

Memory

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“**T**ranslation is an intercultural as well as a translanguing phenomenon, a transcultural as well as an interlingual process. It involves the transfer of a narrative or text from one signifying form to another, the transporting of texts from one historical context to another, and the tracking of the migration of meanings from one cultural space to another. Because translation is a movement never fully achieved, both *trans*, meaning ‘across,’ and *inter*, meaning ‘between,’ are crucial to an understanding of the breadth of the workings of translation. We are most accustomed to thinking of translation as an empirical linguistic maneuver, but excavating or unearthing burial sites or ruins in order to reconstruct traces of the physical and textual past in a new context is also a mode of translation, just as resurrecting a memory or interpreting a dream are acts of translation. In the process of being transferred from one realm or condition to another, the source event or idea is necessarily reconfigured; the result of translation is that the original, also inaccessible, is no longer an original per se; it is a pretext whose identity has been redefined.

The significance of this point as an idea, and its implications for understanding the relationship between survival and cultural memory, will be reiterated throughout this study. Even if, hypothetically, it were possible to excavate a body, a text, a narrative, an image, or even a memory intact, the necessarily delayed, translated context of such an excavation would be transformed in the interval between the moment of production and the moment of its translation. As Benjamin states in the sixth of his eighteen *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, a testament written not long before his suicide in 1940 in Port Bou at the French-Spanish border, as he fled the Nazis:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it actually was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

This is memory resurrected and reconstructed in the breach, rescued from the breach. Benjamin conceives of remembrance as a corrective flash of insight that emerges in times of

crisis, and in response to political and cultural persecution, to the threat of erasure of the voices of resistance, disruption, and heterogeneity by totalitarian regimes. Arguably, the idea that a seamless continuity of the past exists or should be desired could itself be taken as a sign of crisis (of conscience): a deliberate or enforced concealment or forgetting that requires redress. Recent accounts by forensic anthropologists who have retrieved, extricated, identified, and reconstituted the corporeal evidence of mass slaughter, on behalf of those who mourn the victims and to promote social justice, explain how the reading of human remains can “give a voice to people silenced... to people suppressed in the most final way: murdered and put into clandestine graves.” But before bodily remains can be read, they claim an irrefutable form of evidence. Clyde Snow explains: “Bones...are often our last and best witnesses: they never lie, and they never forget.”

I proceed, then, by linking translation to a concept of survival—“survival” as a cultural practice and symbolic action, and above all as a process that extends life, but one that also prolongs the meaning traces of death-in-life, life after death, and life after life. Both bodies and texts harbour the prospect of living on in their own remarkable ways. Echoing the haunting, unanswerable question about the possibility of resurrection in the biblical book of Ezekiel, my title *Can These Bones Live?* seeks to affirm survival’s ongoing poetic and political significance and rhetorical power. Despite its usual connotations, prophetic speech is not only annunciatory; it involves recovery, too, which is another kind of revelation. To cross the threshold from life to death and from death to afterlife is *to be translated, to be in translation*. Translation is the mode through which what is dead, disappeared, forgotten, buried, or suppressed overcomes its determined fate by being borne (and thus born anew) to other contexts across time and space, as famously asserted by Salman Rushdie: “I, too, am a translated man. I have been borne across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion...that something can also be gained.” (pp. 4-6)

[...]

So, what really hangs in the balance? That translation is a function of every cognitive and communicative operation, that every exchange (and non-exchange) has the transforming potential of a fateful encounter. We can postulate that one side or the other inevitably has the “wrong language,” but a connection can, and must, be made from the space of difference. Can we afford not to make the effort? (p. 9)

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