

- 1 This text is an excerpt from a longer work in which Paul Legault “translates” abstract terms included in Harry Zohn’s translation of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay on translation into “simpler” phrases. A lexicon of selected terms by Matthew Goodman follows.

FROM “WHAT THE
TRANSLATOR HAS TO DO”¹

RESPONSE TO À REBOURS

PAUL LEGAULT

It tells very little to those who understand it.

—Walter Benjamin

If you are trying to like something that someone else made, don’t think about what other people think about it. Besides the fact that talking about a lot of people or the people they get along with makes it difficult for you to get what they mean, the idea of the perfect idea: that someone would get what that idea means, isn’t helpful, at least when it comes to something which is thought about, because all that says is that people are like this or like that. It says that people really exist and that people also exist sort of, though nothing really cares either way. Poems and things that you can see and things that you can hear that are made to be thought about and other stuff like that don’t care about you.

Are translations for people who don’t get what they were before? I guess maybe a little since it makes more sense then that where they are isn’t where what’s important to a lot of people comes from. Not to mention the fact that it makes more sense then that people keep talking about how things stay the same over and over. What does something talk about? And what does something talk about in order to let other people know about something? It doesn’t talk that much about stuff in order to add to what the people who get it know. What’s most important about it isn’t the fact that it says something or says

something about something that lets someone know about something — so, it's something that no one cares about. That's when you know it isn't a good translation. But don't we get that the most important thing that makes up a written thing is what isn't anything but is really a part of what makes up the thing anyway — even a bad translator knows that much — the thing that can't be thought about, the thing that is hard to know everything about but about which you want to know everything, the thing that is what poetry is, which only translators who write poetry can do? That's why there's something about translations that aren't as good that — because of the way what we think is the last thing that thought is, we can say it's what you sent out which was something that wasn't very important or real. That's what happens when a translation tries to help whoever it is who's trying to read it. But if the thing was supposed to do that, then the thing that it was made from would also be supposed to do that. If the first thing doesn't care about the person or thing that was trying to find out what it means, then why should the translation be based on that idea that we started this with by not starting with it?

Translation is a way of doing things. If you want to get why it's a way of doing things, then you have to think about how it started, since that's where the translation's reason that it has to be that way is: the translatability of it. Whether or not something's translatable doesn't mean one thing. It means two things. One of them is that the right guy or gal for the job exists and is the right guy or gal for everyone who's going to come across it. And the other thing, which is the more important of the things, is that what's important to it is that it's made to be translated, and it wants to be so bad that it starts talking about how it wants someone to please do the important work of translating it. The way it's supposed to be is that the first thing that was asked can be told what to do only if things are right for it; but the second one can be told what to do in a way that is definitely the case because it shows you how it exists.

Only thoughts that aren't very well thought out will say that there isn't the fact that the more recently said thing doesn't mean something by itself and also say that both of the things that were asked are important in the same way. Someone should say that particular ways of thinking that have to do with each other keep meaning what they mean, and maybe their most important thing, if they are only told about to people. Maybe someone should, for example, talk about someone who existed or something that happened before time happened to it that you can't forget about even if everyone else forgets about it. If what was the normal thing for that kind of person who existed or that kind of thing that happened before time happened to it was for it not to be able to be forgotten, that wouldn't mean that something's necessarily wrong but only mean that there's something that people can't do, and probably also a thing that talks about a place where people can do that: what God doesn't forget. Another way that is like that: the translatability of things that are made by things that are used to write should be thought about even if people show that they aren't able to translate them. If a way of thinking about translation that doesn't let you not think that way exists, would they not really be translatable a little? The question about whether or not the translation of particular things that were made by the things used to write and speak is something that someone wanted to happen should be thought about this way. Because this is where you can think: If translation is a way of doing things, translatability has to be an important part of some things that were made.

"WHAT THE TRANSLATOR HAS TO DO"

LEXICON

COMPILED BY
MATTHEW GOODMAN

<i>Benjamin's Term</i>	<i>Zohn's Translation</i>
1. Kunst	Art
2. Leibliches und geistiges Wesen	Man's physical and spiritual existence
3. Mitteilen	Say
4. Dichtung	Literary work
5. Unfaßbar	Unfathomable
6. Geheimnisvoll	Mysterious
7. Dichterisch	Poetic
8. Leser	Reader
9. Original	Original
10. Unwesentliches Inhalt	Inessential content
11. Form	Mode
12. Gesetz	Law
13. Zulänglicher Übersetzer	Adequate translator
14. Problematisch	Contingently
15. Apodiktisch	Apodictically
16. Relationsbegriffe	Correlative concepts
17. Unvergeßliches Leben	Unforgettable life
18. Gedenken Gottes	God's remembrance
19. Sprachlicher Gebilde	Linguistic creations
20. Übersetzung	Translation

Legault's Translation

Something that someone else made
People really exist and people exist sort of
Talk about in order to let other people know about something
Written thing
The thing that can't be thought about
The thing that is hard to know everything about but about which you want to know everything
The thing that is what poetry is
Whoever it is who's trying to read it
The thing it was made from
What you sent out which wasn't very important
Way of doing things
Reason that it has to be that way
Right guy or gal for the job
If things are right for it
A way that is definitely the case because it shows you how it exists
Ways of thinking that have to do with each other
Someone who existed that you can't forget about
What God doesn't forget
Things that are made by things that are used to write
Translation