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Translation as a Form: A Centennial Commentary on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"

Introduction

This book is a commentary on Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," best known in English as "The Task of the Translator," as a guide to reading it. The essay is, after all, both famously brilliant and infamously difficult, not only because to many readers Benjamin's claims seem wildly counterintuitive but because the theoretical underpinnings of those claims are systematically backgrounded, and thus "hidden" from the reader's view. Samuel Weber (2008: 56) calls those claims a "string of powerful if unargued propositions," noting wryly that this makes the essay rather overwhelming. As a result, it is quite easy to attack and dismiss what Bernd Witte (1976) calls the "elitist, esoteric, if not idiosyncratic nature" and "authoritarian and hypertrophic subjectivism" of the "Task" and other early works (both attacks as paraphrased in Gasché 1986: 69-70). It is my task in this book to explore those theoretical underpinnings by mapping out the series of claims and foregrounding their cultural and religious contexts, to help the reader frame and understand what's there.

There have been numerous earlier commentaries on the essay, at least two at book length; in fact one of the two, by Antoine Berman (2008), was published in English translation by Routledge (Wright 2018). Most, however, have taken the form of longish articles that tend to quote selectively and provide a brief interpretation of each quoted passage. Some of these are quite brilliant, in fact—notably those by Jacques Derrida and Werner Hamacher, but several others as well—and I engage them along the way, respectfully presenting their views and offering slight corrections where necessary; those that are less transformative in their readings of Benjamin appear mostly in the "Other commentators" lists at the end of the various numbered passages. The two book-length commentaries, by Berman (2008) in French (and Chantal Wright's 2018 English translation) and by Hans J. Vermeer (1996) in German, are often quite brilliant as well, and wherever relevant I also engage both. Compared with mine, however, both of those are rather idiosyncratically polemical, Berman seeking explicitly to assimilate Benjamin to his own Romantic vision (downplaying Benjamin's pre-Kantian mysticism), Vermeer comparing Benjamin to his own *skopos* theory and ultimately rejecting the "Task" as utopian thinking. I seek to be more inclusive, engaging Benjamin's own and his idiosyncratic commentators' views on their own terms. (Also, neither Berman nor Vermeer deals with the entire essay. Even though both deal with the "Task" at book length, each only quotes from and comments on about half of the essay.)

None of which is to say, of course, that my reading of the essay is "right" or "accurate." Indeed the difference between Berman's and Vermeer's on the one hand and mine on the other is not that theirs are idiosyncratic and mine is neutral and accurate: mine is equally idiosyncratic. So for that matter is every other interesting commentary on the essay. The chief difference is

rather that I do not seek to overturn Benjamin's theological mysticism. I am very far from a believer myself, but I find supernatural mythologies intriguing, in a literary sense, and am glad to allow Benjamin his *donnée*.

Passages, titles, and sections

To that end I have divided the essay into 78 more or less thematically coherent passages—segments of one to several sentences—in sequence. These cover the entire essay. Reading straight through from #1 to #78, therefore, will give you an expansive experience of reading the essay.

In addition to numbering the passages, I have given them titles—sometimes omnibus titles like “38. Translation's mystical task (4): elevating the source text by transmitting its semantic content as little as possible. / Translating vs. the writing of an original work (1): the essential kernel as the part of the original that is not translatable (1): stump and stalk.” Each parenthetical number in that title places that part of it in a sequence that constitutes a kind of thematic section. The text seems to me to fall “naturally” into eighteen such sections. Most sections consist of four to eight passages. One—“The Logos of translation (#59)”—consists of only a single passage, and that passage is only sixteen words long, five of those words a Bible quotation in Greek and another five the German translation of that quotation. Sometimes the passages making up a section are consecutively sequential, as in the first—“Foreclosing on audiences (#1-6)”—and sometimes the sequence is more sporadic, more intermittent, as in “Translational fidelity (#52-58, #60-64, #70, #73).” Either way, I hope the titles will help you organize the trajectory of Benjamin's argument as you read along.

Here is the complete list of sections (and note that some sections overlap, so that a single passage may appear in two or more):

- Foreclosing on audiences (#1-6)
- Translatability (#7-12, #73-74)
- Historicity (#13-18)
- Fame (#16-17)
- The relationship between languages (#19-24)
- After-ripening (#25-29)
- The supplementation of intentions (#30-34)
- Translation's mystical task (#35-38, #47-50)
- The essential kernel as the part of the original that is not translatable (#38-40)
- Translating vs. the writing of an original work (#39-43, #45-46)
- Hölderlin (#43, #55, #75-76)
- The translator's task (#43-45, #51, #69)
- Translational fidelity (#52-58, #60-64, #70, #73)
- The Logos of translation (#59)

Pure language (#65-69)

Symbolizing and symbolized (#65-67)

The translational tangent touching the circle glancingly (#70, #73-75)

Pannwitz (#71-72)

Holy Writ (#77-78)

Let me underscore that those are not Benjamin's titles, but mine—and indeed that he gives no indication whatever that any part of his essay is to be thought of as sectioned off. The only divisions he provides for his text are paragraph breaks: the essay consists of twelve paragraphs (and Antoine Berman 2008/2018 writes his commentary based on paragraph structure).

Interlinears and paraphrases

In keeping with Benjamin's overwhelming preference for literal translation (which in #62 he calls an "arcade") as well as with his assertion in the last line of the essay (#78) that *Die Interlinearversion des heiligen Textes ist das Urbild oder Ideal aller Übersetzung* "the interlinear version of the Holy Scripture is the prototype or ideal of all translation," I first present each of the 78 passages in an interlinear box, in which my literal rendition is strung out together with Benjamin's German, each German word printed directly above its English translation.¹ This will not only give the English-speaking reader with no German a sense of what Benjamin is doing in the German, but will give the stereoscopic reader the kind of word-by-word juxtaposition that Benjamin expressly championed. (When he asks in #2 whether a translation has any force for the reader who can't understand the source text, for example, he is tacitly urging the kind of reading that Antoine Berman called "reading-in-translation.")

¹ Scholars comparing a self-proclaimed "literal" or "word-for-word" translation against its source text often complain that it's not strictly speaking literal—and the same complaint can be lodged against mine, in the interlinear boxes. Sometimes it takes two or more words in English to render a single German word—*seines*, for example, in English can be "of his" or "of its"—and quite often a German separable-prefix verb is stretched so far across a whole sentence, with the preposition at the end, that a really strict literalism would be so difficult to parse as to be less useful.

For example, in #1 *So setzt auch die Kunst selbst dessen leibliches und geistiges Wesen voraus* splits the separable-prefix verb *voraussetzen* (morphologically "for-out-set") between the main verb *setzen* in the beginning and the separable prefix *voraus* at the end. My "literal" translation there, "So presupposes also the art itself this's bodily and spiritual essence," is therefore not radically or "near-perfectly" literal. A *more* literal rendition would be "So supposes also the art itself this's bodily and spiritual essence pre." One step further: "So sets also the art itself this's bodily and spiritual essence for-out." The point to remember is that "pure" or "perfect" literalism is indeed impossible, except in very rare short passages, often in the kind specially constructed to illustrate such perfection; and therefore that a "literal" translation is *always* an approximation, a workaround, designed above all to give the *impression* of literalism.

Literalism, to put that differently, is always a phenomenology rather than an ontology.

The interlinear as a genre, of course, was developed for learners of the foreign language, to make it easier for the foreign-language learner to track the foreign syntax. It has, therefore, the implicit subtext that you *want* to understand the German syntax, and are constantly tracking along from each English word up to its German source text, looking to understand Benjamin better by feeling the syntagmatic flow of his prose. This is what Benjamin himself would have wanted you to do! But of course that doesn't mean you have to do what he wanted. The interlinears have little or no functionality for readers who only want to know what the source text *says*, and have no interest in the syntax and semantics of the foreign language—and there should be no shame in that preference.

Given that this book is designed to serve a wide variety of scholarly readers, professors and postgraduates, therefore, from those with no German and no interest in German to those who can read Benjamin's German original fluently—indeed given that many readers, perhaps even most, will find themselves somewhere in between those extremes—I provide the interlinears as a Benjamin-approved guide to the German words and syntax, but also follow each interlinear up with a paraphrase that tells the reader what the source text says.

This latter of course is what Benjamin strenuously disapproved. But my assumption is that the modern scholarly reader of Benjamin's "Task" is less interested in theological correctness than in exploring the *tensions* between the word and the sentence, as Benjamin puts it—between strict interlinear literalism and a looser paraphrase of the sense. In any case, as we'll see, Benjamin himself moved from a dogmatic binary between *Treue* "fidelity" (good) and *Freiheit* "freedom" (bad) to a recognition of the fidelity that informs true freedom and the freedom that invigorates true fidelity.

Commentaries

Following the interlinear and the paraphrase in each passage comes the commentary proper. This is of course the book's main burden, and each commentary engages a representative sampling of the relevant critical literature on that passage; but as I say, like every other reading of Benjamin's essay mine too is somewhat personal and idiosyncratic.

Chief among my new contributions to scholarship on Benjamin's essay, perhaps, is the one that informs my main title, *Translation as a Form*: I have never seen another scholar arguing that by *Die Übersetzung ist eine Form* (#7) Benjamin means that translation is a *Platonic* Form. Implicit in that reading, but made explicit in the commentaries to #9, #12-18, and other passages, is the recognition that for Benjamin the Platonic Forms of the original and the translation, and of the source and target languages, are vitalistic agents driving the "sacred history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) toward the messianic end of pure language. And, by extension, I have also never seen another scholar arguing that Benjamin's quotation of the first five words of John's Gospel (#59) tacitly invokes the Jewish Neoplatonist Logos mysticism of Philo Judaeus—the notion that the Logos is a quasidivine demiurgic being who controls the vitalistic force of Plato's Forms.

Other takes on the “Task” that you’ll find here and nowhere else include:

- #5, #13, #33: Reading Benjamin’s passing phenomenological remarks as a transitional bodying-forth of his transcendental metaphysics. Werner Hamacher’s (2001/2012: 539) suggestion that those remarks constitute a phenomenology of the non-phenomenon, or an “aphenomenology,” is similar, but as I suggest in note 7 on p. 00, he and I imagine the process running in opposite directions. My argument is more like Benjamin’s remarks constituting a *trans*phenomenology of the phenomenon—turning an actual embodied, embedded, extended, enactive, and affective experience into a revelation or at least intimation of a transcendental and therefore disembodied truth. In the service of that reading I use J. L. Austin’s performativity and, just below, Diltheyan hermeneutics and Bakhtinian dialogism.
- #13: Tracking Benjamin’s account of the intertwining of the translation and the original as a *Zusammenhang des Lebens* (intertwining of life) back to Wilhelm Dilthey’s coinage of that term in his expansion of Schleiermacherian hermeneutics, and exploring the semantic shift from Dilthey’s to Benjamin’s usage of the term.
- #13: Translating *das Überleben* as “superlife” and understanding the original’s fame as a suprahistorical superpower—a vitalism powered by the Platonic Forms wielded by the Philonian Logos.
- #13, #17: Translating *hervorgehen* in #13 and *entstehen* and *entfalten* in #17 as “to emanate,” in the mystical sense promoted by Philo Judaeus and other Neoplatonists in antiquity and by the Jewish and Christian Kabbalists in the Middle Ages.
- #50, #78: Building a bridge from Mallarmé’s insistence on the importance of restoring body to and through translation in #50 to the embodiment of the “total text” of the Hebrew Bible in #78.
- #54: Unpacking Benjamin’s term *Gefühlston* “feeling tone” through Bakhtinian dialogism.
- #60: Reading Latin *intentio* not only as “intention,” as it has usually been read, but also as a tension or a straining, an increase or an augmentation, and as the exertion or the effort that goes into increasing or augmenting.
- #65, #70: Building a “symbolized” link between Benjamin’s use of the aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and the ideal translation as a tangent touching a circle only fleetingly and at a single point in #70 through the Kabbalistic text Zohar 1.15a, where we read that “Zohar-radiance, Concealed of the Concealed, struck its aura. The aura touched and did not touch this point.”

Just below the commentary for every passage there is a section called “Other commentators”; there I list (without comment) the places in other scholars’ work where they comment on that particular passage. If I have engaged a particular scholar’s reading of the passage in the commentary just above, I do not mention that scholar again under “other

commentators,” even if the remarks I have just engaged above do not exhaust that scholar’s take on the passage. If the remarks that I do engage in the commentary interest you, I encourage you to find the cited place in that source and read around it in search of other illuminating analyses.

You may notice that two or three (or a dozen) of your favorite studies of Benjamin’s “Task” are missing from this book. I apologize in advance for those missing titles and perspectives; I have included everything I have been able to lay my hands on, in a language I can read. And as many scholars have noted, there are a great many such studies, probably more than for any other piece of writing on translation—I have included around 80 of them—and they almost certainly bring a far greater variety of perspectives to bear on this one shortish essay on translation than has been focused on any other theoretical study of translation. It would have been great to include every single one in every single language! But, alas ...

Previous English translations

Benjamin’s “Task” has been translated into English in full four times before, by Harry Zohn (1968/2007), James Hynd and E.M. Valk (1968/2006), Steven Rendall (1997a), and J.A. Underwood (2009). In her 2018 translation of Antoine Berman’s 2008 commentary on Benjamin’s “Task,” Chantal Wright also did a partial translation of the essay, twice, the first directly from the German, the second from Berman’s and Gandillac’s French translations.² (Note that in my References that book appears three times: in French once as *L’Âge de la traduction* [Berman 2008] and in English twice as *The Age of Translation*, as something written by Berman [2008/2018] and as something translated by Wright [2018]. Whenever I discuss what Berman wanted to say, I cite Berman 2008 or 2008/2018; whenever I discuss how Wright translated, or how she commented on her own translation, I cite Wright 2018.)

Wherever one or more of those five translations differ(s) significantly from my understanding, or if they unpack a word or phrase that in my paraphrase needs unpacking, I have given their versions—sometimes in the paraphrase, more often in the commentary—and occasionally discussed the differences at some length.

² Berman selected for commentary, and Wright translated twice—once from Benjamin’s German, again from Berman’s French—almost exactly half of Benjamin’s essay: 2271 of the total 4526 words, in 75 segments of varying lengths, from 5 to 135 words.