

REVIEW OF DOUGLAS ROBINSON, *THE TRANSLATOR'S TURN*

JOHN ROBERT SCHMITZ
(UNICAMP)

The Translator's Turn by Douglas Robinson, for some readers, will most likely be a controversial and provocative book. For those who hold a mentalist view of translation, this publication provides an alternative model which emphasizes emotions, intuition and feeling rather than thought, intelligence and reasoning. Robinson's initial remarks in his "Introduction" exemplify the paradigm he proposes:

"Good translators choose works and phrases by reference not to some abstract system of intellectualized rules, which most of us have never internalized in the first place, but rather to "messages" or impulses sent by the body: a given word or phrase feels right. Intuitively, not just for the translator, but for all language users, sense is not cognition but sensation."

This book is divided into two main parts, each sub-divided into two chapters, respectively. Part one bears the title "Dialogical Bodies", and the first chapter in this part has the title, "The Semantics of Translation" while the second is entitled "The Dialogics of Translation". Part two, entitled "Dialogical Turns", also consists of two chapters entitled "Topics of Translation" and "Ethics of Translation".

Robinson's work is an impressive example of scholarship not only in translation studies but in other disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, literary criticism, religion, and the social sciences as well. The author marshalls an impressive array of sources and uses them convincingly to support his view of translation. Aquinas, Jerome and Augustine, Benjamin and Bakhtin, Derrida and Lacan, in addition to Althusser, Bacon, Buber, Luther, Nietzsche, von Humboldt, Voloshinov, and Wittgenstein are cited in their respective source languages, translated and worked into the web of the author's thinking about translation.

In the first paragraph above I stated that Robinson's publication may be both controversial and provocative, for the author questions the very foundations of Western translation theory based on the Augustinian view of the sign as a stable idea with "true" meanings that lead to a God-given originary unity. For Robinson the notions encountered in the literature on translation theory such as "fidelity" and "equivalence" are vague, for they are difficult to systematize. For this author, translation is feeling or, in his words "somatic", for translation, like all human communication, deals with people. The following passage nicely sums up Robinson's view of translation:

A person writes the SL text, charging the SL [source language] words with all the force of his or her idiosomatic experience. A second person reads the SL text, recharging the SL words with all the force of his or her own idiosomatic experience - an experience that, owing to our idiosomatic conditioning, will probably overlap in significant ways with that of the author, but never exactly. A third person (or the same person in a third capacity) reads the SL text with an ear to translating it into a TL, [target language] and charges the transfer with the force of his or her idiosomatic experience: feels the SL and works to dredge up out of his or her TL storehouse words that feel the same, words that seem charged with something like the same force. (págs. 21-22)

The title of Robinson's book, **The Translator's Turn** is purposely ambiguous. It is now (at this writing or at the moment this review is being read) the translators' turn to throw off the notion that they are committing a terrible sin if they fail to extract faithfully the ideas of the author of the source text in their translations. It is the translators' turn to question the rules dictated by the many self-help books published to "educate", i.e., control, translators. The word **turn** also refers to the work that translators do. Robinson plays on the Greek work **tropain** "to turn" and the Latin word **vertere** with the same meaning, i.e., "to turn, to translate, to explain."

In his chapter "The Ethics of Translation", Robinson examines the act of translation in the light of the different "verts" or turns that are used in human communication such as (i) introversion and extroversion (controversy), (ii) conversion and advertising, (iii) reversion, (iv) subversion (eversion), (v) perversion. (vi) aversion, (vii) diversion, and (viii) conversation.

Introversion or "turning within oneself" is the stance taken by the translator submissive to the ideas and thoughts expressed in the source language text. Extroversion or "turning out of oneself" is that stance taken by translators dissatisfied with the original and who attempt to improve it. Introversion, according to Robinson, is the basic ideology of Western translation theory; its hidden aim is another "vert" -- conversion. The purpose of Bible translation is to convert different groups of people as in Matt 28:19 -- "... go and make disciples of all nations". Conversion, for this author, is dangerous, for it may involve deception or, in his words, "conversion as trickery" and "conversion as a confidence game". Related to conversion is advertising translation, in which the translator tries to convert the target language reader or viewer into a buyer of the SL (or recently, multinational) company's product or rather, into a believer in the company's product, so that he or she will keep buying it" (p. 215). In Robinson's view, reversion is linked to conversion. Such a translator attempts to prepare a "version" that gets the reader to go back to a former view, that is, to effect a "dialogical reversion" (p. 223).

In the act of translation, many translators consciously or unconsciously subvert the original, that is they undermine or overthrow basic expectations or assumptions that the readers have with respect to the translation of a specific text or translations in general. Robinson considers Jerome, Luther, and the eminent translation

theorist and Bible translator, Eugene Nida, as subversive. In the case of Nida, one could quarrel with Robinson, for Nida as a translation theorist is quite conservative, but as a Bible translator he does indeed subvert. Other examples of subversive translators cited by the author are Buber and Rosenswieg. In Robinson's words:

... here the idea is not to wake up a sleepy, churchgoing audience to easy understanding, but to shock an intellectually and artistically sophisticated audience into taking another look at the Bible, a book they had long since "grown out of", given up as childish and boring. (p. 226)

The aim of perversion is "... to convert the TL reader to a state of confusion, a muddledness that is the only response to a hopelessly muddled and meaningless world". (p. 238) Following the inspiration of Derrida, it is important to question the perfectionist view of translation that has plagued Western translation theory from classical times down to the present. For Derrida, translation is doomed to failure, and this very failure contaminates the original with assignment of new meaning and makes way for another original.

The stance of the aversionary translator is to "turn away" from the TL readers and the problems they might have in reading the TL text. Such a translator is loyal to the SL text and views those readers who have to resort to a translation as odious creatures, more odious than translators themselves who dare "to turn" the sacred original into another language.

The stance of diversion refers to a turning away from the SL text toward the TL text. The translator should derive pleasure from his work. Translations should provide enjoyment for the translator and the TL reader. Robinson's view is quite daring and, if put into practice, could liberate the translator from years of years of truckling to the SL author. In Robinson's words:

Translation as caricature: the secret glee that the business translator feels when he or she diverts the boss's "Yours sincerely" into "Yours earnestly", perhaps, or "Yours in Christ" is **empowering**. (Robinson's emphasis), p. 253.

The last vert is conversation, which is part and parcel of what translation is all about. Following Bakhtin (1981), who observes that all words are dialogized, Robinson views translation as "embodied dialogue", as a conversation, as the taking of conversational "turns" in two or more languages.

Robinson's book is vital reading for both students and scholars of translation. It is indeed time to change the subservient role of the translator with respect to the original author and the editor(s), and publishers of the book. Translators must cease to be ghost-like figures whose names are often hidden away on the back of the title page. In most cases, the reader never knows who the translator is, and no information about the translator's qualifications or credentials is provided.

For Robinson, a translation is not “good” or “bad”. It is declared good or bad by the author, by the editors and publishers and, of course, by the readers. The success or failure of a text is not inherent and not permanent. That “good” translation prepared fifty years ago may not be considered so good at this writing, or may even be condemned as being highly inadequate by the contemporary interpretive community. It is important not to misunderstand Robinson’s view of translation. He is not claiming that the translator can do anything he or she likes. Translations have to satisfy people. We are controlled by our own discourse and by the discourse of others. The “doing your own thing” or “anything goes” on the part of the translator may be dangerous, for nothing is gained if translations are not purchased and read.

Robinson’s book is indeed both provocative and controversial for, what does one do if the original text is muddled, if there are errors of fact in the text, or worse still, if the text to be translated is a neo-Nazi one? Poorly-written texts can be revised and factual errors can be corrected, provided the translator is remunerated additionally for these services. Taking advantage of Robinson’s metaphor, in the case of racist and other texts designed to inflame, the translator might very well “turn away” from the task or attempt to “turn” the text in another direction using “subversion”, “reversion” and particularity, “conversation”, that is, cross-cultural conversation, which, for Robinson, is “... the *felt* connections between people who speak different languages, translation can restore us to ourselves—to our full humanity” (author’s emphasis, p. 258).