Chapter 2
Subjectivity and Creativity
Susan Bassnett’s dialogic metaphor

I, as a responsible reader, am not (...) seeking to reveal an unchanging core of meaning, the text’s ‘secret’ in the conventional sense of unrecoverable interior, but rather attempting to perform, here and now, an affirmation of its singularity and alterity – a different kind of secret that cannot simply be revealed. If this performative response is to do justice to the singularity of the text (...) it must itself be singular and inventive – not merely an act of obedience to a law.

Derek Attridge

This chapter centres on Susan Bassnett’s essay ‘Writing and Translating’. Published in a collection of articles exploring the interpretative role of the translator, Bassnett’s intensely personal and subjective text describes her practice as a writer and translator. For her, translating and writing literary texts are intertwining experiences: translating is a reflexive activity through which the writing subject becomes aware of her own possibilities and voice as a writer. In her essay, reflexivity is not perceived as the result or effect of a given translation strategy or choice of text, but as a dialogic process through which the author and the translator interact. In fact, Bassnett is not interested in reflexive writing strategies or in forms of translating which draw attention to themselves. Rather, by comparing translation to a dialogue, she seeks to highlight the correlation between writing and translating, in an effort to assert the creative power of translation.

Bassnett’s text deals with reflexivity on three levels. Firstly, reflexivity is conceived as self-discovery and self-perception. Speaking about translating Alejandra Pizarnik, for example, she explains: ‘I felt I was somehow engaged in a kind of dialogue with her, that by translating I could understand my own thoughts better.’ Translation in this context occasions a reflexive operation of self-exploration. Secondly, Bassnett describes translating as a
singly ‘playful’ activity through which one ‘consciously and deliberately’ engages with a text: an activity which ‘can act as a regenerative force’.\textsuperscript{5} Here, reflexivity lies in the conscious interaction with, and distance from, the source text, in the translator’s capacity to create something different: a ‘counter-poem’.\textsuperscript{6} Thirdly, with its introspective tone and autobiographical quality, the essay is itself the locus of a self-reflexive process whereby the author looks back on her own approach to translating and writing in an attempt to better understand what constitutes the translating self.

Bassnett’s overall 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 be translated. In this chapter I draw on Bassnett’s essay to explore the idea of a dialogic interaction between author and translator shaped by her theory, and engage in a performative translation of her text into French, so as to interrogate the significance of her metaphor in the context of my own reflexive practice of translation. If translating is a reflexive form of writing that requires an active engagement with the source text, as Bassnett suggests, to what extent is it dialogic? What aspects of the relationship between author and translator are brought to light by the use of the ‘dialogue’ metaphor? What does a dialogic translation involve in practical terms? And to what extent is it reflexive?

In this chapter I give a brief overview of Bassnett’s approach in ‘Writing and Translating’ and examine her essay in the context of a growing concern with subjectivity and creativity in translation studies. I then present a performative translation of her text in the form of an open letter addressed back to the author. My letter builds on Bassnett’s description of reflexivity as a dialogic relation between author and translator to present performativity in translation as a responsive enactment of a prior utterance. In the following section I discuss the ways in which my translation of Bassnett’s essay both enacts and questions her dialogic metaphor, and then reflect on my own theorisation of reflexivity in translation as a responsive and responsible enactment of a prior utterance. I argue that translation invokes a combination of sensorial and intellectual reactions that manifests in return the translator’s subjective perception of the translated text, and seals at the same time her responsibility towards it.

**Creativity in translation**

Written as part of a volume of essays she edited with Peter Bush under the title *The Translator as Writer*, Susan Bassnett’s ‘Writing and Translating’
presents a personal account of translation, describing its process as a form of writing which engages the translator in ‘some kind of dialogue’ with the author of the source text. Bassnett’s essay aims to show, through examples of her own experience of translating authors such as Pirandello and Pizarnik, that the intimacy involved in the translator’s relationship with the author of the source text goes beyond the demand of fidelity with which it is usually associated. For Bassnett, translating is a creative activity that involves inspiration, transformation and rewriting. It is a dialogic process through which the translator discovers her own voice as a writer.

Bassnett’s text forms part of what Paschalis Nikolaou and Maria-Venetia Kyritsi describe as an ‘inward turn’ in translation studies, a movement within the discipline characterised by a growing interest in the creative, experiential and subjective aspects of translating. Closely related to the ‘translator’s turn’ and its focus on the translator’s consciousness, this greater emphasis on inner spaces goes hand in hand with a renewed attention to the translator’s creativity – as illustrated by recently edited volumes such as Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman’s The Practices of Literary Translation: Constraints and Creativity, Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella’s Translation and Creativity, Peter Bush and Bassnett’s The Translator as Writer, and Loffredo and Perteghella’s One Poem in Search of a Translator.

In the Handbook of Translation Studies, Carol O’Sullivan provides a brief synopsis of creativity in translation, stressing that in translation studies uses of the term usually seek to challenge the perception that translating is a derivative form of writing. Thus, she explains:

Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella have usefully pointed out that distinctions between ‘original’ and ‘derivative’ writing are themselves cultural constructs and increasingly untenable in a postmodern critical era (2006: 3–6); if translation is a mode of writing, then it cannot be separated from the broader concept of literary writing itself: both are ‘creative writing’.

Viewing translation as a creative practice is crucial to studies concerned with the translating ‘self’, notably those exploring how voice, style and subjectivity are formed through translation. As Nikolaou and Kyritsi underline in their introduction to Translating Selves, the conjoining of self and creativity within translation studies has led theorists themselves to depart from academic discourse and to adopt a more personal tone in theorising translation. This is precisely what Bassnett does in ‘Writing and Translating’. Often diverging from scholarly considerations, her
essay mostly centres on her own creative and translation practice. In this text, Bassnett embarks on a personal process of self-discovery whereby she theorises translation primarily on the basis of her own experience and subjective perception of the translating task.

Bassnett’s discussion of her literary experiments with Pirandello, Pizarnik and poetic writing not only seeks to reveal that literary translators often have unspoken parallel lives as writers, but also serves to highlight that ‘in an adverse environment of sustained self-suppression required for the channeling of another literary voice, the experiential actuality is often one of dialogue and influence, of creative alchemy and meaningful ventriloquism’.15 Using the reflexive method of folding a theory back on itself, I inquire into this proposition through a performative translation of Bassnett’s essay which, following her own approach, invokes a personal and subjective engagement with the source text. In my translation, theorising becomes a creative form of writing, one that does not seek to provide an all-encompassing view of translation, but rather a personal account of a specific encounter with a text through translation.

Letter to Susan Bassnett: example of a creative critical translation

The critical translation below is a creative commentary on the following essay:


À Susan Bassnett

Objet : Lettre ouverte

Chère Susan,

Le 18 mai 2018,

Je t’écris en réponse à ton texte « Writing and Translating », paru dans l’anthologie d’essais intitulée The Translator as Writer, qui m’a beaucoup interpellée, non seulement en tant que traductrice et chercheuse mais aussi en tant que lectrice et amatrice de littérature.
Dans ce texte, tu nous dis que tu n’as jamais réussi à savoir exactement quand la distinction entre écriture et traduction est devenue hégémonique. Tout ce que tu sais, expliques-tu, c’est qu’une telle distinction existe et qu’elle semble avoir lieu depuis quelque temps déjà, conduisant le plus grand nombre à percevoir la traduction comme la fille maudite de l’écriture, quant à elle qualifiée d’« originale » ou de « créative », et considérée comme supérieure.

Ce que l’on oublie souvent, soulignes-tu, c’est que de nombreux écrivains sont également traducteurs, et que, contrairement à la croyance populaire, pour eux la distinction hiérarchique entre ces deux activités n’existe pas. Tout comme l’imitation, la traduction peut servir à l’apprentissage de l’art de l’écriture, car si les écrivains ont la capacité d’imaginer et de faire parler plusieurs personnages, ils devraient être en mesure de se forger leur propre voix.

Ton premier mémoire de recherche portait sur James Joyce et Italo Svevo, et l’intérêt pour le modernisme que ce projet éveilla en toi te conduisit dans les bras de Pirandello. Tu écrivis trois livres et plusieurs articles sur Pirandello, et traduisis un certain nombre de ses pièces pour la radio, le théâtre et l’édition, ainsi que des essais et des nouvelles. Cet intérêt pour Pirandello dura une bonne vingtaine d’années, puis disparut complètement. Avec ses contorsions intellectuelles et la structure complexe de ses phrases, ses intrigues à fin ouverte et son sens de l’humour sombre, Pirandello, celui qui t’avait intriguée pendant des années, perdit toute son importance.

Tu étais tombée amoureuse d’un auteur d’un style complètement différent, la poétesse argentine Alejandra Pizarnik. Traduire Pizarnik et traduire Pirandello furent des expériences complètement différentes, nous expliques-tu. Hormis la différence de style, de contenu et de genre, tu te vis aborder la tâche de manière tout à fait différente. Lorsque tu traduisais Pirandello, et lorsque tu traduis n’importe quelle œuvre complète d’ailleurs (qu’il s’agisse d’une pièce de théâtre, d’un roman, d’une nouvelle ou d’un essai), tu commences par écrire une version manuscrite, sur laquelle tu ne reviens souvent jamais. Pour toi, cette étape est indispensable, c’est une étape qui consiste à « matérialiser l’acte de lecture » par l’écriture. Écrire machinalement page après page fixe en quelque sorte la lecture de chaque phrase ; cela révèle les aspects problématiques du texte, les difficultés de compréhension et les passages qu’il faut retravailler. L’étape suivante, qui constitue d’après toi la tâche de
traduction réelle (ou « translation proper » comme tu l’appelles dans ton texte, certainement en référence indirecte à l’expression de Roman Jakobson), est une étape d’écriture et de réécriture, qui consiste à formuler des phrases, utiliser des dictionnaires, des encyclopédies et des dictionnaires de synonymes. Il y a donc pour toi une distinction claire entre la traduction et d’autres formes d’écriture : traduire implique selon toi un travail d’écriture consciencieux et délibéré en plusieurs étapes. Cela comporte un aspect ludique, un enjouement qui ne se manifeste pas dans d’autres activités d’écriture, où le jeu (si on peut l’appeler ainsi) se produit intérieurement, avant même que l’étape d’écriture concrète ne commence. Bien que la traduction soit elle-même une forme d’écriture, sembles-tu suggérer ici, elle s’en distingue par le fait qu’elle opère une réflexivité particulière, un retour du texte sur lui-même, une distance du traducteur vis-à-vis de l’activité qu’il pratique – distance réflexive dont l’expérience serait exacerbée comparativement à d’autres formes d’écriture. Cette idée que la traduction est une activité intrinsèquement réflexive, c’est précisément ce que cette traduction de ton texte sous forme de réponse épistolaire se propose d’explorer. Ma démarche interroge la capacité d’un texte à en énoncer un autre, et les modalités selon lesquelles il pourrait le faire, par le biais d’une représentation formelle des problèmes que soulève une théorisation de la traduction comme forme d’écriture singulièrement critique et réflexive. Peut-on incarner, actualiser, exprimer formellement le discours d’un(e) autre sans s’en disjoindre, autrement dit sans manifester du même coup son propre positionnement face au texte traduit? Cette question, et l’approche performative que j’adopte ici pour y répondre, ont un caractère volontairement ludique et ironique. Car il est bien question ici d’aborder la traduction comme performativité et performance, comme représentation, comme jeu d’acteur—c’est-à-dire comme dédoublement et redoublement de l’énoncé auquel le traducteur prête sa voix.

Traduire les poèmes de Pizarnik et traduire d’autres écrivains étaient des activités très différentes de ton point de vue. Pour Pizarnik, tu traduisais plusieurs poèmes d’une traite, presque toujours le weekend, aux heures perdues lorsque les enfants étaient occupés et que tu pouvais te détendre. Traduire Pizarnik était une sorte de récréation. Tu ne rédigeais pas de brouillons comme tu le faisais pour les autres écrivains, et avec le recul, tu te rends compte
que le processus de traduction des textes de Pizarnik s’apparentait bien plus à une pratique d’écriture qu’à celle de la traduction. Tu te sentais en quelque sorte prise dans un dialogue avec elle, comme si en traduisant ses textes tu parvenais à mieux comprendre tes propres pensées. On pourrait presque dire que traduire Pizarnik équivalait à écrire du Bassnett – et ceci, malgré bien évidemment le grand fossé entre vos cultures, vos religions, vos éducations et vos expériences de vie.

En 2002, tu as publié un petit livre dans lequel tu essayais de mieux comprendre les motifs de l’écriture et de la traduction, la relation qui peut s’établir entre l’écrivain et le traducteur, les notions d’influence et de transmission qui sous-tendent la traduction. Tu l’as intitulé Exchanging Lives (« Échange de vies »). Il s’agit d’un recueil divisé en quatre parties : tes traductions de Pizarnik avec le texte original espagnol sur les pages opposées, un mélange de traductions et de poèmes que tu avais rédigé et présenté sous forme de dialogue. La quatrième partie était consacrée à ce poème épitaphe intraduisible de Pizarnik :

Alejandra alejandra
debajo estoy yo
alejandra

Et de ton contre-poème :

Susan susanna
lying below
susanna

Auquel j’ajoute le mien :

Silvie silvia
Sous latente
silvia

dans lequel tes deux noms d’usage dans les deux différentes sphères linguistiques font écho à la double signification du mot « lying », de même que l’utilisation du mot « debajo » par Pizarnik évoque des significations multiples—et de même que dans ma version, l’emploi de mes deux noms d’usage en français et en anglais rappellent la duplicité phonologique du mot « latente », qui peut aussi s’entendre
Il te semblait, et je te rejoins là-dessus, que la meilleure traduction que tu pouvais proposer de la structure serrée du poème si court de Pizarnik était d’en donner ta propre alternative. Surgit encore une fois, à travers cette volonté de détacher la traduction des préoccupations de stricte équivalence, la question du statut du texte traduit dans son rapport à l’original. Tes choix manifestent une approche phénoménologique de la traduction conçue non pas comme un processus visant à reproduire une signification solisant objective de l’œuvre originale, mais comme un acte de lecture personnel au sein duquel le traducteur exprime ses propres réactions face à sa rencontre subjective et intime avec le texte source. En ce sens, ta traduction, que tu appelles ici de façon suggestive un « contre poème », fonctionne (pareillement à cette lettre) comme une réponse au texte qu’elle propose d’incarner.

Tu n’as pas retraduit Pizarnik depuis que tu as fini le manuscrit d’Exchanging Lives. La réception du livre fut mitigée : certains commentateurs ont aimé l’idée de deux écrivains pris dans une sorte de dialogue à travers la traduction, d’autres se sont plaints des « inexactitudes » dans les textes traduits. Je fais, quant à moi, partie d’une troisième catégorie de commentateurs : ceux qui se demandent ce que l’idée de « deux écrivains pris dans une sorte de dialogue à travers la traduction » veut dire concrètement—question que la présente traduction tente d’explorer par la pratique, en actualisant formellement ta vision de la traduction comme dialogue intime entre auteur et traducteur. La forme épistolaire, combinée ici avec l’interpellation directe « Susan » et l’utilisation du pronom personnel « tu » qui témoigne d’un registre de discours informel, fonctionne comme une mise en application réflexive de la notion d’intimité que tu décris dans ton essai. Par ailleurs, dans ma version l’alternance des pronoms personnels « je » et « tu » met en jeu la dimension dialogique qui sous-tend selon toi l’interaction entre auteur et traducteur dans l’acte traductif. Le style d’écriture du traducteur serait, de ton point de vue, influencé par celui de l’auteur, inévitablement imprégné de la voix qu’il traduit, inéluctablement transformé par le rapport dialogique que constitue le processus de traduction. Ce point essentiel, qui est aux fondements de ton appel en faveur de la revalorisation du traduire comme forme d’écriture créative, est représenté dans mon texte par la fusion ponctuelle des pronoms personnels « je » et « tu » en un « nous » silencieux et indivisible.
La multiplicité des voix à l’œuvre dans cette traduction performative se divise principalement en trois catégories: adresse directe par l’interpellation « tu »; emploi de la première personne du singulier « je »; superposition des voix auctoriale et traductive à travers un « nous » implicite. Ces catégories soulignent trois aspects essentiels de la dynamique complexe entre « je » et « tu » à l’œuvre dans le processus traductif: d’une part, le traducteur parlant au nom de l’auteur, dont il articule les mots dans une autre langue et qui il confère explicitement la provenance du discours; d’autre part, le traducteur assumant sa voix de traducteur comme réponse au discours de l’auteur et devenant lui-même agent du discours, c’est-à-dire un auteur à part entière; et enfin, une superposition des voix de l’auteur et du traducteur qui résulte en une sorte de polyphonie invisible, en une fusion des voix, où instances auctoriale et traductive se confondent.

Bien qu’incarnant tous ces aspects importants de ta théorie, ma performance de ton texte soulève aussi plusieurs questions. En essayant de mettre en application l’interaction dialogique entre auteur et traducteur par exemple, la forme épistolaire montre en retour que le type de texte auquel on a affaire dans une traduction n’est justement pas un dialogue, puisque l’auteur ne peut pas y répondre, et que cet auteur n’y est d’ailleurs pas à proprement parler l’agent de l’énonciation. L’utilisation de la seconde personne rend compte de cette contradiction en montrant que l’auteur est l’agent d’un discours dont il est dépossédé. En effet, l’emploi du « tu » indique que, même si l’énoncé en question t’est explicitement attribué (« tu nous dis que tu »), tu (en tant qu’auteur) es en réalité absente, car ce n’est pas toi qui parles, mais moi qui te fais parler sur le mode du discours indirect. Cette traduction met ainsi en scène l’appropriation de la voix auctoriale par le traducteur, qui de ce fait rend impossible l’utilisation du « je » par l’auteur. En tant qu’auteur, tu ne peux pas me répondre, à moins bien sûr que j’en décide autrement et choisisse de te faire répondre de manière fictive—mais cela ne serait qu’une autre manière de continuer à te faire parler, à affirmer ma position auctoriale, à conserver le pouvoir de parler en ton nom.

L’emploi des pronoms personnels « je » et « tu » dans cette lettre suggère qu’une conception dialogique de la traduction ne peut être qu’imaginaire et métaphorique—sauf si l’auteur et le traducteur entrentennt véritablement de traduire ensemble. De plus, en s’efforçant
d’actualiser l’intimité du rapport entre auteur et traducteur que tu décris, la forme épistolaire défie, par la même occasion, la possibilité même de cette intimité. Par-delà son registre discursif informel et son ton familier, cette lettre souligne délibérément sa propre incapacité à construire une expérience totalement intime car, en tant que lettre ouverte, c’est-à-dire en tant qu’écrit expérimental destiné à être lu par d’autres lecteurs que toi, Susan, elle est constamment hantée par la figure de cet autre lecteur, qui n’est pas toi. Représentant et contestant à la fois la possibilité d’une intimité dans l’activité traductive, ma réponse à ton texte suggère que le processus traductif n’est ni totalement dialogique, ni entièrement privé, mais au mieux un mise en scène de ces concepts. Ma version épistolaire substitue ainsi à ta théorisation de la traduction comme dialogue intime entre auteur et traducteur une performance de la traduction comme réponse à un énoncé antérieur, effectuant par là littéralement une réponse à ta théorie.

Amicalement,

Silvia

Légende

Adresse directe à travers l’emploi du pronom personnel « tu » (« nous expliques-tu », etc.)

Voix du traducteur exprimée notamment par l’utilisation du pronom personnel « je » (« je t’écris en réponse à », etc.)

Superposition des voix (aucun recours aux pronoms personnels)

Commentaire (expression de l’opinion personnelle du traducteur)

Citation dans la langue de l’original (mise en abyme de l’intertextualité, qui accentue l’effet polyphonique)

Citation en langue étrangère dans l’original (mise en abyme du plurilinguisme, qui accentue l’aspect multilingue)

Traduction de citation (traduction d’un texte cité par l’auteur)

Interventions para-textuelles (explication de mots étrangers, références à d’autres textes, etc.)

Traduction indirecte (traduction d’une citation sous forme de discours indirect)

Genre épistolaire (conventions du genre épistolaire)

Contre-signature (contre-signature du texte qui scelle l’appropriation de l’énoncé par le traducteur)
Creative critical translating

Dialogic translation?

My performative translation of ‘Writing and Translating’ into French focuses primarily on the dialogic metaphor developed by Bassnett in this essay. This metaphor is the locus of the reflexive translation practice she describes in this piece – translating as an empowering form of writing that prompts awareness and creativity. My translation attempts to perform her perception of translation as an intimate dialogue in the form of an open letter, addressed back to the author. The epistolary form, combined with the direct interpellation ‘Susan’ and the use of the personal pronoun ‘tu’ (a rather informal and intimate address in French), functions as a reflexive application of the notion of intimacy described by Bassnett. Furthermore, the alternation of the first- and second-person pronouns ‘je’ and ‘tu’ aims to stage, in a rather extreme manner, the dialogic dimension of translation as verbal interaction between translator and author. In this essay, Bassnett also draws on her personal experience as a translator to show how much translation has influenced her own writing and style. This last, but central, argument in Bassnett’s theory, which sets the ground for re-establishing the status of translation as a creative form of writing, is made visible in the numerous passages where, in my translation, the personal pronouns ‘tu’ and ‘je’, initially distinct, blend into an invisible, silent ‘us’.

The various layers of my reflexive performance of Bassnett’s theory can be summarised using the colour code below: direct address to the author (yellow); use of the first-person in addressing the author (orange); superposition of the author’s and translator’s voices (light blue). For example:

Chère Susan,

Je t’écris en réponse à ton texte « Writing and Translating », paru dans l’anthologie d’essais intitulée The Translator as Writer, qui m’a beaucoup interpellée non seulement en tant que traductrice et chercheuse mais aussi en tant que lectrice et amatrice de littérature.

Dans ce texte, tu nous dis que tu n’as jamais réussi à savoir exactement quand la distinction entre écriture et traduction est devenue hégémonique. Tout ce que tu sais, expliques-tu, c’est qu’une telle distinction existe et qu’elle semble avoir lieu depuis
quelques temps déjà, conduisant le plus grand nombre à percevoir la traduction comme la fille maudite de l’écriture, quant à elle qualifiée d’« originale » ou de « créative », et considérée comme supérieure.

Ce que l’on oublie souvent, soulignes-tu, c’est que de nombreux écrivains sont également traducteurs, et que, contrairement à la croyance populaire, pour eux la distinction hiérarchique entre ces deux activités n’existe pas. Tout comme l’imitation, la traduction peut servir à l’apprentissage de l’art de l’écriture, car si les écrivains ont la capacité d’imaginer et de faire parler plusieurs personnages, ils devraient être en mesure de se forger leur propre voix.

These categories highlight three different aspects of the complex je/tu dynamics at play in translation: firstly, the translator speaking in the name of the author, enacting her words in another language and explicitly attributing ownership of these words to the author (yellow); secondly, the translator taking ownership of her voice as a translator, responding to the author’s discourse and becoming herself an authoring agent, an author (orange); and thirdly, a superposition of the author’s and translator’s voices creating an invisible polyphony, a confusion of voices, where authoring and translating agencies become inseparable (light blue).

Even while it enacts crucial elements of Bassnett’s translation theory, though, my performance of her text also challenges several of her central arguments. Indeed, in its attempt to stage the dialogic interaction between author and translator, for example, the epistolary form makes evident that the type of text we are dealing with in translation is not a dialogue at all, since the author cannot respond and is not even speaking in the first place. The use of the second-person address epitomises this contradiction, for it signals both the author’s ownership and also her loss of her own utterance. In ‘[d]ans ce texte, tu nous dis que tu n’as jamais réussi à savoir exactement quand la distinction entre écriture et traduction est devenue hégémonique’, for instance, the use of ‘tu’ makes clear that, while the utterance is explicitly attributed to the author (‘tu nous dis que tu’), the author is in fact absent, for it is not the author who is speaking, but the translator who is making the author speak through indirect discourse (‘tu nous dis que tu’). By using both first- and second-person pronouns, my translation performs an appropriation of the author’s utterance, making it impossible for the author, Susan Bassnett, to say ‘I’.
Bassnett cannot respond unless I decide to stage or imagine a possible response, which would be another way of continuing to make her speak, of retaining the authoring agency, of retaining the agency to speak in her name. Here, the use of the personal pronouns ‘je’ and ‘tu’ shows that a dialogic conception of translation can only be imaginary and metaphoric. Moreover, by its effort to enact the concept of intimacy developed in Bassnett’s text, the epistolary form simultaneously questions the very possibility of full intimacy between author and translator in translation. Despite its direct address, informal register and intimate tone, my letter to Bassnett shows its own deliberate failure to build an entirely intimate experience because, as an open letter – that is, as an experimental letter designed to be read by other readers than Bassnett – it is constantly haunted by the figure of this other reader, a reader of my letter to Bassnett who is other than Bassnett. Staging yet defying the possibility of performing intimacy, my translation is at best a mise en scène of intimacy. Neither fully dialogic nor private, my epistolary version of Bassnett’s text questions the idea of an intimate dialogue between author and translator, for which it substitutes a view of translation as a subjective response to an anterior utterance, thus literally performing a responsive translation.

Responsive translations

My approach to translation as a response to an anterior utterance is in part inspired by a relatively recent series of translation experiments collected in a book entitled One Poem in Search of a Translator: Rewriting ‘Les Fenêtres’ by Apollinaire. Edited by Loffredo and Perteghella, the volume consists of twelve translations into English of Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem ‘Les Fenêtres’. Translators from different backgrounds and working contexts (poets, professional translators, academics, visual artists, etc.) were asked to engage with the multimodal dimension of this poem, which is inspired by Robert Delaunay’s ‘Les Fenêtres’ series of paintings. The final product showcases a broad spectrum of creative techniques, ranging from machine translations to inventive uses of colour and collage. Each translation is accompanied by a self-reflective commentary which provides insight into the complex process and experience of translating Apollinaire’s text.

The choice of poem is itself self-reflexive: it ‘embodies the notion of translation suggested by the “creative turn” which, after an initial resistance, achieves a liberation of the reading process by promoting the explosion of multiple readings elicited by the text’. As Loffredo and Perteghella clearly outline in their preface, their experimental approach
follows the footsteps of Clive Scott’s ‘experiential’ view of translation as a reading experience, as ‘the ultimate performance of reading’. Reading, according to Scott, is not an interpretative activity (a ‘post-textual’ operation), but a phenomenological process (an ‘in-textual’ operation) whereby ‘the reader actualises or embodies her individual experience of the text’. In his view, ‘it is translation’s business to capture the perceptual experience of reading/performing one text into another’. For Scott, as in the reflexive method I deployed to translate Bassnett, translation consists of reworking the source text into a reflection of the translator’s own reading, an experience wherein what the words do on a sensorial level (their impact on the reader) cannot be separated from what they say (the way they are interpreted).

Drawing from Scott’s phenomenological approach, Loffredo and Perteghella’s experiment in *One Poem in Search of a Translator* relies explicitly on the idea of translation as an enactment of the translator’s sensory response to a source text. The multiplicity of methods and media used to perform the translations testifies to the subjectivity and creativity at play when reading and responding to a text, emphasising that translating is as much to do with expressing how the source text affects the translator as with what it says, or what it means. In my experience of translating translation theory, reading – and translating, as a response to a previous utterance – is indeed inseparable from interpretation. In fact, my experimentation raises the question of whether it is ever possible to separate what a text does from what it says in any translation act. For while Loffredo and Perteghella, following Scott, emphasise the purely sensorial and experiential dimension of reading and translating, their project also suggests that the performance of a text is in reality inseparable from its analysis, from its context and from the enactment of its potential meaning.

As mentioned previously, Loffredo and Perteghella’s choice of a poem which embodies the liberation of the reading process is itself self-reflexive, and suggests an engagement with the source text that exceeds the senses. Further, as ‘paratextual spaces where translators act as “textual critics” intervening and discussing “alternative textual variants” or showing “the elusive nature of translation”’, the commentaries take the translations another step beyond the purely sensorial. Similarly, in my epistolary translation of Bassnett’s text, using a colour code to map out the different voices, registers and levels of discourse deployed in response to her essay serves to symbolise the dynamic interaction of sensorial and interpretative elements at play in my approach to translation. The colours signify in both form (visually, each produces a different sensory effect) and content (analytically, each represents a particular mode of
discourse), thus concretely highlighting the sensorial and critical aspects of my response to Bassnett.

If the translatorly readings proposed in *One Poem in Search of a Translator*, and in my response to Bassnett, are interpretative, they are not interpretative in a hermeneutical, explanatory sense, for they are not just the expression of a rational interpretation of the source text. In my experiment, the intellectual component of translation cannot be separated from its sensorial performance. Interpretation, in my approach, is simultaneously experiential and analytical, practical and theoretical, emotional and critical. In this way I follow Douglas Robinson, who, in the *Translator’s Turn*, suggests that translating is an activity in which the rational and the emotional are intertwined, indivisible:

That our understanding of language, our memories of language, our use and reuse of language, our language-related choices and decisions are all ‘somatically marked’. That we have *feeling* for words and phrases, registers and styles, either when someone else is speaking or writing or when we are doing so ourselves, either when we are working in a single language or when we are engineering a transfer from one to another; and that all of our decisions about language, including what word or phrase would be best or what would be most ‘equivalent’, are channeled through these feelings.²¹

From this point of view, there can be no thinking without feeling. Just as in *One Poem in Search of a Translator* translating poetry and expressing one’s sensory perception of it requires a degree of analytical engagement, so does critical interpretation involve an amount of sensuous interaction with the source text when translating translation theory.

Translating ‘Writing and Translating’ proves a particularly creative and sensory task given that in this text Bassnett deliberately employs a subjective tone, incorporating personal anecdotes and references into her poems, some of which she actually cites in her piece. Translating such a hybrid essay highlights the difficulty of enacting a text without also engaging with it theoretically and reacting to it on a sensory level – that is, without responding to it both analytically and aesthetically. My translation of Bassnett involved enacting a meaning in construction, a meaning that was being created during the very act of performing that translation. Responding, from this perspective, required interpreting in a performative way. It meant performing according to my own understanding and sensitivity. It meant interpreting in the two-fold etymological sense: ‘to declare’ (to make an utterance) and ‘to explain’ (to construct meaning).
Modern acceptations of the term reflect both these aspects: ‘to translate orally’ and ‘to give or provide the meaning of’. In the verb ‘interpret’, enactment and the creation of meaning are inseparable, as the ambiguous status of the ‘I’ in professional interpreting illustrates. In professional interpreting, the ‘I’ simultaneously enacts both authoring and translating instances, the initial utterance and its response, the act of speech and its interpretation. As Theo Hermans explains:

the necessary illusion is one of transparency and coincidence (...). As the interpreter’s voice falls in, coincides with and in so doing – paradoxically – disappears behind [the author’s] voice, the physical experience of hearing two distinct voices speaking more or less simultaneously is suppressed, or sublimated, and in practice we consider the two voices to be wholly consonant.

And yet, Hermans further clarifies, ‘the translation never coincides with its source, it is not identical or equivalent in any formal or straightforward sense’. In fact, the translation’s non-identity to (or distance from) the original is precisely where the translator’s response is located. It is the locus of a meta-text whereby the translating subject expresses her own relation to, view on and position toward the text she translates.

Translating compels the translator to transform the original text. The translator’s role as mediator – ‘the extent to which translators intervene in the transfer process, feeding their own knowledge and beliefs into their processing of a text’ – makes non-intervention impossible. In fact, the decision to remain neutral and stay as close as possible to the source text is itself a form of positioning. As Theo Hermans suggests:

Translation, as the retrieval and representation of an anterior discourse, can be viewed as a form of quotation. In this view the translator is a reporter who simulates, re-enacts, reproduces the reported discourse mimetically. That makes translation a form of direct speech, with as a consequence, limited to minimal reporter control over the reported words. However, even a simulation contains a deictic aspect, which we attribute to the simulator. The matter is complicated further, first by the selectivity of the representation, which again reveals the simulator’s agency, then by the problem of clearly telling the mimetic from the diegetic, and thirdly, and most importantly, by the fact that in an interlingual translation the words we encounter are unmistakably those of the translating reporter.
For Hermans, it is precisely to the extent that the translator is more than just a soundbox or mouth-piece animator that the translator’s subject-position becomes discernible in translation. When translating translation theory and engaging with a text on a theoretical level in particular, the translator’s perspective on the theory translated creates room for the expression of an attitude which works as a response to the theory expressed in the source text.

My reflexive translation of Bassnett’s essay actualises this responsive aspect of translation as a process through which the translator explores her own reaction to a given text. In attempting to enact Bassnett’s description of translation as an intimate dialogue between author and translator, I also construct my own approach to translation as critical response. Just as, according to Bassnett, ‘translating Pizarnik was Bassnett writing’, so was translating Bassnett a pathway to articulating my own perspective on translation. In fact, many translation theories are formulated in response to prior texts. Lawrence Venuti’s concept of foreignization, for instance, was partly inspired by Antoine Berman’s approach in ‘La traduction comme épreuve de l’étranger’, which Venuti translated into English as ‘Translation and the Trials of the Foreign’. Berman’s own theory was developed in reaction to the theories of the German Romantics (including Friedrich Schleiermacher), as well as in response to Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’, a text with which Berman engages performatively in L’âge de la traduction.

Jacques Derrida’s ‘Des Tours de Babel’ provides another example of a translation theory developed in response to a prior text. As explained in the introduction to this monograph, in this essay Derrida undertakes a translation of Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’ in order, ultimately, to present his own approach to translation – which both enacts and transgresses Benjamin’s theory. Derrida’s translation elaborates the idea that translating operates a ‘conserving-and-negating lift’, thereby actualising Benjamin’s view that translation functions as an organic extension of the original. However, Derrida also pushes the limits of Benjamin’s text, for, by choosing to translate a French translation of it (instead of the German original), he also challenges Benjamin’s idea that translating a text which is itself a translation is an impossible task. ‘Translations’, Benjamin claims, ‘prove to be untranslatable not because meaning weighs on them heavily, but rather because it attaches to them all too fleetingly’. With his intralingual translation of ‘The Task of the Translator’, Derrida responds to Benjamin’s theory by extending it, and suggests that to respond to a text also implies going beyond it.
Similarly, in my practice, translating entails developing a critical stance. It involves reflecting and commenting on the text’s key arguments while attempting to enact them. In my translation of ‘Writing and Translating’, the genre of the open letter itself epitomises this critical approach, which is further enhanced by the colouring of the letter and the different categories of speech the colours represent. The passages in red, for example, draw attention to the meta-textual aspect of my response to Bassnett’s text. They signal my comments and highlight the fact that my letter is not a transparent, identical reproduction of Bassnett’s essay, but an expression of my own perspective on the issues that she raises. Overall, the colour code functions as a self-reflexive commentary that seeks to explain visually the text’s underlying structure, its internal design.

**Response and responsibility**

Portraying translation as an operation of response highlights the subjective dimension of the translator’s relation to the source text. This does not mean, however, that the response is unreflective in relation to the writing it incarnates. Far from being removed from its source, the translator’s response to a text is inevitably indebted to it. In very simple terms, the translation needs the original in order to come into being; it inevitably reflects an aspect of the work to which it responds. Derrida’s essay ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’ provides a penetrating discussion of the indebtedness of translation to the source text. Having described the task of the translator as a ‘duty’ (or ‘debt’), which is ‘as inflexible as it is unpayable’, Derrida then literally inscribes the notion of indebtedness into his writing by deliberately inserting problems of translation for the future translators of his text. The use of the word *relevante*, for example – a multilingual term, borrowed from the English but marked by the meanings of the French verb ‘relever’ and noun ‘relève’ – epitomises this challenge, for, as Derrida explains, the term is not only ‘in translation’ but it also serves ‘to qualify translation and to indicate what a translation might be obliged to be, namely relevant’.

Derrida’s concept underlines the necessity yet impossibility for translation to constitute itself as a fully adequate response to the source text. This tension is actualised in Lawrence Venuti’s own English translation of Derrida’s text. As Venuti explains:

Key terms like *relève*, which Derrida describes as untranslatable, have remained untranslated in most passages. But because *relève* is the object of a richly detailed interpretation, I have rendered it expansively in some instances, making explicit the range of meanings that it accumulates in Derrida’s discussion.
Venuti’s decision to maintain and clarify the word *relève* exemplifies the double bind of relevance as concurrently an adequate response to, and an enhancement of, the source text – thus showing that enacting a previous utterance means both remaining at the mercy of the original and going beyond it. By often anticipating its own possible translations, Derrida’s writing suggests that the response brought about during the translating process is already at play, as a possibility, in the source text. It implies that responding to a text is also, to a certain extent, to actualise its potentialities.

My theorisation of translation as a response to a previous utterance is itself conceived and elaborated as a possible interpretation of Bassnett’s own account of translation in ‘Writing and Translating’. Even though her essay explicitly formulates the idea of translation as dialogue, several other elements in her text point toward a view of translation as response. Throughout the essay Bassnett stresses the important role that translating authors such as Pizarnik and Pirandello played in the development of her own voice; she insists on the ideas of writing under influence, expressing herself in reaction to other texts and writing counter-poems. Her approach to translating recalls the experiential perspective of Clive Scott, who in *Translating Baudelaire* describes translation as a process of self-discovery:

> What if we read and translate in order to situate the ST in our own psycho-physiological response to it? I read Baudelaire in order to transpose him to my psychic, emotional and vocal range. This is not to confine the ST, but to be liberated by it, liberated not into Baudelaire so much perhaps as into territories of myself that Baudelaire makes available to me. (2000: 249)

From this point of view, translating is a self-expressive response through which the translator develops her own sense of self.

The translator responds to the source text on the basis of her own experience of it. In the words of Yves Bonnefoy, ‘if the translation is not a crib, a mere technique, but an inquiry and an experiment, it can only inscribe itself – write itself – in the course of a life; it will draw upon that life in all its aspects, all its actions.’ Translating, from this perspective, is an operation of response which both calls upon and creates the translator’s perception of herself, as though the ‘self’ of the translator were being constructed through translation. This self, Scott suggests, we might want to imagine as ‘something unitary, something which has a particular style, something which has a certain vision of the text. But each translational act defines the translator in different ways.’
In fact, each translation is also a translation of the self – the creation of a certain style, of a certain perception of oneself, of a certain vision of translation itself. The moment we acknowledge the subjective dimension of translational work, we become aware of various senses in which the translator is responsible to and for her work.\(^{35}\)

Responsibility in translation lies in the translator’s response to the source text, in the way she interprets it, represents it and expresses her own experience of it. As David Wills puts it in *Matchbook*, a collection of essays devoted to Derridean deconstruction, ‘responsibility is precisely a gesture of response’.\(^ {36} \) The translator’s responsibility resides in the articulation of her own perception of the source text, while making a claim of fidelity to that text. Responding, in this context, means both enacting and transforming the prior utterance; it implies saying something more than (or different from) the original. A response, in this approach, is not a folding back, or a return to the first utterance, but a displacement, a new act of communication. As Susan Petrilli suggests in *Translation, Translation*, to be adequate (I would say relevant) ‘the translation-text must not simply repeat the [source text], but must establish a relation of answering comprehension to it’.\(^ {37} \) The responsible translator must respond to the original: she must render the source text, but she can only do so by interpreting it, reacting to it and transforming it.

As Petrilli points out, translation emphasises the responsive aspect of all writing (the fact that we write within a given context and respond to a certain tradition on the basis of our own history, expressing ourselves in response to other texts): ‘To speak, to be a speaking subject, to be an author’, she explains, ‘is always to respond, and in fact all texts are a response.’\(^ {38} \) For Petrilli, the subject and the text can decide anything except the conditions that make them possible. ‘This’, she indicates, ‘already emerges from the fact that every time the subject speaks, every time it produces a text, it is responding.’\(^ {39} \) Translation in this view is a response to a call, but as such it also formulates a call of its own:

That to speak is to respond and that speaking can do nothing without presupposing that someone is listening, says clearly that this initiative does not belong to the subject, to the I, but, on the contrary, to the other: another with whom the subject is already communicating, to whom it must respond and answer to.\(^ {40} \)

Responsibility in translation is never just a movement of response – or rather, the response it articulates is also concurrently, and inevitably, an address.
A double sense of responsibility is thus at play in translation, for while responding to the source text the translator also addresses someone else: a reader, an audience. Even when literally responding to a text – as I do in my open letter to Bassnett – the response constitutes a new interpellation, an address which displaces the initial act of communication and its reception. My response to (and interpretation of) Bassnett’s text does not end with my personal reading of it, nor does it simply return to the author. Although explicitly addressed to Bassnett, my open letter also calls upon other readers, implicitly asking to be seen and read by a wider audience. Response in translation is not circular; it does not go back to the first sender. Instead it establishes a new address that transforms the first utterance into a new act of communication. This is why a dialogic view of translation is questionable. By simultaneously responding to and addressing a call, translation shows that dialogue itself is not a reflexive operation whereby the message completes a full circle. For every utterance is to a certain extent part of a dialogue, a speaking with, an address to someone; and yet every act of communication is also threatened by the possibility that this address, this message, misses its destination.

In *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Derrida explains that the very structural condition of the act of sending a message is that it may not arrive. According to Derrida, as soon as we send a letter, we take the risk of it not arriving, for there is always a chance that the letter will get lost, that it will not reach its intended addressee. As Derrida makes clear, this does not imply that the letter will *never* arrive. Rather, it means that it ‘may always *not* arrive’. For Derrida, there would be no letter without the possibility of it not arriving. This possibility is what defines its very structure as a letter, as *envoi*. Translating exacerbates this impossibility of securing delivery, and this is precisely what my letter to Bassnett aims to demonstrate, both metaphorically and literally – or ‘letterally’ as David Wills playfully puts it in relation to Derrida’s own performative approach in *The Postcard*. From my perspective, response in translation is a deferred transmission, a displaced address which the sender can never fully control or direct.

Translating requires taking responsibility for one’s personal response to a text – both with regard to the author of the original and to the reader of the target text. Translators are concurrently bound to the source text to which they must respond and exposed to an audience that they cannot entirely anticipate. As Walter Benjamin succinctly phrases it in ‘The Task of the Translator’, ‘[n]o poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener’ – or in Antoine Berman’s
French version: ‘Il n’est pas un poème qui soit fait pour celui qui le lit, pas un tableau pour celui qui le contemple, pas une symphonie pour ceux qui l’écoutent.’ According to Derrida, even when it is addressed to someone we know, the addressee of our text is not knowable, because the structure of the *envoi* makes its destination inescapably uncertain:

J’écris non seulement parce que j’écris à quelqu’un que je connais ou que je suis supposé connaître, mais j’essaie d’instituer, par l’inscription d’une trace nouvelle [cf. l’acte d’écriture] qui doit être un évènement, le ou la destinataire, autrement dit l’autre. Ça peut être quelqu’un que je connais, mais ce quelqu’un que je connais ne sera le ou la destinataire de cette lettre qu’en la recevant, qu’en l’acceptant, qu’en la contresignant en quelque sorte. Donc ça veut dire que, au moment où je l’écris, l’autre n’existe, d’une certaine manière, pas encore.

I write not only because I write to someone I know or whom I am supposed to know, but I try to institute the addressee (i.e. the other) through the inscription of a new trace (i.e. the act of writing) which must be an event. It can be someone I know, but this someone I know will become the addressee of this letter only when they receive it, accept it and counter-sign it, so to speak. This means that at the moment of writing the letter, the other does not, to a certain extent, yet exist.

For Derrida, the addressee of a letter does not exist until she receives it, accepts it, and counter-signs it. This means that when addressing a letter to someone, this someone is, ironically, not yet determined.

Just as it is impossible for a writer to predict every translatorly response to her work, so the translator is unable to guarantee who the reader of her text will turn out to be. Paradoxically, at the very moment of addressing a text to a specific audience, the translator faces the impossibility of securing the specificity of this address. My open letter to Bassnett thematises and formalises this uncertainty, as my direct appeal is continuously threatened by the irruption of another, unknown reader. Further, because I did not send the letter to its primary addressee, its audience remains deliberately undecided, open and unknowable. Even if I decided to send the letter to the author, there is no guarantee that she would respond to it or even consider it. In fact, the very possibility of a lack of response signals that no address – even one which thematises its own displacement – can secure its own arrival. Destination cannot be controlled prior to reception, just
as meaning cannot be decided before the act of reading. In my letter to Bassnett, the colour code seeks to provide guidance on how to read my French rendering of ‘Writing and Translating’. It literally highlights and makes visible my response to Bassnett’s theory. And yet it is up to the reader to decipher it, interpret it and respond to it. It is up to the reader to make my responsive translation relevant.

**Conclusion: from dialogue to response**

My examination of Susan Bassnett’s approach to translation in this chapter suggests that, far from establishing ‘some kind of dialogue’ between author and translator, translating rather produces ‘activations of the self’. My own practice highlights this idea by showing that, as a subjective and creative act of reading, translation involves both enacting the source text and responding to it – that is, expressing one’s personal, sensory and intellectual perception of it. In the process of performing the other text, the translator also, and inevitably, presents her own interpretation of the original, positions herself in relation to it and develops her own understanding of what translating is about. Translation in this sense is metatextual. It does not only represent the source text, but also expresses the translator’s attitude towards it. The process of translating creates a subject-position – a sense of self and a point of view – which gets inscribed in the translated text itself.

For Theo Hermans, translation studies needs a model which ‘accounts for the way in which the translator’s voice insinuates itself into the discourse and adjusts to the displacement which translation brings about’. This model, according to Hermans, must view the translator as ‘constantly co-producing the discourse, shadowing, mimicking […], but occasionally – caught in the text’s disparities and interstices; and paratextually – emerging into the open as a separate discursive voice.’ This is exactly what my performative translation of Bassnett’s text strives to do by simultaneously reproducing her text and responding to it, concurrently confusing voices and distinguishing between them. In my letter, translation becomes a reply, a retort (*une réplique*). It presents an act of interpretation, similar to acting. Just as an actor’s unique way of embodying and performing a script expresses her singularity and subjectivity, so does, in my practice, the translator’s representation and re-enactment of the source text reflect her own vision of translation. In the process of performing a text, the translator creates a difference which functions as an embodied critical position.
Responsibility in translation resides in this difference. It lies in the translator’s response to the source text, in this new act of communication which is not just a folding back, a reply, but also, synchronously and inevitably, a deferral, a new interpellation, a call. From this perspective, being responsible in translation is not just a matter of choosing between being faithful to the author of the original or serving the reader of the target culture, as Friedrich Schleiermacher’s famous formula tends to suggest: ‘Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.’ Instead, accountability in translation means answering to both author and reader, even while knowing that, as a heterogeneous address, this answer is itself subject to displacement and deferral.

A translator must account for her own impersonation of the source text. She must answer for the changes produced as a result of her subjective engagement with it. At the same time, the meaning of the text she creates is itself unstable and open, calling for further interpretation. Regardless of the amount of colouring and guidance provided, translation ultimately remains at the mercy of the reader, of this unknown and unknowable figure who always threatens to be other than the one I intend – a figure ingrained in her own subjectivity, historicity and experience. Responsibility resides in this deferred act of communication – in the displacement of the translator’s response, in the uncertainty surrounding the reception of the call it formulates and in the indefinite deferral of this responsive call.
Notes

43 Wills, Matchbook, 71.
44 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, 75.
46 Derrida, Traces, archives, images et art, 74.
47 Derrida, Traces, archives, images et art, 74 (my translation).