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Guest Editor

Véronique Lane

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# Inventive Languages: Walter Benjamin, Ernst Jandl, and the Possibility of Back-Translation

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Dominik Zechner

Quite often, the prompt to reflect on an object or phenomenon itself implies an interpretive intervention. If we are urged to consider back-translation as a practice or an activity, the implicit judgments at play seem to hinge upon the attribute ‘back’. Immediately one assumes that to ‘back’-translate violates a certain norm: going *backward* in translation is not the usual direction. One might conclude, therefore, that the prompt to contemplate literary back-translations confronts us with a kind of exception, or at least an anomaly. Exceptions, however, always indicate something about the norm which they elude. For instance, the attribute ‘back’ functions as a marker of direction and thus implies the directional nature of all translation, even if this direction usually is forward rather than backward. Translations are translations insofar as they move in a certain direction. Yet the attribute implies a certain reversibility. If a translation can move forward and backward, its direction is presumably invertable. Translating something ‘back’ thus includes a certain prehistory. Going backward in translation does not simply trace a monodirectional retrograde movement; rather, it indicates that the text already went somewhere, whence it is now coming back. This possibility of reversion says something about the very structure of literary works to the degree that translatability can be assumed as one of their essential traits. Even if back-translations do not constitute a ‘norm’,

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the turn that makes them possible must be a structural feature of translation as a form.

This article attempts to bring out and analyse structural aspects that pertain to the movement of translation and the way it discloses itself when approached via questions of direction and reversion. After analysing the problem of translation's direction in the works of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Werner Hamacher, it proceeds by drawing theoretical consequences from the moment of reversibility that underlies back-translations through an engagement with the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl, specifically a reading of his 1966 poem 'chanson'. This particular poem (full text below) does not simply serve an illustrative function, representatively exhibiting a conceptual problem. On the contrary, it will become clear that, much more than a mere example of back-translating, 'chanson' playfully exposes the structural moments of direction and reversion without which translation and back-translation would not be possible.

Jandl's poem obstinately resists translation, and yet translatability describes the very structure of its poetic movement. Rather than providing an argument against translation at large, then, the poem insists that translation is not something that relies on a necessary duality of texts and languages (original and translation, same and foreign), but can take place within one and the same text. Jandl therefore highlights, on some level even corrects, certain standard assumptions about the process of translation. He thus seems to share Derrida's grievance that 'all too often [theories of translation] treat the passing from one language to another and do not sufficiently consider the possibility for languages to be implicated *more than two* in a text'.<sup>1</sup> Jandl's poem exposes the structural possibility of translation and back-translation without having to rely on traditional notions that revolve around originality, subjectivity, and unity. More than this: by actively undermining these notions, Jandl insists that the movement of a single poem is enough to expose all formal dimensions and complications of translatability, including aspects of direction and reversion.

The aims of this article are thus threefold. First, to contribute to our understanding of translation and translatability as it has emerged in the works of Benjamin and Derrida, through the late Hamacher. By emphasizing the reversibility of translation, it exposes the sheer possibility of back-translation; it also stresses the importance of

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 2 vols (Stanford, CA, 2007), I, 191–225 (p. 196); emphasis original.

Benjamin's notion of *Vorgriff* ('prolepsis') which he observes to be central in the dynamic of translations. Second, I aim to contribute to scholarship on Ernst Jandl's poetry in an international context, more specifically refining the understanding of 'concrete poetry' as a category applicable to his oeuvre. I will insist that while Jandl's challenge to representation is definitely shared by most concrete poets, his work is marked by a singular reflection on what I will call 'poetic idiomaticity', to capture how the language of the poem is bound up with issues of translation. Last, this article may be viewed as a modest contribution to recent scholarship on the politics of untranslatability.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the conceptual framing of translation, it would be hard to name a text more often discussed than Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'.<sup>3</sup> What is at stake at the point that I would like to examine, is precisely the issue of translation's directionality. It arises when Benjamin attempts to define what he terms the 'special high purposiveness' ('eine eigentümliche und hohe Zweckmäßigkeit') of translation as expressing the inherent relationship between languages:

Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages with each other. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it germinally or intensively [*keimhaft oder intensiv*].<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin further distinguishes the predicate 'intensive' used to qualify what is represented ('dargestellt') in the process of translation, adding that by 'intensive realization' he means a process that is 'anticipative, intimating' ('intensive, d.h. vorgreifende').<sup>5</sup> It is critical to underscore that Benjamin here refers less to the plurality of languages as such, as a measurable spectrum of multilingualism or a quantifiable number of languages, than to a certain affinity, a kinship among languages through which individual languages enter into a relation with one another. This kinship of languages is what motivates translation's reach, which can only be performed proleptically, as linguistic intensity. It is not presentable extensively, as concretely expressible form, but lies intensively concealed in a manifest translation. Neither visible nor audible, this relational

<sup>2</sup> As most prominently exemplified by Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Tillman Rexroth, 7 vols (Frankfurt, 1991), IV.i, 9–21.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, translated by Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 253–63 (p. 255); translation modified ('Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', p. 12).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* For Benjamin's 'vorgreifende', see Hamacher, 'Intensive Languages', *MLN*, 127 (2012), 485–541. In this profound reading of 'The Task' Hamacher underscores Benjamin's debt to Kant.



affinity remains undeniable, and, Benjamin insists, it governs the purpose of translation's directional reach. Unfolding his appraisal of this proleptic reach, Benjamin goes on to address the problem of direction and how it is bound up with the structural moment of prolepsis: 'Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products, it cannot deny its *direction* toward a final, conclusive and decisive stage of linguistic providence.'<sup>6</sup> Even though translation's directionality is geared toward that final stage, it still has to fall short of it because the 'linguistic providence' Benjamin invokes is only real as an intensive promise, an integral moment in the structure of translatability, albeit not one that could itself become an empirical reality, extensive and concrete.

On the way to this insight, Benjamin invokes a concession the theorist of translation thus has to make: 'This, to be sure, is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages.'<sup>7</sup> The 'provisional' nature of translations speaks to the 'unfulfillability' of their final purpose, that is to say, the integration of all languages into a final harmonious stage of linguistic growth remains unachievable. It is noteworthy that the German original here almost amounts to a pun that plays on the problem of prolepsis ('Vorgriff'). For the term Benjamin picks to indicate the provisional nature of all translations, while definitely indicating the tentative and conditional dimension that comes through in the English rendering, also ties it to his discussion of the 'vorgreifende' or 'intensive' mode of translation's realization. The original reads: 'Damit ist allerdings zugestanden, daß alle Übersetzung nur eine irgendwie *vorläufige* Art ist, sich mit der Fremdheit der Sprachen auseinanderzusetzen.'<sup>8</sup> While the adjective 'vorläufig' certainly means 'preliminary' or 'temporary', its verbal correlate 'vorlaufen' may be translated as 'to run on ahead' or 'to run forward'. In combination with Benjamin's insistence on translation's direction toward its unachievable ultimate purpose, his admission concerning the 'preliminary' nature of our coming to terms with the irreducible plurality and foreignness of languages therefore also corroborates this sense of direction: each time, the semantics of the prefix 'vor' indicates a certain orientation *forward*.

What should become clear through highlighting these moments in Benjamin's text where translation's directionality is consolidated – be it through its forward-reaching intensive prolepsis, through translation's

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'Task', p. 257; translation modified, my emphasis ('Aufgabe', p. 14: 'Verleugnet nicht ihre *Richtung* auf ein letztes, endgültiges und entscheidendes Stadium aller Sprachfügung').

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, 'Task', p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, 'Aufgabe', p. 14; my emphasis.

direction toward a last, though unattainable, stage of linguistic providence, or through the translator's admission of the radical preliminary ('Vorläufigkeit') of his or her endeavour – is the fact that the forward orientation of translation itself functions as an essential presupposition of this theory, and does not undergo further questioning. In other words, what Benjamin seems to preclude are precisely potential moments of reversion and return. It seems that if a translation were to go back, bring something back, fold itself back against its own current, it would perform a gratuitous gesture, conceptually entirely negligible – perhaps even a structurally prohibited, impossible move.

Benjamin suggests as much when discussing the potential 'retranslatability' of completed translations, drawing a rigorous distinction between original and translation. While the specific purpose assigned to translations within his theory is aimed toward the intensive proleptic realization of the kinship among languages, this purpose must stay opaque in as much as it does not realize itself as concrete linguistic reality, which means that it remains irreducible to an original's subject matter or content. Otherwise put, the intensive character of a given text, its 'translatability' as it were, does not correspond to the linguistic category of *communication*; it does not *say* anything, remains ineffable, yet it still belongs to the very structure of language to the extent that languages are multiple and therefore require translation.

One could translate an original, attempting thoroughly to transmit and secure its content, without ever exhausting the translation's intention insofar as it corresponds to the higher purpose it serves. That purpose nonetheless issues from the original, before it is picked up and unfolded, intensively realized through translation. This structural observation leads Benjamin to claim that there must be something about a given translation that in turn resists being retranslated, by which he means precisely 'that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter ... that element in the translation which does not lend itself to a further translation'.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin then explains that the relation between language and its content ('Gehalt') simply is not the same within an original as within a translation: whereas content and language form a unity in the source text, the language of a translation functions like a coat thrown over the transcribed content. This discrepancy arises because the language of a translation, instead of merging with its content, proleptically reaches for a more elevated stage of linguistic evolution: 'For it signifies a more exalted language than its

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, 'Task', pp. 257–8.

own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien. This disjunction prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous.<sup>10</sup> Once the translation has elevated the original in this way, it reaches an impasse and cannot move further up. Benjamin thus discovers the breaking point where an escalation of translation's endeavour becomes impossible, having reached a dead end. Every translation performs this 'stuckness', the arrival at such an impasse precisely through the disjunction between the content lifted from the original, and the higher 'linguistic realm' ('Sprachbereich') into which it transplants the latter. Supplementary movements of reversion and return are perhaps feasible, but they do not speak to the emphatic kinship among languages which Benjamin evokes, and may not, therefore, be termed translations in any meaningful sense. In other words, what retranslations and back-translations are doomed to lack, according to this perspective, is the chance of reaching a more elevated level of linguistic providence, thereby fulfilling the higher purpose of intensively realizing the relationship among languages whose kernel is lodged in the original. Benjamin thus corroborates a firm duality between original and translation that no translating gesture could ever outmanoeuvre as it conditions its very possibility.

The claim that there could be no translations of translations also caught Jacques Derrida's attention, who discusses it in 'Des tours de Babel', offering a concise response to Benjamin. While the bulk of Derrida's piece is dedicated to an analysis of the very dense constellation of rhetorical figures Benjamin mobilizes in his essay, one can discern a series of points of contention on which Derrida does not necessarily elaborate but which he helpfully exposes as problematic. I would argue that Derrida takes issue with Benjamin on at least three levels: the level of the law, the level of subjectivity, and the level of linguistic uniformity. To begin with the law, Derrida recognizes that the impasse of translation that allows Benjamin to declare 'superfluous' any retranslation or back-translation rests on the firm distinction between original and translation, one that secures certain claims concerning authorship, originality, and copyright.<sup>11</sup> These claims are intimately bound up with the problem of subjectivity, for Benjamin dedicates his text not to the translation process but explicitly to the

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, 'Task', p. 258. What is rendered as 'disjunction' here could also mean 'brokenness', which would be semantically closer to Benjamin's 'Gebrochenheit' (see Benjamin, 'Aufgabe', p. 15).

<sup>11</sup> "'Translation is a form", and the law of this form has its first place in the original.' Derrida (n. 1), p. 205; see also pp. 218–20.

translating subject: ‘der Übersetzer’.<sup>12</sup> Just like the original text is identifiable as an entity that can clearly be distinguished from its various derivatives, so the translating subject appears as a nameable, identifiable agent, a legal person. A third aspect, completing this triangle of legalistic assumptions, concerns the issue of linguistic unity. If the object of translation (the original text) as well as its subject (‘der Übersetzer’) remain uncompromised in their identity, it befits this line of reasoning to assume that the very medium of translation displays a finite unity. In other words, Benjamin seems to rely on the idea that the original is written in one language, whereas the translation is written in another, second language, and that these two languages can without difficulty be distinguished. Hence, Derrida keeps reminding us of the possibility of an original written in multiple languages, while not failing to point out the irony of Benjamin’s own text featuring citations in French whose translation into German was neglected.<sup>13</sup>

It may very well be possible to show how any literary work poses a challenge to this threefold assumption of textual, subjective, and linguistic integrity. If we now turn to Ernst Jandl’s ‘chanson’, however, it is because this text not only explicitly addresses the issues at hand, but in so doing also reconfigures, perhaps even undermines, certain theoretical presumptions about the nature of translation. Jandl’s poem bears upon Derrida’s remarks in a profound manner, such that the identifiable unities of language, subject, and text become the target of a disintegrating, corrosive poetic process setting free the possibility of a renewed understanding of translation. I would argue that Jandl’s poetry reveals the very essence of translation by deconstructing all three levels introduced above (law, subjectivity, unity), and by acknowledging reversion as a structural necessity of translation’s form. The poem reads as follows.

chanson  
l’amour  
die tür  
the chair  
der bauch

<sup>12</sup> ‘Benjamin does not say the task or problem of translation. He names the subject of translation as an indebted subject’ (Derrida, p. 203). The reason Derrida calls Benjamin’s translator ‘indebted’ lies in his understanding of the German term ‘Aufgabe’ (‘task’), which may well be interpreted as the inheritance of a certain debt or responsibility.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Benjamin has just quoted Mallarmé, in French, after having left in his own sentence a Latin word ... Once again: how is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated?’ (Derrida, p. 201).

the chair  
die tür  
l'amour  
der bauch

der bauch  
die tür  
the chair  
l'amour

l'amour  
die tür  
the chair

le tür  
d'amour  
der chair  
the bauch

le chair  
der tür  
die bauch  
th'amour

le bauch  
th'amour  
die chair  
der tür

l'amour  
die tür  
the chair

am'lour  
tie dūr  
che thair  
ber dauch

tie dair  
che lauch  
am thūr  
ber'dour

che dauch  
am'thour  
ber dūr  
tie lair

l'amour  
die tür  
the chair<sup>14</sup>

While the poem obviously speaks to issues of directionality and reversion in translation, a slow unpacking will now be attempted of what is at stake by moving from a structural description of the poem to parsing the relationship of its performance with a renewed understanding of what translation is and how it operates. A number of general observations are necessary before unravelling the implications of Jandl's poem for the translation of translation and, by extension, for back-translation.

It has been argued that poetic language, more than other forms of expression, puts into question the structure of propositional logic.<sup>15</sup> While forms of articulation premised upon the primacy of propositions are confined to sustaining a model of predication, literary modes of expression are not reducible to this model and thus evade logical forms such as concept, judgement, and deduction. The irreconcilability between literature and propositional logic might serve as one reason why literary theory has developed a strong attraction to speech act theory: if literature 'speaks' without formulating judgements and normative statements, its mode of occurrence might very well be that of *performance*, which is to say, the possibility of language acting upon itself, rather than making predicative declarations about given objects. The term 'performance', however, is anything but unproblematic in this context. As Rodolphe Gasché argues, it might be the case that upon closer investigation the distinction between propositionality and performativity does not hold up, indeed that the type of performance considered in speech act theory ultimately proves to be reducible to propositional thinking. In his engagement with Paul de Man, Gasché supplements his exposition of the metaphysical implications of speech act theory with the plea for a more profound notion of performativity:

de Man's readings certainly cannot be said to be an application of [speech act theory]. This does not, however, mean that [his] critique is merely negative. On the contrary, it represents an attempt at developing a more

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Jandl, *Werke*, edited by Klaus Siblewski, 6 vols (Munich, 2016), I, 90–1.

<sup>15</sup> See Werner Hamacher, 'Apotropäische Figur: Ein Gedicht von William Butler Yeats', in *Europalyrik, 1775 bis heute: Gedichte und Interpretationen*, edited by Klaus Lindemann (Paderborn, 1982), pp. 322–46 (pp. 327–8).

fundamental notion of the performative than the notion of self-positing on which Austin's speech act theory rests, and which keeps it locked within the boundaries of philosophical idealism and the metaphysics of subjectivity.<sup>16</sup>

If we consider Jandl's 'chanson' a poem in which performativity is at stake – or rather a poem whose inherent dynamic is marked by a certain performativity – then the kind of performative it introduces is equally resistant to traditional models of subjectivity.

Forgoing the paradigm of predication, literature's ability to act cannot realize itself through the logical assumption of a referential relation between words and things; rather, its non-propositional expressive manoeuvres first of all have to refer back to themselves, inventing their own language as the primary 'object' of articulation. Literature, one could preliminarily infer, is marked by a kind of reflexivity through which language's ability to relate is initially realized as an essential relationship of language with itself. The importance of this reflexivity (which cannot be derived from a metaphysics of self-identification or any logic of immaculate identity) can hardly be overstated, for it implies that language's representational mandate can be questioned: instead of providing the reliable, self-positing foundation, this type of reflexive 'act' undermines any claim of referentialism. In other words, if language innately points toward language, its mandate to function as a means of representing the world to us becomes highly dubious.<sup>17</sup> This is not to argue that literary language can entirely dispense with logical, grammatical, and rhetorical forms integral to the propositional paradigm. But it might well be possible to find and exhibit, each time anew in every poetic work, the ways in which this paradigm is challenged, its very foundation crumbling when seized by the uncontainable force of language's inventiveness.

In the case of concrete poetry, and of Jandl in particular, this diversion of literary language from representational models of expression is especially stark. Concrete poetry establishes as its frame of reference its own idiom and the form through which it is articulated. What the poem presents or represents ultimately amounts to its very form. That is, any attempt to coerce it back into a referential logic that would allow

<sup>16</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, "Setzung" and "Übersetzung:" Notes on Paul de Man', *Diacritics*, 11.4 (1981), 36–57 (p. 56).

<sup>17</sup> Hamacher speaks of a 'language which ceases to be concerned with objects of representation, and instead concerns itself with its own speaking as a process of essentially uncontrollable alteration' (Hamacher, 'Apotropäische Figur', p. 332; my translation).

the poem to say or show something outside itself is immediately short-circuited by a rigorous self-reflection pointing back to the form of the poem. Looking at ‘chanson’, it soon becomes obvious that its form is conducive of a powerful dynamic affecting, perhaps even creating, the poetic idiom. This dynamic – one that will help us understand how translations can be translated through back-translation – is not easily pinned down as it does not seem to correspond to any of the traditional categories we are used to deploying when analysing linguistic structures.

As Paul de Man reminds us, the structure of language can be divided into the classic so-called ‘trivium’ of logic, grammar, and rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> Against the backdrop of the trivium, it is quite difficult to decide where to locate the main thrust of Jandl’s poem and its quaking of signifiers, flurry of particles, the sheer poetic commixture marking its dynamic. For one thing, it is certainly not reducible to propositional or referential logic: the poem does not make statements or formulate judgements, nor does it seem to denote anything. Entirely forgoing the medium of the sentence, its chosen form seems to be that of a particular kind of list. Were we to perceive this list as a cluster of syntactical junks, concatenated yet devoid of meaning, the propositional paradigm would still not be salvaged. If anything, the result would be some mad sentence, one that defies logic, sacrifices reference, refuses to represent. While the nouns enlisted in the first and last parts of the poem may be understood as denoting real-life phenomena, it presents them merely as *words*, not as carriers of a referential function, let alone agents of a substantial process of predication.<sup>19</sup> One could even say the selection of words featured in the poem is entirely reducible to their formal appeal, whatever denotation they might imply being completely secondary. Put succinctly, the linguistic entities enlisted in this poem are essentially *arbitrary*. The poem is entirely unconcerned with their meaning; it presents, if it presents anything, the words for what they primarily are: mere words.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Paul de Man, *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN, 2012), p. 13, where he sees this model as ‘in fact a set of unresolved tensions powerful enough to have generated an infinitely prolonged discourse of endless frustration of which contemporary literary theory, even at its most self-assured, is one more chapter’. De Man’s attempt at resolving this diagnosed tension lies in establishing the primacy of rhetoric within the trivium. Jandl’s poem seems to reach even deeper in its resolution to investigate the constitution and coming about of language, for it focuses on translation/translatability as the movement underpinning and releasing the very possibility of de Man’s trivium. Languages first need to assume an idiomatic form before they become construable as grammatical, logical, or rhetorical systems; the principle governing this form-taking of language, according to Jandl, is called ‘translation’.

<sup>19</sup> On the latent differences between sentences and poetic lines, see Jan Mieszkowski’s *Crises of the Sentence* (Chicago, IL, 2019), pp. 84–125. On the formal importance of the list for concrete poetry, see Ann Cotten, *Nach der Welt: Die Listen der Konkreten Poesie und ihre Folgen* (Vienna, 2008).



In his study on cubism and concrete poetry, Stephen Scobie problematizes this point:

Words are inherently referential ... If, then, we are to talk about an 'abstract poetry' we must look at techniques whereby the inherent referentiality of language may be circumvented or subverted. How can this be done? If the word is to be retained as a compositional unit, then it must be placed in a context that will drastically qualify, undercut, or cancel altogether its relation to its signified.<sup>20</sup>

Scobie also emphasizes the subsidiarity of syntactical models for the poetic composition: 'Poetry has often utilized other schemes of connection ... that run counter or across the linear progression of syntax; poetry, in other words, has always aspired towards a spatial form that will inhibit its progression in time. But only Concrete Poetry has succeeded in establishing convincing alternatives to syntax.'<sup>21</sup> Jandl's polyglot list of terms achieves both these aims at once: it detaches the word from its signified by making its selection entirely contingent upon the cadence of the poem, reducing the word to its mere form as signifier forgoing its meaning, while at the same time introducing an alternative to syntactical principles.

Furthermore, the dynamic at stake in this poem is not reducible to grammar. Even though we may discern nouns and articles, it would be a mistake simply to rely on this insight. For argument's sake, let us assume this poem is written in three different languages – English, French, and German – and that its core consists of four nouns, two of which are German ('bauch,' 'tür'), the remaining two French ('amour') and English ('chair'). To each substantive would then correspond the correctly gendered article in the nominative case ('*der* bauch', '*die* tür', '*l'*amour,' '*the* chair'). An important grammatical property of German nouns, however, is that they must be capitalized. We may wonder, therefore: are the words with which we are confronted in fact nouns? Is one of the languages at stake here actually German? The confusion only increases when we consider the possibility that the alignment of articles and nouns in the first stanza may not even be linguistically consistent: hence, we may read 'chair', detached from a perhaps displaced English article, as the French noun for 'flesh.' The same goes for what seems, at first glance, to be the German definite article 'die' as it corresponds to the feminine noun '[T]ür'. Yet, given the

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Scobie, *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry* (Toronto, 1997), p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> Scobie, pp. 182–3.

polylinguistic nature of the poem, why not acknowledge it as an English verb ('to die')? Needless to say, one way of resolving the dilemma of being unable to decide on the linguistic belonging of these nouns would simply lie in reading the poem out loud, listening in on the pronunciation: is 'chair' pronounced the French or the English way? Jandl considered the vocal dimension an essential aspect of his texts, which he often termed 'Sprechgedichte' or 'voice poems'.<sup>22</sup> Even though the present context cannot do it justice, in tandem with the striking visuality of his poems arising from the pictorial order of signifiers on the page, the orality of Jandl's poetry has to be kept in mind as we proceed to investigate its bearing on translation and back-translation.

As the poem goes on to conflate its linguistic matter, inventing its artificial idiom, the reader witnesses certain effects that could still be deemed grammatical. For instance, as the articles realign in the fifth stanza, the syntagma 'd'amour' seems to adhere to French grammar by introducing a prepositional structure and thus a word hitherto absent from the poem: the proposition 'de'. Even if there is no coherent syntax in place which could take on the form of an assertive proposition in the service of referential logic, the poem still seems to insist on the inevitability of grammar, however fragile this insistence may be. What we are inquiring about, however, is the nature of the poem's peculiar dynamic, and it swiftly becomes obvious that this dynamic is by no means reducible to the residues of grammatical quasi-coherence featured in the text. On the contrary, this residual grammar comes undone through a process of translation and back-translation.

While it is impossible to reduce the poem's dynamic to logical or grammatical functions, it seems equally futile to make it readable as a rhetorical manoeuvre. Otherwise put, the shifts to which the form of the list gives rise do not describe standard rhetorical devices, be they metaphorical totalizations or allegorical breaks. If the poem, renouncing any pretence of propositional logic, refrains from exploiting its referential function, and proceeds to undo its grammar, the language thus created is not one of figuration. We therefore observe the vexingly odd situation that the traditional categories used to make language intelligible cannot be used to explicate the poem's genetic process. The dynamic at stake in this text seems to issue from a deeper level of linguistic constitution, indicating a dimension of poetic creation that is

<sup>22</sup> See Jandl, 'Das Sprechgedicht', *Werke* (n. 14), VI, 8: 'The voice poem only takes effect when you read it out loud' (my translation). See also Frieder von Ammon, "Das Gedicht geht gesprochen eher ein:" Ernst Jandl als Vortragskünstler', in *Die Ernst Jandl Show*, edited by Bernhard Fetz and Hannes Schweiger (Salzburg, 2010), pp. 27–36.

not realized through logical appropriation or grammatical order, nor by metaphors or allegories.

And yet this creative dimension into which the poem's performance seems to tap displays a certain kinship with translation, and raises important questions concerning translatability. While the poem does not translate itself in any traditional sense, it does constitute an exercise in translation. Instead of engaging in a proleptic reach forward, however, it questions the direction of translation and probes its reversibility. In order to reach the last stanza, the final instantiation of its recurring refrain ('l'amour | die tür | the chair'), the text moves through various stages of a process that could be called 'intra-translation' (or 'intranslation', if you will). Through this process, the linguistic entities at stake, disintegrated into particles, become enmeshed in the creation of an artificial idiom, yet only periodically to *return* to their original form. The type of translation probed by Jandl therefore asserts the structural moment of reversion, the essential *coming-back* inherent in back-translation.

Incidentally, no doubt because of their linguistic complexity, translations of Ernst Jandl's works are rare. English translations include the anthology *Dingfest: Thingsure*, translated by Michael Hamburger (Dublin, 1997). Another publication worth mentioning is an experimental collection not quite of translations of Jandl's works, but of adaptations and approximations in which several American poets respond to select poems. Rosmarie Waldrop explains in her brief introduction: 'Most of Ernst Jandl's poems are so engrained in the German language that they are impossible to translate. But their procedures can be imitated.'<sup>23</sup> Considering 'chanson', one may add that Jandl's poetry is not necessarily only entrenched in the German language but in an uncontainable multiplicity of languages. It is quite telling, therefore, that while 'chanson' is included in the anthology, it simply stands on its own: neither translated nor adapted, Jandl's poem is simply reprinted.

Jandl's take on back-translation as a self-reflexive poetic device recalls Derrida's critique of Benjamin's threefold insistence on a strong distinction between original and translation; an identifiable subject

<sup>23</sup> *Reft and Light: Poems by Ernst Jandl With Multiple Versions by American Poets*, edited by Rosmarie Waldrop (Providence, RI, 2000), p. 6. Readers interested in a critical assessment of these translations might wish to consult Hanna C. Rückl, 'Imitation and Creativity: Ernst Jandl's Writing in Translation and Completion', in *Culture(s) and Authenticity: The Politics of Translation and the Poetics of Imitation*, edited by Agnieszka Pantuchowicz and Anna Warsø (Bern, 2017), pp. 143–52.

of translation; and the respective unity and discriminability of the languages at play. Jandl's 'chanson' implicitly corroborates Derrida's criticism in that it offers an innovative perspective on the three points in question. For one thing, the poem constitutes an example of translation at work without the need to establish a binary distinction between original and translation, since both the translation's point of departure and its site of arrival are enclosed in one and the same text. The proleptic reach forward emphasized by Benjamin does not contradict the moment of reversion and the eventual back-translation he wants to preclude: both directionalities are manifest as movements within a single poem.

A similar argument can be made about the identification of a consolidated subjectivity: just as the translation process takes place within the text itself, it ceases to be an external task for the translator to perform this process according to some protocol of individual labour. Rather, the text itself, its inherent dynamic that remains irreducible to logical, grammatical, and rhetorical classifications, functions as the hardly graspable 'translational agent'. Translation and back-translation in this text are therefore possible without needing to rely on stable originals in the hands of capable translators.

Last, and most crucial, the poem questions from the outset Benjamin's argumentative gesture towards linguistic unity. Endowed with a French title, the poetic material could be viewed as taken from the French, English, and German languages. Derrida's important question thus warrants repetition: How to translate a text written in several languages? The poem is constituted as a linguistic multiplicity; hence its process of back-translation is not one that transports a certain content from one language to the other. On the contrary, the way Jandl imagines it entails a linguistic multiplicity that keeps translating itself, the poem's elements shifting into one another, colliding, and through this collision creatively yielding a new language, a purely poetic idiom irreducible to the presumed linguistic unities of English, German, or French.

Another way to look at the conception of translation at stake in Jandl would be to approach it via the threefold classification of intralingual, interlingual, or intersemiotic translation offered by Roman Jakobson in his famous essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', to which Derrida makes a brief reference in 'Des tours de Babel' (pp. 198–9). The dynamic of translation at play in Jandl's 'chanson' does not seem to correspond to Jakobson's schema, however: as both his 'intralingual translation' and 'interlingual translation' rely on a sense of linguistic unity (sameness/otherness), 'chanson' remains irreducible to these

categories; and to the extent that its dynamic nonetheless stays connected to a verbal regime, it does not describe a movement of ‘intersemiotic translation’ either. Instead, Jandl insists on two moments which radically exceed Jakobson’s schema: on the one hand, the intratextual plurality of languages, and, on the other, the idiomatic creativity or what I call the ‘inventiveness’ of translation.

Thus departing from the ontological security of a uniform original, and from the subjective integrity of a translating agent, as well as from the phantasm of linguistic unity, the poem reaches for an understanding of translation that comes about as the translation of translation. Initiating a process drawing on and producing an irreducible ‘multilinguisticity’, it yields as its poetic effect the permutation of an incomprehensibly hermetic poetic idiom: ‘am’lour | tie dūr | che thair | ber dauch’. The process through which this idiom comes about is less ‘intensive’, or ‘proleptic’, to recall Benjamin and Hamacher, than it is inventive: the discovery of one language within an assemblage of languages through the medium of back-translation.

The Babel myth of scattered multilingualism arising out of a shattered universal tongue undergoes an interesting reversal in Jandl’s poem. Its postlapsarian premise takes a multiplicity of languages for granted as it starts out from a polyglot conglomerate of articles and substantives. As the poem unfolds, however, this multiplicity merges again, provoking the coming about of a purely poetic idiom, an invented language. This new language by no means functions as a universal lingua franca in the Babylonian sense. Rather than maintaining a distinction between intelligible universal unity and the confusion of linguistic multiplicity, Jandl insists that the poem’s invented language, this new and ‘quasi-universal’ idiom, is not one deployed in the service of intelligibility but of utter linguistic confusion. What baffles is the *single* language, not the many. Hence, the poem’s twelve stanzas become visible as a column that may well resemble a Babelic tower – built not to serve the phantasms of unity and universal cognoscibility, but as a fragile testament to perplexity and linguistic bewilderment. The elements taken from French, English, and German are deployed to construct an edifice of confusion, less a poetic monument than a translation device seeking to discover, in the particles of its linguistic matter, the very language that will serve as its medium.

One could go so far as to say that this poem has no language. It operates as a translation machine, albeit one that does not transport a meaningful element from one discernible language into the next. It has to invent its language of transmission from within the linguistic matter on which it rests, the linguistic particles on which it feeds.

Consider one of the few poems Jandl wrote in German and self-translated into English:

| inhalt   | contents   |
|--|--|
| um ein gedicht zu machen<br>habe ich nichts  | i've got nothing<br>to make a poem                                 |
| eine ganze sprache<br>ein ganzes leben<br>ein ganzes denken<br>ein ganzes erinnern | a whole language<br>a whole life<br>a whole mind<br>a whole memory |
| um ein gedicht zu machen<br>habe ich nichts  | i've got nothing<br>to make a poem <sup>24</sup>                   |

If this poem presents the reader with a self-reflection on its own possibility of existence, it does so by insisting on a radical disconnection between the poetic process and any type of phenomenal experience. A whole life, its thoughts and memories and their possible transmission into language, do not suffice to make a poem. More than that, it is not even a question of sufficiency: experiential content, the memorable substance of life, simply does not bear upon the poetic process. The substance of the poem, thus, is not reducible to a given subjective experience, its process not mirrored in finding an adequation between empirical phenomena and linguistic forms. Again, the poem's form appears to be void of content; inversely put, its form may turn out to be all the content it 'has'. And yet, the poem speaks. The possibility of this odd speech begs questions as to the nature of the language it articulates. Imitating the form of an assertive statement, the first segment, 'i've got nothing | to make a poem', questions the possibility of its own assertion by making its 'making' appear to rely on 'nothing'. If Jandl has nothing to make his poem, this nothingness affects the very linguistic medium through which the text is articulated. Hence the reader is led to assume that Jandl does not even have the language needed to state that he has nothing. Rather than a mere paradox, what this notion indicates is that a poem's language is not simply at its author's disposal; on the contrary, the poem has to be viewed as a generative device through which its own language is invented. Otherwise put, beneath every poem plays an inventive 'chanson', translating and back-translating its linguistic matter in order to set free the poem's idiom. For the poetic idiom to come about, any recourse to a given language that could be 'had' or 'possessed' or 'owned' (the meanings implied by the verb 'haben') is barred.

<sup>24</sup> Jandl, *Werke*, III, 159–60.

The poem is therefore forced to invent its idiom from the elements of its linguistic matter. If it cannot rely on the creative subjectivity of its author and rest on the paradigm of lived experience, the poem, in order not to be nothing, has to invent its idiom from within itself.

Returning to 'chanson', then, the question remains why the inventiveness behind the possibility of the poem's idiom has to be understood as a structural aspect of translation. In other words, one may want to argue that the peculiar dynamic at stake in this text does not necessarily harbour implications for the translation of translation and thus the process of back-translation, and instead reduce it to some kind of linguistic joke or formal experiment. The poem's bearing upon theoretical questions concerning the act of translating – its directionality and reversibility – may not be at all certain. In response to such concerns, a consultation of Jandl's lectures on poetics can prove useful. Delivered in 1985, the *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* consist of five such lectures, the first of which specifically addresses the composition of 'chanson'. It has yet to be translated, so I offer my own rendering here. The passage helps us understand how the author imagined the setup of the poem as an all-too-familiar situation of language acquisition:

Es hängt auch ein Erinnern an Schule daran, eine wohl nicht mehr ganz zeitgemäße Art des Vokabellernens, ein Heftchen mit linierten, in der Mitte durch einen senkrechten Strich in zwei Hälften geteilten Seiten; darin waren in zwei Kolonnen die zu lernenden Wörter einzutragen, links das Wort aus der Fremdsprache, rechts seine deutsche Entsprechung, l'amour – die Liebe; la porte – die Tür; the chair – der Stuhl; the belly – der Bauch.<sup>25</sup>

Attached to it is a certain memory of school, perhaps an outdated sort of vocabulary learning, a ruled notebook whose pages are divided in two halves by a vertical line; thus you have two columns into which to insert the vocabulary to be studied, on the left side the foreign word, and on the right its German equivalent, l'amour – die Liebe; la porte – die Tür; the chair – der Stuhl; the belly – der Bauch.

The poem's disposition thus evokes a minimal translation exercise, albeit not one that aims at phrases, syntagms, or syntactical structures, but at vocabulary. The familiar situation of filling out such a notebook, however, is already estranged by the odd number of languages at play. Apparently, this language learner is taking on three languages at a time, two of which (English and French) Jandl's setup classifies as

<sup>25</sup> Jandl, 'Das Öffnen und Schließen des Mundes: Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen', *Werke*, VI, 297–401 (p. 308).

‘Fremdsprachen’ (‘foreign languages’), while German seems to occupy the place of the mother tongue. But the primacy of German will soon be undermined, for this poem, Jandl goes on to explain, is written in ‘phases’, the initial one corresponding to the situation just described. As ‘chanson’ continues to unfold, the second purported stage consists in the transgression of linguistic barriers bound up with a detachment of nouns from their articles: ‘During the second [phase], the articles liberate themselves from their substantives and, at the same time, leap over linguistic borders.’<sup>26</sup> Arguably, it is during this second phase of poetic unfolding that the work of translation begins, for no translation can occur without a certain leap over linguistic borders.<sup>27</sup>

The poetic process does not halt there, however. As the poem departs from this second stage of linguistic conflation, sliding back into the recurring refrain (‘I’amour | die tür | the chair’) which will eventually mark its closing point, its movement anticipates an even more radical leap: ‘During the third and last phase, a partial amalgamation of sounds takes place; iambic cadence and form remain constant.’<sup>28</sup> In order to grasp the sheer linguistic occurrence taking place in this last stage, we must pay attention to the adjective ‘partial’ used by Jandl. While it may prompt us to think of the process in question as one that affects its linguistic entities only in part, leaving intact a certain idea of wholeness, Jandl’s choice nonetheless indicates a kind of corrosion and particularization of language, a decomposition of the word as the basic meaningful linguistic unit, breaking it up and opening it toward an inherent multiplicity of languages – and, with this, toward the invention of a new idiom.

The process of translation thus envisioned by Jandl is one that, instead of finding equivalents for its terms, smashes its elements into pieces – a plea for translation with a hammer if you will – though not in order to arrive at pure chaos, because cadence and form need to remain constant and unharmed. This new language is not without rule; while it corresponds to the shattered languages it mines for linguistic material, it does not stick to a referential logic or achieve grammatical order; instead, it creates a certain rhythm. ‘[D]er bauch | die tür | the chair |

<sup>26</sup> ‘In der zweiten [Phase] ... befreien sich die Artikel von ihren Substantiven und setzen sich gleichzeitig über Sprachgrenzen hinweg’ (‘Das Öffnen’, p. 308; all translations from this text are mine).

<sup>27</sup> This observation is especially striking if we take seriously Jandl’s formulation ‘sich *über* Sprachgrenzen hinweg *setzen*’ as it corresponds closely to the German term for ‘translating’ (‘Übersetzen’).

<sup>28</sup> ‘In der dritten und letzten Phase, erfolgt eine partielle Vermischung der Laute; der jambische Takt und die Kontur bleiben konstant’ (‘Öffnen’, p. 308).



l'amour' (the last stanza of the initial 'phase' of 'chanson') and 'che dauch | am'thour | ber dūr | tie lair' (its penultimate stanza before the refrain closes the poem), correspond on two levels, one of which regards matter and the other bears upon form. On the material level, the former stanza contains the very linguistic components which will become particularized and recomposed for the latter stanza; on a formal level, however, they have the same cadence but with a minor shift as to the placement of diphthongs and umlauts (-au-|-ü-|-ai-|-ou- becomes -au-|-ou-|-ü-|-ai-). In their radical difference, the multiple languages and idioms at play still hold onto a certain formal consistency; the only governing principle of their translatability, one could argue, is in fact their adherence to the continuous poetic form.

As Jandl concludes his reflections on 'chanson', he insists that this poetic process is not the product of analytical reason: 'Everything occurred intuitively, without calculation.'<sup>29</sup> It would be too hasty to associate the type of intuition invoked here with a stable instance of authorial subjectivity. If Jandl stresses that everything merely 'occurred' ('geschah'), this happening or 'Geschehen' can hardly be reduced to subjective capability. The type of occurrence at stake seems to be released by language itself; it bespeaks the invention of the poem's own idiom through the translation and back-translation of its linguistic matter. 'Geschehen' is the flurry of particles summoning a tongue utterly unintelligible, useless to any type of referential or predicative logic, so as 'to generate a language that only exists in this singular poem, and not in any other poem, and definitely not in any of the world's dictionaries'.<sup>30</sup> The hardly translatable term 'Geschehen' has become the privileged concept in Hamacher's later works, whenever he refers to that dimension of language that is not yet formed, its inventive potential, not yet manifested as or petrified into structures that are grammatically, logically, or rhetorically recognizable.<sup>31</sup> The generation of the poetic idiom, as performed in 'chanson', does not happen *ex nihilo*, but explicitly relies on a process of translation through which linguistic matter is particularized, decomposed, recomposed, and, ultimately, returned to its initial form. This state is not to be confused with any phantasm of originality, for it retains the echo of the radical

<sup>29</sup> 'Es geschah alles intuitiv, ohne Berechnung' ('Öffnen', p. 308).

<sup>30</sup> '[E]ine Sprache erzeugen, die nur in diesem einen Gedicht existiert, und in keinem zweiten, und gewiß in keinem Wörterbuch der Welt' ('Öffnen', p. 313).

<sup>31</sup> Werner Hamacher, 'Vom Recht, Rechte nicht zu gebrauchen: *Menschenrechte und Urteilsstruktur*', *Sprachgerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt, 2008), pp. 93–126, 104–5, 110–14. See also Dominik Zechner, 'Sprachgerechtigkeit by Werner Hamacher', *MLN*, 135.3 (2020), 802–5 (p. 803).

estrangement elicited by a poetic process unfolding through translation and back-translation.

Ernst Jandl's inventive process and the way it manifests in his poem 'chanson' thus help us to reassess theoretical assumptions about the structural nature of translation and its formal complicity with the coming about of poetic idioms. Jandl insists on translation as a means of evoking his poem's singular language. His poetic practice of translation and back-translation, however, foregoes any reliance on a stable original, identifiable translator, and linguistic unity. While it may perform a proleptic reach forward, as the Benjaminian tradition of language philosophy maintains, it does so by insisting on the reversibility of this reach, accepting the directionality of translation only under the condition of its possible turning back. Jandl's poem thereby spawns an idiom whose generative principle is that of translation and back-translation. Its inventive language speaks through a storm of linguistic particles that only relate through translation. The tumultuous confusion thus unfolded is reversible, hence translations have the possibility of travelling back. Periodically, the storm may settle ... 'l'amour | die tür | the chair'. But the song continues.

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