

## WRITING TO READ DIFFICULT TEXTS

*from "The Task of the Translator" (1923) by Walter Benjamin, translated by Harry Zohn*

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.

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. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but 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?

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1) Read the above excerpt as you would in preparation for class discussion. In addition to any other notations, write down the main idea of the passage.

2) Examine the markings you made: Did you underline particular passages? Did you circle any words? Did you write questions or words in the margins?

3) Analyze your markings: Why did you make these markings? What kind of a class discussion do they prepare you to have? How do they help you to prepare for this discussion?

4) How did you locate the main idea of the passage? Did you use underlining, writing, or marginal notation to help you locate, articulate, or remember it?