Reflexive Translation Studies
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Introduction:

**Genesis of a reflexive method in translation**

**Translation theories calling for reflexivity**

The rapid development of translation studies as a discipline since the 1990s, ‘a period that experienced a boom in translation theory,’¹ has seen a proliferation of theories calling for greater reflexivity in translation, which raise issues of visibility, creativity and ethics. Four Western scholars in particular – all of whom also had or still have careers as practising translators – have been prominent in emphasising the need for a reflexive practice of translation: Lawrence Venuti, Susan Bassnett, Henri Meschonnic and Antoine Berman. This book presents a creative way of exploring their theories. It examines the thinkers’ approaches to translation in both form and content, offering critical readings of their theories as well as practical translations of the texts that articulate them.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility*,² Lawrence Venuti argues that increased awareness of a translation’s conditions of production is necessary for an ethical translation practice, since translation involves a degree of ethnocentric violence that tends to erase the cultural specificity of the source text. For Venuti, a translation that highlights its own status as translation is ethical in that, instead of attempting to dissimulate the domesticating forces at play in translational activity, it draws attention to, and raises awareness of, the cultural differences between source and target texts.³ In his view, the translator has an ethical obligation to indicate the otherness of the foreign text when importing it into the target culture.

In her essay ‘Writing and Translating’,⁴ Susan Bassnett focuses on a different aspect of reflexivity in translation: the question of creativity. For her, translating is a form of writing which triggers a dialogic interaction between author and translator, an intimate relation in which the translator becomes aware of her own creative voice.⁵ In
Bassnett’s approach, reflexivity is not a matter of making a text’s status as translation visible, but of recognising the inspirational and creative impulse prompted by translation. According to Bassnett, translating is a conscious and reflexive form of writing, a playful and poetic activity, comparable to theatrical performance.

In *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, Henri Meschonnic also insists on the creative aspect of translation. In Meschonnic’s view, translating is above all an inventive, poetic and transformative enterprise, during which language and life interact. For Meschonnic, theory and practice cannot be separated in translation because translation always involves a reflexive decision-making process, which manifests in return the translator’s relation to language and to translating. Except when it is automated, translation, in his view, always expresses a theoretical position: the translator’s perception of language and engagement with the world.

Similarly, in *Toward a Translation Criticism*, Antoine Berman argues that translators and translation scholars should reflect on translation in a way that combines theoretical considerations with the experience of translation. For Berman, reflecting on the act of translating, and developing a self-reflexive theory of translation, is crucial for liberating translation from its ethnocentric impulse and from the repressed status from which it has suffered in the past. In Berman’s work, an ethical approach to translation is inseparable from a reflexive study of translation – that is, from disciplinary self-reflexivity.

In their own way, each theorist suggests that self-awareness is a key requirement for an ethical practice of translation. By advocating the visibility of the translating subject (Venuti), the translator’s right to creativity (Bassnett), the supremacy of human translation (Meschonnic) and an autonomous study of translation (Berman), they seek to liberate translation from its ethnocentric violence (Venuti), from the demands of fidelity (Bassnett), from mechanical representations of language (Meschonnic) and from its dependence on other disciplines (Berman). In championing reflexivity, their ultimate aim is to empower translation, both as a professional practice and as an academic discipline.

The purpose of this book is to explore whether reflexivity, as presented by each of these scholars, can bring about the empowerment that they seek. To what extent can reflexivity foster an ethical practice of translation? Can reflexivity provide an effective translation methodology? And what can reflexive translation strategies tell us about the role, scope and nature of reflexivity in translation? The experimental approach I develop to address these questions is itself both reflexive and self-reflexive. Using translation as an instrument for critical reflection,
the method I showcase here consists of translating translation theory by folding it back on the text that formulates it. Operating simultaneously on theoretical and practical levels, it inquires into reflexivity through reflexivity, reflecting on reflexive translation theories by translating them according to their own guiding principles.

A reflexive method in translation

The reflexive practice presented in this book is inspired by Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist approach in ‘Des Tours de Babel’. In this text, Derrida attempts an intralingual translation of Walter Benjamin’s 1923 essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, to reflect on Benjamin’s translation theory. In discussing and trying to enact specific aspects of Benjamin’s essay, Derrida also develops and showcases his own philosophy of translation: the idea that translation is impossible yet necessary. Derrida chooses to translate Benjamin’s theory in a Benjaminian way both to explore and to actualise this double bind of translation, which consists in the simultaneous necessity and impossibility to translate, exemplified by the word ‘Babel’, an untranslatable proper noun meaning at the same time father, God and confusion.

Reflecting on the polysemy of the term ‘Babel’, Derrida undertakes an intralingual translation of Maurice de Gandillac’s French translation of Benjamin’s text into French – an endeavour that he presents as follows:

This singular example [the word Babel], at once archetypical and allegorical, could serve as an introduction to all the so-called theoretical problems of translation. But no theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance. This is one of the reasons why I prefer here, instead of treating it in the theoretical mode, to attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation.

For Derrida, theorisation is unable to dominate the Babelian performance (the polysemy of the word Babel, which makes its translation both necessary and impossible), because this performance is itself embedded in a language. To think about translation, Derrida prefers to engage in translation, choosing to describe translation by practising translation.

My approach in this book is comparable. The experimental translations that I propose as possible interpretations of the translation theories examined offer practical ways of exploring theories which suggest
that reflexivity is the only way of developing an ethical translation. The sample translations presented in each chapter serve to illustrate the main concepts of the reflexive theory under scrutiny, as well as my response to it, by providing concrete examples of what a reflexive translation may look like in each case. These translations are conceived as a creative and critical form of engagement with key contemporary translation theories. They question the capacity of reflexivity to counteract the power relations at play in translation, and problematise affirmative claims about (self-) knowledge in translation.

The reflexive method is rooted in the idea that stating is performing an act. First theorised in the 1950s by the English philosopher John Langshaw Austin, the concept of performativity establishes that words do something in the world, something which is not just a matter of generating consequences. According to Austin, in speech acts, words are actions in themselves: they are ‘performed’ and make a difference in the world. Common examples of speech acts include promising, naming and declaring. Extending his definition of performativity to all utterances, Austin suggests that any statement may function as performative, since it may be doing by saying something. The reflexive method in translation is performative in that it proposes to enact the source text by simultaneously doing and saying what it says/does. Saying and doing, word and spirit, form and content are co-dependent in this approach.

The idea that form and content are inseparable is largely recognised in literary translation, and poetry especially. When it comes to translations of theoretical texts, however, the emphasis so far has mostly been on the way concepts travel, rather than on how form and content interact in the process of the transfer from one context to another. Embracing the idea that form and content, saying and doing, text and metatext interconnect in translation, my reflexive approach in this book offers an analysis of the particular operation of reflexivity involved in the translation of translation theory: the fact that the medium of expression (translation) is enmeshed with the object of the discourse (translation). For, when translating translation theory, the translator finds herself performing the activity discussed in the source text itself: her task as a translator mirrors the practice described in the text she translates.

Translating translation theory

The translation of translation theory is a relatively neglected area of inquiry in translation studies. In recent decades, however, a growing
number of studies have emerged that reflect on the expansion of the discipline. Some report the rise of university programmes, others highlight the proliferation of new journals and publications in the field, while others still describe which translation theories are taught as part of these programmes, or attempt to map the ways in which research interests in the discipline have shifted throughout the years. Despite the growing interest in meta-disciplinary questions, however, comprehensive accounts of the translations of translation theory remain scarce.

Jacques Derrida’s ‘Des Tours de Babel’ and Lawrence Venuti’s ‘Translating Derrida on Translation’ are two of the very few examples of article-length writings reflecting on the practice of translating translation theory. In fact, even these two texts are not, so to speak, reflections on translating translation theory per se. ‘Des Tours de Babel’ is a reflection on translation which presents itself as an act of translation, rather than a reflection on translating theory, while ‘Translating Derrida on Translation’ starts off as a reflection on translating Derrida’s ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’ but rapidly digresses into a discussion of translation in cultural studies.

At the time of writing, there is no single volume specifically devoted to the translations of translation theory, no study that attempts to theorise this particular practice of translation. Everything that has been written so far on the subject appears in scattered form, either as prefaces to actual translations of theoretical texts on translation (see Françoise Massardier-Kenney on translating Berman’s *Pour une critique des traductions*) or in author interviews (see Pier-Pascale Boulanger on translating Meschonnic’s *Éthique et politique du traduire*). Interestingly, these writers, too, highlight the performative aspect of their work – the fact that they translated texts by mirroring the translation theories developed in those texts themselves.

In the introduction to her English translation of *Pour une critique des traductions*, for example, Massardier-Kenney makes clear that her approach to translating Berman’s book was deliberately informed by Berman’s own translation theory: ‘The principles I used to translate Berman’s text,’ she points out, ‘were those proposed by Berman in the text itself.’ Throughout her preface Massardier-Kenney explains her translational choices with reference to Berman’s ideas of translation. However, she does not explicitly state why applying Berman’s theory would be more appropriate than translating his text in another way, as though for her a performative approach was unquestionably the best way of translating Berman.

Similarly, in an interview with René Lemieux and Caroline Mangerel,
Boulanger supports her approach to translating Meschonnic by saying that ‘Meschonnic must be translated according to his own conception of translation.’\cite{Boulanger} In the introduction to her translation of *Éthique et politique du traduire*, she further explains:

In order to keep the reader’s attention, I could have worked to flatten the reading bumps to correct, smooth English, but this would have constituted domestication, which contradicts Meschonnic’s idea of translating. He clearly outlines what should be translated in a text when he says that ‘we must invent discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm’ (see p.71). So I decided to apply Meschonnic’s theory of translating to translating Meschonnic’s theory. This decision implied doing to English what he did to French, resisting conventional forms in the translation as he does in his writing.\cite{Boulanger}

In saying that translating Meschonnic faithfully meant following his own vision, Boulanger implies that when translating translation theory, a performative approach is always preferable.

Joseph F. Graham’s translation of Derrida’s ‘Des Tours de Babel’ provides another example of a performative perspective on translating translation theory. In a note to his English version of Derrida’s text, Graham indicates that the principles guiding his translation of Derrida’s essay were also those found in the text itself:

There was consolation for so much effort to so little effect in that, whatever we did, we were bound to exhibit the true principles of translation announced in our text. And so this translation is exemplary to that extent. To the extent that we were guided in translation, the principles were also those found in the text. Accordingly, a silhouette of the original appears for effect in many words and phrases of the translation.\cite{Graham}

In this note, Graham suggests that despite its shortcomings, his English translation of ‘Des Tours de Babel’ remains faithful to the French original because it exemplifies the central idea articulated by Derrida in this piece: the impossibility yet necessity to translate.

Translating translation theory seems intuitively to call for a reflexive approach. It triggers an uncanny mirroring effect, as the translator finds herself performing the activity that the theorist discusses in the text to
translate. Translating translation theory thus brings about the possibility of new forms of fidelity in translation. In the context of such practice, the demand of fidelity to the source text appears to apply simultaneously to form and content, as though translating the original differently than according to its own guiding principles would mean betraying it. When translating translation theory, the ideas articulated in the source text tend to dictate the way it ought to be translated, seemingly leaving the translator no other choice but to translate the text reflexively by attempting to apply the theorist’s vision to the text itself.

**Reflexivity, performativity, deconstruction**

In this monograph, translating a theoretical text in the light of its own theory is developed into an instrument of critical and self-critical inquiry. The ambition is both to explore the applicability of translation theories advocating greater reflexivity and to inspect the unique form of reflexiveness involved in the translation of translation theory. Studying the reflexive experience prompted by the activity of translating translation theory is essential to understanding the nature of performativity in translation. As an extreme manifestation of the fusion of form and content, signifier and signified, theory and practice, translating reflexively brings into question a defining aspect of fidelity in translation – the opposition letter vs. spirit which has preoccupied thinkers of translation for centuries. By moving beyond this opposition, the operation of reflexivity at play in translating translation theory provides the grounds for a tangible exploration of the possible applications of a performative approach to translation.

What does it mean to simultaneously do and say a text by translating it? To what extent is such a practice feasible? And what would its benefits and limits be? The reflexive method showcased in this book is deliberately deconstructive in nature. Following Derrida’s own deconstructionist approach, it strives ‘to undo a construction with infinite patience, to take apart a system in order to understand all its mechanisms, to exhibit all its foundations, and to reconstruct on new bases’. Using translation to think about translation, the reflexive method aims to untangle the structures of the texts translated by exposing their internal contradictions, furthermore building on these aporias to develop a critical and self-critical mode of theorising reflexivity in translation.

In this perspective, the reflexive method offers a practical exploration of a deconstructionist approach to translation. Derrida’s writings have
been widely influential in translation studies. His essays ‘Des Tours de Babel’ and ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation’, which subvert traditional views of translation as a secondary, inferior form of expression, have become canonical texts, foregrounding the importance of critical inquiries in the discipline. However, his contribution to translation is often considered too abstract or inapplicable. Moreover, translation scholars invoking his work as a source of inspiration tend to focus on the notion of untranslatability, rather than on the necessity to translate. Thereby they occlude the fact that for Derrida deconstruction itself is an operation of translation and transformation – a process that ‘consists of transference, and of a thinking of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages’.

In this book, I experiment with the reflexive method and explore it as a possible application of a deconstructionist approach to translation. Unlike interpretations which give priority to the concept of untranslatability in Derrida’s work, my own approach advances the notion that Derrida’s deconstructionist philosophy is in fact unthinkable without a creative, experimental practice of translation. My analysis of the particular form of reflexiveness involved in the translation of translation theory seeks to provide new insight into the articulation of reflexivity in translation, and ethics of translation beyond that. For in various ways, the four theorists discussed in this book associate reflexivity with ethics, and my intention ultimately is to question the scope and limits of an ethical practice of translation based on the opposition between reflexive and non-reflexive approaches.

**Reflexive, self-reflexive, self-critical**

Reflexivity is an important but slippery topic, which may conjure up a variety of concepts. In some social theories, reflexivity refers to an essential human capacity; in others, it is a system property; in still others, it is a critical, or self-critical, act. In ‘Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge’, Michael Lynch identifies six main categories of reflexivity (mechanical, substantive, methodological, meta-theoretical, interpretative and ethnomethodological), four of which are themselves subdivided into further sub-categories.

Lynch’s classification of reflexivity, which I have summarised in the table below, provides a good overview of its complexity:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical reflexivity</td>
<td>Knee-jerk reflexivity</td>
<td>A habitual, automatic or thoughtless response.</td>
<td>In behaviourist psychology, a pattern through which a stimulus evokes a response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cybernetic loopiness</td>
<td>A circular process involving feedback loops.</td>
<td>Models using mechanistic imagery, but emphasising a humanistic sense of reflexivity as <em>self-reflection</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections ad infinitum</td>
<td>An infinite regress of reflections.</td>
<td>Halls of mirrors, the Möbius strip, Escher’s hand drawing itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive reflexivity</td>
<td>Systemic-reflexivity</td>
<td>Modes of social inquiry relying upon expert knowledge.</td>
<td>Risk benefit analysis, economic forecasts, opinion polling, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflexive social construction</td>
<td>Subscription to the reality of socially constructed facts.</td>
<td>The way consensual beliefs give rise to objective social institutions (e.g. value of currency).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodological self-consciousness</td>
<td>The attempt to correct biases that distort or confound access to the object of study.</td>
<td>Researchers considering their relations to the groups they study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodological self-criticism</td>
<td>Self-criticism aiming to enhance epistemic value.</td>
<td>Confessional ethnography, anti-objectivistic styles of discourse analysis and textual criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodological self-congratulation</td>
<td>A self-exemplifying sociology of science.</td>
<td>Applying the same indices of ‘maturation’ in the natural sciences to the study of their own specialty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-theoretical self-reflexivity</td>
<td>Reflexive objectivation</td>
<td>An objectivation of the social field.</td>
<td>Critically revaluing what members of a given field take for granted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standpoint reflexivity</td>
<td>A reflexive critique of dominant discourse.</td>
<td>Subjecting one’s own framework to criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breaking frame</td>
<td>An exposure and realisation of the conjurer’s tricks.</td>
<td>Film or painting calling attention to the illusionist techniques deployed to create a sense of reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative reflexivity</td>
<td>Hermeneutic reflexivity</td>
<td>A style of interpretation based on the reader’s active interpretation.</td>
<td>A sociologist’s self-critical interpretation (vs. ordinary interpretations, unconscious of the forces influencing them).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Radical referential reflexivity</td>
<td>A pre-occupation with, and sceptical treatment of, representation.</td>
<td>An analysis problematising or deconstructing positive claims about knowledge without distinction or exemption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnomethodological reflexivity</td>
<td>The reflexivity of accounting practices and accounts.</td>
<td></td>
<td>An ethnographic description (which explains the features of a specific setting, but uses the setting itself to make sense of the description).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the types of reflexivity listed by Lynch involves some form of ‘recursive turning back’: a return, a repetition or a folding back. However, what the turning back does, how it does it and what its implications are vary from category to category, as well as within a given category.

Furthermore, the boundaries between these various aspects of reflexivity are not clear-cut, but fuzzy, interdependent. Ethnomethodological reflexivity, for example – the correlation between a fact and its description – is simultaneously methodological and substantive, for it involves both philosophical self-reflection and subscription to the reality of socially constructed facts. Interpretative reflexivity, on the other hand, which includes reading, thinking, contemplating or making sense of an object or text, is prominent in most categories, including substantive, methodological and meta-theoretical reflexivity. The main challenge of dealing with the notion of reflexivity lies first and foremost in identifying and clarifying its multiple and shifting meanings, the nuances surrounding its various uses and its overlap with other key notions such as reflection, self-reference and self-reflexivity.

The distinction between reflexivity (folding something back on itself) and self-reflexivity (pointing to or reflecting upon oneself) is particularly unstable and hazy. The process of translating translation theory is at once reflexive and self-reflexive. The mirroring, self-reflexive effect prompted by the act of performing the activity discussed in the source text seems to instigate a performative, reflexive approach that incites translators to fold the theory they translate back on itself. Hence, in most cases, my use of the term ‘reflexivity’ also encompasses the notion of self-reflexivity. Later in the book, however, the distinction between these two concepts will emerge more clearly as a result of the sample translations I present in each chapter.

The texts discussed in this monograph each address a different aspect of reflexivity in translation. Venuti’s argument in favour of a foreignizing practice that strives to secure the visibility of a translation’s status as translation falls within the categories of breaking frame (an exposure and realisation of the translator’s tricks) and standpoint reflexivity (a critique of the ethnocentric discourse prevailing in Anglo-American culture). Bassnett’s approach to translation as a subjective engagement with the source text relies on hermeneutic reflexivity, a style of interpretation based on the translator’s creative reading of the text to translate. The opposition poetics vs. mechanics underlying Meschonnic’s theory is founded on the distinction between hermeneutic reflexivity (the translator’s subjective interpretation of the source text) and mechanical reflexivity (a thoughtless, automatic response to a stimulus).
And Berman’s call for disciplinary self-reflexivity is a form of reflexive objectivation, which consists in critically revaluing the role of translation studies in the articulation of translation and ethics.

My own approach, and use of translation as a critical instrument, is inscribed in a reflexive and self-critical praxis that interrogates affirmative claims about knowledge and self-knowledge in translation. The reflexive method is unstable and continuously changing, mirroring the object under scrutiny even while critically challenging it. Translating reflexively will mean different things in relation to the different texts examined. It requires redefining reflexivity in each context of use, determining what it signifies for each of the theorists and what it brings into play for their respective theories. Overall, this approach attempts to characterise the various expressions of reflexivity in translation, their complex articulation with ethics, and the extent to which reflexivity is possible, preferable or even avoidable in each case.

The treatment of reflexivity in this book thus operates concurrently on three levels: (1) thematically, in the object of analysis (the reflexive translation theories analysed); (2) methodologically, in the method of analysis (folding a theory back on itself); and (3) self-critically, on a metadisciplinary level (reflecting on the benefits and limits of the reflexive method adopted). The multiple layers of reflexivity at play – within the text, in the translating process and from a scholarly perspective – are often difficult to untangle and therefore constantly challenge the researcher’s own self-awareness. These challenges will themselves be examined and discussed throughout this work.

**What is translation theory?**

In his seminal paper entitled ‘The Name and Nature of Translation Studies’, James Holmes describes the then-emerging discipline known as translation studies as being concerned with ‘the complex of problems clustered round the phenomenon of translating and translations’. He identifies two main branches in the discipline: on the one hand, ‘pure research’, which includes ‘translation theory’ (the establishment of general principles to explain or predict translation phenomena); and on the other hand, ‘applied translation studies’, in which the findings of pure research are applied in ‘actual translation situations, in translation training, and in translation criticism’. In Holmes’ categorisation, then, translation theory is a subcategory of research within the wider discipline of translation studies.
However, the use of the term has created some confusion in the field, for several scholars have employed it to refer to the discipline of translation studies as a whole. Anton Popović, for example, defines translation theory as a ‘discipline engaged in the systematic study of translation’,\(^{35}\) while Peter Newmark describes it as ‘the body of knowledge that we have and have still to have about the process of translating’.\(^{36}\) As Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie point out, though, such definitions gradually came to represent the minority in the discipline, as the term became more and more used in the sense of Holmes’s categorisation, taking on a meaning which is closer to that of ‘theory’ in the natural sciences: ‘a specific attempt to explain in a systematic way some or all of the phenomena related to translation’.\(^{37}\)

In the *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, Maria Tymoczko defines translation theory, following definition 4 of ‘theory’ in the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, as ‘a scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena’, which she opposes to the ‘loose or general sense’ of definition 6, ‘an idea or set of ideas about something; an individual view or notion’.\(^{38}\) According to Tymoczko, translation scholars do not consistently maintain a distinction between these different meanings. For her, the term ‘translation theory’ should only be used to refer to ‘the development and testing of hypotheses’.\(^{39}\) Natural scientific approaches like Tymoczko’s are more and more debated, however – notably by translation theorists who make a deliberate choice to use the term ‘theory’ in the general sense of individual views or notions.

Jean Boase-Beier, for instance, defines theory as ‘a partial description (mental or perhaps written down) of a segment of reality’, which, she stresses, quoting Iser, is especially true in the humanities, where theories ‘do not enbody laws that make predictions, but rather search for metaphors adequate to the description of the phenomena in question in order to understand them’.\(^{40}\) For Boase-Beier, translation theories are partial, descriptive accounts which represent different ways of seeing and practising translation. Deconstructionist scholar Joseph F. Graham goes even further, challenging the very idea that elaborating an all-encompassing theory of translation is possible. Translations, he suggests, comprise an indefinite and fuzzily distinguished set of problems that differ sufficiently from each other to undermine any single theoretical framework.\(^{41}\)

In this book, the term ‘translation theory’ is intentionally used in the broad sense of individual views or notions about translation, so as to account not only for the experiential, subjective and partial nature of
the theories that I consider, but also my manner of considering them. The texts examined in subsequent chapters are acknowledged works of theory through which the authors present their own perspectives on translation phenomena – perspectives that centre primarily on their personal experience of translation, or perception of what translation is or should be about. In response to these texts, my reflexive practice presents a performative, process-driven form of theorising through which I compose my own approach to translation.

My use of the word ‘theory’ is close to Anthony Pym’s. In *Exploring Translation Theories*, Pym draws on the Greek etymology of the term ‘theory’ (theā, view + horan, to see), stressing its analogy with the word ‘theatre’ to define translation theory as ‘the scene where the generation and selection process takes place’. In Pym’s approach, translators are theorising all the time as part of their practice, since they generate translations by formulating various alternatives and then choosing between them to determine their definitive translation. While translating, translators constantly think ‘what translation is and how it should be carried out’. They theorise translation internally as part of the translating process, thus developing a certain view of how to practise translation.

In this work, theorising may thus refer to: 1) the decision-making process at play in translation (the mental formation of an individual perception of translation through translation); 2) the formulation of metaphors and/or explanations designed to describe translation (the written account through which an individual perception is expressed); 3) the operation of inquiring about the applicability of specific theories (the adoption and development of a critical positioning in response to existing statements about translation). My overall approach is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. Its aim is not to provide a general account of reflexivity in translation (its regularities, tendencies, frequencies, distributions), nor to quantify how typical or widespread it is (how much of it there is), but to reflect on the various manifestations of reflexivity in translation through the actual practice of this activity.

**Reflexive translation studies**

In the past decades, translation studies has increasingly focused on the ethical dimension of translational activity, emphasising reflexivity to assert the role of the researcher in understanding and highlighting the ethical issues at stake. The main ambition of these translation
theories has been to counteract the power relations at play in translation (between minor and dominant languages, for example) by making visible the transformative dimension of translation itself. The main idea underlying this line of thought is that, in order to highlight manipulation in translation (such as a stereotypical representation of the source culture), research must itself be reflexive and think about the conditions of its own emergence. This is necessary because, like the translator, the researcher is ‘constantly faced by choices, choices he can make only on the basis of his individual grasp (knowledge, sensibility, experience...) of the two languages and cultures involved, and with the aid of his personal tastes and preferences’. The selection and interpretation of concepts, metaphors and theories is not only determined by their empirical, objective applicability; it is also influenced by the researcher’s feelings, personal ideologies and motives. Reflection and self-reflection upon these conditions of research is therefore key to the empowering capacity of that reflection itself.

Several scholars have emphasised the need for increased reflexivity in conducting research on translation. At the outset of the discipline, James Holmes registers a moment of disciplinary self-awareness. According to him, ‘[t]ranslation studies has reached a stage where it is time to examine the subject itself’. More recently, Theo Hermans has suggested that the self-observations that come with the maturation of every discipline ‘[oblige] us to reconsider not just what we know, but how we know’. Like Hermans, Mona Baker stresses the importance of the role of the researcher in shaping the course of the research, and the subsequent need for increased attentiveness to the researching self. In adopting a reflexive methodology while simultaneously investigating the viability of the reflexive approach adopted, I am seeking here to serve as a step towards a better comprehension of the researching self in translation studies.

Reflexivity in research is built on an acknowledgement of the ideological and historical pressures forming researcher and researched alike. In its attempt to identify, acknowledge and act upon the constraints of a research project (location, subjects, process, theoretical context, data, etc.), reflexivity has important ethical implications. According to scholar Jay Ruby, failure to acknowledge the interests implicit in a critical agenda, or to assume value-free positions of neutrality, results in a ‘dishonest position’. The failure to acknowledge the interests implicit in any critical agenda is considered unethical because a project that affirms its neutrality perpetuates existing norms instead of attempting to reflect and act upon them. In the same way as ‘a theory of translation should attempt to empower translators-to-be and raise their conscience
as writers concerning the responsibility they will face in the seminal role they will play in the establishment of all sorts of relationships between cultures, the aim of translation scholars ‘should be research and training that produces readers of translations and translators who are critically aware’.

The reflexive methodology I adopt to explore the scope and confines of reflexive translation theories thus invites me, as a researcher, to also think reflexively about my own approach. The goal, however, is not so much to highlight my subjectivity as a researcher as to explore the extent to which such subjectivity can be highlighted at all. Focusing on the question of whether reflexivity can produce self-awareness, the sample translations I showcase and discuss in this book question the very possibility that one can ever be fully aware of, or make visible, the conditions at play in the production of a translation. To what extent can reflexivity be achieved in translation research? Can a researching translator ever be aware of the range of motivations behind her own translation choices? Finally, to what extent can research methods based on reflexivity be considered more ethical than non-reflexive approaches? If it is true that translation and research on translation can never be fully reflexive and self-reflexive, then the question of an ethics of translation needs to be reformulated beyond the concepts of visibility, self-awareness and intention which underlie current approaches to translation ethics.

Translation theory in translator education

Translation theory plays a central role in translator education, and many scholars have underlined the benefits of theoretical instruction in translator training throughout the development of the discipline. Translation theory is essential, according to these scholars, because it gives translators more options to choose from when they translate; makes them aware of problems they may not have anticipated, and provides them with a metalanguage for explaining their choices. In other words, it helps them to make better-informed decisions.

Interestingly, many of the texts taught on such courses are themselves texts in translation. In Lawrence Venuti’s anthology *Translation Studies Reader*, for example, which is widely used in translator training programmes in the UK, we see that 13 out of the 32 theoretical texts listed (40%) have been translated into English from a foreign language. This proportion is even larger in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet’s *Theories of Translation*, an anthology of essays containing 61% of
translated texts (13 out of 21). A look at the mandatory reading list of any postgraduate translation studies programme in the UK shows that many of the key texts taught as part of the curriculum are translations from foreign languages.

Analysing the nature of the shifts and challenges at play in translating translation theory is important for understanding the impact that translation may have on the dissemination of such texts and the academic response to them. Like any translation activity, translating theory involves interpretation and transformation, and perhaps even implies a degree of conscious or unconscious manipulation. A translated piece of theory will inevitably be different from the original. It will have a different effect on the way readers interact with it and interpret it. Students’ interpretation of a theoretical text is also likely to influence their perception of translation and their behaviour as translators when they enter the professional world.

If students interpret Derrida’s concept of untranslatability as a deliberate gesture of resistance to translation, for example, they may be inclined subsequently, as literary translators, to retain ‘untranslatable’ words in the original language, words that have no established equivalent in the target language. If, on the other hand, they apprehend untranslatability as an inevitable dimension of the process of translating itself, they may be less likely to highlight the ‘untranslatability’ of these words and hence decide to translate them in a more creative or experimental way.

Raising these issues in the context of translator education is crucial in allowing both students and trainers to address the fact that the theory on which their training is based might itself be a translation. As Dilek Dizdar perceptively notes in the *Handbook of Translation Studies*, the ‘reflexive turn’ in the discipline, which foregrounds ‘the untenable nature of a value-free and detached point-of-view’, requires that we ‘recognise that theory itself is ambivalent and contingent’. The reflexive method developed in this book aspires to encourage students and trainers to adopt a critical attitude towards the texts that they study or teach in translation, and thereby hopes to make a practical contribution to fostering critical thinking in translator education.

Contents and structure

This volume is divided into four chapters, each of which centres on the work of a prominent translation theorist and the specific aspect(s) of reflexivity conjured up by his or her approach.
Chapter 1 deals with Lawrence Venuti’s concept of foreignization and its ethical significance in translation. In this chapter I explore the scope and limits of Venuti’s foreignizing approach by presenting and discussing a sample translation of the opening pages of The Translator’s Invisibility into French. I suggest that the ethics of visibility championed by Venuti cannot be secured or sustained, and showcase a reflexive translation practice which, unlike foreignization, productively thematises its own shortcomings.

Chapter 2 centres on Susan Bassnett’s essay ‘Writing and Translating’, and her description of reflexivity in translation as an intimate dialogue between author and translator. In response to Bassnett’s dialogic metaphor, I provide an example of a performative translation of her text in the form of a colour-coded open letter addressed back to the author. Building on Bassnett’s subjective and personal approach, reflexivity in this chapter is conceived as the responsive enactment of a prior utterance.

Chapter 3 focuses on my comparative experimentation with human and machine translations of an extract from Henri Meschonnic’s Éthique et politique du traduire. Putting side by side machine translation outputs and human versions of Meschonnic’s text, this chapter questions the hierarchy poetics vs. mechanics underlying Meschonnic’s claim that reflexivity is inherent to human translation – and ultimately shows that automation is itself traversed by reflexivity and uncertainty.

Chapter 4 explores Antoine Berman’s approach to reflexivity in translation through analysis of my back translations of excerpts from selected works by Berman: The Experience of The Foreign, ‘Translation and the Trials of the Foreign’ and Toward a Translation Criticism. These translations exemplify the challenges of an ethics of translation based on self-awareness, and tentatively redefine reflexivity as an experience of uncertainty and self-opacity.
Notes

1 Edwin Gentzler, Contemporary Translation Theories (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 187.
5 Bassnett, ‘Writing and Translating’, 179.
11 Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, 175.
14 For example: Şebnem Susam-Saraeva, Theories on the Move (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).
Lynch, 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge', 26–34.


Holmes, 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies', 71.


Tymoczko, 'Translation Theory', 1.


Graham, Difference in Translation, 29.


Pym, Exploring Translation Theories, 1.

See Dizdar, 'General Translation Theory', 56–58.

Holmes, Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies, 54.

Holmes, 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies', 79.


Pym, Exploring Translation Theories, 4.


Dizdar, 'General Translation Theory', 58.