Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

(introduction to a Baudelaire translation, 1923; this text translated by Harry Zohn, 1968)

[This is taken from the anthology, *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000).]

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1. In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an "ideal" receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.
2. Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original? 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. For what does a literary work "say"? What does it communicate? It "tells very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information -- hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations. But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information -- as even a poor translator will admit -- the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic," something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? This, actually, is the cause of another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. This will be true whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader. However, if it were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader's sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise?
3. Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability. The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it? [. . .]
4. Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifest itself in its translatability. It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connected a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as he manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original -- not so much for its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stag of continues life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. [. . .] The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all

of natural life through the more encompassing life of history. And indeed, is not the continued life of works of art far easier to recognize than the continual life of animal species? The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. 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. [. . .]

5. With this attempt at an explication [that languages "are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express"] our study appears to rejoin, after futile detours, the traditional theory of translation. If the kinship of languages is to be demonstrated by translations, how else can this be done but by conveying the form and meaning of the original as accurately as possible? To be sue, that theory would be hard put to define the nature of this accuracy and therefore could shed no light on what is important in a translation. Actually, however, the kinship of languages is brought out by a translation far more profoundly and clearly than in the superficial and indefinable similarity of two works of literature. To grasp the genuine relationship between an original and a translation requires an investigation analogous to the argumentation by which a critique of cognition would have to prove the impossibility of an image theory. There it is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity, not even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife -- which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living -- the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendency of a writer's literary style may in time wither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound quaint. To seek the essence of such changes, as well as he equally constant changes in meaning, in the subjectivity of posterity rather than in the very life of language and its works, would mean -- even allowing for the crudest psychologism -- to confuse the root cause of a thing with its essence. More pertinently, it would mean denying, by an importance of thought, one of the most powerful and fruitful historical processes. And eve3n if one tried to turn an author's last stroke of the pen into the *coup de grâce* of is work, this still would not save that dead theory of translation. For just as the tenor and the significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.
6. [Benjamin talks about language 'kinship,' which to him is not a matter of likeness or identities of origin but in "intentionality." Nonetheless, words from two different languages are not 'interchangeable.'] this, to be sure, is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt. Indirectly, however, the growth of religions ripens the hidden seed into a higher development of language. Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products, its goal is undeniably a final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation. In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. In cannot live there permanently, to be sure. [. .

.] 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 deigned as the element that does not lend itself to translation. Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien. This disjunction prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous. For any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages. Thus translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew and at other points of time. [. . .]

7. The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original. This is a feature of translation which basically differentiates it from the poet's work, because the effort of the latter is never directed at the language as such, at its totality, but solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects. [. . .] The traditional concepts in any discussion of translations are fidelity and license -- the freedom of faithful reproduction and, in its service, fidelity to the word. These ideas seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of a meaning. [Benjamin discusses the 'untranslatability' of connotation, etc.] Finally, it is self-evident how greatly fidelity in reproducing the form impedes the rendering of the sense. Thus no case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning. Meaning is served far better -- and literature and language far worse -- by the unrestrained license of bad translators. Of necessity, therefore, the demand for literalness, whose justification is obvious, whose legitimate ground is quite obscure, must be understood in a more meaningful context. Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel [Benjamin here invokes the Kabbalistic doctrine of *tsim-tsum*, the breaking of the vessels and the gathering up of the 'sparks of light,' which will usher in Messianic time, one of Benjamin's life-long concerns]. In the realm of translation, too, the words 'in the beginning was the word' [Benjamin writes the Greek here] apply. 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*. Therefore it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, doe snot black its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade.
8. Fidelity and freedom in translation 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? 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 and yet infinitely remote, concealed or distinguishable, fragmented or powerful. In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated,; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is hat very nucleus of pure language. Though concealed and fragmentary, it is an active force in life as the symbolized thing itself, whereas it inhabits linguistic creations only in symbolized form. While that ultimate essence, pure language, in the various tongues is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language -- which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages -- all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. This very stratum furnishes a new and higher justification for free translation; this justification does not derive from the sense of what is to be conveyed, for the emancipation from this sense is the task of fidelity. Rather, for the sake of pure language, a free translation bases the test on its own language.. It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language. [Here Benjamin talks about various German translators.]

9. 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 is information, the less fertile a field is it 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 a 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 the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touch by the wind. Hölderlin's translations are prototypes of their kind; they are to even the most perfect renderings of their texts as a prototype is to a model. This can be demonstrated by comparing Hölderlin's and Rudolf Borchardt's translations of Pindar's Third Pythian Ode. For this very reason Hölderlin's translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; 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 Write 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 translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages. Just as, in the original, language and revelation are one without any tension, so the translation must be one with the original in the form of

the interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united. For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.

Petrarch: Sonnet 140

The following literal prose translation of Petrarch's "Sonnet 140," the poem translated by both Wyatt and Surrey, is taken from p. 9 of *The English Sonnet* by Patrick Cruttwell (Longmans, Green & Co., 1996).

Love, who lives and reigns in my thought and keeps his principal seat in my heart, comes like an armed warrior into my forehead, there places himself and there sets up his banner. She who teaches me to love and to suffer and who wishes that reason, modesty and reverence should restrain my great desire and burning hope, thrusts aside and disdains our ardour. Wherefore Love in terror flies to my heart, abandoning all his enterprise, and laments and trembles; there he hides himself and no more appears without. What can I do, when my lord is afraid, except stay with him until the last hour? For he makes a fine end who dies loving well.

Francesco Petrarca in Translation.

Amor, che nel penser mio vive e regna
   E 'l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene,
   Talor armato ne la fronte vène,
Ivi si loca, et ivi pon sua insegna.
Quella ch'amare e sofferir ne 'nsegna
   E vòl che 'l gran desio, I'accesa spene,
   Ragion, vergogna e reverenza affrene,
Di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna.
   Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core,
Lasciando ogni sua impresa, e piange, e trema;
   Ivi s'asconde, e non appar piú fòre.
   Che poss'io far, temendo il mio signor
Se non star seco infin a l'ora estrema?
Ché bel fin fa chi ben amando more.

Francesco Petrarca.

Love that doth reign and live within my thought
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.
But she that taught me love and suffer pain,
My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire
With shamefaced look to shadow and refrain,
Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.
And coward Love, then, to the heart apace
Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and 'plain,
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain,
Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove,--
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.

Henry Howard Earl of Surrey. (1517-47)

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)

The Long Love that in my Thought doth Harbour

The longë love that in my thought doth harbour
And in mine hert doth keep his residence,
Into my face presseth with bold pretence
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
She that me learneth to love and suffer
And will that my trust and lustës negligence
Be rayned by reason, shame, and reverence,
With his hardiness taketh displeasure.
Wherewithall unto the hert's forest he fleeth,
Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
And there him hideth and not appeareth.
What may I do when my master feareth
But in the field with him to live and die?
For good is the life ending faithfully.

Petrarch, 189	**Trans., Anna Maria Armi**
Passa la nave mia colma d'oblio	My ship is sailing, full of mindless woe,
Per aspro mare, a mezza notte il verno,	Through the rough sea, in winter midnight drear,
Enfra Scilla e Caribdi; et al governo	Between Scylla and Charybdis; there to steer
Siede 'l signore, anzi 'l nimico mio;	Stands my master, or rather stands my foe.
A ciascun remo un penser ponto e rio	At each oar sits a rapid wicked thought
Che la tempesta e 'l fin par ch'abbi a scherno;	Which seems to scoff at storms and at their end;
La vela rompe un vento umido, eterno,	The sail, by wet eternal winds distraught,
Di sospir, si spernaze, e desio;	With hopes, desires and sighs is made to rend.
Pioggia di lagrimar, nebbia di sdegni	A rain of tears, a fog of scornful lines,
Bagna e rallenta le giá stanche sarte,	Washes and tugs at the too sluggish cords
Che son d'error con ignoranzia attorto	Which by error with ignorance are wound.
Celansi i duo mei dolci usati segni;	Vanished are my two old beloved signs,
Morta fra l'onde è la ragion e l'arte,	Dead in the waves are all reason and words,
Tal ch'i' 'ncomincio a desperar del porto.	And I despair ever to reach the ground.

Sir Thomas Wyatt.

My galley, chargèd with forgetfulness,
Thorough sharp seas in winter nights doth pass
'Tween rock and rock; and eke mine en'my, alas,
That is my lord, steereth with cruelness;
And every owre a thought in readiness,
As though that death were light in such a case.
An endless wind doth tear the sail apace
Of forced sighs and trusty fearfulness.
A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain,
Hath done the weared cords great hinderance;
Wreathèd with error and eke with ignorance.
The stars be hid that led me to this pain;
Drownèd is Reason that should me comfort,
And I remain despairing of the port.

VEGLIA by Giuseppi Ungaretti
Three English translations of the Italian poem *Veglia* which was written while Ungaretti was a soldier in the First World War.

a. Wake
Hill Four, the 23rd of December 1915

A whole night
thrown near
a massacred
companion
with his mouth
sneering
facing the whole moon
with the congestion
of his hands
penetrating
my silence
I have written
letters full of love

I have never been
attached to life
so much
translated by Fiamma Ferraro

b. **Deathwatch**

All night long
thrown against
a buddy
slain
with his gnashing
teeth
bared to the full moon
with his bloated
hands
penetrating
my silence
I was writing
letters full of love

Never have I hugged
life
so hard

Cima Quattro, December 1915
translated by Sonia Raiziss and Alfredo de Palchi

c**. Vigil**
Cima Quattro, 23 December, 1915

One entire night
thrown beside
a comrade
massacred
with the mouth of him
gnashed
facing the full moon
with the congestion
of the hands of him
penetrated
into my silence
I wrote
letters filled with love

Never have I been
so
attached to life

Here is the original poem:

Un'intera nottata
buttato vicino
a un compagno
massacrato
con la sua bocca
digrignata
volta al plenilunio
con la congestione
delle sue mani
penetrata
nel mio silenzio
ho scritto
lettere piene d'amore

Non sono mai stato
tanto
attaccato alla vita

VERSO VIENNA . **TOWARDS VIENNA**.

Il convento barocco
di schiuma e di biscotto
adombrava uno scorcio d'acque lente
e tavole imbandite, qua e la sparse
di foglie e zenzero.

Emerse un nuotatore, sgrondò sotto
una nube di moscerini
chiese del nostro viaggio,
parlò a lungo del suo d'oltre confine.

Additò il ponte in faccia che si passa
(informò) con un soldo di passaggio.
Salutò con la mano, sprofondò,
fu la corrente stessa….
Ed al suo posto,
battistrada balzò da una rimessa
un bassotto festoso che latrava,

fraterna unica voce dentro l'afa.

(Eugenio Montale)

The baroque convent
all biscuit and foam
shaded a glimpse of slow waters
and tables already set, scattered here and there
with leaves and ginger.

A swimmer emerged, dripping
under a cloud of gnats,
inquired about our journey, spoke
at length about his own, beyond the frontier.

He pointed to the bridge before us,
you cross over (he said) with a penny toll
With a wave of his hand, he sank down,
became the river itself……….
And in his place
to announce our coming, out of a shed
bounced a dachshund, gaily barking -

sole brotherly presence in the sticky heat.

(William Arrowsmith)

NEAR VIENNA

The baroque convent
foam and biscuit
shaded a brief moment of slow water
and set tables, scattered here and there
with leaves and ginger.

A swimmer emerged, dripping
under a cloud of gnats, inquired
about our journey, going on
about his own across the border.

He pointed to the bridge in front of us
that costs (he said) a penny to cross over
He waved, dove in again, became
the river……..
And in his place
a happy dachshund, our pacesetter,
bounded barking out of a garage,

The one fraternal voice inside the heat.

(Jonathan Galassi)

TOWARD VIENNA.

The baroque convent
made of foam and biscuit,
shaded an inlet of smooth water
and well provided tables scattered
here and there with leaves and ginger.

A swimmer surfaced, dripping
under a cloud of gnats,
who inquired about our journey
and told of his voyages beyond the pale.

Indicating the bridge before us which
you cross (he said) with ten cent's toll,
he waved goodbye and then submerged,
– he was the stream itself……
Understudy
in his place, a dachshund bounced
with a howl from a nearby shed,

sole fraternal voice in the sultry heat.

(Edith Farnsworth)