

Review of What Is Documentation?: English Translation of the Classic French Text. By Suzanne Briet. Translated and edited by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet with Hermina G. B. Anghelescu. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

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The name of the French librarian and documentalist Suzanne Briet (1894–1989) is well known to the contemporary Anglophone information-studies community, primarily thanks to those scholars such as Michael Buckland, Ronald E. Day, Birger Hjørland, Mary Niles Maack, and W. Boyd Rayward who have engaged with Briet’s writings in the two decades following her death. Buckland, in particular, has caught the imagination of many readers with his analysis of Briet’s invocation of an antelope in a zoo as an example of the kind of thing that, in the extended sense in which documentalists use the term, can usefully be considered as a document.

Briet’s major work—a 48-page pamphlet called *Qu’est-ce que la documentation?* (*QD*; Paris: Éditions Documentaires Industrielles et Techniques, 1951) that serves as the manifesto for a second generation (following Paul Otlet’s first) of participants in the European documentation movement—was published by an arm of the Union Française des Organismes de Documentation (UFOD; an organization that Briet co-founded), three years before Briet took early retirement from the Bibliothèque Nationale at the age of 60. A Spanish translation appeared in Argentina in 1960, but English-speakers have had to wait until now for this thoughtful translation by Day and Laurent Martinet (with the assistance of Hermina Anghelescu).

Briet trained as a historian, and her writing has remarkable aesthetic qualities. Translation is never an exact science, of course, but translators of technical works are seldom required to exercise as much literary skill and cultural sensitivity as Day and Martinet demonstrate with *What Is Documentation?*

One of Briet’s most important insights was that individual documents may be interpreted in different ways by different people wishing to put them to different uses for different purposes. This variability of interpretation is characteristic of documents even at the level of individual words, and the different decisions made by different translators at the word level can have significant consequences. For instance, the pivotal definition of “document” on which Briet settles in short order—“tout *indice* concret ou symbolique, conservé ou enregistré, aux fins de représenter, de reconstituer ou de prouver un phénomène ou physique ou intellectuel” (*QD*, p.

7)—is rendered in Buckland’s 1991 paper “Information as Thing” (*Journal of the American Society of Information Science* [*JASIS*] 42, no. 5:351–60) as “any concrete or symbolic indication, preserved or recorded, *for reconstructing or for proving* a phenomenon, whether physical or mental” (p. 355); in Buckland’s 1997 paper “What Is a ‘Document’?” (*JASIS* 48, no. 9:804–9) as “any physical or symbolic *sign*, preserved or recorded, intended *to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate* a physical or conceptual phenomenon” (p. 806); and in Day and Martinet’s 2006 edition as “any concrete or symbolic *indexical sign*, preserved or recorded toward the ends of *representing, of reconstituting, or of proving* a physical or intellectual phenomenon” (p. 10; all emphases added). Buckland’s latter choice of “sign” as a translation of the French “indice” reminds us that the anonymous “linguists and philosophers” whom Briet identifies as sources (p. 10) are usually presumed to be of the structuralist persuasion; interestingly, however, the use of the French “indice” in a semiotic context derives not from Saussure (who spoke of “signes”) but from Peirce. In that light, it might be argued that Day and Martinet’s addition of “indexical” as a qualifier of “sign” does not wholly deliver on the precision it promises, since the Peircean taxonomy distinguishes clearly between indexical signs (such as photographs) and symbolic signs (such as ordinary words).

In Day and Martinet’s edition, Briet continues (p. 10): “Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But the photographs and the catalogues of stars, the stones in a museum of mineralogy, and the animals that are cataloged and shown in a zoo, are documents.” Here we have at least partial confirmation that Briet was being deliberate with her distinction between the three ends (representation, reconstitution, and proof) to which documents are directed—since photographs are representations of objects, and since the animals in a zoo are evidence (if not proof) for the existence of the types (i.e., species) of which the animals are considered to be instances. Should the catalog record of a star, a stone, or an animal be construed as a reconstitution? Or is it the (visual) photograph that reconstitutes the object, and the (textual) record that represents? Or—given her subsequent reference to the stuffing of the celebrated antelope—could Briet be thinking of reconstitution in purely taxidermical terms? It seems more likely that Briet intends “reconstituer” to have the sense of “reproduce,” and that the reproductions that exist in the form of “copies” of documents are themselves to be treated as documents of a separate kind. It nonetheless remains unclear how the distinction among documentary ends corresponds with Briet’s attendant distinction between the “initial” document (e.g., the cataloged antelope) and the many “secondary” documents (e.g., the catalog records) that are derived from it (p. 11). Are initial documents uniquely the ones that prove, and secondary documents the ones that represent or reproduce? That we are left pondering such issues is a testament to the enduring interest that Briet’s work has held for successive generations of theorists in information studies.

What is less often appreciated is that the significance of Briet’s book extends far beyond her revolutionary, semiotics-inspired definition of “document.” In its three short chapters, Briet identifies the “new conditions” that characterize modern scientific and scholarly research (p. 20), and the new kinds of agency that must be developed to provide effective documentary support for such research. In the course of her description of these documentation centers, Briet outlines the functions and techniques that distinguish the modern documentalist’s work from that of the traditional “pre-documentalist” professions in libraries, archives, and museums (p. 20), emphasizing the need for documentalists to develop skills in documentary production (indexing and abstracting from a variety of different points of view) and reproduction (making documents available in a variety of formats), as well as in “prospecting” (p. 23; finding documents on behalf

of researchers by carrying out searches at the edges of domains). A pre-requisite is that documentalists have specialist knowledge not simply of the techniques of documentation, but of the subject matter explored by the researchers with whom they closely work. Briet advocates the teaching of information literacy at pre-college levels, looks forward to achieving global unity through the construction of an “international network of documentation” (p. 42), and puts her faith in documentation as a necessary (albeit, clearly, not a sufficient) condition for solving modern society’s problems. Briet’s dual commitment to scientific progress and specialization on the one hand, and to service and collaboration on the other, was one that was shared by many in the mid-century European documentation movement. More recently, especially in information science as it has developed in the U.S., evidence of a Brietian respect for humanistic values has sometimes proven harder to locate.

In their edition, Day and Martinet have included an updated version of Buckland’s appreciation of Briet first published in *JASIS* (46, no. 3:235–7) in 1995; a condensed version of Buckland’s web-based bibliography of Briet’s writings (see <http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~buckland/Brietwebbib.pdf>); a bravura assessment by Day of the importance of Briet’s contributions to our understanding of the dynamic relationships among technology, culture, and society, and of the cultural specificity of our conceptualization of those relationships; and a set of notes explaining some of Briet’s allusions and references for the benefit of the book’s new audience. These latter are so useful as to make more conspicuous the occasional gaps that remain within them.

Briet’s original French text is available at Martinet’s website (as is the English translation, in fact; see <http://martinetl.free.fr/>). One wonders what factors might have been involved in the publishers’ decision not to print the French and English texts together, in parallel. But, less idly, one is thankful that, at last, this full and excellent translation exists.