Reflexive Translation Studies

Kadiu, Silvia

Published by University College London

Kadiu, Silvia.
Reflexive Translation Studies: Translation as Critical Reflection.
University College London, 2019.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81908

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2778867
Conclusion

Towards self-critical engagement in translation

The possibilization of the impossible must remain at one and the same time as undecidable – and therefore as decisive – as the future itself. Without the opening of an absolutely undetermined possible, without the radical abeyance and suspense marking a perhaps, there would never be either event or decision. Certainly. But nothing takes place and nothing is ever decided without suspending the perhaps while keeping its living possibility in living memory. If no decision (ethical, juridical, political) is possible without interrupting determination by engaging oneself in the perhaps, on the other hand, the same decision must interrupt the very thing that is its condition of possibility: the perhaps itself.

Jacques Derrida

(Self-)reflexivity

This book has given insight into translation theories that call for greater reflexivity in translation, and sought to map the various aspects of reflexivity brought into focus in each case. It has shown that whether relying on the visibility of a text’s translation status (Venuti), dialogic creativity (Bassnett), reflective decision-making (Meschonnic) or self-awareness (Berman), the reflexive approach championed in each case is conceived in opposition to non-reflexivity: transparency, fidelity, mechanicity and repression. My experimental approach in this book has revealed that in practice the distinction between reflexivity and non-reflexivity is more unstable, ambiguous and fuzzy than these theories tend to suggest, since in translation visibility produces invisibility; the translator’s response constitutes a new address; mechanicity is criss-crossed by indeterminacy, and self-knowledge includes awareness of self-opacity.
I began this book by asking whether reflexivity could be systematised so as to foster an ethical practice of translation. In response, I have argued that reflexivity, as described by Venuti, Bassnett, Meschonnic and Berman, cannot bring about and secure the empowerment of translation that they seek. Each of their theories strives to establish a reflexive approach that would enable translators to welcome the Other as Other, whether through foreignization, intimate dialogue, creative poetics or retranslation. However, instead of instigating an ethical opening towards the Other, the radically different, the unknown, these reflexive systems end up operating a circular return to the Self, whether through self-reference, self-discovery, self-reflection or self-knowledge. My exploration in this volume has indicated that in these views reflexivity is inseparable from self-reflexivity, even though it is not recognised or theorised as such.

The reflexive method has highlighted the difficulty, and yet the necessity, of distinguishing clearly the reflexive from the self-reflexive in translation. The reflexive act of folding a theory back on itself through translation reflects something about the translator herself, her interpretation of the texts translated and her view of translation, her self-reflexivity. Moreover reflexivity, attending to the theories of others, I have suggested, not only invokes self-reflexivity, enacting my own perception of their texts, but also manifests as an experience of the limits of that self-reflexivity itself: the impossibility to encompass or control the factors driving my own decisions as a translator. Instead of calling for greater reflexivity in translation, the reflexive method as I have developed it here acknowledges both the intricate imbrication of reflexivity and self-reflexivity in translation, and the necessity to maintain their difference.

This work has redefined reflexivity in translation in terms of an impossible self-reflexivity. Throughout the practical as well as the discursive components of this book, reflexivity has been theorised as an experience of uncertainty, indeterminacy and undecidability. Unlike translation theories that advocate greater transparency, the reflexive method as I have investigated it suggests that reflexivity can only be apprehended negatively, at moments of hesitancy, ambiguity and self-opacity. The main difference between the reflexive method practised here, as opposed to translation theories that call for reflexivity, is that my practice reveals the limitations of the empowering value that such theories attribute to reflexivity itself. Instead of asserting that reflexivity can make up for the lack of neutrality in translation, my reflexive method shows that no amount of highlighting, pointing or self-awareness can secure an ethical practice of translation.
The reflexive approach advanced and practised in this book does not claim to conquer bias. Rather, it suggests that no practice of translation or research on translation can provide an antidote to the limits of self-reflexivity, or enable translators to overcome partiality. Furthermore, it emphasises the futility of such an ambition, and self-critically examines its own powerlessness to fulfil the fantasy of a stable, systematic approach to translation ethics. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this volume, the reflexive method offers more than a reflexive approach: it is a critical and self-critical translation practice, which invites translators, translation scholars and trainers to welcome continual examination, and to interrogate self-interrogation itself.

In investigating the particular form of reflexivity involved in the translation of translation theory, this book has challenged on multiple levels translation theories that identify reflexivity with ethics. Going beyond the opposition reflexive vs. non-reflexive, by redefining reflexivity in relation to self-reflexivity, it has sought to develop an experimental translation practice which is at once critical and self-critical, rather than simply reflexive. Furthermore, the reflexive method engaged throughout this volume has introduced practical examples of a deconstructionist approach to translation, as well as playful tools for engaging with theory in the classroom. In the rest of this conclusion, I would like to draw this work to an end by further demonstrating what I believe to be the greatest contribution of the reflexive method to translation studies, both as a working deconstructionist practice of translation and as a creative translation pedagogy.

A deconstructionist approach

The reflexive method inspired by Jacques Derrida’s approach in ‘Des Tours de Babel’ proves a uniquely productive tool for exploring the applicability of theories calling for greater reflexivity in translation. Playing particular theoretical approaches off against each other by translating them in line with their own guiding principles provides a way of engaging with theory which is at once practical and critical, experimental and analytical. Each of the experiments in translation I have presented here uses the process of translating to question current approaches to reflexivity in translation, while proposing a tentative alternative. My foreignizing translation of Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility* theorises reflexivity not as an attempt to secure, through foreignization, the visibility of a translation’s status as translation, but rather as an attempt to take into account the potential
failure of that performative gesture. Similarly, my open letter to Susan Bassnett extends her description of translation as an intimate dialogue between author and translator, and presents reflexivity in translation as a responsive enactment of a prior utterance. Furthermore, in my experimentation with machine translation, the word ânonnement, which in Meschonnic’s account signifies the lack of reflection characteristic of automated translation, comes to symbolise the hesitation underlying any decision-making process in translation, whether or not it is carried out with the help of computation. Lastly, my analytical back-translations of Antoine Berman’s works question the possibility of an ethical translation practice based on self-awareness, and strive to redefine reflexivity in translation as an experience of uncertainty and incalculability.

Using translation to take these texts beyond the theoretical aporias within them, my reflexive method is framed within a deconstructionist approach that views translation as ‘a conserving-and-negating lift’, a work of recontextualising which both suppresses the original and extends it, erases it and goes beyond it. The reflexive method is a form of deconstructive writing which, as Derrida suggests,

must inevitably partition itself along two sides of a limit and continue (up to a certain point) to respect the rules of that which it deconstructs or of which it exposes the deconstructibility. Hence, it always makes this dual gesture, apparently contradictory, which consists in accepting, within certain limits – that is to say, in never entirely accepting – the givenness of a context, its closedness and its stubbornness [sa fermeture et sa fermeté].

Deconstruction’s double critical movement of preservation and transformation consists of undoing a system in order to understand it and reconstruct it on new bases. Like deconstruction, the reflexive method is a productive form of criticism, which generates new practices out of the aporias of established theories. As I practise it here, the reflexive method creates foreignizing, responsive, hesitant and analytical translations out of the impossibility of performing the concepts of foreignization, dialogic translation, reflexive decision-making and self-reflexive analysis. In the reflexive method, like in Derrida’s deconstructionist approach, theories are produced as responses to anterior theories: ‘every text is a text upon a text (...) any theory is another text in an unstable network of texts in which every text bears the traces of all the others’. The reflexive method develops on the basis of, and in distinction from, reflexive translation theories. It uses the conserving-and-negating movement of displacement
characteristic of translation to unsettle translation theories that call for an ever-greater accumulation of reflexivity in translation. The reflexive method, as I have developed it here, displaces the theories it enacts, takes them beyond the realm of literary translation and nudges them towards a broader disciplinary context.

Using theory as praxis and praxis as theory, the reflexive method brings out the partial nature of performative translation endeavours, including my own. It shows that a reflexive performance of another text through translation cannot be achieved, in the sense of secured or sustained, for in its attempt to represent the other text a translation marks the absence of that text, displacing it into another context, subjecting it to the translator’s stance. My attempt to fold a theory back on itself by translating it into another form indicates that reflexivity in translation can only be experienced negatively, as a partial and subjective performance, as an incomplete representation of one’s own understanding of a text. And yet, as a method unable to provide a privileged viewpoint of heightened self-awareness or neutrality, the reflexive method is negatively self-reflexive and in that way illuminating. Embracing its own partiality as a subjective, critical enactment of a specific translation theory, the reflexive method enables a critical form of self-reflexiveness that highlights the unpredictability at play in translation processes. My experimentation with reflexivity in this book suggests that the major asset of a deconstructionist approach to translation is, ironically, its ability to make translators experience the limits of their own self-reflexivity.

Ultimately, the reflexive method indicates that an ethical translation practice can neither be systematised nor secured, but only intimated during the singular experience of attempting (and failing) to translate a text in a reflexive way. Translating reflexively shows that an ethical decision cannot be programmed, since it is incalculable, and the non-calculable is itself unpredictable. Translating reflexively takes place beyond established parameters, but also testifies to them, including those formulated by the author of the source text. In my deconstructionist redefinition of reflexivity, a decision taken in formulating a translation is reflexive, and thus ethical, when it involves uncertainty – when it acknowledges its own limits as a partial and partly intuitive choice that exceeds the translator’s full understanding. The moment of reflexivity in translation is now a critical moment when the subject does not know what to decide but must decide nevertheless. It is the moment when, unable to follow a given translation theory or strategy, she must create something new, invent something which is not viable: a contradiction, like the foreignizing translation. In my reflexive method, like in Derrida’s.
deconstructionist approach more broadly, from which it is drawn, ‘the condition of possibility of the thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible’. In this perspective, the translator becomes responsible when she experiences, practically and experimentally, the possibility that translating reflexively might be beyond the translator’s reach. This moment is also, as I experienced while writing this book, one in which I submit myself to the unpredictable, to the viewpoint of that which I cannot know or foresee, calling upon the Other, the unknown reader, to take the reflexive method beyond its own limits.

The reflexive method is criss-crossed by many contradictions. It is a performative way of engaging with texts which stages the failure of its own effort to exhaustively perform another text. It is a form of theorising and a method of translating that highlights the limits of translation methodology itself. Like the deconstructive gesture that inspired it, the reflexive method is neither an analysis nor a critique. In ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, Derrida explains:

[Deconstruction] is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a simple element, toward an indissoluble origin. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense (...). The instance of krinein or of krisis (decision, choice, judgment, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential ‘themes’ or ‘objects’ of deconstruction.6

The reflexive method in translation is not an analysis in the sense of discovering something pre-existing, but in the sense of formulating a new perspective on the text translated. It is not a critique of prior theories, nor does it seek to propose a definitive form that reflexivity should take in translation. Rather, the reflexive method in translation interrogates the possibility of achieving reflexivity itself. In other words, it is not defined in opposition to the non-reflexive, but delves into the viability of that opposition. However, as an instrument of critical and self-critical investigation, the reflexive method is itself subject to the exigencies of self-reflexivity. It recognises that no amount of experimentation can ensure self-awareness, or undermine the effects of self-identity, or establish a theory impervious to future challenge.

The reflexive method addresses rather than evades the aporias that it throws into relief: it strives to embrace its own contradictions, as an
operation that simultaneously does and does not constitute a method. Systematically folding a theory back on itself by translating it constitutes a method to the extent that it proceeds according to a rule as to how the translator should approach the task of translating the theory expounded in the text itself. However, the translation method used and explored in the process varies depending on the text investigated and its approach to translation – foreignization, intimate dialogue, machine translation, productive criticism, etc. The reflexive method functions by displacement and digression, detour and re-contextualisation, rather than through automatic pursuit of equivalence or the repetition of a procedure. In fact, the reflexive process shows that repetition and reproduction themselves contain an element of digression and displacement, an element which resists measurement. The reflexive method operates according to a certain undecidability, challenging method itself. As a process embedded in the particular, its significance is constructed in the singularity of each translation task. It is a method which highlights, and allows us to experience, the impossibility of systematising an ethical practice of translation.

But the reflexive method in translation is not simply a systematised transgression. It is not an attempt to systematise displacement, criticism or interrogation, but is rather a process which demonstrates that displacement and critical engagement occur regardless of the translator’s or the researcher’s intentions. Paradoxically, reflexivity is also and inevitably unreflexive, partly unthinking and unconscious. It arises as a response to a singular encounter with a text, a contingent interaction with it, a particular translating experience. Reflexivity as such is not something that the subject can secure or direct, but a gesture, a movement, a process of interrogation which must be made to cease for any decision to take place. It is a mechanical operation which exceeds programming, in that paradox lies its pertinence. As a response to Derrida’s deconstructionist approach to translation, it shows that translating concepts involves undoing them, transforming them. Unlike interpretations of Derrida’s work that focus on the notion of untranslatability (defining translatability in terms of assimilation by the Other, as opposed to untranslatability, the experience of the Other as Other), my understanding of his thought suggests that untranslatability takes place in the process of translating, and in the attempt and simultaneous failure to translate without displacing, transforming and recontextualising the text being re-enacted in the other language. Like deconstruction, the reflexive method is above all a process of translation triggered by the impossibility of translating faithfully and transparently, of enacting a text in both its form and
content, of performing it without making it different. The reflexive method shows that reflexivity is not something that can be inscribed in the translated text or secured through specific translation strategies, but is rather an experience of uncertainty that is integral to the process of translating. Ultimately, my experimentation with the reflexive method suggests that an ethical approach to translation is not something about which translators can learn cumulatively, applying that knowledge in the same way in different contexts; it is developed by each translator in the decisions she makes in the act of translation.

In Exploring Translation Theories, Anthony Pym devotes a full chapter to what he calls theories of ‘indeterminacy’. At the end of the chapter, Pym recognises that, even though deconstructionist approaches to translation ‘offer very few guidelines that might be of practical use to translators’, they ‘could be of some practical consequence for the way in which translators are trained’. Pym does not go on to indicate how deconstruction could be used concretely in translator training. He does mention ‘productive use of translation within philosophical discourses’ as being ‘one of the paradigm’s most profound contributions’ to translator education, but he does not explain why, or what such ‘productive use’ would involve in practice. My exploration of the pedagogic applications of the reflexive method below seeks to address this question by providing a detailed account of the possible benefits and limits of a deconstructionist approach to training translators in higher-level education. The following section presents a summary of its main points.

Pedagogic applications

My experimentation with the reflexive method suggests that it is in its capacity to allow an experience of its own limits that the reflexive method is at its most productive. For reflexivity is not something that can be conveyed or transmitted, passed on securely to another; rather, it comes about as a singular experience of uncertainty inseparable from the very process of translating. The reflexive method is an incomplete, process-driven approach embedded in the translator’s point of view. For that reason, it provides a uniquely effective instrument for teaching the values and limits of self-reflexive decision-making in translation. The attempt is not to pass on precedent knowledge, but to allow students to experience the limits of (self-)reflexivity through and as a translation process.

The reflexive method offers an innovative, stimulating and playful way of engaging with theory. The gap between theory and practice has
long been discussed in translation studies, particularly in the pedagogy of translation, by scholars such as Hanna, Woodsworth and Rogers. While many academics in the discipline (including Pym, Chesterman and Baker) recognise the need for theoretical knowledge, students often express a negative attitude towards theoretical training and tend to think that practice should be prioritised. Combining theory and practice, the reflexive method provides stimulating exercises which enable students to engage with theory in a practical way by translating the theoretical texts themselves. Translating theory in a reflexive way encourages students to learn theory by practising it, in so far as translating a concept involves attempting to understand it. The reflexive method invites students to interact with theories in form as well as content, highlighting the fact that translating involves a degree of theoretical engagement, since translating a text also requires positioning oneself in relation to it, and developing one’s own view of translation in the process.

Using the reflexive method in an educational framework helps to allow students to experience the challenges of fidelity in translation. Striving to fold a theory back on itself encourages them to rethink the demand of fidelity in translation not in opposition to unfaithfulness or betrayal, but in terms of performativity, simultaneously saying and doing what the source text says/does. The aspiration to be faithful to the source text is challenged in such a practice, since the translator cannot perform a theory or concept (e.g. increase awareness of the text’s status as translation) without also negating it and/or going beyond it (e.g. in the act itself of pointing to translating). In accordance with a deconstructionist approach to performativity, the reflexive method shows that a performative translation of a theoretical concept involves displacing it, transforming it. Trying and failing to perform a theoretical text by simultaneously saying and doing what it says/does, students experience translation as a performative act rather than as ‘the transport of a semantic content into another signifying form’.

Attempting to translate translation theory reflexively throws into relief the limits, incompleteness and contingency of the attempt to theorise translation in an objective way. It shows that the endeavour to explain or predict translation phenomena is embedded in a view of translation with its own limitations, internal contradictions and blind spots. The reflexive method teaches students that while being familiar with an existing theory will help them make better-informed decisions, in order to make effective use of theory they also need continuously to interrogate it in light of their own practice. What constitutes a theory is that it remains partial, open to question, open-ended and vulnerable to
refutation. The attempt to fold a theory back on itself allows students to experience the contingency of any given theory; it invites them to resist the temptation of applying theory unconditionally and indistinguishably from text to text. In other words, it encourages them to develop their own point of view and explore new possibilities of translation. As Pym explains, ‘theories provide translators with valuable tools not just to defend their positions but also to find out about other positions’. By getting students to translate translation theory reflexively, and making them experience the limits of such an ambition, the reflexive method helps them to develop a tangible form of theoretical vigilance.

The reflexive method teaches students that responsible decision-making takes place in the singularity of each translation event. It presents a responsible decision as the result of a moment of indecision, a moment of reflection on the rules of reflection. It proceeds from a questioning of the strategies that are spontaneously formed in the act of translating. When translating reflexively, a decision must be made, almost invented; it cannot be calculated or programmed. Through the reflexive method students experience the uncertain, interrogatory nature of responsible decision-making in translation. They are encouraged to explore their own proposed solutions. To that extent, however, the moment of the decision, even as experienced through the reflexive method, interrupts the indeterminacy that makes that method possible, for ultimately translators must choose a translation. The reflexive method is not just an analysis or an exploration of hypothetical translations; it requires that students actually make a decision; it obliges them to decide without and beyond certainty. Translating reflexively shows students that uncertainty is indispensable to responsible decision-making, and that simultaneously a decision transcends the paralysing moment of indecision. It teaches them that a reflexive decision is also, partly and inescapably, unreflective, instinctive and intuitive, exceeding the decision maker’s prescription and intentions.

The reflexive method allows students to experience their own partiality in highlighting a concept within a given text and choosing to translate it in a certain way. It shows them that the manner in which a text is translated depends very much on the way the translator interprets it. By inviting students to translate a theoretical text according to their own understanding of that text, the reflexive method puts them face to face with their own role and agency as translators – emphasising the fact that translators are responsible for their translation, which necessarily reflects their own interpretation of a text, their subjective interaction with it and position in relation to it. As such, the reflexive method contributes to developing the students’ awareness of their role as translators – a key
objective of successful translator training, according to Donald Kiraly. For Kiraly, this self-perception (or 'self-concept', as he calls it) is crucial for developing translator expertise because it provides translators with their own point of view to carry out the tasks. The mechanism of reflexivity at play in the reflexive method does certainly enable a heightened sense of self-awareness, a grasp of one's own relation to and positioning toward the source text, but the self-awareness it brings about is incomplete and partial. The knowledge the reflexive method generates is the knowledge of partiality and opacity – of the impossibility of stepping outside one's own perception.

The reflexive method shows that translating involves a double risk: the risk of misunderstanding the author and the risk of being misunderstood by the reader. Through the reflexive lens, translating therefore becomes an experience of double uncertainty. On the one hand, translators realise that their interpretation of the text is inevitably partial and subjective, determined by factors that exceed the frame of their awareness. On the other hand, they recognise that their imperfect rendering will in turn be interpreted in a subjective, intuitive or uncritical way. Training translators who understand the risks involved in translating is essential in encouraging them to take responsibility for their decisions. By inviting students to acknowledge the partiality of translation tasks and the uncertainties involved, the reflexive method requires them to be all the more daring and experimental in the choices that they make. It encourages them to analyse the possible implications of their decisions all the more thoroughly; it also teaches them to be humble about their work, open to the criticism of others (clients, readers, collaborators, etc.) and forgiving towards the errors or contradictions of fellow translators or critics, starting with those of the texts translated critically and reflexively.

Interest in the ethical dimension of translation has boomed in the past decades, and yet in most classrooms the ethos of neutrality still prevails. For Baker and Maier, ‘educators need to engage far more directly and explicitly with the issue of ethics and build it into the curriculum’. In their view, in order to encourage students to take responsibility for their decisions, teachers must refrain from prescribing strategies or specific courses of action: ‘Building ethics into the curriculum means opening up a space for critical reflection, training students to think through the consequences of their behaviour, rather than telling them what is right or wrong per se.’ The reflexive method closely responds to this approach. By showing that the ethical decision cannot be taught, programmed or calculated, but that it emerges in the moment of translating itself, the reflexive method enables a teaching
practice which recognises that ‘ethical decisions can rarely, if ever, be made *a priori* but must be understood and taught as an integral and challenging element of one’s work’. The reflexive method teaches ethics by showing that ethics cannot be taught. As such, it provides ‘a space of experimentation and reflection’ where students are free to explore any argument and encouraged to decide responsibly.

As a method that changes according to the text it translates, the reflexive method also emphasises the singularity of translation tasks as unique events embedded in an individual, historical experience. The reflexive method highlights that performing a given strategy or concept to the letter is impractical, for the significance of the strategy or scope of the concept enacted is itself subject to change, fluctuating and contingent. Translating reflexively exacerbates the unpredictable nature of translation, the impossibility of anticipating every translation problem, of predicting one’s own response to a particular challenge. When asked to translate translation theory performatively, students often realise that elements in their translation decisions exceed prediction. They are thereby brought to recognise that as professional translators (of literature in particular) they will have to face situations for which they will not have been prepared.

Using the reflexive method means also, from an instructor’s perspective, acknowledging that, however thoughtful and thorough our training might be, it is itself limited. This is so not only because it is informed to a certain extent by our own partial and subjective experience of translation, but also because it cannot predict every translation situation, or the state of translation in the future – something which has become all the more apparent in recent years, considering the rapid evolution and growing impact of technology on the way we translate. The question, then, is how can we prepare translators for something which does not yet exist? The possibility offered by the reflexive method is to teach translation not by providing ready-made solutions but by engaging in a process of interrogation and discovery. Students are inspired to constantly challenge their own approach to translation and to remain open to the possibilities offered by the specific context of the translations they undertake.

In its attempt to foster a translation practice that enables flexibility and openness to the unknown, the reflexive method provides a pedagogy which is itself flexible and open. In *Becoming a Translator*, Douglas Robinson stresses the importance of developing a learner-centred training which is adapted to its audience, and which respects the learning preferences of each student:
Translation is intelligent activity involving complex processes of conscious and unconscious learning; we all learn in different ways, and institutional learning should therefore be as flexible and as complex and rich as possible, so as to activate the channels through which each student learns best.\textsuperscript{28}

The reflexive method allows students to engage with translation both theoretically and practically in their own and multiple ways. Translating a text reflexively will mean different things to different students. The reflexive method allows for plurality because it is a process-oriented pedagogy, which does not teach by showing, but through experience – the experience of failing to enact a translation theory exhaustively.

In ‘Ethics in Interpreter and Translator Training’, Mona Baker and Carol Maier describe the main objectives of effective translator education in the following terms:

First, training should aim to provide students with the conceptual tools they need to reason critically about the implications of any decision. This means engaging with some of the theoretical literature on ethics that can provide a coherent terminology and a means of reflecting on the pros and cons of particular ways of justifying behaviour (...)}. Second, training should enable students to identify a range of potential strategies that may be deployed to deal with ethically difficult or compromising situations (...). And third, educators need to develop a set of pedagogical tools that can be used to create an environment in which students can make situated ethical decisions, rehearse the implications of such decisions, and learn from this experience.\textsuperscript{29}

The reflexive method fulfils every aspect of the above description and more: it provides students with the conceptual tools they need not only to reason critically about the implications of their decisions, but also to think critically about the tools themselves. It invites them not only to identify a range of potential strategies for dealing with ethical issues, but also to interrogate the usability of these strategies in a different situation. It provides a pedagogic tool which invites students to reflect on possible consequences and learn from experience, and to consider that a responsible decision cannot be programmed or calculated. In other words, it teaches the importance of both vigilance and risk-taking.

As an educational tool, geared towards a flexible, learner-centred approach which celebrates student singularity and diversity, the
reflexive method is itself traversed by contingency and uncertainty. In translator education, great emphasis is placed on determining teaching objectives and learning outcomes prior to a session. However, if, as my experimentation with the reflexive method suggests, the effects of any reflexive project are contingent, then the benefits of the reflexive method itself are not entirely securable or sustainable. Teaching the limits of self-reflexivity is contingent, for educating is as much an encounter with the Other, the unknown, as the experience of translating itself. I can spell out learning outcomes to students so as to influence them, but how they understand them, interiorise them and transform them over time is not something that I, as a tutor, can ensure or control, even if I wanted to. This challenge, which applies to any teaching approach and not only to the reflexive method, does not mean that the pedagogic benefits listed previously are immaterial, but only that their emergence is subject to instability, change and uncertainty. From the translator trainer’s point of view, the reflexive method makes evident the need for continual re-evaluation and readjustment of teaching objectives.

Just like non-reflexive approaches, the reflexive method does not provide, nor does it seek to provide, an absolute truth, or an ultimate approach to teaching translation theory. True, its experimental, innovative mode of operation seems to fulfil many key requirements of effective translator training, including combined theory and practice; a process-driven approach; a learner-centred pedagogy; flexibility; intuition; self-perception; critical thinking; and incalculability. However, these effects are themselves, in part, incalculable. If, as Lynch argues, ‘attempting to be reflexive takes one no closer to a central source of illumination’, the benefits of the reflexive method themselves cannot be taken at face value. For, like non-reflexive approaches, the reflexive method is also flawed, imperfect and lacking. The experience of incompleteness that it triggers should therefore also be applied to itself, thereby drawing attention to the fact that parts of its learning outcomes may be irrelevant in certain contexts or proved wrong in particular situations. One of the dangers of such a reflexive pedagogy is that it can easily be misinterpreted as solving the contradictions that it raises, instead of being used to face them.

The open-endedness of the reflexive method (the fact that the form of critical engagement and self-interrogation it triggers is indefinite) is perhaps its greatest challenge. The aporias it highlights are insoluble (if they can be elucidated it is only to a certain extent, by producing new aporias in the process). As Biesta points out in ‘Preparing for the Incalculable’:
The main problem of deconstruction, which has been the cause of many ‘misunderstandings’ and ‘misinterpretations’, lies in what I propose to call its *reflexivity*, i.e., the fact that its conclusions (which are by no means endings) constantly subvert its assertions.\(^{40}\)

Even the sense of incalculability of the decision (the impossibility of programming the event) can be misleading, according to Derrida. In *Without Alibi*, he explains:

> Will this be possible for us? Will we one day be able, and in a single gesture, to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine? Will we be able to think, what is called thinking, at one and the same time, both what is happening (we call that an event) and the calculable programming of an automatic repetition (we call that a machine)? For that, it would be necessary in the future (but there will be no future except on this condition) to think both the event and the machine as two compatible or even indissociable concepts. Today they appear to us to be antinomic. Antinomic because what happens ought to keep, so we think, some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity. An event worthy of the name ought not, so we think, to give in or be reduced to repetition.\(^{41}\)

Derrida acknowledges that, if in his philosophy an event or decision can only emerge beyond calculation, it may still become programmable.

My argument in this book has been that deconstruction in fact anticipates the emergence of a programmable event – of a system preparing for the incalculable and preparing to manage it. According to Derrida ‘deconstruction is not a method’ but a non-programmable ‘event’ deconstructing itself.\(^{42}\) Equally, my reinterpretation of Derrida’s approach to translation, and transformation of it into a method of critical interrogation and a translation pedagogy, suggests that trying to systematise the event might itself be a useful and productive endeavour, if only for investigating the scope, degree and various manifestations of its incompleteness. In realising that it is impossible to programme an event, it might be possible to prepare for it. As Biesta explains:

> Just education – if such a thing exists – has to be on the outlook for the impossible invention of the other. The other, Derrida writes, ‘is not the possible.’ The other is ‘precisely what is not invented’ (Derrida 1989: 59–60). This means that ‘deconstructive inventiveness can
consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclosionary
structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other’ (Derrida
1989: 60). But one should not forget that one does not make the
other come. One lets it come by preparing for its coming. Education,
in short, must prepare for the incalculable.43

With deconstructive inventiveness, the reflexive method destabilises
translation theory as a whole, and in doing so opens a passage towards
the Other, towards something which is yet to come, new concepts, new
practices and new pedagogies. The reflexive method displaces, limits and
partialises Derrida’s performative translating endeavour in ‘Des Tours de
Babel’ by attempting to systematise it. Moreover, the reflexive method
itself can only move into different contexts, both within and beyond
academia. Its effects cannot be fully predicted, nor secured, since every
new interaction will occasion a different experience, a singular encounter.
Further benefits and limitations of the reflexive method are yet to emerge
from further acts of displacing, translating and re-contextualising – from
experiences which I, in this moment of writing, can neither determine or
foretell.
Notes

12 See Margaret Rogers in Christina Schäffner, *The Role of Discourse Analysis for Translation and in Translator Training* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2002).
13 Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories*.
16 See:

CRITICISM AND SELF-REFLECTION: ANTOINE BERMAN 161


Robinson, *Becoming a Translator*, 49.


Biesta, ‘Preparing for the Incalculable’, 47.

