

A Life in Language

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Gregory Rabassa. 2005. *If This Be Treason: Translations and Its Dyscontents, A Memoir*. New York: New Directions. 189 pp.

THE distinguishing principle of the memoir as a subgenre of autobiography is selectivity. Whereas writers who use the term “autobiography” are committed to giving a full account of their life history, memoirists highlight only self-selected features of their experience. Their choices may reflect such variables as sensibility (e.g. William Trevor’s *Excursions in the Real World*), the pressures of history (e.g., Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*), or some traumatic personal circumstance such as the new responsibilities conferred by the death of a parent in David Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. But even compared with these examples, chosen because their authors’ lives are primarily engaged with the written word, Gregory Rabassa’s *If This Be Treason* stands apart by virtue of its apparent thinness, the extent to which larger events are filtered out, leaving almost nothing but a focus on writers, writing, and, above all, words.

The subtitle, “Translation and Its Dyscontents,” makes that focus explicit. Rabassa is the preeminent contemporary translator of Latin American fiction in both Spanish and Portuguese. His achievement is neatly encapsulated in Gabriel García Márquez’s description of him, cited on the dust jacket, as “the best Latin American writer in

the English language.” As someone embarked on an extensive translation project, I turned to this book expecting to read about the issues and challenges such work entails. Rabassa addresses these issues, but except for his invocation and dismissal of a composite bogeyman, the pedantic Professor Horrendo, his treatment of them involves almost no actual skirmishes to lend drama to his reminiscences. Rather, only gradually did I come to realize that words in themselves are the stuff of this writer’s life, the principal things he must wrestle with. As he explains, he is more purely a writer than the authors he translates, since they are engaged with such matters as plot, theme, character, and so forth, whereas he is entirely concerned with their words. Where they are free to follow the lead of their own imagination, he is constrained by the text he tries to render faithfully into a different language, a task he clearly enjoys even as he declares it “impossible” (8).

That impossibility certainly doesn’t faze him. Though he cites the Italian punning phrase “traduttore, traditore” (translator = traitor), he argues convincingly that the betrayal starts at an even earlier stage of writing and is indeed inevitable, since words (despite Swift’s satirical conceit of having the members of the Academy of Lagado deal only in things) are never the equivalent of the things they stand for. For the translator there are additional stumbling blocks, created by the differences between the original language and the “target language” (a term he has fun with) in connotation, historical development, cultural associations, and sound values. It follows that translation must be an art rather than a craft that can be taught and practiced by the application of pedantic rules. The artist must draw upon his word hoard, and just as in Lagado, the richer the hoard, the greater the opportunity for effective expression. But there are also difficult choices to be made. How contemporary should one’s language be, for example? Rabassa expresses his preference for the “evergreen” word rather than some merely current locution, especially when translating the “classics” (16). Adapting this preference as a guideline, I would have to strike “You’ll have to start all over, Buster” from my English version of *La Fontaine*. The one betrayal he counsels against is discarding inspired hunches in favor of pedantry, and I am tempted to call Buster back. All the same, he realizes that it is not the translator’s business to improve upon the original (a temptation I understand too well). As for method, he explains that he simply translates as he reads a book the first time around, in effect “reading the Spanish into English as he goes along” (8).

In writing his own text, Rabassa is of course free of the constraints that limit him in his role as translator. And the use he makes of that freedom constitutes the oddest feature of this memoir: its structure. The book consists of three extremely unequal parts: the first, roughly one-quarter of the whole in length, sketches his theory of translation intermixed with an account of the circumstances and predilections that led him to his chosen career; the second constitutes the bulk of the book and consists of very brief chapters, each devoted to one of the authors he has translated, and arranged chronologically in the order in which he first tackled that author's work; the last part, just a shade over a page long, ties these two parts together. One must pay closer attention than I did the first time around to realize that the whole constitutes an apologia, a defense of his vocation and, more particularly, of the way he has practiced it. In the very first chapter, he cites Vladimir Nabokov's claim that translation is necessarily a criminal act. He does not dispute that claim, but goes on playfully to suggest that the issue at hand is to decide whether he has committed a felony or a misdemeanor.

For me, Part I, "The Onset of Perfidy," was the most charming and satisfying section. Rabassa is a very witty writer, and it is clear that his delight in word play makes him eminently suited to find or create lively English approximations for words in his source texts. Just a few examples may convey the flavor of his prose. He writes, "I try to avoid the jargon of 'target language'; I am an old infantryman, and we dogfaces were taught to shoot at a target and, ideally, kill it" (4). His response to those who want to "dumb down" texts in order to reach the largest possible readership is "I have always maintained that 'vox populi, vox Dei' is an open invitation to atheism" (15). Occasionally there is a groaner: "I was born in Yonkers, but they didn't fit" (30), which seems awful until we hear this as Rabassa's homage to Groucho Marx. Indeed, his affectionate allusions to the movies of the 1930s through the 1950s constitute a major element of the book's charm for me and, I imagine, anyone who grew up in those decades. On the other hand, if I am in on some of his allusions, I draw a blank (there's that target metaphor creeping in) on others. I can vaguely surmise that his confession that the choice of the name Catso for a cat he once owned was infelicitous because of its vulgar connotations in Italian, but I don't really get the joke.

Part I also provides as much relevant biographical background as we ever get in the book. We learn of Rabassa's "piebald" ancestry—Catalan, Cuban, English, and Hell's Kitchen American—and of his

family's consequent sensitivity to the sounds of words, a sensitivity heightened by their relocation from Yonkers to the rustic backwaters of New Hampshire and illustrated, slightly tediously, by a list of family nicknames. He records with delight his first memory, the memory of making up his very own word, *magotso*—a charm to be uttered when passing a cemetery (11). With much skipping around and many digressions, he explains how he was led to his chosen profession by “serendipity”: the interruption of his college career by service during World War II as an Army cryptographer; his exposure to other languages and cultures when his regiment served in North Africa and Italy; his postwar gravitation to graduate studies in Romance Languages at Columbia after realizing that law and journalism were not for him; his work as a translator for a short-lived literary review; and thence the invitation to translate Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, his first book-length translation and the first winner of the National Book Award for Translation. Any reader will recognize that inclination and talent guided him as much as “serendipity.” But that realization in no way prevents us from registering the passionate sincerity of his avowal that his roundabout entry into the field kept him from becoming “a knee-jerk, pedantic, post-modern craftsman” (39).

Such avowals illustrate another aspect of Rabassa's personality. For all his playfulness, he takes some things very seriously. He protests against the greed of publishers who try to get away with paying translators as little as possible and who are even reluctant to acknowledge that a work is a translation lest it hurt the bottom line. He rails against “a government that listens to the call of greed and greed” (45) in rejecting as an unlawful restraint of trade any effort to establish basic pay scales for translators. He celebrates the rise of professional associations dedicated to furthering the interests of his profession even as he deplors their linkage to academia, especially since it has fallen under the sway of the deconstructionists. To him, these theorists are “the big kids, who like to take things apart to see how they work,” adding “I remember the big kids as the spoilers, always ruining what the imaginative little kids were up to” (42). Acknowledging that today's academics may see him as something of a dinosaur, he embraces that label in proud opposition to the current pack of “hyenas.”

By contrast with the delightful discursiveness of Part I, the forward-march organizing principle of Part II, “The Bill of Particulars,” seems dreary and unduly repetitive. And this is unfortunate since this section constitutes three-quarters of the whole. In some thirty-odd,

roughly chronologically arranged chapters each devoted to an individual author, Rabassa displays and discusses his achievements in translating their work with a modest pride befitting a Boy Scout showing off his merit badges. If one's audience consists of one's fellow Scouts (or fellow specialists in Latin American literature), the shared experiences provide a comfortable backdrop for the kind of reminiscences that leave an outsider quite indifferent. "I met Juan a couple of times"; "I kept missing Jorge in Brazil, but finally did meet him in New York at a book party [. . .]." Cronies enjoy this sort of thing. Others yawn. And how many times does one need to be told that the translation of book titles is tricky or that Spanish and Portuguese sound quite different?

Still, there are the rare anecdotes that can tickle even the non-initiated, for instance his account of his quarrel with the fastidious editors of *The New Yorker*. They wanted to print an extract from his translation of Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, but in what Rabassa labels "a beautiful tale of editorial timidity and orthodoxy," they insisted on breaking up a text that had been deliberately written without paragraphs or sentence breaks. García Márquez wanted to create a sense of breathless "inexorable momentum"; the editors wanted to show that they had mastered the conventions of written English. Rabassa and his publisher yielded only because the book-length version, printed as its author intended, would soon be out, and readers exposed to the extract might be drawn to the whole. But he held firm on another disputed matter, the translation of "mierda," and eventually prevailed. His glee—and self-effacement—are both evident in his punch line: "Since then I have liked to trumpet the news that in a triumph even greater than his winning the Nobel Prize, García Márquez broke the shit barrier at *The New Yorker*."

Another entertaining anecdote reflects his left-leaning political sympathies. With his reputation well established by the late 1970s, *The Wall Street Journal* invited him to be interviewed. At the time, he was working on translating a novel by the Ecuadorian writer Demetrio Aguilera-Malta, a committed socialist whose writings epitomize his concern for human dignity and social justice. Aguilera-Malta had also become a personal friend. Rabassa accepted the invitation and used the interview to praise his friend's novel *Seven Serpents and Seven Moons*, a work that he admired so much that he had undertaken to translate it as a labor of love without having any commitment from a publisher. As it turned out, the interview led to an offer by the University of Texas Press to be the novel's publisher.

Rabassa chuckles at the irony of the fact that “One of the founders of the Socialist Party in Ecuador had gained his first recognition and publication in the United States under the indirect assistance of that firmly capitalist organ *The Wall Street Journal*” (114).

After the long roll call of authors who make up his “Bill of Particulars,” Rabassa’s coda, “By Way of a Verdict,” is strikingly succinct. It is also characteristically witty. Its single chapter, “How Say You?” reminds us of the etymology of *verdict*: “what is truly said.” But who is to say? In a burst of virtuoso teasing not much longer than this paragraph, Rabassa leads us to “the Scots verdict: not proven” and concludes with a riddling, multilingual verse that I will not transcribe in the hope that my readers will be drawn to look it up and puzzle it out for themselves.

For in writing this review, I underwent a strange conversion. My first impression of the book, shaped largely by the “longueurs” of the slogging central section, gave way to an appreciation of how well these memoirs convey the essential qualities of their author. And I liked and admired those qualities so much that I found myself laboring to emulate his way with words. Though not yet arrived at the state he calls “the isle of Octogenaria” or, alternatively, “Brontosauria,” I can even grudgingly grant that he has earned the right to indulge in an old warrior’s reminiscences. But tales that entertain one’s buddies are not necessarily going to have a larger appeal. I also note that my own citations have been drawn disproportionately from the two sections that serve as bookends to that lumpy middle.

The middle is essential, though. Without its documentation of the author’s accomplishments, we outsiders cannot appreciate the authority with which he speaks. And those accomplishments are also the grounds that allow him to assume his persona of satisfied, genial defiance. The puzzling spelling of “Dyscontent” in his subtitle turns out to be one more pun, saying, in effect, that it’s never possible to get a faultless translation, but what one has done is good enough. In turn, I can only trust that I have done enough and left enough “bon mots” uncited to tempt those with a general interest in language, even if they know nothing about Latin American literature and “magic realism,” to dip into this book.