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From an “Experience of the Foreign”
to an Experience of Alienation?
Translating in the Age of AI

**Human-Centred AI
in the Translation Industry.
Questions on Ethics,
Creativity and Sustainability**

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From an “Experience of the Foreign” to an Experience of Alienation? Translating in the Age of AI

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Abstract: This article explores the hermeneutic and ethical dimensions of translation in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Drawing on Antoine Berman’s concept of the “experience/trial of the foreign,” which conceptualises translation as an ethical and hermeneutic practice, the article examines how AI-assisted translation transforms the experience of translation and the encounter with the foreign. From the professional translator’s perspective, AI translation not only engenders alienation from the product of their labour in the Marxist sense but also introduces an alienation caused by the prior appropriation of foreign-language text content by AI systems. Translators must therefore return to the original text and reconsider it through the “lens” of AI-generated text. This fundamentally alters the translation experience and is likely to reshape the relationship between languages and cultures.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Antoine Berman, Translation, Ethics, Hermeneutics.

1 Introduction

For some time now, the *technological turn* has been proclaimed in Translation Studies and the thesis has even been put forward that “technology can now be considered as the connective tissue of the discipline” (Jiménez-Crespo 2020: 328). The rapid development of translation technologies has led to an increased focus on the nature of translation as a technical process and to in-depth research into the interactions between translators and machines from the perspective of their convergences and divergences, i.e. a more or less ‘successful’ agency of humans and machines.

In this context, it has long been pointed out that the boom in translation technology—which with artificial intelligence (AI) is producing new types of actors who are committed to a technical principle of rationality¹—potentially strengthens the agency status of ‘computer agents’ and reduces that of the human actors. As translation technology appears to be increasingly replacing the central role of the human translator, the following challenge for Translation Studies that arose with the neural turn of machine translation is gaining new momentum:

This emergent practice is potentially challenging both for translators and translation scholars, as embracing the full potential of machine-

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- 1 To summarise Russell/Norvig, AI aims to develop “rational agents”: “An *agent* is just something that acts (agent comes from the Latin *agere*, to do). But computer agents are expected to have other attributes that distinguish them from mere “programs” such as operating under autonomous control, perceiving their environment, persisting over a prolonged time period, adapting to change, and being capable of taking on another’s goals. A rational agent is one that acts so as to achieve the best outcome or, when there is uncertainty, the best expected outcome” (Russell/Norvig 1995/2003: 4). We are therefore faced with a competitive or convergent relationship at the level of the actor. This makes it difficult to speak of AI as a ‘tool’ for translation.

driven translation seems to require a rethinking of human agency, and the understanding of translation as a predominantly human endeavour can be difficult to let go. [...] The issue of human versus machinic agency is thus a crucial question for contemporary Translation Studies, and we urgently need to enhance our understanding of translator-computer interaction. (Ruokonen/Koskinen 2017: 310f.)

The revolutionary upheavals outlined above were often described as experiences of crisis at the level of the actors, especially as they fundamentally challenge not only the practice but also the self-image of translators.² In addition to economic, cognitive, psychological, social, political and methodological questions, they also raise the problem of the experience of translation in its hermeneutical and ethical implications, not only because—as we have seen—they call into question an understanding of translation that is characterised by the translator’s autonomy and agency, but also by a specific (ideal) conception of the cultural relationship established through translation: an experience of translation that is open and dialogical, that expresses, in other words, an ethical relationship to the ‘foreign.’

In this article, we want to look at this experience of translation in its actor-orientated, hermeneutic and, above all, ethical dimensions in the age of AI. Our aim is to present reflections on the changing experience of translation in the ethical context outlined above, which we believe will result from the boom in AI-driven translation practice. These considerations are based on the following observation: Instead of a direct encounter with the foreign language text and the associated culture, AI-assisted translation initially centres on the product of an invisible, intangible ‘agent.’ A text in the target language that is al-

2 As early as 2013, Cronin, for example, speaks of a “sense of confusion” (2013: 1) as the prevailing state of mind of translators in the digital age.

ready more or less perfectly or adequately formulated (but in need of revision). From the professional translator's perspective, this not only manifests an alienation from the product of their labour in a Marxian sense, but also an alienation caused by the upstream appropriation of the foreign-language text content by the AI. Translators must therefore go back to the original text and look at it again, but with the premise that this is done through the 'lens' of the AI-generated text. This has consequences that are likely not only to fundamentally transform the experience of translation, but also, as will be seen, to change the ethical relationship between languages and cultures.

Rather than being based on an empirical study, this article represents an attempt to connect the poles of (non-theoretical) practice on the one hand and (non-practical) theory on the other. Providing reflections on translation in the digital age, it draws its theoretical framework from a time long before the current boom of generative AI models such as ChatGPT, but in which the effects of translation memory tools were already being discussed vigorously and controversially.

The next chapter (ch. 2) explores the theoretical premises, by firstly examining the *traductique* debate on the impact of machine translation tools on translation, and subsequently Berman's concept of the "experience/trial of the foreign." Chapter 3 will present reflections on the transformation of this experience, exploring its impact on the ethics and practice of translation, and the related network of relationships between languages and cultures.

2 Technologisation, Translatability, and the "Experience of the Foreign"

The theoretical framework underpinning the phenomenon of alienation, as previously delineated, finds its roots in the semi-

nal work on Translation Studies by the French philosopher and translator Antoine Berman during the 1980s. Berman's theoretical approach to translation is founded on a hermeneutic and actor-oriented paradigm. One of the central aspects of his understanding of translation is the idea that translation embodies a fundamentally existential experience and confrontation with the source text, the source language and culture, which, in Berman's words, creates an *experience of the foreign*, according to the title of his most important study *L'Épreuve de l'étranger* (1984), which made him one of the most influential figures in the history and theory of translation in the 20th century.³ As such, it is both a hermeneutic and an ethical practice, because in Berman's view this experience cannot or must not be a pure appropriation of the foreign, but rather contains a decentralising and dialogical component.

Although Berman draws his theory of an ethics of translation from his preoccupation with the translation reflections of German Romanticism, his gaze is directed towards a present of translation—a present that is, and this was already apparent in the 1980s, characterised by an unstoppable technologisation that fundamentally endangers translation in its existential dimension as an *épreuve*. If we assume that AI is based on an ideology of fundamental, universal translatability or creates such translatability with technical means (which ultimately only re-

3 Venuti's seminal study *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (1995) played a pivotal role in the reception of Berman's ideas and œuvre. The distinction between *domestication* and *foreignisation*, omnipresent in modern Translation Studies, and the equally omnipresent criticism of an ethnocentric translation practice can be traced back in important parts to Berman's reception of Schleiermacher and German Romanticism. In his thinking Berman focussed in particular on literary translation or, to put it more generally, the translation of "works". The concepts of "*own*" and "*foreign*" used in this context are not fixed, antagonistic categories, but rather elements of a mutual dialogue.

quires human intervention in the sense of post-editing), then any “experience of the foreign” seems to become more difficult or impossible.⁴ This may be true at first glance, but the problem lies deeper: in our view, it is rather the experience of difference that changes in character, because it no longer marks the beginning of the translational dialogue but is retroactively constructed into a pre-translated text in the process of post-editing. Drawing upon Berman’s conceptualisation of translation, our objective is to undertake a more thorough examination of this dual experience below.

2.1 Traductique vs. Traductologie

First of all, however, it should be mentioned that Berman himself has repeatedly dealt with machine translation—with what the French neologism “traductique,” a composite of “traduction” (translation) and “informatique” (computer science), which emerged in the 1980s, refers to. This is not the place to analyse this debate in detail.⁵ Here we see that *traductique* “ne désigne pas simplement l’application de l’informatique à la traduction inter-langues” (Berman, as quoted in Talbot 2023: 26),

4 In this respect, an examination of translation history can provide valuable insights into the ideologies and debates surrounding translation in the digital age. This perspective reveals that these debates are not as novel as they may initially appear, but rather, they are to a certain extent historically ‘prefigured.’

5 The emergence of the term *traductique* and the debates surrounding this neologism in Translation Studies have been analysed by Aurélien Talbot (2023) in an article which we largely follow in this chapter. Due to the unavailability of the special issue of the journal *Protée* (“La traductique,” 1987, 15/2), a central contribution to the *traductique* debate, important quotations from articles of the aforementioned issue are also drawn from Talbot. According to the author, the term is best rendered in English as “translation technology” (2023: 28).

but “le ‘savoir technico-scientifique’ sur la traduction, par opposition à la traductologie qui en est le ‘savoir philosophique’” (Annie Brisset, as quoted in Talbot 2023: 24) Translation Studies in the “proper” sense—*traductologie*—focuses on “la réflexion de la traduction sur elle-même à partir de sa nature d’expérience” (Berman 1999: 17).⁶

As Talbot (2023: 29–30) aptly observes, the distinction between *traductive* and *traductologie* coincides with the fundamental distinction between literary and technical translation that Berman draws from his examination of German Romanticism and, in particular, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s ideas (“On the Different Methods of Translating,” originally published in 1813, translated version cited here from 2020/2021) on the two types and two fields of translation (cf. Berman 1984: 226–242). Whereas in the fields of literature and science—i.e., wherever *works* (“Werke”/“œuvres”) are involved—translation is used, in the fields of business and commerce—i.e., in those areas where communicative goals take centre stage—interpretation is employed (cf. Schleiermacher 2000/2021: 52). According to Berman, literary works focus on “la transmission de l’expérience de l’être-dans-le-monde humain,” whereas specialised texts focus on “la transmission d’informations déterminées” (Berman 1991: 10).⁷ In the first case, language is the

6 In this sense, translation has a profoundly philosophical and reflexive character, as Berman makes clear with reference to a tradition during German Romanticism (the Schlegels, Hölderlin, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Humboldt) as well as to a philosophical tradition (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger), at the centre of which is the reflection of experience and which extends to a more recent tradition, to Rosenzweig and Benjamin, who “pensent la traduction dans le langage philosophique de la réflexion et de l’expérience” (Berman 1999: 17).

7 Although, as Berman recognises, there are in reality many connections between these fields. Berman shows that the aim of literary translation cannot simply be communication, referring to Benjamin’s rhetorical

(expressive) medium of an experience, in the second an instrument of communication (Berman 1991: 10; similarly Berman 1999: 70). Since the transfer of technical language information follows a clear linguistic, discursive and cultural framework of rules, this transfer is particularly suitable for “technologisation” and “informatisation” (Berman 1991: 12). In this case, translation is a largely technical or mechanical act. (*Traductique* is therefore to be understood primarily as the science of specialised translation.⁸) In the case of literature and philosophy, translation is, following Schleiermacher (2000/⁴2021: 52–54), the medium of a deeper and intricate engagement with the foreign work, its form and language, which are inextricably linked, and with its culture of origin. (It is therefore also the medium of a hermeneutic interpretation, which is reserved for works of art). Moreover, the translation of works and of specialised texts respectively obey different imperatives or laws: the literary one obeys the imperative of fidelity (*fidélité* “à la lettre, à la *texture*”), the specialised one that of reliability (*fiabilité*) (Berman 1991: 14).⁹ The distinction between two principles is also of central importance: While specialised translation (expectedly) follows the principle of *communicability*, literary translation, in its quality as a medium for the transmission of experience, is subject to the principle of *traditionality* (in the sense of ‘transmission’):

Si les œuvres langagières, avant d’être de la « littérature », sont des manifestations d’expérience, la tâche de leur traduction est d’assurer la transmission interlinguistique de ces manifestations et, ce faisant, d’assurer leur « vie continuée ». Cette transmission, si elle veut être « fidèle

question of what a poem is supposed to say/express and what it actually communicates (Berman 1999: 73).

- 8 In the current era of AI, an increasing number of researchers are exploring the impact of machine translation on literary translation (cf. Rothwell et al. 2024).
- 9 Unless otherwise indicated, emphasis is taken from the original.

le », est une transmission du tissu langagier qui, toujours, est la réalité d’une œuvre. *Traduire, c’est donc transmettre des formes d’expérience*. Mais la transmission des formes d’expérience, c’est ce qu’on a toujours appelé « la tradition » avant que ce mot n’en vienne à désigner le poids d’un passé figé. La traduction des œuvres, qu’il s’agisse des œuvres du passé ou de celles du présent lointain, est donc *traditionnalisante*. (Berman 1991: 14)

As a reaction to the advancing logic of the expansion of the “univers de la communication technico-scientifique” (Berman 1991: 14), which is increasingly penetrating and jeopardising all areas of translation, including the field of the transmission of works, traditions and experiences, the task of *traductology* must, according to Berman, be the “critique de la raison traductique” (Berman 1989: 678), which should set limits to the advance of technoscience. As Talbot shows, however, Berman’s relationship to *traductique* and the development described is more ambivalent and differentiated than it appears at first glance. For Berman, a successful and fruitful convergence of machine and literary translation is quite conceivable, especially since the new technical possibilities open up new potentials for the literary translator, such as the possibility of systematising and increasing the coherence of translated texts (Berman 1988: 121).¹⁰ Following an appeal by translator Elmar Tophoven—“il vaut mieux relever le défi de l’informatique que de l’ignorer” (Tophoven, as quoted in Talbot 2023: 34)—Berman also recognises the potential applications of machine translation for literary translation. He sees them above all in areas where one would hardly expect them at first glance. Paradoxically, this instrument, which is associated with the destruction of tradition and

10 These include aspects such as increased productivity and efficiency in the areas of editing, documentation, terminology and publishing—aspects that Berman takes from an article by Annie Brisset on Elmar Tophoven (cf. Berman 1988: 121).

the passing on of experience, could prove to be the facilitator of a tradition of translation by equipping it with a memory: “l’un des outils les plus modernes du monde moderne, en dotant la traduction d’une mémoire analytique, pourrait enfin permettre l’émergence d’une *tradition de la traduction*” (Berman 1988: 121). Acting as an archive of translation that allows the process of translation to be documented and thus made transparent, technology could even enable translation to “de devenir, peut-être pour la première fois, pleinement expérience” (ibid.).¹¹ In this sense, machine translation even contributes to the constitution and communication of a history of translation—an “archéologie de la traduction,” as Berman (ibid.) puts it, following Annie Brisset. It thus creates a basis for constituting it as an independent research discipline—a goal to which Berman feels particularly committed.¹²

In any case, this seems to pave the way for placing—in the words of Bernard Stiegler—the link between technology and translation practice at the centre of Translation Studies and for understanding translation not only as an *épreuve de l’étranger*, but also as “l’épreuve de la *techné*” (as quoted in Talbot 2023: 36), even in the field of literary translation.¹³ In Talbot’s words, it could instead be the task of Translation Studies (and a “critique de la raison traductique”) to ask about the possibilities of

11 It provides “la communicabilité d’une expérience gardée en mémoire” (Berman 1988: 122).

12 See above all Berman (1984). He even goes so far as to claim that “la traduction informatiquement assistée est en vérité potentiellement *plus artisanale* que la traduction prétendument ‘traditionnelle’” (Berman 1988: 122).

13 As Cronin (2013: 25) points out, historical distinctions between machine translation and human translation ultimately prove to be problematic on closer inspection, not least due to the inherent reliance of translation on media and technology.

a “sustainable convergence” of translation and computer science, instead of unnecessarily expressing outrage at the excesses of technology.¹⁴

This is not the place to pursue the possibilities and conditions of “successful” or “sustainable convergence” further.¹⁵ Rather, we will continue to ask where the tipping points mentioned in the *traductive* debate might lie that are associated with the increasing technology and the associated industrialisation of translation (cf. Talbot 2023: 36)—tipping points that are capable of fundamentally changing the practice of translation because they deprive translators of their potential for action vis-à-vis technology, imposing their own dominance on them, thereby, on the one hand, plunging translational action “into an aveuglement au moins égal à celui des pseudo-artisans-traducteurs solipsistes du passé” (Berman 1988: 123).¹⁶ At the same time, transcending the “pas technologique” (ibid.) also has an effect on the relationship between languages and cultures because, according to Berman, technology creates a universal translatability that follows a logic of currency convert-

14 “Réinterprétée en ce sens, la ‘critique de la raison traductive’ viserait effectivement à dégager les conditions de possibilité d’une convergence soutenable de la traduction et de l’informatique, tenant compte du fait que la technique peut aussi bien être facteur d’homogénéisation que de diversification, à la fois productrice et destructrice des différences. Dans la mesure où ce qu’on entend par ‘traduction’ et par ‘traducteur’ ne cesse d’évoluer, il ne faut pas s’étonner des évolutions aussi de ce qu’on peut entendre par la réflexion, la théorie ou le ‘savoir de la traduction’” (Talbot 2023: 37).

15 In the empirical study by Ruokonen/Koskinen (2017: 311), “successful convergence” is assessed by “whether the human and machinic agents are seen as convergent and moving in the same direction, or divergent and pulling in different directions.”

16 “[C]onvergent agency is considered positive as long as the human leads” (Ruokonen/Koskinen 2017: 318).

ibility and thus negates linguistic and cultural differences. It is the experiential nature of translation at the actor level and the resulting network of relationships between languages and cultures that Berman has analysed in his studies on translation.

It should be added that, for Berman, this logic of translatability according to economic criteria is by no means exclusively the result of a modern technisation of translation. Rather, he sees it as being rooted in the historical epoch that particularly interested him as a translation historian: the era of (German) Romanticism, in which the foundations for modern translation theory emerged, centred on the “infinite versatility” (Novalis) that makes all arts and disciplines transformable into one another (but pays surprisingly little attention to the concrete act of translation)—a way of thinking about convertibility that, according to Berman, seems to have been taken to extremes with the modern mechanisation of translation. We will return to this aspect below. Before that, however, we need to look at the existential experience at the heart of literary translation.

2.2 Translating as an “Experience” / “Trial of the Foreign”

If, as seen above, the works of literature and science are to be regarded as manifestations of world experiences, this means for Berman: “*Traduire, c’est donc transmettre des formes d’expérience.*” In this respect, it is appropriate to understand and conceptualise translation itself as experience (Berman 1988: 119). Berman draws the essence of this experience from his study of the reflection on translation during the German Romantic period. Fundamental to the “experience of the foreign” in and through translation—a formula that Berman attributes to the German

poet Hölderlin¹⁷—is a shift in meaning that manifests itself in the translation of the word “experience” (“Erfahrung”) as “épreuve” in Berman’s work. The latter term does not refer to an “experience” in the conventional sense, but rather to a “challenge” or “trial”.¹⁸ For Berman, the “experience of the foreign” is therefore always also a touchstone for one’s own and its “practice”—an experience which, as he shows using the example of Hölderlin and his translations of ancient Greek tragedies, faces the resistance of the other language and uses this to transform (even violently) one’s own language through translation (Berman 1984: 250–271).¹⁹

The idea that translations make a certain form of truth claim—and thus have a fundamental ethical dimension—is fundamental to Berman’s hermeneutic and actor-oriented approach, which distinguishes him from the more system-oriented, social-scientific and empirical model of translation history within *Descriptive Translation Studies*. However, a translation that does not face up to the challenge of the foreign and does not communicate this challenge to its readers; that is, in Berman’s words, one that is not open, dialogical and decentralising, is not a translation at all in this sense. It squanders its genuine ethical value; it is pure appropriation. If Berman’s engagement with

17 In reality, however, it originates from a study by Heidegger on Hölderlin’s poem *Andenken*.

18 This alteration in interpretation has now also become widely established in the English-speaking world: While Heyvaert translates the title as “The Experience of the Foreign” (1992), Venuti (2000/42021) renders it as “The Trials of the Foreign” in his *Translation Studies Reader*.

19 According to Heidegger (1981: 115), Hölderlin’s poetry is based on the formula: “Die Erfahrung des Fremden und die Einübung des Eigenen” (“The experience of the foreign and the practice of one’s own”). On the nature of this experience cf. the remarks on Berman’s concept of *pré-translation* below.

the translation reflections of German Romanticism provides him with essential theoretical foundations for translation, his view of early Romanticism (the Jena circle around Novalis and the Schlegels) as well as later Romanticism is not uncritical. Berman sees the limits of Romantic thinking on translation above all in its powerful tendency towards meta-linguistic and metapoetic abstraction, which universalises translation. The core of this thinking is the concept of “infinite versatility” (“*unendliche Versabilität*,” Novalis 1957: 159f.). This concept posits that all forms of art and science are transformable into one another, following a pattern analogous to that of currencies. It thus establishes a general translatability (Berman 1984: 135f.), which detaches itself from translation in the narrower sense, or “translation proper.” For Berman, this tendency towards abstraction is ultimately also the reason why late Romanticism moved away from its original enthusiasm for translation and why the Romantic transformation of natural language into artificial language turned into a cult of untranslatability. On the one hand, we are thus confronted with the paradox that this cult of untranslatability, which is the consequence of an idealisation of individual linguistic differences, ultimately threatens to put an end to the fundamental hermeneutic and ethical quality of the translational endeavour. On the other hand, the early Romantic logic of making poetic form, language and aesthetics absolute not only leads to a loss of contour of the foreign, but also to the paradoxical consequence that any “experience of the foreign” becomes impossible, because ultimately there is or can no longer be anything foreign in the sphere of universal art and language. One might add, and Berman has already recognised this problem, that the current triumph of machine translation seems to lead to a similar result in its own way. From this perspective, machine translation is precisely the form of translation that threatens to destroy or fundamentally

change the experience of the foreign, especially in its existential dimension as *épreuve*, as a challenge from the foreign.

3 From an “Experience of the Foreign” to an Experience of Alienation? Translating in the Age of AI

In Berman’s terms, translation can be described as an experience that is characterised by the linguistic and cultural confrontation with supposed untranslatabilities of a morphological, syntactic and lexical nature. There are countless strategies for dealing with the supposed “loss experience” of translation and with those linguistic and cultural elements of the source language for which there seem to be no or only inadequate equivalents in the target language: Borrowing, paraphrasing, substitution, compensation, etc. (Berman 1984: 302f.).²⁰ These are strategies that have a kind of dialogic, even decentralising force, because, in Schleiermacher’s words, they bring the reader towards the author (and the source culture), but also move the author (and the source culture) towards the reader. In any case, it is a kind of “processus de rencontre intersubjectif” (ibid.: 235), which, however, by no means articulates a harmonious or balanced relationship (for Schleiermacher, an “authentic” translation exists when the first case occurs).

These strategies are characterised by the fact that they create translatability, which can be regarded as a “natural” expression of a relationship between cultures and languages on a textual level:

20 Cf. also Eco’s (2003) famous definition of translation as a negotiation process. For a detailed exposition of the strategies alluded to by Berman, cf. Eco (ibid., chapter 5).

La prétendue intraduisibilité se dissout en traduisibilité sans reste, par le simple recours à des modes de rapports existant naturellement et historiquement entre des langues, mais modulés ici selon les exigences de la traduction d'un *texte*: l'emprunt et la néologie pour le domaine lexical. (Berman 1984: 302)²¹

It should be emphasised that translatability appears here as a product that reflects an experience of differences. (For Berman, the counter-model is an ethnocentric translation that levels out differences, as is the case in the historical current of the French *belles infidèles*). Translation is therefore not transparent. Rather, the different methods of translation, e.g. alienating translation, reflect personal or cultural intentions, e.g. the need to enrich one's own language through the "foreign."

With AI-supported translation, we are usually dealing with a text that has already been (pre-)translated. The translator's main task here is proofreading or post-editing to correct the errors produced by the technology. This means that translators have to go back to the original text, i.e. establish the network of relationships with the original retrospectively. As Berman argues, however, translational reading is more than just editing or hermeneutic reading. Rather, it is a specific form of reading that goes beyond a hermeneutic, i.e. primarily interpretive reading, because it is not in the first place a matter of grasping the literal meaning of a text, but also of uncovering the "système de son écriture" (Berman 1984: 248). It should be emphasised that this "lecture-traduction" is an action that precedes the actual translation. Only through this reading does the translator experience the full foreignness of a work. And only

21 Translation is based on a correspondence between languages, which according to Berman is virtual in nature: "Pour toute langue, on peut postuler une correspondance rigoureuse avec une autre langue, mais à un niveau virtuel" (Berman 1984: 303).

this reading forms the basis for a reading that, with Berman, can be called “critical”:

[L]ire pour traduire [...] c’est opérer une lecture-traduction – une *pré-traduction*. Cette pré-traduction peut apparaître si l’on regarde les mots, les phrases ou les segments de phrases qu’un traducteur a soulignés dans l’ouvrage à traduire *avant* de commencer la traduction proprement dite : non seulement les mots et les passages qu’il ne “comprend” pas (que l’on supposera peu nombreux), mais ceux qui, à la première lecture, posent un problème de traduction à cause de leur grande distance par rapport à la “langue d’arrivée”. On a là les lignes de crête de l’étrangeté de l’œuvre, ou sa ligne de résistance à la traduction. Et cette ligne coïncide en grande partie avec le système original de l’œuvre dans sa langue. De là, est possible une certaine lecture de l’œuvre, qui peut se transformer en lecture “critique”. (Berman 1984: 249)²²

In the context of AI-assisted translation, this “pré-traduction” is transformed into a “post-traduction”: the dialogue with the original largely takes place through the “glasses” of a text pre-translated by the AI, which forces the human translator into the role of a post-editor.²³ The latter is ultimately responsible for processing the machine-pretranslated text, which obeys a communicative, technical logic in which languages and texts are transformed by algorithms through the decomposition of linguistic units into tokens “en réalités a priori traduisibles, conformément aux exigences de communication des technosciences” (Berman, as quoted in Talbot 2023: 27). According to Ber-

22 On the limits of a hermeneutic approach to translation, which dissolves the specificity of translation “en en faisant un cas particulier de processus interprétatif” and which proves incapable “d’aborder, en tant que théorie de la conscience, la dimension inconsciente dans laquelle se jouent les processus linguistiques et donc la traduction” (cf. Berman 1984: 248).

23 This is also the case if translators not only receive a text already translated with the help of AI from an agency for editing, but also if they use the AI themselves and edit their own AI-generated text.

man, this logic is based on convertibility thinking, in which languages are traded and exchanged along the lines of currencies.²⁴

It is the translator's task here to transform such technically generated texts, which from an ontological point of view are still in the stage of an unfinished or artificial, *a priori* translated reality, into an (authentic) "réalité traduisible" or rather "traduite." In other words, the aim is to add "colour" and "depth" to texts that have been produced according to standardised technical procedures and that are perceived, if not necessarily as faulty, then often as "sterile," in other words to breathe "life" into them by making stylistic adjustments or incorporating certain peculiarities of the source text into the translated text.²⁵ For instance, in the process of translating essays into German, the insertion of conjunctions and adverbs (e.g. "sogar," "doch," "überhaupt"/"even, after all, at all") can be appropriate, despite the fact that they do not fulfil any evident function within the sentence and impede the readability of texts. This approach, however, serves to enhance the argumentation. In communicative logic, such filler words often appear to be misplaced and are frequently identified as superfluous by the autocorrect function of word processing programs ("more concise language would be clearer for your reader"). A further characteristic of AI translation from English into German is the prioritisation of the most prevalent syntactic structures. Sentences frequently conform to a predictable paradigm, with

24 It is this notion of convertibility that, in Berman's view, reduces translation to the simple practice of transferring meaning and thus to its communicative function: "Dès que l'on postule cela, la traduction acquiert la minceur d'une humble médiation du sens" (Berman 1984: 299).

25 Not to forget: In many respects, Berman's ideal of translation is based on Schleiermacher's idea of alienating translation.

subject–predicate–object order being a common example. However, the linguistic flexibility characteristic of German sentence structure lends itself to the restructuring of texts, thereby enhancing their dynamism. One may also mention strategies such as the use of neologisms and partial “naturalisation,” for example semi-Francisation of terms in order to convey local colour: “porteño, habitant de Buenos Aires, donne ‘portègne’” (Berman 1984: 302).²⁶ Post-editing therefore turns out to be a kind of difference amplifier: the focus on what is flawed and worthy of revision in the AI translation makes the translators, in a sense, guarantors of difference who endeavour to make the original, its “flavour,” visible in the machine-generated translation. They thus become the guardians of that more or less latent alterity of the original which manifests (is supposed to manifest) itself in the translation and which we generally mean when we speak of a “good” translation or of an “authentic” text. The experience of the difference between the work in the original language and the target-language context which Berman refers to does not come at the beginning here, as already mentioned; it is not the impetus or prelude to the actual translator’s engagement with the text, but rather comes at the end. The production of a text that is more or less different from the AI-generated translation, but has fewer differences compared to the original (one could also say that it is “more faithful”), usually forms the *scopos* of post-editing. Although this is mostly a pragmatic process, there is a danger that, in a kind of radicalisation of the ethical claim (being “faith-

26 The purpose of this article is not to provide empirical evidence on the quality and creativity potential of machine translation and post-editing. Nevertheless, studies such as Guerberof-Arenas/Toral (2020) indicate that increased use of machine translation and diminished human translator intervention leads to less creative and “enjoyable” translations, particularly in the literary domain.

ful” to the original), the translator in his role as defender of alterity appears here as the guarantor of the ideologems against which he is actually fighting: against the “*intraduisible comme valeur*” (Berman 1984: 298).²⁷ This value forms the flip side of the ideology of an *a priori*, universal translatability, which completely relegates translation to the level of solving problems of a technical nature and which is radicalised by the technisation and automation of translation.

The automation of translation by AI could therefore paradoxically lead to linguistic and cultural differences (the reluctance of the original) being overemphasised on the one hand and levelled out on the other. The general translatability and the emphasis on differences are to a certain extent the “enemies” of the previously described translational engagement with the foreign and thus also of ethical translation practice, which creates a dialogical, “natural” connection between languages and works. Metaphorically and pointedly speaking, the translator is transformed from a bridge builder into someone who has to tear down the technologically constructed bridge (at least partially) or repair its cracks and gaps.²⁸ The dialogical and decentring relational space that, according to Berman, characterises “authentic” translation and enables the experi-

27 There is a danger that AI-generated translation will activate the dictum of untranslatability that is deeply rooted in cultural discourse, according to which “[l]’essentiel d’un texte n’est pas traduisible” (Berman 1984: 298).

28 As can be seen in the age of nation-building, translation has always had a border-building effect between languages, cultures and nations. Nevertheless, there is a danger that this function will lose cultural significance between the ideological poles of general translatability and untranslatability, and that the deeper cultural meaning of defining borders—namely to sharpen the contours of the familiar through the foreign—can hardly be honoured anymore, because a resonant relationship between the familiar and the foreign seems less and less possible.

ence of the foreign outlined above cannot arise here. The result seems to be not only alienation in the Marxian sense—from the product of one’s own work and ultimately from oneself. Rather, in the context of Berman’s concept of translation, the experience of alienation also proves to be the result of what Hartmut Rosa calls the impossibility of a deeper, successful and thus “resonant” relationship, in our case with the translated text, as a kind of “relationship of unrelatedness” (cf. Rosa 2010, 2019), which is also the result of an experience of acceleration in translation.

We cannot survey all the consequences of this experience of alienation here, let alone thematise it. Nevertheless, it seems clear that, as a form of “relationship of unrelatedness,” it not only diminishes the cultural value and visibility of translation, but also, as already indicated, has a fundamental effect on linguistic developments (or, in a kind of vicious circle, is also driven by such developments of a linguistic and communicative nature). First of all, there is the relationship of humans to language itself in view of the loss of expressivity and the ability to speak (in German: *Sprachlichkeit*) of languages as stated by Berman in the course of the expansion of the “univers de la communication technico-scientifique” and the uniformisation tendencies of languages driven by them. It is these developments that make the automation of translation seem conceivable at all and jeopardise the natural relationship between humans and language:

[I] s’est produit un phénomène que maints auteurs de notre siècle ont dénoncé, et qui concerne la destruction de la *Sprachlichkeit*, de la capacité parlante des grandes langues modernes, au profit d’une langue-système de communication de plus en plus vidée d’épaisseur et de signifiante propres. On peut penser ici à l’appauvrissement de la créativité orale, à la mort des dialectes, à l’enfoncement de la littérature dans un espace de plus en plus clos où elle devient de moins en moins capable de “figurer” le monde. La dégradation du langage (du langage

naturel), voilà certes un lieu commun. *Notre* lieu commun. [...] Anéantissement des dialectes, de parlers locaux ; banalisation des langues nationales aplanissement des différences entre celles-ci au profit d'un modèle de non-langue pour lequel l'anglais a servi de cobaye (et de victime), modèle grâce auquel la traduction automatique deviendrait pensable ; prolifération cancéreuse, au sein de la langue commune, des langues spéciales – il y a là un processus qui attaque en profondeur le langage et le rapport *naturel* de l'homme au langage. (Berman 1984: 288f.)²⁹

There is also the relationship between languages and cultures. For Berman, the central aspect here is that the dynamic (and danger) of the homogenisation of languages and communication systems associated with the mechanisation of translation destroys the natural and dialogical network of relationships between languages and cultures. For it seems clear that *a priori* translatability obeys interlinguistic power relations, “qui tendent à annuler la différence des langues, et souvent à étouffer la spécificité de la langue dominée, taxée d'inférieure” (Berman 1984: 276). The result of *a priori* translatability is global, uniform languages, which are ultimately languages into which much is

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- 29 As can be observed, the amount of AI-generated data is constantly increasing. However, the quantity of texts produced by AI does not seem to automatically lead to an increase in quality, especially as many translations remain unchecked and uncorrected, enriching the universe of (poorly translated) texts that AI in turn draws on. In any case, it should be investigated in the future whether AI not only leads to linguistic standardisation effects, but also to a loss of quality in translations. The field of AI has seen significant advancements in recent years, with the development of algorithms capable of producing literary works such as poems and novels. However, at present it seems difficult to imagine that AI, without substantial and guiding intervention by human translators, will embark upon those innovative paths that demand ‘courageous’ translation strategies and completely new linguistic choices. There are numerous historical exemplars of such epoch-making translations into German, including Luther’s translation of the Bible and Hölderlin’s of *Antigone* and *Oedipus*.

translated and from which much is retranslated—languages that are the opposite of processes of *métissage*:

Il suffit de songer à cette masse croissante de textes modernes, débordant largement l’aire du technique ou du diplomatique, certes “rédigés” en français, en espagnol, en allemand, etc., mais paraissant de mauvaises traductions d’un mauvais anglais qui, néanmoins, est leur *maître suprême* et dans lequel, finalement, ils sont destinés à être retraduits. “Confusion des langues”, véritable “incendie”, en effet, l’inverse d’un métissage. Quand une langue investit les autres en vertu de sa position dominante et consent elle-même à se transformer pour devenir une “langue universelle” il se produit un processus de destruction généralisé. Les métissages linguistiques, par contre, sont féconds : pensions, dans le domaine français, aux parlers créoles. (Berman 1984: 276)

In other words, the expansion of the “univers de la communication technico-scientifique” not only marks the end of an idea, an ideal and an intention of translation, at the centre of which is the idea of enriching one’s own language, but also the end of relationships in which languages mutually fertilise each other (in the sense of an expansion of their *Sprachlichkeit*).³⁰

The technically generated egalitarianism in the age of *machine translation* (everything is *a priori* translatable!)³¹ thus endangers the actual egalitarianism of translation, which is an ethical one: “l’essence de la traduction est d’être ouverture, dialogue, métissage, décentrement. Elle est mise en rapport, ou elle n’est

30 With reference to Hölderlin, for Berman, translating literary works always also means working on the linguistic nature and capacity of one’s own language. “*L’épreuve de l’étranger et l’apprentissage du propre*” are two interconnected, albeit not always harmonious, dynamics (Berman 1999: 86).

31 Behind the indiscrimination that AI demonstrates towards texts, there is, as is well known, an opaque and unreflected culture of differentiation, because ultimately algorithms programmed by human actors (which often reflect their world views, cultural imprints and associated stereotypes) determine what becomes visible and how it does.

rien” (Berman 1984: 16). There is therefore a real danger that translation will act as an agent of uniformisation (which, with AI, is reaching unprecedented dimensions in terms of quantity) and thus undo the achievements that go hand in hand with postcolonial developments, which brings a new topicality to the question of the ethics of translation: protecting interlingual relationships from the standardisation tendencies of the present. The experiences outlined by Berman (1984: 288) “situent désormais la tâche de traduire dans une lumière nouvelle ou, sinon nouvelle, du moins infiniment plus crue il s’agit de défendre la langue et les rapports inter-langues contre l’homogénéisation croissante des systèmes de communication”:

Ré-ouvrir les chemins de la tradition ; ouvrir un rapport enfin exact (non dominant, non narcissique) aux autres cultures, et notamment à celles de ce qui est maintenant devenu le “Tiers Monde” ; mobiliser les ressources de notre langue pour la mettre à la hauteur de ces diverses ouvertures – c’est évidemment lutter contre ce phénomène destructeur, même s’il est d’autres manières de le conjurer. Et tel est, peut-être, l’essentiel de la conscience traductrice moderne : une exigence maximale de “savoir” au service d’une certaine ré-alimentation de la capacité parlante du langage, d’une certaine manière lucide d’habiter et de défendre Babel à l’heure où la Tour-des-Multiples-Langues (c’est-à-dire celle des Différences) est menacée par l’expansion d’un jargon déracinant qui n’est même pas l’espéranto, ce rêve humaniste naïf qui révèle maintenant son vrai visage de cauchemar. (Berman 1984: 289)

It is precisely the translator’s task to work against a machine-generated *a priori* translatability, i.e., to oppose the reduction of *Sprachlichkeit* to communicative functions, that makes the translator a guardian of diversity and difference—but not in the ideological sense mentioned above as the defender of an “*intraduisible comme valeur*” that essentialises the foreign and the own, but in the sense of an actor who brings it into a dialogue through applying suitable translation strategies, making it tangible and communicable.

4 Conclusion

Similar appeals to the ethical and cultural role of translation, which act as a force that resists the present-day tendencies towards linguistic and cultural uniformisation on the one hand, while becoming a medium for cultural hybridisation and *métissage* on the other, have become commonplace today.³² Nevertheless, in a digital world dominated by economic interests and non-transparent actors, in which carefully guarded algorithms regulate processes of communication and interaction, the question of the ethical dimension (and the associated claim to truth of translation) has lost none of its topicality—on the contrary!³³ It is this problem of intransparency that makes the search for answers to questions about the effects of AI on practices, methods and theories of translation more difficult.

Despite or precisely because of the many unanswered questions and the new challenges to theory and practice that arise, it seems clear that the experience of translation in the age of AI is an experience of discomfort because it is characterised by experiences of loss and a supposedly shrinking power of human actors and their agency. And yet the notion of discomfort should by no means be seen as generalised and absolute, especially as the experience of technology (which Berman does not regard negatively across the board either) and AI technology can also open up new scope and new forms of successful convergence between humans and technology, e.g. opportunities to respond quickly to current language developments that

32 Such appeals are known to have been formulated also within the field of Postcolonial (Translation) Theory. Cf. Bhabha's (1994) reflections on the so-called *third space*.

33 For example, it is important to consider that the utilisation of AI consumes enormous amounts of energy, a fact that should be incorporated into a contemporary ethic of translation.

have not yet manifested themselves in the traditional media (dictionaries etc.) that translators still often rely on. Both within and outside the professional domain, the digital space creates new potential and horizons for resonance experiences through translation. One example of this can be found in the field of crowdsourcing and online fan/amateur translation, which sometimes defies the economic logic of the translation market (cf. Jiménez-Crespo 2017).

And yet it is obvious that in the digital sphere, where social relationships are subject to a process of automation, the relationships between languages and cultures and the channels through which they run, and of which translation is one of the central ones, are also becoming increasingly opaque, even invisible. In the face of a seemingly overpowering technology that is changing their practice and professional image, translators are not only becoming alienated from themselves, their work and the “products” they generate. Rather, it has led to a downright alienation of society from this practice and the people involved, if you look at the sharp decline in the number of students across Europe who choose to study translation, even though the public demand for translations does not seem to be declining at all. Paradoxically, academic research and teaching in Translation Studies do not appear to be innocent of these developments, as they are increasingly dominated by translation technology and its application, yet increasingly lose sight of the aspects of translation relevant to Cultural Studies.

This article has focussed on precisely this aspect of Cultural Studies and Cultural History, from an actor-oriented, ethical and hermeneutic perspective, shedding light on the changing experience of translation in the brevity offered here. What is the experience of translation? In Berman’s words, it is an experience of the *foreign*, which is an experience of the difference between languages and cultures, but which loses its absolute

status in translation because it is made tangible. While a human, ethical translation practice leads to mediating between the poles and essentialisms of universal translatability on the one hand, and untranslatability as a value on the other, without dissolving them in the process, AI translation seems to reinforce this kind of polarity thinking: in the current political and social situation of Western countries, a universal, *a priori* translatability generated by technology and committed to a communicative logic encounters societies that, as Andreas Reckwitz (2020) has shown, are characterised by singularisation tendencies, the idealisation and absolutisation of differences—tendencies that, as has now been researched, are driven by social networks. The insistence on the uniqueness of individuals and social groups, which manifests itself, for example, in the accusation of cultural appropriation, is expressed here in the (ideological) notion of the untranslatability of cultures and languages. Just as in Romanticism general translatability thinking, the universalisation of poetics, literature and art, and the absolutisation of differences, and thus untranslatability, form two sides of the same coin, the technical claim to translate everything and make it translatable conjures up resistance. It is to be feared that this logic of “*intraduisible comme valeur*” is likely to be radicalised by the AI translation machine and the lack of transparency of its algorithms (which are often suspected of being manipulation tools).

What is lost from view here is the space of the in-between outlined by Berman, in which languages and cultures “tout en se mélangeant, manifestent aussi leur pure différence”—“cet espace de métissage qu’est la traduction, et peut-être elle seule” (Berman 1984: 275), which ethically and practically also makes translation an instrument against cultural essentialisms, fantasies of autarky and nationalisms which are currently booming around the world.

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