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Compte rendu

DOUGLAS ROBINSON. *Translation & Taboo*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996. 232 + XIX p.

Why is it, so this "visceral," first-person narrative of a "somatic anxiety's" genesis launches itself with the question of moment, that "any Christian, or just about any atheist who was raised a Christian, or just about anyone raised in a Christian society" will shun the invitation "to throw a copy of the Bible on the floor and jump on it, or rip out its pages, or spit inside it, or urinate on it"? (XII, XVI). "Iconoclastic" Douglas Robinson's answer, for himself as for these others ("I say radical heretical things about the Bible, too, but I probably couldn't bring myself to destroy one"), is that such an instance of anxious demurring bespeaks the survival of "the deep ideomatic alignments of taboo," the "deep ideosomatic nexus that runs all through the history of translation theory" in the West, from the time of the earliest sacred texts to the present (XVII, XVI). It is his contention that even the most enlightened of contemporary theorists of linguistic/cultural interchange, by foreignists, postcolonialists, and polysystems people alike, remain blocked (in) as a result of their repressive, exclusionary deference to "the old dualisms and dogmatisms" (X). If virtually all others before him have succumbed to the taboo against traducing/translation, have fed too much, if not exclusively, on "that old staple of dualistic, the *non distributio medii*," he will do otherwise: intent on "exploding the excluded middle," and "sticking with the anecdotal, the experiential, the excursive, the contrifugal" method practised in his *The Translator's Turn* (1991), he would "quest" for "a way through the blockages [of taboo] to *truth*" (XI, XVII). Softened though it is by virtue of its will to truth, Robinson's excursive, diffidently aggressive text does achieve a Nietzsche-like verisimilitude in its representation of a mind's feeding on the "in-betweenness… the muddledness… or the middledness that rationalist thought has always suppressed" (214).

Chapter 1 ("The Translations of Lucius") opens with an account of the conversion ritual imaged in Book 11 of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, in which Mithras translates parts of the Egyptian Book of the Dead into Greek for the benefit of a Lucius on the threshold of mystery and priesthood. What Robinson's reflections on his own response to his reading of *The Golden Ass* and the Egyptian Book of the Dead in translation lead him (however inconclusively) to conclude is that "mystery… is a by-product of the alienation of language from ordinary everyday use" (16). To be enveloped "in mystery" is to be en-veloped "in taboo" (17). Cases from ancient to contemporary times (including an account of certain acts of translation by Robinson's children) are adduced to indicate not only that mystery and taboo are pretty much one and the same thing, but that "the ideosomatics of taboo are intensely contagious" (25). To be anxious about anything is to defer to taboo, which fact from experience belies the principle of "identity in difference… the rationalist ideal for translation," according to Robinson (43). There is, in other words, something of self-spoofing going on in this chapter, since (at least for any rationalist worthy of the

name) *simile non est idem*. Nor does the universalism of Robinson's speculative observations – e.g., "these days we are always already spoken by the Other-as-reason" (38) – seem designed to win agreement from contemporary students of translation respectful of the manifold limitations imposed by the traditional formal logic. Quite aptly, the first chapter of *Translation & Taboo* ends on a note of self-effacing self-parody: "Feels like I'm paddling a pogue in a storm with a Popsicle stick" (45). No doubt, but that Robinson in the first chapter of this book has made pretty heavy weather of the disposition of some translators and comparatists not to confound similitude with identity.

Chapter 2, "The Divided Self," which takes up half volume, reads the entanglements of rationalism with mystery and taboo within the context of an "abbreviated… intellectual history of the Platonic-Christian-scientific West" (47). The "birth of reason" is retold, and the growth of that offspring as recounted in a somewhat anachronistic history of Bible translation involving Aelfric, Thomas More, Augustine, and Jerome, among others, signs a continuity in dread. Again, as in Chapter 2, Robinson's discourse is not constrained by the excluded middle. He writes, for example, of Aelfric's experience of "vernacularising" part of the Bible: "doing the translation at his lord's [his bishop's] command relieves him of accountability (as Hitler's command relieved the Nazis of responsibilities for the Holocaust – or so they were led to believe by nearly two millennia of ecclesiastical hegemony in the West)" (84). If such is *the* translator's perennial anxiety, how then to overcome it? Robinson's answer: schizophrenia ("if schizophrenia is the breakdown of rationalist regimes which… those regimes themselves always inevitably drive, then perhaps the only escape is *through* schizophrenia") (142). Such cases as Louis Wolfson's *Le Schizo et les langues* and Sherry Simon's translations of *joual* indicate (to Robinson, at least) that "*surrender* to schizophrenia… may be the only way out of our current (post)colonial impasse" (159). Like the first, this second chapter ends self-effacingly, with a duly self-conscious admission of somatic anxiety: "the mystical ideal of surrender I've been peddling in these last few pages" (169).

Chapter 3, "Magical Doubles," proceeds in quest of some "middle ground" between the "metempsychotic" theories considered in chapter 2 and the "magical" (post)romantic theories of translation advanced by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Walter Benjamin. What middle ground Robinson finds himself sadly finding between these two sets of theories is in the willingness "to sire *Blendlinge*, bastards, mongrels, half-breeds, the monstrous births by which a foreignizing translator, or *any* translator, reproduces or doubles himself or herself" (212). "Utopian romantic thinker" that he is, though, Robinson is able to end his autobiography as translator on a note of some optimism: "I feel, to put it in the rather melodramatic terms I've used throughout, that I've been doing battle with dark forces from the underworld, forces of repression and constraint, stifling protection against the deadly contagions of mana and taboo – which are also, if we can learn to channel those energies rather than let them kill us outright, vast resources of vitality and strength – and have been depleted by my struggles" (215). As Robinson himself invites the recognition, his earnest story impelled by an aggressively "hesitant anecdotal openness to the muddles and middles of new experience" ends not unhumorously, with something of an upbeat "whine fest" (215). All in all, *Translation & Taboo* is a funny book. Like *The Golden*

Ass, the more serious this whimsical text from Robinson is in what it does, the funnier it gets. In absence of reason, anything goes.

Reference: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, vol. 25, Nos. 3-4, 1998, p. 589-591.