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**Translation as Event.
Performing and
Staging Translations**

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[eds.]

3/2023

**Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics
Jahrbuch für Übersetzungshermeneutik**

Journal of the Research Center
Zeitschrift des Forschungszentrums

HK

Hermeneutics and Creativity, University of Leipzig
Hermeneutik und Kreativität, Universität Leipzig

DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi3.75



Cite this review article:

Baltrusch, Burghard (2023): „Translation as a form – A new Guide to Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.”“ In: *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics 3: Translation as Event. Performing and Staging Translations* (ed. by Brian O’Keeffe, Larisa Cercel, Marco Agnetta), pp. 329–344. DOI: <10.52116/yth.vi3.75>.

Translation as a form – A new Guide to Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”

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Review Article on: ROBINSON, Douglas (2023): *Translation as a Form. A Centennial Commentary on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”*. London / New York: Routledge. 216 pp. ISBN 9781032161389.

Last year marked the centenary of Walter Benjamin’s groundbreaking essay, “The Task of the Translator,” a seminal work that significantly shaped the theory and philosophy of translation. In this context, the renowned translation scholar Douglas Robinson has offered a timely contribution with his book, *Translation as a Form: A Centennial Commentary on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.”* Before delving into some of its numerous intriguing proposals, it might be useful to consider a context that readers less acquainted with the text might have appreciated reading in an introduction, especially the ex-

tensive history of reception, translation, and continuous re-translation that Benjamin's essay has undergone. Originally, it was published as the preface to Benjamin's German translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* (1923). According to Benjamin, Baudelaire not only served as the linchpin of modern literature but also stood out as a pivotal figure within the psychosocial and intellectual fabric of modernity in Europe.¹ "The Task of the Translator" encapsulates various facets of Benjamin's experiences up to that point: his role as a literary translator of Baudelaire and Marcel Proust, his pursuits as a literary and art critic, philosopher and historian, and his keen observations of urban life in early 20th-century Paris.

Robinson's examination of "The Task" occasionally touches upon this broad context and it is understandable that his *Centennial Commentary* primarily focuses on the English translations of Benjamin's essay. Nevertheless, there is a diverse and extensive history of translations of "The Task of the Translator" in various languages, each complemented by indispensable commentaries. It seems imperative to briefly acknowledge and reference this rich tapestry of translations and associated insights. Exclusively within the realms of Romance languages and English, I've identified a remarkable 31 translations of "The Task" since 1962, 27 in romance languages, with a strong likelihood of there being more as yet undiscovered (cf. Baltrusch 2018: 41ff.). If we broaden our scope to include the Euskera language, which hails from the Iberian Peninsula, our tally reaches 32 translations, spanning a mere nine languages. Seven translations are already in existence for Spanish, six for

1 Cf. the texts and fragments „Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire,“ „Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,“ „Zentralpark,“ „Notes sur les Tableaux parisiens de Baudelaire“ (in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann / Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1991).

Portuguese, and five for English, leaving just two languages with a solitary translation, with the baseline being a minimum of three. Considering that this is a philosophical and poetic text, really challenging even for those well-versed in its original German, and composed in Benjamin's quite idiosyncratic language, this narrative of success proves not just surprising but underscores its profound importance and enduring significance.

The very first translation of "The Task" dates back to the 1960s in Italy, with Renato Solmi (1962)², followed by another in 2007, and recently a third rendition. However, in the 1960s, a parallel story unfolded with the initiation of seven Spanish translations, beginning with Argentine writer Héctor Álvarez Murena, recurrently reissued since 1967. It remains the most widely recognised and disseminated version, albeit laden with various issues. In the 1990s there emerged another three Spanish translations, and in this century at least three of them can be documented.

The saga of translating "The Task" into English also started in the 1960s, and all versions can be found discussed in many key issues by Robinson. Mirroring the Spanish scenario with Murena, Harry Zohn's initial English translation, first published in 1968, persists as the one with the broadest reach. Despite its numerous drawbacks (and which have sparked significant debates), it has managed to overshadow other versions through its continuous reedition, virtually consigning most of those others to an exclusively academic realm.³ In comparison, Douglas Robinson offers now a new and fascinating proposition by offering a complete paraphrasing (cf. *infra*).

2 Except Robinson's, all translations are referenced in Baltrusch (2018).

3 The three versions are: Hynd/Valk (1968), Rendall (1997), and Underwood (2009). For the references see Baltrusch (2018).

This brief and partial overview touches upon the recent history of the translation of “The Task.” Considering the essay’s importance not only in Translation Studies but also in shaping modern hermeneutic theory, it is intriguing to look at the myriad versions produced in various languages since the 1960s, although they offer only a limited glimpse into the intricate tapestry of the essay’s reception history, which is always also a history of its critique. This pattern seems to reveal a profound and evident need for a continuous process of translation and retranslation of a text deemed essential in diverse cultural spheres.⁴ But it is also a text seemingly resistant to achieving satisfactory ‘equivalence’ in the specified target languages—ultimately proving this endeavour to be elusive. It will be fascinating to see how Robinson will add to this rich history of translations and commentaries in Romance languages. These translations are interwoven with a highly intense theoretical debate on translation spanning decades, particularly within the Brazilian context (with already 6 translations since 1979).⁵

Nevertheless, Robinson adeptly synthesizes crucial elements from English, German, and French language critique. This makes his study a standout and arguably the most comprehensive guide for those seeking to interpret Benjamin’s essay today, especially from an anglophone perspective. The work provides a rich repository of materials and insights that clarify Benjamin’s arguments in “The Task.” In essence, we

4 Creating interconnected realms of exegesis, a strange notion, but one that aligns quite well with Benjamin’s perspective.

5 E.g., a brief acknowledgment of the pivotal importance of Haroldo de Campos’s studies on “The Task of the Translator,” including his important reception of Derrida’s thoughts on Benjamin’s essay. Some examples might be his essays “Para além do princípio da saudade. A teoria benjaminiana da tradução” (1984/2013) and “A língua pura na teoria da tradução de Walter Benjamin” (1997).

might say, Benjamin argues that a translator's role transcends the mere conveyance of the original text's meaning; it encompasses capturing and preserving its "ongoing life" (Robinson, p. 36). And literary translation should strive to reveal the linguistic uniqueness of the original in philosophical, metaphysical, and messianistic dimensions. Since the 1960s, "The Task" has profoundly influenced translation theory, making it essential reading in hermeneutical translation studies.

Robinson has conducted a meticulous analysis of Benjamin's text, dissecting it into 78 thematically coherent passages, which are then organized into 19 sections, each assigned a corresponding title. Regrettably, these passages and sections are exclusively detailed in the Introduction rather than the Contents.⁶ Essentially, Robinson provides readers with two translations of the original text: the first, a line-by-line rendition presented alongside the original, is a precise, specifically interlinear, or philological translation. The second is an excellent paraphrase and could be regarded as a high-quality translation in numerous instances. For each segment, both the interlinear translation and paraphrase are complemented by a commentary that thoroughly documents and discusses the nuanced aspects found in the specialized literature corresponding to each translated text segment.

The commentaries predominantly draw from critical literature published in English, supplemented by key studies in German and French. It might have been beneficial to take into account also some of the substantial contributions in German by Alfred Hirsch (1995), however, or the significant commentaries provided by Laurent Lamy and Alexis Nouss (1997) in

6 Particularly in the case of a book that, alongside its Index, could serve as a practical handbook for studies in English, French, and German on "The Task."

their translation of the essay. Naturally, it is unreasonable to expect that even a work titled *A Centennial Commentary* would encompass the entire spectrum of critical literature on a subject which enjoys such a global reception and influence across diverse disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, theology, history, or translation studies. Nevertheless, it is somewhat intriguing to emphasize the statement that “like every other reading of Benjamin’s essay, mine too is somewhat personal and idiosyncratic” (p. 5). While it seems to be clear that certain interpretations of Benjamin’s ideas in “The Task” resonate across various cultural fields of its reception, adopting a more transversal approach might have offered valuable perspectives to enrich the discussion.⁷

In the Introduction, Robinson underscores his primary contribution to the scholarly discourse on Benjamin’s essay, emphasizing the significance of the author’s view that the Platonic forms of both the original and the translation serve as “vitalistic agents” propelling “sacred history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) toward the messianic culmination of pure language (p. 5).⁸ Robinson’s contributions to various aspects of “The Task” prove to be truly inspiring. Particularly noteworthy are his insights into Benjamin’s establishment of a “*trans*phenomenology of the

7 Acknowledging the extensive debates and studies on “The Task” in Spanish (e.g., Andrés Claro 2012), Portuguese (e.g., Haroldo de Campos 1987, 2006 and 2013, or Susana Kampff Lages 2002), partially accessible in German through Michaela Wolf’s edition of *Übersetzungswissenschaft in Brasilien* (1997), and, of course, in Italian (e.g., Carlo Salzani). Recognizing these and others as significant arenas of academic debate on the subject would undoubtedly enhance the volume.

8 Andrés Claro had already put forth related ideas in his monumental commentary, *Las vasijas quebradas. Cuatro variaciones sobre ‘la tarea del traductor’*, back in 2012.

phenomenon”⁹ (p. 21–22, 36–41, 81), his commentaries on the Benjamin’s intertwining of translation and life (cf. p. 36–41), and his examination of Benjamin’s “Gefühlston” through the lens of Bakhtinian dialogism (cf. p. 129–130). These, along with numerous other lucid and original interpretations, add a commendable dimension to the commentaries.

The emphasis on messianism, mysticism, and “sacred history” in Robinson’s commentaries, although they might be permeating Benjamin’s work, might be somewhat less captivating.¹⁰ Especially for those interested in the ongoing significance of “The Task” in today’s hermeneutical debates on translation theory, this is a facet that I would appreciate seeing further explored by the author. I’m thinking, for instance, on Benjamin’s ideas concerning translatability and the overarching complementarity among languages. His notion of languages converging towards an imagined pure language, supposedly bringing them all together, prompts the question: could these ideas be related to an evolutionary perspective, one that sees languages and cultures as ecosystems? In his early essay, “Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916), Benjamin breaks away from anthropocentric perspectives by disentangling the concepts of language, speech, and

9 Robinson defines it as “turning an actual embodied, embedded, extended, enactive, and affective experience into a revelation, or at least intimation, of a transcendental and therefore disembodied truth” (p. 5).

10 Nonetheless, exceptions exist to my personal (and undoubtedly also idiosyncratic) reservations regarding the interest of the theological dimension of “The Task.” A notable instance is Robinson’s thought-provoking proposal to connect Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” (as discussed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) with the idealized conception of translation as a tangent, fleetingly touching a circle at only a single point, drawing inspiration from Kabbalistic texts (cf. pp. 154–156, 167–168).

translation from the human condition. He presents a vision of continuous linguistic and semiotic evolution where the notion of originals becomes elusive. This perspective, echoed in “The Task,” aligns with Haroldo de Campos’ insightful characterization: originals are essentially “translations of other translations.”¹¹

Robinson adheres closely to Benjamin’s ideal of carrying literalness into the syntax of the target language, without fear of distorting it. This approach mirrors what Hölderlin did when translating Pindar and Sophocles—his versions were considered exemplary, even ‘archetypal’ by Benjamin. Robinson dissects the syntax of English in a way that reproduces Benjamin’s German with the utmost possible literalness. Naturally, English readers will find it profoundly unfamiliar to encounter a sentence like this:

Only the superficial thinking will, in that it the self-sufficient sense of the last denies, both for synonymous explain. To it opposing, is thereupon to point out that certain relational concepts their good, indeed perhaps best sense keep if they not from outset on exclusively to the humans tied become. (Benjamin transl. by Robinson, p. 28)

Certainly, Robinson consistently pairs his interlinear versions with the original, breaking down each sentence into typographic units. This meticulous presentation allows for the alignment of German and English words whenever possible. However, it also adds to the difficulty of reading the word-by-word translation with its unfamiliar and foreignized syntax (cf. Figure 1).

11 And furthermore, we could ask: what if Benjamin didn’t see Hölderlin’s translations as a process that renders sense completely unintelligible? Instead, he might have approached this concept differently. What if we interpret Benjamin’s perspective through the lens of what Haroldo de Campos termed anthropophagic translation (see footnote 18)?

9 Translatability (3): the value of excluding the human

Nur das oberflächliche Denken wird, indem es den selbständigen Sinn
 Only the superficial thinking will, in that it the self-sufficient sense
 der letzten leugnet, beide für gleichbedeutend erklären. Ihm gegenüber
 of the last denies, both for synonymous explain. To it opposing
 ist darauf hinzuweisen, daß gewisse Relationsbegriffe ihren guten,
 is thereupon to point out that certain relational concepts their good,
 ja vielleicht besten Sinn behalten, wenn sie nicht von vorne
 indeed perhaps best sense keep if they not from outset
 herein ausschließlich auf den Menschen bezogen werden.
 on exclusively to the humans tied become.

Paraphrase: Given a choice between defining translatability in terms of the capabilities of human translators and in terms of the transcendental Form of translation, only the superficial thinker will deny the independence of the latter and claim that both come to the same thing. Certain relational concepts are best served by pulling back from an exclusive focus on human beings.

Figure 1: Philological translation and paraphrase in Robinson (2023: 28)

Robinson's philological translation seeks to embody what Benjamin admired in Hölderlin's versions, endowing translation with an almost equal status to the original. Creation and translation become comparable through the ideal of interlinearity and the pursuit of what Benjamin termed the "pure language." This concept embodies the presence of shared essential elements across all languages, bringing the idea of translation into closer association with the realm of sacred texts. I prefer to think that this is not necessarily a mandatory approach to translation; instead, it serves as a guiding principle.

Robinson tackles Benjamin's assertion that "translation is a form" by presenting two translations that are fundamentally contrastive. One version is profoundly alienating due to its adherence to a syntactically interlinear structure, while the other, described as a paraphrase, seeks to maintain the hermeneutic

complexity of the original, albeit rendering the text in a much more accessible form:

Given a choice between defining translatability in terms of the capabilities of human translators and in terms of the transcendental Form of translation, only the superficial thinker will deny the independence of the latter and claim that both come to the same thing. Certain relational concepts are best served by pulling back from an exclusive focus on human beings. (Benjamin transl. by Robinson, p. 28)

In this paraphrase, the priority is given to expanding the first sentence at the expense of the second. However, this achieves a clear unity of meaning, assigning a conclusive function to the second sentence. As a philosophical text in the English language, it serves as a valid translation, aligning even with what functionalists term as the *skopos*. I think that most of Robinson's paraphrases of the German version of "The Task" could easily serve as an exemplary instance of functionalist translation within an educational and informative context. It is regrettable that he chose not to compile and present them as a cohesive text in an annex to his book.¹² Such an approach could have broadened the reach of this *Centennial Commentary* to a much wider audience, not exclusively academic, as Benjamin's arguments inherently pose challenges in communication, already requiring multiple readings or intratranslations in German. Of course, the question remains whether Benjamin's dismissal of the communicative value of translation should be 'translated' in a comprehensive, functionalist manner.

Considering this complexity, Robinson, via his paraphrases, always manages a nearly lossless philosophical explanation. But commencing with a philological, syntactically interlinear translation was, of course, essential. It illustrates the ideal of

12 It would have been also fascinating to read the interlinear translation as a complete text.

translation advocated by Benjamin in his essay from an evolutionist standpoint, emphasizing the importance of understanding historical continuities and discontinuities. There might not be a widespread audience that fully appreciates a syntactically reorganized sentence that deviates from conventional norms. But philological translation is always the method if one wishes to initiate the translation of highly complex, philosophical, or poetic texts. An active engagement with the source language allows a maximum approximation to the target language, thereby deepening the understanding of the text.

Benjamin recognized a limitation in interlinear translation, as indicated in a passage from “The Task:” “To the nineteenth century Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles stood as monstrous examples of such literalism” (Benjamin transl. by Robinson, p. 131).¹³ Robinson connects Benjamin’s mention of the risk associated with this form of translation insofar as it results in the “incomprehensible” to the notion that not only does “literalism threaten to impede understanding,” but it also hinders “the sacred development of languages toward the messianic culmination of pure language” (p. 131).¹⁴

The German term “monströs” in the original, akin to the English “monstruous,” conveys a notion of deformity, evoking a certain fear of the extraordinary while also bearing a distinct power and significant presence. The practice of a literal and syntactically interlinear translation, as a form of monstrosity, compels the target language to merge with the source language. Simultaneously, it leads to the linguistic decomposition

13 The original reads: “Dem neunzehnten Jahrhundert standen Hölderlins Sophokles-Übersetzungen als monströse Beispiele solcher Wörtlichkeit vor Augen” (apud Robinson, p. 131).

14 Once again, I find it excessive to emphasise the theme of messianism from what I consider to be a necessary, actualising perspective.

and deconstruction of the original text, as the translated text intricately intertwines with the structure of the original work. Benjamin aimed to explore a foreign language through the lens of his own, treating it as a form and trying to attain stability through the dynamic process of change.¹⁵ He sought an essence, fully aware of its elusive nature—something he referred to as “pure language,” suggesting thereby a fundamental commonality akin to the shared elements that all languages possess by virtue of being languages. It’s as if we are to conceptualize languages on an ontological level, almost in a materialistic sense, especially when Benjamin sees translation coming near to poetry (cf. p. 121–122).¹⁶ And it’s worth remembering here that “The Task” was crafted in connection with the experience of translating poetry—specifically, the poetry of Baudelaire, the embodiment of modernity in *poiésis* for Benjamin.¹⁷

Regarding Hölderlin’s translation, which Benjamin idealized as a form, a closer examination of Benjamin’s use of the term “das Unverständliche” (apud Robinson, p. 131) might suggest an interpretation that would allow us to set aside messianic undertones. In the Kantian sense, the German term ‘Verstand’ signifies the power of thought, namely intelligence prevailing over sensuality. This power is denied by ‘Un-Verstand’ or ‘un-verständlich,’ which emphasizes the sensible and the subjective. What if Benjamin did not perceive Hölderlin’s translations as an incomprehensible “flipping the reproduction

15 A kind of allostasis.

16 “Mallarmé’s idea that a pre-Babelian and thus pre-translational truth would have been material, materializable, seems to suggest also that a post-Babelian return to ‘pure language’ might restore that state” (p. 122).

17 Although it is of course true that there is an “astonishing gap between Benjamin’s practical experience of translating and his understanding of translation theory” (p. 127).

on its head” (p. 132), but rather as the opposite—something Haroldo de Campos referred to as an “anthropophagic” or “luciferian” translation? Or Erin Mouré as “transelation”?¹⁸

Translation as a Form lacks a formal conclusion, but the final commentary on the last two sentences of “The Task” could be regarded as a substitute. Robinson paraphrases them in this way:

When it comes to Holy Writ, such boundless trust is required of the translation that, just as in the source text language and revelation are united without tension, so too must literalism and freedom be united in the form of the interlinear version. For to some degree all great writings harbor their own virtual translations between the lines—and this is true in the very highest degree of scripture. The interlinear version of Holy Writ is the prototype or ideal of all translation. (p. 187)

The biblical (Hebrew) foundation of “The Task” seems to become unmistakably clear when Robinson concludes by stating that “Perhaps the deepest and most ancient reason for the sense that ‘we’ ‘commonsensically’ have that the claims Benjamin makes in the ‘Task’ are counterintuitive and even bizarre is that ‘we’ tend to take Christian body–spirit (word–sense) dualism as the ‘true’ ‘nature’ of translation” (p. 189). Robinson asserts that “Benjamin’s essay requires midrashic commentary to emerge into clarity” (*ibid.*). Unlike a literal interpretation

18 Influenced by the modernist Brazilian cultural metaphor of ‘anthropophagy,’ Haroldo de Campos introduced the concept of ‘anthropophagic translation.’ This term encapsulates a transformative approach to translation, wherein source texts are reinterpreted in ways that are innovative and culturally enriching within the context of the translator’s culture and language. Anthropophagic translation celebrates the creative possibilities inherent in translation, seeing it as a dynamic form of cultural exchange and artistic expression (cf. e.g. Campos 2006; cf. also Mouré 2004). Seeking to clarify the “incomprehensible” primarily by attributing it to Hölderlin’s struggle with a presumed schizophrenia (p. 132–133) may prove to be insufficient.

(also known as *peshat*), the term midrash denotes a profound exegesis aiming to unveil potential revelatory spaces, encircling, scrutinizing and revealing interpretations not apparent in the superficial reading of a text.

Throughout the book, Robinson adeptly clarifies how the Christian discourse, affirming the complete translatability of its Holy Texts, directly contradicts Benjamin's premise of an ideal translation grounded in the Jewish belief that their Bible exists solely in Hebrew. Consequently, he suggests, "Benjamin's essay would have been considerably easier to read had he explained all this as he went along. As this and other commentaries on the essay show, for clarity, his argument truly necessitates a book-length exposition" (p. 190).

For those contending with the perceived mystical inclinations in Benjamin's theories on language and translation, especially in light of Antoine Berman's perspective as referenced by Robinson, solace may be found in the concluding paragraph of *Translation as a Form*.

Full disclosure: I don't trust it fully either. More specifically, I don't surrender total ontological belief to it. I don't trust it to represent the true nature of translation, or literature, or the universe. I trust it as a narrative, a story about mythical and mystical forces at work and at play in the universe. I trust it in the way I trust Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, or any other amazing and enjoyable story. It doesn't have to be true to be amazing. (Robinson, p. 190)

However, Robinson's assertion that there is no "need to go beyond [Benjamin] or hold back from him, because I am writing a commentary, not a credo— and a commentary on a tantalizing but cryptic story" (*ibid.*) is also somewhat disheartening. The conclusion of the book appears to leave many questions unanswered, conveying the impression that much of the preceding discussion is being undervalued.

Does this profoundly influential essay, deliberated and commented upon extensively in nearly all world languages, deserve to be reduced to nothing more than a “tantalizing but cryptic story”? Does this suggest that the commentary, as beneficial and elucidating as it may be, is the only approach to this epoch-making text? The reader is left contemplating why several crucial suggestions for interpreting and updating Benjamin’s essay were introduced but not further explored.¹⁹ Most importantly, those acquainted with research in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking cultural field might miss certain interpretative approaches, especially those influenced by Haroldo de Campos. Could interlinear translation be perceived as one language appropriating another? After all, Robinson has defined freedom in translation as “the translational counterpart to source-textual revelation” (p. 187).

I may have overlooked a lot of intriguing details from Robinson’s valuable and insightful exploration of Benjamin’s seminal essay and its criticism. However, I am confident that his *Centennial Commentary* will continue to stimulate engaging discussions in the future. In summary, it stands out as an evolving, comprehensive, and thorough guide to “The Task of the Translator”—a reference work, particularly within the linguistic domains scrutinized by Robinson. Lastly, in my opinion, the paraphrases of Benjamin’s text could potentially offer a comprehensive and innovative translation. It would be highly beneficial and fascinating to consider releasing them separately.

19 E.g., Pratt’s [2008] ‘social spaces’ and ‘contact zones,’ Mudimbe-Boyi’s [2002] ‘in-between,’ Emily Apter’s [2006] ‘translation zone,’ Lydia Liu’s [1995] ‘middle-zone of interlinear translation,’ or Bhabha’s [1994] ‘third space,’ where ‘hybridisation’ takes place, and ‘newness’ is generated” (Robinson 2023: 189).

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