1 Introduction

This chapter examines the notion of ethics in the works of two influential French authors, Antoine Berman (1942–1991) and Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009). Specifically, it aims to clarify the ways in which these two important thinkers conceive of ethics and what their contributions may be to the discourse of ethics in translation, specifically in literary translation.

Both Berman and Meschonnic depart from the French linguistic tradition in Translation Studies, as represented, first, by the extremely influential *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation* (1958) by French Canadian linguists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, in which they offered a list of rules and a taxonomy of translation procedures; and second by the work of linguist Georges Mounin, in particular *Les Problèmes théoriques de la traduction* (1963) and *Linguistique et traduction* (1976), in which he attempted to provide a scientific linguistic account of translation. Instead Berman and Meschonnic, each in his own way, developed an interdisciplinary approach that mixes philosophy, poetics, criticism, and sociology to talk about what translation, specifically literary translation, does.

2 Historical trajectory

To understand how Berman and Meschonnic developed their thinking about translation and more specifically their views of ethics in translation, it is useful to have a sense of their socio-cultural environment. Antoine Berman studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and wrote a dissertation on the poetics of the German Romantics, but he worked mostly outside of the French university system. After a five-year detour through Argentina, he published a translation of *Yo el supremo* by Argentinian writer Augusto Roa Bastos as well as *L’épreuve de l’étranger* (The Experience of the Foreign) based on his dissertation. He then became the first program director at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, which was co-founded by philosopher Jacques Derrida outside of the university system. The college focused on interdisciplinary approaches and themes not usually studied in French universities, and Berman offered a number of seminars on translation, one of them on Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Task of the Translator” in 1985.
Berman’s work with the German Romantics led him to advocate an approach to translation that is non-ethnocentric. He emphasized its role as a positive cultural and literary force that should respect the otherness of the source text (its language and culture) while recognizing the agency of the translator. His articulation of difference in translation has been influential on postcolonial and feminist approaches to translation in particular. At the same time, during his time as director of the Centre Amyot, a short-lived government-funded centre for terminology and translation, his interest in various aspects of translation and his desire to have the work of translators properly recognized led to the publication of booklets on specialized translation geared at businesses. His last work *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne* in which he developed a method for analyzing translations, what he called a “positive criticism,” was published posthumously in 1995.

In contrast, Henri Meschonnic spent his long career within the French university system, albeit most of it in a university known for its radicalness. He trained as a literary scholar and a linguist and became a professor of linguistics in Lille, then in 1969 at Vincennes Paris VIII, a new experimental institution where Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Etienne Balibar, and Jacques Lacan, among others, were also professors. Meschonnic participated in the creation of the important reference work, the Larousse *Dictionnaire du français contemporain* (1967). He was extraordinarily prolific, and his interests were varied. He authored some sixty works of poetics, linguistics, philosophy, poetry, essays, and translations. His poetry earned him major literary prizes (Prix Max Jacob in 1972 for *Dédicaces proverbes* and the Prix Mallarmé in 1985 for *Voyageurs de la voix*). He also contributed greatly to the rediscovery of the German linguist philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1737–1835), who was also among the thinkers Berman analyzed in his first book.

For Meschonnic, the theory and the practice of translation are inseparable, as are literature and translation. He is known both for his translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew into French and for theoretical works that challenged the tenets of structuralism. In particular, he authored *Pour la poétique II, Épistémologie de l’écriture, Poétique de la traduction* (1973) and a monumental 800-page work titled *Critique du Rythme* (1982). In the same way as Berman did, Meschonnic rejected the conception and practice of translation as “annexation” (what Berman called “ethnocentric translation”) in favour of “decentering,” a translating gesture which allows a textual relation between two texts that does not erase the differences in culture, time, and linguistic structures that exist in those texts.


Meschonnic is less well known in the Anglophone world because of the astonishing unavailability of his work in English, which is perhaps due to his opposition to the theoretical movements that became popular in the Anglophone world (i.e. structuralism and deconstruction) and
his often belligerent remarks about living critics, authors, and translators. However, the publication of his last work, *Ethique et Politique du Traduire* (2007), translated as *Ethics and Politics of Translating* by Pascale Piers Boulanger in 2011, has received critical attention and provides translation studies scholars with a point of entry into his thought. Similarly a special issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* (2019) devoted to Meschonnic will contribute to the dissemination of his works, as should the forthcoming volume *Henri Meschonnic Reader: A Poetics of Society* (2019).

Both thinkers propose in different ways an ethics of translation that is at heart a reflection on the relations between identity and alterity and on the role of translation as a de-centering process.

### 3 Core issues and topics

While Berman’s work triggered an “ethical turn” in Translation Studies and has led to numerous publications and conferences on the topic, it has also become clear that a multitude of definitions of ethics are at work in Translation Studies (Chesterman 2017) and that we need more than lists of do’s and don’t’s supposed to guide professional translators. In fact, the study of translation has lacked an explicit examination of ethics grounded in concepts and terms elaborated in philosophy. It is important, however, to interpret the works of Berman and Meschonnic using existing philosophical frameworks so that their ethics of translation may be evaluated consistently and meaningfully.

In the 2001 special issue of *TTR* devoted to the work of Berman, the feminist translation scholar Barbara Godard wrote about Berman and the “ethical turn” in translation. She characterized Berman as “Kantian,” a statement which, if not inaccurate, was at least incomplete. It is true that Berman’s notion of ethics is indeed a type of “duty-type normative ethics.” In moral philosophy, normative ethics refers to the questions that come up when we consider how we should act. In turn, duty-based moral theories are based on principles of obligation (duties) that determine whether an action is right or wrong. Kant emphasized a *single principle of duty* (what is also called a *priori categorical imperative*) and asserted that the morality of all actions can be determined by appealing to this single well-known a priori principle: “Treat people as an end, and never as a means to an end.” However, Berman does not embrace an *a priori* categorical imperative, a single pre-existing moral law valid in all cases, which is characteristic of Kant. In fact, before we can discuss Berman’s and Meschonnic’s ethics, it is important to note that the word “ethics” is often loosely used in Translation Studies to refer to some kind of universal category, but in moral philosophy, this notion of one principle for all practices refers to only one type of ethics. Thus it is inaccurate to state as Gouanvic (2001, 33) does, “Any ethics worth its name must account for all the practices in a given domain; if it does not, it could be seen as elitist or populist, depending on the case, and thus go against the universal aims of ethics,” and then to propose to integrate all the practices of translation; as we shall see, he is misreading Berman’s emphasis on the principle of welcoming the stranger/foreigner into the host culture.

Berman’s discussion of ethics begins with *L’Epreuve de l’étranger* (1984) in which he examines the theories of translation developed by nineteenth-century German authors (including Novalis, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Humboldt, and Herder). In this work, he conceives of the ethics of translation as resting on a priori notions of what is “good,” what he calls “the pure aim of translation” (Berman 1992, 6), which he argues needs to be liberated from its ideological ghetto. He reminds his readers that at one time questions of fidelity and treason did not matter because the mother tongue was not considered sacred. It is when this sacralization occurs in given cultures that translation becomes repressed and resisted because it is at odds with the ethnocentric tendency and illusion of self-sufficiency held by every culture. On the contrary, “true”
translation seeks to establish a relation with the Other and “fertilize what is one’s Own through the mediation of what is Foreign” (Berman 1992, 4). At such times, when translation reflects the cultural illusion of self-sufficiency and its accompanying need to appropriate other cultures (he gives as examples ancient Roman culture, classical French culture, and modern North American culture), it results in “ethnocentric translations,” or what he calls “bad” translations. In contrast, he proposes that the “ethical aim of translating is by its very nature opposed to this injunction: “The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering” (4).

As we will see, Meschonnic also mentions this notion of decentering in opposition to what he calls annexation when he describes poetics and translation. Berman further explains, “A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work” (Berman 1992, 5). This statement is what probably led Barbara Godard to characterize Berman’s position as Kantian. As we have seen earlier, Kant’s notion of ethics rests on the a priori universal principle of duty. For him, moral rightness and wrongness are based on a moral law that is in place prior to the action taking place and there is only one basis of moral obligation: the Good Will. Berman’s notion of the essence of translation, of “bad” and “good” translations, can indeed be seen as based on a kind of categorical imperative that mandates behaviour, parallel to Kant’s imperative to treat people as an end and never as a means to an end. Berman’s notion of dialogue and decentering, of cross-breeding with the other, implies a respect of the other, a duty of hospitality regardless of circumstances. This fundamental duty of openness to the other is expressed in the title La traduction et la lettre ou l’auberge du lointain (1999), a work in which he opposes ethnocentric translation to an ethical translation which is in its essence “motivated by the desire to open the Foreign as Foreign to one’s own space of language” (Berman 1995, 74) as opposed to rejecting or attempting to dominate the Other. However, Berman’s position is not quite an a priori imperative since it is obviously based on Berman’s observations of human beings and past and present behaviour with regard to translation. In particular, it is based on his study of past and current practices in translation and his observation that, in the French tradition (and in most Western traditions and the Arabic tradition), translation tended to appropriate and digest the other rather than provide a welcoming space.

Berman’s focus on the strangeness of the foreign work is a legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s call to bring the reader to the author and to transmit a “feeling of foreignness” ([1813] 1982, 46), and of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s ([1816] 1992) famous distinction between das Fremde (the flavour of the foreign) which the translator should strive to convey, and die Fremdheit (foreignness, strangeness), which the translator should avoid (159). However, Berman goes beyond this tradition in that he transforms this aesthetic and literary imperative – which was also a political one since this desire to bring the foreign into German stems from a desire to expand the resources of the receiving language and culture, in other words, to enrich German – into an ethical imperative. He credits Schleiermacher for making the choice of presenting the “foreign in the mother tongue” (150) and of presenting this choice as that of authenticity, which, according to Berman, unites “the ethical and the ontological dimension, justice and correctness.” (151). However, this ethical dimension seems more a concern of Berman himself rather than what Schleiermacher is actually proposing. Schleiermacher does say that authentic translation (which brings the foreign into the mother tongue) must be applied extensively: “a transplantation of whole literatures into a language, and it makes sense and is of value only to a nation that has the definite inclination to appropriate what is foreign” (151, emphasis added). But as this quote makes clear, at the same time as Schleiermacher’s notion of translation expresses the ideal of Bildung, the process of human development by which one “can only gain access to oneself through the experience of the other” (88) in society, his notion also indicates that translation is perceived as
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a type of utilitarian ethics focused on the receiving culture: translation will expand the capacity of one's language and thus benefit its many speakers. In other words, the receiving culture, the self that is accessed, is at the centre of the process described by Schleiermacher.

In contrast, Berman’s (1992) goal in affirming the alterity of the source text is an ethical imperative that requires a decentering and that moves away from utilitarianism. As he concludes in *The Experience of the Foreign*:

The issue is to defend language and the relations among languages against the increasing homogenization of communication systems – because they endanger the entire realm of belonging and difference. Annihilation of dialects and local speech; trivialization of national languages; leveling of the differences among them for the benefit of a model of non-language for which English served as guinea pig (and as victim) . . . this is a process that thoroughly attacks language and the natural relation of human beings to language.

(181)

So rather than Kantian or utilitarian ethics, Berman’s ethics, especially as expressed in *Pour une critique des traductions*, can be more fruitfully described using the nuanced ethical theory of moral philosopher W.D. Ross. Berman does not reference Ross (nor Kant for that matter), but Ross’s system is directly related to Berman’s thinking about ethics in translation and provides us with precise philosophical concepts. Ross’s ethics of prima facie duties was developed in *The Right and the Good* ([1930] 2002), in which he argued that there is a plurality of moral requirements and goods (as opposed to Kant’s a priori unitary principle). Ross (1877–1971), a translator and editor of Aristotle’s works, is considered a major twentieth-century ethicist who developed his theory to address what he saw as limitations in Kant’s moral theory. In particular, as Anthony Skelton (2012, 7) argues, Ross rejects Kant’s belief that only one motive has value. Instead, moral life consists in the struggle among many desires which have “various degrees of worth.” For Ross, basic moral propositions are self-evident; duties can be weighted off and we should recognize that there are competing versions of the “right” or “good” depending on circumstances, as Berman also intimated in *Toward a Translation Criticism*. For Ross, duties are not absolute and may be conflicting in a given situation, but we can come to an intuitive decision through a process of weighing which of these duties is the one that we must follow. Prima facie duties are those that give us genuine moral reasons to do certain actions. They include responsibilities both to ourselves and to others; what we should do is determined by the balance of these responsibilities. One obligation can be overridden by another obligation. What we should do is what is appropriate to the situation. The prima facie duties come from relationships, the past, the future, and the good. It is important to note that the inclusion of relationships among the duties is an innovation in moral philosophy. For instance, the prima facie duty of fidelity can take the form of keeping a promise. This duty has its grounding in a relationship that emerges when a promise is made, and grounded in the past. In *The Right and the Good*, Ross (1930, 21) provides a list of duties: those based on previous acts (those resting on a promise, for instance, the implicit promise not to tell lies when entering a conversation, or translating accurately) and duties of reparation, of gratitude, of justice, of beneficence, of self-improvement, and of non-maleficence (not to harm others).

In *Toward a Criticism of Translation*, Berman (2009) develops a method that expresses a view of ethics in translation that relies on an understanding that some considerations (duties) are weightier than others depending on circumstances and on relationships, these circumstances being the horizon and the project of the translator. When he says, “Ethics lies in the respect, or rather, in a certain respect for the original” (74, emphasis original), he acknowledges the fact that
this notion of respect involves an inter-subjectivity, that is, an awareness of the presence of a subject in the text translated, which involves a duty of non-maleficence (the translator must not deny this subject) or fidelity (the translator must attempt to best transfer source text – call this the prima facie duty of fidelity), but also the duty of the translator to him/herself to create a text in her own language (this is a type of justice duty and even of self-improvement duty, that is respect for one's intelligence). Berman observes that the translator “must always want to create a text [faire œuvre]” and “stand up” to the original (74–75).

Sometimes, fidelity (usually conceived of as the promise of accuracy at the word level) must be weighed against integrity (which could be a rendering that hews most closely to the rhythm or cadence of the original work). In some cases (for instance the translations of Beowulf by Seamus Heaney), integrity is more important than fidelity. So respect for the alterity of the text is not in and of itself “ethical“ if it is not also accompanied by the acknowledgement of the work of the translator as a subject and an agent. For Berman, respect necessarily implies a dialogue between the one and the other, the translator and the author. Further, he rejects servility, the unthought reliance on equivalence at the word or phrase level which implies the “annihilation” of the translator (2009, 75), and the non-recognition of the translator’s œuvre (work as in artistic creation) or the non-recognition of what the translated text “does” with its own language, to use Meschonnic’s expression.

Berman also emphasizes that an ethical translation must be true to (respectful of) the work translated and the translator’s own work, but also true to (respectful of) the readers. In keeping with the “relationships” aspect of Ross’s prima facie duties, we can say that there is a fiduciary relationship between the translator and the work that is being translated, but also between the translator and the audience for whom the work is being translated. This relationship is the basis of many obligations. Translators must acknowledge what they do and to what purpose. Indeed, Berman states, “the translator has every right as soon as he is open about it” (2009, 75). He gives the example of the Quebecois poet, translator, and theatre director Michel Garneau, who playfully comments in his translation of Macbeth that he is omitting lines because they are confusing and who uses the Quebec sociolect joual in his translation. Garneau even coins the neologism “tradaptation” (translation and adaptation) to describe his renderings of Shakespeare.

To establish the translator’s right to make choices, to decide how to translate, Berman relies on the notion of translating position and translation project. He defines translating position as the articulated (or unarticulated and unexpressed) conception the translator has about translation, what translation means, what its purpose is, and what its forms may be. He (2009, 58) defines the translating position as “the compromise between the way in which the translator, as a subject caught by the translation drive, perceives the task of translation, and the way in which he has internalized the surrounding discourse on translation (the norms).” Thus, the translating position refers to the subjectivity of the translator as it is shaped both by cultural norms (which are part of what Berman calls “the horizon,” following Gadamer’s notion of horizon as the cultural-historical context out of which interpretation always occurs) and a more personal striving. Every translator has a position because s/he is a subject in language and is part of a language community. This position can be inferred by analyzing a translator’s translations and the paratexts surrounding her/his activity as translator.

In addition, every translation has a project, that is, an articulated purpose. The project is determined by the translating position of the translator as well as the “specific demands of each work to be translated. . . . The project defines the way in which the translator is going to realize the literary transfer and to take charge of the translation itself” (Berman 2009, 60). Berman’s notion of project implies a self-reflexivity on the part of the translator without the project being an a priori theorizing. The project can emerge in the process of translating. A Bermanian project
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refers to the existence of a translating subject who inscribes its presence in the language in which s/he translates. A project is not good or bad, ethical or unethical, in and of itself. What makes it ethical or unethical has to do with whether it is acknowledged or hidden. Berman mentioned French Canadian translations of Shakespeare and Lorca as examples from the 1970s. A more recent example might be the translation of Korean Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* translated by Deborah Smith (2015). The translator was criticized by a number of reviewers for embellishing and expanding a number of sentences from the source text, as Jiayang Fan’s *New Yorker* article “Buried Words” documented (2018). However, the translator was very open about what she did and articulated her reasons in a number of interviews and articles and in a workshop with the author herself. In addition, the author was in full agreement regarding her strategies, and the translator was transparent with her readers and was attentive to the author’s own project. The book was awarded the Man Booker Prize, and Smith just published the translation of Kang’s latest novel *The White Book*. On the other extreme, there is the example of the 1944 translation of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* in Belgium under Nazi occupation. Gouanvic shows that the many omissions, additions, and changes to the text aim at making the source text fit into a Nazi ideology that is at odds with Steinbeck’s purpose, and that these changes are all unacknowledged (Gouanvic 2001, 40). As Berman (2009) explains, “The project or aspiration is determined both by the translating position and the specific demands of each work to be translated” (60, emphasis added). This translation does not respect the integrity of the source text and, whether it keeps some of its foreignness or not at the syntactic or lexical level, in hiding its purpose, it fails in its fiduciary duty to the author and its audience.

Following Ross’s model, we can say that Berman’s ethics goes beyond recognizing the relation of a translation to its original and of making visible the foreign in the target text. His insistence of the translator’s “right” and the need to acknowledge the translator’s position and project avoid simplifying the relationships that exist among the work, the audience, the translator, and the author. Responsibility toward the source text does not mean that the source text is autonomous. On the contrary.

Berman recognizes that the duty of “fidelity” (i.e. the duty to keep promises) depends on circumstances (the cultural horizon, the translator’s position and project as we have seen) and one of these circumstances is obviously the agency of the translator. A crucial development in Berman’s notion of ethics is the recognition of the translator as subject, especially as developed in his last work *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*. Berman’s early ethics of non-ethnocentric translation focusing on the recognition of the Other as developed in *The Experience of the Foreign* is complemented and complicated by his recognition that in order to make sense, any notion of ethics based on relationships (thus of duties, among which are the Russian duties of justice and self-improvement) must be accompanied by the existence of a subject (i.e. “the translator”) who is free to make choices and whose experience must be taken seriously. His last work outlines a model of translation criticism that is meant to question the subordination of the translating subject (the translator is recognized as having a position and a project), and promotes a recognition that translation criticism must acknowledge both the duties to the source text, the author, and his/her source language and to the translating subject, with his/her project, position, and horizon.

Although Berman uses a vocabulary that is different from Meschonnic’s, his ethics, like Meschonnic’s, is based on the recognition and preservation of plurality, of both identity and alterity, and on a theory of non-ethnocentric translation.

However, unlike Berman, Meschonnic’s views on ethics have not been studied as such, in part because his work has remained mostly untranslated but also because of the volume, variety, and difficulty of his works. That said, his *Ethique et Politique du Traduire*, published in 2007 two
years before his death, provides an extended and useful description of what he means by ethics. Although he shares with Berman (or Berman shares with him) the notion of the centrality of the translator as subject, the Rossian model discussed earlier cannot be applied to Meschonnic’s notion of ethics because, for him, ethics is embedded in a much larger system that includes his notion of language and of subjectivity, and his rejection of the binary opposition between signifier and signified on which the notion of the sign is based, a binary opposition which he calls the “poison” of the “heterogeneity of the categories of reason” (2004, 121). His ethics of translation are inseparable from his aesthetics, politics, and metaphysics and parallel his central notion of the “continuum body-in-language” (127). This bringing together of ethics with epistemological and metaphysical concerns grounds his thinking about language, translation, and ethics. It can be most fruitfully related to the Spinozian tradition in which ethics is the sum of epistemological and metaphysical notions.

Meschonnic rejects translating the sign in favour of what he calls translating “the poem,” that is the site where the subject constitutes itself. Meschonnic’s use of the term refers not to a literary form but to a way of thinking, a process of creating subjects. He uses “poem” in its etymological sense of work, creating, making. He summarizes his principles as follows:

Because if the poem is the activity of the subject of the poem, it is first an ethical act, and if it is an ethical act, because it concerns all subjects, an ethical act is a political act. Thus, a poem is an ethical and a political act. Whence a poetics of translating is an ethics and a politics of translating.

(2011, 77)

Thus, while Berman can be understood through moral philosopher David Ross’s notion of prima facie duties, Meschonnic leads us back to notions found in Spinoza’s Ethics and also to von Humboldt’s understanding of language. In works such as Spinoza, poème de la pensée (Spinoza Poem of Thought) (2002) and “Humboldt, plus d’avenir que de passé” (2004), Meschonnic emphasizes the connection between poems, ethics, and politics. He (127) states that poetics is theory, in the sense that theory is a reflection about the unknown, about what systems of knowledge as they are constituted (essentially the sign) prevent us from knowing: the continuum body-language, the poem as ethical act and system of discourse, the continuum language-poem-ethics-politics.

Meschonnic’s ethics is inseparable from his radical reconceptualization of language; for him language is the place where we can resist dominant ideologies (modes of thinking and of feeling), and translation is the way in which we can transform a language system “by importing a foreign mode of consciousness” (Underhill 2013, 11). The ethics and politics of literature consist in creating discourses that develop alternative modes of thought that allow subjects to come to existence.

Meschonnic’s thinking about ethics can be teased out of his earlier numerous writings, which include, beside several works of poetry and translation, an 800-page work on his theory of rhythm (1982), books on philosophers (on Heidegger in 1990; Spinoza in 2002), many articles and books on various topics (translating the Bible, Hugo’s poetics), as well as his Pour La poétique II. Epistémologie de l’écriture. Poétique de la Traduction (1973), Poétique du Traduire (1999), Ethique et Politique du Traduire, and his posthumous magnus opus Langage, histoire, une même théorie (Language, History, One and the Same Theory 2012),1 which brings together his essays and prefaces spanning over three decades and documents his life-long concern with the connection of language theory (of which translation theory is part) to ethics and politics. All these works exemplify what could be called the Meschonnic ecosystem. This ecosystem derives from the
Spinozian tradition in which ethics is the logical outgrowth of epistemological and metaphysical notions.

The Jewish Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) was an early proponent of rationalism and freedom of thought. His major works include the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), a mixture of biblical criticism, political philosophy, and metaphysics. In *Tractatus* Spinoza argues that since divine law is necessary and eternal, it cannot be changed by any human or divine action (thus miracles must have scientific explanations). Likewise, the Bible should be studied as a historical document in a scientific way, and people should be allowed to think, write, and publish freely. In opposition to Descartes, Spinoza rejects the mind/body dualism. His major work *Ethics* (Spinoza 1677) is written like a geometrical proof with a series of definitions, axioms, and derived propositions, which Meschonnic emulates in his essay “Propositions pour une Poétique de la Traduction” (Propositions of a Poetics of Translation) (1973, 306–326). In *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that there is just one substance apprehended by us through “extension” (i.e. matter, the physical world or things) and thought (spirit). For him, the order of matter is causal in nature and so is the Spirit, but one order does not affect the other, which means that matter is not the cause of the spirit, and reciprocally, the spirit is not the cause of matter. They are just two parallel ways of viewing one thing: substance. Spinoza is not a materialist; he brings matter and spirit together. His emphasis on the body, on correlation and interrelation, on the non-binary, and on the process of understanding to attain freedom are key notions shaping Meschonnic’s ethics. Meschonnic also adopts Spinoza’s linking of ethical theory to social and political theory.

In his book on Spinoza (2002), Meschonnic argues that Spinoza’s ethic of language is the ethic of his entire thought, and thus makes Spinoza’s conception of language part of his ethic and political thought, what Meschonnic will call the “body-language, language-poem–ethics-politics continuum.” Meschonnic rejects readings of Spinoza that reinstate the sign, that is the mind/body dualism and the signifier/signified opposition and that ignore the “relation conceived between rhythm, prosody, and thought” (119) to focus on Spinoza’s thinking about “the inseparation between affect and concept” (119).

Meschonnic’s analysis of Spinoza’s language, with its emphasis on “poetics,” is one of the major places where Meschonnic articulates his own views about the interrelation between poetic and ethics, thought and language. When he speaks about Spinoza, he is weaving in his own thinking. He states, “Philosophers are interested in thought. Poetics attempts to hear in language the movements of the body. Spinoza thinks the unity of the two,” (2002, 128) and links this poetics to ethics. Throughout his commentary, Meschonnic insists on the continuum of Spinoza’s thought (what he calls “la pensée Spinoza”), his language “la langue Spinoza” and his rejection of dualism as these examples (a few among many) show: “a word is not a tool. Poetics rejects this conception of language. . . . The sign is not the nature of language. It is only one representation” (129); “the particular is included in the universal . . . Spinoza’s conceptual power issues from this connection” (151). Near the end of the book, Meschonnic again emphasizes that the unity of spirit and body as conceived by Spinoza implies “an activity of the continuum in language. . . . It implies the thought of what a body does to language” (2002, 270). This continuum body/language is for Meschonnic at the core of ethics in the act of language because it both inscribes the subject in language and language in the subject. Language, here in the sense of empirical discourse, is where the subject manifests itself. Since ethics has to do with leading a good life, to use Spinoza’s terms, that is, a life in which human beings strive to exercise reason and to develop adequate emotions in order to preserve their essence as human beings, it is necessarily linked to this presence of the subject in language, which Meschonnic calls poetics. He (2002, 296) repeats, “In this continuous invention of language by a subject and of the subject by language is ethics in the act of language.” And he adds: “Hence the act of thinking, the act of language is an ethical
act, hence a poetic act, hence a political act” (300). To sum up, from Spinoza, Meschonnic takes his insistence on the inseparability of matter and spirit, as two attributes of one substance, in opposition to duality, and develops his notion of thinking as an act in language which demotes the sign to one (false) representation of language to replace it with the continuum of language.

Meschonnic rejects translating the sign in favour of what he calls translating “the poem,” that is, not a literary form, but the site where the subject – understood as the “very property of transformation and continuity” – not the individual as a person (1988, 100) – constitutes itself through its historical activity. For him, poetics is the place where notions that are usually (and mistakenly) treated in separate disciplines can be brought together. He defines poetics (thus ethics and politics) as the history of the concepts with which literature and language have been thought, in particular the concepts regarding the relation between literature and language, the relation between the subject who exposes itself and invents itself [s'expose et qui s'invente] in language, the subject and its relation to society, of the interrelation between history and language and society (1999, 140). The understanding that strives to recognize the interrelations between the concepts mentioned earlier constitutes Meschonnic’s ethics and politics and is founded on a critique of the sign, what he calls the striving for the continuum between language and literature, language and society, and language and subject, and for which he credits Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1999, 141) seminal thinking about both the diversity and specificity of languages.

In “Humboldt, plus d’avenir que de passé” (Humboldt, more future than past) (2004), Meschonnic specifically refers to von Humboldt’s role in thinking the connection between poem, ethics, and politics.

While Spinoza informs Meschonnic’s correlation of epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical system, Wilhelm von Humboldt is central specifically to Meschonnic’s thinking about language (thus about ethics) because, as he says, he is an antidote “to the poison of the current heterogeneity of the categories of reason, the separation of knowledge in ‘regional sciences’” (2004, 121). Meschonnic sees in Humboldt a thinker who refused to separate disciplines, thus to separate translation from ethics and politics. Humboldt (1767–1835) was a philosopher, educational reformer, translator, and a linguist who pioneered the scientific study of language (Basque and the Kawi language of Java). In particular, he was interested in the interrelation of culture and language (what is now called ethnolinguistics). Like Spinoza, he also rejected the mind/body dualism in favour of a vital unity of mind and body. He saw speech as the product of simultaneous interactions:

A word is more than just the sign of a concept, for the concept could not come into existence, let alone be grasped, without the word; the indeterminate force of a thought forms itself into a word just as soft clouds form out of a clear blue sky.

(von Humboldt, [1816] 1992, 55)

In other words, Humboldt recognizes that there are two interacting elements present in speech: the existing language of the speakers, who depend on it to be understood by others (that is, a linguistic and cultural mindset), and the individual character of each speaker’s speech, which modifies these traditions and expresses a personal perspective.

As Mueller-Vollmer puts it, Humboldt does not view human speech as applying and manipulating a fixed system of arbitrary signs but consisting of the “operation of joining together [emphasis mine] these two different sets of orders: that of the articulated sound, the signifier, and that of the ‘thought’ or signified. Signification (speaking) is defined by him as the synthesis (Saussure’s combination) of sound and idea.” For Humboldt (and for Meschonnic and Berman of course), language is not merely instrumental: linguistic signs are not the instruments of communication.
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for ideas that already exist. In addition, Humboldt perceives language not as a fixed entity or object, but as something that is real only in the moment of speaking, as an activity. This emphasis on activity is picked up by Meschonnic when he insists throughout his works that what matters is what language does. That “does” expresses Humboldt’s key concept of language as “Energeia” against a view of language as instrumental. It is in Humboldt that we can find Meschonnic’s emphasis on translation’s need to attend to what the language “does”: “Language is not a product but an activity” (2004, 122). Indeed, Meschonnic repeatedly urges us to consider “what the poem does” rather than “what it says” (2011, 69). This doing is tied to his notion of rhythm as the organization of the movement of speech within a rhythm-syntax-prosody continuum. Rather than translating a language system, we should focus on the action of a subject on her/his language; not on what an utterance says but on “what a system of discourse does, or what it does to you” (2011, 90). Translators must invent “discourse equivalences in the target language, prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm” (71). In short, translation must be experimental and transformative. It is the subject that must be translated and heard through attention to discourse instead of language, information, and communication (98).

Meschonnic points out that Humboldt’s importance for our understanding of language, translation, and ethics is that he sees its origin in its functioning. He (2004) sees Humboldt’s conception of language as a way to escape what he calls “the anthropologies of totality, of the binary one plus one equals everything (generalized semiotization of thought)” (122). Meschonnic again stresses that ethics is part of a continuum, a diversity of thinking, an awareness that there are different worldviews (2004, 122). This diversity, theorized by Humboldt, allows him to think of poetics as anthropology, the theory of language as a continuum of body-language, language-poeam-ethics-politic. Meschonnic refers to Humboldt’s recognition of the role of translation to “enlarge the significance and the expressive capacity of one’s own language” (2004, 35–37) and his insistence that identity arises only through alterity. However, he warns us not to think of identity and alterity in terms of individualistic conceptions of the individual and to avoid going back to the traditional dualism between the individual and the social. On the contrary, Meschonnic (1988) explains, “what one calls a work [œuvre] is what can be passed on to others, indicating that the subject is that very property of transformation and continuity – not the individual as a person. The writer and the reader become subjects through the work” (100).

In an effort to do away with dualistic theories of the sign, Meschonnic uses notions of signification, rhythm, and orality, which are all tied to his view of literature, translation, and poetry as ethical acts. Signification is a concept Meschonnic finds in the linguist Benveniste who creates this neologism to go beyond the concept of signification, which was linked to the sign and its referent (Meschonnic 1997). In contrast, signification is linked to the very activity of signifying, so that there is no longer a signifier opposed to a signified (as in the definition of the sign). Meschonnic expands Benveniste’s notion of signification as what constructs a subject in and through a text (Bedetti 1992, 449). For him, signification is more than meaning. It establishes the new into the established. It is a creative value (445). And it is this creative value that translation must strive to express.

In turn, Meschonnic defines rhythm in language as the movement of signification, as a continuous movement that exposes the subject. He began developing his theory of rhythm, which arose from his practice as a writer and translator, when he began reading the Bible in Hebrew. He realized that the writing was full of oral marks: accents and counter-accents, echoes, which contributed to the production of meaning and to its effects, but which had not been visible in the French translations he had previously read (Meschonnic 1994). As theoretician of rhythm Pascal Michon (2012) describes it, Meschonnic thus developed the new concept of “the rhythm
of a discourse” to account for this active production of signification through a “linguistic activity that doesn’t separate the signified from the signifier” (2). Meschonnic’s definition of rhythm differs from the traditional (Platonic) definitions which involve the organization of a movement of sounds as a binary, arithmetic series of beats (another form of dualism against which he rebels). In contrast, he returns to the pre-Socratic conception of the word *rhuthmos* to mean a “way of flowing,” and redefines it as “an organization of the movement of speech in writing” (Michon 2012, 3). In his *Critique du rythme*, Meschonnic (qtd in Michon 2010) explains:

> I define rhythm in language as the organization of the marks through which the signifiers, whether they are linguistic or extra-linguistic (in the case of oral communication), produce a specific semantics, distinct from the lexical meaning, and that I call the Signifiance: i.e., the values that belong to one discourse and to only one. These marks can be located on any level of language: accentuation, prosody, lexicon, syntax.

(3)

This rhythm of discourse produces a new kind of subject, which explains why attending to this rhythm (in translating or in writing) is an integral part of his ethics and politics of language as reading or hearing literary works change “our ways of feeling, thinking, behaving or acting” (Michon 2012, 4). The last important element of Meschonnic’s theory of rhythm is his notion of “oral” and “orality” which goes beyond the binary opposition of written and spoken. This third term refers to the bodily, rhythmic element in writing, which translation must strive to render. For Meschonnic, rhythm is what “governs meaning” as the continuous movement of signifiance constructed by the historical activity of a subject (4). Since rhythm/signifiance/writing is the site where the subject (both social and individual) becomes, writing, and even more so translation, is profoundly political: it is where ideology can be transformed, where worldviews can be resisted, and where new modes of feeling and of thinking can emerge.

4 Conclusions

Although Meschonnic and Berman come out of different philosophical traditions (Spinozism for Meschonnic, hermeneutics for Berman), they are both influenced by Humboldt’s view of language as that which both shapes us and is shaped by us. They both share a conviction that language is where the subject is constructed, and that an ethics of translation should be based on an understanding of the system of relations in which this construction or shaping occur, be they social, cultural, linguistic, or political relations, and of the system of relationships involved in translation (author, translator, reader). They share a common passionate drive to think about translation and its role as a site where the subject can “become” at the intersection of sameness and alterity. They also share the willingness to go against the dominant models that have created binary oppositions (form/content, word/thing, biological/historical, individual/society, source oriented/target oriented, foreignization/appropriation, linguistic/cultural, ordinary language/literary language, etc.) and that allowed discussions of translation to continue using unexamined moral notions of “fidelity,” which pre-suppose the existence of a stable, fixed, individual original.

One of the issues Meschonnic’s and Berman’s work brings up is the question of whether it is legitimate to speak about ethics in a context where the translator does not have autonomy or power, and whether one can talk about translation ethics broadly in an attempt to conceptualize a system that will include the translation of all kinds of texts. Both Meschonnic’s and Berman’s writings about what ethics in translation can and should be are based on their recognition that literary translation ethics can only make sense if it is accompanied by a recognition of the
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existence of a free translating subject, a recognition that is often absent from much of the discourse on translation ethics. In other words, there cannot be a translation ethics if there is no translating subject in the language. At a time when artificial intelligence and neural machine translation are developing at such a rapid pace, and when translators may well be soon replaced by language workers who will merely work to clean up the output of machine systems, the work of Meschonnic and Berman with its emphasis on the subject can encourage Translation Studies scholars to avoid separating discussions of the role of translation from discussions of the role of literature and language, and to reflect further on the notion of the “foreign.” Because Berman and Meschonnic deeply cared about the subject in translation, about the forgotten translator, about what the text does, about the interconnectedness of the material practice of translators and of their theoretical and cultural positions, their writing can help us reflect about the conditions under which it is still possible to speak about translation ethics.

Related topics in this volume

Virtue ethics; the ethics of linguistic hospitality and untranslatability in Derrida and Rieger; Venuti and the ethics of difference; literary translator ethics.

Notes

1 For a recent discussion of this work, see Marko Pajević’s “A Poetics of Society: Thinking Language with Henri Meschonnic” (2019).
3 See philosopher Don Garrett, “Spinoza’s Ethical Theory” (1996), for a full description of Spinoza’s ethical terms and his relations to topics of ethical theory; 267–314.
4 All translations from Spinoza, Poème de la Pensée are mine since there is no existing English translation.
5 For a clear and thorough description of Humboldt’s theory of language, see Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt and Messling, Markus (2017), “Wilhelm von Humboldt,” and for an exposition of his thinking about translation, see his 1816 Introduction to his translation of Agamemnon.

References

Further reading


This is the essential primary source text to become acquainted with Berman’s thinking. The first part, “The Project of a Productive Criticism,” will be particularly helpful.


This early work is useful to understand the origin of Berman’s thinking about translation.

The first four chapters deal specifically with the question of ethics in translating and provide a good introduction to Meschonnic’s style and thought.


This volume provides a variety of primary texts for readers interested in reading several of Meschonnic’s essays on translation (the chapters in part 4) and his essay “Realism, Nominalism: The Theory of Language Is a Theory of Society.”