

Doing
Pablo Justice
Oyarzun



Doing Justice

Critical South

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Doing Justice

Three Essays on Walter Benjamin

Pablo Oyarzun

Translated by Stephen Gingerich

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Contents

<i>Note on the Texts</i>	vii
<i>Introduction – Jacques Lezra</i>	ix
<i>Prologue: Doing Justice?</i>	xxxi
1 On Benjamin's Concept of Translation	1
2 Four Suggestions about Experience, History, and Facticity in the Thought of Walter Benjamin	40
3 Narration and Justice	75
<i>Notes</i>	108
<i>Bibliography</i>	136
<i>Index</i>	140

Note on the Texts

The author has published translations into Spanish of many works by Walter Benjamin, including most of the work discussed in this volume. (These editions have been included in the bibliography.) The original Spanish text therefore integrates his own translations with references to standard German editions of Benjamin's work, and often includes the original German text when this is appropriate for his interpretation and commentary. The translator has chosen to preserve the German interpolations and to include, when possible, references to both the German editions and the standard English translation, using in the text the abbreviations listed here in order to reduce the number of bibliographic notes. Occasionally, the English translation has been altered and made to harmonize with Oyarzun's interpretation; such modifications, wholly the responsibility of the translator, are noted parenthetically, as translator's notes (TNs). Translations from German, when a text is not available in English, are the translator's; they take into account the author's Spanish version. When given in the text, the sigla listed below will include a Roman numeral indicating the volume and,

when necessary, an Arabic numeral indicating the section, followed by page numbers.

- A Walter Benjamin. *Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- GS Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Suhrkamp, 1991. 14 volumes.
- O Walter Benjamin. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, translated by Howard Eiland. Harvard University Press, 2019.
- SW Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996. 4 volumes.
- WN Walter Benjamin. *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Christoph Gösde and Henri Lonitz. Suhrkamp, 2010. 21 volumes.

Introduction

“...beneath these clouds”

Jacques Lezra

Are we truly, though, midway to making real what ought to be, as the historical discourse of the winners insists? If we pass a hand over that well-groomed story—but do so against the part and against the grain, as Walter Benjamin counseled—won’t it perhaps turn out that what this history holds to be “exceptional”—exceptions that constantly and forcefully occur, even in our days—can teach us more regarding the history of democracy in modernity, and about its current possibilities, than what that history recognizes as the “rule”?

Bolívar Echeverría, “El sentido del siglo XX”

beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

Benjamin

Cuento is the name given to the bolster used to shore up what threatens to fall into ruins; hence the expression *andar, o estar en cuentos*, to be or find oneself *en cuentos*: to be in danger, and hold oneself together with handiwork and artifice.

Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana, o española*

How, who, what is Walter Benjamin “in Latin America”?¹ What did and what does Benjamin teach Latin America? So asked a helpful collection of essays from 2010.² For Benjamin’s influence in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere, in Portuguese and Spanish translation, though read in German and English as well, has been profound. His “Theses on the Philosophy of History” help Michael Löwy understand the theology of liberation that takes hold distinctively across the continent.³ Benjamin’s “For a Critique of Violence”—first in Héctor Murena’s 1967 version *del alemán*, “from the German,” then in a faulty translation by Jesús Aguirre, and most recently translated from German in 2007–2008 by Pablo Oyarzun and republished in 2017 in a revised edition, with an accompanying group of essays by distinguished Latin American philosophers—serves to organize the Latin American response to the failures and successes of revolutionary movements, from Central America to the Southern Cone. A *Glosario Walter Benjamin: Conceptos y figuras* was published in Mexico in 2016. Benjamin is studied from the perspective of exile and, in Brazil, of the philosophy and practices of translation. He shapes the understanding of Latin American literary and artistic modernism.⁴ He helps define what has been called the *barroco de indias*. He is read against, and with, authors such as Mariátegui, Bolívar Echeverría, Óscar del Barco, and Viveiros de Castro. He is received in agonistic relation to Derrida, Agamben, Hamacher and others—each also read differently, in the publishing and scholarly markets that run from Mexico to Brazil, from how they are read in Europe or the United States. And, of course, the reception of Walter Benjamin has differed depending on the institutional and political cultures in which each country has read him and on the moment and circumstance of each country. Reading Benjamin is a different matter under Pinochet from what it is under the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico; it is one

thing to read the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” under Videla in Argentina and quite another to hear news of it in Havana, where Benjamin had once hoped to find himself, with Theodor Adorno’s help. Latin American Marxisms—which do not map easily onto the European varieties—take on Benjamin’s texts with different degrees of reluctance, violence, enthusiasm, and misprision—or reject them, again, for various reasons.

What does the complex, controversial, partial, rich, differentiated reception of Benjamin in Latin America offer anglophone readers of Benjamin’s work? And why now? Why offer *now*, in English, these essays about Walter Benjamin written by one of Latin America’s foremost philosophers, translators, and essayists? There is one answer for both questions: partly because Pablo Oyarzun’s *Doing Justice* will help an anglophone readership understand what it means to take account of, and to be responsible for and to, the “now.”⁵ What is it about *today*, just now, that requires thought, particularly the thought of those whose world is made up in, and of, English—the language of global capital at the moment of its crisis, in other words *now*? I’ll say that crisis is not *a moment*; that *every* moment is critical; that the relation that thought bears to crisis is a matter of justice, of doing justice to, in, and through crisis, of justly *translating* crisis: I can move through these assertions, from one to the next, stepwise, in the wake of Benjamin’s work. I arrive at the last one: I find Pablo Oyarzun’s work waiting.

I want to be careful, though. What Oyarzun’s essays offer the anglophone reader now is inseparably related to his writing about Benjamin *in Spanish*. That, though, was not these essays’ goal when they appeared in Spanish and helped to form Benjamin’s reception by Latin America’s Spanish-speaking readership. Rather the opposite: Pablo Oyarzun’s essays were intended to provide an alternative—in Spanish, with Latin America as a backdrop, a goal, and a resource—to the industry of Benjamin

readings in English, French, and German, flowing South in translation or in the original from New York, or Paris, or Berlin. For this reason, a translation of Pablo Oyarzun's work should have the constant company of disarming questions: what does it mean to write in Spanish about works from a philosophical tradition from which Spanish has long been excluded? How does the value that a moment ("now"), or a state, or a complex cultural prejudice assigns to a language like Spanish affects how its philosophers can make claims? How does such a language describe? How true can it hope to be? (Even phrasing the question this way proves violent. We think it means: Can the generality of a thesis' truth claims be separated from the language in which these claims are articulated? But in Castilian Spanish we would say: *¿Cuán verdadera puede esperar ser?* and we bring time, waiting, *esperar*, into the expression. In Spanish, I wait where I hope; less so, much less so, in English. The burning question of philosophical untranslatability... To the anglophone world, Spanish remains largely a servile language—the language of abjection, of *la bestia*; the language spoken on the other side of the wall; the language of the European PIGS—Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. In the age of Donald Trump, to reach for a philosophical timbre in Spanish will appear to some degree improper, or an act of defiance. These senses of Spanish are to be noted and understood as conditions of philosophical expression *now*, when the relation between Latin America and the anglophone world enters a different world, a world globalized utterly differently from heretofore, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marx and Freud, Foucault said, founded discursivities; we might say that they were world making. As is Benjamin. A work, as well as the novel interpretation of a work or of a significant body of work, can make a world other, break it, unfound the discourse that composes it, and reconfigure it around the displacement of what was

already assimilated and around all the emplacements that emerge *now*, in light of the new. The world of Walter Benjamin's work has its rhythms, its crystallizations on different focal terms: violence; mysticism; law; allegory; history. These terms set values in different academic and non-academic markets and travel with greater or less ease from one language to another. *Gewalt* offers a sort of value, and offers it differently in the French academic context from how it offers it in the American or the Italian one; "violence" offers another, and differently in Santiago from in New York. And so on, at different times, with consequences that change and reconfigure past worlds, as well as what we imagine to be the case and what will come.

I say that the interpretation of a significant body of work makes a world other. This is hardly news. Any number of examples will come to mind; to choose a single one, or even a number, is to configure a world in which that sort of example has a normative weight. I'll be offering the name "Benjamin," for instance, as a sort of metonym: his name stands for other names, which stand for works that also make worlds new and make new worlds, when read out of place and against their time. This is familiar ground, well covered by subaltern studies and articulated recently in the languages of the so-called decolonial option. Yes, when Benjamin's body of work passes through the South, through peripheral readings, through the capitals of the twenty-first century rather than of the nineteenth, or even twentieth, when it takes shape in the languages of the South, then the focal terms that arrange its values change sense, and the worlds they configure change too. Both suffer translations. What terms and worlds suffer will make up other worlds than those in which Walter Benjamin was first read and valued and received. The North (my caricature, of course) will be reading Benjamin through, and in, contexts for which his work was not explicitly intended. The South will no longer read Walter

Benjamin as the bearer of European legitimacy. Like that famous word-laden suitcase that he carried to Port Bou, Benjamin will now have been lost—lost to the fantasy that his work bears *to* Europe, *for* Europe, the last illumination of European enlightenment (and that it bears to those it is *not* for, *to* the colony, just its shadows or reflections); and lost to the fantasy that his work, always already estranged from its original habitat, finds itself at home—or less unhoused—somewhere at the periphery, in Buenos Aires or in Santiago or in Johannesburg. Now, the boulevards and parks of Paris are distressed by, mapped on, the *grandes alamedas*, the great shaded avenues of (say) Santiago de Chile—and vice-versa.

But Walter Benjamin's work, read in and from the South, seems to me particularly addressed to this moment, just for what escapes its representativeness, its metonymy; just for what makes that, vice versa, spurious. (Here is Benjamin's difference: I have to say what "this moment" is, or what I take it to be; to whom his work sets on "offer" what escapes representativeness; I am responsible for addressing its address. This, I think, is what *Jetztzeit* entails.)⁶ Take this example. It's phrase that recalls a moment like the one we are living *now*, when one world was unmade, and another announced—abortively, incompletely. Pablo Oyarzun opens *Doing Justice* by remarking: "An experience always overflows its context." He is thinking about experiences we—he, history—seek to foreclose: "never again," we say, for instance (it is not just any example), regarding *los desaparecidos*, "the disappeared." For Oyarzun, the circumstance that gives rise to the injunction "never again" is not single. He recalls Salvador Allende's words on September 11, 1973—*Sigan ustedes sabiendo que, mucho más temprano que tarde, de nuevo [se] abrirán las grandes alamedas por donde pase el hombre libre para construir una sociedad mejor*—the conventional translation of which would be "Do not stop knowing that, much sooner than later, the great shaded

avenues will open again, down which free men will walk to build a better society.” Oyarzun tells us that it took him forty years to understand that Allende’s sentence did not lack the reflexive pronoun *se*, as in my conventional translation—[*se*] *abrirán*, “the great shaded avenues will reopen, will open themselves, will be opened”—but rather that the sentence embedded a promise and an injunction: the people of Chile, to whom the sentence is addressed, are enjoined into political subjectivity: *Sigan ustedes sabiendo*, “Continue to know,” or perhaps “Continue, progress, move forward, and do so knowing that sooner or later *you will open for yourselves* the great avenues,” or even “Press on in and by means of the knowledge that one day *you will open for yourselves* the great avenues...”

Forty years, Oyarzun tells us, separate the experience from his understanding. That period installed in Chile what he calls *el régimen más despiadado del “se”* and *la equivocidad aciaga del “se”*—which English can only render, rather poorly, as something like “the pitiless regime of the impersonal reflexive passive *se*” or “the fateful equivocality of the passive voice.” The impersonal reflexive passive erased Allende’s addressee. Where his call to the people of Chile beat implicitly, the regime installed the hegemonizing braid of political coercion, consensus, and (self-)knowledge that the homonymy of *se* carries. Poetically, with the vertiginous speed of the pun rather than the forty-year delay, the forty years of waiting with which it reaches Pablo Oyarzun (and us): an overdetermined number, Moses’s number, the number of waiting in the desert, the number of exile—poetically, the impersonal reflexive passive particle *se* tells us *se sabe*, “it’s generally known” (the coercion of consensus); it says the verbal form *sé*, “I know” (the unassailable assertion: I know what I know); and it speaks the imperative *sé*, “be!” (In Castilian Spanish we say ¡*Sé bueno!*, “Be good!”; and we translate רֹא *or sit lux* [*Vetus Latina*] and *fiat lux* [*Vulgata*] as “¡*Que se haga la luz!*” or *!Sea la luz!*”) Like a

call he now hears ringing under the “fateful equivocacy” of *se*, against the hegemonizing coupling of political coercion and (self-)knowledge that anchored Pinochet’s regime, Oyarzun offers what he and others *should* have heard in 1973, what all Chile should have heard: Allende’s proper audience, the political subject that Allende sought to call into being by promising the collective addressee its future. Here Benjamin is Oyarzun’s—and Latin America’s—guide.

Benjamin se esforzó por echar luz sobre lo que aquí llamo la equivocidad aciaga del “se,” discernir en él todo vestigio de lo demoníaco—esa otra impersonalidad revestida de figuras vengativas, caprichosas y violentas, presta a retornar en todo momento con la parafernalia o la insidia del “siempre, una y otra vez”—discernir, digo, lo demoníaco de una violencia radicalmente distinta, que se borra a sí misma en el instante mismo en que se desencadena, porque emancipa. Las huellas de este afán siguen presentes en toda su obra.

Benjamin attempted to illuminate what I call here the fateful equivocacy of the passive voice and to highlight in it all vestiges of the demonic—this other impersonality wrapped up as it is in vindictive, whimsical, and violent figures and poised to return at any moment, with the paraphernalia or malicious claim of an “always, again and again.” In other words, Benjamin wanted to differentiate demonic violence from a radically different kind of violence, one that is erased in the very instant in which it is unleashed, because it has emancipatory force. This ambition has left traces on his entire oeuvre. (Prologue, pp. xix–xx)

What do we make of the forty-year lag between the event and the experience on the one hand, and their interpretation on the other? Of the antithetical value of *se*—fatefully, dreadfully equivocal, but also demonic or daemonic, Oyarzun says (and we are to take *daimon* in its double sense: the insidious, the evil, the diabolical, but also the figure of philosophical integrity that calls the

wandering thinker—call him Socrates—back to the just path, the path of truth). *Se*, coercively hegemonizing, but diagnostic and critical at the same time? A *se* that hides, disappears, buries the collective political subjectivity that Allende promised and sought to bring into being; but also one that, forty or fifty years later, can violently bring it forth: *sea el pueblo de Chile, sé?*

Minimally, three things.

First, the event, never coincident with experience or interpretation, can eventually come into being, or even be commanded into being (*¡sé!*).⁷ Forty years pass; knowledge (*saber*, to know: *yo sé*, “I know”) catches up with the event of Allende’s radio transmission; the event of his promise to the people of Chile discloses itself (in Castilian, *se revela*, “it reveals itself”) to Pablo Oyarzun. Now Oyarzun can say, “I know to whom Allende’s phrase was addressed”; *sé quiénes [se] abrirán las grandes alamedas*. Let’s call “redemption” the horizon of possibility that opens when, and since, an event does not disclose itself as one and does not come into being at one time. (I am reading Oyarzun’s reading of Benjamin through and with Adorno, whose suspicion of singularity I share.) The standpoint of redemption: that an event a world ago can be called into being: *sé; sea el pueblo de Chile*. And this retrospective calling into being operates according to what Oyarzun calls “a radically different kind of violence, one that is erased [*se borra*] in the very instant in which it is unleashed [= unleashes itself, *se desencadena*], because it has emancipatory force.” Oyarzun rightly gives this “radically different kind of violence” its proper name: justice, *Gerechtigkeit*. The possibility of redeeming the event, the always open possibility of encountering or making a different addressee and of making appear a different world for the event of an enunciation, is the condition of (its) justice.⁸

Second, we encounter this non-coincidence of the event with experience and with interpretation where a natural language’s substances (names, nouns, pronouns) touch on

its times, on its tenses, on its verbs, on its eventuality. Where there is predication, there the event may be redeemed, and there justice may be done. And this means not only attending, as Oyarzun does with exemplary care, with the care of a translator and a philosopher, to Benjamin's language; even more importantly, it also means committing ourselves to reading one natural language's predications through and against another's. German through and in Spanish; this English sentence I am writing, in and against Spanish. Each has its times; for each, predication installs a relation the subject bears to truth and to the event that another language can only paraphrase. To do justice to English is to install in it another language's times and truths. Another language's world is the condition of a language's *se*.

The English language and Benjamin's German parse their reflexive, passive, and impersonal constructions—their autopredications, the instants at which something like a reflexive position emerges in a language with respect to itself; its *se*-moments; the places and times where I act upon myself, or where an impersonal act carries the weight of a historical event—differently from Spanish, indeed differently from Romance languages in general. This is how Allende's words have been translated into German. Note the reflexive, impersonal formation *sich auftun werden* for *se abrirán*.

*Werkstätige meines Vaterlandes! Ich glaube an Chile und sein Schicksal. Es werden andere Chilenen kommen. In diesen düsteren und bitteren Augenblicken, in denen sich der Verrat durchsetzt, sollt ihr wissen, dass sich früher oder später, sehr bald, erneut die großen Straßen auftun werden, auf denen der würdige Mensch dem Aufbau einer besseren Gesellschaft entgegengeht.*⁹

In English:

Workers of my country, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will overcome this dark and bitter moment when

treason seeks to prevail. Keep in mind that, much sooner than later, great avenues will again open, through which will pass the free man, to construct a better society.¹⁰

Oyarzun's Benjamin is least familiar to the English-speaking world just here. In both English and German, the daemonic *se*-moment and the interval between event, experience, and articulation (the retrospective articulation of Allende's interpellation of the Chilean people into political subjectivity) are foreclosed—so much so, indeed, that the German translation reaches for its object and calls out *andere Chilenen* by name just where Allende's Spanish leaves the announced political subject as yet nameless. No language, not English, not German, not Spanish, can *do justice* to the event; but could Oyarzun have come to the story of waiting, hope, and political interpellation that Spanish offers him without reading Allende's words *through* the in-justice that English and German do, each in its way, to the event, the experience, and their articulation?

In this sense, then: third, doing justice is indeed, along with *Doing Justice*, a matter of translation. This is why I'll be running the risk of translating Oyarzun's concern today—his concern with “doing justice,” with that “doing” that is *claiming* or *demanding* justice, with narration and justice in Benjamin's work—into a matter that also matters to me—the matter of translation—but that would appear to be extrinsic to the immediate concerns of *Doing Justice*. I risk seeming to play irresponsibly, unjustly, with Pablo Oyarzun's words by translating the problem of articulating narrating and justice into the problem of articulating translating and justice. Where Oyarzun subtly and convincingly tells the story of the narrator's vocation for justice, you'll fear to hear me say something like “Justice is a matter of translation,” or “Translation is a matter of justice, of doing justice.”

The questions how justice is to be done and how justice is to be demanded are Pablo Oyarzun's topic.