The Performance of Translation:
Benjamin and Brecht on the Loss of Small Details

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The question of translation, as reflected from different viewpoints by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, offers a methodological framework concerning the relation between text, performance, and gesture. Beginning with a short commentary on the well-known essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," ("The Task of the Translator" [1921] 1989), this article points to some principles of translation and "translatability" which Benjamin opened up by his particular style of writing. Benjamin deconstructs the most common metaphors of translation theories such as "resemblance," "adequacy," and "faithfulness" to the original. Brecht developed a similar concept of translatability and of gestures as "theatrical thoughts," especially in connection with his *Galileo*, which he translated together with the actor Charles Laughton. In this context, the current idea of performance as a kind of translation finds its counterpart in the notion of translation as performance.

In "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" ("The Task of the Translator") [1] Benjamin calls into question some traditional theories that tend to restrict the translation process to the communication of the meanings and intentions of an original text. Instead, he outlines an idea of translatability (*Übersetzbarkeit*) based on the assumption of a kinship and a mutual "agreement" of the different languages. Translation would then promote a development of language in general that Benjamin describes in terms of a messianic theory of redemption, and as an exchange between the art forms as material languages (Benjamin 1989, 4:9ff; see also Benjamin 1989, 2:140ff, 156). This ideal community of languages needs to be performed--and this is perhaps the most important and fascinating aspect of Benjamin's theory of translatability, because it also determines his style of writing and thinking. We might even say that Benjamin's essay *performs* translation, dislocating the common understanding of the word "translation" and some of the most widespread metaphorical expressions related to this subject (see Jacobs 1975:756).

A prevailing concept of translation theories has always been the notion of "resemblance." To a certain extent, a translation would have to look like the original, which is supposed to be fixed and inalterable. The task of the translator remains contradictory: He is forced to adapt his own language more or less mimetically to a foreign text--comparable to an actor wearing a costume that **[End Page 53]** doesn't fit well. On the other hand, he is obliged to destroy and replace the original text with a new one that eliminates the traces of the old, even hiding its *dis*appearance. Besides the numerous theoretical approaches and practical efforts to solve this problem, there are also proposals for redefining or even rejecting the task, particularly when poetry and dramatic literature are concerned.

As poetry offers and enables much more than the communication of a message, theatre can't be reduced to a more or less appropriate translation of a text. The various features and qualities of a performance go far beyond the rendering of a writer's intention. And the fact should be considered as well that the different forms of avantgarde theatre in this century not only challenged the dominance of the dramatic text, but also developed new and different forms of translation besides the traditional identification with characters and actions. This may lead us to the theatrical nature of translation in general, to a scene of gestures that maintain and justify the exchange of signs and meanings in the "afterlife" of texts. Benjamin and Brecht have illuminated the interrelations between theatre, translation, and the perception of gestures in literature by crossing the borders between theory and practice, text and performance, language and body. And both of them, more or less explicitly, deconstruct the traditional patterns by which translation theories usually reflect the communication of intentions and messages.

According to Benjamin's essay the text of the translation is marked by an inevitable failure. Thus, the translator enacts the ideal of translatability not by communicating the meaning of the original work, but on the contrary, by a deformation or even destruction of the work of literature in so far as it has been the expression of an individual intention. From this point of view, the task of the translation is always connected to an expropriation. Ambiguously, the German word *Aufgabe* means not only a task, but also a renunciation or rejection, as Paul de Man underlined in his interpretation of Benjamin's essay (1989:80; see also Jacobs 1975:765). At the end of Benjamin's text one might even draw the conclusion that the translator has been or should be "given up," at least in regard to the interlinear version of the holy text as an ideal of translatability and *virtual translation.* In this extreme case, translation is a process of reading between the lines and between the languages, independent from any translator in terms of an institution or a profession. From the beginning of his essay, Benjamin reflects the provisional nature of translation and its irreducible violence, a necessity of interruption and choice and the obligation to perform a loss of parts and details. Against the concept of similarity to the original, he describes the structure of a temporary and only fragmentary displacement by which a translation represents translatability in all other languages:

Denn jede Übersetzung eines Werkes aus einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt der Sprachgeschichte repräsentiert hinsichtlich einer bestimmten Seite seines Gehaltes diejenigen in allen übrigen Sprachen. Übersetzung verpflanzt also das Original in einen wenigstens insofern--ironisch--endgültigeren Sprachbereich, als es aus diesem durch keinerlei Übertragung mehr zu versetzen ist, sondern in ihn nur immer von neuem und an andern Teilen erhoben zu werden vermag. (1989, 4:15) [Because any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translations in all other languages. Thus translation transplants the original into a linguistic realm which is--ironically--more definitive insofar as it can no longer be displaced from this realm by any other translation. The original can always only be raised there anew and with other parts.] [2]

Benjamin defines translation as a process of destruction and transformation, explicitly pointing to the concept of irony in German romanticism. The irony **[End Page 54]** of this "final transformation" derives from the circumstance that translation may transfer the original only to a sphere from which it can't be translated again. The life of a text then is to be regarded as a discontinuous afterlife (*Fortleben*). Similar to Benjamin's idea of critique and allegorical reading, translation reaches a state of pure language (*reine Sprache*) only through the demolition of the individual unity of form and content of the original. Benjamin doesn't neglect the daily experience that translations are translated again and again without any contact to the former original. However, this process wouldn't bring the original closer to pure language because, for this purpose, each translation has to begin its destructive work again with the original text. From a pragmatic point of view, translators always have to decide what to keep and what to lose. But for Benjamin, those decisions are already enclosed in the structure of the original: its translatability means a specific ability or even a demand of poetic language to be altered and deformed.

This very dialectic of loss and renouncement is reflected by Brecht as well, perhaps commenting on Benjamin's essay. At least we may regard Brecht's approaches to this topic as a trace of many discussions with Benjamin about poetry and related subjects since 1929. Using a title close to Benjamin's, Brecht wrote (around 1935) the following aphorism, "Die Übersetzbarkeit von Gedichten":

Gedichte werden bei der Übertragung in eine andere Sprache meist dadurch am stärksten beschädigt, daß man zuviel zu übertragen sucht. Man sollte sich vielleicht mit der Übertragung der Gedanken und der Haltung des Dichters begnügen. Was im Rhythmus des Originals ein Element der Haltung des Schreibenden ist, sollte man zu übertragen suchen, nicht mehr davon. Seine Haltung zur Sprache wird übertragen, auch wenn man, etwa wenn er bestimmte Wörter durch ihre Einreihung in Wortfolgen, wo sie sonst nicht gehört werden, neu faßt, nur eben dieses Tun nachahmt, sich die Gelegenheit dazu aber nicht vom Original vorschreiben läßt. (BFA 22:132)
[While being translated into another language, poems usually get damaged most strongly through the effort of translating too much. Perhaps one should be content with the translation of the poet's thoughts and his attitude. From the rhythm of the original, only that should be translated which is an element of the writer's attitude, not more. His attitude toward language will be translated even if, for example, one imitates only the way he reshapes certain words by arranging them in an unusual word order. And the occasion for this imitation must not necessarily be prescribed by the original.]

If a translator tries to render too much of the original, he causes more damage to the poem than by voluntarily restricting himself to the rhythm of the original and the writer's attitude towards language and syntax. In regard to the difficulties with regularly intoned rhythms onstage, Brecht's idea of a "gestic" technique requires a discontinuous structure, a new kind of *rhymeless* poetry. Close to Friedrich Hölderlin's concept of the *caesura* as an interruption of the dominant rhythm of a tragedy, [3] Brecht elaborates a technique of disturbance and alteration. Commenting on different translations of a flight scene in Christopher Marlowe's drama *Edward II*, he explains the need to replace the boring and oily smoothness of the iambic verse with an irregular, syncopated rhythm:

Das ergab den stockenden Atem des Rennenden, und es enthüllen sich in diesen Synkopen besser die widersprüchlichen Gefühle des Sprechers. [...] Es handelte sich, wie man aus den Texten sehen kann, nicht nur um ein "Gegen-den-Strom-Schwimmen" in formaler **[End Page 55]** Hinsicht, einen Protest gegen die Glätte und Harmonie des konventionellen Verses, sondern immer doch schon um den Versuch, die Vorgänge zwischen den Menschen als widerspruchsvolle, kampfdurchtobte, gewalttätige zu zeigen. (BFA 22:359)
[This gave the jerky breath of a man running, and such syncopation did more to show the speaker's conflicting feelings. [...] As can be seen from the texts it was a matter not just of a formal "kicking against the pricks"--of a protest against the smoothness and harmony of conventional poetry--but already of an attempt to show human dealings as contradictory, fiercely fought over, full of violence.] [4]

Brecht defines the adaptation and "translation" of a text for the stage in regard to both gestures and rhythm, with obvious parallels to his comment on the translatability of poems. The technique of interruption indicates the violence and the politics of translation and also a fundamental disharmony in the feelings of a person speaking onstage. In a later annotation Brecht remarks that it wouldn't be possible or even necessary to explain "gestic" structures only as an expression of social conflicts. This correction underlines his intention to develop gestures from the attitude of a poem towards language rather than from its meaning. In particular as a practitioner of theatre, Brecht regards this attitude as the most important achievement of a poet's work because it allows and requires translation also in terms of a theatrical process. The question remains: How does one combine concepts of translation between different languages with theoretical approaches to the transformation of a written text (not necessarily a drama) into a theatrical event? For Brecht, the idea of translation as performance has its counterpart in the notion of performance as translation. Far beyond a mere metaphor, these concepts are reflected in his pleasurable *Galileo* production with the famous actor Charles Laughton.

As Brecht reports in his 1947 "Aufbau einer Rolle: Laughton's *Galileo*" ("Building a Part: Laughton's *Galileo*," 1964), it was a rather unusual process, involving the development of the first ideas for the performance of the text at the same time as he and Laughton were translating the play into English. The text itself was changed again and again during this period between 1944 and 1947. A considerable number of collaborators were involved (BFA 25:9ff). [5] In fact, many of Laughton's suggestions didn't appear in the "final" version heard on the opening night of the play in Beverly Hills in July 1947. Brecht's report testifies not so much to the influence of Laughton's poetic genius on his own work as playwright but to a special productivity deriving from the interrelations between translating and rehearsing. "Aufbau einer Rolle" begins with the remark that in contemporary theatre, a basic quality of acting, as developed by former generations, had almost disappeared: the art of inventing *theatrical thoughts* (*theatralische Gedanken*). These thoughts would have combined not only to form a character but also to give a rich texture--a new kind of text produced by the inventive work of the actors. This also points back to Brecht's theory of a *literarization* of the theatre, elaborated in his annotations to the *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera) in the late 1920s (BFA 24:56ff). Laughton's contribution to the making of *Galileo* is inseparable from a process of reading and acting between the languages:

Wir benötigten solche ausgebreiteten Studien, da er kein Wort Deutsch sprach und wir uns über den Gestus von Repliken in der Weise einigen mußten, daß ich alles in schlechtem Englisch oder sogar in Deutsch vorspielte und er es sodann auf immer verschiedene Art in richtigem Englisch nachspielte, bis ich sagen konnte: Das ist es. Das Resultat schrieb er Satz für Satz handschriftlich nieder. Einige Sätze, viele, trug er tagelang **[End Page 56]** mit sich herum, sie immerfort ändernd. Die Methode des Vor-und Nachspielens hatte einen unschätzbaren Vorzug darin, daß psychologische Diskussionen nahezu gänzlich vermieden wurden. (BFA 25:11)
[We needed such broadly ramified studies, because he spoke no German whatever and we had to decide the gest of each piece of dialogue by my acting it all in bad English or even in German and his

then acting it back in proper English in a variety of ways until I could say: that's it. The result he would write down sentence by sentence in longhand. Some sentences, indeed many, he carried around for days, changing them continually. This system of play-and-repetition had one immense advantage in that psychological discussions were almost entirely avoided.] [6]

Thus Brecht used the gap between the languages and the process of translation as material for theatrical thoughts (which finds a parallel also in his artificial, apparently dense behavior during his examination by the House Un-American Activities Committee [7]). Important in this context is the description of the event itself, in which the translation is characterized as a *scene*. Everything gives the impression that the agreement regarding the gestures of the dialogue could be reached only through a complicated method of trying out, testing, and *tasting* each sentence. Instead of being discussed in terms of psychology, the part is built up in a process of translation, performed by "Vor-und Nachspielen" (play-and-repetition): Brecht articulated a sentence in "bad English," or in German, and Laughton repeated it in different ways, as a changing echo in proper English, until the result was ready to be written down (only to be changed again). Once more, we may return to Benjamin's essay, in which this very performance had been designed and anticipated. Benjamin constructs the spatial order of a "soundscape," where the translation lends its voice to the original:

Die Übersetzung aber sieht sich nicht wie die Dichtung gleichsam im innern Bergwald der Sprache selbst, sondern außerhalb desselben, ihm gegenüber und ohne ihn zu betreten ruft sie das Original hinein, an demjenigen einzigen Orte hinein, wo jeweils das Echo in der eigenen den Widerhall eines Werkes der fremden Sprache zu geben vermag. (1980, 4:16)
[Translation, however, does not view itself as does poetry as in the inner forest of language, but rather as outside it, opposite it, and, without entering it, calls into (the forest of language) the original, into that single place where, in each case, the echo is able to give in its own language the resonance of a work in a foreign tongue.] [8]

This performance of translation enacts the encounter of texts in different languages. In contrast to any communication that we could describe in terms of a psychology of individuals, this scene corresponds rather to the psychoanalytic concept of speech in *transference*, from the position of the other and in the circulation of the "significant." So the virtual translation "on trial" articulates a foreign, heterogeneous, and expropriated voice--calling the original into the "forest of language." As an echo of the foreign word, the translation discovers its "own" voice, beyond the work of an individual translator. The scenario outlined in "Aufbau einer Rolle" comes very close to Benjamin's essay and leads Brecht to a fundamental relation between translation, performance, and gesture, as shown by the following section on "Theaterspielen als Methode der Übersetzung" (Acting as a Method of Translation):

Wir waren gezwungen, zu machen, was sprachlich besser bewanderte Übersetzer ja ebenfalls machen sollten: Gesten übersetzen. Die Sprache **[End Page 57]** ist nämlich da theatralisch, wo sie vornehmlich das Verhalten der Sprechenden zueinander ausdrückt. [...] Das Wichtige war der Theaterabend, der Text hatte ihn lediglich zu ermöglichen: in der Aufführung fand der Verschleiß des Textes statt, er ging in ihr auf wie das Pulver im Feuerwerk! (BFA 25:12)
[We were forced to do what better equipped translators should do too: to translate gests. For language is theatrical in so far as it primarily expresses the mutual attitude of the speakers. [...] The theatrical occasion was what mattered, the text was only there to make it possible; it would be expended in the production, would go off like gunpowder in a firework.] [9]

Like the translation, the theatrical event is a process by which the text may be altered and destroyed. Brecht describes this ruination of the text as the result of Laughton's particular interest in an effective appearance onstage, but also as a necessary exploitation and exhaustion of the material. Despite his objections to this process from the viewpoint of a playwright, he underlines the parallels between Laughton's consumption of the text in *Galileo* and the use of plays in the Elizabethan theatre. From this perspective it is just the passion of the theatre that swallows and destroys a text for a single, all-important moment that allows this text to become immortal. Gestures, as *theatrical* thoughts, indicate already an interruption of any individual expression. If there is a translation of gestures, the translation itself contributes another gesture of displacement and transformation. Therefore, the loss of small details determines both the economy and the theatricality of language in translation. Brecht reminds us that theatricality is often connected to the behavior of speaking persons to each other (*das Verhalten der Sprechenden zueinander*). Similar to his observations on rhymeless poetry, he refers to the

"speakers" onstage, not only to the dramatis personae of a play. And it is probably no mere coincidence that it was Benjamin who pointed out this difference as an important element of Brechtian theatre:

Oberste Aufgabe einer epischen Regie ist, das Verhältnis der aufgeführten Handlung zu derjenigen, die im Aufführen überhaupt gegeben ist, zum Ausdruck zu bringen. (1989, 2:529)
[The highest task of an epic directing is to express the relation between the performed action and the action of performing itself.]

The productivity of such a task emerges not from a continuous transition but from the gap and the tension between the languages and between performance and text. To make gestures *quotable*, as Benjamin also puts it, means to release them from their regular and encrusted form, in the performance of translation as echo and displacement of the text.

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Notes

1. The essay was published for the first time in 1923 as a preface to Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in Benjamin's own translation. In this article, the Benjamin text is quoted from Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* (1989, 4:9-21).

2. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are my own. The currently used translation of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" by Harry Zohn, which originally appeared in *Illuminations* (Benjamin 1969), remains helpful, although it misses in some parts the expressiveness and also the content of the essay. For example, in Zohn's text, the end of the paragraph quoted above reads: "The original can only be raised there anew and at other points of time." Thus Benjamin's remark that the original may be raised only incompletely and always in different parts, is dropped (see Benjamin 1997:258).

3. For a detailed study on Benjamin's readings of Hölderlin, his theory of translation, and his ideas on drama and theatre, see Patrick Primavesi (1998).

4. Translation by Beatrice Gottlieb (Brecht [1939] 1957:33; and 1964:116). The literal translation of "Gegen den Strom schwimmen" would be "swim against the current" or "swim against the tide." In replacing this phrase by the rebellious act of "kicking against the pricks" (as a protest against a severe order), Gottlieb's translation exaggerates and thus destroys the imagery of Brecht's argumentation.

5. See also Brecht (1964:163ff). For the development of the play see Werner Hecht (1981).

6. Translation by John Willett (Brecht 1964:165).

7. According to James K. Lyon, Brecht's English in those days was probably much better than he publicly admitted (Lyon 1980; 1994:230ff).

8. Translation by Carol Jacobs (1975:763).

9. Translation by John Willett (Brecht 1964:165-66).

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