

# Living in Languages

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## Introduction to Living in Languages Journal

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## Introduction

ANDREW BROOKS

I wandered off the set paths into the *Living in Languages Journal* project in late 2019, discussing plans vaguely with strange colleagues in emptying halls. And then, *what* unfolded over the last three years. Oddly, *what* became tempered for a group of strange collaborators by the absurdity of traversing the trials of this journal during said *what*. Much unfolded, distances crossed and recrossed with delays, deaths, discussions, dedications, and *what*. What can be said about another academic journal while *what* continues? Is the whole project a whistling in the dark? Over the last few years, in moments of despair, when the weight of *what* led to exhaustion, the questions piled up: What is the reason? What is the value? What is the point?

A[nother] periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
 Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
 With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.  
 It was not (to start again) what one had expected.

(Elliott, lines 248-251)

What despair, what fatigue, what fatalism—the strange community surrounding *Living in Languages Journal* kept at bay; through simple “next steps” we seemingly moved forward, or stood still in modes of survival. And so, now, having made it thus far through—surely still in the midst of *what* but still—I am tasked with “introducing” the *Living in Languages Journal*.

We attempt to gather an obviously impossible coexistence. An unstable forming of the seemingly disparate trends of our historical moment revolving around literary translation studies: strivings and demands for ethical political relevance, for poetic critical creations, for self-presenting experimentality of form, for humanistic and institutional readability, for toe-to-the-line quasi-mystic aesthetic encounters—for translation as practice, theory, and metaphor.

I suppose what we hope to be is impossibly, or at least strategically, relevant to the contemporary moment. To think about this relevance to now, let me digress back a hundred years:

For Walter Benjamin, 1921 was bookended with two works: “The Critique of Violence” (January of 1921) and “Task of the Translator” (last months of 1921); 1921 was a year of “integrating the idea of pure language into politics” (SW 1, 503).” Through the months in between, Benjamin’s time was consumed in part by the never actualized journal *Angelus Novus*, which gave (in theory) a central role to translation. In the official announcement of the journal Benjamin writes:

Once again, German writing in its current state stands in need of a genre [Form] that has always had a beneficial effect on it in its periods of great crisis: translation. In the present instance, however, the translations of the journal wish to be understood not just as providing models to be emulated, as was the case in earlier times, but also as the strict

and irreplaceable school of language-in-the-making. (SW 1, 294, *my insertion of original*).<sup>1</sup>

In a moment of “great crisis,”<sup>2</sup> translation becomes a beneficial form. Arguably, what translation offers in such moments is an experience of the integrating between word and politics—an experience of between source-text and target-text, and an encounter with the possible delimitations and limitations of the moment. Translation is a model of the striving for and failure to reach contemporary relevance, and houses the potential for an emerging otherness.

Of course, this is only a coincidental framing. That *Living in Languages Journal* developed one hundred years after *Angelus Novus* means little, except to the coincidental narrative we create. Brought together are echoes of a time, person, and journal carrying an immense weight of an (im)possible symposium of word and politics in contemporary relevance. However, neither Benjamin’s journal nor *Living in Languages* is about creating an ideal communing. Benjamin writes, “the journal should proclaim through the mutual alienness of its contributors how impossible it is in our current age to give voice to any communality” (SW 1 296).<sup>3</sup> *Living in Languages Journal* coincides in theory and narrative, attempting momentarily strange communings by foregrounding translation as practice, theory, and metaphor.

To strive for contemporary relevance is to be strange. We are in a moment on a spectrum of technological shadows and blinding dusk: from narcissistic belief *only* in one’s own humanness, to post-human calls for equality and equity—as the world burns and we seek to see further than ever. In the shadow of our moment, in trying to understand and describe *Living in Languages Journal*, I am led back again to Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*:

The true designation of a journal is to evince the spirit of its epoch. Its contemporaneity is more important than even its own unity or clarity. (my translation)<sup>4</sup>

Part of the stammering in trying to introduce *Living in Languages Journal* is in the tension of a “contemporaneity,” which is the “true designation” of not just a journal but translation itself. Benjamin, later in the *Angelus Novus* announcement, moves this “contemporaneity” into a rhetorically ideal image as “die wahre Aktualität,” [the true contemporaneity] which demands a

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<sup>1</sup> “Von neuem ruft die Lage des deutschen Schrifttums eine Form hervor, welche seit jeher heilsam seine großen Krisen begleitete: die Übersetzung. Freilich wollen die Übersetzungen der Zeitschrift nicht sowohl als Vermittlung von Vorbildern verstanden werden, wie dies früher Brauch war, denn als unersetzlicher und strenger Schulgang werdender Sprache selbst.” (GS II, 243). Translation is by Rodney Livingstone. Livingstone’s choice of “genre” for Benjamin’s “Form” seems to mark a historical limitation of English-language translators of Benjamin in the early last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a certain reiterative stumbling over Benjamin’s use of “Form,” especially as in, “translation is a form.” This may be due to a lack of background in German Romanticism and Kantian tradition, as well as a long tradition of not defining ‘form.’

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin is referring to the political and economic crises of the Weimar Republic around 1920-1923, which despite the current rhetoric reflecting late 1930’s and 1940’s Germany, shares many affinities with our current moment. Though we have the added weight of environmental catastrophe.

<sup>3</sup> “...daß auch die Zeitschrift in der wechselseitigen Fremdheit ihrer Beiträge es bekunde, wie unaussprechlich in diesen Tagen jede Gemeinsamkeit...” (GS II, 246)

<sup>4</sup> “Die wahre Bestimmung einer Zeitschrift ist, den Geist ihrer Epoche zu bekunden. Dessen Aktualität gilt ihr mehr als selber seine Einheit oder Klarheit.” (GS II 241)

“wechselseitigen Fremdheit” [mutual foreignness] (GS II, 246). We are a journal with a focus on translation in the broadest sense. In such breadth, translation attempts this very, mutually foreign, contemporaneity. And yet, I am wary. For translation as a practice and product is mired in a history of ethnocentric violence that spans the west—from hellenizein’s barbarism through to the rise of modern imperialism, problematic globalization, and nationalistic-politics, i.e., translation as violent appropriation and as a tool of oppressive ideology. Any attempt at contemporaneity by this journal runs the risk of an ethnocentric violence (already present in my own Eurocentric references). And yet, an equally long counter history exists—from the indeterminacy and performativity of the pre-Socratics, through to contemporary calls for thick, self-conscious and ethical translations, which attempt to bring about encounters with the foreign, immerses itself in the complexities of context, and foregrounds its own violence and limitations. We can only *attempt* to align ourselves with the latter, with a healthy amount of skepticism and wariness towards our own abilities, positionalities, and the incessantly malleable nature of language in its complex entanglement with/as systems of power, grammars.

In the midst of these tensions our attempts at “contemporaneity” arise—to reveal the entanglement of the political and the word, in the reality of living in languages, in and through translation, in a world on fire. For, as the ethnocentric violence of translation is seemingly inevitable, the heft of the word is *ineradicable*. This, I believe, is what we mean (for now) when we aim for “contemporaneity.”

The two held in tension—word|politics—equating to *true contemporary relevance*: a moment when the *ineradicable*—be in *whatever* form (the absolute, history, etc.)—experienced as a distortion in the world (as “word”) is brought to a tension and flashes up.

After all, according to a legend in the Talmud, the angels—who are born anew every instant in countless numbers—are created in order to perish and to vanish into the Void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God. (SW 1, 296)<sup>5</sup>

The ineradicable is always only ever present, “anew every instant,” in continual momentary relevance, in ethnocentrically distorted forms—then as Talmudic angels, now as *what?* And paradoxically the ineradicable is distortedly “God”/“Void”—that is, the presence of such *ineradicable* is only intuited/reasoned due to the momentary hymns and absences thereof.

In Benjamin’s image, I see the flash of the in/separability between word|politics. The “hymns” of our shared disparate moment are not all angelic, but carry forth in attempts at totalizing-tones of anew despotism in malignant forms and modes. Such flashes the necessity of the translator and critical journals: to attempt to point towards the ineradicable by foregrounding the violent distortions of the hymns and the void/god, foregrounding the ethnocentric violence—our own, and the present—in hopeless attempts at contemporaneity, and the possibility of other.

*Living in Languages Journal* has attempted to place translation and the journal in the place of bringing hymns to a tension in context, in hopes of possible liberations:

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<sup>5</sup> “Werden doch sogar nach einer talmudischen Legende die Engel - neue jeden Augenblick in unzähligen Scharen - geschaffen, um, nachdem sie vor Gott ihren Hymnus gesungen, aufzuhören und in Nichts zu vergehen.” (GS II, 246) Translation is by Harry Zohn.

In this pure language [...] all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. (SW 1, 261)<sup>6</sup>

In this image from Benjamin, the Talmudic angels have become “all” (information, sense, intention) which, instead of being “born anew,” are seemingly always-already present as language. And yet, these “all” “finally encounter a stratum” (like the void) i.e., pure language, in which they are “to be extinguished.” Does “pure language” point towards the materiality of language as-is, or as-if, or the quasi-transcendental structural possibility intuited? Or some yet read *what?* Any answer places the translator in the same position. We are tasked with opening and closing the passage for the angels and giving their hymns anew distorted form; transforming the “original” historical manifestations into other openly derivative historical manifestations (translations); and in the process possibly, allowing the potentiality of other to release and the ineradicable to flash up. The “word” destabilizes the attempts at totalizing-tones and in immanent events each are transformed. The politicalness of this is touched, in our moment, as in Benjamin’s, in the language of “gefangene” and “befreien.” The “political” imprisons the word and the “word” imprisons the political, while the translator attempts to liberate through anew delimitation. The political potential for this suggests Goethe’s words on contemporaneity (paraphrased and quoted by Antoine Berman):

[we] ‘must also absorb, as far as possible, in theory and in practice, what is opposite to [our] nature’...

...the scene of the relation between what is one’s own and what is foreign is dominated by that which, beyond their opposition, is the element of their possible coexistence: The foreign is always only an *alter ego*, and conversely, I am the foreign to a multiplicity of *alter egos*. Which entails that the relation to the foreign is above all a relation of contemporaneity (62).<sup>7</sup>

The political and the word, the source-text and the target-text, then and now, are alter egos; the translator attempts an encounter between them; *Living in Languages Journal* strives to bring such attempts into a strange symposium.

But, maybe the Talmudic angles and liberation of the word gains a more grounded relevance to our moment in one last image by Benjamin from 1939:

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<sup>6</sup> “In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern als ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen Sprachen Gemeint ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu erlöschen bestimmt sind.” (P11, S9) Translation is by Harry Zohn.

<sup>7</sup> “C’est pourquoi l’homme doit aussi accueillir en lui, théoriquement et pratiquement, autant que cela lui est possible, ce qui est opposé à sa nature....[...]Par ailleurs, la scène du rapport du propre et de l’étranger est dominée par ce qui, au-delà de leur opposition, est l’élément de leur coexistence possible : l’étranger n’est jamais qu’un alter ego, et inversement, je suis l’étranger d’une multiplicité d’alter ego. Ce qui entraîne que le rapport à l’étranger soit avant tout un rapport de contemporanéité : il ne peut pas y avoir de commerce et d’interaction avec les morts.” (101) Translation by S. Heyvaert.

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake. (SW 4, 402)<sup>8</sup>

In this dangerous and sobering moment, the angels have become “passengers” and the “hymns” have become the act of trying to stop “this train,” i.e., the unfolding of reactionary and ruthless history, ignorance, brutality. The translators, brought down to right size, sit as “passengers” stuck “on this train,” and attempt, what has always failed thus far, to activate the emergency brakes—to bring *what* is emerging to a stop, momentarily, one word at a time.

I do not know if it is hyperbolic to see parallels between then and now. I think that is only a question that the future can answer. I feel a dangerous and sobering energy, and I hear angelic and demonic hymns. And in this moment, I ask, without having an answer—*what* is the task of the translator?

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In keeping with the above, our selections for this inaugural edition are brought together not out of unity of thought, or goal, or belief, but as an attempt at a strange symposium.

First, Komal Agarwal offers a translation of two poems by Indian author Leena Malhotra, along with a short introduction of the poet and commentary on her own translation process. We start with Agarwal’s work, for in a certain light, her claim of a “universality of human emotion”<sup>9</sup> correlating to familial relations will seem at odds with the majority of the other inclusions, which focus more directly on untranslatability, change and difference. And yet, Agarwal foregrounds what she perceives to be the “incomprehensible” differences between a Hindi and English readership—and languages—while still perceiving a certain “universality” to be present none the less. To whatever extent we agree or disagree about what the “universality” is, even if radical alterity, this is an understated assumption of all literary translation: the translatable as innate with the untranslatable and the untranslatable as beyond the translatable. Agarwal’s choice of poems purposefully foregrounds this tension: “A Mother’s Prayer” and “Exiled to the Moon.” This general tension—“translatable” and “untranslatable”—is held throughout the inclusions in this edition.

Yolande Schutter offers four translations of poems by Algerian poet Mohamed Sehaba, with a short subsequent note on Sehaba’s exilic “Algérieance.” Schutter’s selections for translation, framing of the poems, and comments on translation reflect a movement in-between home and exile, in-between familiar and alien, in-between hopelessness and openness. Moreover, Schutter brings forward the close affinity between poetry and translation: “the ability and inability for language and poetry to speak,” “the possibility of language to encompass the impossible.” This affinity is likewise present in Schutter’s subsequent notes on Sehaba’s Algérieance, where she traces the historical “translations” of Negritude to Algérieance, through different translators—Césaire, Senghor, Cixous, and Sehaba. This tracing culminates with an implied paradoxically shared exilic indefinability i.e., language and identity as difference, which

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<sup>8</sup> “Marx sagt, die Revolutionen sind die Lokomotive der Weltgeschichte. Aber vielleicht ist dem giinzlich anders. Vielleicht sind die Revolutionen der Griff des in diesem Zuge reisenden Menschengeschlechts nach der Notbremse.” (GS Bd I, 1232)  
Translation is by Harry Zohn.

<sup>9</sup> All citations from the included authors can be found in their respective articles.

“does not seek to bring together beyond difference” and is itself “translation.” Schutter’s theoretical implications of an “in-between” exilic space of translation, as well as her political notion that such exilic “translation [functions as] a connective tissue between Algeria’s past and its potential future” shares, while deviating in method and implications, a frame with such inclusions as John Sanderson’s case-study.

Sanderson’s text echoes Schutter’s exilic position of the literary author and thus also the metaphoric affinity between translation and the experience of exile (both opening up a space of potentiality). Sanderson’s methodology is decidedly more archival and historical than the other selections. He offers an in-depth case study of the act of exilic translation through examining the complexities of the Spanish filmmaker and playwright Fernando Arrabal’s life in exile, the necessity of translation, and the conflicting reception of Arrabal’s works inside Francoist Spain and internationally. Moreover, Sanderson’s essay explores the ethnocentric lingering violence of historic national narratives and identity, by turning to the subsequent attempts of the exiled artists to represent individual identities and narratives through “rewriting/retranslating,” which “struggle to contradict imposed historical narratives.” Thus, for Sanderson translation turns away from being merely an act of ethnocentric violence and towards being a means of resistance. Overall, this raises the question of the possibility of a national identity from an exilic artist, or a national identity as exilic.

In a different direction, we have included two works that deal with the *experience* of untranslatability. Nicole A. Cosentino’s essay explores the late fragmentary works of Roland Barthes and the attempts to represent the untranslatable, the idiosyncratic experience of love and loss. While offering a compelling and lyrical reading of Barthes late works, something unexpected occurs in Cosentino’s essay: in her use of “translation”—as the movement between the deeply personal language of individual experience and discourse—one begins to hear her call for a mode of expression through “the neutral, [through] the perspective of the lonely, queer subject.” In such a use of “translation,” and a striving for “neutral,” one perceives a literary criticism influenced by the necessity and impossibility of translation. One hears the echo of exilic translation or what Schutter describes as a “cold” “isthmus.”

In an oddly inverted accord with Cosentino’s experience of the untranslatable, Sudarshan Ramani’s examination of a single Hindi phrase in *Finnegans Wake* explores how the encounter with the familiar within the untranslatable can compel expansive readings and efforts to solve the unsolvable. Ramani takes a personal “single point of contact” in the immensity of Joyce’s work and runs wild—through historical research, theoretical implications, close readings, personal narrative—representing in an essay mode the extensive innateness of the familiar in the other, the common in the untranslatable, and thus a “paradoxical accessibility” through a seemingly universal and bound (un)accessibility.

And lastly, we have included two essays by Andrew Brooks and Umar Nizar respectively, directly focused on the theory of translation and the question of presentation.<sup>10</sup> Nizar reads the rising “cognitive militarism” and dangerously conservative pseudo-psychology of our current moment, as projecting a conception of language, self, and nation that is “mechanically autopoiesis,” and as such views “translation” as unnecessary. In contrast to said “autopoiesis,” and arguing for a “more radical translation” that is “non-cognitive, non-utilitarian,

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<sup>10</sup> We have chosen to summarize Nizar’s work at length here, as the performative aspects of his essay could create confusion.

non-positivist,” Nizar turns to a call for “literal translation,” and a thinking of “self” and “one” as “many.” For the “self is an entity antagonistic to any possibility of translation...and any entity in any source language can be translated into any other host language that exists.” With this general summary in mind, Nizar’s vertiginous style and ironic tone should be understood as performing his argument. In an email, Nizar writes:

AK Ramanujan, the Kannada language translator once gave an example of an informant he was working with in the field, who was the last speaker of a near extinct language. When Ramanujan received funding from the university, he forwarded the informant a stipend and she proceeded to buy a pair of dentures for herself, changing the entire texture of the language under study. This axiomatic malleability has been at the center of my thesis.

This “axiomatic malleability” of language places an inescapable irony at the center of any critical writing, leading to Nizar’s deadly serious and playfully ironic tone. Likewise, with this malleability posited, “translation becomes a wager and not an infinitesimal calculus of change;” this is reflected in Nizar’s near elimination of transitions and explanations, in favor of a jarring collage like structure that reverberates with his return to Benjamin’s call for literal translation, or “radical translation creating radical alterity.”

In many ways, such a thesis is present though unstated in Brooks’ essay as well. Brooks begins from the assumption that the task of translation is to stretch *seemingly* unified texts, narratives, experiences, in a manner that reveals the sutures, and allows for an extension of possible meaning, experience, thinking. Brooks, in essayistic fashion, argues that Benjamin’s privileged “Traktat” form and notion of “Darstellung” becomes a means by which to understand his call for “Wörtlichkeit” and syntactical fidelity. Moreover, Brooks utilizes his readings and retranslations of Benjamin to propose a self-conscious form of translation: Darstellung as an essayistic-retranslation, or what he refers to as “entangled-retranslation.”

Lastly, Brooks and Nizar offer performative texts. Nizar chooses a vertiginous rapidity and a montage-like structure, while Brooks relies on a digressive essayistic approach. This difference in presentation *may* speak to a nuanced distinction between the two author’s thinking about the nature of language: the possibility of an experience of an absolute beyond the historical continuity, beyond the “prison house of language.” Brooks’ digressive essayistic form reflects a theory of presentation and translation that foregrounds historical distortions, perceiving said distortions as rhythmic privative encounters with *a* possible absolute (of possible infinite absolutes). Nizar’s ironic collage presentations reflects language “as a torture house of being,” due to a complete nihilistic break between human and thing-in-itself, between historical representations and an absolute (if any such exists). While Nizar’s montage compels a confounding experience for the reader assumingly in affinity with the experience of the other without gradation, Brooks’ essay compels the reader to “stretch” through disparate re-encounters of the problem of language, translatability, and presentation.

All inclusions in this first edition approach the questions of how one reads and responds to ‘untranslatability,’ and the possibility of ethical translation. Though, the editors can’t say they

agree with all readings included here, we have found each to produce an affective response and a call for constructive agonistic communing.

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