

Walter Benjamin's Politics of the Pure Word

Melancholia, Mourning, and the Task of the Translator

by Adam Rosen

Throughout his essay, "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin seems impelled by an anxious repulsion from the irredeemable loss that enables his text/task; yet the force of this repulsion is not enough to prevent Benjamin from continually approaching various figures of this foundational loss that problematize his most crucial arguments. Benjamin appeals to the force of a certain Law whereby he seeks to resolve—but ultimately obscures—these tensions and the loss from which they stem. However, since this Law can, at best, only suppress and displace the text/task's tensions, Benjamin is bound to confront the return of the repressed, and in order to do so, he invokes symbolic images designed to bridge over and explain away these recurrent tensions. Both the Law and the images, then, may be read as modes of passing over certain profoundly unsettling moments rather than seriously working through them, thereby evading a decisive confrontation with precisely those issues that recurrently trouble Benjamin's text/task: loss, desire, and authority.

In the very first paragraph,

Benjamin laudably attempts to stave off a vulgar psychologism that would grant too much weight to culturally embedded authority and the aesthetic judgments that arise therefrom as he works toward an explication of art's resistance to present constellations of authority. For Benjamin, considerations of art are not to attend to the subjective responses of the "receivers," since art is precisely that which can keep culture moving by exceeding its compensatory economy and articulating new values and world-historical orientations that defy the standards of any particular cultural formation. "Any reference to a particular public or its representatives [is] misleading," on Benjamin's account, in that it would either amount to an unnecessary focus on the original's content or merely reproduce the judgments of a regime of cultur-

