The Age of Translation. A Commentary on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' by Antoine Berman, Isabelle Berman, and Valentina Sommella, translated and with an introduction by Chantal Wright, Routledge, 2018, 216 pp., £29.99/£110.00 (paperback/hardback) ISBN: 9781138886315/ 9781138886308

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The Age of Translation is a book-length commentary on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator". The book is made up of ten "cahiers", or notebooks, each one corresponding to a seminar delivered by French translation theorist Antoine Berman as part of a series given at the *Collège international de philosophie* in 1984-5. Berman had intended to work the seminars into a book but was not able to complete this project during his lifetime. The original French version, *L'Âge de la traduction*, edited by Isabelle Berman and Valentina Sommella, was produced from Berman's seminar notes and recordings of the seminars and published posthumously in 2008. This version is a full English translation, with additional introduction, commentary and notes by the translator, Chantal Wright. As Wright observes in her Introduction, *The Age of Translation* is thus "an English translation of a French commentary written about a German text that … prefaces the German author's own translation of a French text" (p. 1). Operating at the interstices of commentary and translation, and moving between complex layers of translated and untranslated language, Wright's translation represents a major intellectual contribution to the discipline of translation studies.

This is a book that does three different things, all of them important. First, it offers Anglophone readers a lengthy commentary on one of the most cited but perhaps least understood essays in the translation studies canon, Walter Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" ("The Task of the Translator"). Second, it adds significantly to the amount of work by Antoine Berman that is available in English, opening up the

possibility for a deeper and more contextualised appreciation of this important figure from French translation studies. Finally, through Wright's introduction and the notes that accompany her translation, it positions both Benjamin's and Berman's contributions within current debates in Anglophone translation studies, representing in its own right an original reflection on literariness, translatability, and the connections between translation and philosophy.

Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" is both notoriously difficult to understand and notoriously polarising (the two things are closely connected). In *The Age of Translation,* Antoine Berman declares the essay to be "*the* twentieth-century text on translation" (p. 27); this contrasts with the view of leading American translation studies scholar David Bellos, who concludes in an essay entitled "Halting Walter" (2010) that Benjamin's essay is an academic emperor with no clothes. Unsurprisingly – for who would spend four years translating a commentary on a text that they had concluded was nonsensical– Wright comes to Benjamin's essay from a position that is close to Berman's, identifying her primary motivation for undertaking the translation project as the possibility of "an unparalleled intensity of engagement with Benjamin's text" or even an opportunity to "glimpse the 'pure language'" (p. 3) that Benjamin imagines emerging through the translation process. As both Wright and Bellos observe, there is a mismatch between the opacity of Benjamin's essay and the frequency with which it (or rather, very limited and decontextualized portions from it) is cited by translation studies scholars. In a sense, Bellos's essay and Wright's book share the same goal: halting this easy and unreflective recycling of Benjamin's ideas and promoting a full and intellectually honest engagement with Benjamin's text. Here, though, the similarities end: Bellos's short essay deliberately limits itself to discussing Harry Zohn's 1968 English translation of "The Task of the Translator" and is ultimately

dismissive of the essay's value; Wright's book is an intense engagement with Benjamin's German version through a French commentary and stands in itself as evidence of the way in which "The Task of the Translator" can yet enrich translation studies by serving as a stimulus to philosophical debate.

To illustrate the value of *The Age of Translation* for helping us to engage with Benjamin's essay, I will focus on what is in my opinion one of the most enigmatic statements from "The Task of the Translator". This is the statement "Übersetzung ist eine Form" [Translation is a form], which opens the third paragraph of the essay. Over the many years of reading "The Task of the Translator", I have never really understood what Benjamin means by this. Unlike other writers, who would usually build up to such a statement or at least offer some context against which it might be read, Benjamin places this statement into the essay with no lead-up and no explicit explanation of what he means. For the reader –let alone the lecturer attempting to elucidate Benjamin's essay for her students– this part of Benjamin's essay is like a climbing wall with no holds of any kind. There is nothing to grasp onto, no block from which to begin the ascent. Berman's commentary, though, offers a way up: "To grasp the meaning of the term, we have to look to Goethe" (p. 62). Berman argues that if we see translation as form in Goethe's sense, then translation is "a sort of metamorphosis of the original text", a metamorphosis that is governed by the principle of translatability (p. 64). Berman goes on to connect this idea of translation as *form* with the philosophical concept of *kairos* (not explicitly mentioned by Benjamin) and explores its relevance for his own teleological view of retranslation. Now, while not all readers would find their reading of Benjamin extending in the same directions as Berman's –here or elsewhere– what Berman's commentary does is give us a first foothold: we can investigate Goethe's discussions of "form" for ourselves, and see if the resonances in Benjamin's essay are

such that we agree that this can be seen as a viable reading of Benjamin's enigmatic statement. We can, in other words, begin our climb.

As noted above, the value of this book lies not only in the access that it gives us to Berman's interpretation of Benjamin, but also in the further layers of analysis and interpretation provided by Wright's translation and commentary. These are of exceptional quality and erudition. One thing in particular that stands out is Wright's alertness to the networks of meaning that are crucial to understanding both Berman's commentary and Benjamin's essay. For example, in the first Cahier of the commentary, Berman states that he hopes that his engagement with "The Task of the Translator" will be "rechtzeitig" [timely]. Berman is writing in French, but uses German for the final word of the sentence in order to highlight the connection between what he is doing and what Benjamin himself says about the connections between commentary and translation: both activities can be seen, in Benjamin's words, as "die rechtzeitig fallenden Früchte" [the timely falling of the fruit] from the tree of the profane (p. 28). A translator might easily have opted to render the whole of Berman's sentence in English; however, in an effort to preserve the network of meaning built up by Berman, Wright translates Berman's French words into English and retains German for his German word, adding an endnote that further explains the nuances of meaning of *rechtzeitig* developed by Benjamin. This conscious manoeuvring between French, German, and English represents a key aspect of Wright's translation and in her own analysis becomes a means of thinking about Benjamin's text more deeply. In her introduction to Cahier 2, for example, Wright teases out the meanings and syntactic constraints around the German term *gelten* and its many possible translations into French and English. This allows us to think much more intensely about Benjamin's controversial statement, "kein Gedicht gilt dem Leser, kein Bild dem Beschauer, keine Symphonie der Hörerschaft"

[no poem pertains to the reader, no painting to the viewer, no symphony to the audience] than we would if operating solely in English with one singular translation of the German term. The French translations chosen by Berman and in some cases discussed by him in his commentary also give rise to further reflections by Wright: *verlangen,* for example, has as its most common contemporary meaning the sense of *demand* in English, but Berman's decision to render it as *désirer* [desire] in French calls attention to what Wright terms the "latent meaning" that is part of Benjamin's original German term.

This process of "thinking Benjamin's text trilingually" (p. 53), to use Wright's expression, thus becomes a means of staying close to the letter of both Benjamin's text and Berman's commentary, offering a way of exploring Benjamin's essay in its density rather than rationalising or simplifying it into a theory that might be applied to translation practice. The value of *The Age of Translation* thus lies in the way in which it stimulates philosophical thinking and intellectual debate, offering us multiple ways in to Benjamin's difficult essay and forcing us to reflect not simply on what we think, but how we think. As Wright notes: "We owe it to Benjamin to try to understand him, even if it should turn out that understanding is beside the point" (p. 7).

References

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