

FROM RELEVANCE TO REVENANCE IN TRANSLATION

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A zombie theory of translation: or, what is a “Revenant” translation?, Douglas Robinson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, 70 pp., £18.00, ISBN: 9781009678230 (paperback).¹

A zombie theory of translation: or, what is a “Revenant” translation? by Douglas Robinson is one of the most recent titles in the Cambridge Elements in Translation and Interpreting. Following the editorial model of the broader *Cambridge Elements* series, the Elements offers concise, peer-reviewed publications positioned between journal articles and full-length monographs. Since Lee’s *Translation as experimentalism* (2022), the series has expanded rapidly, with volumes ranging from risk management (Pym, 2025b) to translation process modelling (Abdel Latif, 2025). This compact format is well suited to theoretically ambitious interventions in a field increasingly shaped by AI-driven translation, multimodality, and media accessibility.

Robinson’s scholarship has, for more than three decades, expanded the conceptual horizons of translation studies by bringing translation into dialogue with philosophy, literary theory, semiotics, and cognitive science (e.g., Robinson, 2020, 2023a). His work has often provoked debate (e.g., Lefevere, 1993), while also shaping discussions of translation as a spiritual, embodied, cultural, and communicative practice (e.g., von Flotow, 2002). Against this background, the book invites readers to rethink translation not as transfer but as ‘textual zombification’: a process through which texts persist and return across linguistic and historical contexts. This reframing recalls Chesterman’s (2016) memetic alternative to the transfer metaphor, in which translations operate as ‘survival machines for memes,’ allowing ideas to propagate and mutate across cultural boundaries. Robinson’s emphasis, however, falls less on memetic spread than on revenant return, redirecting attention from the spread of ideas to the afterlife of textual forms.

What is particularly distinctive about the book is its combination of conceptual originality and experimental form. In addition to advancing a novel metaphor, Robinson performs it through a polyphonic and heteronymous mode of scholarly writing. The following discussion assesses both the theoretical contribution and the limits of this proposal.

What is “A zombie theory of translation”? Robinson begins by clarifying what he does not mean. Rather than invoking the familiar sense of a theory that survives despite having been

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¹ Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/abs/zombie-theory-of-translation/027316DE56E1540E94B9FA9DEC8DB9C2> (Accessed: 28 April 2026).

discredited, he proposes “a theory of translations-as-zombies” (Robinson, 2026, p. 2). Translation, in this view, produces forms that return from earlier linguistic contexts in altered yet recognizable shapes. Robinson describes the process as “a recursion specifically of revenants as disturbingly/decayingly embodied/diseminded memories” (2026, p. 11). What is foregrounded is recursive embodiment: translations carry traces of prior textual lives without remaining identical to them.

This conceptual shift is crystallized in Robinson’s reformulation of Derrida’s question, from “What is a ‘Relevant’ translation?” to “What is a ‘Revenant’ translation?” (2026, pp. 1-10). The substitution displaces evaluative adequacy with temporal recurrence. Translation is no longer primarily assessed in terms of relevance; it becomes the reappearance of textual life in new linguistic embodiments.

How does the book advance Derrida and engage with Benjamin? The book develops its argument through sustained dialogues with two influential traditions in translation theory: Benjamin’s reflections on textual afterlife and Derrida’s analysis of translation’s aporetic logic. In *The task of the translator*, Benjamin introduced *Fortleben*, or afterlife, arguing that “the idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity” (Zohn, 1968, p. 71). Robinson radicalizes this insight by giving textual afterlife a more corporeal and unsettling form: where Benjamin describes the continuation of textual life, Robinson imagines the return of textual bodies (cf. Robinson, 2023b).

Derrida provides a more critical point of engagement. Robinson notes the canonical yet elusive status of “What is a ‘Relevant’ translation?” (2026, p. 3), citing Batchelor’s description of the essay as “a strange, centaur-like beast” (2023, p. 1). His reading relocates Derrida’s argument from relevance as adequacy to reflections on translatability. Derrida’s appeal to “the best possible translation” or “the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible relevant” translation risks, for Robinson, collapsing into a conventional model of adequacy (2026, p. 4). The more productive dimension lies in “*L’épreuve de l’intraduisible*,” the trial of the untranslatable (2026, p. 16), which he reads as an “aporetic trial zone” and renames the “zombie zone” (2026, pp. 16-17). Translation here is neither fully possible nor fully impossible; it unfolds as a recursive process haunted by what resists assimilation.

Robinson’s synthesis of Benjamin and Derrida becomes explicit later in the book. Derrida, Robinson argues, did not seek to erase the body of the source text but to allow it “to survive in some form, to some degree” (2026, p. 55). This is where afterlife, aporia, and corporeality meet. Robinson’s move from ‘relevance’ to ‘revenance’ therefore extends Derrida through Benjamin: translation becomes the return of a textual body, altered but still marked by its prior life.

How does the book’s textual form enact its theoretical claims? The book’s most striking feature is its textual architecture. Rather than presenting its argument through conventional exposition, Robinson interweaves theoretical reflection with fragments of *Six million Shylocks: a zombie memoir* (“*Six million Shylocks*”), which, as the abstract states, “not only theorizes the six million Holocaust Shylock-zombies but explores that theme

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narratively, in a 5,000-word short story interwoven with the 20,000-word article” (2026, abstract). The narrative fragments are embedded in the argument itself, giving the essay its performative structure.

The fictional narrative stages revenance at the level of cultural memory. Shylock returns as a proliferating collective—“six million Shylocks”—a formulation that inevitably evokes the Holocaust (Robinson, 2026, p. 30). Textual return here becomes historical recurrence: a figure reappears in forms that remain linked to prior textual lives while being radically reconfigured by later historical trauma.

This performative logic is intensified by Robinson’s use of marked ‘heteronyms’ (cf. Robinson, 2022). The memoir is attributed to ‘Jacques Derrida,’ while Robinson appears as its ‘pseudo-translator,’ thereby generating dialogic footnotes in which authorial, translatorial, and editorial voices comment on and contest one another. The most revealing moment occurs in Part 3.2, where the translator questions a digressive zoological discussion of bison, bardot, and hybrid animals—“I repeat: what exactly is the relevance of this bison story?”—only for the text to continue proliferating such seemingly irrelevant material (Robinson, 2026, pp. 28-29). The episode matters because it turns irrelevance into a textual procedure. By staging Derrida as a heteronymous voice and allowing the text to drift into apparent irrelevance, Robinson extends Derrida’s concern with relevance toward a logic of revenance. Meaning emerges through repetition, displacement, and return rather than through a prior criterion of adequacy.

How does zombie theory relate to Robinson’s broader intellectual context? The zombie metaphor becomes more intelligible within Robinson’s broader scholarship. From *The translator’s turn* (1991) to *Who translates?* (2001), Robinson has been concerned with translator somatics, subjectivity, and agency. This concern later develops into heteronymous narratoriality (Robinson, 2022), informed by Pessoa’s practice of writing under multiple heteronyms. Translation, in this view, is understood as a site of shifting narratorial positions rather than the transmission of a stable authorial voice.

Zombie theory extends this line of thought by shifting the focus from voice to textual return. If heteronymous narratoriality foregrounds the plurality of voices involved in translation, zombie theory foregrounds the persistence of translated texts as returning forms. The book’s hybrid structure—combining theoretical essay, fictional narrative, and dialogic footnotes—turns plurality from a feature of narratorial voice into a feature of textual life. This continuity with Robinson’s long-standing engagement with embodiment gives the metaphor much of its force, but it also raises a question: to what extent can such a model be extended beyond literary and philosophical contexts?

What does zombie theory leave unexplored? The book leaves several questions open. The zombie metaphor is most illuminating where literary texts acquire complex afterlives, as in the transformation of Shylock from *The merchant of Venice* into the post-Holocaust *Six million Shylocks*. Its relevance to domains such as legal or technical translation, where functional adequacy and communicative precision matter more than textual memory, remains less clear. Zombie theory also functions primarily as a conceptual lens; empirical scholars working with corpus-based analysis or cognitive modelling may find it suggestive

but difficult to operationalize.

The most significant omission, in the present context, is the limited engagement with AI-driven translation. Generative AI systems, including large language models (LLMs), produce outputs through the recombination of prior linguistic material, including previous translations. From the perspective of zombie theory, such outputs might be read as secondary revenance: reactivations of already circulating textual afterlives. AI translation may therefore produce 'zombies of zombies,' a recursive amplification of the processes Robinson describes. The book does not explore this possibility, but its conceptual framework clearly invites reflection in this direction.

In summary, the book reframes translation by shifting attention from equivalence and relevance to the recursive dynamics through which texts return across languages and historical contexts. Its originality lies equally in form: by interweaving theoretical argument with *Six million Shylocks*, Robinson constructs a polyphonic textual space in which theory is performed. As Pym observes, Robinson "has built up an intricate conceptual system that can deal with almost any intellectual problem concerning translation" (Pym, 2025a, p. 300). Whether one accepts or contests his argument, it remains difficult to ignore. This, precisely, is the value of the book: it compels us to rethink not only what translation does, but how texts return.

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