



## Notes on Zohn's Translation of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"

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L'essai sur la traduction de Walter Benjamin : traductions critiques  
Walter Benjamin's Essay on Translation: Critical Translations

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Résumé de l'article

La traduction de "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" de Benjamin par Zohn — En 1968, Harry Zohn a publié une traduction pionnière de « Die Aufgabe des Übersetzters » qui resta longtemps la seule forme sous laquelle l'essai célèbre était connu de la plupart des lecteurs anglophones. Ces notes examinent certains problèmes posés par la traduction faite par Zohn.

# **Notes on Zohn's translation of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"**

**Steven Rendall**

[These notes were not originally intended for publication but for presentation as a talk to be given at the Universität des Saarlandes (Saarbrücken, Germany) in 1995. They record my reservations with regard to Harry Zohn's ground-breaking translation of Benjamin's essay, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers".]

The most obvious oversights in Harry Zohn's translation of "Die Aufgabe" are four rather glaring omissions. One of these has been noted by a number of critics :

...gewisse Relationsbegriffe ihren guten, ja vielleicht besten Sinn behalten, wenn sie nicht von vorne herein ausschliesslich auf den Menschen bezogen werden." (10)

...certain correlative concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance, if they are referred exclusively to man." (70)<sup>a</sup>

Here the omission of the negative completely inverts Benjamin's meaning, and makes it impossible to follow the logic of his argument at this point. De Man, in his commentary on Zohn's translation, regarded this omission as particularly crucial because it conceals what De Man saw as Benjamin's assertion of the inhuman, mechanical operation of language, of the essential *inhumanity* of language. (However, as if to remind us of the treacherous ground trod by every critic of translation, De Man himself makes a rather egregious error in criticizing Zohn's translation of "Wehen" as "birth pangs," arguing that it means "pains" of any sort, and that the implicit suggestion of an organic origin is improperly imported by Zohn. De Man clearly confuses "Wehe" with "Wehen.")<sup>1</sup>

A second omission I have not seen mentioned by critics occurs later in the essay :

Wenn aber diese derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen... (14)

If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time... (74)

Here Zohn neglects to translate the word "messianisch," and this again cannot be considered insignificant, particularly with regard

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<sup>a</sup> I cite the following editions of Benjamin's work : Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Werkausgabe (Frankfurt-am-Main : Suhrkamp, 1980); "The Task of the Translator," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (New York : Schocken, 1969).

to the intense debates about the role of messianism in Benjamin's thought in general and in this essay in particular.

The third omission, which also seems to have passed unnoticed, occurs in the crucial passage where Benjamin is discussing the "wesenhafte Kern" that is the true translator's chief concern, and whose ripening points toward the (messianic) "realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" without ever quite reaching or realizing it :

Den erreicht es nicht mit Stumpf und Stiel, aber in ihm steht dasjenige, was an einer Übersetzung mehr ist als Mitteilung. Genauer lässt sich dieser wesenhafte Kern als dasjenige bestimmen, was an ihr selbst nicht wiederum übersetzbar ist. (15)

The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation. (75)

In this case, Zohn fails to translate the words "an ihr" and "wiederum" in the second sentence, with the result that it seems Benjamin is suggesting that the object of the translator's chief concern lies completely outside his reach. Although in one sense this may be true (as Paul de Man has argued), the point here is surely that whatever aspect of the "wesenhafte Kern" is echoed in a translation (*an ihr* clearly refers back to "die Übersetzung" in the preceding sentence) cannot be translated *again*. This presupposes, of course, that the *wesenhafte Kern* can be translated a first time. The reason it cannot be translated again — that is, the reason a translation of a translation gives no access to this essential nucleus of language — is, as Rodolphe Gasché's reading of the essay suggests, that this *wesenhafte Kern* of language consists of communicability or translatability itself, that which within language exceeds any given use, situation — or "language." A translation of the kind Benjamin is defining makes perceptible the

element of "pure language" simultaneously hidden and designated in the text to be translated — and which is precisely its translatability.<sup>2</sup> One may find Benjamin's explanation of this point in the rest of this paragraph less than wholly clear, but the problem is not solved by merely eliding the words that cause it.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth omission also seems to have gone unnoticed, though it is no less crucial than the first. Benjamin is characterizing the traditional view that privileges translation of meaning over translation of words :

Treue und Freiheit — Freiheit der sinngemässen Wiedergabe und in ihrem Dienst Treue gegen das Wort — sind die althergebrachten Begriffe in jeder Diskussion von Übersetzungen. (17)

The traditional concepts in any discussion of translations are freedom and license — the freedom of faithful reproduction, and in its service, fidelity to the word. (77-78)

By overlooking the word "gegen" in Benjamin's text, Zohn makes it say precisely the opposite, just as he does by overlooking "nicht" in my first example. That this is not merely an oversight is suggested by his corresponding elision of the word "sinngemässen"; it is traditionally argued, as anyone familiar with translation theory stemming from Horace and Dryden would know, that literal or word-for-word translation — *Wörtlichkeit* — is to be avoided precisely because it interferes with the transmission of meaning. And, of course, by leaving the impression that traditional theory endorses *Wörtlichkeit*, Zohn makes it difficult to understand why Benjamin later offers a vigorous defense of this mode of translation.<sup>4</sup>

Other flaws are less obvious, but some of them seem to me equally undeniable. For instance, near the beginning of the essay

Benjamin asks whether translations are made for readers who do not understand the original, and answers :

Das scheint hinreichend den Rangunterschied im Bereiche der Kunst zwischen beiden zu erklären. Überdies scheint es der einzig mögliche Grund, "Dasselbe" wiederholt zu sagen. (9)

This would seem to explain adequately the divergence of their standing in the realm of art. Moreover, it seems to be the only conceivable reason for saying "the same thing" repeatedly. (69)

While it is true that "wiederholt" can often be translated by the English adverb "repeatedly," the latter emphasizes the multiplicity of the repetitions. It seems clear, in the context of Benjamin's argument, that the point is not that the same thing is said "over and over," *zu wiederholten Malen*, but rather that what has once been said is said *again* — even *once* again, *zum wiederholten Male*. This can perhaps be related to the omission of "wiederum" noted earlier, in that it blurs Benjamin's focus on the relation between original and translation(s). — Note also that later in the essay Benjamin explicitly says that once a translation has been made into any language, it amounts to a translation into all other languages, and makes further translations superfluous (because it demonstrates the translatability of the text, which is Benjamin's chief concern).

In addition, Zohn sometimes introduces apparent distinctions where there are none in the German text; for instance, in the following passage, by substituting "continual" for "dasjenige" he suggests a distinction between the *Fortleben* of texts and that of creatures (a distinction Benjamin goes to great lengths in this essay to deny, by insisting that when he speaks of the *life* of texts he is not speaking metaphorically), thus tending to send the careful reader off on a wild goose chase :

Und ist nicht wenigstens das Fortleben der Werke unvergleichlich viel leichter zu erkennen als dasjenige der Geschöpfe? (11)

And indeed, is not the continued life of works of art far easier to recognize than the continual life of animal species? (71)

A few lines farther on Benjamin is discussing fame (*Ruhm*) as the form taken by the *Fortleben* of great works :

Übersetzungen, die mehr als Vermittlungen sind, entstehen, wenn im Fortleben ein Werk das Zeitalter seines Ruhmes erreicht hat. Sie dienen daher nicht sowohl diesem, wie schlechte Übersetzer es für ihre Arbeit zu beanspruchen pflegen, als dass sie ihm ihr Dasein verdanken. (11)

Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame. Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. (72)

Here Zohn takes the antecedent of "diesem" and "ihm" to be "Werk," whereas the logic of Benjamin's argument seems to me clearly to refer these pronouns to "Ruhm" or at least to "das Zeitalter seines Ruhmes." Again, the point is not, as Zohn's translation makes it appear, simply the banal assertion that "translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter" owe their existence to the original work, but rather that they owe their existence to the work's *fame*, to its prestige and to its history.

Benjamin's argument is frequently harder to follow in Zohn's version because syntactical and logical markers are so often omitted. As in the case I just cited, where the "former/latter" (*jene/diese*) marker is ignored in Zohn's rendering, in the following case the antecedent of the pronoun "dieses"—which in the German identifies its antecedent as "das nicht sprachlichen Leben"—is considerably less clear in the English version :

Und zwar ist diese Darstellung eines Bedeuteten durch den Versuch, den Keim seiner Herstellung ein ganz eigentümlicher

Darstellungsmodus, wie er im Bereich des nicht sprachlichen Lebens kaum angetroffen werden mag. Denn dieses kennt in Analogien und Zeichen andere Typen der Hindeutung, als die intensive, d.h. vorgehende, andeutende Verwirklichung. (12)

This representation of hidden significance through an embryonic attempt at making it visible is of so singular a nature that it is rarely met with in the sphere of nonlinguistic life. This, in its analogies and symbols, can draw on other ways of suggesting meaning than intensive — that is, anticipative, intimating — realization. (72)

I also think Zohn mistranslates the first sentence here; *den Versuch* and *den Keim* are in apposition, alternative formulations; the sense is : "And indeed this representation of what is meant by attempting to produce it in embryo is a very peculiar mode of representation..."; Zohn makes it appear that the *Versuch* itself is *keimhaft*. The passage is muddied still more by his translation of "herstellen" in the preceding sentence as "establish," whereas in this one he translates "Herstellung" as "making visible," thus effectively masking the logical connection between the two.

Another case :

Dagegen kann, ja muß dem Sinn gegenüber ihre Sprache sich gehen lassen, um nicht dessen intentio als Wiedergabe, sondern als Harmonie, als Ergänzung zur Sprache, in der diese sich mitteilt, ihre eigene Art der intentio ertönen zu lassen. (18)

On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can — in fact, must — let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*. (79)

I would argue that "in der diese sich mitteilt" should read : "but rather as harmony, as a complement to its language *in which*



*language communicates itself.*" The antecedent of the feminine pronoun "diese" has to be *die Sprache* (not *Sinn* or *intentio*, as Zohn's translation suggests); this seems paradoxical until one realizes that it is a precise echo of Benjamin's essay "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," where Benjamin insists that language communicates itself — i.e., its nature or essence — *in* and not *through* language. (Cf. Gasché.)

And in the same passage :

Allein wenn der Sinn eines Sprachgebildes identisch gesetzt werden darf mit dem seiner Mitteilung, so bleibt ihm ganz nah und doch unendlich fern, unter ihm verborgen oder deutlicher, durch ihn gebrochen oder machtvoller über alle Mitteilung hinaus ein Letztes, Entscheidendes. (19)

Only if the sense of a linguistic creation may be equated with the information it conveys does some ultimate, decisive element remain beyond all communication — quite close yet infinitely remote, concealed or distinguishable, fragmented or powerful. (79)

This passage seems to me to make better sense if *Mitteilung* is construed not as "information conveyed" but as "(the act of) communication." The point here is again, I believe, that what language communicates is — to borrow Gasché's formulation — communicability; its "meaning" as language is communication itself.

A last example of this sort of problem : in the very knotty passage where Benjamin is discussing the emergence of pure language out of the mutual "Ergänzung" of different languages in translation, Zohn complicates matters further by his translation of the following passage :

Während dergestalt die Art des Meinens in diesen beiden Wörter einander widerstrebt, ergänzt sie sich in den beiden Sprachen,

denen sie entstammen. Und zwar ergänzt sich in ihnen die Art des Meinens zum Gemeinten. (14)

While the modes of intention in these two words are in conflict, intention and object of intention complement each of the two languages from which they are derived; there the object is complementary to the intention. (74)

Here Zohn thoroughly confuses the relation between these two sentences by melding them. The singular verb in Benjamin's first sentence ("ergänzt sie sich") makes it clear that it is the mode of intention (not "intention and object") in the two words that is "complemented" in the two languages from which they derive. The second sentence makes a related but different point — though one wouldn't know this by reading Zohn.

However, the problems are not limited to Zohn's erasing or blurring of the logic of Benjamin's argument, which one might think particularly important chiefly insofar as we see "Die Aufgabe" as a philosophical work. Zohn's translation overlooks metaphorical patterns whose significance seems central to Benjamin's text considered as a poetic artifact. I will close this part of my discussion, therefore, by offering a single (if rather lengthy) example illustrating this shortcoming alongside the others I've noted.

My example is drawn from the last paragraph of Benjamin's essay :

Wie weit eine Übersetzung dem Wesen dieser Form zu entsprechen vermag, wird objektiv durch die Übersetzbarkeit des Originals bestimmt. Je weniger Wert und Würde seine Sprache hat, je mehr es Mitteilung ist, desto weniger ist für die Übersetzung dabei zu gewinnen, bis das völlige Übergewicht jenes Sinnes, weit entfernt, der Hebel einer formvollen Übersetzung zu sein, diese vereitelt. Je höher ein Werk geartet ist, desto mehr belibt es selbst in flüchtigster Berührung seines

Sinnes noch übersetzbar. Dies gilt selbstverständlich nur von Originalen. Übersetzungen dagegen erweisen sich unübersetzbar nicht wegen der Schwere, sondern wegen der allzu großen Flüchtigkeit, mit welcher der Sinn an ihnen haftet. Hierfür wie in jeder andern wesentlichen Hinsicht stellen sich Hölderlins Übertragungen, besonders die der beiden Sophokleischen Tragödien, bestätigend dar [...] In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren. Aber es gibt ein Halten. Es gewährt es jedoch kein Text außer dem heiligen, in dem der Sinn aufgehört hat, die Wasserscheide für die strömende Sprache und die strömende Offenbarung zu sein. Wo der Text unmittelbar, ohne vermittelnden Sinn, in seiner Wörtlichkeit der wahren Sprache, der Wahrheit oder der Lehre angehört, ist er übersetzbar schlechthin. Nicht mehr freilich um seines —, sondern allein um der Sprachen willen. (20-21)

The extent to which a translation manages to be in keeping with the nature of this mode is determined objectively by the translatability of the original. The lower the quality and distinction of its language, the larger the extent to which it is information, the less fertile a field it is for translation, until the utter preponderance of content, far from being the lever for a translation of distinctive mode, renders it impossible. The higher the level of the work, the more does it remain translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly. This, of course, applies to originals only. Translations, on the other hand, prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them. Confirmation of this as well as of every other important aspect is supplied by Hölderlin's translations, particularly those of the two tragedies by Sophocles. [...] in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language. There is, however, a stop. It is vouchsafed to Holy Writ alone, in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be "the true language" in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally

translatable. In such case [*sic*] translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages. (81-82)

I would make two observations concerning this passage :

First, Zohn's translation erases altogether Benjamin's metaphorical opposition between two modes of relation between language and meaning : light and *flüchtig* on the one hand, *schwer* and immovable on the other. By translating *Schwere* as "difficulty," and *Flüchtigkeit* as "looseness," Zohn not only destroys the opposition between *Schwere* and *Flüchtigkeit*, but also obscures the logical and metaphorical connection with the earlier reference to an "Übergewicht" of information (which Zohn translates as "preponderance," further obscuring the metaphorical coherence of this passage), as well as with the later reference to a "Halten" and to "die Wasserscheide für die strömende Sprache und die strömende Offenbarung." (The words "Hebel" and "höher" could also be seen as belonging to this metaphorical complex.)

Second, I would draw attention to Zohn's translation of the last sentence of this passage. Benjamin says that in the case of Holy Writ, in which alone meaning has ceased to be a *Wasserscheide* separating the flow of language from the flow of revelation, the text is unconditionally translatable, "Nicht mehr freilich um seines —, sonder allein um der Sprachen willen." Zohn translates this : "In such case translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages." He takes the *um-willen* construction as referring to an obligation to translate the text, and adds an explanatory phrase not in Benjamin's text, "the plurality of," thereby suggesting that Benjamin's point is that only the post-Babelian plurality of languages makes it necessary to translate Holy Writ.

Now this makes perfect sense, in a way. But I think this sentence should be translated quite differently : "Truly, not for its own sake, but for that of the languages." That is, I believe here

Benjamin is referring back to his claim, in the preceding paragraph, that Luther's, Voss's, Hölderlin's, and George's translations extended the range of the German language, and to the passage from Rudolph Pannwitz quoted at length in the same paragraph, which emphasizes that translation can change the languages into which the text is translated. This notion goes back, of course, to Schleiermacher's 1813 lecture "Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens," which seems to me to play a more important role in Benjamin's essay than is commonly recognized (also in regard to Schleiermacher's positioning of the translator *between* two languages), though Benjamin has a different goal in view : the ultimate, messianic coalescence of different languages in *die wahre Sprache*. As he puts it earlier in the essay, "So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmässig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander."

Finally, I would point out that the metaphorical complex I mentioned earlier is inaugurated in the preceding paragraph, first by the suggestion that a translation touches the original at an infinitesimally small point of meaning or sense, the way a tangent touches fleetingly—*flüchtig*—the circumference of a circle, and secondly, by the final sentence of the quotation from Pannwitz, which immediately precedes the passage I've been discussing; the transformation of languages occurs, Pannwitz says, "nicht wenn man sie allzu **leicht** sondern gerade wenn man sie **schwer** genug nimmt."

Now, no doubt some would say that the flaws in Zohn's translation to which I've drawn your attention are after all *minor* flaws, and hardly worth this much attention. In another case, I might be inclined to agree, though it's hard to say just where the line between pedantic exactitude and reasonable accuracy ought to be drawn. Certainly there are cases where minor errors of translation don't matter much so long as the reader is able to "get the gist" of the text, to follow the author's "drift," as we say in English, or to savor his style and way of thinking. What bothers me

in Zohn's translation of Benjamin's essay, however, is that the errors seem likely to prevent a careful reader from following the argument. This is a particularly serious issue when the text concerned is one that is subjected to the kind of intense interpretive and critical pressure to which Benjamin's has repeatedly been subjected in an English-speaking world that has been depending largely on Zohn's translation. Indeed, part of what I want to argue here is that "accuracy" remains an indispensable regulative idea in translation that should not be abandoned for fear of being called a pedant.

More generally, I would mention two difficulties in translating this essay I was unable to resolve to my own satisfaction.

In the first sentence of the third paragraph, Benjamin writes : "Übersetzung ist eine Form." Zohn translates this as "Translation is a mode." I can see a certain justification for this translation, but it creates difficulties when Zohn goes on to translate "die Art des Meinens" as "the mode of intention," since this seems to suggest that translation is a mode of intention (rather than, as I take it, a form or mode of the art work's continuing life, or as I argue in my essay, "Translation, Quotation, Iterability," a mode of iteration). Should one follow Benjamin in avoiding the technical implications of "mode" in both cases, translating "Form" as "form" (this has the advantage of being more consonant with the vitalist vocabulary that dominates Benjamin's discussion), and "Art" as "kind" or "type"?

The other difficulty is related to this one, and has been commented on by De Man, Gasché, and others : how to translate "die Art des Meinens"? The chief justification for Zohn's translation of "Meinen" as "intention" is Benjamin's use of the Scholastic *intentio* in a similar context later in the essay. One wonders, however, why he did not use the German word "Intention" here, as he does, for example, in the preface to the

*Trauerspiel* book. I'm rather inclined, for reasons I explain in the essay just mentioned, to translate Benjamin's phrase as "mode of connotation," though I have not done so in my own translation.

### Notes

1. "Conclusions : Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pages 79 and 85.

2. Cf. Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" :

Übersetzung verpflanzt also das Original in einen wenigstens insofern — ironisch — endgültigeren Sprachbereich, als es aus diesem durch keinerlei Übertragung mehr zu versetzen ist, sondern in ihn nur immer von neuem und an andern Teilen erhoben zu werden mag. (15)

3. Perhaps it's worth noting here that, as De Man points out, this same passage is also mistranslated in Maurice Gandillac's French version of Benjamin's essay. Gandillac has : "Là où le texte, immédiatement, sans l'entremise d'un sens [...] relève de la vérité ou de la doctrine, il est purement et simplement *intraduisible*" — *schlechthin unübersetzbar*. De Man comments — here I'm quoting De Man : "what adds some comedy to this particular instance is that Jacques Derrida was doing a seminar with this particular text in Paris, using the French — Derrida's German is pretty good, but he prefers to use the French, and when you are a philosopher in France you take Gandillac more or less seriously. So Derrida was basing part of his reading on the "intraduisible" on the untranslatability, until somebody in his seminar (so I'm told) pointed out to him that the correct word was "translatable." I'm sure Derrida could explain that it was the same [...] and I mean that in a positive sense, it *is* the same, but still, it is not the same without some additional explanation." (De Man, "Conclusions," p. 80.)

4. The same misunderstanding is reflected in Zohn's translation of another passage in which this issue comes up :

Wenn Treue und Freiheit der Übersetzung seit jeher als widerstrebende Tendenzen betrachtet wurden, so scheint auch diese tiefere Deutung [i.e., the one Benjamin has just given] der einen beide nicht zu versöhnen, sondern im Gegenteil alles Recht der andern abzuspochen. Denn worauf bezieht Freiheit sich, wenn nicht auf die Wiedergabe des Sinnes, die aufhören soll, gesetzgebend zu heissen? (18-19)

Fidelity and freedom have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies. This deeper interpretation of the one apparently does not serve to reconcile the two; in fact, it seems to deny the other all justification. For what is meant by freedom but that the rendering of the sense is no longer to be regarded as all important? (79)

Fidelity is the concept Benjamin has given a deeper interpretation that seems to deny freedom any justification — precisely because the two concepts have traditionally been regarded as being in conflict. Thus Benjamin's second sentence asks rhetorically, reflecting the traditional view, "For what can the point of freedom be, if not the reproduction of meaning, which is no longer to be regarded as normative?"

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**ABSTRACT :** Zohn's translation of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" — In 1968 Harry Zohn published a pioneering translation of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" that for many years was the only form in which Benjamin's famous essay was known to most readers in English. These notes examine certain problems raised by Zohn's translation.



**RÉSUMÉ : La traduction de "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" de Benjamin par Zohn** — En 1968, Harry Zohn a publié une traduction pionnière de "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" qui resta longtemps la seule forme sous laquelle l'essai célèbre était connu de la plupart des lecteurs anglophones. Ces notes examinent certains problèmes posés par la traduction faite par Zohn.

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