

Robinson, Douglas. (2022). *The Strange Loops of Translation*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 240, £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781501382420; £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781501382468; £21.59 (eBook), 9781501382437.

Over the past thirty-five years, in a steady stream of monographs, Douglas Robinson has developed a critical idiom that is unique in the field of Translation Studies. Robinson writes about translation as a philosopher and philosophises through the lens of translation. At one moment, he insists on the reader's total analytical focus; at the next, he draws them into a game of linguistic invention and conceptual daring that verges on lyricism and poetry. Reading *The strange loops of translation*, I found myself by turns objecting, resisting, debating and enthusing, undoubtedly with many questions and reservations, but always coming out of each engagement with something precious and new.

At a primary level, what is precious and new in Robinson's books is the directness and erudition with which he addresses Translation Studies, challenging the discipline to rethink some of its fundamental assumptions; that is, urging it to reconceptualise translation beyond binary oppositions such as original and copy, loss and preservation, foreign and domestic, as a social practice that is “always embodied, always situated, always collectivized, and always collectively normative” (Robinson 2017, p.177). In *Critical Translation Studies*, where this quotation is taken from, Robinson showed how translation has been used to help produce regimes of normativity that make thoroughly coded systems of knowledge and political economy appear natural and even universal. At that point, he urged translation scholars to critically re-examine their disciplinary commitments to principles such as translational mediation, reproduction, and equivalence.

Several books later, in *The strange loops of translation*, criticality becomes central to exploring translation's imbrication not only in the ideological structuring of reality but also in the formation of subjectivity. In Robinson's account, our individual sense of self, that is, of an individual core that can be expressed creatively and encountered by others, is a function of translation. Put differently (as I understand it), the self is a rhetorical relation that can be exemplified by the author/translator dyad. Robinson writes of the “mutual self-constitution of authorial ‘I’ and translatorial ‘I’” (Robinson 2022, p. 49), arguing that, within the current cultural order, translators contribute to the creation of the illusion of the author's sovereign subjectivity. They do so by eclipsing themselves from the space of translation which they create, allowing this space to reappear publicly as the author's putative interiority. Thus, translators retrospectively *constitute* authors as well as themselves, rather than *mediate* between already differentiated selves and equivalents.

If all this sounds circular, in that texts, knowledges, and subjectivities cannot ultimately point beyond their own contingent, relational nature, that is because it is meant to be so. Robinson borrows the idea of “strange loops” from writings by Douglas Hofstadter — notably, *I am a strange loop* (Hofstadter 2007), an analysis of the cyclical structure of the act of representing, on which much of the discussion above is based. In *The*

strange loops, Robinson gives several examples of how translation in all its standard and unconventional guises remains a mechanism of production of apparent symmetries on linguistic, social, and cultural levels. Even in the case of his own imaginative, self-aware translation of a canonical Finnish novel, Aleksis Kivi's ([1870] 2017) *The brothers seven* — a translation that “radically exceeds the original” (Robinson 2022, p. 21), as he puts it — Robinson remains sceptical: “Progress? Not really a translation? Not, therefore, a strange loop? No, because again, it's a translation, and therefore equivalent. Back to square one” (p. 21).

Hofstadter is better known to translation scholars for his 1997 book *Le ton beau de Marot*, where he writes about the cognitive and philosophical paradoxes of translation, but does not theorise them as loops. Robinson takes him to task for this omission and *The strange loops of translation* constitutes his effort to compensate for it. In the course of the book's four chapters, his mission is to show that the strange loops phenomenon manifests itself more clearly and transformatively in translating than in “original” writing. His method is to revisit some key ideas of thinkers most of whom have figured in his earlier writings, in light of Hofstadter's strange loops proposition. It will be impossible not to oversimplify Robinson's extraordinarily informed writing, but nonetheless here is an account of the trajectory that he follows in this book.

Chapter 1 centres on Hofstadter's preference for “sense-for-sense translation” over literal translation, as discussed in his essay “Translator, trader” (2009). In this preference, Robinson discerns an effort on Hofstadter's part to save translation from itself (i.e., from linguistic violence), by relying — unselfconsciously, it seems — on the humanist thesis of the pre-existence of meanings in relation to language. Deconstructing this claim, Robinson reminds us that even Jerome asserted that there is a limit beyond which sense-for-sense translation is no longer applicable, namely, the “mystery” of the Holy Scripture's syntax. Robinson also suggests that literal translation is not a theoretically sounder solution, as it is equally selective and contingent on circumstances. In a clear-sighted analysis, he identifies the roots of Friedrich Schleiermacher's call for literal translation in his well-established nationalism and in the xenophobia associated with German academia of his time.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the issue of “translator-function.” Echoing Michel Foucault's (1977) “author function,” this useful concept is examined here with reference to a small number of translation scholars who first discussed it in the late 1990s. Among them, Robinson focuses more approvingly on Theo Hermans's analysis of the role of the translator in inventing the norms of what counts as an “original.” On this note, Robinson also reminds us that Hermans specifies the central task of translation theory as the examination of the contingent discourses and norms that legitimise the various historical conceptualisations of translation (Robinson 2022, pp. 97-98). Robinson concludes with a musing on the “uncanny” (p. 100) convergence between Hermans's and Hofstadter's critiques of the methodological fallacies of equivalence-based translation theories.

In Chapter 3, Robinson complexifies further his story of strange loops, looking at the “periperformative” contexts in which translators work, by which he means the social and disciplinary pressures on them to prioritise communication and meaning transfer. A most difficult chapter to summarise, it is nonetheless fair to say that Robinson offers a fine example of how philosophical critique can be conducted through the performance of translation. He discusses various possible English translations of the key terms *Dasein* and *das Man* in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and time* ([1927] 1988), which represent “authentic” and “inauthentic being,” respectively. Robinson asks what an “authentic” English translation of these terms would look like, that is, one that does justice to Heidegger’s call for a fundamental rethinking of “being.” It turns out, however, that there is no such translation, inasmuch as any attempt at communicating these ideas through the use of equivalent terms is already contaminated with translational context, whether cultural, political or disciplinary. The philosophical corollary is that there is no *Dasein* other than the one which *das Man* constructs. There is no “outside” normativity, in analogy with Jacques Derrida, also quoted in this chapter, for whom there is no “outside the text” (Derrida 1976, p. 158). This chapter concludes with a reference to Naoki Sakai’s account of the internal splitness and multiplicity of the translator. As such, the translator echoes the inauthenticity and groundlessness of the Heideggerian *das Man* but is now rebranded by Robinson as the ultimate creator and operator of these social-normative mechanisms that his book frames as “strange loops.”

The first three chapters of the book can therefore be read as an incremental demonstration of the claim that subjectivity is constituted through translational knowledge and practice. In Chapter 1 we are reminded that the “I” does not ontologically precede linguistic difference; on the contrary, the translator’s understanding of difference equips them with the capacity to position the “I” as the idealised resolution of that difference (the hypothesis of equivalence). Chapters 2 and 3 subsequently bring to the fore the social and contextual factors that contribute to this functioning of translation. Chapter 4 complements this trajectory by arguing that the normative, subject-forming function of translation operates at a guttural and corporeal level, following sedimented patterns and habits of translating.

The first part of this chapter is based on Henri Meschonnic’s account of rhythm and voice as the main categories determining the production of subjectivity. Robinson uses the term “knowledge-translation” (introduced in his 2012 article on Meschonnic) to explore how embodied knowledge is used by a community to “[transform] individual becoming-collective opinions into what come to feel like ontologically reliable realities and truths” (p. 157). Robinson does not follow Meschonnic in his call for resistant, counter-normative translational practices, preferring instead to emphasise the iterative and “loopy” character with which translation creates subjects to its own image. Even so, he is no less polemical or dismissive than Meschonnic famously was, when, in the second part of the chapter, he launches an attack on Kobus Marais’s work (2014) for his reductive understanding of the mechanics of social constructivism. Robinson may have a point in seeing signs in some writings by Marais of the “survival of naive pre-Kantian scientism, objectivism, the ideologically normative Western belief that it is

possible to know objective reality reliably” (p. 167; see also Marais’s [2022] response). The bigger point, however, seems to be that even theories that claim to draw attention to complexity, unpredictability and cultural semiosis risk reproducing the positivism and universalism that they set out to escape.

Towards the end of the book, Robinson turns his attention to the limitations of the theory of strange loops. In fact, he seems to sense that this theory puts translation in a difficult spot, much as it highlights its social importance. This theory suggests that translation, insofar as it operates strictly normatively, cannot be imagined as a productive force, i.e., a mechanism of social change or a means of truthful representation of personal and collective experience. Instead, norms will always fold translation into a self-reinforcing loop. Even the knowledge of difference accumulated by translators over the centuries will never amount to a distinct critical translational perspective that can help transform lives and societies. We know, of course, that this is not entirely true: Robinson himself writes from such a critical perspective and so do a few others that he mentions in *The strange loops*. In the Conclusion of the book, he attempts to mitigate this issue by turning to an alternative theorisation of loops that actively invests in translation’s derivative, mimetic character. He relies in large part on Johannes Göransson’s book *Transgressive circulation. Essays on translation* (2018), where translation is revalued precisely by positioning itself as something debased, displaced, carnivalesque and kitsch. In other words, translation’s positive, social-transformative power may be in *visibly* mimicking the “original,” visibly failing to provide the right equivalent, and by the same token indicating to readers and audiences that the subjectivities that it constitutes are imperfect and phantasmatic. The restorative action of translation thus might lie in its ability to point to the errors of our long-standing commitment to logocentric, patriarchal or capitalist norms at local and global levels.

In the final pages, Robinson criticises Hofstadter for refusing to see that the strange loops of translation entail not just circuitry and repetition but also real failure, dislocation, and abjection, as suggested above. From my translational perspective, however, I cannot help thinking that there is something easy and gratuitous in the idea of “loops” in the first place; namely, that it was always meant to be a convenient and risk-free device for representing and thus circumscribing unruly phenomena on the ground. The loops’ neat geometry, spatialising the urge to reach some higher metaphysical level (e.g., the author’s interiority) but then failing and returning to “square one” (see above), is much less sophisticated than, say, Heidegger’s hermeneutics of fallenness, which Robinson seems to undervalue. In fact, at every turn of the book, someone seems to understand better the phenomenology of normativity than Hofstadter does with his strange loops (as represented by Robinson). Derrida understands better than Hofstadter the logic of supplementarity and contamination; Hermans understands better the social and textual operation of norms; Meschonnic understands better their somatic, intersubjective, character; Sakai understands better the translational constitution of national cultures; and Mendonça Cardozo, in Chapter 3, understands better the power of disciplinary norms and periperformativity. In what way, then, are the strange loops useful to Translation Studies?

In 2020, Robinson gave an online talk about *The strange loops* (then presumably just a manuscript), which he concluded as follows: “This, I suggest, is the takeaway from the strange loops approach to the study of translation: the focus it brings to the constitution of the individual and the collective ‘I’” (Kundu: n.d.). If so, let us use the strange loops approach to train our focus on the translational in its entanglement with the collective and the individual. But once we get there, let us leave these loops behind and make room for more nuanced, critical and self-reflexive approaches that do better justice to translation’s complexity — approaches such as those that are already being worked through in Douglas Robinson’s long oeuvre with a consistency and refinement matched by few others.

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