
Gregory Rabassa. *If This Be Treason. Translation and Its Dyscontents: A Memoir*. NY: New Directions, 2005. 189p.

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Gregory Rabassa's name is one we have long seen under titles of masterful English translations of Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Amado, and many others. This reviewer is but one of many introduced to Spanish-language literature via his translations. His recently published memoir will be of interest to scholars both of translation studies and literature. In addition to being an edifying window into the often anonymous world of an accomplished literary translator, this anecdote-filled memoir illuminates the sometimes contentious interplay between the fields of literary studies and translation. The book is, however, neither a toolkit for aspiring translators nor a broad philosophical treatise. Indeed, Rabassa has elsewhere provided many examples of excellent translation theory and practice over his multi-decade career as "the best Latin American writer in the English language," in the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

If This Be Treason is divided into three parts of significantly unequal length, imagined as an *amicus curiae* brief in the trial of a translator being a traitor to language (*Traduttore, traditore*). While his ultimate answer is in the affirmative, he eruditely demonstrates why pleading guilty to such charges cannot, in the end, be worthy of punishment. The first part of Rabassa's self-effacing memoir sketches his early years, demonstrating "certain traits that fit in nicely with the needs of translation" (10). Readers are taken through his childhood, undergraduate and graduate years, his service in the military and his emergence as a translator of renown with his rendering of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*) into English in 1963. A recurring theme is how fortunately his circumstances and abilities aligned, whether serving in a cryptology unit during the war, editing a short-lived literary magazine requiring translation, several of whose contributors later won Nobel Prizes, touring Brazil with summer travel money to make long-lasting contacts, and more. There is undoubtedly more than serendipity at work given this polymath's superlatively nuanced skills in both translation and narration, yet his tale is as organically mystical as his well-known interpretations of magic realism.

The second and largest section of Rabassa's work contains his self-styled "rap sheet" (50): a list organized by author and works that he has translated, together with impressions and anecdotes relating to the texts. For those such as this reviewer whose translation experience has been not from the Spanish or Portuguese, but German, the book is made quite relevant in that it acquaints one with the breadth and reputation of Rabassa's work. Those familiar with these authors only in English

will appreciate the palpable joy he conveys in the process of having translated them, carrying their expressions and riddles into the target language. Those with detailed knowledge of both source and target texts will find insight into Rabassa's personal path as a translator as well as encouragement to craft potential alternatives to the authoritative, final version.

Like Rabassa, a tenured professor as well as translator, many of us straddling the fields of translator and traditional scholar have experienced that translation cannot always be taught in the way academic convention might require. He asks: "You can explain how translation is done, but how can you tell a student what to say without saying it yourself?" Glib as it may at first appear, there is truth in this statement and its corollary: "You can tell him what book to read but you can't read it for him." For him, "a good translation is essentially a good reading" (49): a creation personal to each translator that depends significantly on the "reading skills" of each individual artist.

To describe one's translation process, one must often employ metaphors to describe that which is "unteachable" (41). An accomplished translator friend of the reviewer imagines her work as forcing a source text through an imaginary linguistic-cultural sieve, kneading together what remains, pushing it through again and again until after many attempts she is satisfied with the remnant of text. Likewise, Rabassa's many descriptions of the craft and product of translating include, at various places, "simply reading [the foreign work] in English" (42), "letting the words lead me" (53), "gestated, not assembled out of dead parts" (28), and "shift[ing] between two selves...induced schizophrenia" (20). Rabassa's vivid and personal metaphors underscore once again the notion that translations and the process by which they are produced remain more easily rendered oneself or enjoyed as a third party rather than being codified and systematized for wider use. He advances a point that is perhaps the only "teachable" maxim: the intimate interior translation process cannot be wholly reproduced by others except to show the choices which a translator may make. Here, his discussion of the myriad ways in which the seemingly innocuous Garcia Marquez' title *Cien años de soledad* or Virgil's *Arma virumque cano* can be legitimately translated is illustrative (95).

Some scorn is palpable where his memoir tackles the contracting practices of literary agents, some reviewers of literary translations and the field of translation studies itself. As to the latter, he believes that aspects of translation studies are often too compromised by schools of philosophy to be fully useful to professional translators. Rabassa understands one often needs a professorship to ensure a stable income while pursuing one's passion. Yet this can lead to "translation, along with the rest of literature, [falling] into the hands of the big kids, who like to take things

apart to see how they work.” Deconstruction of a completed translation, an organic inseparable whole, can never re-construct the original vision of the translator, “which has its seat in the [individual] imagination” (42). Though his gently-stated opinion against fashionable theories in translation studies might be construed as treading on the specialties of his fellow academics, Rabassa’s prodigious scholarship in both literary studies and translation imbue his current reflections with the authenticity of considerable experience. In any case, his greatest vitriol, characteristically displayed with more humor than venom, is reserved for others, namely academic critics from the field of the source text language (Alastair Reed’s “translation police,” Sara Blackburn’s “Professor Horrendo”). “Tin-ear” alternatives and tepid adjectives such as “flowing” or “awkward” are the best that they can offer, which for Rabassa is clearly not enough (42-43).

The final section is but two pages long and acquits the translator of any treasonous crime with the Scots verdict of “not proven” (189). Rabassa concludes it is both impossible for a third party to recreate a translator’s crime and nearly so to find a jury pool not tainted by academic pedantry. Thus, it is foolhardy to prosecute anyone involved in the process. His legal brief is crafted with as much infectious good will as attention to detail. It provides compelling evidence that a translator can remain free from prosecution, except perhaps from a healthy perfectionism whispering “one may have done something treasonable in our own work” (189). Once released from this imaginary courtroom, we admire the professionalism of Rabassa in the role of prosecutor, defendant and jury and prepare to enjoy more treason with his next publication. ✱