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A Passage in Time

From Peter Newmark, *The theory and the craft of translation* (1976, 9.1, 5–26).

> The translator's craft lies first in his command of an exceptionally large vocabulary as well as all syntactic resources – his ability to use them elegantly, flexibly, succinctly. All translation problems finally resolve themselves into problems of how to write well in the target language. Benjamin (1923) stated that in a good work, language surrounds the content as a shell surrounds its fruit, whilst a translation is a coat hanging loosely round the content of the original in large folds. A translation is never finished, and one has to keep paring away at it, reducing the element of paraphrase, tightening the language. The shorter the translation, the better it is likely to be.
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> Secondly, the translator as craftsman has to know the foreign language so well that he can determine to what extent the text deviates from the language norms usually used in that topic on that occasion. He has to determine with an intuition backed by empirical knowledge the extent of the text's grammatical and semantic oddness, which he must account for in a well written 'expressive' text, and may decide to normalise in a badly written 'informational' or 'communicative' text. Moreover, he requires a degree of creative tension between fantasy and common sense. He has the fantasy for making hypotheses about apparently unintelligible passages, and the common sense for dismissing any unrealistic hypothesis – it is pointless to pursue an idea (unlike an ideal) that cannot be real or realised. . . .
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> . . . Goethe (1826) stated that translation is impossible, essential and important. The words of all languages overlap and leave gaps of meaning: there are unnamed and perhaps unnameable parts of a hand or a cloud. Benjamin (1923) stated that translation goes beyond enriching the language and culture of a country which it contributes to, beyond renewing and maturing the life of the original text, beyond expressing and analysing the most intimate relationships of languages with each other, and becomes a way of entry into a universal language.

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