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A Philology of Survival: Adorno, Benjamin, Hamacher

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ABSTRACT: Focusing on the works of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and particularly Werner Hamacher, this essay seeks to develop an understanding of "survival" as the medial condition of linguistic structures. In the course of the past century and beyond, the term "survival" has repeatedly been deployed in discussions around the ontological status of linguistic entities. Most prominently, Benjamin finds in "survival" the essence of what he calls "translatability." He decidedly puts the term in quotations marks to signal its linguistic nature, which prompts Hamacher to speak of "survival in citation." This article thus attempts to demonstrate that the term "survival" is not reducible to its biological or phenomenal implications, and reintroduces it as the fundamental concept of a renewed understanding of philology. In three sections, the essay discusses linguistic technification, translation, and irony as three modes that bring the survival of language to the fore.

KEY WORDS: finitude, irony, philology, survival, Theodor W. Adorno, translation, Werner Hamacher, Walter Benjamin

A Linguistic Effort

Toward the end of the introductory chapter to his *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor W. Adorno addresses the problem of rhetoric, discussing the relationship between language and philosophy. Having established the futility of disavowing what he terms philosophy's "linguistic essence" ("sprachliches Wesen"), he goes on to criticize the connection between philosophy and modern science that reached its preliminary peak in the twentieth century and that Adorno considers to be hostile to language. He writes: "The alliance of philosophy and science aims at the virtual abolition of language [*Abschaffung der Sprache*], and thus of philosophy itself, and yet philosophy cannot survive

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without the linguistic effort [*so überlebt sie nicht ohne ihre sprachliche Anstrengung*]" (2004: 56 [trans. modified]; see 2003: 65). The relative clause hovering at the center of this formulation equates philosophy with language: the virtual abolition of language in philosophy would, in the final analysis, amount to an abolition of philosophy itself. If that is the case, Adorno concludes, the only way for philosophy to survive would be through a linguistic effort ("sprachliche Anstrengung"). Hence, language is the very condition upon which philosophy relies to stay alive; it determines philosophy's continued existence. The word "überleben" in Adorno's formulation is strategically placed and indicates more than a figurative application of a quasi-biological term with Darwinist undertones. Its connection to the existential possibility of philosophy discloses a deeper conceptual layer on which survival becomes discernible as something akin to the very linguistic form through which philosophy may live on. In other words, if philosophy can only survive through a linguistic effort, language becomes the medium of its survival.

What is more, the term "survival" indicates that philosophy's linguistic being is essentially compromised. Language does not offer an environment within which philosophy could fully be "alive"—and it is hardly a coincidence that Adorno avoids the term "leben" ("to live"). Instead, language grants the space of a precarious persistence through survival. According to Adorno's proposition, this precariousness is owed to something like an autoimmunity on the part of conceptual thinking. For the impulse to do away with language, and thus with its own being, is rooted in philosophy itself, in its being drawn toward technification, sanctioned by what Adorno calls its alliance ("Bündnis") with science. This self-destructive trait pushes philosophy toward the threshold of muteness, while its linguistic effort prevents it from fully losing itself.

The willed extraction of its rhetorical moment from the body of philosophy is provoked by something that could be termed language's inevitable messiness. Leading up to the passage quoted above, Adorno explains the aversion of the philosophical tradition to its linguistic character by emphasizing the latter's unruly dimension:

> The fact that all approved traditional philosophy from Plato down to the semanticists has been allergic to expression [*Allergie . . . gegen den Ausdruck*], this fact accords with a propensity of all Enlightenment: to punish undisciplined gestures [*das Undisziplinierte der Gebärde . . . zu ahnden*]. It is a trait extending all the way to logic, a defence mechanism of the materialized consciousness [*des verdinglichten Bewußtseins*]. (Adorno 2004: 56)

A little further down, he refers to this undisciplined aspect of language as "sloppiness" ("Schlamperei"). The undisciplined gesture that virtually inheres in every expression prompts philosophy's anti-rhetorical impulse, culminating in its self-

abolition by becoming a science.[1] The double bind of the structure laid bare by Adorno is almost tragic in its consequences. While it is language's very sloppiness that threatens its abolition in the first place by purging from philosophy its undisciplined expressions, it is precisely these expressions and their inevitable lack of discipline that allow for philosophy's continued existence (*as* philosophy).

Adorno's argument yields two substantive insights, one on a conceptual, the other on a structural level. First, he emphasizes that rhetoric is not an extrinsic or disposable addition to a philosophical kernel that would remain intact even beyond the scope of its rhetorical dimension. On the contrary, Adorno's train of thought suggests that rhetoric's extraction from philosophy would rob the latter of its very being. Philosophy would suffocate itself into a muteness that would rid it of its essence. Secondly, on a structural level, Adorno connects philosophy's quintessential link to rhetoric to the movement of survival: philosophy may continue to exist through a linguistic effort that defies its utter technification. It does not live, it *survives*—as the autoimmune menace of self-abolition into scientific exactness and discipline accompanies it from the beginning. The future of philosophy, should it have one, is therefore contained solely in language as the medium of its survival.

One could speculate, however, whether Adorno indeed drew the full set of consequences from his observation. After all, the question remains as to whether it makes sense to hold on to the term "philosophy" even after its reducibility to language is uncovered. If philosophy can self-extinguish through the abolition of its rhetorical dimension, one could argue that rhetoric ceases to be an immanent function of philosophy and, instead, subordinates the latter: to the extent to which it can only exist through language as its medium of survival, philosophy can be termed a function of rhetoric.[2] In other words, as soon as philosophy has fully revealed itself as existing only through its linguistic element, it forfeits its sovereignty to maintain itself as philosophy. It proves to be reducible to rhetoric, and, by extension, *philology*. Sloppiness takes precedence over conceptuality. In consequence, then, Adorno's suggestions imply that, one way or another, philosophy must annihilate itself: for either its alliance with modern science extracts its messy linguistic dimension, effectively killing its philosophical essence; or, it embraces language as the medium of its survival, thus revealing its reducibility to philology. In either case, philosophy ceases to be self-sufficient as it either suffocates itself into technology, or survives as philology. But as soon as its essential reliance on the sloppiness of expression is revealed, its being is tragically dislodged and distorted.

Offering a similar observation, the late German philosopher and literary scholar Werner Hamacher took important steps toward the development—or, perhaps, the resuscitation—of an emphatic understanding of *philology*. In his seminal essay, "Für—die Philologie," he expressly addresses what in Adorno merely remains a structural implication, namely the inherent *impossibility* residing in the very possibility of language. Discussing René Char's poem, "La bibliothèque est en

feu," Hamacher insists on a structural moment in language that does not necessarily coincide with the dimension that Adorno calls "sloppiness," yet yields similar effects: languages, he argues, are marked by an inherent trauma that resides at the very place where their possibility to signify ("Bedeutungsmöglichkeit") pivots into its impossibility. This impossibility points to the exact moment within an expression that resists its normative and transparent objectification (what Adorno would call "disciplining"): "the ultimate impossibility of meaning . . . damages language's most desired ability: to be able to fix and maintain principles, norms, and schemas of meaning in a continuum of communication." And he continues:

> The experience of language [*Die Erfahrung der Sprache*] is always also the experience of the danger of no longer being able to speak; the experience of communication is always the experience of the danger of not reaching an addressee or of destroying him and communication itself. This traumatizing danger is not a vague possibility that could perhaps become a reality; it accompanies speaking and speaking-with-one-another from the outset by determining, as this danger, where the stress falls in speaking [*sie skandiert als diese Gefahr das Sprechen von Anfang an*]. And from the outset language is the survivor of this danger and bears its traces [*Und von Anfang an ist die Sprache die Überlebende dieser Gefahr und trägt ihre Spuren*]. (Hamacher 2015: 137; see 2009: 44)

One ought to be careful not to miss the complexity of the genitive resounding in the formulation, "the experience of language" ("Erfahrung der Sprache"). Its resonance exceeds the subjective experience of the speaker of a given language. "The experience of language" may very well mark a subjective genitive that recognizes as its subject *language itself*, its own speaking or inability to speak, rather than privileging the lived experience of a given speaker. In other words, if language coincides with the threat of not being able to speak, the realization of this threat is not a contingency that could possibly beset the speaker or user of a language. To the contrary, the danger of no longer being able to speak ("Gefahr, nicht mehr sprechen zu können") is a structural moment inherent in language regardless of a speaker's acute presence.

Hamacher maintains that the inability to speak is not simply an elusive possibility that may or may not realize itself in the course of the history of language. If anything, this inability marks a threat that *releases* the possibility of speaking in the first place: "Diese traumatisierende Gefahr . . . skandiert . . . das Sprechen von Anfang an." The traumatizing threat of the inability to speak *chants* ("skandiert") the very speech whose existence it threatens. The menace of speechlessness, one may therefore conclude, is not a contingent supplement added to an intact economy of communication. Instead, the sheer possibility of speech arises from the imposing threat of losing language to total aphasia: the menace of speechlessness chants what is effable—"from the beginning."

This last augmentation ("von Anfang an") invokes a historical perspective. Hamacher's point does not consist in indexing a mythological origin of language whose primordial locus could somehow be identified or grasped. In stating that the threat of speechlessness chants language "from the beginning," he indicates that throughout the historical unfolding of a finite language, there is no point at which the possibility of speaking would not be governed by the threat of its sheer impossibility. Any phantasm of an origin is permeated, thus dislocated, by the muting menace against language. Not unlike in Adorno's observation, speech and the peril of its inability are not only coextensive but also equiprimordial. Hence, rather than laying claim to a mythological place or moment of origin, Hamacher's phrase suggests that there simply is no instant in which language would not speak (or chant) *as* the threat of its own failure to speak.

As a consequence of the constant and encompassing threat of speech's inability to speak, language becomes a bearer of survival ("von Anfang an ist die Sprache die Überlebende dieser Gefahr und trägt ihre Spuren"). The nominalized present participle stresses the temporal aspect of the linguistic struggle against silence: rather than into a "survivor," i.e., an heroic figure who has effectively overcome a given threat, the present participle turns language into an agent of "surviving" as temporalized movement, which is to say, its overcoming the menace of speechlessness takes place as an open-ended process.[3] Neither does this process know a fulfilled prehistory during which the possibility of speech would have been unthreatened by its own inability; nor does it target or teleologically orient itself toward a time during which the menace of speechlessness will have been overcome. The threat itself is inherent in the sheer possibility of language, so much so that "surviving" becomes the only tenable mode of language's "being." In contrast to Adorno, then, the emphatically philological argument advanced in Hamacher does not merely view language as a medium of survival for specific discourses such as philosophy, as here *language as such* is said to extend as a movement of "surviving"—"from the beginning," perpetually, throughout its non-teleological history. Any expression, one may conclude, thus carries the mark—Hamacher writes of "Spuren" ("traces")—of surviving the threat of its radical incapacitation.

Mediations of Life

Some four decades prior to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, Walter Benjamin made a significant intervention in an attempt to introduce "survival" as an emphatically *philological* concept that supersedes its biological connotations in critical ways and that proves vital for the understanding of what he calls the "translatability" of texts. He suggests that when thinking about the history of language—appropriating another biologically inflected term, Benjamin calls it its "growth" ("Wachstum")—one needs to turn to the problem of translation in

order to discern how literary works accrue different layers of meaning over time. It is therefore important to appraise the structure of the relationship between an original and its translation, and what it is about the original that comes to belated fruition in translation, hence describing a historical trajectory. Benjamin understands this historical dimension in terms of an extravagant concept of "life" (which may be viewed not so much as a concession but certainly as a reaction to the impact of *Lebensphilosophie* in the early twentieth century).[4]

As a matter of fact, he proposes a concept of life that only takes full effect if its irreducibility to nature is exposed, turning life into a quality that pertains not only to entities that are "alive," but which take part in history. In other words, Benjamin suggests bequeathing the predicate of life to everything whereof there is history: "In the final analysis, the range of life [*Umkreis des Lebens*] must be determined by the standpoint of history rather than that of nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history [*alles natürliche Leben aus dem umfassenderen der Geschichte zu verstehen*]" (Benjamin 2002: 255; see 1991: 10). The eponymous "task" of the translator thus doubles into the task for philosophy at large to de-naturalize the concept of life and to demonstrate the reducibility of "natural" life to the more encompassing life of history. Life's perimeter, the scope of those entities to be included under the concept's umbrella, is derived not from the sphere of nature but that of history. If there is something like a philosophy of life, it must, therefore, manifest as a science of things endowed with a historical dimension rather than as a natural science. And it is *from* this historically determined type of life that natural life is derived, as a secondary filtrate that by itself cannot account for the scope of its concept.

Given this understanding of life that hinges upon the historical dimension of its expression, it is consequential that Benjamin will attempt to grasp the persistence of works of art through their historicity rather than the subjective intentionality that purportedly motivates them. It is in this respect that the crucial connection between historical life and the linguistic character of its manifestations is thrown into sharp relief. In fact, one can observe in Benjamin's text how the emphasis on the linguistic character of historical transmission complicates in important ways this newly defined concept of life as historical rather than natural. This complication first appears in the passages wherein Benjamin unfolds what he means by "translatability." A central consequence drawn from Benjamin's argument, the latter comprises the very historical dimension of literary texts, their embeddedness in and transmissibility through tradition. Defining translatability, Benjamin's initial claim consists in the assumption that original texts possess "a certain meaning" that can be expressed exclusively through their ability to be translated. And he continues:

> It is evident that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Nonetheless, it does stand in the closest

> relationship [*im nächsten Zusammenhang*] to the original by virtue of [*kraft*] the original's translatability. . . . We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a context of life [*Zusammenhang des Lebens*]. Just as the expressions of life [*Äußerungen des Lebens*] are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its 'survival' [*'Überleben'*]. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of living-on [*Fortleben*]. (Benjamin 2002: 254 [translation modified]; see 1991: 10)

The relation between original and translation Benjamin views as situated within a certain "context" ("Zusammenhang"). As a matter of fact, translatability admits the very "force" ("Kraft") that draws both original and translation into this space of proximity. If Benjamin proceeds to qualify this context as "natural," he does so only in order to anticipate the concept of life that he is about to introduce—not, however, to insinuate that this context would be removed from history in any way, posited as a natural given. The nature of the proximity between original and translation is inevitably historical, and only as such does it indicate a kind of life.

What happens in this contextual neighborhood, Benjamin elaborates, is that translation "issues from" ("hervorgehen aus") its original. Yet, this process of coming-forth and quasi-origination makes it necessary to variegate the concept of historical life, endowing it with an additional complication. For as soon as the notion of life ("Leben") is established, it is retracted, or at least qualified, by Benjamin's adding the prefix *über*-. He argues that translation issues not from the original's "life" but its "'survival'" ("'Überleben'"). Problems of language, to the extent that they are describable as matters of life (and thus history), pertain to the structure of survival. In other words, the history of linguistic entities somehow exceeds even the more encompassing perimeter of historical life ("das umfassendere Leben der Geschichte"); to the degree that it is linguistically cast, historical life unfolds as "survival." The distancing effect of the shift in terminology is underscored by the quotation marks with which Benjamin endows the term survival. Unlike the life he invokes, "survival" as the philological structure marking the tension between original and translation inevitably traces the citational movement of *survival, quote unquote*. Put in quotation marks, the concept itself *exposes* its own linguistic character.

The implicit terminological shift raises the question concerning the relationship between life and survival. Although Benjamin does not pursue this aspect, if we follow his argument and assume that the concept of life he deploys derives from historical facticity ("life pertains to that of which there is history"), then it is at least conspicuous that this understanding of life needs to be further qualified as soon as the *history of language* is at stake—as though linguistic histories were

somehow at odds with "regular" history. If the context shared by an original and its translation is historical, which is to say, if translatability carries its own kind of historical temporality, realizing the relation between translation and original over time, it is puzzling why the concept of life—understood as historical life—does not suffice to grasp this specific temporality. When Benjamin holds that translation issues from the original, "zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem 'Überleben,'" he implicitly exposes an insufficiency pertaining to the concept that initially governs his argument: life. As soon as historical life is construed as the life of linguistic entities, the concept deployed proves less "encompassing" ("umfassend") than Benjamin might wish it to be, which, in turn, necessitates its reshaping into *Überleben*, *over-life*, *super-life*, *more-than-life*—"survival."

Thus arises a curious conceptual tension that cannot simply be resolved by putting the original text on the side of life and its translation on the side of survival. Benjamin explicitly states that it is the *original's "survival"* whence translation issues. Regarding the sphere of linguistic entities, one could therefore argue that it is not enough to speak of historical *life*—for each text, to the extent that it is translatable, already inhabits the sphere of *survival, quote unquote*. If this is the case, however, the "survival" thus invoked supersedes the concept of historical life, making it necessary to recalibrate Benjamin's conceptual set-up by stating that the understanding of life at stake in his essay in the final analysis proves to be conditioned upon the structure of "Überleben," not the other way around. "Survival" is the structural medium of language insofar as linguistic entities are historically transmissible. Hence, it becomes impossible to speak of the life of a text without construing the latter as corresponding to a structure of "survival"—such that the text in question never rests within itself. Rather, its force of signification implicitly performs a historical reach toward those aspects of its being that may only realize themselves through their translatability. Insofar as translation issues from the original's "survival," the latter marks the very medium of a text's translatability. "Survival" affords the form of translation.

Adding yet another intricacy, Benjamin goes on to distinguish the original's "survival," whence translation issues, from what he calls "living-on" ("Fortleben"). And he adds that this thought must not be understood figuratively: "The idea of life and living-on in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity [*in völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit*]" (Benjamin 2002: 254 [translation modified]; see 1991: 11). Benjamin's warning against a rhetorical understanding of his terminology must not be misread as the expression of a resentment against the figurative dimension of language, as though the "matter-of-fact-ness" or "objectivity" ("Sachlichkeit") he demands were connected to the kind of linguistic technification bemoaned by Adorno. If Benjamin calls for an unmetaphorical comprehension of the terminology of life and living-on established in his essay, he cautions against a reductive organic understanding of

these terms whose application to linguistic entities and their formation—such as literary works and their translations—would, in a rather banal sense, describe the instrumentalization of metaphor. The lexicon of linguistic life and living-on may be called "unmetaphorical" and "objective" precisely because these terms correspond, in an essential manner, to the inherent structure of literary texts without having to be superimposed from spheres inhabited by non-linguistic phenomena (such as the realm of organic life). The terminology of survival may still describe a set of tropes—tropes, however, that first and foremost pertain to language and *from there* may be applied to non-linguistic circumstances. In this sense, the philology of survival *radically precedes* any biology or sociology that would revolve around the same term.

The tropic nature of "life" in Benjamin's essay is underscored by the fact that the terms he mobilizes do not coalesce into a consistent taxonomy. Refusing to cohere into stable concepts, they instead proliferate into a diverse array of semantically related terms that nonetheless assume profoundly distinct conceptual velocities.[5] The *life* of a text is specified to be its "*survival*," which in turn proffers the grounds of its translatability, whereas a text's actual translation indicates its stage of *living-on*. Indeterminacy remains an essential trait of these quasi-concepts as they obfuscate Benjamin's argument through their destabilizing proliferation. Instead of making for clear distinctions, the semantic field of life and its offshoots that Benjamin deploys effectively develops a life of its own. Diversifying into ever more variants, the trinity of life/"survival"/living-on becomes still further complicated when, at a later point, Benjamin argues that translation is ignited not just through the *living-on* of works but the unending *livening-up* of languages: "Wenn aber [die Sprachen] derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen *Fortleben* der Werke und am unendlichen *Aufleben* der Sprache sich entzündet . . ." (Benjamin 1991: 14 [my emphasis]). The livening-up ("Aufleben") of languages thus introduces a further diversification to Benjamin's lexicon, especially insofar as it points to the unending ("unendlich") nature of this philological history, carried forth by an infinite linguistic revival. Throughout the essay, the reader can observe how the central concept of "life," redefined as historical life, branches out into different offshoots whose relationship, however, remains untotalizable.[6]

Despite the disorienting richness of the semantics at play in Benjamin's text, it is nonetheless possible to discern the ways in which the different offshoots of life relate to each other. It is quite remarkable that, unlike *Leben*, *Auf-*, and *Fortleben*, Benjamin puts the term "*Überleben*" in quotation marks thus underscoring its linguistic nature already on the level of the signifier. Although the term "survival" appears only once in the course of his argument, its impact is hard to overestimate. For survival—quote unquote—determines the nature of texts to the extent that they are translatable. If the historical dimension of linguistic entities realizes itself

in translation, which is Benjamin's core argument, this means that the history of language at large is one of "survival"—and, by extension, it means that their living-on at the stage of realized translations is structurally reducible to the original's "survival." In other words, if the translation "issues from" the original's "survival," its living-on is an offshoot not of any kind of totalizable "life" as the basic concept governing this proliferating semantics, but of "Überleben." The same holds true for the perpetual livening-up of languages, which, unfurling as historical occurrence, depends on the "survival" of linguistic entities as the grantor of a precarious futurity. The term "Aufleben" carries the connotation of iterability—something is, once again, revived—hence it indicates less a moment of origination than a repeated re-ignition for which "survival" provides the medial condition. In consequence, it becomes possible to argue that the semantic proliferation at play in Benjamin's text does not root in the concept of *Leben* as its master signifier but that it instead describes a complex relation that consists in various modes of linguistic "survival." In other words, Benjamin's reaction to the modern philosophies of life consists in the formulation of a philology of "survival."

In a lengthy essay titled, "Intensive Sprachen," Hamacher delivers an insightful commentary on "survival" as a linguistic structure, as he assesses the debt of Benjamin's theory of translation to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially to Kant's notion of *intensive quantities*. Similar to the gesture made in "Für—die Philologie," Hamacher here insists on a kind of quasi-primordiality in order to emphasize the historical pervasiveness of survival as a problem that has to be understood philologically. "Translation," he laconically comments, "is language's survival [*Die Übersetzung ist das Überleben der Sprache*], towards which it was drawn from the beginning and without which it would not be language" (Hamacher 2012b: 495 [trans. modified]; see 2001: 184). Rather than attending to "works" or "texts," as does Benjamin at the beginning of his essay, Hamacher seeks to draw greater philological consequences from Benjamin's argument in an attempt to posit a series of propositions about language as such. "Translation is language's survival," is a statement we cannot, in such pithiness, find in Benjamin. Yet, if we assume with his argument that *translatability* refers to the medium of a finite language's historical growth, and if we consider that translations "issue from" an original's "survival," then the consequences that can be derived from these stipulations undoubtedly pertain to the structure of language as such. Hence, it becomes possible for Hamacher to depart from a discussion of individual texts and works in order to make a claim about the essence of language itself. "Translatability" thus emerges as another name for what Hamacher calls "Sprachlichkeit," a concept by which he seeks to grasp the very linguistic character of language, its "languageness," so to speak (Hamacher 2001: 175–76).[7]

The relationship between nature and history that Benjamin hierarchizes in favor of the latter is made transparent by means of Hamacher's distinction between

immediacy and mediatedness. He claims that "[l]anguage makes a life for itself only in the medium of its 'survival' [*Medium ihres 'Überlebens'*]; it sets in [*einsetzt*] not with its natural or immediate but in its mediate, historical existence, its existence in translation" (Hamacher 2012b: 495 [trans. modified]).[8] The definition of history that could be derived from this observation would grasp it as mediation through translation. This kind of mediation is not just set apart from any pretense of "natural" and thus "immediate" communication. What is more, Hamacher's claim is that language can only "live" through the medium of "survival," which is to say that any insistence on the immediate, natural use of language is inevitably void. As an inherently historical structure, language is *ab initio*—"von Anfang an"—determined by its translatability and therefore inevitably severed from the fiction of immediacy.

Further unpacking Benjamin's philology of survival, Hamacher also emphasizes the use of quotation marks to set apart the term "Überleben" from the cluster of life-concepts deployed in "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers." The quotation marks are no gratuitous addition to an otherwise intact concept; rather, their application touches upon the concept's linguistic crux thus opening a dimension of language where signification breaks down and only the signifier remains:

> Survival—as also translation—is in every instance survival in quotation marks [*Überleben in Anführungszeichen*]; it is, as Benjamin writes, "survival" because it is not only a life beyond life, or a life after life—and therefore after death—, but because this survival in the word [*Überleben im Wort*]—in the word "survival," for instance—is only a survival in citation [*Überleben im Zitat*], therefore no survival that would still signify survival, rather a survival that has ceased to signify, thus one that is, if only rudimentarily, linguistically realized [*sprachlich verwirklicht*]. . . . As survival, translation is the singular element—the medium—in which language and nothing but language occurs [*Sprache und nichts als Sprache geschieht*]. (Hamacher 2012b: 495 [trans. modified]; see 2001: 184)

In order to come to terms with Benjamin's linguistic ("sprachlich") understanding of "survival," Hamacher mirrors the gesture of proliferating the life-concepts at play and offers three variations of "survival" as deployed by Benjamin: in the course of this tense and syntactically convoluted passage, he speaks of "Überleben in Anführungszeichen," "Überleben im Wort," and "Überleben im Zitat." These three facets of Benjamin's concept do not, however, denominate distinct states that could realize themselves apart from one another. On the contrary, they mark different articulations of the same circumstance—namely that survival in Benjamin is first and foremost a philological problem, entirely detached from phenomenal reality. It does not refer to a given phenomenon outside of language but pertains to the structure of language itself. In consequence, Hamacher can argue that language understood as "survival" ceases to signify anything outside itself, and instead is

realized as sheer linguistic occurrence ("Geschehen"). The repeated use of the preposition "im/in" already hints at this immanence according to which survival does not indicate or prompt a transcending movement through which language could refer to something outside itself. Rather, it marks the inherent structure of language itself. One could argue that it is only through its own "survival" that a language can take on its signifying and referential functions, which only appear as secondary features derived from the occurrence of linguistic survival.

This structure also suggests that *survival in quotation marks/in the word/in citation* does not indicate a specific event that may or may not transpire in the history of a given language. To the contrary, "survival" *always and inevitably takes place*—as the "peculiar element in which nothing but language occurs." In other words, "survival" is what remains when language is stripped of all imperatives to say, indicate, or signify something, to refer to objects or identify phenomena, to communicate a determinate content. Survival is the basic, functionless, and formless occurrence of language. This formlessness beyond reference, however, poses a problem for any attempt linguistically to *represent* the movement of language's "survival." How is one supposed to cultivate a discourse on the very condition of possibility of expression? Hamacher's convoluted syntax, the proliferation of concepts, and the propagation of dashes in the quoted passage already hint at the difficulty, perhaps even the sheer impossibility, of endowing the "element in which language and nothing but language occurs" with a recognizable form. One cannot speak the "survival" of language; still, language survives with each act of speaking.

If "survival" opens up language's ground zero and indicates the moment words do not yet signify and are not yet subject to the demands of referentiality, this state of survival cannot find proper representation through acts of predication that are based on propositional and signifying modes of language. Hamacher says as much when he speaks about "survival" as "Überleben im Wort—im Wort 'Überleben' zum Beispiel," which at first glance seems to express a tautology. Yet, the formulation actually suggests that the "survival" in which Benjamin is so invested is not something to which one could simply refer through the use of words (or one specific word). Rather, its movement is implicitly present no matter which word is at stake—thus also in the word "survival" itself. Every and any word implicitly carries—is carried by, enveloped, and mediated by—this *survival in citation*, which cannot itself be spoken, but its implicit movement guarantees the very possibility of speech. Every word, one could argue, implicitly quotes or cites this "survival" as the index of its own linguistic being. The emphatically linguistic character of every effable word is thus inscribed by a pair of invisible quotation marks that not only frames the word "survival," but the entire lexicon of a given finite language. "Survival" thus cannot be a signifiable extra-linguistic phenomenon for it is the name of the very occurrence that yields linguistic structure. For Benjamin, this yield grants "translatability" as the mode in which languages release and realize their historicity.

Irony's Endings

In his appraisal of Benjamin's essay on translation, Hamacher holds that the central term "survival" demands to be put in quotation marks "weil es nicht nur ein Leben über das Leben hinaus, nicht nur ein Leben nach dem Leben—und also nach dem Tod—ist" ("because it is not only a life beyond life, or a life after life—and therefore after death"). The phrase "nicht nur" ("not only") in this context seems quite abstruse for it disqualifies a survival beyond death for the sake of the kind of "survival" that is realized solely linguistically ("sprachlich") while at the same time retaining post-mortem persistence as a structural facet of linguistic "survival." Implicitly, then, Benjamin's thoughts on translatability raise the question concerning the relationship between language and death.[9] If the concept of life at stake in Benjamin is historically cast—superseding both the life of a given speaking subject as well as the perimeter of organic life at large—it is necessary also to understand finitude and, more concretely, the problem of death as connected to something other than organic life or a life that would correspond to the structure of finite subjectivity. Hamacher's suggestion that Benjamin's movement of "survival" also marks a survival beyond death prompts us to dephenomenalize the problem of death in an attempt to capture it in linguistic terms. If *survival in citation* indicates the kind of life that corresponds to linguistic entities, how exactly does finitude factor into this structure? How are we to imagine a kind of death that would name an exclusively linguistic occurrence rather than marking the end of an organic system or the fadeout of a subjective consciousness?

If death is to be more than the mere linguistic representation of something that happens "outside" language, that is, if it is something that can and must affect language as such, the question arises as to how it would affect the linguistic structure of survival that so predominantly figures in Benjamin. Is death a threshold that the "survival" of language must transcend in order to attain its actual being, or does death mark a functional moment embedded within the structure of survival that Benjamin views as the historical medium of finite languages? Discussing the work of French poet Jean Daive, Hamacher proffers some reflections in this respect, arguing for a paradoxical understanding of death's relationship with language. "Speaking," he observes, "is killing"; and continues:

> But, at the same time, it is a way of ridding oneself of death, of expelling or partitioning death and imparting it to others [*ihn zu teilen und mit Anderen zu teilen*]. To speak—to determine and to declare—thus means to kill death itself, at least in part. Speaking isn't just death; it's a death that turns against itself, balancing itself. . . . Language is the safekeeping and self-denial of death [*Selbst-Verwahrung, die Selbst-Verwehrung des Todes*]. An I, a Thou, He, She, It, We, You, They only exist within the scope of language as death's

> self-dislodgement [*Selbst-Entfernung des Todes, die die Sprache ist*]. (Hamacher 2006: 154–55 [my trans.])

Any instance of speech, then, already manifests *as* being engaged in a critical relationship with death, which is to say that any instance of speech is inherently marked by the possible breakdown and loss, one could call it the "absence," of saying in what is being said. We recall that the experience of language is one of death because of the constant "danger of no longer being able to speak" that has accompanied linguistic history "from the outset." This very threat "chants" the possibility of language. Hence, it is possible for Hamacher to propose the aporetic notion of speech that manifests both the instance of death as well as death's evasion—finitude as safekept custody ("Verwahrung") as well as the object of denial ("Verwehrung"). Insofar as linguistic acts defy their own death precisely in their embrace of death through a speech that kills, they discover finitude's own finitude and keep language afloat through the death of death ("a death that turns against itself"). Language may therefore be defined as the self-distancing of death from death—disclosing a rift within finitude itself that indexes the very place where something like *survival in citation* becomes possible and necessary. Survival through language would therefore mark a constant death as death's constant evasion: "Whoever speaks, whoever understands, dies—and, prosaically enough, does not stop dying" (Hamacher 1996: 22; see 1998b: 27).[10]

Rather than marking a transgression of finitude's threshold, the movement of *survival in citation* turns out to affect the very integrity of the threshold and uncovers a distancing that is at work in death itself. It is as though even death had outlived its own death, so that the relationship between language and death appears to be conditioned upon survival rather than finitude. In other words, the relationship between language and death is also one that happens "in the word," "in quotation marks," thus "in citation." The death that takes place in every word is a death in quotation marks that indexes both death's embrace and its elision. Hamacher suggests such an ambivalence when, elsewhere, he writes: "the absence of speech speaks in any act of speaking once language speaks 'death' [*spricht die Sprache 'Tod'*]" (Hamacher 2012a: 216 [my trans.]). Much like "survival" in Benjamin, the term "death" in this sentence is conspicuously put in quotation marks. The formulation remains ambiguous as it allows for at least two readings whose consequences differ greatly from each other. On the one hand, one could read the "death" in question as an isolatable instance of speaking, such that the clause, "spricht die Sprache 'Tod,'" could be rendered as, "If language were to say [the word] 'death.'" Death is but a word—an option that would leave open the possibility of other modes of speaking unaffected by "the absence of speech" that speaks in speech itself, as the rest of the proposition suggests. A more radical reading, on the other hand, would read the term "death" in the first clause as the name of language itself. Such that Hamacher's formulation becomes translatable as "When

the language [called] 'death' speaks . . ." Instead of denominating a content of expression, i.e., something sayable, death thus morphs into the very name for an idiom that would essentially condition the expression of linguistic contents. Yet, even death as the name of (a) language must remain a death in quotation marks and thus reducible to the structure of "survival" that designates the historicity of linguistic entities. One could argue that the very reason for the historical existence of languages is that their "death" is traversed by "survival."

Among the names one could give to this dilemma of a finitude that doubles into a distancing of death from death is that of "irony." The critical relationship between finitude and irony has been obvious at least since Friedrich Schlegel's seminal definition of irony as "permanent parabasis" and unending paradox—and Benjamin picks up this relay when he notes that his argument on translation might bring "the Romantics to mind." It is specifically the term "ironic," of which Benjamin makes use to characterize a complication regarding the relationship between language and finitude when it comes to translatability, that invokes Romantic thought. Expropriating yet another quasi-biological term, he holds that "translation transplants the original into a more ultimate linguistic realm," and makes sure to qualify this "transplantation" as one that takes place "ironically" ("Übersetzung verpflanzt . . . das Original in einen . . .—ironisch—endgültigeren Sprachbereich"; Benjamin 2002: 258 [trans. modified]; see 1991: 15). It is not immediately clear how one should understand the strange descriptor "endgültiger" in this statement. The adjective "endgültig" means "final" or "ultimate," hence signaling an instance of finitude, which makes it seem even more peculiar that Benjamin uses it in the comparative form. The comparative could indicate either an approximation or a kind of transcendence, which means that "endgültiger" could serve both as the marker of something that moves or is located *closer to* the ultimate endpoint—or, something that's even "more ultimate" than the ultimate frontier itself, hence something that has *surpassed* finitude's frontier and thus, in a sense, also survives it. The term's oscillation between these two options, and thus the location of translation in the field of tension between not-quite-the-end and already-beyond-the-end grounds the "ironic" structure of translatability.

Toward the end of "Intensive Sprachen," Hamacher observes that this ironic elision of finitude directly corresponds to the movement of "survival" that determines the temporality and historicity of linguistic entities. The "absolute comparative," as he calls it, inherent in the descriptor "endgültiger," indicates a temporality characteristic of language and its history. This "time of language" does indeed entertain a relation to finitude—yet only insofar as this relation is predicated upon the permanent elision of the end, which, for Hamacher, is the nature of *survival in citation*:

> In accordance with the absolute comparative of the *more ultimate* [*endgültiger*], the time of language . . . is that of an ending without end [*eines Endens*

> *ohne Ende*]. This form of time must be called ironic, because in it every moment marks a non-coincidence with itself. Just as the end, which is none [*das Ende, das keins ist*], characterizes a life, which is essentially "survival," so the language of translation—and language as such—is characterized by irony, signifying a language that refuses to surrender to the signifying. (Hamacher 2012b: 538 [trans. modified]; see 2001: 231)[11]

Irony, the passage makes clear, does not aim for the mere abolition of finitude. The movement traced by Hamacher is still one of coming to an end ("eines Endens"), yet without reaching its ultimate point of conclusion. Instead of eschewing finitude, irony thus makes its approach permanent. The gerund of the verb "enden" ("to end") succinctly captures this paradoxical relation of unendlingly seeking an end without ever quite getting there. Finitude is suspended through the very process that attempts to attain it. The passage goes on to link this suspension of finitude to the movement of "survival" whose structure can be called "ironic" precisely because it is premised upon the idea of an end that fails to coincide with itself (i.e., the dislodgement of death from death). Survival, one could say, is the end's essential displacement, a self-distancing within finitude's reach. Irony reveals itself as an end that fails to be one ("ein Ende, das keins ist"), and as such discloses "survival" as language's fundamental structure.[12]

One final ramification of the problem of survival demands to be mentioned. For one only needs to lift the quotation marks clenching the word to discern its potential to become abused as a fascist battle term. In other words, one of the ironies of "survival" resides in the possibility of its unironic application. Phenomenalized and formalized, stripped of the distancing buffer of its quotation marks, survival easily pivots into a metaphysical concept, one prone to provoking political derailment. Attuned in terms of hyped-up propriety and quasi-authenticity, it may well bespeak the survival of a people or body politic, defined by archaic registers of biological unity or autochthonous pedigree. Hamacher does not fail to identify and call attention to this peril when, in a discussion of the concept of "work" ("Arbeit"), he holds, sans quotation marks: "Work is the form in which fascism . . . survives [*Arbeit ist die Form des Überlebens des Faschismus*]" (Hamacher 2020b: 149; see 2002: 157). The survival thus pronounced has lost its ironic stall and citational precariousness and shifted into the realm of vitalist velocities that endorse their agent's perpetual survival and factual immortality at the cost of institutionalized mass murder. If work is the form of fascism's survival, this "work" must manifest as a production of death by virtue of which life's perseverance is guaranteed. The philological distance indicated by the "survival" inhering in each word (be it the word "death" or the word "survival") is relinquished when survival ceases to vibrate as sheer linguistic occurrence and, instead, becomes a phenomenally posited form dedicated to the project of death at which it works away in order to maintain itself.[13]

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Notes

1. It is remarkable how closely this argument corresponds to Heidegger's stance as formulated in the late essay, "Das Ende der Philosophie und die Aufgabe des Denkens," written in 1964, two years prior to the publication of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. Therein, Heidegger argues that philosophy—as a practice of interrogation that finds its essence in metaphysics—comes to an end at a historical moment when human agency is entirely determined by cybernetics: "Die Philosophie endet im gegenwärtigen Zeitalter. Sie hat ihren Ort in der Wissenschaftlichkeit des gesellschaftlich handelnden Menschentums gefunden. Der Grundzug dieser Wissenschaftlichkeit ist . . . ihr kybernetischer, d.h. technischer Charakter" (Heidegger 2007: 72).
2. Paul de Man made important suggestions in this regard when discussing the linguistic model of the so-called "trivium" as consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In his view, traditional accounts of language have falsely emphasized the relationship between grammar and logic at the cost of language's rhetorical dimension. Such accounts, in his opinion, fail to grasp the nature of language in terms of its literariness, that is, in terms of its radically immanent character as language. "Unlike grammar," de Man argues, "tropes . . . pertain primordially to language. They are text-producing functions that are not necessarily patterned on a non-verbal entity, whereas grammar is by definition capable of extra-linguistic generalization" (de Man 1986: 15). This means that rhetoric provides the possibility for language to "rest in itself," as it were, devoid of any anchorage in extra-linguistic phenomenality.
3. In an essay dedicated to the problem of finitude and its relation to translatability, Samuel Weber observes about the present participle that it "cannot be substantiated: it is radically different from the present indicative, which is constative and self-contained. The presence of the present participle, of the gerund, is precisely partitioned, split up between its enunciation and its significance: . . . something that goes on only so long as it is being enunciated. It is never self-contained. It can be determined only by being interrupted" (Weber 2010: 633–34).
4. In his comprehensive take on the various concepts and para-concepts of life that Benjamin deploys in his essay on the translator, Daniel Weidner bemoans the fact that critical appraisals of Benjamin thus far have neglected sufficiently to determine his concept of life: "Es ist aber vor allem der Übersetzeraufsatz, in welchem der Lebensbegriff eine zentrale und bisher gegenüber den Konzepten der 'reinen Sprache,' der 'Wörtlichkeit' und der 'Aufgabe' des Übersetzens weitgehend vernachlässigte Rolle spielt" (Weidner 2011: 168). American literary scholar Kevin McLaughlin recently picked up the relay, providing a profound reappraisal of Benjamin's relation to the philosophy of life. He argues that Benjamin's early exposure to the philosophy of Heinrich Rickert, towering opponent of German *Lebensphilosophie*, resulted in the development of a literary critical project that McLaughlin frames in terms of "a science of poetic creation, which is to say, less as a philosophy than as a philology of life" (McLaughlin: 2018: 565).
5. The essential 'sloppiness,' as it were, inherent in the term "life," is addressed in Hans Blumenberg's theory of life-world, in the context of which he suggests: "Auch 'das Leben' ist, wie die Indivudialität, das *Unbestimmte*, das sich selbst seine Bestimmung findet"; in the same passage he characterizes the concept of life as "ungefügig" (2010: 15).

6. In an insightful contribution to the matter, Bettine Menke (1991) goes beyond Benjamin's translation essay in order to trace the figure of "Nachleben" ("afterlife"). For a recent assessment of survival in Benjamin, see chapter two of Adam Y. Stern's *Survival: A Theological-Political Genealogy* (2020).
7. Allen and Tester translate the term "Sprachlichkeit" as "linguisticality" (see Hamacher 2012b: 487).
8. Allen and Tester translate Hamacher's term "Überleben" as "living on," which inevitably invokes Benjamin's "Fortleben" and therefore does not serve to clarify an already convoluted terminological situation (see Hamacher 2001: 184).
9. Rather than Benjamin's theory of translation, Giorgio Agamben's monograph *Language and Death* (1991) chooses Hegel and Heidegger as its main subjects—and in what could be discerned as an anti-Derridean swoop, he makes his discussion revolve around the problem of the *voice*.
10. This quotation from the introduction to Hamacher's *Premises* continues: "To use a word that was important to Nietzsche, Kafka, and Benjamin, one could say: whoever speaks, whoever understands, 'survives' and is 'survived' [*er 'überlebt' und ist 'überlebt'*]" (Hamacher 1996: 22; see 1998b: 27). The phrase deliberately resonates with a moment in Nietzsche that Hamacher discusses later in the book. In §262 of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche sets up the singular individual as the survivor and decomposer of society and its morals: "Diese Moral selbst war es, welche die Kraft in's Ungeheure aufgehäuft, die den Bogen auf so bedrohliche Weise gespannt hat:—jetzt ist, jetzt wird sie 'überlebt.'" As is the case in Benjamin, the term "survival" here is put in quotation marks. Even though this article is not the place to develop the intricacies of Nietzsche's particular argument, let me emphasize the way his formulation underscores survival's peculiar temporality: "Now it is, now it becomes 'survived.'" The phrase's doubled "now" already points to the split nature of the temporality of survival according to which survival is both an event that has taken place *already*, marking a finality, perhaps irreversibly ("now it is 'survived'"), and, on the other hand, an ongoing process, stretching out continuously if incalculably ("jetzt *wird* sie 'überlebt'"). The concluded "process" of surviving comes in tandem with an opening toward—or *from*—the future, into which survival is—indefinitely—carried on. If the present as the time of the now morphs into the time of survival, it becomes impossible to identify this now with itself because the now of surviving and the now of having survived fail to coincide and instead make for a rift within now-time whence a precarious future becomes possible (see Hamacher 1998a).
11. On the motif of an ending without an end, see also Hamacher's essay "(The End of Art with the Mask)," where he states: "And what Hegel may have found unbearable in Schlegel was not only the sustained mobility of the negative force of the dialectic as infinite paradox and 'permanent parabasis' instead of their being bound in the unity of subject and substance, but also that his end, his *own* end, the end *itself*, was thereby contested" (2020a: 60–61).
12. Hamacher does not even speak of specific idioms or individual languages; instead, he establishes *the irony of survival* as the determining trait of "language as such" (of "Sprache überhaupt," as Benjamin phrased it in an earlier essay).
13. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Gerhard Richter for his detailed feedback on this article.

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