examination of the otherwise also short poem it may be established that there are spectacular differences between the original version and the English transliteration of the same text; i. e., they cannot be considered identical, and their separate analysis may even lead to slightly different readings. Felstiner's English translation has a strongly interpretative character that digresses from Celan's original text, making certain decisions within the process of reading and translation.

## **JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:**

**TO STAND** in the shadow  
of a scar in the air.

Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.

Unrecognized,  
for you  
alone.

With all that has room within it,  
even without  
language.

**THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:**

**STEHEN** im Schatten,  
des Wundenmals in der Luft.

Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.  
Unerkannt,  
für dich  
allein.

Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,  
auch ohne  
Sprache.

The above cited poem is one of Celan's emblematic work from his late poetry that was also published in the volume entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn*. Although it is also a hermetic and hardly

decodable poem, it may be stated that in fact it refers to the task of the poet – to stand, under any circumstances, to stand, fight and write, without any reward.

Examining the first two lines it can be spectacular that while Celan writes *im Schatten des Wundenmals* that literally means in the shadow of the scar, Felstiner translates the German definite article into an indefinite article – in the shadow of *a* scar. The definite *Wundenmal* – scar created by becomes indefinite in the translation, and via this little modification the whole poem may lose its definite character.

However, despite the seemingly little difference between the original and the translated text, in the second paragraph of the poem the translation and the original version seem to be nearly completely identical. The neologism by Celan *Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn* is translated by Felstiner into *Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing*, although the *Stehn* – stand element of the original and the translation are in different places, Celan's original text ends in *Stehnn*, while Felstiner's translation begins with *stand*, but this difference



probably derives from the grammatical differences between German and English.

The third paragraph of the poem may show differences in its first line – while in German Celan writes *Mit allem, was darin Raum hat*, Felstiner translates this line into *With all that has room within it*. However, Celan's original line may also mean *With all for which there is enough room / space within*. Felstiner made a decision, but this decision is not unconditionally the best one and the meaning of the two lines in German and English, although they can mean approximately the same, they can also be interpreted differently. It is not evident whether the German noun *Raum* should be translated into its German etymological counterpart *room*, since it may rather mean *space* in this context. Nevertheless, there may be no doubt about the fact that the lines *auch ohne / Sprache* are well-translated into English with the expression *even without / language*.

Similar to the previous poem compared in original and in translation, in the case of the present poem it can also be established that the translation has a strongly interpretative character, and the translator digressed from the original

version at several places. The lack of a definite article, as seen above, may modify the whole atmosphere of a given poem in translation compared to the original text. That is why I think that it would rather be more exact to speak about adaptations / interpretations instead of translations in the case of the transliterated versions of Paul Celan's certain, mainly late and mature poems.

## **JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:**

### **THREADSUNS**

over the grayblack wasteness.

A tree-

high thought

strikes the light-tone: there are

still songs to sing beyond

humankind.

## **THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:**

### **FADENSONNEN**

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.

Ein baum-

hoher Gadanke  
greift sich den Lichtton: es sind  
noch Lieder zu singen jenseits  
der Menschen.

*Fadensonnen – Threadsun*s is one of the emblematic and well-known pieces of Celan's late poetry. The poem is not so hard to decode as several of Celan's late texts, since it seems to mirror the authors philosophy of art. The short piece consisting only a few lines is probably a vision about the *language beyond human language*, a system of representation that may be able to tell the untellable beyond the limits of human language and sing the songs beyond humankind. However, this vision can also be interpreted in a negative way, since it is possible that in the world in which the songs are to be sung humankind exists no more – the question whether or not human beings are necessary for the existence of art and poetry may arise.

Analysing the translation and the original text, it can be observed that the beginning word of the poem is a neologism that probably means late autumn sunlight, but it is questionable in the case of Paul Celan's word creatures. The unusual

neologisms in Celan's poetry may be treated as the elements of an independent, new poetic languages in which the words get rid of the limits of their traditional meanings. Felstiner's translation of Celan's neologism may be treated as precise, since the German word *Faden* means thread in English, although other interpretations are also possible.

It is also an interesting character of Felstiner's translation that the German compound adjective *grauschwarz* is translated into English as *grayblack*, which is an exact translation, but it may also be considered that the German adjective *grau* – *gray* has a common stem with the noun *Grauen* – *horror*. Certainly, this semantic fact cannot be translated into English, but something is necessarily lost in translation. The compound adjective *baumhohe* (*baumhoch* in an undeclined form) is translated into English as *tree-high*, and Felstiner even preserves the poetic hyphenation of the word in his own text.

Another difference between the original and the translated version of the poem can be that while in the original version Celan uses the verb *greift sich* that approximately means *grasp something*, in Felstiner's translation we can read that *the tree-*

*high thought strikes the light-tone*, and this verb creates a much stronger poetic imagery than Celan's original verb use. In this sense, Felstiner's translation is rather interpretative, creating the texts own reading in English. Furthermore, the last word of Celan's original poem is only Menschen that means only men, humans, while Felstiner translates it into humankind, which gives a much more solemnly connotation to the English version of the poem, digressing from the atmosphere of the original.

It may be established that the English translation of one of Paul Celan's classic poems by John Felstiner strongly *interprets* the original one, creating its own poetic world in English; therefore, reading the English counterpart of *Fadenonnen* demands the analyst to consider the fact that not each translated text can be treated as identical with the original one, mainly when it is spoken about poetry translation.

## **JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:**

**WORLD TO BE STUTTERED AFTER,**  
in which I'll have been

a guest, a name  
sweated down from the wall  
where a wound licks up high.

## **THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:**

**DIE NACHZUTOTTERNDE WELT,**  
bei der ich zu Gast  
gewesen sein werde, ein Name  
herabgeschwitzt von der Mauer,  
an der eine Wunde hochleckt.

The above cited poem was published in the volume *Schneepart – Snow-part* in 1971, one year after the authors death. It is also a poem that mirrors poetic and epistemological problems. The poetic speaker claims himself to be only the guest of the world, identifying the world (or himself?) with a name that is sweated down from the wall. The hermetic, visionary world of the poem may even be terrific – the world is to be stuttered after; i. e., no knowledge can be conceived, communicated by human language. The limits of human language and the wish to create a new

poetic language is one of the main topics of the *celanian poetry* – the present, fairly well-known poem may represent the same approach to language.

Comparing the original text of the poem and its version translated into English it can be seen that the strange tense structure, the Future Perfect in German, *bei der ich zu Gast gewesen werde* is preserved in the translation – Felstiner writes by which *I'll have been a guest*, suggesting that the poetic speaker *will have been* a guest in some point of the future; i. e., the unusual temporal dimension of the poem is not lost in translation. However, what is a compound participle in German – *nachzutotternde* cannot be translated into English with a similar compound, only with the expression to be stuttered after. This solution, on the other hand, means that the unusual composition of words that is one of the main characteristics of Paul Celan's poetry is lost in this case of translation, the translation adds and takes certain elements, but this untranslatability of the compound structure derives from the differences between English and German. If we have a glance at the German compound *herabgeschwitzt* which really means sweated down from somewhere in English, we

may see that it is not translated into English with another compound either. However, Felstiner maybe could have translated the compound into English as *downsweated* which would certainly sound strange, but since Paul Celan is a master of the creation of strange, unnatural poetic compounds, it might even be preserved in English – i. e., what sounds strange in German should also sound strange and unnatural in the English translation, although it is merely a supposition.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Hungarian literary historian Mihály Szegedy-Maszák examines the issue of untranslatability and the chance of translatability in a general aspect (Szegedy-Maszák 2008: 235-248). It may seem evident that in case of translation the issue of the differences between languages and the question of temporality arise; that is, the phenomenon of untranslatability must exist to some degree, as it is impossible to create completely form- and / or content-faithful translations. Certainly, reading the English translations of Paul Celan's certain poems it becomes evident that as it is mentioned by Imre Madarász that in parallel with untranslatability,



translatability also exists to some degree, rather it is worth dealing with the question how much the translation of a given text is able to represent the atmosphere and references of the original text (Madarász 2005: 86-88). As it seems to be justified by the translations above, the translation of a given artwork in the target language is an independent literary entity, and the parallel translations of the same source text may not be considered identical to each other either. Perhaps it is not an overstatement that there can be as many Paul Celan as translators within the literature of a given language into which certain works of the author were translated – all translations speak differently, mediating certain elements of the original poem in a different proportion being a reading in itself, and it may depend on the attitude of the analyst which translation he or she chooses or whether he or she draws back to the original text of the poem avoiding the translations. Certainly, it has to be done if a given work to be analysed has not yet been translated into the native language of the analyst, but if a text was already translated into a certain language, in my opinion, the translated text should not be avoided and ignored by the analyst,

since it is an already existing reading of the source text that is part of the literature belonging to the target language. I do not think that it would unconditionally mean a problem in interpretation if a given text exists in translation, even if in several different translations, since a translation may add more aspects to the analysis of the same work. Although meaning may really be enclosed in language, and Celan's complex, self-reflexive, hermetic poems evidently mean challenge to literary translators, their translation, if not even completely faithfully, but is possible and is able to contribute to the success of understanding them.

Although as if some scholarly literatures in Hungary and elsewhere had mystified the issue of the translatability of the *celanian poetry*, it seems that the hermetism, obscurity and self-reflexive quality, at least in the majority of the cases, can be transliterated from the source language into several target languages including English. However, when analysing a poem by Celan in translation it cannot be forgotten that the given text is a *translation / interpretation*; i. e., it is worth knowing and examining the original German version of the given poem, but it does not evidently mean that

the translated quality of a given text leads to incorrect interpretations. In my opinion, on the contrary, the translated and the original version of a given poem may even complete each other, adding extra aspects to the analysis and interpretation. The *celanian* poetry and its transliteration in any language require especially sensitive reading, but the original poem and the translated version do not unconditionally disturb each other's interpretation, they rather add something to each other, supporting each other's textual structures. A *good translation* (I use this term very carefully, since it is a very subjective judgement which translation of which poem is good and how) may be able to legitimise a foreign text within the culture and literature of the target language, and even a higher, more complete interpretation may evolve from the interaction of the translated and the original text. In my opinion, John Felstiner's interpretative English translations of Paul Celan's poetry evidently added something to Celan's Anglo-Saxon reception, supporting the fact that on the one hand, all texts of the world literature are translatable to some degree; on the other hand, Celan's textual universe, since it does

not always intend to be unambiguous even in its original German language, via the translations richer, deeper, more complete interpretations can evolve than only in German. All national literatures into which he was translated can have *their own Paul Celan* that makes the segments of unusual and richly whirling poetic world sound from different points of view, not falsifying the original version for the readers.

## REFERENCES

Celan, Paul (1959): *Sprachgitter*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag.

Celan, Paul (1967): *Atemwende*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Celan, Paul (2001): *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. London and New York: W. W. Norton Company Ltd. Translated by John Felstiner.

De Man, Paul (1997): *Schlussfolgerungen. Walter Benjamins 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'*, In Alfred

Hirsch (Hg.): *Übersetzung und Dekonstruktion*.  
Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Derrida, Jacques (1997): *Babylonische Türme. Wege, Umwege, Abwege*. In Alfred Hirsch (Hg.): *Übersetzung und Dekonstruktion*, 119-165. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Gadamer, Hans Georg (1984): *Igazság és módszer*.  
Budapest: Gondolat.

Gadamer, Hans Georg (1993): *Wer bin ich und wer bist Du?*. In Gadamer, Hans Georg: *Ästhetik und Poetik II. Hermeneutik im Vollzug. Gesammelte Werke*. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Verlag.

Kiss, Noémi (2003): *Határheyzetek – Paul Celan költészete és magyar recepciója*. Budapest: Anonymus.

Madarász, Imre (2005): *Irodalomkönyvecske*.  
Budapest: Hungarovox.

Rába, György (1969). *Szép hűtlenek*. Budapest: Akadémiai.

Steiner, George (2005): *Bábel után – nyelv és fordítás I.* Budapest: Corvina.

Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály (2008): *Megértés, fordítás, kánon.* Bratislava-Budapest: Kalligram.

**FINDING WHAT IS LOST IN  
TRANSLATION  
AN ATTEMPT OF READING OF WALTER  
BENJAMIN'S ESSAY 'THE TASK OF THE  
TRANSLATOR' AND PAUL DE MAN'S  
COMMENTARY IN PARALLEL**

***WALTER BENJAMIN: The task of the  
literary translator  
(Scanning the primary text)***

Right at the beginning of his well-known and paradigmatic essay, Walter Benjamin rejects the notion of the ideal recipient, as if he were to consider poetry as existing for its own sake rather than being addressed to the reader in particular – he calls it pure language (*Reine Sprache*).

According to his thesis, the translator must go beyond conveying the message of the literary work. A translation that only conveys the message of the work is not a good translation. Linguistic expressions are in some respects untranslatable, some works are essentially translatable, while others do not yield to the intention of translation.

A translated text is a text that has a life of its own in relation to the original work, since it was written later than the original text. The translation owes its very existence to the glory of the original work, i.e. its exceptional aesthetic value, since the original work is a text that has been found worthy of being lifted out of its own linguistic and cultural environment and transplanted into a foreign culture by means of translation.

Benjamin argues that languages are related to each other in what they want to say, and that translation expresses this. That is, despite superficial differences, human languages function in a very similar way, and it is this similarity of function, as a kind of anthropological unity that makes the phenomenon of translation itself possible.

A translation is not a work that can be considered definitive, as the original work it is based on changes over time. By this Benjamin surely means that it is the way in which the work is received that is changing over time, and the texts take on new and new meanings. The translator's mother tongue itself also changes, so that at certain intervals a re-translation may be necessary, since



some older translations may appear linguistically outdated, making it difficult to receive them in the target language.

Benjamin introduces the notion of *so-understanding* to show that, although languages are distinct in their external structure, they are very similar in their intentions. Two words in two different languages, e.g. French *pain* and German *Brot*, mutually exclude each other, yet their meaning is essentially the same, since they refer to the same entity.

Translation is only a temporary way of fighting the alienation of languages. Benjamin reiterates that no translation can claim permanence because of the temporal aspect.

The author seems to lean a little towards mysticism when he claims that there is a layer of the literary work that no translation can convey. On the other hand, he makes a sober, considered statement when he claims that the translated text can no longer be translated, and it is therefore much less capable of being lifted out of its place than the original work.

Benjamin argues that the tasks of the poet and the literary translator are basically very

different, since the literary translator need not necessarily be a poet – a claim he supports by the fact that many great translators, such as Martin Luther and Friedrich Schlegel, were poor or at least mediocre poets in relation to their epoch-making literary translations. The translator's task is distinguishable from that of the poet because, unlike the poet, the translator's task is not directed at reality, but solely at language. The poet's intention is original, reflecting reality, whereas the translator merely encounters the original work, which exists through language, and merely creates an echo of the original work through the process of translation.

Another of Benjamin's claims, perhaps containing a bit of a mysticism, and perhaps not scientific enough to our contemporary minds, is that the literary translator tries to integrate the many languages into one single true language, but what he means by a single true language is not explained in any further detail, perhaps because of the limitations of his essay. Translation, like philosophy, has 'no muse'; that is, unlike poetry, it is not an inspired activity, but rather a kind of craft that requires knowledge rather than inspiration.

Translation, according to Benjamin, is itself a form, and the fidelity to form required by literary translation can sometimes make it difficult to be faithful to the meaning. Strangely enough, a translation, especially in its own time, has little virtue if it appears to be a creation of its own language, that is, if it does not show any foreignness, if it does not feel like a translated text, with an original work written in a language completely foreign to the target language behind it.

According to Benjamin, freedom of translation seems to be justified for one's own language. The aim is to achieve a kind of *pure language*, but Benjamin does not give any further analysis of this in the last section of his essay, but merely describes the task of the literary translator as being nothing other than to redeem *pure language* as an exile, to free the language captured in the original work from the reproduction in the target language. Perhaps this actually means that the translator's task is to make visible and comprehensible in the target language text, in the translation, the content that is hidden, implicit, in the original work. It should be pointed out, of course, that Benjamin's text, which later became

the subject of great controversy, as his later interpreter Paul de Man points out, is, like most works of fiction, itself resistant to understanding and allows for multiple interpretations.

At the end of his paradigmatic essay, Benjamin states that the extent to which a given translation is able to fulfil the essence of translation as a form is determined, in an almost objective way, by the translatability of the original work. Translatability and untranslatability are therefore obviously not the same for all works, and if it is not measurable, then it is perhaps still intuitively perceptible. The more a work is a communication; that is, the more it is intended to express some kind of explicit message or content, the less it is worth translating, whereas the more highly structured and complex a work is, the more it is untranslatable. Benjamin is perhaps also thinking here of the word games in some literary works, of references deeply encoded in the culture of the source language, or of the deliberate concealment of meaning, which obviously make it difficult to integrate the work into another language and to make it intelligible to another culture.

Friedrich Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles are good examples of the great harmony between languages, since they try to remain true to the form, in them the German language moves more towards Greek than Greek towards German, but at the same time they are all the more difficult to receive and understand. Nevertheless, these translations of Sophocles are a kind of archetype of literary translation, and perhaps in some way they serve as a model for contemporary literary translators as well.

Benjamin goes so far at the very end of the essay to say that some great literary texts, such as sacred texts like the Holy Bible contain their own virtual translation; that is, they are so true that their content can be reproduced for anyone in any language. The interlinear version of sacred texts, a translation written between the lines, which follows the syntax of the original text to such an extent that it does not even take into account the syntactic specificities of the target language are imagined by Benjamin as the idea of translation. It should be noted, however, that this view seems obviously idealistic to our postmodern eyes, and it is probably not feasible in practice for all texts.

An interesting observation about the text is that Benjamin seems at times to be trying to formulate his message with the precision of exact science, and at other times to be assuming certain transcendent elements that do not need explanation or cannot be explained in words, and his text seems to be speaking out of religious frenzy.

For example, it is common sense, which even today seems scientific, that different literary works can be translated from one language to another at different levels, so there are evidently degrees of translatability. It may also be argued that, while the poet (and by this we probably mean the prose writer or dramatist in the modern sense as well; that is, the author of any genre of literary text) draws the meaning of his work from reality, if we assume the legitimacy of referential readings, it is the task of the translator, his/her activity is first and foremost a linguistic one, enclosed in language, since he/she does not create his/her work entirely inspired by reality, but on the basis of another work written in a foreign language, which is itself a linguistic expression, and translation therefore refers to another text. This

obviously anticipates the current view of literary scholarship that translations can themselves be treated as intertexts, since they are texts that in some way refer to and derive from a literary work that preceded them.

However, the existence of *pure language*, *reine Sprache*, by which Benjamin obviously means the language of poetry (?), but does not explain it, does not make it tangible, is a mystical and inexplicit claim, and *pure language* certainly cannot be interpreted and defined within the scholarly, literary theoretical frameworks of our time.

This constant alternation of scientifically verifiable and metaphysical claims makes Benjamin's text itself very similar to a literary work, in the way that it resists comprehension and obviously allows for multiple readings, making it difficult to decide whether, in contemporary terms, we should read *The Task of the Translator* as a text with scientifically substantiated claims, or as a work of fiction that is at least partly fictional and imaginary? Certainly, in the case of texts on literature it is not so easy to decide...

***PAUL DE MAN: Walter Benjamin on The  
Task of the Translator  
(Scanning the Commentary)***

Paul de Man, in his equally well-known lecture on Walter Benjamin's essay, begins by saying that it is impossible to translate from Benjamin, as the various translations of Benjamin's essay attest. He follows Hans-Georg Gadamer's suggestion that the task of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy is nothing less than to reassess earlier concepts. In Gadamer's view, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the philosophers of the German tradition who were paradigmatic until the age of modernity, represented a degree of naivety that we have now moved beyond. Compared to Gadamer's conception, Benjamin's essay may at first sight seem to be a step backwards, as if a kind of messianistic world view could be read out of it. In de Man's reading, Hölderlin, George or Mallarmé appear almost as saints in Benjamin's concept of poetry, he sees poetry as a kind of sacred language, which is not really addressed to the audience or the reader. The essay is therefore, according to de Man, is a step backwards to the messianic world



view, and it is no wonder that it is criticised by many, but praised by others precisely because it restores the sacred status of literary texts, which has been challenged by the destructiveness of metaphysics.

De Man's presentation asks the question what does Benjamin's essay actually tell us? The answer to this question is that scientific discourse is not capable of reaching any kind of common agreement. Even the various translators of the text are not fully aware of what Benjamin is actually saying, and even when translating simple statements they go astray. But de Man also raises the question whether Benjamin, under the pretext of examining the task of the literary translator, is not doing nothing more than poetics, that is, a theoretical approach to poetic language? Benjamin originally intended the essay to be as an introduction to his own interpretations of Baudelaire, and so the text could be a kind of self-legitimation. But de Man sees more than that in the essay, and one of the main reasons for this is that, ironically, Benjamin believes that the translator, unlike the poet, is necessarily doomed to failure, since the translated text he creates can

never be as good as the original work it is based on. The title of the work is tautological in de Man's reading, since *Aufgabe* in German means both task and abandonment, giving up/resigning from an intention; that is, it implies that the translator is in some way forced to abandon his own mission. (This, of course, implies in a way a deconstruction of the text, since we do not know whether Benjamin really intended to include this plane of interpretation in the title of his essay – the author's intention, of course, cannot be fully reconstructed afterwards, but we must not forget that De Man's reading is itself an interpretation of the text under examination, and is therefore by no means objective.)

De Man points out that Benjamin makes a cardinal distinction between the poet and the literary translator, and even points out that many great literary translators were poor, or at least mediocre, poets. In de Man's reading, the poet works primarily with meaning, which does not strictly speaking belong to language; the translator, on the other hand, is closely related to language, his relationship to the original text is similar to that of one language to another language, and

translation cannot be placed outside language. Translation, according to Benjamin, is more like philosophy, in that philosophy is not a representation of the world, but has a different relationship to the world. In his reading of Benjamin, de Man also sees translation to be similar to criticism or literary theory, and he writes this mainly on the basis of Schlegel. It is also ironic that the translated text is in some cases more canonical than the original work, since the original by its very nature does not require canonisation or translation. Only the original work is translatable, a translated text cannot be translated further under any circumstances, and its place is in practice more static than that of the original text. The activity of translation is also similar to literary criticism in the way that it reads and canonises the translated text. Obviously, translating a text into a foreign language has some significance if it is an attempt to transpose it into another culture by lifting it out of its own national literature, but at the same time translation is also necessarily interpretation.

De Man also points out that, according to Benjamin, translation is also like history. We should not imagine history in terms of dialectics,

but rather understand natural changes from the perspective of history, not the other way round. It is the same in the case of translation – we are able to understand the original work from the perspective of translations. Translation is not some kind of mapping or paraphrase. But de Man draws attention to the metaphorical sense of the German verb *übersetzen*, which is in fact an exact translation of the Greek word *metaphorein*. In de Man's interpretation of Benjamin, metaphor is not really metaphor, which is why *The Task of the Translator* is also a rather difficult text to translate. The translation is not metaphorical in the sense that the translated text does not resemble the original, which is, in de Man's view, a paradox.

In the same way, philosophy, criticism and literary theory are not similar to what they are derived from, since they are activities within a language. But de Man argues that Benjamin points to the fact that it is in one's own language that one feels most alienated, as opposed to the idealistic assumption that it is in one's own language that one feels most at home. This is also shown by the various translations of Benjamin's text, in which de

Man points out various, both minor and major misunderstandings.

Translation, as a process, gives the illusion of life, but in de Man's view it is more a kind of life after death, since translation also reveals the deadness of the original text. In de Man's reading, Benjamin is not talking about the suffering of individuals or subjects, suffering of human beings, but rather suffering of language that takes place exclusively in the world of language. Benjamin's text is itself a fine illustration of this phenomenon, since, as de Man repeatedly emphasises, even the most excellent translators cannot cope with it, nor can the interpreters and commentators who attempt to analyse it – the text is the best example of what it says about itself, and speaks of itself and the problems of translation and understanding that it manifests as a meta-language.

According to de Man, Benjamin conceives a whole theory of language in the space of a few sentences by distinguishing between *the thought* (*das Gemeinte*) and the *mode of thought* (*Art des Meines*), between the signified and the mode of meaning of the statement. In the case of French translations, the transposition of these words also proves to be

rather problematic. But de Man acknowledges that Benjamin is right that the problem of translating certain words into another language is a purely linguistic one.

According to Benjamin, the translator cannot really do more than translate literally, and in some cases ignores the syntactic relations of the target language and follows the syntax of the original text. But are grammar and meaning compatible at this level? De Man points out that Benjamin cites the example of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which are both literal and almost incomprehensible. The meaning of a word is so elusive that even grammar cannot capture it.

In Benjamin's view, there is a kind of original, pure language, which in de Man's reading is in fact not more than a religious thesis about the unity of human language. This is exemplified in Benjamin's essay the simile of the dish, where he says that in order for the pieces of a broken dish to fit together, they must fit together down to the smallest detail, but not be similar in form. According to Carol Jacobs's commentary also cited by Paul de Man, Benjamin does not say that the

pots are assembled into a whole, but that the assembling of the broken pots only produces another broken pot, that is, that the idea of the whole is in fact a kind of illusion.

But de Man also points out that it is not at all clear in the various translations whether Benjamin is referring to the broken pots of a single vessel, i.e. whether he is assuming some kind of integrity in the metaphor. Here again, Benjamin's text, which speaks of an inerrancy in a certain sense, is itself a prime example of this inerrancy. De Man argues that every translation is a type of fragment of the original, but that the original work is also a fragment of the language – the translation is, therefore, a fragment of the fragment.

The supposed fidelity and freedom of translation are both aporias. On the one hand, it is useful if the translation faithfully conveys the content of the original text, but on the other hand, given the idiomatic nature of the target language, freedom is obviously a requirement. However, translation pushes the original work even further towards disintegration, towards fragmentation, and *pure language* exists only as a collection of all languages, but in de Man's reading, this is the real

tragedy of the fact that for man, the language he believes to be his own becomes the most alien.

History is not entirely a human phenomenon either, since it also belongs to the dimension of language. Benjamin calls history the aberration that takes place through language. Pure language and poetic language are to be separated, since poetic language does not resemble pure language that Benjamin postulates. Benjamin's view of history is not, in de Man's opinion, messianistic, since some kind of coming of the Messiah would not complete history, but would rather abolish it.

Finally, de Man concludes that the chapter of Hegel's Aesthetics on *the sublime* is much closer to Benjamin's in 'The Task of the Translator' than to Gadamer's, since he derives the category of the sublime from the separation of the philosophical categories of the sacred and the profane...

\*

### ***CONCLUDING REMARKS***

Paul de Man deconstructs Benjamin's text in a way that is characteristic of him and the school of



literary theory to which he belonged; that is, he attempts to re-read it in a radical, provocative way and to draw attention to its contradictions. The deconstructive/deconstructionist reading is also characterised by the fact that de Man reads the text as a vivid example of his own claim; that is, the existence of translation itself is in some way tragic and ironic in the light of the ambiguities of Benjamin's essay and the misunderstandings found in the various translations. Another deconstructive feature of the commentary is that de Man reads out of the text word plays not originally or not explicitly used by Benjamin; e.g, he interprets the word task (*Aufgabe*) as both a *task* and the abandonment of/giving up of something, or he substitutes *the political* for *the poetic* in the text, taking Benjamin's view of history as a starting point.

The understanding of the Hungarian translations of the texts (and here it should be noted that the author of the present research article, given that Hungarian is his native tongue, has started from mainly the Hungarian translations of the two texts, sometimes referring back to the original, source-language texts of the works as well) is of course complicated by the fact that,

following the argument of Benjamin and de Man, they are themselves translations, with their own necessary imperfections. De Man, for a twist, cites, among other things, English and French translations of the original German text, which in places appear in the Hungarian text in Hungarian translation, and thus essentially contradict Benjamin's thesis that translation cannot be translated further (of course, in the field of humanities, the contrary is often proved by practice, depending on what foreign languages the given researcher knows, but we will not go into the topic of this here and now in detail).

Reading the theoretical texts on translation in translation, however, also makes them inherently more difficult to understand and interpret, which is why I myself believe that reading them in, for example, in Hungarian makes it even more difficult for the reader to know what Benjamin is actually saying about translation and the task of the literary translator, whether in the original text or in de Man's reading. Both Benjamin's text and de Man's text are in some way and to some degree resistant to understanding, and in both of them ambiguities can be detected, which

of course can generate interesting many – and in some cases perhaps even self-serving – further interpretations, if not an infinite number...

## REFERENCES

Walter Benjamin, *A műfordító feladata.* trans. Csaba Szabó. In: Walter Benjamin, *A szirének hallgatása. Válogatott írások.* Osiris, Budapest, 2001. 71-83.

Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1999.

Paul de Man, Walter Benjamin *A műfordító feladata* című írásáról. trans. Edit Király, *Átváltozások.*, 1994/2. 65-80.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, De Gruyter Verlag, Oldenbourg, 1999.

Barbara Johnson, *The Task of the Translator*, in Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality*,

Trials, Motherhood, Translation, Harvard College,  
2003, 40–64.

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, *Megértés, fordítás, kánon*,  
Kalligram, Budapest-Bratislava, 2008.



Balázs Kántás was born in Budapest, Hungary, 1987. He graduated at Eötvös Loránd University in BA English Studies in 2009, then in MA Literary and Cultural Studies in 2011. He obtained a PhD degree in Comparative Literature in 2015, at the same university. As a literary historian, his primary field of research is the oeuvre and Hungarian reception of Paul Celan. Furthermore, he is also a very active critic and scholar of contemporary Hungarian literature. Currently he works as a senior archivist in the National Archives of Hungary, and as such, he is also a researcher of the history of the radical right-wing paramilitary movements of Hungary in the 1920s, including their international relations with their German and Austrian counterparts. In parallel, at the moment he is working on his second PhD dissertation in History at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. He is the author of numerous monographs, collections of studies and source publications.