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Critical Translation Studies

Douglas Robinson

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Critical Translation Studies

This book offers an introduction for Translation Studies (TS) scholars to Critical Translation Studies (CTS), a cultural-studies approach to the study of translation spearheaded by Sakai Naoki and Lydia H. Liu, with an implicit focus on translation as a social practice shaped by power relations in society. The central claim in CTS is that translators help condition what TS scholars take to be the primal scene of translation: two languages, two language communities, with the translator as mediator. According to Sakai, intralingual translation is primal: we are all foreigners to each other, making every address to another "heterolingual," thus a form of translation; and it is the order that these acts of translation bring to communication that begins to generate the "two separate languages" scenario. CTS is dedicated to the historicization of the social relations that create that scenario.

In three sets of "Critical Theses on Translation," the book outlines and explains (and partly critiques) the CTS approach; in five interspersed chapters, the book delves more deeply into CTS, with an eye to making it do work that will be useful to TS scholars.

Douglas Robinson is Chair Professor of English at Hong Kong Baptist University. A scholar of language, literature, translation, and rhetoric, and a translator from Finnish to English since 1975, he is author most recently of *Schleiermacher's Icoses* (Zeta Books, 2013), *The Dao of Translation* (Routledge, 2015), *The Deep Ecology of Rhetoric in Mencius and Aristotle* (SUNY Press, 2015), *Semiotranslating Peirce* (Tartu Semiotics Library, 2016), and *Exorcising Translation* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and editor of *The Pushing Hands of Translation and its Theory* (Routledge, 2016).

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For Sveta, and converging paths

Preface

This is a book about a school of thought about translation that doesn't exist.

The scholars exist, of course; they have even published together. But to my knowledge they don't have a term for their approach to the study of translation, and may not even think of it as a unified approach. They do not call their approach Critical Translation Studies: that term, abbreviated in this book as CTS, is my own coinage. I base it on the term Critical Translation Theory, which is how Lydia H. Liu, one of the prime movers in the group, names one of her research areas on her Columbia web page – on the model, presumably, of Critical Discourse Analysis or Critical Legal Studies, with an implicit focus on translation as a social practice shaped by power relations in society. To my (perhaps biased) mind "translation theory" is always "critical theory," always strongly oriented to post-Nietzschean studies of power; to me, therefore, "Critical Translation Theory" sounds a bit redundant. Approaches that call themselves "studies" or "analysis," by contrast, may be purely formalistic, making it a decisive Nietzschean move to append the adjective "Critical" before them.

That, at any rate, is the thinking behind my title, for the book and the approach it delineates.

The actual pioneers of the approach that I seek to present under the rubric of Critical Translation Studies or CTS consist of two groups of scholars loosely confederated around the leadership of Lydia Liu and Sakai Naoki (who publishes in English under the Western-resequenced name Naoki Sakai), in the monographs Liu (1995) and Sakai (1997), then the essay collections Liu (1999d) and Sakai and Solomon (2006), then converging in the special issue of *translation* coedited by Sakai and Sandro Mezzadra in 2014 (containing articles by Liu and Solomon). What struck me about this work as I began reading it was how little TS scholars know about it – to the point of almost total ignorance. Chinese TS scholars tend to know Lydia Liu, because she's Chinese; but they don't seem to know quite what to do with her work. Sakai Naoki has been moving recently into the peripheries of TS scholars' awareness, and was asked by Siri Nergaard to coedit the special issue of *translation*; but again, TS scholars who do know his work seem to be mostly at a loss with it. There doesn't seem to be any obvious TS work that can be done with it. The work he does with it, beginning in 1997 with his study of the eighteenth-century creation of the Japanese national

language, doesn't seem to be TS work; the contribution of Jon Solomon in Sakai and Solomon 2006 seems to push his thinking about translation into the world of political economics, and Solomon's contribution to Sakai and Mezzadra (2014) is even more overwhelmingly a high-level retheorization of political economics, with only passing references to translation.

For twenty years, then, these scholars have been theorizing translation, and translation scholars have not known (much) about them; nor, for the most part, have the CTS scholars been reading us. Sakai (1997) mentions Benjamin (1923/1972), Jakobson (1959), and Quine (1960: 27–79) – all major TS texts, of course, especially the first two, but not exactly indicative of an intimate familiarity with the field over the last half century. In *Translingual Practices* Liu (1995) mentions a double handful of TS scholars, including me, but very much in passing, as if by way of due diligence;[1] by *Tokens of Exchange* (Liu 1999d) she has pretty much written us off, hinting in rather terse break-up lines ("we can no longer talk about translation as if it were a purely linguistic or literary matter" [1999a: 1]) that TS has nothing to offer the approach she is developing – without giving any indication that she has actually read anything in the field, except Jakobson (1959). The same refrain appears in Liu (2004: 110), and again in Liu (2014: 149), her contribution to the Sakai and Mezzadra special issue of *translation*:

> Secondly, there is a formidable obstacle to overcome if we decide to undertake this line of investigation in translation studies. The obstacle, which often stands in the way of our understanding of the political, is the familiar mental image of translation as a process of verbal transfer or communication, linguistic reciprocity or equivalences, or an issue of commensurability or incommensurability. It is almost as if the promise of meaning or its withdrawal among languages were the only possible thing – blessing or catastrophe – that could happen to the act of translation. I have critiqued these logocentric assumptions in translation studies elsewhere (Liu 1995, 1–42; Liu 1999, 13–41) and will not reiterate my position here.

The refrain rings a little hollow, however – as if she had gotten locked into the attitude she adopted in the mid-nineties, and simply not bothered to read anything in TS for the two decades since. Is TS really still so "logocentric"?[2] Is "the promise of meaning or its withdrawal among languages" still for TS scholars "the only possible thing – blessing or catastrophe – that could happen to the act of translation"? Was it, for that matter, in 1999, or even in 1995? Was the *skopos* or functionalist or action-oriented school, beginning in the mid-eighties, really obsessed with the "process of verbal transfer or communication, linguistic reciprocity or equivalences, or an issue of commensurability or incommensurability"? As translator-based research into Think-Aloud Protocols has evolved into eye-tracking and other exciting new developments in cognitive science, it has moved further and further away from the narrow "logocentric" realm that Liu attributes to all TS; but there is apparently nothing there that might interest Liu in 2014. Postcolonial translation studies, beginning in the late eighties, is the subdiscipline

of TS that most strongly anticipates what I'm calling CTS here, and Liu (1995) mentions the work of Asad, Rafael, Cheyfitz, and Niranjana in passing; but they are strikingly absent from her work since that early book. Sociological studies of translation from Pym (1992) to Angelelli (2004a, 2004b) are obviously quite distant from the "logocentrism" Liu dismisses, as are the activist or "intervenient" political approaches to translation championed by Baker (2006, 2009) and the authors of Munday (2007). But Liu is content to ignore all this, without reading it – apparently without even being aware of it – and to pursue her own research into translation.

To be fair, though, the logocentric assumptions that she dismissively associates with TS as a whole are not only still very much present in the field, but remain in some sense definitive for the field. The fact that some of us associate those assumptions with the linguistic approaches that dominated TS before the Cultural Turn began to take hold from the late seventies to the early nineties – and shudder to see the field caricatured along those lines – does not mean that TS is not still in (large?) part about that "process of verbal transfer or communication, linguistic reciprocity or equivalences."

And to be even fairer, where are the intelligent, complex, nuanced assessments of CTS by TS scholars? Where is the evidence that TS scholars are even reading Liu and Sakai and the others?

This book is my attempt to build bridges between the two approaches – with a primary focus on introducing CTS to the TS scholarly community, but with a secondary orientation toward a tentative assimilation of CTS insights to TS concerns and problems. For CTS to become relevant to TS, TS scholars first need to know about it – and then need to know how to proceed with it, how to make it do the kind of work that they do.

To that end I have mainly organized my ruminations in the book into two genres of academic writing: Critical Theses on Translation, in three installments (circa 1997, 2006, and 2014), designed to introduce the dominant ideas of CTS as it develops over nearly two decades; and more traditional chapters that bring a more exploratory attitude to bear on the CTS theses. Specifically, where in the Critical Theses I mainly record (and in passing lightly interrogate) CTS theorizations, in the chapters I seek to make those theorizations do work that TS scholars will regard as useful – and sometimes that latter task means bending the CTS concepts in new ways, new directions.

For example, in Sakai's work the "schema of cofiguration" and the "regime of translation" are phenomena that are mostly valorized negatively, by association with the ideological formation that Sakai dubs the "regime of homolingual address," which imposes an idealized model of perfect mutual comprehension within a single national language and perfect mutual incomprehension across national language barriers. It is this latter regime that for Sakai cofiguratively *creates* national languages as unified entities, and in so doing creates the need for translation, and specifically for regimes of translation, which he defines as "an ideology that makes translators imagine their relationship to what they do in translation as the symmetrical exchange between two languages" (1997: 51).

What is useful about this notion for TS is that it historicizes the rise of the paradox whereby the translator is desperately *needed* for communication across languages but must also be *invisibilized*, in order to maintain the illusion that all address is homolingual, and therefore unmediated. Beginning with the primacy of something like Roman Jakobson's (1959) notion of intralingual translation, heavily grounded in the Heideggerean rethinkings of Jean-Luc Nancy, Sakai insists that all address is actually heterolingual – fraught with ruptures, discontinuities, failures – and that therefore we are all to each other not only foreigners but translators. His desideratum would appear to be the restoration of all human communication to the *attitude* of heterolingual address – which is to say, reminding us that homolingual address is sheer ideological illusion.

Useful as that theoretical model undeniably is to TS scholars, however, it also seems to imply that TS as the study of regimes of translation is a study of ideological illusions. If the regime of translation is "an ideology that makes translators *imagine* their relationship to what they do in translation as the symmetrical exchange between two languages," then perhaps the utopian solution to the current situation is to smash that ideology and convince translators to *stop* imagining those illusory things. And if that utopian solution is the task of CTS, perhaps TS is part of the problem. Perhaps these thousands of TS scholars around the world who busy themselves studying translation as "the symmetrical exchange between two languages," or as "a process of verbal transfer or communication, linguistic reciprocity or equivalences, or an issue of commensurability or incommensurability," are just making things worse – just helping global capitalism maintain its illusory stranglehold on our social practices and affective loyalties. Perhaps that is why there's no need for CTS scholars to keep up with the research in TS.

I do not believe, in fact, that this is Sakai's view of translation. The "real" vs. "illusory" binary that I've sketched in is a panicky caricature that does not accurately characterize Sakai's theoretical model. But his theorization is vulnerable to that caricature, I suggest, because he never quite works out the complex intertwining of heterolinguality and homolinguality – making it *seem* like an airtight binary stretched across the ontological horns of reality and illusion and the moral horns of good and evil.

One of my goals here is to explore that middle ground in some detail. To some extent this also involves a transvaluation of Sakai's values, so that the schemas of cofiguration and regimes of translation are not negatives – not to be regarded with ideological suspicion. Certainly they are ideological formations, shaped by the last few centuries of the nation state, the capitalist stabilization of markets, and the colonialist imposition of hierarchical identities on peoples, cultures, nations, regions, and civilizations. Certainly there are political evils that have arisen out of those formations. But I'm not activist enough to tilt against those evils. I'm mostly interested in how things work.

In the chapters, then – and even, in passing, in the Critical Theses, beginning in CT 1.10 and 1.12—I offer a series of what I take to be friendly amendments to the reigning CTS binaries. The main form these friendly amendments take is the icotic/ecotic theory that I have been developing over the last few years, which

seeks to explore the "felt hypostatization" of opinions and concepts through group somatic plausibilization processes. I derive the term "icosis" from Aristotle's *eikos* "plausible," *ta eikota* "the plausibilities," and his observation that, given a choice between a plausible story that is untrue and a true story that is implausible, we will almost always choose the former, because plausibility is an ideological construct that we *feel as real.* Icosis, therefore, is the becoming-real of group normative opinion. I derive "ecosis" in a parallel fashion from *oikos*, which can mean "household" or "community"; *oikos* and *eikos* were pronounced almost identically in Attic Greek, to the point that Greek thinkers often punned on the two. Ecosis for me is the becoming-good of the community, or the becoming-communal of abstract concepts of the good. In both icosis and ecosis group norms come to seem like "objective" realities – the way things are, the true nature of humans and their world.

In my revision of CTS, in other words, *both* the attitude of the heterolingual address and the regime of homolingual address are social ecologies – which is to say, both are sociosomatically constructed "realities" that cannot and should not be derogated as illusions. While agreeing with Sakai that the attitude of the heterolingual address is in almost every way more attractive than the regime of homolingual address, and even that it seems to fit my intuitions about the way human communication *really works* far better than the regime of homolingual address, I submit that that attractiveness and that intuitive sense of rightness do not make the attitude of the heterolingual address "truer" or "more real" than the regime of homolingual address. To the extent that my intuitions, and presumably Sakai's intuitions, support the "reality" of the primacy of the heterolingual address, the socioecological conditioning of our intuitions could (and arguably should) be historicized as well – beginning, for example, with the German Romantic valorization of *das Gefühl des fremden* "the feel of the foreign," which we find implicitly inspiring Lydia Liu in Chapter 1.

Since I bring to these matters a less utopian vision of salvation than the Sakai group – especially beginning in 2006, with Sakai's close collaboration with Jon Solomon – and certainly do not envision a Romantic/Occidentalist post-capitalist paradise as the ultimate goal of our critiques – I am far more interested in the *tensions* between the icoses of heterolinguality and homolinguality, within specific social and professional practices, and in the relational attitudes and motivations and other affects that structure those practices, than I am in consigning heterolinguality and homolinguality to the opposite banks of a deep ideological ditch. As I say, these are not negatives for me – or, to the extent that some specific homolingualization becomes an irritant, the negative attitude in which I participate with like-minded readers becomes a matter for scrutiny. What occasions that negativity? What conditions it?

The structure of this book

As I say, the book is divided between – and also alternates between – Critical Theses on Translation and more traditional chapters, organized into two Parts: Critical Theses 1 (Sakai circa 1997), then two chapters, then Critical Theses 2

(Sakai and Solomon circa 2006), then three more chapters, then Critical Theses 3 (Solomon circa 2014).

The Critical Theses tend to be focused mainly on the work and influence of Sakai Naoki, but with detours: CT 1 tracks his argument in Sakai (1997), but with side glances at Liu (1995) and the articles in Liu (1999d); CT 2 tracks his argument in Sakai and Solomon (2006a), which partly recuperates CT 1, but also pushes strikingly past it, due no doubt in part to the influence of Jon Solomon; and CT 3 tracks the argument of Solomon (2014) alone, his contribution to the special issue of *translation* guest-edited by Sakai and Mezzadra (2014). There is, in other words, a kind of fade movement from Sakai to Sakai/Solomon to Solomon – but with a solid grounding throughout in Sakai's theories of heterolingual and homolingual address, schemas of cofiguration, and regimes of translation. At the end of CT 3 I perform another fade, by way of bringing the book to a close: in CT 3.4 Solomon invokes the work of Franco "Bifo" Berardi, friend and collaborator of Félix Guattari, and after tracking Solomon's argument in CT 3.1–11, I shift in the Conclusion to a closer look at the work of Berardi (and Guattari).

In a rather expansive sense the chapters are devoted to a series of readings of Liu's (1999b) opening chapter in *Tokens of Exchange*, with side glances at her Introduction (Liu 1999a) and later chapter (Liu 1999c). Chapter 1, "Liu Reading Marx," looks closely at Liu's "The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign," where she develops Marx's ruminations about the creation of an *allgemeine Äquivalent*, which is literally a "general equivalent" or "common equivalent" but was translated in the nineteenth century by Moore and Aveling as "universal equivalent." Liu's goal is to historicize the pragmatic use of translation to generate competing universals of equivalence, and to adjudicate among them; but as I note in the second section of Chapter 1, she neglects to foreground the history of translation that led to her ability to comment on Marx in English, and the theoretical problems that history creates for her.

In the third section I interrogate the Romantic conditioning of her insistence that the creation of universal equivalents is a "social act," and ask who, then, the "social actor" is. One of Liu's historicizations tracks the battle the British fought in the mid-nineteenth century over the word 夷 *yi*, which originally meant the non-Han tribes, and therefore in some contexts "barbarians"; insisting on translating the word in that latter aggressive sense, once the Opium War was won the British built into the peace treaty a ban on the use of the word in official documents. And Liu (1999b: 35) concludes: "The legal ban was so effective that it has made the word literally disappear from the languages of today's Chinese-speaking world." Banning the word from official documents was a political act, obviously; but what was the "social act," and who or what was the "social actor," that "made the word literally disappear from the languages of today's Chinese-speaking world"? The ban itself? Or what? I follow that line of questioning up in section 1.4 by looking closely at Liu's use of depersonalizing nominalizations for that "social actor," like "meaning," "the sign," and "language." She doesn't stop to consider how these actors act, what kind of agency they possess and how they wield it; this becomes my first occasion to broach an icotic explanatory model,

to suggest that Liu is largely right to invoke these apparently "abstract" agents as the forces that bring about the circulation of meaning and significance – but that we need to think more carefully about how that happens.

Chapter 3, "Walter Benjamin's Intentions," picks up the thread of Liu's admiring critiques of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," and offers a tentative reading of Benjamin's "mystical" argument in the piece along icotic lines: what Benjamin seems to attribute to supernatural/spiritual forces might be retheorized as aggregated products of social ecologies. It doesn't quite work: Benjamin, mostly so careful to naturalize his kabbalistic mysticism, to make the awakening by translators of the clash of the Intentions in the different languages and the consequent move toward Pure Language sound reasonable, realistic, also refuses to budge on the instantaneity of the possible future messianic transformation. But then *my* intentions are not in the end to foist my demystifying interpretation on Benjamin. Rather, I seek to build a bridge, even a partial bridge, a failed bridge, between Benjamin's mysticism and Marx's political economism, to help Liu flesh out her admiration for Benjamin along lines that will advance CTS theorization.

Chapter 4, "What One Reads When One Reads Heidegger," picks up on a passing phrase in Liu (1999c: 137), namely that "one does not translate between equivalences; rather, one creates tropes of equivalence in the middle zone of translation between the host and guest languages." My question there is, who is this "one" who "creates tropes of equivalence"? Liu borrows the "tropes of equivalence" from Robinson (1991), and advances my argument in surprising and useful ways: I didn't stop to ask where those tropes came from, back then, when I was writing the book. I didn't ask who created them. They were my tropes, obviously, borrowed partly from Kenneth Burke's four master tropes and Harold Bloom's six-stage map of misreading from 1975, deployed as analytics to help me sort out the different models of translational equivalence translators and their critics and theorists seemed to be working with – but *where did those models come from*? As it turns out, Liu doesn't quite get around to asking who creates/created those models/tropes either – but her use of the impersonal third-person pronoun "one" suggests to me that Heidegger's *das Man* did. *Das Man*, of course, was Heidegger's nominalization of the impersonal "one" pronoun; in *Sein und Zeit/Being and Time* he tended to theorize *das Man* negatively, as a crowd mentality that resists and denies and suppresses the authenticity of the fully realized "I." Following a chain of retheorizations from Benveniste on the depersonalizing effects of the third person, through Hugh Kenner on Joyce's use of free indirect discourse, to Eve Sedgwick's notion of periperformativity, I suggest that "one" is the quintessential periperformative pronoun: it is a singular "they" that includes the "I," and seeks proactively to include the "you" as well, and so channels the group-normative pressures of the crowd of witnesses into the performative encounter between the "I" and the "you." The answer to the question of who this "one" is that "creates tropes of equivalence," then, is that that "one" is icosis. "One" or *das Man* is the aggregate face of an affective-becoming-conative social ecology.

In Chapter 5, "The Socioecological Thought of Laozi and Mengzi," I return to Liu's insistence that the legal ban on 夷 *yi* "made the word literally disappear from the languages of today's Chinese-speaking world," and ask how 老子 Laozi and 孟子 Mengzi would theorize the agency behind that "making," or that "d(a)oing." The answer takes us through the socioecological thinking of ancient Chinese philosophers, in close readings of *Laozi* 51 on the entelechy of propensity (勢 *shi*) and *Laozi* 49 on 聖人恆無心，以百姓心為心 *shengren heng wuxin, yi baixing xin wei xin* – the sage lacking an individualized heart, and so taking the people's heart as heart – and finally of Mengzi on 仁 *ren* as something like that 心為心 *xin wei xin* "heart as heart," a phenomenology of fellow-feeling that shapes not only identity but social reality. Laozi and Mengzi, in other words, extend the socioecological – icotic/ecotic – thread running all through the book, exploring, in Daoist terms, the collective human vitalism of 道 *dao*: knowing without controlling knowledge (無知 *wuzhi*), desiring without controlling what is desired (無欲 *wuyu*), feeling without trapping feeling in individual skin-bags (無心*wuxin* = 心為心 *xin wei xin*).

I have said that I divide my argument in this book into two genres, the Critical Theses and the traditional chapters; but in fact in Chapter 2 I also introduce a third genre, one that I have plied numerous times in the past (Robinson 1992: 29–32, 51–3, 161–4; 2001: 170–9; 2008: 187–90): the double-bind of translation. This particular double-bind, called "The Double-Bind of Translation Quality Assessment (TQA)," sets Juliane House's TQA up as a candidate for what Liu calls a universal equivalent, and seeks to voice the conflicted collective "social actor" that might be imagined to be creating and consolidating that equivalent.