

## **It Must Fail: On Language and Freedom in Benjamin's Early Philosophy**

**Élise Derroitte**

Centre for Philosophy of Law - Institut supérieur de Philosophie  
Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium  
elise.derroitte@uclouvain.be

**Abstract** This essay is primarily concerned with Benjamin's theory of language in "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" and "The Task of the Translator" with reference to Jewish mysticism and German Romanticism. I seek to show how Benjamin's theory of language distances itself from a theory of restoration of a pure, divine language to propose a theory of the self-expression of the world. I argue that human language translates the historical attempt and failure to reunite subjective experience and self-expression. Such a conception implies that Benjamin's theory of language is based on his conception of human nature and that it finds its specificity in the free will of the subjects whilst a pure expression of the truth is never reachable in human language. I conclude in showing that Benjamin's theory of translation expresses this theory of language where the self-expression exceeds the possibility of the words opening space for the creativity for the one who speaks.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin, language, Jewish mysticism, Name, translation

### **0. Introduction**

Benjamin's texts on language are probably part of his most complicated ones. One of the difficulties comes from the function he allocates to language. His essays "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" and "The Task of the Translator" do not address the questions of the verifiability of speech acts. Moreover, they are best understood as an anti-theory of communication between the subjects. It states indeed that even the possibility to communicate is by nature uncertain. Facing this difficulty, Benjamin tries to redefine the role of language as a mode of relationality that is not predetermined by the meaning of a message but bounded by the *desire* of the subjects to exchange one with another. This definition of language is more anthropological characterization than methodology of verifiability.

In order to explore this form of language that does not communicate, we will determine what function language plays in Benjamin's philosophy. Therefore, we will reconnect this theory to its sources and underline its particularity. The main source of this theory of language is the Jewish mysticism; this background is associated to a second influence: the Romantic theory of poeticization. Our first point concerns the ontology of language based on this theology of the origin of language. Our second section analyzes the different conceptions of history this theory of language implies. In this section, we argue that all the different steps dramatized in the theory of the Fall of pure language into the non-sense of

communication are related to different moments of a theory of history. Consequently, our second point develops the structure of transformation and of resolution of history included in these ontologies of language clarified in our first point. Finally, our third point develops a broader definition of translation in order to interpret the consequences of Benjamin's theory of language. This last section explains how translation is what ensures the perpetuation of the process of language – its material historicization – and how “The Task of the Translator” complements the theory of the Fall into human language defended in the first essay.

## 1. Sources

“On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” is constructed on different steps where Benjamin develops a speculative genealogy of the linguistic facts at the source of human language. His theory is close in its form to the Jewish mystic conception of the Fall of sacred language into human language, and its content is also derived from the story of Creation. However, its implication with respect to the belief is profoundly different. This dramatization of the origin of the world – narrated in the Story of Creation – allows Benjamin to isolate the particularities of the different phases of the origin of language and, consequently, to consider the different functions each moment has during this process of Creation.

### 1.1. Ontology of Language

In his “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, Benjamin's main thesis is that language concerns everything in the world; it is not limited to humankind. As he puts it: “there is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake in language.” (BENJAMIN W., 1996b, 62) Language is thus the system that represents all the different modes of relationship in the world. It is a principle of mediation between two separate elements. As such, language is not simply the expression of content into words. Benjamin's theory of language is developed on a distinction between the transcendent essences and the material essences of things, namely the spiritual essences and the linguistic essences of things. Language, as experienced in the world, is only realized through the linguistic essences. These essences are only the forms in which the spiritual essences of things can come to reality. It is not the spiritual essences themselves. According to Benjamin, everything has a spiritual essence, which is speechless. It can only communicate itself through its other essence, the linguistic one. This spiritual essence is an intensive totality. It cannot, as such, be rendered objective. It needs language to become a material object. Language is therefore the medium *in* which spiritual essences can communicate themselves; *in* which and not *through* which says Benjamin, because those spiritual essences need a particular form to become an object of knowledge. Therefore, every attempt to cognize an object needs a particular formalization, a historicization. This interpretation explains why Benjamin uses the story of Creation. This process through which the spiritual essence “becomes an object” requires a dramatization of the story of the Fall into the material world. It is inside the process of objectivization that knowledge becomes possible. As such, we can say that Benjamin follows Schelling's conception of origin according to which

“The act precedes the essence.” Benjamin would have said: the act of speaking precedes the linguistic essence. The world is only cognizable through the act of naming. As Benjamin explains: “And he saw that it was good’ – that is, he had cognized it through name.” (BENJAMIN W., 1996b, 68) God himself has an origin outside himself that explains his Creation. Creation is the fact that renders this act visible<sup>1</sup>.

Still, this explanation of language as the manifestation of spiritual essences is, at this point, constructed as a negative deduction. Benjamin needs to give this structure a particular form in which it can reveal itself. In other words, this ontological structure has to be the support of an historical development. The passage from this negative construction to a historical succession needs a story to support it. This story of the becoming of the spiritual essence is dramatized in the story of Creation.

### 1.2. Dramatization of the Story of the Fall

Benjamin tries to define the problems of language in regard to its origin. This origin, symbolically, can be narrated using the Genesis. This recourse to the biblical narrative is therefore a dramatization of his theory of language:

If in what follows the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither a biblical interpretation nor *subjection\** of the Bible to *objective\** consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts. (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 67,  
\*emphasis added)

This recourse to the story of Genesis is thus a way of analyzing fundamental linguistic facts<sup>2</sup>. According to Benjamin’s account of the relationship between spiritual essences and linguistic essences, this construction of the text on language is indeed a kind of *mise-en-abîme* of its own theory into a concrete representation. As

---

<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of the divine creation as a contraction of the absolute into the particular associates the idea of creation with the concept of melancholy. This idea of the nostalgia God would have had in creating the world has a Jewish origin, especially in the Cabala of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) whose studies become famous in Germany during the 18<sup>th</sup> century through its reception by the Swab pietism. Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1782) contribute to incorporate Luria’s cabala in the Christian tradition. Schelling is a famous example of this cabalistic influence in German Romantic philosophy. On the cabalist sources in Schelling, especially in the corporeity of God, see: BENZ, 1968: 55-67. On God’s nostalgia, see: SCHELLING, 2006: 28.

<sup>2</sup> It is useful to note here that this Christian structure is completed by a Jewish background of the theory of language in the Cabala. This construction involves a conception of the stages of the transition from the Absolute to the Particular, dramatized within Christian theology through the story of the Creation and the Fall, and in the Cabala through the story of the broken vessels and the theodicy it implies. This theory explains that the vessels containing the original light were broken by the power of the divine during creation. This transition from an original unity to the dispersion into multiplicity inside the world implies the task of repairing this original dispersion. This structure supports the theology of history of the Lurian Cabala. Gershom Scholem discusses this theory of the breaking of the Vessels in the seventh lecture of the *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (SCHOLEM, 1995: 265 sq).

the spiritual essences of things must be updated by the linguistic essences in order to be real, the Bible is a way of realizing this process – that is, giving the spiritual essence a reality in the linguistic essence.

This narrative recourse allows the author to designate two moments in the origin of language. One of them is ahistorical and the other, a historical one. The ahistorical step concerns the ideal moment of immediate knowledge<sup>3</sup>. It concerns the idea of a complete unity of the subject and the object. The historical one, dramatized in the Christian idea of the Fall, concerns the principle of differentiation between the subject and the object within history.

The idea of an immediate knowledge is also what the Romantics wanted to achieve with the idea of the Self as the beginning and the end of history. These questions resonate with theological interrogations. They can be expressed like this: 'is a true knowledge possible in history or is it always already lost? How can knowledge be attested in the context of constant changes?'

In order to address this problem, Benjamin tries to make an analysis of the Fall as the story of the origin of differentiation. He first constructs a metaphysical topography of what an absolute knowledge would be using the story of Creation. In the first story of the Genesis, God creates the world through the Verb. The particular (the real world) is created by language. Language is thus the medium that connects the whole to the particular.

The second story concerns the language of man. Language appears when Adam has to name the animals. In this case, the Adamite language is the manifestation of a form of immediate knowledge. The Name he gives to animals is immediately related to the truth<sup>4</sup>. Language, in this second story, is thus a process of intensification. Things reach knowability through the name man gives them. In brief, Benjamin constructs a sequence that comes from the word of God that creates, the nature, which communicates itself silently, and the Name which gives Nature a linguistic expression and achieves God's Creation. The Adamite Name is thus the expression of language in its absolute wholeness (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 65), where spiritual essences are expressed by linguistic essences. This is why, in Name, "to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same thing." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 65) In this second story, the spiritual essence and the linguistic essence are united<sup>5</sup>. In the theory of Adamite Name, the intensive totality and the extensive totality reach their peak, as Benjamin explains: "So in name culminate both the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable spiritual essence, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin's use of these two conceptions of ahistorical theory of language and historical theory of language is, as we shall see, embedded in his reception of a theology of language. Even if his interpretation does not call for the restoration of the pure language, he poses this Adamite process of Naming as the precondition of the apparition of historical language. Therefore, "ahistorical" signifies here a process that has occurred before the entrance of humankind into history, in a pre-Fall moment.

<sup>4</sup> This expression "Truth" symbolizes the communion of Adam with the creative divine world. Truth here signifies that it is related to God. See BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 69.

<sup>5</sup> As such, we find here a process similar to the *Tathandlung* in Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*. We can say that the pure reflectibility is a pure intensity and that the positing, at its absolute level, would be a pure extensity.

the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating essence." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 65-66, translation modified)

This conception of language described in the Adamite nomination defends a unity between universality and absolute; this is why this cannot be a proper historical theory. Adam is able to give the animal a Name because he is related to God<sup>6</sup>. As Benjamin says, theory of pure language is based on the "communion of man with the *creative* word of God." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 69)

Consequently, he does not believe that the language of Adamite Name is still possible after the Fall. To the contrary, the theory of Name is reserved to the meta-archeology of language Benjamin produces. Therefore, we can question the interpreters of Benjamin who focus their readings on the notion of messianic restoration of a loss Origin. This Origin is definitively separated from any historical life. The dramatization of the Fall of language is only a necessary step for the understanding of the creative power of language but not an attempt to find redemption<sup>7</sup> in this ahistorical totality. Benjamin does not seek to recover the divine realm of immediate knowledge. This theory of language can be understood as either as the supremacy of the ideality – as it is formalized in the pure language of Name – or as a theory of the loss that does not permit to recreate the original process of Naming and consequently is completely separated from spiritual essences.

## 2. Language as the Result of a Conception of History

We now need to analyze what those two ways of understanding language in history involve. The first one, which Benjamin identifies as the pure language of Name, stands outside all process of transformation. It does not involve a principle of differentiation. In this theory, Name is the revelation of the spiritual essence into linguistic essence. It works as follows: "the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by a human word [...] Rather, the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 69) As such, if it had to be understood in regard to a historical process, it is a theory that implies the impossible expectation that the world would remain the same and be completely expressible.

The second conception is the language that seeks a meaning without connecting it to any subjective reality. This is how Benjamin defines communication. Communication is the empty language that transmits linguistic essences that are not related to their spiritual essences. The connection between them is not to be found in (presumably) objective reality. The connection of the two essences belongs to the life

---

<sup>6</sup> To pursue our analogy between Fichte's theory of knowledge and Benjamin's theory of language, we can say that, as Fichte tried to stop the infinity of the reflection using the *Anschauung* (intuition), Benjamin stops the infinity of meaning using God's creative nomination as an instance of absolute intuition.

<sup>7</sup> This is why Andrew Benjamin makes a very strict distinction between theology and religion in Benjamin's work. According to A. Benjamin, W. Benjamin does not adhere to a religion but he uses theology as a support of his construction of philosophy. (BENJAMIN A., 2009: 2).

of the subjects itself. It concerns the intensity of linguistic experience, not the accuracy of linguistic facts.

### **2.1. The Adamite Unity of the Essences**

As we posited in our introduction, the Adamite language is a negative mode of resolution of the problem of the origin of language. It concerns the transcendent conditions for pure language and cannot be applied to its human use. This consideration involves two consequences: the first one is that this theory is related to the particular development of the Story of Creation. It cannot be the exemplification of historical language. The second consequence is that it is based on a mythical unity of the linguistic and spiritual essences at the origin. Therefore, it serves only as a reverse-image of what human language is: it is a negative reconstruction of a mythical language of unity where every Name creates the object it designates.

First, the unity of absolute and language would not be possible if “were not the name-language of man and the nameless language of things related in God and released from the same creative word.” (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 70) This unity of the language of man and the nameless language of things in God is the origin of the creative power of the Adamite Name. The Name is neither the communication of an externality nor the pure spiritual essence itself. It is a performative utterance. It contributes to the process of accomplishment of the divine Creation<sup>8</sup>; this conception of achievement of the truth in its absolute resolution is based on a metaphysical conception of the Self the Romantics associate to the conception of reflexivity. According to the Romantics, in opposition Fichte, reflexivity is already fulfilled by content, i.e. the essence of the Self. This content only needs concrete forms to come to reality. In the Fichtean theory of *Tathandlung*, reflexivity is a form without content, which has to be fulfilled by the positing of content. The empty form becomes thus the content of an ulterior reflection. This is the way Fichte understands the relation between the Absolute of a Self and the particular positing of an I. On the contrary, the Romantics consider that the Self already exists and is filled with content. This implies that the subject takes part in the process of potentiation of the Self as one part of the whole. In the Adamite conception of Name, the language of man is also the medium-of-reflection through which truth is revealed in a concrete form. As such, at this level, the creation of the world is the manifestation of the unity in God of spiritual and linguistic essences.

The comparison to the Romantic theory of reflexivity ends here. In fact, the theory of Adamite Name precedes any principle of reflexivity. It is a unique operation specific to the excessive moment of the Creation itself. It is not repeatable, neither is it revisable. This is why the analysis of the theory of the Name implies staying at the state of the origin and cannot be enlarged into an historical process of differentiation. The Name achieves divine Creation. This is why this process, if it has to determine a historical process, would be the yearning for the lost origin and the unreachable moment where nomination was the synonym to creation.

---

<sup>8</sup> There are similarities between this process and the one he developed in his thesis on the German Romanticism: it involves a dimension of accomplishment of the universal through the mediation by materialization.

## 2.2. The Disunion of the Essences in Language of Man

Hence, the theory of divine Creation and the role Adamite Name plays within this process cannot be the support for human language whilst the creative power of Adamite Name is due to the unity of all essences in God, which allows no process of differentiation. After the Fall, this union is broken. The essences are divided and the Name loses its privileged relation to truth.

Therefore, the description of the linguistic facts that determine human language has to acknowledge the rupture with the unity of the origin. The conception of language as communication is an exposition of this rupture of the unity of the absolute. Communication, before being the effort of transmission of content, is the proof of the disunion of the essences. If the essences were still united, the act of naming would remain creation. In communication, the divine link to the creative origin is lost. Consequently, the language of man has become incapable to reach the immediate knowledge of truth. Language as communication is based on a lack, the loss of the capacity for the Self to express itself. In communication, language is always late compared to the life it has to determine (DÜTTMANN, 2000: 62). As such, word has become a parody of itself (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 71). It is the manifestation of the unfillable gap between the essences.

This decay of pure language into the human languages appears when language becomes unable to relate to the truth. In the biblical dramatization, this decay appears with the knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge, according to Benjamin, is nameless; it emanates from the outside (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 71). This gap between the knowledge from outside that predominates in communication and the knowledge from inside that predominates in name indicates a separation<sup>9</sup> between language as pure expressivity and language as ill communication. Language as communication tries to convey meaning from outside without being first related to the ontology of the subject. Therefore, all its effort to fill the gap between the truth for the subject and the linguistic essences exhausts the meaning itself. This process is what Benjamin calls '*Überbenennung*' (overnaming) (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 73). This process of overnaming is the race against the loss of origin. And its inherent failure leads to melancholy. Melancholy is thus the trace of a lack that cannot be filled; it is a form of *manque-à-être* that language never silences. This conception is very similar to the conception of the 'master signifier' in Lacan's conception of the constitution of the ideal of the I. The signifier is always what represents a subject for another signifier. In language as communication, Benjamin describes a very similar process of self-reference of the linguistic facts, one with respect to another.

---

<sup>9</sup> This divide between spirit and heart is, according to Schelling, the basis of evil or madness, stupidity and melancholy. In the *Stuttgart Conferences*, Schelling analyses evil and madness, stupidity and melancholy as an inversion (*Verkehrung*) of the potencies of the subject (SCHELLING 1855: 468). Evil has to be distinguished from the other inversion because it is an inversion done on purpose. It means to put the understanding before the soul (*Geist* before *Seele* and *Gemüth* before *Geist*). On this topic, see MAESSCHALCK, 1991: 16.

### **3. Is There a Form of Human Language That Is Not Empty Communication?**

The interest of the opposition between the Adamite Name and the communication is that these two conceptions do not clarify how the subjects could use language to share something. At the end of this second section remains the impression that all desire of exchange is impossible after the Fall into history.

#### **3.1. It Must Fail**

In order to understand how the historicization originating in the Fall affects language<sup>10</sup>, we have to go further in our understanding of the way language is a medium between the subject and the object. If, in Benjamin's views, there is no content to language, it is thus a pure reflexivity. This reflexivity needs linguistic essences to come to reality. Language has no content except communicability: "There is no such thing as content of language; as communication, language communicates a spiritual essence – a communicability *per se*." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 66, translation modified)

According to that, the differences between languages are differences of intensity. A complete language would be the pure equality between two kinds of totalities (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 65-66): the first one would be an intensive totality (the spiritual essences)<sup>11</sup> and the second would be an extensive totality (the Name). This unity between the universality and the intensity is impossible in history. This union has to be understood as the unconscious ideal of a theory of language where the word would be the thing itself when the experience of human language, on the contrary, is the permanent expression of a defeat on the field meaning.

The solution is not in overnaming; it is not in the over-adherence to the expected role. The solution is to produce a gap, within language, where the relation to others is not the complete union but where the incapacity to name creates a community of the downtrodden ones. There is something very particular in the fact of failing. There is a way to fail in a very particular manner that has a more intensive meaning for the subject than any communication of the truth. This is this profound unpredictability that Benjamin searches in human language.

As such, every historical language can be developed as a translation. This operation is not a pure expression as it was in the Adamite Name. Translation is always a form of expression *of second hand*. We will explore this conception of the opportunities gained by failure in the "Task of the Translator."

In this text, Benjamin allocates to the translator the task of the *afterlife* of a work into history (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 254). Our study of Benjamin's theory of language gives a larger understanding of this concept: language of man is always the afterlife of a purest language that has not survived the differentiation between subject and

---

<sup>10</sup> We can here refer to Brecht's theory of historicization, which immediately involves a principle of subjective interpretation by reframing the reality by way of deconstruction of the beliefs provoked by a history of the one in position of power. In Benjamin also, the historicization of language is related to the way the subjects strive for expressing themselves and the way their failure intensifies their relation to themselves and to the others.

<sup>11</sup> This spiritual essence is also what Benjamin identifies in the text on "Elective Affinities of Goethe," the *Wahrheitsgehalt*.

object. According to this, the text is always late with respect to what it wants to describe. Moreover, even language itself is subject to a permanent decrepitude and reinvention. As Benjamin puts it: "For just as the tenor and significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually perish with its renewal." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 256) This implies that the task of the translator is thus a task of intensification of the text with respect to his own experience of the attempt of expression. As such, the translation does not only intensify the work; it also intensifies the specific experience that produces it. In fact, to translate, the translator "must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 262) The translation is not an operation that only concerns the text; it also translates the desire of the subjects to express themselves, and latter's incapacity to do so.

How does this relationship to the text function? According to Benjamin, the point of junction between desire and incapacity is located within the affectivity of the translators. The translators, if they have to intensify the experience of the work, have to "mortify" that work (BENJAMIN W., 1992: 182), to reconstruct the form of their own historical experiences of it. They have to disclose the unity of the work in order to give to the translation a provisional form (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 257). "For any translation of a work [originates] in a specific stage of linguistic history." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 258, translation modified) Thus, translation is the operation of connection between the desire to express and the objectivity of the work. This connection is only possible from the experience that the translators make of their own language. As such, this experience is not an intellectual experience but also a sensual experience. In fact, one word in one particular language is always related to an affective constellation of significance, as Benjamin shows: "For this sense, in its poetic significance for the original, is not limited to what is meant but rather wins such significance to the degree that what is meant is bound to the way of meaning of the individual word. People commonly convey this when they say that words have emotional connotations." (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 259-260) This constellation is involved in translation. Therefore, translation does not translate content; it translates *a mode of connection to reality*. The difference between languages is similar to the difference between the two forms of essences in divine language. One language is one option; one manner for the world to express itself through the call it addresses to anyone who experiences it. As a specific solution into the unreachable expression of the spiritual essence, language is always a particular attempt that always has to be exceeded. This is why we can define this process very closely to the German etymology of *übersetzung*. In Benjamin's theory of translation, the task is to posit further (*übersetzen*). This definition has of course, according to what we said, a very Fichtean connotation. Translating is the new positing (*Setzung*) emanating from the reflection experienced in the reading of the text. This new position transforms the real by introducing a new mode of relation to otherness that intensifies and overcomes the previous modes of relation. This is why Benjamin says that

[a] translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 260)

This definition of translation is at the closest to the cabala's theodicy (WARRAIN, 1931: 59). In fact, this story of the broken vessel represents the story of Creation. The task of humankind is to reconnect the pieces of the vessel that broke during Creation. The underlying theory of translation is thus a theory of community that determines the history of humankind. In fact, this idea of collective destiny of humanity is at the basis of the messianic conception of history. The end of history will be reached when the task of reuniting what was separated at the origin of history is fulfilled. Nevertheless, Benjamin defends here a weak form of messianism (BENJAMIN W., 2001, 811) where this conception of history, though it helps understand the transcendent condition of possibility of the destination of the events, does not give any solution on the modes or manners by which this task has to be embodied in the concrete history.

Translation, as a process of intensification of the text, takes part in this historicization. It is thus haunted by two characteristics inherited from the philosophy of history that originates in a Fall. On the one hand, it deals with the nostalgia of loss of the perfect and immediate meaning and, on the second hand; this yearning (*Sehnsucht*) (BENJAMIN W., 1996b: 259) calls attention to the way of dealing with this loss. Translation is not only a transposition of a text into another language; it also has to construct the specific way of meaning of this language because the immediate connection between experience and truth is broken in history. The translation has to accept that the form it gives to a text is always a step in the history of the text and that this step will be overcome at every attempt to communicate it with others<sup>12</sup>.

This is why translation is articulated on an interaction between fidelity and freedom. Fidelity refers to the fidelity of the subjects to their commitment to communicate themselves. Freedom is the potential for creativity this fidelity opens. And, as it always fails, the self-communication of the subjects never ends in a definite determination. The subjects always exceed what they express. Consequently, every attempt to communicate is a translation of this gap between the experience and the words that seem inadequate to qualify it. The particularity of the subjects is situated in this unfillable gap. The subjects are subjects when they fail to express themselves and when, while failing, they keep trying<sup>13</sup>. Translation partakes in the same process. It also has to find a particular way of displacing the loss of the pure expressibility.

#### 4. Conclusion

The path we took in Benjamin's theory of language and translation has driven us to a theory of language and translation articulated on the process of historicization of the

---

<sup>12</sup> On the historical character of the translation, we would refer to the very interesting comment of Antoine Berman. (BERMAN, 2008: 72)

<sup>13</sup> As Schelling theorized in *On Human Freedom*: "The concept of becoming is the only one appropriate to the nature of things." (SCHELLING, 2006: 28)

subjects who use language as a medium. This conclusion implies that Benjamin's conception of language is founded on his anthropology. In fact, the idea that language translates the historical attempt of reunion between experience and self-expression by the subject explains how the author conceives the specificity of humankind.

According to what we showed, two hypotheses can be excluded. The first one is that Benjamin conceptualized his theory of Adamite Name in order to explain concrete linguistic facts. This theological explanation is, according to what we have presented, rather the negative conditions of explanation of the subsequent loss of this creative power. Therefore, if Benjamin must be called a messianic thinker, this assertion must immediately be tempered by the fact that his messianism is used as an empty form. It is a dramatization that manifests the linguistic facts but not an effective explanation of language of human.

The second hypothesis is that Benjamin would want to restore this state of absolute reunion. Benjamin's theory of language and translation is a theory of disunion. It organizes failure. As such, it renders understandable what human freedom would be. If there were a mode of expression or translation that would, thanks to the right amount of willpower and effort, exhaust the expression of the subjects, this expression would lock any other forms of expression. It would reduce the subjects to silence.

For this reason, we conclude that the only interpretative solution to understand Benjamin's theory of language and of translation is to consider it as an anthropology. The particularity of the subjects is that they are at the source of their own definition. This task of saying something about oneself is missed in advance. Consequently, the self-experience of the subjects and the experience of otherness is always preceded by a doubt, a discrepancy that gives room for the subject to live because, to paraphrase Benjamin, "no one could live in a fulfilled life"<sup>14</sup>.

## Bibliography

BENJAMIN, Andrew (2009), *Messianic Nature: Notes on Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment*, paper given as a lecture at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilization at Monash University and then at the Centre for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London both in 2009.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1992), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by J. Osborne, London/New York, Verso.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996a), *Gesammelte Briefe, Band I, 1913-1918*, Frankfurt a/Main, Suhrkamp.

---

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin says: "no one can live in a fulfilled time" (BENJAMIN 1996b: 56).

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996b), "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", translated by E. Jephcott, in *Selected Writings, volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 62-74.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996b), "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism", translated by D. Lachterman, H. Eiland and I. Balfour, in *Selected Writings, volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 116-200.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996b), "The Task of the Translator", translated by H. Zohn, in *Selected Writings, volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 253-263.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996b), "Trauerspiel and Tragedy", translated by R. Livingstone, in *Selected Writings, volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 55-58.

BENJAMIN, Walter (2001), "Franz Kafka, On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death", translated by H. Zohn, in *Selected Writings, volume 3, 1927-1934*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 794-818.

BENZ, Ernst (1968), *Les sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande*, Paris, Vrin.

BERMAN, Antoine (2008), *L'Âge de la traduction, "la tâche du traducteur" de Walter Benjamin, un commentaire*, Paris, Presses universitaire de Vincennes.

DERROITTE, Élise (2012), *La critique de la critique, de la philosophie de l'histoire de Walter Benjamin*, Hildesheim, Olms.

DÜTTMANN, Alexander Garcia (2000), *The Gift of Language, Memory and Promise in Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger and Rosenzweig*, translated by A. Lyons, London, The Athlone Press.

FICHTE, Johann Gottlieb (1845-1846), *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), in *Sämtliche Werke, Band I*, Hers von I. H. Fichte, Berlin.

GELY, Raphaël (2010), "La vie sociale, le langage et la vulnérabilité originale du désir, Réflexions à partir de l'œuvre de Michel Henry", in *Bulletin d'analyse phénoménologique*, VI, 6, pp. 1-31.

KOHLENBACH, Margarete (2002), *Walter Benjamin, Self-reference and Religiosity*, Hampshire/New-York, Palgrave Macmillan.

LACAN, Jacques (1966), *Écrits*, Paris, Gallimard.

MAESSCHALCK, Marc (1991), *L'Anthropologie politique et religieuse de Schelling*, Paris/Leuven, Vrin/ Peeters.

MOSES, Stefan (1985), "Langage et sécularisation chez Gershom Scholem", in *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, 60/1, pp. 85-96.

SCHELLING, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph (1855-1861), *Sämtliche Werke, Bd VII*, éd. K.F.A. von Schelling, Stuttgart.

SCHELLING, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph (2006), *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, translated by Jeffrey Love and Johannes Schmidt, New-York, State University of New-York Press.

SCHOLEM, Gershon (1995), *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New-York, Schocken Books.

WARRAIN, Francis (1931), *Les Sephiroth, Etude sur la théodicée de la Kabbale avec deux Figures*, Paris, Bibliothèque Chacornac.

WEIGEL, Siegfried (1996), *Body and Image-Space, Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, translated by G. Paul, R. McNicholl and J. Gaines, London/New-York, Routledge.