

RESEARCH IN TRANSLATION BETWEEN PARALYSIS AND PRETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This essay adopts a highly but not entirely relativistic position towards the study of translation. On the basis of a long list of research questions that may legitimately be asked about two fragments from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (one original, the other a translation) the essay attempts to recapture a fuller sense of the endless complexity of reality and of how provisional and partial human knowledge of reality is doomed to remain. This implies a criticism of the monological and self-assertive attitudes which are often displayed by researchers hoping to conquer the field. Combining elementary insights from epistemology with an awareness of research as a sociological, economic, institutional and psychologically motivated reality, the essay rejects rigid thinking while accepting the necessity of theories and paradigms, and ends up recommending old-fashioned homely ideals such as common sense and dialogue.

KEY WORDS: Dogmatism vs. relativism, monological and dialogical attitudes in research, theoretical plurality in translation studies.

RESUMEN

Este artículo muestra una postura, aunque no totalmente, sí bastante relativista con respecto al estudio de la traducción. Partiendo de una larga lista de preguntas que podrían plantearse a dos fragmentos del *Hamlet* de Shakespeare (un original y una traducción), el artículo intenta captar un sentido más amplio de la infinita complejidad de la realidad y de cómo el conocimiento que el hombre tiene de ella está destinado a ser siempre parcial y provisional. Esto conlleva una crítica a actitudes monológicas y autocomplacientes que a menudo los investigadores adoptan con el objetivo de dominar un campo de estudio. Combinando visiones básicas desde la epistemología con el reconocimiento de que la investigación es una realidad motivada sociológica, económica, institucional y psicológicamente, este trabajo muestra un rechazo por los juicios e ideas rígidos y reconoce la necesidad de las teorías y de los paradigmas, para terminar recomendando principios tradicionales y cotidianos como el diálogo y el sentido común.

PALABRAS CLAVE: dogmatismo vs. relativismo, investigación monológica y dialógica, pluralidad teórica en estudios de traducción.



My starting point for the following reflections is one of the most famous passages in world literature, the “to be or not to be” soliloquy from Hamlet (act 3, scene 1), and its recent French translation by Jean-Michel Déprats:

To be, or not to be, that is the question.	Être, ou ne pas être, telle est la question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer	Est-il plus noble pour l'esprit de souffrir
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,	Les coups et les flèches d'une injurieuse fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,	Ou de prendre les armes contre une mer de tourments,
And, by opposing them, end them. To die, to sleep,	Et, en les affrontant, y mettre fin ? Mourir, dormir,
No more, and by a sleep to say we end	Rien de plus, et par un sommeil dire: nous mettons fin
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks	Aux souffrances du coeur et aux mille chocs naturels
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation	Dont hérite la chair ; c'est une dissolution
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep,	Ardemment désirable. Mourir, dormir,
To sleep, perchance to dream, ay, there's the rub.	Dormir, rêver peut-être, ah ! c'est là l'écueil.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,	Car dans ce sommeil de la mort les rêves qui peuvent surgir,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,	Une fois dépouillée cette enveloppe mortelle,
Must give us pause. There's the respect	Arrêtent notre élan. C'est là la pensée
That makes calamity of so long life.	Qui donne au malheur une si longue vie.
[...]	[...]¹

This is only the beginning of the monologue and I also omitted to quote the translator's annotations. But then, there was no need for a more extensive quotation inasmuch as my intention is not to analyse the two fragments, but merely to present a list of possible questions that a pair of texts like this may give rise to. In point of fact, we could replace the source-text fragment, or the translation, by other ones without fundamentally affecting the relevance of many of the questions that follow.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Tragédies I: Oeuvres complètes I*. Pref. Anne Barton. Ed. Jean-Michel Déprats (Paris: Gallimard, 2002) 806-07.

NO END OF QUESTIONS

A fair number of the questions that may be prompted by the above pair of texts are presented below. They follow in a vaguely associative order which is not meant to reflect any particular preference or hierarchy:

- If all traces of the text's origin were removed, to what extent would we be able to date the translation? Could a Hamlet translation like this have been written (and/or performed, and/or published) twenty-five years ago? Or a century ago?
- Are there stylistic profiling or finger-printing techniques that would enable us to identify the translator?
- Does it make a difference whether the translator was a man or a woman?
- Who was the translator anyway, and what is his position in the field of cultural production? Is he primarily a translator, or an author, or a theatre director, or an academic, or a combination of these? And how much prestige or authority does he have in his field?
- How much time did he require to accomplish this translation?
- What research, writing and publishing technology did he have at his disposal?
- Have any draft versions or other working documents survived, showing earlier variants of the translation and documenting the process of its genesis?
- Would it have been possible for a team of translators to come up with a translation like this?
- What would have been the translator's intentions or his ambitions, artistically or otherwise? Could we establish the "skopos" of this translation?
- What is the relationship between the translation "itself" and the so-called paratexts surrounding it (preface, introduction, blurb on dustcover, annotations...)? Does the translation live up to the assertions it makes about itself in these paratexts?
- Apart from the translator, which other "enablers" or "providers" have played a role in the production of the French text? For example, was there an external commissioner? Who is the publisher of the translation? Did the publisher employ a style-editor, and how much room for manoeuvre did the style-editor really have? Were any subsidising agencies or other patrons involved?
- Who would have been the intended readers or users of this translation? And who have been the real readers and users of it, and were they "ready" for this translation?
- What was (or were) the source-text edition(s) that the translator used? How has the translator handled the cruxes, textual variants and other editorial complications of the source text?
- How does the target text relate to earlier translations of the same original in the same target language (or, for that matter, in other languages)? Can one observe either positive forms of translational intertextuality (imitation, copy, influence...) or negative forms (deliberate avoidance strategies)?
- How justified would it have been (aesthetically, morally, legally) for this translator to copy successful phrases and passages from earlier translations of the same source text?



- Are there traces of this translator having consulted older or more recent Shakespearean scholarship (e.g. critical sources or reference tools)?
- Does it require a training in English studies to be able to write a translation like this?
- Would a training in translation studies be or have been of any help?
- Does it make a difference to our understanding and appreciation of this translation that we are dealing with a very famous fragment from a canonised play and that we have probably read it in several other versions before?
- Does it make a difference to our perception of this passage that we are dealing with a bilingual edition, with the original and the translation facing each other?
- How visible is the French translation as such? Could this conceivably have been a passage from an original French play?
- How has the translator dealt with the “otherness” or the historical “difference” of the source text? How has the translator negotiated the tension between “domestication” and “foreignisation”?
- How have the differences between French and English prosody been handled? Or the differences between French and early modern English syntax?
- How do the linguistic registers and style levels of source text and target text compare?
- Are any neologisms or archaisms used in the translation, and with what effect? How have Shakespeare’s mixed metaphors and other unusual style features been rendered?
- Is the source text longer or shorter than the target text? What about average sentence length? Is the wording of the source text more or less explicit than that of the target text? Which of the two is easier to understand? Which of the two is more “fluent”?
- Do the source text and the target text show comparable patterns of text-internal cohesion?
- Is this translation meant to be performed, to be read, or both? How “actable” or “speakable” is the translated text really? Does the text already incorporate and command a specific style of dramatic delivery, for instance in terms of rhythm and —gesture?
- Is it possible for a translation like this to be both philologically accurate and theatrically effective?
- On which conditions does an actor or a theatre director have the right to alter a translation like this in order to enhance its performability?
- Could this translation (with or without modifications) be used as a textual basis for subtitles for a film production of Hamlet? Or for the dialogues of a dubbed version?
- Should or could the translation be assessed either in general (absolute, universal) terms or in terms of a specific poetics of translation?
- Which shifts have occurred between original and translation? Are there certain shifts which could be described as “translation errors”?
- What would it take for this translation to achieve “classic” status?



- What is the translation’s likely book-shelf-life? How long is it going to preserve its freshness and relevance for later generations?
- Does the translation show the effect of so-called universals of translation?
- Does the translation show the effect of conventions, norms, cultural taboos or comparable intersubjective pressures?
- May the translation strategies observed here also be found in French translations of other originals, or in other French translations of the same play?
- How has this translation been received in terms of critical esteem and/or in terms of commercial success?
- Is it a relevant factor for this translation that the target language, French, used to be a prestigious international language, which is, however, now increasingly overshadowed by the source language, English, as Europe’s and the world’s lingua franca?
- How realistic an option is it, or would it be, to market and/or to stage this translation in Quebec, in French-speaking African cultures, or in other parts of la francophonie?
- Can a translation strategy like the one used here be transposed to other target languages or target cultures, including the world’s small, peripheral or threatened languages? If so, would it necessarily produce the same type of effect?
- To what extent could this translation be said to be a political act or an ideological intervention?
- Do we still need translations of Shakespeare in an increasingly globalised world which is characterized by the rapid spread of English —the source language— as an international language?
- Or, conversely, should the English-speaking world envy non-English cultures because through translations like these they can liberate the “real” Shakespeare from the archaic and increasingly incomprehensible historical idiom in which the original versions keep him imprisoned?
- On what conditions can this target text “replace” the source text? Or should metaphors of “enrichment” or of “survival” be used to describe the relationship between translation and original?
- Do the source text and the target text have the same meaning, or perhaps equivalent meanings? Is identity, or equivalence, of meaning a workable notion in translation anyway? And what hermeneutic or interpretive model does one use to investigate questions of meaning?
- Do the source text and the target text have a comparable impact on their public or readership? Could empirical tests be designed to measure audience response?
- What audience or readership should one consider for the source text to make the previous question meaningful, for example Elizabethan Londoners as opposed to native speakers of English today (keeping in mind that neither of these constitutes, or would have constituted, a homogeneous group)?
- To the extent that Hamlet conveys a specific set of philosophical notions reflecting the Western tradition, can these be transported successfully into a non-Western frame of philosophical thought?



- If it is true, as some have argued, that the magic appeal of this play depends partly on its latent psycho-analytical energies, how much of that effect can be conveyed in translation?
- What could have been the mental or cognitive processes that took place in the mind of the translator, and would there be a way of reconstructing them?
- Will it be possible to computer-generate a translation like this in the foreseeable future?
- How could a fragment like this be used in the training of future translators?
- How meaningful or helpful is the analogy between the translator interpreting the original (on the one hand) and the translation scholar interpreting the translation (on the other)?

Long as it is, this list of possible questions is by no means exhaustive. Yet, I would venture to suggest that all of the questions asked, as well as many of those that have remained unasked, are somehow worth our attention. Each of them is an interesting one, at least potentially, and at least for some of us —for indeed, depending on our background, on the research tradition that we come from, and the school of thought that we adhere to, we are likely to believe that these questions could and should be ordered in terms of their “importance” and even that only some of them are truly “crucial” ones.

MODELLING A COMPLEX WORLD

The above list illustrates the fact that, in the synchronic terms of any individual moment hypothetically “frozen” in time, every single word of every single translation and every single translation-related event could be said to be part of a thousand contexts. Or, in the diachronic terms of historical processes and changes, it could illustrate the fact that every single word of every single translation and every single translation-related event is at once the combined result of a thousand direct or indirect causes and the partial cause of a thousand effects.

Not surprisingly, translation has given rise to an enormous variety of opinions, theories and discourses which often have precious little in common, with individuals and groups looking at different parts or aspects of the endlessly variegated reality of translation, and/or having a different take on whatever it is they are looking at. Regardless of whether one believes this huge variety of meta-discourses to be a problem or rather an encouraging sign of the discipline’s vitality, there is no denying that plurality and fragmentation are striking features of translation studies.²

² See my discussion in “Translation Studies for the 21st Century: Trends and Perspectives,” *Génesis: Revista científica do ISAI* 3 (2003): 7-24; as well as several of the publications cited below.





In objective terms reality is single and undivided. For all we know, there is only one human race, one planet earth, one universe, all having evolved from the same Big Bang onwards. This single reality (which includes human history—which in its turn includes translation, and also our human efforts to make sense of it all) is immensely complex and largely exceeds our powers of observation and comprehension. That is why our understanding of it is bound to be provisional, partial and plural (and often plainly and demonstrably wrong!). This epistemological fragmentation manifests itself in the use of deeply ingrained and even institutionalised divisions such as: scientific knowledge versus non-scientific knowledge, the natural sciences versus the social sciences versus the humanities, hermeneutic methods versus empirical methods, translation studies versus the other disciplines, and so on—with cultural frameworks, theories and paradigms being at odds with each other across the board.

To state that the world is frustratingly complex is of course an awful platitude if ever there was one. Yet, before we dismiss it on the basis of its trivial nature, it is good to remember that it is a factor which in academia—and in certain other areas of public life (e.g. politics) too—is all too often overlooked in what sometimes looks like a collective process of repression. The academic marketplace is hardly dominated by intellectuals who regard caution, prudence, self-criticism or doubt as the first prerequisites for scholarly credibility. In order to win the day as a scholar one is usually better off having a more entrepreneurial attitude and a strong belief that one's new theory or concept is worth "selling" to the research community. Nowhere are such self-confident attitudes displayed with less reserve than on the dustcovers of books. Here are two randomly chosen examples:

George Steiner presents the first systematic investigation of the phenomenology and processes of translation inside language and between languages since the eighteenth century. Taking issue with the principal emphasis of modern linguistics, Steiner finds the root of the "Babel problem" in our deep instinct for privacy and territory. He notes that every people has, in its language, a unique body of shared secrecy. With this provocative thesis he analyzes every aspect of translation, from fundamental conditions of interpretation to the most intricate of linguistic constructions.³

"A brilliant work ... Robinson has fashioned an argument for a radically new paradigm, which will be not only a new "theory of translation" but a new way of dealing with words, and he has framed its intellectual goals, its humanistic foundation, and its ethical implications with great accuracy." (Paul J. Hopper, Carnegie-Mellon University)⁴

³ From the blurb of George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford UP, 1975).

⁴ From the blurb of Douglas Robinson, *The Translator's Turn* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991).

The claim —or at least the implicit suggestion— is that one’s approach revolutionalises the field, eclipses previous theories, sweeps aside many of the petty debates and scruples of the past, and finally brings us closer to a more adequate understanding of what translation in general is “really” about. I do not want to suggest that blurbs are necessarily an accurate reflection of personal attitudes, but they do seem to illustrate the view that research fields are social spaces in which individuals and groups are competing for prestige, authority and influence, and that the suspension of doubt is a useful instrument to that end.

One should hasten to add that many scholars today have adopted a more Popperian approach, stressing the tentative character of their work, as well as the more dialogical view that translation studies should be developed as an inclusive field of inquiry in which different approaches co-exist and may be equally valid. Important recent examples include books such as *Unity in Diversity? Current Trends in Translation Studies*.⁵

This volume brings together contributions from feminist theory, screen translation, terminology, interpreting, computer-assisted translation, advertising, literature, linguistics, and translation pedagogy in order to counter the tendency to partition or exclude in translation studies. Machine translation specialists and literary translators should be found between the same book covers, if only because the nomadic journeying of concepts is often the key to intellectual discovery and renewal. (from the blurb)

I might also have quoted *Intercultural Faultlines. Research Models in Translation Studies I: Textual and Cognitive Aspects* and its companion volume *Crosscultural Transgressions. Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*.⁶

Such projects may be said to create “a platform for discussion, mutual criticism, exchange and dialogue.”⁷ But while such efforts seem commendable enough, one also has to realise that their success depends ultimately on the commitment of those who use these platforms. The presence of strongly different approaches “between the same book covers” may indeed stimulate “journeying,” “discovery” and “renewal.” But rather little of all this will actually materialise if readers end up using the books selectively —referring to those chapters only that fit their beliefs and

⁵ Lynne Bowker, Micheal Cronin, Dorothy Kenny & Jennifer Pearson, eds. *Unity in Diversity? Current Trends in Translation Studies* (Manchester: St Jerome, 1998).

⁶ Maeve Olohan, ed. *Intercultural Faultlines: Research Models in Translation Studies I: Textual and Cognitive Aspects* (Manchester: St Jerome, 2000), and Theo Hermans, ed. *Crosscultural Transgressions: Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues* (Manchester: St Jerome, 2002).

⁷ Sebnem Susam-Sarajeva, “A “Multilingual” and “International” Translation Studies?” *Crosscultural Transgressions: Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*, ed. Theo Hermans (Manchester: St Jerome, 2002) 193-207. See page 198.

serve their research agenda— and if the authors of individual chapters see their contribution mainly as a way of entrenching their position and publicly staking their claim to greater centrality within the field. Inasmuch as something like this happens in the production and (no less importantly) the reception process of such publications, plurality becomes somewhat less plural and much of the dialogue is going to get lost in the cracks between competing monologues.

It is one of the arguments of this essay that a combination of epistemological, economic, social and psychological pressures causes researchers to be easily wooed by the monological research model, which we could describe as being self-assured more than self-questioning, and exclusive more than reaching out, and as having a monopolistic tendency.⁸ It might be helpful to pause and recall the rapid succession of, and competition between the mega-concepts and buzz-words that translation studies has known in its relatively short existence as a formal discipline. Here is a selection of such past, current and upcoming buzz-words in alphabetical order:

(translatorial) action, archaism, cannibalism, cooperation, corpus, creativity, différence, discourse, equivalence, ethics, globalisation, habitus, hermeneutic motion, ideology, imperialism, integrated model, invisibility, irony, media, meme, norm, otherness, polysystem, post-coloniality, relevance, the remainder, rhetoric, shift, Skopos, the task of the translator, think-aloud protocol, transfer, rewriting.

To put it more correctly, we have to recall perhaps not so much these concepts as such as the way in which they have tended to function within the scholarly community. Recall, more specifically, the assertiveness with which they have often been launched and/or the exclusiveness with which they have usually been brought into play. Consider, in some cases, the academic cult that they have generated and the conflicts that followed as they have tried to occupy the central ground of the discipline at the expense of other contenders.

In the struggle for credibility and prestige, aspiring new mega-concepts have to deal somehow with existing rivals. This can be done silently —by simply ignoring them. Or rival theories may be dispensed with in a more up-front manner and in that case, an often found strategy consists in the construction of a binary opposition whereby one claims the positive pole (“new” and “adequate”) of the opposition for oneself and relegates the rival theories to the negative pole (“obsolete” and “inadequate”):

⁸ It is ironic and symptomatic that even approaches which flaunt their radical scepticism and never stop highlighting the need to decentre hierarchies cannot help exemplifying the monological model themselves. Think of the way in which deconstruction managed to firmly establish itself in the academic world, making itself centrally and positively present in the humanities (institutionally, economically, discursively...) by discrediting and in effect supplanting existing discourses and paradigms which it criticised for embodying a naive metaphysics of truth and presence.



scientific versus non-scientific, hermeneutic versus empirical, function versus form, critical versus positivistic, self-reflexive stance versus naiveté, ethics versus formalism, target versus source, transfer versus source/target, descriptive versus prescriptive, cultural studies versus linguistics, historical versus universalistic, empirical versus speculative, politics versus poetics, ideology critique versus ideology, post-colonial versus colonial, gender equality versus patriarchy, non-Western versus Western, periphery versus centre, etc.

The use of such binary oppositions usually involves more or less serious simplifications,⁹ but that has not stopped them from playing an important role in the discursive manoeuvring that takes place as alliances and enmities are formed and redefined in the permanent struggle for scholarly authority and success. Theories may accordingly rewrite the history of the discipline, showcasing the appropriate pioneers, epoch-making books, landmark conferences, and other watersheds, milestones, revolutions, and crucial turning points (the “pragmatic turn,” the birth of the “interdiscipline,” the “cultural turn,” the “cognitive twist,” the “return to linguistics,” etc.). Here is a recent example of this line of argument, culled from the first of the two Research Models in Translation Studies volumes referred to above:

The turn of this century and millennium could be a very important time for the development of the study of translation. There are some exciting prospects ahead. Perhaps we can leave behind us some of the tedious and unfruitful issues of the past which were often terminological or typological, like discussions about what constitutes translation, i.e. to what kinds of texts one could/should apply the term “translation,” as opposed to “paraphrase” or other modes of interlingual communication. Perhaps we can also shed the normative-communicative approach to translation which makes a priori demands on what translation should achieve, without sufficient inquiry into what it can achieve. With new insights about the inferential nature of communication at hand, we can now explore the possibilities and limits of translation as a cognitive activity and learn how best to utilize it in interlingual communication.¹⁰

PRESSURES ON THE SCHOLAR

The strong attraction of the monological model is to a large extent the result of the fact that human knowledge, necessarily being historical, will tend to

⁹ See also the argument of Mona Baker, “Linguistics and Cultural Studies: Complementary or Competing Paradigms in Translation Studies?” *Übersetzungswissenschaft im Umbruch. Festschrift für W. Wilts zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. A. Lauer, H. Gerzymisch-Arbogast, J. Haller & E. Steiner, (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1996) 9-19.

¹⁰ Ernst-August Gutt, “Issues of Translation Research in the Inferential Paradigm of Communication,” ed. Maeve Olohan, 161-179. See page 161.

reflect the concepts, values, concerns, anxieties and priorities existing within the wider social context in which it is produced. These can be of an elusive ideological nature, or of a sobering pragmatic nature. Thus, translation studies has gained more prominence in academia these last thirty years or so, not just on the basis of its own intellectual merits, but also, and more fundamentally, because of increased international trade and communication in a globalised world. Similarly, gender studies became a major paradigm largely because of women's changing roles in socio-economic life in the West. And post-colonial thinking about translation would not have occurred the way it did without the wave of independence movements in the former Western colonies, without globalisation, or without the rise of multiculturalism in the West; and so on. As new issues and problems are thrown up in the public sphere, they will usually have their effect on which questions scholars and scientists will variously raise and how and with which partners they will go about trying to answer them. And the determination with which they will defend their scholarly agenda, possibly in monological fashion, finds at least some of its momentum in the urgency of the issues that are at stake in the wider outside world.

An important concomitant factor has been the increasing commodification of academic knowledge, which makes personal careers ("publish or perish," citation indexes...) and the fortunes of departments and universities (assessments, rankings, student numbers...) more and more dependent on market mechanisms and hence on economic principles and marketing strategies, which have to prove their effectiveness within ever shrinking timeframes. Thus, the dialectic of intellectual obsolescence and innovation, combined with the search for new research niches, has to keep the market dynamic. Institutions (research foundations, universities, governments, publishers) may be found willing to invest inasmuch as a short-term return (money, prestige) is to be expected. Names of leading scholars and centres start functioning as brand-names, helping to enhance product recognition and consumer loyalty ("have you read the latest x?"). In this manner, successful new academic trends or fashions keep the publication industry going, they can boost individual careers, they can put research and training programmes on the map, and they will generally keep the research money flowing, or at least trickling. And conversely, an excess of intellectual caution and soul-searching can cut you off from funding and put you out of touch with an increasingly impatient world which expects the academic community to deliver quick answers and effective solutions to today's issues.

Ultimately, like so many other collective realities, epistemological principles and socio-economic mechanisms always operate through individuals. And in this respect we have to acknowledge that the increasingly general sway of academic fashions probably responds to a deep-seated psychological need which exists in most of us. In a world of existential doubts and intellectual insecurities (not to mention unstable job markets), struggling as we are to survive (and preferably make a decent living) in the ruthless social jungle of academia, we are easily tempted to settle for protection and psychological comfort. Thus, those who are not capable of major conceptual innovations or of great leadership themselves (i.e. the large majority of us) will therefore be happy to follow those who are. We will seek refuge within the relative safety of a single theoretical paradigm that offers at least the



prospect of a certain stability and social recognition. True, to ensure our visibility and to display our skills as individual scholars, we will certainly try to be original to some extent by making a personal contribution to the field, perhaps even adopting a moderately critical attitude towards the chosen paradigm, or perhaps combining two paradigms. But our social-survival gene will also tell us never to stray further from the herd than we think is going to be good for us. After all, if we cannot be an academic luminary ourselves, it is wise at least to be pals with someone who is. Quoting leading scholars with the appropriate blend of broad approval and judicious critical comment gives us a position and an identity in the world and perhaps a vicarious share in the prestige associated with them, and if we are very lucky, we might in the end even experience the ultimate gratification of being quoted by them.

Far be it from me to suggest that the mega-concepts in translation studies we have just alluded to, or the theories which they represent in metonymical fashion, are useless and that there would be any wisdom at all in dismissing them offhand. For a start, they have all been instrumental in putting new issues (higher) on the agenda of the discipline and in invigorating thought and debate, and that is in itself a major contribution. Many of the questions which were listed at the beginning of this paper were actually inspired by them. After all, as Theo Hermans reminds us, theories

are ways of focusing attention, of asking questions, of locating data. New theories, new questions, new data. They are lines of approach, vantage points, searchlights. None of them claims to be comprehensive or the last word.¹¹

But one may disagree with what Hermans says in the last sentence of this quote. My personal feeling is that theories all too often do tend to present themselves, or at least end up being seen and mobilised, as if they were “comprehensive or the last word.” Because their arguments are so intriguing, and/or because of the persuasive strength of their rhetoric, and/or because of the operation of the psychological, sociological and economic mechanisms just alluded to, theories have a way of becoming monological and expansionist, claiming the whole field for themselves.

Theories may certainly ask new questions, but the snag is that they often do so in such a way as to discredit or silence the other possible questions. Their central concepts may start to be used uncritically and lead a life of their own, being bandied about almost in the manner of slogans and serving as “answers” more than “questions.” In other words, theories can come to function in a dogmatic and hegemonic way, and when that happens, their history, their hypothetical nature, and their partialities and limitations get obscured from their adherents, ultimately

¹¹ Theo Hermans, “Some Concluding Comments on the Debates and the Responses,” *Current Issues in Language and Society* 5.1-2 (1998): 135-42. See page 140.



causing the wider critical debate to be stifled rather than fuelled. It is worth noting that this process may occur quite independently from the concept's originators or the paradigm's captains.

STRIKING A BALANCE

Somewhat like the Queen in the play-in-the-play in Hamlet ("The lady doth protest too much, methinks," Gertrude says about her in line 3.3.123), many theories make excessive claims about their relevance, generality and truth value, or excessive claims are projected upon them. However much one is sympathetic to the need to investigate the effect of (say) gender-based ideologies, or that of norms, or that of universals, in translation, or no matter how much one realises the importance of exploring the problem of semantic indeterminacy, or of viewing translation within a cognitive or a pragmatic framework, there is no reason why we should accept that any single one of these concepts or approaches can be the be-all and end-all of translational reality. Nor should we allow any of these individual scholarly concerns to colonise the entire field of its study. Rather than submit deferentially to the authority of any single paradigm or discipline, we should never stop cultivating a sense of awe and wonder in our contemplation of the complexity of reality and thus an awareness of the limitations inherent in individual theories or paradigms. We need an awareness not only of what a concept or paradigm can do for us, but also of what its searchlight leaves in the dark.

This observation really leaves us hanging in a somewhat uncomfortable position between two extremes. On the one hand, an acute sense of awe for the unfathomable complexity of reality and for the unique singularity of each cultural event will lead to paralysis and silence. The awareness of our fallibility and fear of partiality, reduction and simplification may indeed cause us to abdicate our responsibility as researchers. The other extreme position is that of the hard-nosed and single-minded researcher who goes about the promotion of his personal model (self-constructed or adopted) showing total disregard for what that model happens to sideline or oversimplify.

This second extreme position is hardly an acceptable option, but neither is the first. Allowing reality's wonderful complexity to reduce them to passive and silent admiration is a luxury that researchers cannot afford. Engaging with the world—trying to comprehend it, to describe it, to model it, to work out possible answers to its questions and needs—is our job and social responsibility, and for that purpose, we need metalanguages, models, theories. But we do have to keep in mind that every description or account of reality entails a massive and problematic reduction of its true complexity. That reduction is the cost we have to pay for our cognitive control over reality, or (as a more cynical phrasing would have it) for the temporary illusion of such cognitive control.

I would like to take the argument one step further by suggesting that there is a way of roughly estimating this cost beforehand, inasmuch as it is determined and collected at the point where we, researchers, try to bargain our way out of a set



of identifiable dilemmas. Ideally speaking, one might like one's understanding and scholarly account of reality to fulfil the following four requirements¹² at least:

1. being coherent (rather than an eclectic bunch or jumble of distinct concepts and free-floating ideas, we prefer our model to show some kind of structure and inner logic);
2. being wide-ranging and comprehensive (rather than being very particular, selective or partial in its coverage of reality, we want our model to have a broad scope and applicability);
3. being accurate (not only appearing interesting or truthful in an intuitive manner, but actually being explicit and amenable to empirical testing through verification or falsification procedures, or perhaps even being replicable);
4. being non-trivial and fruitful (showing insights which strike us as having originality, substance and a certain level of generality).

But we do not live in an ideal world, and if these four conditions are daunting enough one by one, it is especially their combination which creates a number of impossible choices. The harder you try to comply with one requirement, the more you jeopardise your chances of even beginning to satisfy the next one. Thus, among other complications which arise, there seems to be a tension between the first and the second condition, as well as between the third and the fourth of the set just listed.

To begin with the first tension, models which display a convincing inner logic are likely to have bought this virtue at the sacrifice of band-width and applicability, their validity being restricted to carefully selected and specific fields of application, and/or being subject to biased forms of interpretation. As an example we could quote Lawrence Venuti's research, which has been praised for the consistency of its vision¹³ but also taken to task for the selectiveness of its historical interpretations.¹⁴ Conversely, the more comprehensive and all-embracing your theory attempts to be, the more likely it is to show weaknesses on the coherence front. And here Mary Snell-Hornby's "integrated" model, launched in the late 1980s,¹⁵ may be cited as an example. It shows how hard it is to combine the aim of presenting a

¹² This list results from "naïve" personal experience and reflection. For an example of a professional philosopher's set of criteria for theory appraisal, see e.g. Thomas Kuhn's acceptability criteria: 1. consistency, 2. agreement with observations, 3. simplicity, 4. breadth of scope, 5. conceptual integration, 6. fertility. John Losee, *A Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 228 ff.

¹³ E.g. Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St Jerome, 1999) 156.

¹⁴ Siobhan Brownlie, "Distinguishing Some Approaches to Translation Research," *The Translator* 9.1 (2003): 39-64. See pages 50-51. See also Anthony Pym, "Venuti's Visibility [Review Article]," *Target* 8.1 (1996): 165-177.

¹⁵ Mary Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1988).

wide-ranging and multifaceted view of translational reality with the aim of moving beyond sheer juxtaposition and eclecticism in a bid to achieve true integration: “one must question whether an attempt to incorporate all genres and text types into such a detailed single overarching analytical framework is really viable. Inconsistencies are inevitably to be found.”¹⁶

Then there is the second tension: the more “fundamental” or “fruitful” the questions which are being raised, the further we often find ourselves drifting away from the possibility of accurate empirical testing. In other words, there tends to be an inverse correlation between the “precision” (“statistical validity,” “objectivity”...) of one’s research results and their ultimate interest and non-triviality. The deeper one digs into a phenomenon, the more interesting and revealing the analysis usually gets, but also the harder it becomes to maintain the criteria of hard empirical accuracy. And the more one is forced to forego verifiability or falsifiability, the more one has to resort to cognitive operations such as holistic interpretation, introspection, speculation, abstraction, generalisation, metaphor, etc. And thus the more deeply one enters the realm where there is no solid basis for refutation, so that we also become more vulnerable to the intrusion of ideology and dogmatism, and to a proliferation of “words, words, words” showing more “art” than “matter” (Hamlet 2.2.95 and 192).

The long list of questions at the beginning of this paper may be used to illustrate this tension between how “important” or “challenging” a question is and the extent to which it permits exact measurements and straightforward observations. The question about the commercial success of Déprats’ Shakespeare edition, or the one about average sentence length in original and translation are questions which are fairly easy to answer with absolute numerical precision, but they are not—in themselves at least—the most fascinating ones in the list. Compare this with (say) the question about the norms which underlie Déprats’ translation, or the one about the semantic translation shifts that the French version may or may not show as compared to the original. These are far more fascinating questions—in themselves—but they are typically no longer answerable in the language of facts and numbers.

In a more extreme manner, the same tension may be illustrated by the belief that empirically oriented science can do little more than scratch the surface of things and that the “fundamental” truths about human nature or about reality can ultimately only be accessed and expressed by poets or philosophers: poetry and philosophy are precisely two discursive forms of knowledge which care very little for ambitions of scientific precision, objectivity or empirical testability. We might recall here P. B. Shelley’s popular definition of poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” or the traditional view that philosophy is “la reine des sciences.” And within the confines of our discipline we cannot help being struck by

¹⁶ Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (London: Routledge, 2001) 185.

the increasingly important authority ascribed to creative writers/translators and philosophers within contemporary translation theory.

TO CONCLUDE

The tangible constraints of time, space, technology, observable evidence and available brainpower to which any research project is subject merely highlight the inevitability of the many fundamental choices and reductions having to be made anyway. Consciously or unconsciously, immense reductions have to be carried out at the following three levels: that of the object we are studying (our corpus, the data); that of the conceptual matrix and methodological grid we are employing (concepts, theory, methods); and that of our objectives (what we set out to do, the questions we would like to answer, the ulterior ethical or political motives we may want to serve by studying a specific object in a specific manner). Common sense tells us that we should try to adjust these three dimensions to each other. A theory or method which works fairly well in one project may not be suitable for another type of corpus, or for another type of research question, and so on. Trying to find the best possible mutual fit, we usually look around and prospect for interesting material and theories, and through a combination of bottom-up and top-down test procedures we progressively define the basic variables of our research. This search for an inner logic and coherence somewhat restricts our leeway, but the inevitability of problematic reductions never stops looming large.

Common sense also tells us to make all these choices as lucidly and as openly as possible, on the basis of a serious review of the state of the art, and with an acknowledgment of what the chosen variables simplify and leave out, as well as of what they include and make possible. In weighing the pros and cons of certain options we should consider their “intrinsic” scholarly merits, thinking among other things about where they leave us in terms of the four conflicting requirements listed above. We should thereby mistrust radical claims and academic hype, remain critical of the seductive oppositions that are used to structure the field, and generally resist the power of scholarly rhetoric, be it of the “scientific” type (jargon, graphs, statistics, formalistic style-sheets...) or of the “anti-scientific” variety (which is of course in its own way every bit as rhetorical).

In making our choices, we may also want to give consideration to the various psychological, economic and sociological dimensions of scholarship. And in the assessment of the importance of these more “extrinsic” factors, we may want to pursue what we take to be a correct middle course (“healthy pragmatism”) between the two extremes of naive idealism and cynical opportunism. Thus, without necessarily submitting to them, we should at least be aware of both institutionalised and hidden power mechanisms in the field and assess the risk involved in challenging what counts as the orthodox theory and method in our academic environment. Or, in order to lubricate the funding machinery, if not for less practical motives as well, it might be wise to define our project in such a way that it makes a useful contribution to the culture or social environment where the research is carried out.



But no matter how hard we ponder all these arguments, there is no way our choices are ever going to be self-evident or unproblematic. This could inspire us to do three things. First, never stop positioning ourselves within the entire field and try to achieve a second-order understanding of what parts and aspects of translation we do and do not cover, from what position we are observing the object, and where we stand with respect to other approaches. Second, be willing to engage in a critical dialogue with other approaches, so that we can become more aware of the blind spots in our own models of reality, make the most of possible conceptual synergies,¹⁷ and accept the need for eclecticism inasmuch as integration turns out to be unfeasible.¹⁸ Third, promote a self-reflexive and self-critical stance, resisting the temptation to take our own options and positions for granted.

These three challenges mutually imply one another. After all, the willingness to engage in a critical dialogue follows more or less logically from the self-positioning stipulated by the first point, the link between the two being the acknowledgement of the partiality and relative character of one's position. And all of this quite naturally presupposes a self-reflexive and self-critical stance —indeed as much self-criticism and self-reflexiveness as is probably needed, for it is good to remember that no amount of self-reflexiveness, however sophisticated or originally worded, can actually resolve the aporias of human knowledge. In fact, if you believe it is important that some serious empirically oriented research should actually get done, an excess of critical self-contemplation may become a liability more than anything else:

... conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
[...] lose the name of action.

... la conscience fait de nous tous des lâches,
Et ainsi la première couleur de la résolution
S'étoile au pâle éclat de la pensée,
Et les entreprises de grand essor et de conséquence
[...] perdent le nom d'action.¹⁹

¹⁷ See the first of the three stated main aims which inspired Andrew Chesterman's *Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997): "The book... offers a view of theory, in fact of several theories. It explores some of the main ways in which translation has been seen and contemplated, and suggests a conceptual framework within which a number of disparate views of translation can be linked" (2).

¹⁸ See Edoardo Crisafulli's "The Quest for an Eclectic Methodology of Translation Description," ed. Theo Hermans, 26-43.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare. *Tragédies I: Oeuvres complètes I*, Pref. Anne Barton. Ed. Jean-Michel Déprats (Paris: Gallimard, 2002) 808-09.