

# Theories on Translation Criticism: Antoine Berman's Project

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes Antoine Berman's theoretical project regarding the criticism of literary translations. Positioned at the intersection between hermeneutics, philosophy of language, and literary theory, Berman's thought aims to build a discipline that would legitimize the evaluation of translations on the basis of their textual, ethical, and historical fidelity. The focus is placed not on identifying translation errors in the traditional sense, but on identifying what Berman calls "deforming tendencies" - a series of systematic alterations that a text can suffer during the transfer from one language to another. These tendencies, such as rationalization, clarification, or the destruction of linguistic patterns, reveal the translator's resistance to the foreignness of the original and are at the core of what Berman denounces as ethnocentric translation. Consequently, his critical model is closely connected to the idea of respecting the Other, of welcoming the foreign without reducing it to the familiar. This article also examines Berman's reconfiguration of the notion of equivalence, proposing instead an ethical adherence to the letter of the text - not understood in a reductive or literalist manner, but as a form of dialogic fidelity. The discussion is illustrated with references to various literary texts, including those of John Donne, and is anchored in the broader context of translation ethics and hermeneutics. The conclusions underline the relevance of Berman's approach for contemporary debates on translation quality and cultural representation. By refusing both the relativism of "everything is a valid translation" and the rigidity of prescriptive models, Berman opens the path for a responsible and nuanced critique that values both the linguistic singularity of the source and the creative agency of the translator. His project remains a fundamental reference for any theoretical or applied reflection on translation as an act of writing and reading across languages and cultures.*

**Keywords:** Antoine Berman, translation criticism, deforming tendencies, ethics of translation, literary theory.

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Just like translation itself, the criticism of translations has been a subject of debate among theorists, and we have observed a richness of perspectives on this matter. In this article, we aim to offer a brief overview of the opinions expressed, focusing in particular on the method outlined by Antoine Berman, which appears to us as the most suitable approach for evaluating a poetic translation.

## 1. Theoretical Landmarks

Since the reflections of Katharina Reiss, it can be concluded that a valid evaluation of translations must be relevant, a characteristic that implies two conditions. On the one hand, the critic must develop an objective assessment, that is, one that is verifiable, because "the critic of a translation must make explicit the reasons for every positive or negative judgment and support it with examples" (Reiss, 2002, p. 16). Furthermore, before judging a version as inappropriate, the critic "should attempt to establish the motives that might have led the translator to choose the erroneous or supposedly erroneous solution" (Reiss, 2002, p. 16).

On the other hand, she calls for a committed attitude from the critic, who should understand that the translator's choices are always influenced by subjectivity, especially in terms of the interpretation that precedes and accompanies the translation process.

*"Translation criticism always encounters two types of limitations: the subjective contingency of the hermeneutic process and the structure of the translator's personality. [...] However, this does not make the criticism less objective (in the sense of being non-arbitrary), since it is developed in a relevant manner, that is, by taking into account the personal implications involved (Reiss, 2002, p. 143)."*

These observations, which primarily concern literary texts, complement her views on text typology, which appears to be the starting point in developing a framework for translation criticism. The German translation theorist proposes a classification of texts into three types, based on their primary function: informative texts, expressive texts (including literature and poetry), and operative or appellative texts.

If for Katharina Reiss the evaluation of a translation can be either positive or negative, in the theory advanced by Antoine Berman the dichotomy is maintained but more nuanced, forming the final stage of his productive criticism as presented in the book *Pour une critique*

*des traductions: John Donne [Toward a Criticism of Translations: John Donne].*

In his view, translation criticism is a “rigorous analysis of a translation, of its fundamental features, of the project that gave rise to it, of the horizon in which it emerged, and of the translator’s position” (Berman, 1995, p. 15). This definition shows that the critic’s work is not limited to a comparison between the version(s) and the original, but rather constitutes a complex activity that involves several stages: “reading and rereading the translation,” “readings of the original,” “searching for the translator,” “analysis of the translation,” “reception of the translation,” and “productive criticism.”

It seems to us that the project proposed by Berman is both a product and a producer. As he himself admits, this pathway stems from his own practice and largely describes the process he followed, alongside his wife, Isabelle Berman, to *learn how to read a translation* [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, p. 65). Therefore, the project is initially a product that can, in turn, become productive if the analysis manages to create the appropriate space for a retranslation - that is, to open the way toward new translation projects.

Berman insists on what the critic must not do: propose a new translation project (that is the translator’s task) or offer advice to the future translator (Berman, 1995). This calls into question the very existence of the final stage of the project, which depends on the value of the version. In this sense, the sixth stage of the project emerges “when the analysis has dealt with a translation that urgently calls for a retranslation, either because it is too flawed or unsatisfactory, or because it has aged too much” (Berman, 1995, p. 96). When the analysis concerns a “successful” translation, the aim is to demonstrate and justify its accomplishment. Thus, the critique becomes fruitful for the reader, though not for a potential translator (Berman, 1995).

However, for his mentor, Henri Meschonnic, there is no clear distinction between the critic and the translator. Drawing from his own translational practice, particularly his work on certain biblical fragments, he argues that every new translation of a text is preceded by a more or less conscious critique of the existing versions. The translator is, in fact, a critic of the translations that precede their own (Meschonnic, 1999).

In our view, this perspective leans more towards a philosophical approach, even though the author is a theorist of language. Furthermore, it is not universally applicable, as we can point to translators who entirely disregard the versions proposed by their peers. Another drawback is the potential subjectivity of the translator, whose

main concern may be to justify their own translation project, thereby increasing the risk of producing a subjective critique.

Another observation worth noting is that of Canadian translation theorist Jean Delisle. According to him, analyzing a translation involves taking into account the full range of cultural and social phenomena that enable translated foreign texts to exist within the target society (Delisle, 2014). In other words, the translation critic must consider the context in which the translation was published as part of their analysis.

Just like Berman, Lance Hewson, professor at the University of Geneva, pays particular attention to the selection of passages subjected to comparison. However, unlike the French theorist, he begins with a reading of the original text, which enables the critic to identify the specific features of the work to be translated - features that the translator must have taken into account (Hewson, 2011). This perspective recalls the earlier view of Vladimir Streinu, who stated that the preliminary stage of translation criticism is a thorough understanding of the original text (Streinu, 1968).

Even though we observe a wealth of thought in the field of translation criticism, in the following paragraphs we will present in detail the method outlined by Berman. Our choice is based on several reasons. On the one hand, this project grants significant autonomy to the critic and can be adapted according to specific needs - something the author himself recommends by stating that "the aim is not to present a model, but a possible analytical path" that "*can be adjusted according to the particular purposes of each analyst*" [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, p. 64). On the other hand, Berman attests that the structure of this analysis owes much to his own experience as a translator of literature, which makes his ideas especially relevant for the field of poetry translation.

## **2. Reading as a Prerequisite for the Critical Assessment of Translations**

Theories of poetic text translation reveal a strong connection between the act of translating and the act of reading. Numerous translators and scholars have addressed this topic. Yves Bonnefoy speaks of a "writing reading" that must awaken the reader's creative impulse. The reader becomes a translator when they identify and take into account the specific traits of the poet to be translated (Bonnefoy, 2000).

In the Romanian space, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș proposes three types of reading: "aesthetic," "hermeneutic," and "genetic," the latter being the one that corresponds to the translation process. In other

words, the translator's task is not merely to grasp one of the meanings of the work and transpose it into a target language, but to reconstruct the context in which the source text was produced, including its historicity (Doinaş, 1988) - a vision that closely resembles that advanced by Henri Meschonnic (Meschonnic, 1999).

For Paul Miclău, translation is an act of "total reading" that involves understanding the subtext through interpretation, but he also introduces another stage - which he calls "supertotal reading" [*lecture supertotale – fr.*] - referring to the reading of both the original and the translation(s) (Miclău, 1983). This notion brings to mind the steps outlined by Antoine Berman in his method of translation analysis, particularly the first two: "the reading and rereading of the translation" and "the readings of the original" (Berman, 1995).

From Berman's perspective, translation criticism must begin with the reading of the translation "while entirely setting aside the original" [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, p. 65). This is a way to avoid any prejudice that regards the translated version merely as a copy of the source text. The translation is thus perceived as a "fully-fledged" text, to borrow Guy Leclercq's phrase (Leclercq, 1990).

Moreover, this kind of reading, which we may call blind or preliminary, allows the critic to determine whether the translated text "holds," that is, whether it is written in grammatically, syntactically, and lexically correct language and whether it functions as an autonomous text. At this stage, the critic identifies the "problematic textual zones"

"...the problematic textual zones are those where defectiveness becomes apparent: where the translated text suddenly seems to weaken, fall out of tune, or lose all rhythm; where it appears instead too smooth, too fluent, too impersonally "French"; where it abruptly displays words, turns of phrase, or sentence structures that clash; or where it is overtaken by modes, structures etc., reflecting the language of the original and revealing a phenomenon of linguistic contamination (or "interference")" [the quotation marks are the author's] (Berman, 1995, p. 66).

and those "miraculous" and "blissful" segments in which the translator excelled in their work and produced "visibly accomplished passages" or ones written in a style that is "harmoniously" strange, bearing no resemblance to any author in the target language (Berman, 1995, p. 66). Despite all these advantages, this stage requires a strong command of the target language and an in-depth knowledge of the receiving literature.

Even though the critic has retained in memory the "problematic" and "miraculous" textual zones of the target text, this time they must focus on the specific characteristics of the writing and language of the source text.

Given that he is both a theorist and a practitioner, Berman highlights a distinction between the reading performed by the critic and that of the translator. For the former, it is a more technical and applied reading, whereas for the latter, the reading of the source text must be fertile and productive (Berman, 1995). The concrete critical analysis of the translated text must be preceded by a "pre-textual analysis" aimed at discovering the fundamental stylistic features of the original. These are the "signifying zones" of a work - those in which the writing reaches its intended purpose and gravitational center. A simple reading is not sufficient to identify them, hence the necessity of a prior interpretation of the source text, which corresponds to the second stage of the "productive" critique project, namely "readings of the original" (Berman, 1995). To better identify these significant passages, Berman suggests a distinction between the "necessary" parts of the text and those that are "accidental," which "could always have been written 'differently'" (Berman, 1995, p. 71) [the quotation marks are the author's].

Therefore, the critic must identify the symbolic elements, those that are present throughout the development of a work, in its "drafts," "versions," "states," or "variants" (Berman, 1995, p. 71). From an aesthetic perspective, "these passages are not always the most 'beautiful'" [the quotation marks are the author's], but they are marked by "the highest possible degree of necessity" (Berman, 1995, p. 71). In other words, the "signifying zones" form the core of the writing, what Doinaş refers to as the "fundamental sound" (Doinaş, 1988).

In addition to these two stages focused on reading the translation and the original, the theorist identifies a form of accompanying reading that must follow them<sup>2</sup> (Berman, 1995, p. 67). On the one hand, there is the "scaffolding of the translation," which the critic must take into account. This includes the paratext surrounding the translated version: introduction, preface, postface, notes, glossaries, and so on<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In a footnote, he further develops this idea. In his view, this reading - which encompasses what he calls "collateral readings" - should not precede the first two stages, as there must first be "an intimacy with, on the one hand, the translated text, and on the other, the original. Without too much mediation" (note 62, emphasis in the original text).

<sup>3</sup> We consider that this is the most appropriate moment to integrate the fifth stage proposed by Berman, "the reception of the translation" (Berman, 1995, pp. 95-96).

On the other hand, there is the reading of other works by the translated author, hermeneutic texts that facilitate the understanding of the writer's style, various documents related to the author's historical context, and so on. For the translation process, these readings - what Berman (1995) refers to as the "support of the translational act" [*étayage de l'acte traductif*] - are relatively "free" and optional. However, for critical analysis, they become "more connected, more systematic."

By comparison with the translator, who must take into account the poietics of the original, the hermeneut must be concerned with the poietics of the translation. Starting from the "supporting material of the translation", they attempt to understand the translator's work - hence the necessity of the third step: "the search for the translator."

### **3. "À la recherche du traducteur" [In Search of the Translator]**

This third stage of the analytical trajectory is dedicated to the translator's profile, which includes three components: the translational position, the translation project, and the translational horizon. In order to identify the avenues to explore when constructing the translator's portrait, Berman draws on literary criticism, where the question of the author's identity plays a central role. To better understand a writer's creative universe, the hermeneut often considers biographical, psychological, existential elements, and the author's inner states. From Berman's perspective, such traits are not as evident or directly applicable when configuring the translator's profile, so he proposes a set of criteria to be taken into account: nationality, profession, relationship with the source and target language(s), their position within the socio-cultural environment, their interest in theorizing the practice of translation, the fields from which they translate, the continuity of their translation work, etc. However, the list remains open and can be adapted. For example, in the case of a poet-translator, one must take into consideration their creative particularities in order to determine the degree of affinity between them and the author being translated.

Due to the clarity of its conceptual presentation, Berman chooses to divide the third stage into three components: "the translational position," "the translation project," and "the translator's horizon," which, in practice, "do not follow a linear sequence" (Berman,

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First, the critic must determine whether the new text was recognized as a translation and whether the translator was mentioned. Then, they can examine how the translation was evaluated and analyzed, which involves reviewing articles published in the press or in specialized journals. Nevertheless, the theorist emphasizes that critics very rarely make explicit judgments about the act of translation.

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1995, p. 83). Moreover, we can even notice a certain difficulty in defining them. For example, "the translational position" is seen as a compromise between the translator's personal vision of translation and the way translation is perceived during a given period. Each translator relates differently to the general translational mindset because they are driven, above all, by the "drive to translate" (Berman, 1995, p. 74) [*italics in the original*], a concept that has not yet been fully theorized but which lies at the origin of the translator's subjectivity. Hence the diversity of translational positions, which may be stated explicitly by the translator or revealed through practice. They are influenced by two other factors: "the linguistic position" (the translator's relationship with the source and target languages) and "the scriptural position" (their perception of writing and of literary works).

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"The translation project"<sup>4</sup> (Berman, 1995, p. 76) links "the translational position" with the specific features of the text to be translated. Thus, in his first attempt to define the notion, the theorist compares "the translation project" to a barometer indicating the degree of autonomy of the version in relation to the original. The translator may choose how to translate: to publish a single-author volume (bringing together several texts by the same writer) or a translator's anthology (including texts by several authors), to produce a monolingual or

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<sup>4</sup> To express the same notion, the theorist uses the phrase "the literary translation project", which reflects the "mode", the "manner" of translating (*emphasis in the original*) (Berman, 1995).



bilingual edition, to accompany the volume with a paratext, to follow the structure of the original collection or to choose a different format, to include the translations in a personal volume, etc. Some translators state their project, which the critic must take into account. In the absence of a paratext, the project can be inferred from the translation itself, which is, in fact, the result of the project. Berman sees this relationship as an absolute circle for the critic. Nevertheless, the existence of a project, whether stated or not, does not preclude the intuitive character of translating, which follows the “impulse to translate”.

As for “the translator’s horizon,” it represents the set of linguistic, literary, cultural, and historical parameters that influence the translator’s choices. At first glance, this concept appears to refer solely to the limits imposed on the translator by the context, but, seen from another angle, it may suggest the opening of translation toward other horizons (our emphasis): the expectations of a modern reader, the perspectives of an evolving literary environment, the translator’s shifting goals, etc.

Following the theoretical reflections formulated by Berman, we can make several observations. The analysis of the translation project begins as early as the first stage, with the reading of the version(s), which is accompanied by a collateral reading: preface, postface, articles, interviews, etc. With the reading of the original, the critic already begins the comparative work that corresponds to the fourth stage of the project, “the analysis of the translation.”

#### **4. The analysis of the (re)translation – an autonomous text**

The form of the analysis varies depending on the critic’s focus (Berman, 1990). They may choose to examine the translation of a single text, a translated collection by one author, or a translator’s anthology. In turn, each of these three types of analysis can become a comparative study when the critic considers other existing translations of the same text. In such cases, the examination becomes the analysis of a retranslation (Berman, 1995, p. 84)<sup>5</sup>. In fact, productive criticism

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<sup>5</sup> The article “La retraduction comme espace de la traduction”, published in *Palimpsestes*, issue no. 4, “Retraduire”, pp. 1–7 (published online on December 22, 2010, available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/palimpsestes.596>), presents Berman’s reflections on retranslation in great detail. In his view, every first translation calls for a retranslation because it tends to naturalize the foreign work. In other words, it functions as an introduction. By contrast, retranslation is a “space of fulfillment.” “We must retranslate because translations age, and because no translation is the translation: from which we see that translating is an activity subject to time, and one that has its

already implies retranslation through its very aim: to create a favorable context for future translations. The theorist also refers to the pedagogical value [emphasis in the original] of comparative analysis. The variety of solutions proposed for translating a single work can prove stimulating for a new translator, especially in the case of poetry (Berman, 1995, p. 85). A good example is provided by Radu Cârnci, who acknowledged that his desire to translate Baudelaire was sparked by reading and rereading the poems both in the original and in translation (Baudelaire, 1991).

Thus, the confrontation becomes a highly complex stage encompassing four directions: the comparison of the selected elements and passages in the original with their equivalents in the translation, the comparison of the "problematic" or "successful" textual zones of the translation with the corresponding textual zones of the original, the comparison of the identified sequences with those in other translations, and the confrontation of the translation with its project (Berman, 1995, pp. 85-86).

Another issue raised by Berman concerns the "communicability" and "readability" of the analysis, which is threatened by several pitfalls:

- terminological technicality - which is not necessarily negative as long as the new terms used, or those belonging to the critical apparatus, are explained;
- the intrusion of the source language or of a foreign translation mentioned - it is possible that the reader of the translation does not know the source language, in which case the critic must explain the fragments from the original;
- special attention should be paid to "key" words, often seen as untranslatable - such as the Romanian word *dor*<sup>6</sup>;
- the meticulous, dense character - an overabundance of quotations weighs down the reading of the analysis, whereas criticism should aim to spark the reader's interest;

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own temporality: that of obsolescence and incompleteness" (Berman, 1990) [emphasis in the original]. This idea is reiterated in the presentation of his project, where he speaks of a threefold horizon of retranslation: previous translations within the target language/culture, contemporary translations within the target language/culture, and foreign-language translations (Berman, 1995, p. 84).

<sup>6</sup> Although *dor* has no exact equivalent in English or other languages, its emotional nuance is often approximated by phrases like *I missed you*. This English expression, though commonly translated into Romanian as *Mi-ai lipsit* or *Ți-am simțit lipsa*, also overlaps semantically with *Mi-a fost dor de tine*, capturing the Romanian concept of *dor* only partially.

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- the overly specialized nature of the analysis - which restricts itself to comparison and fails to raise any questions (Berman, 1995, pp. 87–89).

To avoid these pitfalls, the theorist advises the critic to be mindful of three essential aspects that turn the analysis into a “writing process”:

- clarity of exposition - the critic must produce a transparent text in accessible language for a general audience;
- reflexivity - the analysis should not be reduced to a simple comparison between original and translation, and the critic must reflect on their own discourse with an objective eye in order to achieve a form of writing that opens toward new perspectives;
- digressiveness (Berman, 1995, pp. 89–90).

These theoretical observations allow us to see that the critic bears a threefold responsibility: toward the text being analyzed - the translation(s) alongside the original), toward the reader of the critique - including readers of the translation(s), and toward their own discourse - which must be developed as a form of autonomous writing.

A final point addressed concerns the purpose of the analysis, which must lead to an evaluation of the translation in order to become a true critique. But, as objective as the critic may try to be, they have already developed their own understanding of the translational work, and therefore their text is at risk of subjectivity. To avoid this drawback, Berman argues that every evaluation must be based on a “double criterion”: “poetic” and “ethical.” In other words, it is necessary to assess the “poeticity”<sup>7</sup> (the autonomy of the target text, to what extent the translator “has created a work”) and “ethicality”<sup>8</sup> (to what extent the translator respects the original<sup>9</sup>) of a translation<sup>10</sup> [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, pp. 92–93).

Based on this presentation, we can retain three key ideas. Sometimes, translation criticism may become the criticism of

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<sup>7</sup> The poeticity of a translation lies in the fact that the translator has carried out genuine textual work, has created a text, in more or less close correspondence with the textuality of the original [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, p. 92).

<sup>8</sup> Berman quotes J.-Y. Masson to show that ethicality is not an absolute obedience to the source text, rather, it is a dialogue between the original and the version (Berman, 1995, pp. 92–93).

<sup>9</sup> Respect towards the original is closely linked to respect towards the readers. The translator must not conceal what they are doing: a translation, an adaptation, an independent text etc. (Berman, 1995, p. 93).

<sup>10</sup> Analyzing these two parameters of a translation means examining whether the translator has created a “work-in-correspondence,” simultaneously with the receiving environment and with the original [emphasis in the original] (Berman, 1995, p. 94).

retranslations. The analysis carried out must function as an autonomous text. It is necessary to ensure the objectivity of the evaluation, and the critic must clarify the reasons behind any assessment, positive or negative, by providing examples, in accordance with the recommendations of Katharina Reiss (Reiss, 2002, p. 16).

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