

## TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction

### “The Task of the Translator”: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a *Forschungsbericht*

Susan Ingram

---

L’essai sur la traduction de Walter Benjamin : traductions critiques  
Volume 10, numéro 2, 2e semestre 1997

URI : [id.erudit.org/iderudit/037305ar](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037305ar)  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/037305ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN 0835-8443 (imprimé)  
1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

Ingram, S. (1997). “The Task of the Translator”: Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a *Forschungsbericht*. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 10(2), 207–233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037305ar>

---

Tous droits réservés © TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction — Les auteurs, 1997

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L’utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

---

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. [www.erudit.org](http://www.erudit.org)

# **“The Task of the Translator” : Walter Benjamin’s Essay in English, a *Forschungsbericht***

**Susan Ingram**

Just as the names and locations of the various converging two-way streets that mark English-language Benjamin studies have tended to shift with the academic tides, the name of Walter Benjamin itself has become something of a Shakespearian pearl in the quicksands of Anglo-American academia. “Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange.” Arendt chose this snippet from *The Tempest* to head the final section of her introduction to *Illuminations* (p. 38) and it is also an appropriate signpost for the intersection where Benjamin’s “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” has crossed and been crossed by the English language.<sup>1</sup> The rather sporadic manner in which Benjamin’s works began appearing, both the original and English

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of Jay Parini’s recent biographical novel, *Benjamin’s Crossing*, is a fortuitous one with respect to the state of *Benjaminiana* (cf. Puttnies and Smith’s *Benjaminiana : Eine Biografische Recherche*) and Benjamin’s increasingly cult-like status.

translation, has become the stuff of anecdote if not legend,<sup>2</sup> but of relatively little scholarship in English.<sup>3</sup> There have thus far been no book-length studies devoted to the question of English-language Benjamin reception and only two major articles : Ioan Davies' "Approaching Walter Benjamin : Retrieval, Translation and Reconstruction," published in 1980 in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*; and Jeffrey Grossman's 1992, "The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution," which appeared in *German Quarterly*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Grossman's analysis, which acknowledges its indebtedness to Foucault in tracing "the importation and appropriation of Benjamin's writings into the Anglo-American literary institution" (p. 414) and identifies Marxist and deconstructionist discourse as two of the most influential tendencies in that reception, Davies' approach is that of a critical theorist, one who realizes that "of more concern for the English-speaking reader is the presentation of Benjamin in translated form" (p. 66). Whereas Grossman identifies editor Arendt's strategies of selection and containment, selecting those essays which highlight Benjamin's importance as a literary critic while containing his Marxist tendencies (p. 418-

---

<sup>2</sup> Not only the two volume *Schriften* in 1955, edited by the Adornos, and the 1961 *Illuminationen*, a selection of essays taken from the *Schriften*, and edited by Siegfried Unseld, but also the *Gesammelte Schriften*, which have been appearing since 1972 under the editorship of Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, have been subject to controversy, cf. Tiedemann's *Die Abrechnung : Walter Benjamin und Sein Verleger*, and Markner and Weber's *Literatur über Walter Benjamin. Kommentierte Bibliographie 1983 - 1992*, pp. 234-35 for other references. For more on the "even more dubious forms" that "the presentation of Benjamin's writings in English has frequently assumed," cf. Grossman, p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> For resource purposes, a section has been included in the references listing works in German and English on Benjamin reception.

<sup>4</sup> And which makes no mention of or reference to Davies' earlier article.

19), Davies identifies the differences between British and American varieties of Benjamin : “while New Left Books [in Britain] has attempted to put Benjamin in the context of a European political-aesthetic debate, Harcourt Brace [in the US] has delivered the provocative (Jewish) essayist” (p. 67).<sup>5</sup> Davies then incorporates these two Benjamins into his larger argument that “the significance of Benjamin’s ideas as well as his contextual metaphors have been read in quite discrepant ways, that the task of translating has been bounded not so much by the perspectives of interpretation, but by the frameworks of ideology” (p. 69). Both Grossman and Davies attend to the sea-changes, and neglect the oysters.

In the year which has gone down in history rampant with student unrest, protest, and flower-power, not one but two essays were published bearing the title, “The Task of the Translator.” Not surprisingly, it was not the translation which appeared in the long since defunct journal *Delos*, but rather the one in Arendt’s collected volume *Illuminations*, which has gone on to become canonical reading. Berman may call it “un texte devenu *presque canonique*” in *L’Épreuve de l’Étranger* (p. 21, italics added), however there can be no qualifying its current Anglo-American status. Benjamin’s essay has become, as Rachel May points out in the introductory survey of translation studies in her 1994 *The Translator in the Text : On Reading Russian Literature in English*, a “seminal work” (p. 7). It would be a thankless task to chart every one of the increasing number of passing references made to Benjamin’s translation essay in English; such examples cannot provide adequate parameters for a study of the English-language reception of Benjamin’s translation essay. Rather, in providing an account of the English-language fate of “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” both in and out of translation studies circles, this article will attend to currents in the criticism while chronologically

---

<sup>5</sup> For an accounting of the Jewish context of Benjamin’s essay, cf. Jay.

riding its major waves, from 1975 and the hermeneutic and polysystemic turns, to 1985 and deconstruction, to 1992, the celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of Benjamin's birth and recent offerings in translation.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion will return to the question of translation — how does the story of "The Task of the Translator," as opposed to those of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," "La tâche du traducteur," et al., speak to the essay's own argument on translation?

### 1975 — Benjamin and Babel

The year of OPEC crises and Watergate saw the Translation Studies' tide begin to rise. In the year before the Leuven colloquium joined the functional, sociocultural approaches of the Israeli polysystem and European Low Countries manipulation schools, there appeared a book which was to open up the concept of translation to interdisciplinary consideration. Until George Steiner's *After Babel*, as he reminds the reader in the preface to the second edition, "there had been no ordered or detailed attempt to locate translation at the heart of human communication or to explore the ways in which the constraints on translatability and the potentialities of transfer between languages engage, at the most immediate and charged level, the philosophic inquiry into consciousness and into the meaning of meaning" (p. ix-x). Benjamin figures prominently in Steiner's work as one of the handful to have written "anything fundamental or new about translation" (p. 283), as he does in Kelly's monumental *The True Interpreter* four years later, where his name, together with Buber's and Meschonnic's, comes to stand for the hermeneutic, as opposed to literary or linguistic, approach to translation. Kelly's prodigious

---

<sup>6</sup> The story of Harry Zohn and his translation of the Benjamin translation essay has already been recounted in my "The Trouble with Harry, or Producing Walter Benjamin's Anglo-American Reception" and has therefore not been included here.

history of translation in the West considers it "natural, after the work of Cassirer, Buber and Heidegger, that interest would quicken in the Romantic theories of translation, and that important symbolist documents, like Benjamin (1923), would come out of obscurity" (p. 226).

And out of obscurity he came, first in special issues of academic journals devoted to translation. Following on the heels, or stepping on the toes, of Steiner's book was a special Comparative Literature volume of *Modern Language Notes* in 1975 which included Carol Jacobs' "The Monstrosity of Translation" as part of its tribute to "Translation : Theory and Practice". Then, in 1982, *Dispositio* put out a volume on "The Art and Science of Translation" under the guest-editorship of André Lefevere, based on papers presented at the Third International Symposium on Translated Literature and Interliterary Communication at the University of Antwerp in 1980. The volume featured, along with articles by Translation Studies scholars such as Lefevere, Even-Zohar, and Toury, Marilyn Gaddis Rose's "Walter Benjamin as Translation Theorist : A Reconsideration." Both Jacobs' and Gaddis Rose's articles concern themselves with Zohn's practice of translation with respect to the argument in the essay itself, chastising him for "maintain[ing] a significant respect for his own linguistic usage" (Jacobs, p. 760; cited in Gaddis Rose, p. 164).<sup>7</sup> Jacobs takes it upon herself to scrupulously retranslate and deconstruct key passages of the essay, such as those on the *Nachreise* and *Ver-pflanzung* of the kernel of translation (p. 758)

---

<sup>7</sup> Neither would be surprised to learn that Zohn considered Benjamin's views on translation, as communicated to me in personal correspondence, "important as a stimulus and a new way of looking at translation, but I was never guided by it as I translated, and I don't think anyone else was." I am very grateful to Harry Zohn, Steven Rendall and Alexis Nouss for their generous cooperation and support with this project. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the SSHRC for the resources which have allowed me to work on this, and other, projects.

and its inherently broken nature (p. 762). Gaddis Rose, on the other hand, takes her reconsideration of Benjamin a further step and compares a passage from his translation of Baudelaire with Stefan George's as well as briefly touching on the ways examples from outside his own personal practice speak to his theory. Like Steiner and Kelly, both Jacobs and Gaddis Rose are sensitive to the broader implications of Benjamin's essay, the ironic, metaphorical possibilities it suggests to the deconstructive critic (Jacobs, p. 764), that it "makes us more aware of the language contours we intuit and never fully express but can see approached in a constellation of language [...] [and] names the intuitions so that we can talk about them" (Gaddis Rose, p. 175). These are the groundswells which were to crest in Derrida and de Man's essays on Benjamin.

### 1985 — After Deconstruction, a Theoretical Deluge

English-speaking readers attentive to the texts of Jacques Derrida to appear in their language may have anticipated Joseph Graham's offering as the *pièce de résistance* to his 1985 collection, *Difference in Translation*, his own translation of "*Des Tours de Babel*." However, such readers were far from numerous in the blossoming field of Translation Studies. If any of the contributors to the other notable volume on translation to be published in 1985, *The Manipulation of Literature*, edited by Theo Hermans, were intrigued by the passing reference in Derrida's "Living On/Borderlines" to a Paris seminar on Benjamin's essay (p. 168), it did not translate into their own texts. There is but one brief reference to Benjamin in the collection, in Leon Burnett's essay on Mandel'shtam and myth, and none to deconstruction or Derrida. 1985, the year Gorbachev and Reagan could hum along together to "We are the World," thus ironically marks something of a watershed in translation studies, with Benjamin's essay at the "great divide" where the one stream of generally more culturally-oriented, systemic approaches to translation separates from another more interested in the hermeneutic implications of translation in psychoanalysis and philosophy.

Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" and de Man's "Conclusions" have spawned their own school of response to Benjamin, becoming as canonical in their own right as the original Zohn translation. Since the mid-1980's there has arisen a substantial body of criticism involving this translation trinity. Chapters of such much-discussed books as J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*, Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation*, Douglas Robinson's *The Translator's Turn* and Andrew Benjamin's *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy* are devoted to "The Task of the Translator" as it is informed by this triangulated deconstructive constellation. Miller takes the translation essay as his coda and traces how the paradoxes of Benjamin's "idea of the work of genuine translation" (p. 122) can help inform his own writing on how to read unreadability in de Man and James, among others. Niranjana comes under criticism by Robinson for her "heavy methodological reliance on, and disproportionately close attention to, [these] three white European males" (1993, p. 122). Robinson views this attention as a way of legitimizing, of institutionalizing, her 1992 foray into the field of postcolonial translation studies and rhetorically wonders whether she "would have been ignored, cut adrift, cast in a ditch, had she made no more than passing nods toward Benjamin, Derrida, and de Man? And if she had, would that have confirmed her thesis that 'translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, helping them acquire the status of what Edward Said calls representations, or objects without history'?" (1993, p. 122). One is inclined to be similarly suspicious of the rather graphic, noisy reading that the habitually irreverent Robinson affords Derrida's "most persuasive perverse ethics of translation" (p. 233) in his own 1991 *The Translator's Turn*,<sup>8</sup> as well as his decision to limit the final chapter of the 1996 *Translation and Taboo* to a ghoulish,

---

<sup>8</sup> cf. Lefevere's somewhat scathing review in *Comparative Literature Studies*.



inconclusive treatment of Benjamin.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Andrew Benjamin's 1989 *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy*, as its subtitle suggests, offers a new theory of words. It would be difficult to quibble with Edwin Gentzler's estimation that it is the "most comprehensive" (p. 177) treatment of Benjamin thus far, as it subtly investigates the translation essay both within the context of Benjamin's philosophy of language as expressed in other essays such as the 1916 "On Language as Such and on the Languages of Man" and the 1933 "On the Mimetic Faculty" as well as relating it to Jewish mystical postulates and pre- and post-Enlightenment philosophy. Gentzler, for his part, summarizes the work that forms the debate surrounding deconstruction and translation as it centers around Benjamin's essay, opting to devote more attention to selective texts representative of "Deconstruction," the title of chapter six, and only quote and not demonstrate de Man's oft-

---

<sup>9</sup> In light of Ewa Ziarek's excellent 1995 "The Beauty of Failure': Kafka and Benjamin on the Task of Transmission and Translation," not to mention Andrew Benjamin's work, it is extremely difficult to take seriously nine printed pages which "conclude": "by the end of the essay the translator's task is to free the damsel in distress from magical powers and principalities and save the world. Maybe I'm just too cozy with the Other-as-reason, but I'll take a rain check. Find somebody else, Walter; I'm too busy translating chain saw manuals" (p. 209). Ziarek's article provides an especially useful contextualization of Benjamin's translation essay in modernity by linking Benjamin's reading of Kafka with de Man's of Benjamin: "in both, the question of failure, insofar as it is one of the main effects of transmissibility, is intertwined with a redefinition of both language and modernity [...]. With its emphasis on the differential, fragmentary and inorganic character of languages, Benjamin's theory of translation can be seen as the antithesis of the community based on the natural and intimate common bonds. As an antidote to the modernist nostalgia for the being in common, translation becomes a safeguard of sorts against the complicity of this nostalgia with fascism." (p. 182-3) Watch out for those chain saws, Doug, one never knows whom they'll be used to massacre next.

quoted "you are nobody unless you have written about this text" (p. 174).

Generally, the articles which follow from Derrida and de Man, in moving translation, "from the periphery to center stage, where it serves as a metaphor for the work of the academy" (p. 578), as Eve Tavor Bannet puts it, tend to follow tacks similar to those in the above four books by Niranjana, Robinson, A. Benjamin and Hillis Miller. Like Miller (and like many of the contributors to the 1989 *Reading de Man Reading* volume edited by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich), the interest of San Juan's 1991 "Criticism, Language, Hermeneutics" is bound up in de Man and in what Benjamin's essay has provoked. San Juan sets out to answer the question of what is at stake in attempting a symptomatic reading of a deconstructive critique (p. 397) and concludes that "de Man's strategy of reading [...] testifies more to his ethico-political agenda than to the projects Benjamin was grappling with" (p. 399). James McGuire also draws on de Man's reading of Benjamin. As one would correctly assume from the titles of his 1990 "Beckett, the Translator, and the Metapoem" and the 1992 "Forked Tongues, Marginal Bodies : Writing as Translation in Khatibi," McGuire's interest is in bilingual writers and the processes of translation which their writing necessarily involves :

[...] the post-colonial bilingual writer is essentially a translator or, more precisely, a self-translator. The inherent failure of language as it is posited by Benjamin, with the help of de Man, undermines any lingering notions that language can be policed and purified by a history as derivative as language itself. The question really is not 'what language to write,' but rather 'how to write two languages simultaneously, how to write a life lived between languages.' (1992, p. 112)

In the same vein as A. Benjamin's careful, philosophically-informed opening up of Benjamin's writing is Thomas Pfau's 1988

"Thinking Before Totality : *Kritik, Übersetzung*, and the Language of Interpretation in the Early Walter Benjamin" which patiently proceeds through the possibilities of Benjamin's early writings on language and translation for rethinking literary and philosophical language, Horst Turk accomplishes a similar philosophical contextualization in "The Question of Translatability : Benjamin, Derrida, Quine." Hent de Vries in "Anti-Babel : The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida" is more interested in the "increasingly important role" (p. 443) that readings of Benjamin's early work play for Derrida, as is Taina Rajanti in "The Law of Babel." However, while Rajanti sticks to their work on translation, de Vries isolates the issue of Benjamin's mystical tendencies as provoking "profound uneasiness" and "ambivalence" (p. 444) in Derrida and approaches the subject *via* Derrida's reading of de Certeau's writings in *La Fable mystique* on mysticism as the anti-Babel. Finally, Niranjana's work is exemplary of the move towards integrating the understanding of translation for which Benjamin's essay has come to serve as a conduit to Cultural Studies. As Sherry Simon reminds us in *Gender in Translation*, both Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba are familiar with Benjamin and de Man and mine their writings, as Niranjana does, for theoretical weapons of resistance.

There is a different type of resistance on the agenda in Dennis Porter's 1989 "Psychoanalysis and the Task of the Translator" and Fritz Gutbrodt's 1992 "Poedelaire : Translation and the Volatility of the Letter." The former comes in the wake of Porter's translating Lacan's *Éthique de la Psychanalyse* into English and focuses on what Lacan's *retour à Freud* can add to the debate between Benjamin and de Man. Of the two, Porter finds Benjamin's work on translation to be closer to Lacan's than de Man's : "Lacan's lesson for the translator is the antithesis of de Man's. It is because there is no original — 'always already disarticulated' — that translation is possible... Translation is possible in the context of Lacanian theory because it is in our misses, if anywhere, that we know each other and know ourselves."

(p. 1080) The latter, Gutbrodt, uses Benjamin on the foreignness of languages and on Baudelaire as a translator of Poe to link two books under review : Bettine Menke's *Sprachfiguren : Name, Allegorie, Bild nach Benjamin* and John P. Muller and William J. Richardson's collection *The Purloined Poe : Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. The result is a *tour-de-force* comparison of Benjamin and Lacan on translation and the nature of language, which looks at, among other points, how Benjamin's interest in the *kinship* of languages relates to Lacan's interest in the *kinship* of language (p. 60, italics in the original), especially as both involve Baudelaire and Poe. Klaus Peter Müller's "Transferring Culture in Translations — Modern and Postmodern Options" involves a similar cast of characters — Baudelaire, Freud and Benjamin — but focuses on their relation to the play of modernity. Müller's concern is with post-modern theorists affiliated with Benjamin, namely Derrida and de Man, and the way the ahistorical function of language he reads in their theorizings (p. 77) and their privileging of difference over differences (p. 78) impede the transferring of cultures in translation.

The final storm of activity to be considered in this section is that found in collections of essays by translation scholars and practitioners. While negligible in Bassnett and Lefevere's *Translation, History and Culture* (1990), Benjamin's presence makes itself felt in two other contemporaneous collections. In turning to the translators assembled in her 1989 collection *The Art of Translation : Voices from the Field*, Rosanna Warren notes that what had changed in the thirty years since Reuben Brower's similar collection is "the new presence we hear affecting a good number of them, and distinguishing this collection from its elders, [...] Walter Benjamin." (p. 4) Of the three essays in Warren's collection which integrate Benjamin into their discussion, Richard Sieburth's "The Guest : Second Thoughts on Translating Hölderlin" offers the most personal account linking Benjamin to the practice of translating and is a must-read for those in doubt as to Benjamin's possible relevance to practicing translators.

Rosmarie Waldrop's "Silence, the Devil, and Jabès" begins with a quotation from Benjamin's translation essay as an attention-grabber; its discussion of her translations of Jabès draws more on Gadamer than Benjamin. And Denis Donoghue's "Translation in Theory and in a Certain Practice" looks at the ways de Man's and Benjamin's theories of translation "propose a more arduous relation between translation and original" (p. 251) in order to critique a translation by Thomas Kinsella of an anonymous 17<sup>th</sup> century Irish love-poem. The second collection, Lawrence Venuti's 1992 *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, also registers the impact that commentaries on "The Task of the Translator" by Derrida and de Man have had in "initiat[ing] a radical reconsideration of the traditional topoi of translation theory" (p. 6). However only one article, John Johnston's "Translation as Simulacrum," pays more than passing homage to Benjamin's terminology. Johnston uses Benjamin's views on translation as a substantial springboard to Deleuze's denigration of Platonic representation and a Deleuzian reading of Louis Wolfson's *Le Schizo et les langues*. Anu Aneja makes a similar jump in the 1995 "Translating Backwards: Hélène Cixous' *L'Indiade*" in integrating Benjamin's writing on translation with *écriture*.

As this section shows, the scene of translation has been flooded over the last ten years with metacritical discourse inaugurated by Derrida and de Man's "translations" of Benjamin's translation essay. Eve Tavor Bannet sets "The Scene of Translation: After Jakobson, Benjamin, de Man, and Derrida" with a letter of Alexander Pope's to the Earl of Burlington about a conversation with the bookseller Lintott on the marginal nature of translators. She vividly demonstrates that translators, their correctors and critics, "past and present, always already travel together on the road to Oxford, home of the muses — allied despite their divisions, joined in the difference, as each other's condition of possibility" (p. 594). While the destination of translation studies may be more difficult to locate even metaphorically [one can

imagine perhaps Dante's Purgatory as the only likely terminus upon which the various stripes and shadings of scholars would agree], the role that translation plays in serving as condition of possibility *sine qua non* will be explored in the final section.

### 1992 — Beyond Benjamin's Birth

By the year which followed Benjamin's birth by an even hundred years and his *Freitod* by an odd fifty [52], the place of Benjamin in Anglo-American academia had been secured. The two special German issues with which *Modern Language Notes* marked the occasion, #106 (1991) and #107 (1992), evidence not only this institutionalization of Benjamin, but also the difficulty of defining an "Anglo-American academia" within which to situate Benjamin studies. Of the six articles in #106 and eight in #107, seven are written in English, five in German, one in French and one translated into English from French; scholars contributing to the two volumes display such institutional affiliations as the University of California in Los Angeles, John Hopkins, the Collège de France, Debrecen, York, Strasbourg, Loyola at the University of Chicago, Oslo, Amsterdam, St. Gallen, Emory, Rochester, and the University of California at Davis. While none of these essays deal directly with Benjamin on translation, taken together they are indicative of the scope of Benjamin studies and its reliance on translation.

Works appearing in the English language on Benjamin and translation are now as likely to be translations as originals. 1992 saw the much-awaited appearance of *The Experience of the Foreign : Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, Antoine Berman's influential period piece with its careful attention to *les tâches fondamentales de la traductologie*. It was also the year of Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet's *Theories of Translation : An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. An important critical tool which has gone far to establish a canon of translation theory, this anthology includes essays by Hugo Friedrich, Dryden,

Schopenhauer, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, Goethe, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Nietzsche, Pound, Ortega y Gasset, Valéry, Nabokov, Jakobson, Paz, Yves Bonnefoy, Henry Schogt, Michael Riffaterre and Hans Erich Nossack, in addition to Zohn's "The Task of the Translator," an excerpt of Graham's "Des Tours de Babel," and a translation of Peter's Szondi's "The Poetics of Constancy : Paul Celan's Translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 105." The latter's first appearance in English (in 1986 in the collection of Szondi's essays entitled *On Textual Understanding*) places it among the first essays in English translation to draw attention to Benjamin's work on translation; it concerns itself with Celan's "intention toward language" (p. 185). Among the more recent translations which concern themselves with Benjamin are Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen's *Walter Benjamin* (translated from the German by Laimdota Mazzarins) and Rainer Rochlitz's *The Disenchantment of Art : The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (translated from the French by Jane Marie Todd). Both were published in 1996 and incorporate chapters on Benjamin's philosophy of language and translation into synthesized readings of his *œuvre* as a whole. Finally, there are two further articles to have appeared in English translation which deserve mention in this survey, not because they address the subject of Benjamin in/on translation directly but because they return us to the broader framework of Benjamin reception in translation. Roland Kany, at Tübingen, and Henning Ritter, at Frankfurt, emphasize, for an English-reading audience, the necessity of approaching Benjamin historically. Kany's is one of the articles stemming from a 1989 conference on particularism subsequently collected in the summer 1990 volume of *Criticism*. He focuses on Benjamin's particular fascination with the particular as revealed in readings of the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin's autobiographical reminiscences, as well as his "primordial history" of the nineteenth century (p. 326). What is interesting for the present context are the thought-provoking questions with which Kany concludes on the implications for current scholarship of "the deepest intention of all works by Benjamin, the rescue of the past in its fragments, ruins and wrecks"

(p. 339) : "What is our stance with respect to Benjamin's body of work as something which now also belongs to the past? Is it our continuity or our discontinuity with him which impels us toward his particularism whether to redeem or to destroy?" (p. 340).<sup>10</sup> Henning Ritter's 1996 "Thinking Incognito : On Walter Benjamin" takes the more pessimistic stand that "a genuine intellectual attitude towards his [Benjamin's] work as the part of today's thinkers cannot be conceived because they don't recognize their distance from him but simply revere him" (p. 603). Ritter thus feels impelled to explicate why "the Benjamin reception" (p. 595)<sup>11</sup> ought to give up its distressing insistence on interpreting Benjamin's writings, which "actually cannot be interpreted, for they understand themselves to be the *last stage* of commentary, providing a final answer to the person seeking an interpretation" (p. 595, italics added).

I would like to think that this review article has gone some way towards disputing Ritter's claim, refiguring this "last stage" as a *Drehbühne* if not *Drehscheibe*, a point of departure to destinations English and otherwise. The tendency to reverence, to concomitant redemption and destruction, to the disturbingly easy canonization of both translation and criticism which characterizes the story of "The Task of the Translator," may underlie the relations between original and translation underwritten by Benjamin's translation essay but it does so in such a way as to

---

<sup>10</sup> These questions are, one will note, very much in the spirit of Richard Wolin's critical review of the 1982 Frankfurt Congress : "Does this mean that Benjamin's brilliance is one which blinds rather than illuminates? Does it mean that the tragic aura of Benjamin's historical persona fascinates, but repels a deeper understanding?" [184].

<sup>11</sup> Ritter does not specify the language of reception, just as he does not specify to which of "today's thinkers" he is referring. One is left therefore to presume that Benjaminiana in its entirety is meant, and not simply the English-language variety.



allow, challenge and demand of critics a level of hermeneutic suspicion and self-reflection to counterbalance the tendencies with respect to which Ritter is so negative. Foremost, translation and original, like text and critic, are *related*. To conclude this survey of the English language progeny of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," I would like to put a spin on, and spin together, the notion of relation and the aquatic imagery borrowed from Arendt with which the overview began. The following selection is from Birgit Vanderbeke's tale of family revolt, *Das Muschelessen* [*The Meal of Mussels*]. While waiting for their *pater familias* to return for dinner after a business trip, a daughter meditates on the upcoming feast :

Mir ist grausig gewesen, daß sich der ganze Muschelberg bewegte, weil sie sich öffneten, dabei habe ich natürlich kein Mitleid mit ihnen gehabt, ich esse sie schließlich, auch wenn ich mir nichts daraus mache, und es ist klar, daß sie vorher noch leben, und wenn ich sie esse, leben sie nicht mehr, ich esse auch Austern, und da weiß ich sogar, daß sich noch leben, während ich sie esse, aber sie machen nicht dieses Geräusch. (p. 13-14)<sup>12</sup>

University of Alberta

---

<sup>12</sup> Vanderbeke's *Erzählung*, which appeared in German in 1993 with Rotbuch, has not as yet to my knowledge been translated into English and I am indebted to Andrew Shields for introducing me to it. This passage is intended as a grain of sand and not salt : "It gave me the creeps the way the mountain of mussels moved as they opened, but of course I didn't feel any sympathy for them, after all I eat them, although I could take them or leave them, and it's clear that before I eat them they're alive and then when I eat them, they're no longer alive, I also eat oysters, and with them I know they're still alive while I'm eating them, but they don't make that noise."

## References

### "The Task of the Translator" in English Translation

BENJAMIN, Walter (1996). An emendated version of Harry Zohn's translation. In Marcus Bulbock and Michael W. Jennings, eds. *Selected Writings, I: 1913-1926*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP.

— (1992). In Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago and London, U of Chicago P, pp. 71-82.

— (1977). "The Concept of the Third Language," an excerpt. In André Lefevere, *Translating Literature: The German Tradition, From Luther to Rosenzweig*. Assen/Amsterdam, Van Gorcum, p. 102.

— (1968). In *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, pp. 69-82.

— (1968). Translated by James Hynd and E. M. Valk. *Delos 2*, pp. 76-99.

### Secondary Literature in English incorporating "The Task of the Translator"

ANEJA, Anu (1995). "Translating Backwards: Hélène Cixous' *L'Indiade*." *Studies in the Humanities* 22 (1-2), pp. 50-64.

BANNET, Eve Tavor (1993). "The Scene of Translation: After Jakobson, Benjamin, de Man and Derrida." *New Literary History* 24 (3), pp. 577-95.

BENJAMIN, Andrew (1989). *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy. A New Theory of Words*. London and New York, Routledge. [Ch. 4, "Walter Benjamin and the Translator's Task," pp. 86-108.]

BERMAN, Antoine (1992). *The Experience of the Foreign : Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Translated by S. Heyvaert. Albany, SUNY P. [*L'Épreuve de l'étranger : Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*. Paris, Gallimard, 1984.]

BOLZ Norbert and Willem van REIJEN (1996). *Walter Benjamin*. Translated by Laimdota Mazzarins. New Jersey, Humanities Press. [*Walter Benjamin*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1991, ch. 3, "The Magic of Language," pp. 21-31.]

BOYER, Mildred V. (1981). "On Translation and its Uses." *Teaching Language through Literature* 2, pp. 3-11.

CHAMBERLAIN, Lori (1983). "How Dead Men Write to Each Other." In Don Wellman, Cola Franzen, Irene Turner, eds. *Translations : Experiments in Reading*. Cambridge, MA, O.ARS, pp. 51-6.

DE MAN, Paul (1985). "'Conclusions :' On Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," *Yale French Studies* 69, pp. 25-46. [Also in *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 1986, pp. 73-105.]

DE VRIES, Hent (1992). "Anti-Babel : The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida." *MLN* 107, pp. 441-77.

DERRIDA, Jacques (1985). "Des Tours de Babel." Translated by Joseph Graham. In Joseph F. Graham, ed. *Difference in Translation*. Ithaca and London, Cornell UP, pp. 165-207.

— (1985). "Roundtable on Translation." Translated by Peggy Kamuf. In Christie V. McDonald, ed. *The Ear of the Other : Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. New York, Schocken Books, pp. 91-161. [*L'oreille de l'autre. Otobiographies, transferts, traduction. Textes et débats avec Jacques Derrida*, ed. C. Lévesque, Christie McDonald, Montréal, vlb éditeur, 1982, pp. 123-212.]

— (1979). "Living On/Borderlines." Translated by James Hulbert. In H. Bloom et al., eds. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York, Continuum, pp. 75-176.

DONOGHUE, Denis (1989). "Translation in Theory and in a Certain Practice." In R. Warren, ed. *The Art of Translation : Voices from the Field*. Boston, Northeastern UP, pp. 244-57.

DUARTE, Joco Ferreira (1995). "The Power of Babel : Pure Language as Intertranslation." *Perspectives* 3 (2), pp. 271-82.

GADDIS ROSE, Marilyn (1995). "Enacting a Benjamin Premise with a Tribute to Joyce Mansour (1928-86)." *Platte Valley Review* 23 (2), pp. 23-33.

— (1982). "Walter Benjamin as Translation Theorist : A Reconsideration." *Dispositio* 7, pp. 163-75.

GENTZLER, Edwin (1993). *Contemporary Translation Theories*. London and New York, Routledge.

GUTBRODT, Fritz (1992). "Poedelaire : Translation and the Volatility of the Letter." *Diacritics* 22 (3/4), pp. 49-68.

INGRAM, Susan (1997). "The Trouble with Harry, or Producing Walter Benjamin's Anglo-American Reception." *Carleton Germanic Papers* 25, pp. 78-90.

JACOBS, Carol (1975). "The Monstrosity of Translation." *MLN* 90, pp. 755-66. [Also in *Telling Time : Essays on Lévi-Strauss, Ford, Lessing, Benjamin, de Man, Wordsworth, Rilke*. Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1992, pp. 128-41.]

JAY, Martin (1986). *Permanent Exiles : Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America*. New York, Columbia UP. [Ch. 12, "Politics of Translation : Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible," pp. 198-216.]

JOHNSTON, John (1992). "Translation as Simulacrum." In L. Venuti, ed. *Rethinking Translation : Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. New York, London, Routledge, pp. 42-56.

KELLY, Louis (1979). *The True Interpreter : A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

MCGUIRE, James (1992). "Forked Tongues, Marginal Bodies : Writing as Translation in Khatibi." *Research in African Literatures* 23 (1), pp. 107-16.

— (1990). "Beckett, the Translator, and the Metapoem." *World Literature Today* 64 (2), pp. 258-63.

MILLER, J. Hillis (1992). "Theory and Translation in Comparative Literature." In Fortunati, Vita, ed. *Bologna, la cultura italiana e le letterature straniere moderne, I-III*. Ravenna, Longo, pp. 31-41.

— (1987). *The Ethics of Reading : Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin*. New York, Columbia UP.

MÜLLER, Klaus Peter (1995). "Transferring Culture in Translations - Modern and Postmodern Options." *TTR* 8 (1), pp. 65-83.

NIRANJANA, Tejaswini (1992). *Siting Translation : History, Poststructuralism and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, U of California P.

PFAU, Thomas (1988). "Thinking before Totality. *Kritik, Übersetzung*, and the Language of Interpretation in the Early Walter Benjamin." *MLN* 103, pp. 1072-97.

PORTER, Dennis (1989). "Psychoanalysis and the Task of the Translator." *MLN* 104, pp. 1066-84.

RAJANTI, Taina (1992). "The Law of Babel." In Nicholas Royle, ed. *Afterwords*. Tampere, Outside, pp. 80-95.

ROBINSON, Douglas (1996). *Translation and Taboo*. DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois UP.

— (1993). "Decolonizing Translation." *Translation and Literature* 2, pp. 113-24.

— (1991). *The Translator's Turn*. Baltimore and London, John Hopkins UP.

ROCHLITZ, Rainer (1996). *The Disenchantment of Art : The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. New York, London, The Guilford Press. [*Le désenchantement de l'art : La philosophie de Walter Benjamin*. Paris, Gallimard, 1992. Ch. 1, "Philosophy of Language" includes a section on "Theory of Translation," pp. 23-32.]

SAN JUAN, E. (1991). "Criticism, Language, Hermeneutics." *Revue de littérature comparée* 65 (4), pp. 397-408.

SIEBURTH, Richard (1989). "The Guest : Second Thoughts on Translating Hölderlin." In R. Warren, ed. *The Art of Translation : Voices from the Field*. Boston, Northeastern UP, pp. 237-43.

STEINER, George (1975). *After Babel : Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford, Oxford UP. [Second edition, 1992.]

SZONDI, Peter (1986). "The Poetry of Constancy : Paul Celan's Translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 105." Translated by Harvey Mendelsohn. In *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, pp. 161-78. [Also in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation : An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago and London, U of Chicago P, 1992, pp. 163-85. Originally published as "Poetry of Constancy — Poetik der Beständigkeit : Celans Übertragung von Shakespeares Sonett 105." *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 37 (1971), pp. 9-25.]

TURK, Horst (1990). "The Question of Translatability : Benjamin, Derrida, Quine." *Translation Perspectives* 5, pp. 43-56. [Also in A.P. Frank, ed. *Interculturality and the Historical Study of Literary Translations*. Berlin, pp. 120-30.]

VENUTI, Lawrence (1992). "Introduction." In *Rethinking Translation : Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London and New York, Routledge, pp. 1-17.

WALDROP, Rosmarie (1989). "Silence, the Devil, and Jabès." In R. Warren, ed. *The art of translation : Voices from the field*. Boston, Northeastern UP, pp. 225-36.

— (1984). "The Joy of the Demiurge." In W. Frawley, ed. *Translation*. Newark, U of Delaware P, pp. 41-9.

WARREN, Rosanna (1989). "Introduction." In *The art of translation : Voices from the field*. Boston, Northeastern UP, pp. 3-12.

ZIAREK, Ewa (1995). "'The Beauty of Failure' : Kafka and Benjamin on the Task of Transmission and Translation." In

Alexander Gelley, ed. *Unruly Examples : On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*. Stanford, CA, Stanford UP, pp. 175-207.

### **Reception : Walter Benjamin in German and English**

ALT, Peter André (1988). "Benjamin und die Germanistik : Aspekte einer Rezeption; Vorträge des Ger.-tages Berlin 1987." In Norbert Oellers, ed. *Das Selbstverständnis der Germanistik, Aktuelle Diskussion*. Tübingen, Niemeyer, pp. 133-46.

BATHRICK, David (1979). "Reading Walter Benjamin From West to East." *Colloquia Germanica* 12 (3), pp. 246-55.

BEICKEN, Peter and Jay F. BODINE (1979). "Walter Benjamin : A Selected Bibliographical Checklist." *Colloquia Germanica* 12 (3), pp. 292-303.

BRODERSEN, Momme (1995). *Walter Benjamin. Eine kommentierte Bibliographie*. Morsum/Sylt, Cicero Presse.

DAVIES, Ioan (1980). "Approaching Walter Benjamin : Retrieval, Translation and Reconstruction." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 4 (1), pp. 59-74.

GARBER, Klaus (1987). *Rezeption und Rettung : Drei Studien zu Walter Benjamin*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer.

GROSSMAN, Jeffrey (1992). "The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution." *German Quarterly* 65 (3-4), pp. 414-28.

KANY, Roland (1990). "Particularism in the Work of Walter Benjamin." *Criticism* 32 (3), pp. 325-41.

LINDNER, Burkhardt (1979). "Werkbiographie und kommentierte Bibliographie (bis 1970)" und "Benjamin Bibliographie (1971-



1979)." *Text + Kritik* 31/32, pp. 103-21.

MARKNER, Reinhard, and Thomas WEBER, eds. (1993). *Literatur über Walter Benjamin. Kommentierte Bibliographie 1983 - 1992*. Hamburg, Argument-Sonderband.

NORDQUIST, Joan (1989). *Walter Benjamin : A Bibliography*. Santa Cruz, Reference and Research Services.

RITTER, Henning (1996). "Thinking Incognito : On Walter Benjamin." Translated by Cheryl Spiese McKee. *New Literary History* 27 (4), pp. 595-603.

SCHWARZ, Vera (1979). "The Domestication of Walter Benjamin : Admirers Flee from History into Melancholia." *Bennington Review* 4, pp. 7-11.

SCHÖTTKER, Detlev (1992). "Walter Benjamin und seine Rezeption. Überlegungen zur Wirkungsgeschichte." *Leviathan* 20, pp. 268-80.

SMITH, Gary (1983). "Walter Benjamin in English : A Bibliography of Translations." *Philosophical Forum* 15 (1/2) pp. 206-08. [Reprinted in *Benjamin : Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*. Chicago and London, U of Chicago P, 1989, pp. 260-63].

— (1979). "Walter Benjamin : A Bibliography of Secondary Literature." *New German Critique* 17, pp. 189-208. [Reprinted in *On Walter Benjamin. Critical essays and recollections*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991, pp. 371-92].

WAGNER, Gerhard (1990). "Zum Bilde Benjamins : Aspekte der neueren Rezeption seines kulturhistorischen und geschichtsphilosophischästhetischen Werkes in Westeuropa 1978-1987." *Weimarer Beiträge* 36 (9), pp. 1492-1513.

WOLIN, Richard (1982). "The Benjamin-Congress : Frankfurt (July 1-3, 1982)." *Telos* 53, pp. 178-85.

### Dissertations

DASS, Nirmal (1990). *The Fall into Confusion : Babel, Translation, Auden*. York U. DAI 51 (4), 1237A.

LIU, Xian (1993). *Yoknapatawpha County in China : A Study of Faulkner's Short Stories in Translation*. U of North Dakota. DAI 53 (8), 2815A.

MACDONALD, Bruce Robert (1984). *Translation as Transcendence. Walter Benjamin and the German Tradition of Translation Theory*. U of California, San Diego. DAI 45 (4), 1744 A.

PARK, Jusik (1995). *From Aesthetics to Poetics : The Benjaminian Turn in Paul de Man*. Purdue U. DAI 56 (2), 546A.

### Other Works Cited

BASSNETT, Susan and André LEFEVERE (1990). *Translation, History and Culture*. London, Pinter Publishers.

BENJAMIN, Walter (1972). *Gesammelte Schriften*. eds. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

— (1961). *Illuminationen : Ausgewählte Schriften*. ed. Siegfried Unseld, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

BROWER, Reuben A., ed. (1959). *On Translation*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP.

HERMANS, Theo (1985). *The Manipulation of Literature : Studies in Literary Translation*. New York, St. Martin's Press.

LEFEVERE, André. Review of *The Translator's Turn*. *Comparative Literature Studies* 30, 4 (1993), pp. 451-54.

MAY, Rachel (1994). *The Translator in the Text : On Reading Russian Literature in English*. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern UP.

PARINI, Jay (1997). *Benjamin's Crossing*. New York, Henry Holt & Co.

PUTTNIES, Hans and Gary SMITH (1991). *Benjaminiana : Eine Biografische Recherche*. Giessen, Anabas.

SIMON, Sherry (1996). *Gender in Translation : Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. London, New York, Routledge.

TIEDEMANN, Rolf (1989). *Die Abrechnung : Walter Benjamin und Sein Verleger*. Hamburg, Kellner.

VANDERBEKE, Birgit (1993). *Das Muschelessen*. Berlin, Rotbuch.

**ABSTRACT :** "The Task of the Translator" : Walter Benjamin's Essay in English, a *Forschungsbericht* — This overview of the English-language reception of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" charts the fate of the essay in English from its 1968 inception, through the hermeneutic and polysystemic turns in translation studies, to the influence of deconstruction and translation on English-language scholarship.

**RÉSUMÉ :** "The Task of the Translator" : L'essai de Walter Benjamin en anglais, un *Forschungsbericht* — L'article entreprend une analyse de la réception de "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" de Benjamin en anglais, à partir de sa traduction en 1968 jusqu'à l'influence de la déconstruction et de la traduction sur les recherches anglophones, en passant par les tournants

herméneutiques et polysystémiques en traductologie.

**Susan Ingram, Dept. of Modern Languages and Comparative  
Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, T6G 1E3.  
Email : [singram@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca](mailto:singram@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca)**