

Exorcising translation. Towards an intercivilizational turn. By Douglas Robinson (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), xxvi + 176 pp., \$27.95 (paper)

Douglas Robinson, an American translation scholar who has been living in Hong Kong for some years, deals here with no less than the question of how civilizations should interrelate. The question concerns translation because translators work on the way people sense belonging to one culture or another. Yet translation in the narrow language-to-language sense is only dealt with in one chapter of this book – a fairly distanced commentary on Western receptions of Daoism, with just a few comments on Chinese. For the rest, we are treated to a series of close readings, notably of Harold Bloom’s *Western Canon* (1994) provocatively approached through Nietzsche, but also marginally of the translation scholars Andrew Chesterman (on why it should not matter where scholarship comes from) and Naoki Sakai (on breaking the “civilizational spell” that apparently dissociates theory from Asia, as if it did matter where one came from). For Robinson, to “exorcise translation” means breaking that spell, showing that barriers between cultures are tricks of the mind, deeply based in collective imaginaries, operative but surmountable. It could be that translation itself is the work that cuts through those imaginary barriers, but Robinson avoids such facile idealisms. He instead points the way towards something called “intercivilizational regimes”, which would be like Sakai’s “cofigurative regimes” by which translators think about their task in one way or another, but in Robinson the issue is less binary, more open to awareness of undercurrent drives and feelings. Anyway, that is how Robinson gets his title.

This is one of a sleuth of books in which Robinson deploys the same basic methods: close readings of long citations, digging out the implications of particular words, comparing translations, teasing out one sense or another until we discover, not necessarily the solution to any problem (in this case the requisite solution is given in the title anyway), but how other thinkers either somehow prefigured Robinson’s own concepts but lacked the words, or can be righted by those same concepts now with the words. In this book we have rather less chance to err, since key pointers are given in a series of boxes-to-be-learned-for-the-test: “icosis” is “socioecological plausibilization”, “ecosis” is the “socioecological becoming-good of the community”, “periperformativity” is “the ratification of performatives by a community”, a “regime of translation” is “an ideology that makes translators imagine their relationship to what they do in translation” (as in Sakai) but here within a “socioaffective ecology” where it has no negative associations, since affectivity is always part of the way the social works. These notions, along with a few others, form a rich, robust discourse that seeks consistently to break down the binary divisions of what might otherwise be seen as Western thought, starting from the mind-body dichotomy that Robinson has been challenging since his somatics of translation in *The Translator’s Turn* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991): we translate with what sounds right, with what feels good in our guts. That very plausible initial argument has now flowered into the whole of psychic and social life and its history, described in terms of interrelated ecologies, the imaginary that drives perceived reality, logics that stem from feelings and drives (from pain, *dixit* Nietzsche), with substantives of the form X-becoming-Y in many registers and on numerous levels. One is not surprised that Robinson claims to find

in Mengzi and Laozi “a deep intellectual kinship” (ix); one might surmise this means substantial interrelations have been reached after the incantations of separate cultures have been dispelled, in a deeper meeting of minds. But does that solve the problem of how civilizations should interrelate?

Any simple pairing of problem and solution is not what one should ask from this discourse. In the tradition of the sages, the best answer is that the question itself is false: there are no absolute separations between cultures, Robinson shows, since Chinese thought has been operating in the West for several centuries (here we only find a superficial summary) and Laozi, for example, underwent multiple interpretations in Chinese well before that multiplicity was continued in Western languages (again, the survey is restricted to a handful of versions). Robinson does not sell solutions; he offers a discursive grid for reading, which is a way of seeing the world.

Robinson does nevertheless offer three “conclusions” that look like something has been found (here I struggle to summarize): 1) the “Enlightenment/modern/scientist/universalist camp” is haunted by master narratives that function as spells, 2) dispelling a spell, one can demystify the circular argument that Western science is universalist and must thus be universalized, and 3) “there is this larger historical and cultural context that in many ways overshadows our current concerns [in translation studies] and that we would therefore do well to open our gates to those CTS [Critical Translation Studies] scholars who are already brilliantly engaged in the study of such things” (146). At that is the end of the book.

So what exactly is the larger context? It could be all civilizations, as Robinson might have us believe: translation is in all communication, after all (16). Yet it could also be the university system, spreading from the West, with its center of power in the United States. Sakai is a Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell – the surprise would be that he didn’t theorize! And the scholars who are similarly “brilliantly engaged” are also mostly in literature departments in the United States. Further, the location of translation studies in the United States, where relatively few professional translators are trained as such, is very much within those same literature departments, struggling to attract students by sounding practical (hence translation) and doing all they can to overcome the national boundaries that once separated literatures (hence a certain *kind* of translation studies, breaking the binarisms). Robinson’s plea for a wider context is in some sense also an application for full membership of that quite narrow club. Why else would a book on translation deal mostly with Harold Bloom, who has virtually nothing to say about translation? Why else would it take issue directly with the empirical approaches to translation that have developed elsewhere in the Western university system, notably in Europe, where professional translators are actually needed for governance? Robinson’s discourse purports to be about how civilizations should be related; it is more clearly about how the word “translation” is used within the American university system.

Robinson’s is one the first books in the series “Literatures, Cultures, Translation”, published by Bloomsbury New York and edited by Brian James Baer at Kent State and Michelle Woods at New York. The series is sure to continue the brilliant engagement.

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