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# “Es gibt nur eine Sprache”: The ‘Task of the Translator’ in Rosenzweig’s Idea of Language and Redemption. Its Conceptual Homologies and Expansions

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**Abstract:** The concurrence of different languages is one of the tenets of Rosenzweig *Sprachdenken* and of his translation activity which finds its main theoretical explication in the afterword to his ‘Zweiundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte des Jehuda Halevi’ (Konstanz, Wöhrle, 1924). In the afterword to the translation of Halevi’s lyrical corpus, Rosenzweig outlines a translation model which, trying to convey all the morphological, syntactic and lexical traits of the source language into the target language, gives way to a real linguistic fusion which defies the limits and boundaries of expression and opens onto a redemptive perspective. On the basis of this concluding note and of some passages from ‘*The Star of Redemption*’, the article tries to analyse Rosenzweig’s idea of language and of its nexus with the idea of redemption with reference to Walter Benjamin’s famous essay ‘*The Task of the Translator*’ and, as a point of convergence, with Paul Celan’s conception of poetic language.

**Keywords:** Rosenzweig, translation, redemption, task of the translator

The afterword to Rosenzweig’s 1924 translation of Judah Halevi’s poems and hymns is a foundational text for understanding his approach to translation.<sup>1</sup> Rosenzweig maintains that the constitutive possibility of translation is guaranteed by the fact that every language contains the same germ or embryo, shared by all languages that have ever been, and will ever be, spoken. This means that each language has the potential to express everything that might be expressed in any other language.

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Sechzig Hymnen und Gedichte des Jehuda Halevi, deutsch. Mit einem Nachwort und mit Anmerkungen* (Konstanz: Oskar Wöhrle, 1924).

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The concept of a primordial language is key here; the idea that before human language fragmented there was a common universal tongue, an Adamic, pre-Babel language (perhaps the language of God) from which all languages stem. Therefore, for Rosenzweig, despite linguistic differences, all languages share a common root and a common structure. According to this theory, any linguistic feature of any natural language can be recognized, either overtly or latently, in any other language.<sup>2</sup> The idea underlying this primordial affinity, *Urverwandtschaft*, between all languages is not Rosenzweig's. Rather, it dates to the Biblical story about linguistic unity preceding the construction of the Tower of Babel, to the idea of the Earth being 'of one lip, and of the same words' (*Genesis* 11,1).<sup>3</sup> This idea was later developed by Kabbalistic thought, which was preoccupied with unravelling the concept of *Ursprache*, the original, super-individual and meta-historical language.<sup>4</sup>

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2 On Rosenzweig's idea of language, see also Rivka G. Horwitz, "Franz Rosenzweig on Language", *Judaism* 13 (1964): 393–406; Anna Elisabeth Bauer, *Rosenzweigs Sprachdenken im "Stern der Erlösung" und in seiner Korrespondenz mit Martin Buber zur Verdeutschung der Schrift* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1992).

3 *Genesis* 11,1: "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech". The image of the 'one lip and the same words' references the Hebrew syntagma in *Genesis* 11,1 וְכָל־בְּרִיִּים אִשְׁתֵּי־לֶשֶׁן..

4 Gershom Scholem argued that the Kabbalists reflected and developed the biblical and Talmudic notions about the origin of the world from the divine word. Kabbalists emphasized that metaphysical speculation about language was not initiated by Jewish esotericism but by Torah itself, and that the concepts of creation and revelation are in their metaphysical dimension essentially linguistic (See Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2003]: 123–128). The idea of language as the vehicle of creation is present in what is generally regarded to be the earliest Kabbalistic text, *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The concept of creation as a hermeneutical act is then further developed in the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the *locus classicus* of the Kabbalah. In the Zoharic imagery, the common denominator of the triad God, Torah and Israel is the ontological status accorded to Hebrew. Hebrew is not only the language through which all things are created, but also the *Ursprache* which reveals the intimate essence of being in a way that is not duplicated by any other language (not even Aramaic, which some medieval thinkers believed to be of equal importance and value). Later, in his attempt to systematize the different schools of Kabbalistic interpretation, Moses Cordovero claimed that the language of the Torah (and the language that thereby ultimately comprises the world) was the result of transformations within a primordial and hidden language that constitutes the ultimate deep structure of our world and that is transformed in every age. Cordovero proposed a theory of a linguistic-ontological parallelism where language and the world mutually determine each other. Though not a linguistic theory of creation in itself, Lurianic Kabbalah subsequently focused its attention on language as the vehicle of creation and the substance of the world. Its constitutive ideas of *shevirat ha-kelim*, *tzimtzum* and *tiqqun* do show a linguistic component and can be interpreted within a linguistic framework, see footnotes 44–46. Luria's interpreters, in particular Moses Chayim Luzzatto, further elaborated Lurianic theosophy as a model of linguistic meaning. In the Kabbalistic view of the world, the Word of God in Revelation, especially in the Hebrew

Thanks to translation, the conjoining act *par excellence*, the various world languages may therefore be traced back to a single original unified language. It is precisely this ancient, undifferentiated unity of all languages that establishes the possibility and need for translation, through which the famed hierogamy<sup>5</sup> between source language and target language is celebrated. “Es gibt nur eine Sprache”.<sup>6</sup> Rosenzweig thus declares explaining:

Es gibt keine Spracheigentümlichkeit der einen, die sich nicht, und sei es in Mundarten, Kinderstuben, Standeseigenheiten, in jeder andern mindestens *keimhaft* nachweisen ließe.

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language, is the precondition not only of all human reaction and reflection, but – cosmologically and historically – of creation itself, whereby the model of reflection is a kind of universal hermeneutics on the basis of a godlike *Ursprache*. Kabbalah distinguishes between a mythical, supra-historical, original and uncorrupted language in which God spoke to Adam and biblical Hebrew. Hebrew is regarded as the remnant of an original language, a weakened imprint of that first pure means of expression. The priority given to Hebrew increased during the 15th and 16th centuries and Christian kabbalah, from Johannes Reuchlin to Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, continued to reason extensively on the Adamic language and its absolute rank of purity and transparency to which Hebrew is more closely approximated than any other language ever spoken. In the nineteenth century, ideas about Hebrew as a pure language (*reine Sprache*) were revived in convergence and confluence with the philosophy and aesthetics of German Romanticism and Idealism. Franz Xaver von Baader and Franz Joseph Molitor whose interests were directed to theosophy, Christian mysticism and Jewish Kabbalah attempted to harmonize Christianity and Kabbalah. Molitor's *magnum opus*, the *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (Münster: Theissing, 1827–1834–1839–1855) in four volumes and unfinished, is – together with discussions and intellectual exchange with his friend Scholem – the source from which Walter Benjamin draws his notions of Jewish tradition, theology and mysticism, as regards above all the idea of pure language (*reine Sprache*). See footnote 19. See: *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism*, international symposium held in Frankfurt a.M. 1991, ed. Karl Erich Grözinger – Joseph Dan (De Gruyter: Berlin-New York, 1995); Andreas Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma. Die Konstruktion einer ästhetischen Kabbala seit der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart – Weimar: J. B. Metzler 1998); *Kabbala und die Literatur der Romantik. Zwischen Magie und Trope*, ed. Eveline Goodman-Thau – Gert Mattenklott – Christoph Schulte (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999); Bram Mertens, *Das Denken der Lehre: Walter Benjamin, Franz Molitor and the Jewish Tradition*, PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, submitted in 2001.

5 “Dann geschieht eines Tages das Wunder der Vermählung der beiden Sprachgeister. Es geschieht nicht unvorbereitet. Erst wenn das empfangende Volk aus eigener Sehnsucht und in eigener Äußerung dem Flügelschlag des fremden Werks entgegenkommt, wenn also die Aufnahme nicht mehr aus Neugier, Interesse, Bildungsdrang, selbst ästhetischem Wohlgefallen erfolgt, sondern in der Breite einer historischen Bewegung, erst dann ist die Zeit für einen solchen ‘Hieros Gamos,’ eine solche Heilige Hochzeit gekommen”, Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und Luther*, in Martin Buber – Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936): 88–129, here 122.

6 Franz Rosenzweig, *Nachwort*, F. Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi. Zweiundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte, deutsch*, Der sechzig Hymnen und Gedichte zweite Ausgabe (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1927), 153–168, here 155.

Auf dieser wesenhaften Einheit aller Sprache und dem darauf beruhenden Gebot der allmenschlichen Verständigung ist die Möglichkeit wie die Aufgabe des Übersetzens, ihr Kann, Darf und Soll, begründet. Man kann übersetzen, weil in jeder Sprache jede andre der Möglichkeit nach enthalten ist; man darf übersetzen, wenn man diese Möglichkeit durch Urbarmachung solchen sprachlichen Brachlands verwirklichen kann; und man soll übersetzen, damit der Tag jener *Eintracht der Sprachen*, die nur in jeder einzelnen, nicht in dem leeren Raum “zwischen” ihnen erwachsen kann, komme.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that all world languages may be brought together through translation. Ultimately, in a messianic moment, languages will harmonize and then the idea of redemption through language may be distinctly glimpsed as a point of convergence. The adverb ‘*keimhaft*’ (‘embryo’ or ‘sprouting’) is used by Rosenzweig to highlight the messianic component of original linguistic correspondence and the simultaneous presence of all languages in each. The germ, a metaphor for the kernel of future generations, the epitome of utmost concentration, absolute density and future possibility, has been perhaps the most powerful image in messianic discourse since prophecies about the Messiah stemming from the Davidic line.<sup>8</sup> This redemption too takes place through linguistic coalescence and through the gravitation of all languages towards the synthetic unity of the one *Ursprache*.<sup>9</sup>

Inherent in the ultimate messianic unity of all languages is the disruption of order and ensuing chaos. So, before turning to the eventual messianic reunification of language, it is helpful to ask: what are the consequences of the fundamental linguistic correspondence between all languages? What are the features that the target language takes on after the constant transferring from one language to another, which is inherent in the translation process?

Since the beginning of his work on Yehuda Halevi’s poetic corpus in 1922, if not before, Rosenzweig considered translation to be an extreme process, where the

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7 Ibid. My italics. In *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Rosenzweig hints at the image of the ‘pure lip’, drawing on *Zephania* 3,9 where the “‘pure lip’” is considered to be synonymous with ‘pure language’ (on the word ‘lip’ as contiguous with ‘language’, see footnote 3). In *Der Stern der Erlösung*, the ‘pure lip’ is once again related to ‘that day’ (see footnote 13) when the fracture between languages will be healed in the context of messianic expectation and of the promise of redemption (“Die ‘geläuterte Lippe’ [...], die den allzeit sprachgeschiedenen Völkern für ‘jenen Tag’ verheißen ist,” Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Reinhold Mayer (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 329.

8 In this regard, for instance *Isaiah* 11,1 is worth remembering: “A shoot will grow out of Jesse’s root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots.”

9 Already in *Der Stern der Erlösung* Rosenzweig had seen the plurality of languages as the sign of the world’s unredeemed character: “Ein Blick sagt da alles. Daß die Welt unerlöst ist, nichts lehrt es deutlicher als die Vielzahl der Sprachen,” *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 328. In *Der Stern der Erlösung* translation is considered as the unifying process *par excellence* that, thanks to the spirit, builds bridges between languages: “Es ist das die erste Wirkung des Geistes, daß er übersetzt, daß er die Brücke schlägt von Mensch zu Mensch, von Zunge zu Zunge,” *ibid.*, 407.

result must preserve the sense and meaning of the source language as much as possible, even at the expense of intelligibility and transparency in the target language. This requires leaving the translated text unpolished and often inaccessible, even foreign to the reader's ear.

In Rosenzweig's translations the Hebrew of Halevi's poems (and later on the Hebrew of the Bible, whose translation into German he begins with Martin Buber in 1925) is transferred into the receptacle provided by the German language. In doing so, German is stretched out of shape to adapt to a foreign linguistic form, being so twisted as to become a new and almost foreign language in and of itself. There is a 'fallow land' of the component parts of the target language that translation can plough in an attempt to create a possibility. The possibility that the meeting, or *conjunction*, of the two languages may bring about transformation by way of *metamorphic synthesis*, whereby language in the translation process undergoes mutation, renewal and transformation. As is well known, messianic dynamic entails some similar features: the unravelling of pre-existing configurations, the sudden invasion of the new and the unconditional, categorical overturning, the coexistence of contraries,<sup>10</sup> the paling-genetic moment, the isotopy of the root stock and the germ, as well as harmony.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the union of languages does not result in order, linearity or clear linguistic structures. Rather, it results in *productive disorder* where an *asyntactic chaos* prevails. This picture is programmatically evident in the afterword to *Jehuda Halevi*, in the language used in translating his poems and hymns as well as in the translation of the Bible.

It may seem strange that the conjunction of languages, understood as an act of reconstitution of linguistic unity and hence redemptive, takes place through chaos. For Rosenzweig, the outcome of the translation process is that the target language, in an attempt to approximate the source language and to reproduce its structures as closely as possible, tends to upset the syntax (and 'syntax', as we know, means 'order') so as to result in a new language, in an attempt to plough a

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**10** *Isaiah* 11, 6–8: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them / and the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox / and the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den."

**11** During the 19th and 20th centuries, revolution, metamorphosis, and reversal from negative to positive (*Umkehr, Umwandlung, Umschlag*) played a central role in the discourses of cultural renewal and Jewish rebirth. These ideas were employed to describe the eruption of new times, with a strong messianic component. See, for example, Buber's writings from the first twenty years of the twentieth century especially the first three discourses on Judaism; Martin Buber, *Frühe jüdische Schriften 1900–1922*, ed. Barbara Schäfer, in *Martin Buber Werkausgabe*, vol. III, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007: 219–256. For example, hendiadys "Umkehr und Umwandlung" ('conversion and transformation') recurs in the third Prague speech, *Die Erneuerung des Judentums*, *ibid.*, 239.

new linguistic ground, to break the discursive linearity, to dissolve logical links. However, this process of dissolution and corrugation, triggers metamorphic processes of new synthesis and linguistic clotting, on the way to a new language that synthetically holds together source and target language, in a redemptive attempt to heal the fracture originating with the Tower of Babel. Only after it has been disintegrated, only by passing through chaos, can the mutated language, once again articulate a discursive movement. So, what Rosenzweig formulated in his afterword to his translations of Judah Halevi's poems is an idea of language close to the chaotic matter that already contains the traces of creation. Rosenzweig hints at an indistinct and integrally potential fullness where opposites meet in a disharmonious consonance because it is precisely in this harmony of dissonance, defined and constituted by oxymoron, that the seed of renewal and redemption is inherent. Eliding the syntactic links, overturning common sense categories, freeing words from their relationships of logical dependence, dissolving the nodes of causality in the target language thus paves the way for new configurations and frees chaotic potentialities, thereby fertilizing creation through destruction. Preaching the solution of 'redemptive chaos' means embracing destruction and creation simultaneously. This productive disorder is an approximation of the idea of *Ursprache*, which clears the ground for its messianic reinstatement by approximation and anticipation through translation. Each translation is thus an act of redemptive preparation, of messianic anticipation.<sup>12</sup>

As is well known, the category of 'anticipation' (*Vorwegnahme*) is central to Rosenzweig's formulation of the link between time and eternity.<sup>13</sup> While waiting for the end of time, humankind can expect tomorrow in today, eternity in the now.

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**12** In Jewish messianic thought, from Luria to Scholem, the link between destruction and restoration, catastrophe and redemption has always been hermeneutically fruitful. Jewish messianism has often emphasized the catastrophic and cataclysmic, therefore revolutionary, element in the transition from the historical present to the messianic future.

**13** The concept of *Vorwegnahme* first appears in Rosenzweig's essay *Von Einheit und Ewigkeit. Ein Gespräch zwischen Leib und Seele* (first edited by Bernhard Casper, *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts* 74 (1986): 65–78). *Vorwegnahme* implies that the advent of the messianic Kingdom can, indeed must, be brought forward. The future must be brought forward into the present, the Messiah must be made to come before time ("das Herbeiführenwollen des Messias vor seiner Zeit," Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 253) and violence must be done against the Kingdom of Heaven ("das Himmelreich zu vergewaltigen," *ibid.*). The concept of approximation of the eternity of the Kingdom in today's world is also expressed in Rosenzweig's 1929 essay, which accompanies and illustrates the translation of the Bible, *Der Ewige. Mendelssohn und der Gottesname*: "Die Sehnsucht nach seiner Ewigkeit vergeht dem Menschen, der Gottes Gegenwärtigwerden in dieser Weltzeit erfährt und erhofft. Selbst das Wort der Bibel, das gewöhnlich mit Ewigkeit übersetzt wird, bedeutet in Wahrheit ja eben diese unsere Weltzeit bis zu ihrer Wende, bis zu 'jenem Tag'," Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift. Aufsätze. Übertragungen und Briefe*: 34–50, here 50. The radical

In his afterword to *Jehuda Halevi*, Rosenzweig suggests that the “task of translating” can be found in the absolute and extreme conjunction between languages achieved through translation.<sup>14</sup> This is the “task of the translator.”<sup>15</sup> This idea evokes Benjamin’s identically titled 1921 essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*.<sup>16</sup> It is likely that Rosenzweig read this essay as it was published in 1923 (as an introduction to the German edition of *Tableaux Parisiens* in the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire), one year before the publication of the first edition of *Jehuda Halevi*.<sup>17</sup> Benjamin’s essay elaborated on a translation model that was contiguous, or even overlapping, with Rosenzweig’s. Moreover, the fact that Benjamin’s title featured prominently throughout Rosenzweig’s afterword may indicate Rosenzweig’s first-hand knowledge of Benjamin’s essay. In any case, there is no doubt that a certain like-mindedness between the two thinkers’ approach to translation is present, as they share urgent preoccupations and the essays have analogous conceptual terrain.

Though Benjamin’s thought on translation, and its effect on *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, have been extensively documented, what it shares with Rosenzweig’s translation model is worth highlighting. The similarity was first pointed out by George Steiner in *After Babel*, who casts the similarity in messianic terms: “‘Every translation’, urged Franz Rosenzweig when announcing his projected German version of the Old Testament, is a messianic act, which brings redemption nearer.”<sup>18</sup>

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change and reversal typical of the messianic moment is also evident in the term *Wende* (‘turning point’), as in the aforementioned *Umkehr*, *Umwandlung* and *Umschlag*.

14 “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzens”, Franz Rosenzweig, *Nachwort*, 155.

15 “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”, *ibid.*, 159.

16 Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV.1, *Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), 9–21. All the quotations from *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* come from this edition.

17 Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux Parisiens*, deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers von Walter Benjamin (Heidelberg: Verlag von Richard Weissbach, 1923, VII–XVII). This edition presents Benjamin’s translations of the *Tableaux Parisiens*, with original parallel texts. Another comparison drawn between Rosenzweig and Benjamin’s translation theories is contained in Stéphane Mosès’ essay “Walter Benjamin und Franz Rosenzweig”, in S. Mosès, *Spuren der Schrift. Von Goethe bis Celan* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum Verlag, 1987), 73–100. Mosès highlights the difference between the two conceptions, which can otherwise be seen only as a difference in degree and intensity, in other words, again, as a similarity. See below, footnotes 49 and 50.

18 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257.



Given the research completed on Benjamin's essays on language and translation, it would probably be more useful to outline the conceptual thread upon which both Benjamin and Rosenzweig draw. Like Rosenzweig, and on the basis of Wilhelm von Humboldt's writings, Benjamin develops the Kabbalistic and Romantic notion of *Ursprache*, the pure and ancestral language,<sup>19</sup> on which every meta-historical linguistic affinity is based and which translation can attempt to approximate. Also like Rosenzweig, Benjamin thought the original unity of all languages is visible when touched by translation's *connective* power. Furthermore, the contact between Rosenzweig and Benjamin's thinking becomes apparent when one considers Benjamin's previous essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916)<sup>20</sup> which, however, due to its publication in 1955, Rosenzweig cannot have read.<sup>21</sup>

In detailing the various types of translation in his afterword to *Jehuda Halevi*, Rosenzweig deals with the use of translation for practical purposes, where the content and intelligibility of the message constitute the primary aim. For example, he explains, "wenn ich als Kaufmann eine Bestellung aus der Türkei erhalte und sie auf das Übersetzungsbüro schicke."<sup>22</sup> This is neither true language nor true translation because, Rosenzweig goes on to explain, "Die Sprache, der ihr Sprecher nichts abverlangt, erstarrt zum Mittel der Verständigung."<sup>23</sup> Language is therefore denied its communicative power. Real translators are *Sprachschöpfer*, creative, unbiased demiurges who must gravitate, together with their language, towards the other language. The translator must contemplate any sort of risk or distortion, even a complete overhaul of linguistic form, forfeiting any aspect of

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<sup>19</sup> In *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* Benjamin uses the expression "reine Sprache" ("pure language", *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 13) but the reference is always to the nominal, Adamic language in which words and things are consubstantial which had been dealt with in his previous essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, see below, footnote 20.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol II.1, *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977, 140–157). All the quotations from *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* come from this edition.

<sup>21</sup> The essay was first published in Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, 2 vols., ed. Theodor W. Adorno – Gretel Adorno, in collaboration with Friedrich Podzus, vol. II (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1955), 401–419.

<sup>22</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Nachwort*, 154.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* In *Über Sprache überhaupt* Benjamin himself focuses on the distinction between *Mittel* ('means'), the instrumental function of communication, and *Medium* ('medium'), the language that magically and immediately communicates itself. See the sections dedicated to the two ways of speaking at the beginning of the essay, Walter Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 142.



comprehensibility, if necessary.<sup>24</sup> Creativity and innovation in translation involve *potentiality* and linguistic *alterity*. By making room for change and renewal, the creative and innovative power of translation is often opposed to comprehensibility. In *Über Sprache überhaupt* Benjamin, too, denies the legitimacy of communicating *through*, of the transmissive model of communication, what he calls “die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache.”<sup>25</sup>

After the Fall of Adam and the Tower of Babel (two moments Benjamin ties together metonymically) original, pure language becomes fragmented before branching out into a chaotic dispersion of multiple languages. From then on, language was communication, mediation and intentionality. In contrast, pure language is hindered by mediation and impedes the transmission of information, with the direct consequence that communication itself is sidestepped and thus denied. As pure language is absolute and unconditional, a word must instead declare itself immediately, without conveying a particular sense or mediate meanings. Pure language, Adam’s name-language, is *unintentional* (*without intention, consequences or implication*) and *inexpressive*, foreshadowing two ideas that will surface repeatedly around the time of *Über Sprache überhaupt* and in the following years.<sup>26</sup> It is in original language that word and thing co-belong. With

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24 “Der Übersetzer macht sich zum Sprachrohr der fremden Stimme, die er über den Abgrund des Raums oder der Zeit vernehmlich macht. Wenn die fremde Stimme etwas zu sagen hat, dann muß die Sprache nachher anders aussehen als vorher. Dieser Erfolg ist das Kriterium für die pflichtgemäß ausgeführte Leistung des Übersetzers.”, Franz Rosenzweig, *Nachwort*, 155.

25 Walter Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 144.

26 With reference to this aspect, see the fragment *Analogie und Verwandtschaft*, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI, *Fragmente vermischten Inhalts – autobiographische Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 43–45. The category ‘inexpressive’ (*ausdruckslos*) appears in this fragment, which was composed in the years between the two essays on language (1916 and 1921). It was then central to the almost coeval essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*. See: Walter Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 123–201. Benjamin left scattered notes on unintentionality between 1920 and 1921. For example; “Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Begriff des Systems und die Lehre vom Erlöschen der Intention in der Wahrheit,” Walter Benjamin, *Sprache und Logik I*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI, *Fragmente vermischten Inhalts. Autobiographische Schriften*, 23. See also: “Das Wissen der Wahrheit. Dieses gibt es nicht. Denn die Wahrheit ist *der Tod der intentio*,” Walter Benjamin, *Arten des Wissens*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI, *Fragmente vermischten Inhalts. Autobiographische Schriften*, p. 48. In *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* Benjamin stated that “Wahrheit tritt nie in eine Relation und insbesondere in keine intentionale. Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis als ein in der Begriffsintention bestimmter ist nicht die Wahrheit. Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein [...] Die Wahrheit ist *der Tod der Intention*,” Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I. 1, *Abhandlungen*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp,

this understanding of original language, Benjamin does away with logical and rational discursiveness, with instrumental rationality and, even more radically, with meaning. Indeed, pure language does not partake of the mediation of meaning and communicative intention that characterizes language. In original pure language, meaning is not achieved because pure language, in its perfect constanciality with the thing, quite literally, *no longer means*.

Like Rosenzweig, who claimed that the metamorphosis of language was the necessary result of every act of translation,<sup>27</sup> Benjamin maintained that translation is not a surface movement or a fleeting passage from one language to another. For Benjamin, Adam's *nominatio rerum* is the carrier of a mute entity towards its configuration in sound, a transfer, a geometric *translation*. A translation from the voiceless to the voiced, from the nameless to the named. Humankind thus receives the voiceless and nameless language of things and then translates it into sound through the act of translation.<sup>28</sup> This transformation, a changing of forms, is a *metamorphosis*. As for Rosenzweig, for Benjamin, translation opens up "ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen."<sup>29</sup> In his 1916 essay, translation functions merely as an allusion to the transmutation that language in its highest state, Adam's bestowing pure name, contains as a promise or seed.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin considers the transformative power that correctly carried out translation can wield in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1921), which explores the metamorphic value of translation as approximating and anticipating redemption. For Benjamin, translation is an attempt to come closer to the *Ursprache*, the pure language, by juxtaposing languages in the knowledge that they are irreparably separate. Translation is an attempt at harmony and messianic reintegration, in which only a literal translation can succeed.<sup>31</sup>

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1974), 204–430, here 216. Benjamin also dwelt on the absence of expression and intention in authentic language in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, see below, footnote 47. Italics in the quotations are mine.

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 24 above.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 151. A little further on, Benjamin points out: "Die Sprache der Dinge kann in die Sprache der Erkenntnis und des Namens nur in der Übersetzung eingehen," *ibid.*, 152. Of course, after the destruction of the Tower, there will be as many translations as there are languages: "Soviel Übersetzungen, soviel Sprachen, sobald nämlich der Mensch einmal aus dem paradisischen Zustand, der nur eine Sprache kannte, gefallen ist," *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>30</sup> On the messianic component of the word *Keim*, see above.

<sup>31</sup> In the afterword to *Jehuda Halevi*, Rosenzweig, too, makes a clear distinction between two sorts of translation, the simple 'imitation' and the true 'translation.' Simple imitation results in adaptation, the re-elaboration of the source text. In contrast, true translation is an encounter, the

Benjamin also puts forth a form of literalism which, not unlike Rosenzweig's, can measure the effectiveness of translation in its ability to explode the target language in the name of pure language by removing its constraints and expanding its boundaries. The alteration of and dissonance within the target language are necessary because they are meant to ripen the seed of pure language in translation.<sup>32</sup> Through this process, translation achieves harmony and linguistic integration, "Die große Sehnsucht nach Sprachergänzung",<sup>33</sup> extremely close in meaning to that "Eintracht der Sprachen"<sup>34</sup>, which Rosenzweig had mentioned in his concluding note to *Jehuda Halevi*.

In Benjamin's opinion, translation ultimately tends towards the revelation of the most intimate unity between languages. It achieves this by redeeming the remnant of pure language, found in the source language, in the target language.<sup>35</sup> Translation cannot reveal this secret relationship,<sup>36</sup> but can represent it in *embryonic* or *intensive* form.<sup>37</sup> The adjective *keimhaft* (incipient or embryonic) is used by Rosenzweig in his afterword to *Jehuda Halevi*<sup>38</sup> to indicate the sprouting, the budding into the ultimate stage of perfection, – harmony *in statu nascendi*.<sup>39</sup>

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authentic communication between two languages, the transference of one into the other. By making this categorical distinction, Rosenzweig took up concepts expressed by Friedrich Schleiermacher, translator of Plato, at the *Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften* in Berlin (1813), especially the conceptual bifurcation between the practice of *Dolmetschen* and that of the true *Uebersetzen*. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens*, in F. Schleiermacher, *Sämmtliche Werke*, third part, *Zur Philosophie*, vol. II (Berlin: Reimer, 1838), 207–245; Hans-Christoph Askani, *Das Problem der Übersetzung – dargestellt an Franz Rosenzweig. Die Methoden und Prinzipien der Rosenzweigschen und Buber-Rosenzweigschen Übersetzungen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997). On Rosenzweig's activity as a translator, see: Everett Fox, "Franz Rosenzweig as Translator", in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* (34), 1989: 371–384; Mara Benjamin, "Building a Zion in German(y): Franz Rosenzweig on Yehuda Halevi", in *Jewish Social Studies* (13), 2007, 127–154.

32 "In der Übersetzung den Samen reiner Sprache zur Reife zu bringen," Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 17.

33 *Ibid.*, 18.

34 See above, footnote 7. In *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin also speaks of the reintegration of the various languages into the one true language and of harmony ("Integration der vielen Sprachen zur einen wahren"; "Harmonie", *ibid.*, 16, 18) as the ideals that move the translation process.

35 "Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*," *ibid.*, 19.

36 "Dieses verborgene Verhältnis," *ibid.*, 12.

37 "keimhaft oder intensiv," *ibid.*

38 See above, footnote 7.

39 A little further on, Benjamin also uses the term *Keim* ('germ', 'bud', 'embryo'), to indicate the prelude, the hint of harmony that the translation can approximate, trying to represent, without

For both Rosenzweig and Benjamin, in translation the messianic dynamic that repairs the fracture and reinstates paradisiacal harmony takes center stage. Thus conceived, translation unfolds in an *intensive, allusive and anticipatory* manner.<sup>40</sup> In Rosenzweig's thought, the concept of anticipation is in turn a figure in the messianic discourse, and translation can help to heal linguistic division while retracing the path towards the lost unity of language.<sup>41</sup>

Benjamin's concept of translation merges into Rosenzweig's, though he takes the outcome to extremes: by clinging to pure language, which no longer means or expresses anything,<sup>42</sup> ideal translation, namely literal translation, gets rid of clarity of content while eliminating any expressive intentionality. Hence, the value and dignity of translation increase as its ability to communicate decreases. In fact, if it is to be a redemptive tool and a means to universal understanding, translation must be, quite paradoxically, contrary to communication, and must rid itself of the weight of meaning.<sup>43</sup> The ideal translation therefore features no communication and a very high degree of harmony and messianic redemption. In Benjamin's extreme conclusion, stripped of any meaning language moves towards annihilation, towards silence, gathering the scattered shards of differentiated language left behind after the Tower of Babel, while encouraging a unified, pure language through the extreme act of linguistic conjunction that translation represents.<sup>44</sup> As

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being able to produce it from scratch, the intimate and secret relationship between languages, Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 12.

**40** The outcome of the translation process is "eine intensive, d.h. vorgreifende, andeutende Verwirklichung," *ibid.*

**41** See above, footnote 13.

**42** See below, footnote 47.

**43** "schwere[r] und fremde[r] Sinn," Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 12.

**44** After dealing with the construction of the Tower of Babel, its destruction and the consequent pulverization of the languages in *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* Benjamin's argument passes towards the cosmic drama of the rupture of the vessels. Here he refers to the Kabbalistic ideas of the *tzimtzum* (contraction), of the *tiqqun ha-'olam* (restoration) and, above all, of the *shevirat ha-kelim* (rupture of the vessels). Through a mimetic approach and the mirroring of the source language in the target language, translation tends to erase the diversity between languages by conjuring up a glimmer of the pre-Babel language and, metonymically, contributes to recomposing the primordial rupture and to reconstituting the whole: "Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen. Eben darum muß sie von der Absicht, etwas mitzuteilen, vom Sinn in sehr hohem Maße absehen," *ibid.*, 18.

there is an inherent connection between languages, based on the original unity of language, the translation that anticipates redemption and draws it nearer necessarily passes through a shutdown of the causal and logical relationships within language and, as part of a redemptive dynamic, literal translation triggers metamorphic and transformative processes in the target language.

Until the ‘messianic end’<sup>45</sup> is reached, the redemption of meaning through the harmony of languages – which corresponds to the conjunction of signifiers – will remain hidden. However, in the present, the redemption of meaning may be revealed in translation.<sup>46</sup> Through linguistic movement, translation reflects the *reine Sprache*: “In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern als ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen

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45 See below, footnote 46.

46 “Bei den einzelnen, den *unergänzten* Sprachen nämlich ist ihr Gemeintes niemals in relativer Selbständigkeit anzutreffen, wie bei den einzelnen Wörtern oder Sätzen, sondern vielmehr in stetem Wandel begriffen, bis es aus der Harmonie all jener Arten des Meinens als die reine Sprache herauszutreten vermag. So lange bleibt es in den Sprachen verborgen. Wenn aber diese derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen Fortleben der Werke und am unendlichen Aufleben der Sprachen sich entzündet, immer von neuem die Probe auf jenes heilige Wachstum der Sprachen zu machen: wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei, wie gegenwärtig es im Wissen um diese Entfernung werden mag.”, Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 14. Italics are mine. In this context, *die Art des Meinens* and *das Gemeinte* can be considered approximately as synonyms for ‘signifier’ and ‘meaning’, respectively. While speaking about the literal fidelity to the syntax of the original text, which leads to an upheaval of meaning in the target language and to the danger of unintelligibility, Benjamin affirms that communicative intentionality, and therefore meaning, should not be preserved but should be restored on the basis of more fundamental and more hidden relationships. To illustrate this method, Benjamin uses an image based on the reconstitution of shards, the reunion of fragments, an image which clearly recalls the cosmogonic dynamics elaborated by Luria with the three following steps: the contraction of the divine energy (*tzimtzum*), the breaking of the vessels containing divine light (*shevirat ha-kelim*), the ensuing serious alteration of the original harmony, and finally its restoration by means of the *tiqqun* (the process of reintegration towards which the whole world tends and which will be completed at the arrival of the Messiah, see above, footnotes 4 and 44). In the process of translation the reconstitution of the fragments does not proceed on the basis of a similarity between source language and target language, but is moved by the principle of the reproduction of ‘the way of understanding’ (*Art des Meinens*). The concept of *Art des Meinens* coincides, but only in part, with that of *signifier*; besides the acoustic image of the word, it also means the phrastic-syntactic structure. Only by this way can the traces of ‘a greater language’ be glimpsed, whereby this syntagma means the true and pure language (*reine Sprache*). It is therefore necessary to follow the edges, the lines of junction of the various fragments: this means dealing with a fragmentary, rough-hewn, sharp, harsh and splintered language, which is near either to implosion or to explosion. Tending towards utmost litarality – a litarality which tends at times to go to the limits and beyond – and somehow disfiguring the sense of sentences the process of translation recovers a reflection, a glimmer of pure language and contributes to the messianic utopia of linguistic re-integration and reconstitution (*Sprachergänzung* or, as Rosenzweig had defined it, *Eintracht der Sprachen*, see above, footnotes 33 and 34).

Sprachen Gemeinde ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu *erlöschen* bestimmt sind".<sup>47</sup> Both Rosenzweig and Benjamin emphasized the creativity of the act of translation, the synthetic creation of something completely new and apparently extraneous, which overturns categories by preparing or messianically anticipating new categories of meaning.<sup>48</sup>

Rosenzweig's vision of translation proceeds by addition – in his absolute and boundless faithfulness to the original language and by way of proliferation, extension and enhancement of the target language. With Benjamin, the extreme theoretical outcome is achieved, and the Rosenzweigian demand for a new language is met to its fullest extent. This results in an unusual language which, through authentic conjunction, overturns word order and syntax. For Benjamin, translated language asserts itself at the edges of silence, the word extinguished. In this sense, the most faithful translation is the one that subverts meaning, that draws nearer to pure language and that expedites redemption, even though this leads straight to unintelligibility<sup>49</sup> and its own annihilation.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, redemption presupposes the extinction of meaning. Or, in other words, the *Erlösung* (redemption) implies an *Erlöschung* (extinction).<sup>51</sup> According to this Benjaminian stance, in which Adorno would see an absolutely anti-communicative moment,<sup>52</sup> the linguistic conjunction is bolstered to such an extent that it *disjoins*

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47 Ibid, 19. Italics are mine.

48 The adjective *schöpferisch* ('creative'), used by Benjamin (see footnote 47), is also used by Rosenzweig who, discussing the translator's task, uses the syntagma "schöpferische Leistung des Übersetzers" (Franz Rosenzweig, *Nachwort*, 154) and the noun "Sprachschöpfer" (ibid., 155).

49 "Geradenwegs ins Unverständliche," Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 17.

50 This radicality is illustrated on the basis of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, the most radical and absolute examples of fidelity to the original text ("monströse Beispiele solcher Wörtlichkeit," ibid.) Even though they relate to the most perfect translations as the archetype (*Urbild*) to the model (*Vorbild*), there is a further, more obscure aspect in Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles. Therein the sense precipitates from abyss to abyss and runs the risk of losing itself in bottomless linguistic depths ("In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren," ibid., 21). The original and greatest danger of translation lies in the risk of moving along the edge of silence and eventually touching it ("die ungeheure und ursprüngliche Gefahr aller Übersetzung: daß die Tore einer so erweiterten Sprache zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen," ibid.). The extremism of total translation is therefore perceived by Benjamin as a danger, but, in the veins of the text, even though it is not made explicit, the verse of Hölderlin's *Patmos* clearly resonates: "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / das Rettende auch," in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Ausgabe*, ed. Detlev Lüders, 2 vols., vol. I (Bad Homburg: Athenäum Verlag, 1970) 340–346, here 340.

51 See above, footnotes 26 and 47.

52 Theodor W. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin. Aufsätze, Artikel, Briefe*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, revised and integrated edition (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 46.

any logical relationship, reaching the edges of the realm of silence or even trespassing it.

This journey, if followed, leads to Paul Celan, a reader and an admirer of both Rosenzweig<sup>53</sup> and Benjamin.<sup>54</sup> In his Darmstadt speech, which Celan gives on the occasion of the awarding of the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, the poet hints at a rapid decline of syntax.<sup>55</sup> In the *Büchner-Rede* preparatory notes, Celan draws on Benjamin's concepts again, and he makes annotations about the tendency to silence inherent in language that has become rough and fractured.<sup>56</sup> Further on

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53 See: John Felstiner, "Translating Paul Celan's 'Jerusalem' Poems", *Religion & Literature*, 16 (1984): 37–47; Barbara Galli, *On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson's Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan* (Montreal-Kingston-London-Ithaca: McGill-University Press, 2007), especially the chapter "Underpaths toward Redemption: The triad of Franz Rosenzweig, Paul Celan and Elliot R. Wolfson": 40–74.

54 Among many titles, see: Ulisse Dogà, "*Port Bou – deutsch?*": *Paul Celan liest Walter Benjamin* (Aachen: Rimbaud Verlag, 2009); Ricardo Forster, *Los hermeneutas de la noche: de Walter Benjamin a Paul Celan* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2009); Rosalba Maletta, "Eterotassie del Novecento. Dalla mela di Benjamin al pasto di neve di Celan", *Psicoart. Rivista di arte e psicologia* 3 (2013): 1–60; Anna Glazova, "Paul Celan in conversation with Walter Benjamin: The 'Secret Open'", *The Germanic Review*, 91 (2016): 277–293.

55 "[das] rapidere[...] Gefälle der Syntax," Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises Darmstadt, am 22. Oktober 1960*, in P. Celan, *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol. III, ed. Beda Allemann – Stefan Reichert in collaboration with Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 197.

56 "Die Neigung zum Verstummen ist unüberhörbar [...] In der [...] Schroffheit der Sprache bekundet sich, unüberhörbar, die Neigung zum Verstummen," Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Vorstufen – Textgenese – Endfassung. Tübinger Ausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Wertheimer – Bernhard Böschstein – Heino Schmuil (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 125. And further on in his Darmstadt speech, Celan states: "Gewiss, das Gedicht – das Gedicht heute – zeigt [...] das ist unverkennbar, eine starke Neigung zum Verstummen. Es behauptet sich [...] am Rande seiner selbst; es ruft und holt sich, um bestehen zu können, unausgesetzt aus seinem Schon-nicht-mehr in sein Immer-noch zurück," P. Celan, *Der Meridian, in Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden*, 197. Again in the notes that prepare the Darmstadt speech, Celan, himself a translator of Osip Mandel'shtam, Paul Valery and Giuseppe Ungaretti, develops his thoughts on translation, recalling Rosenzweig and Benjamin's concepts: "Das Übertragen von Gedichten ist eine Übung in diesem Sinn: es geschieht über die Abgründe der Sprachen hinweg: das Einende ist der Sprung. – Solcher Sprung ist Glück und Gelingen," Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Vorstufen – Textgenese – Endfassung. Tübinger Ausgabe*, 125. On the translation as 'leap', see also: Heino Schmuil, "Übersetzung als Sprung. Textgenetische und poetologische Beobachtungen an Celans Übersetzungen von Shakespeares Sonetten", *Arcadia* (32) 1997: 119–147. The concept of 'leap' as an immediate movement, opposed to transit and the mediated, linear passage and closely connected to the inexpressive immediacy of feeling, is a recurrent concept of Benjamin's early years. See the fragment *Analogie und Verwandtschaft*, where, in opposition to the scientific-rational principle that governs the analogy, the affinity is an inexpressive, non-linear immediacy of feeling. Moreover, in his thesis on the concept of romantic criticism, while discussing romantic gnoseology,



in the same preparatory notes, and even more radically, messianic syntax is still recognizable, although in reverse perspective, where the ‘embryonality’ *in statu nascendi* is replaced by a new *status creaturalis*, a new creatureliness which is *in statu moriendi*, where the purer language has turned into a death rattle:<sup>57</sup>

Sprache als *Involution*, Sinnentfaltung in der einen, wortfremden Silbe: es ist die im *durchröcheln Stammeln*<sup>58</sup> erkennbare ‘Stammsilbe’, Sprache als das in den Keim *Zurückgekehrte* – der Bedeutungsträger ist der sterbliche Mund, dessen Lippen sich nicht mehr ründen. *Muta cum liquida* – vokalisch gestützt, der Reimlaut als Selbstlaut.<sup>59</sup>

So, Rozenzweig’s request for a translation that is faithfully close to the original text (breaking the constraints and widening the boundaries of the target language often by way of violation of its morphological, syntactic and lexical norms) is taken by Celan to its extreme repercussions. Celan also embraces Benjamin’s radicality, and his depriving the translation (and language in general) of communicative

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Benjamin states: “In der Vermittlung durch Reflexionen liegt aber kein prinzipieller Gegensatz zur Unmittelbarkeit des denkenden Erfassens, weil jede Reflexion in sich unmittelbar ist. Es handelt sich also um eine Vermittlung durch Unmittelbarkeiten; Friedrich Schlegel kannte keine andere und er spricht gelegentlich in diesem Sinne von dem ‘Übergang, der immer ein Sprung sein muß’. Diese prinzipielle [...] Unmittelbarkeit ist es, auf der die Lebendigkeit des Zusammenhanges beruht,” W. Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.1, 7–122, here 26–27.

57 “Aber wieviele sind es denn heute, die solche Aspekte des Dichterischen überhaupt wahrnehmen? Die das Gedicht wahrnehmen als menschliche – und mithin von einmalige und vom Geheimnis der Einmaligkeit begleitete – Präsenz? Wieviele sind es wohl, die *mit dem Wort zu schweigen wissen*, bei ihm bleiben, wenn es im Intervall steht, in seinen ‘Höfen’, in seiner – schlüsselfernen – Offenheit, *das Stimmhafte aus dem Stimmlosen fallend*, in der Systole die Diastole verdeutlichend, welt- und unendlichkeitssüchtig zugleich – Sprache, wie Valéry einmal sagt, *in statu nascendi, freierwerdende Sprache*, Sprache der Seelenmonade Mensch – und, wenn ich auch noch das hinzufügen darf, Sprache *in statu moriendi*, Sprache dessen, der Welt zu gewinnen sucht, weil er – ich glaube, das ist ein uralter Traum der Poesie – *weltfrei* zu werden hofft, *frei von Kontingenzen*.” Letter of Celan to Werner Weber, March 26th, 1960, cited in Axel Gellhaus, “*Fremde Nähe*”. *Celan als Übersetzer. Eine Ausstellung des Deutschen Literaturarchivs in Verbindung mit dem Präsidialdepartement der Stadt Zürich im Schiller-Nationalmuseum Marbach am Neckar und im Stadthaus Zürich*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997: 398. Italics are mine.

58 In the third part of *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Rosenzweig also makes reference to a certain kind of silence, different from that silence of the pre-world (*Vorwelt*), which had been dealt with in the first part of his work. This silence no longer needs words and is similar to a stuttering voice, the real connecting link between the different, unredeemed languages: “Hier ist ein Schweigen, das nicht wie die Stummheit der Vorwelt noch keine Worte hat, sondern das des Worts nicht mehr bedarf. Es ist das Schweigen des vollendeten Verstehens [...] Zwischen verschiedenen Sprachen vermittelt nur das stammelnde Wort, und die Gebärde hört auf, unmittelbare Verständigung zu sein.” F. Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 328.

59 Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Vorstufen – Textgenese – Endfassung. Tübinger Ausgabe*, 123–4. Italics are mine.

intention as an alternative to linear discursivity and to logical coherence, so as to reach the domain of the inexpressive and the edge of silence.<sup>60</sup> Celan recognizes Benjamin's assumption that translation must move *contra sensum* by triggering transformative-metamorphic processes in the target language. However, unlike Benjamin, Celan does not warn against the danger of silence. As stated in his Darmstadt speech, Celan instead embraces the need for a retroversion of language, an erosion of syntax, the necessity of subverting meanings and leading language *ad absurdum*.<sup>61</sup> The 'death of meaning' and the extinction of syntax are thus the prerequisites for creating a new language and a 'new breath'.

Here Celan finds a connection with Rosenzweig, working out the implications not only of Rosenzweig's translations of Judah Halevi but also of Rosenzweig and Buber's translation of the Bible (which was begun in 1925, interrupted by Rosenzweig's death in 1929, and concluded by Buber in Israel in 1961). In its attempt to create a new Hebraized German, their extremely literal Bible translation can be seen as a culmination of German-Hebrew relations and, in retrospect, as a last attempt to bridge these two languages in Scripture. This translation, as well as the philosophy of language underpinning it, were influential factors in Celan's poetry, particularly the attention Rosenzweig and Buber paid to breath. To give visibility, and audibility, to the oral dimension of Scripture and to reproduce the orality of the Hebrew Bible within German, Buber and Rosenzweig freed the text from its traditional subdivisions into chapters and verses, basing their translation on a minimum unit of sound production. The units into which Rosenzweig and Buber segment biblical verses are *cola*: rhythmic breath units (*Atemzug-Einheiten*) that are also units of meaning. They are the intervals between one intake of air and the next, prolonged until the renewal of breath,<sup>62</sup> until the bursting of what Rosenzweig calls 'breath-turn' (*Atemkehre*).<sup>63</sup>

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60 See above, footnotes 26 and 47.

61 "Und das Gedicht wäre [...] der Ort, wo alle Tropen und Metaphern ad absurdum geführt werden sollen," Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises Darmstadt, am 22. Oktober 1960*, 199.

62 "Vom Auge her sollte das Band der Zunge gelöst werden. Da mußte unter aller logischen Interpunktion [...] das Grundprinzip der mündlichen Interpunktion entbunden werden: Der Atemzug. Der Atem ist der Stoff der Rede; so ist das Atemschöpfen ihre natürliche Gliederung. Es steht unter seinem eigenen Gesetz: Mehr als zwanzig oder allenfalls dreißig Worte wird man kaum sprechen ohne ein tiefes, nicht bloß nachfüllendes Erneuern des Atems [...] aber innerhalb dieser Grenzen folgt die Verteilung der atemerneuernden Schweigen dem inneren Zuge der Rede, der ja nur gelegentlich von ihrem logischen Aufbau bestimmt ist, meist aber unmittelbar die Bewegungen und Erregungen der Seele selber in seinen Stärke- und vor allem in seinen Zeitmaßen spiegelt." Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und das Wort*, in Martin Buber – Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, 80–81.

63 *Ibid.*, 81.

Celan made use of the same concept, slightly altered, speaking in turn of a ‘breath-turn’ a ‘turning point of the breath’ (*Atemwende*). Celan mentions this concept for the first time in Darmstadt,<sup>64</sup> and the term itself becomes then the title of a poetry collection published in 1967.<sup>65</sup> Only by intervening in the language, freeing words from logical dependencies and encrypting their images, only by disrupting meaning and comprehensibility, breaking the language, bringing poems to the verge of unintelligibility it is possible to achieve that inversion of breath. The air taken in at the moment of inhalation changes direction, undergoes a ‘turning point’ and is returned, at the moment of exhalation, as a new poetic word to which Celan entrusts the task of portraying what, for the ordinary means of figuration and discursivity, would be irrepresentable. In a longer draft written in preparation for the Darmstadt speech, dated May 30th 1960, Celan uses more or less the same term previously attributed to Rosenzweig and Buber, “Atemeinheit”:

“Was auf der Lunge, das auf der Zunge,” pflegte meine Mutter zu sagen. Das hat mit dem Atem zu tun. Man sollte es endlich lernen, im Gedicht diesen Atem, diese Atemeinheit mitzulesen; in den Kolen ist der Sinn oft wahrer gefügt und gefügt als im Reim; Gestalt des Gedichts: das ist Gegenwart des Einzelnen, Atmenden.<sup>66</sup>

In another undated note, Celan returns to Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s *Kolen* (though this time with explicit reference to the mass death in the concentration camps) to deal with a new language that is needed, a language made of new words, silences, breath stoppages (*Stauungen des Atems*) and inversions of breath:

Deine *Umkehr* – was ist das? Ist es das Wort von der Mandeläugig-Schönen, das ich dich, auf das opportuniste variiert, wiederholen höre? Erst wenn du mit deinem allereigensten Schmerz bei den krummasigen und mauschelnden und kielkröpfigen Toten von Auschwitz und Treblinka und anderswo gewesen bist, dann begegnest du auch dem Aug und seiner Mandel. Und dann stehst du *mit deinem verstummenden Denken* in der *Pause*, die dich an dein Herz erinnert, und sprichst nicht davon. Und sprichst, später von dir. In diesem “Später” in dort erinnerten Pausen, in den *Kolen* und *Moren* gipfelt dein Wort; das Gedicht heute – es ist eine *Atemwende*<sup>67</sup> Kammzeiten und Seelenwende, daran erkennst du’s. – nimm es wahr.<sup>68</sup>

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64 “Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten. Wer weiß, vielleicht legt die Dichtung den Weg – auch den Weg der Kunst – um einer solchen Atemwende willen zurück?”, Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises Darmstadt, am 22. Oktober 1960*, 195.

65 Paul Celan, *Atemwende* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967). On the motif of breath in Celan’s poetry and translations, see: Florence Pennone-Autze, *Paul Celans Übersetzungspoetik: Entwicklungslinien in seinen Übertragungen französischer Lyrik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2007), 94.

66 Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Vorstufen – Textgenese – Endfassung. Tübinger Ausgabe*, 108.

67 Italics are mine.

68 Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Vorstufen – Textgenese – Endfassung. Tübinger Ausgabe*, 127.

In this paragraph, Celan returns to a lexicon with messianic connotations, using the term *Umkehr*, which is linked to the concepts of ‘palingenesis’, ‘metamorphosis’, ‘categorical inversion’, entering fully into the semantic field of redemption, as seen above.<sup>69</sup> Thus, redemption can, perhaps, take place through a new language, devoid of logic, referentiality and profoundly paradoxical.

These are extreme outcomes and revealing them is not meant as a violation of the Rosenzweigian *Sprachdenken*, in its utopia of reunification and restoration of the one language through ‘absolute translation’. My intention is to show what the ultimate horizon of this total openness is, along a line of direct consequentiality. The trajectory that tends towards the contraction and the retraction of language into itself, towards the ‘decline of syntax’ and the death of the word, precisely because, *e negativo*, the seed of the new and a chance at redemption are perhaps hidden within silence.

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<sup>69</sup> See above, footnote 11.