

REVIEW: Gregory Rabassa's *If This Be Treason: Translation and its Dyscontents*, a Memoir (New York: New Directions, 2005, 189 pp.). *Forum Italicum*, Fall 2005, v. 39, no. 2, pp. 666-668.. An abbreviated version appeared in the *NCTA Translatorial*, v. XXVII, no. 3, September 2005, p.20.

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*If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents*, A Memoir by Gregory Rabassa (New Directions, 2005, 189 pp.) is composed of three main sections: "The Onset of Perfidy", "The Bill of Particulars" and "By Way of a Verdict". Refreshingly there is no Introduction, no Index and no notes to distract the reader with a scholarly display of erudition. This is not a ponderous volume. Instead it is a lively discourse of juicy sentences and even juicier words, each of which makes you stop and ponder its many ramifications before you feel ready to move on to the next one. All interlaced with references to Rabassa's own experiences and recollections of his own entry into translation. Andrew Bast, in an interview that appeared in the *New York Times* (May 2, 2004), called it "a playful reflection on his life's work", and indeed the personal circumstances related make this more than another theoretical treatise on what translation is and isn't.

To those in translation circles, Gregory Rabassa needs no introduction. Now in his eighties, he is a giant who translated giants: the luminaries of the Latin American Boom of magic realism. Having translated over 50 works, by contemporary authors such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Amado, José Lezama Lima, Antônio Lobo Antunes and the non-contemporary Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, his accomplishments are uncontested. As William Deresiewicz put it in his *New York Times* review of May 15, 2005: "If translators are the anonymous heroes of contemporary literature, its anonymous superhero is Gregory Rabassa."

Rabassa's reflection takes the form of an inquiry into the varieties of perfidy and treason implied in the by now shopworn *traduttore/traditore*, with Rabassa himself as both the (self-)accused and judge-and-jury. An apology it is not. Indeed the "hearing" is replete with personal confessions, such as how Rabassa "backed into translation", the fact that he himself has tried to "teach what is unteachable", and his ultimate dissatisfaction with any translation he has done.

Rabassa takes a meandering, leisurely approach as he explores the varied landscape of translation within the framework of a "j'accuse". Along the way he reprises many of the unanswerables, such as the facelessness imposed on the translator (an invisibility that we have been taught to cherish as "ideal"), the treachery of words (can a stone ever be a 'pierre' or a 'pierre' a stone?), the fact that translation is about value judgment and personal choice, and that it is basically a close reading with the translator as just one of the many readers of the work.

If there is one thing Rabassa declares with utter certainty it is that translation is an art, not a craft, "because you can teach a craft but you cannot teach an art".

"The Bill of Particulars" is by his own admission, a kind of "rap sheet" of his experiences with his authors over the years. These are case studies or experiential accounts that will resonate with any translator. Rabassa's testimony that his relationship with these writers was personal in some cases, while "regretfully only through their work" in other cases implies a strong preference for author-translator interaction. I identified with this, as I did with his approach of following the text to see where it leads: an exercise of "controlled schizophrenia" requiring skills at "mutability".

Rabassa's preferred method of working, namely, to translate a book without having first read it through – a seemingly unstructured process not bound by methodology – finds a parallel in the approach he takes in his book, which might be construed as a deliberate, if gentle, dismissal of today's overly theoretical approach to translation. Deresiewicz seems to chalk it up to "a kind of intuitionism or even mysticism", noting that words like "hunch" and "instinct" keep coming up. I see it more as a realistic acceptance of the facts: "My thesis in

the book,” Rabassa says in the interview, “is that translation is impossible... The best you can do is get close to it.” Instinct comes into play, but not mysticism. This man is too practical. And his sense of humor precludes his taking theory – much less mysticism – too seriously: speaking of García Márquez’s book “One Hundred Years of Solitude”, which the writer is said to have preferred to the original and which Rabassa, contrary to his usual practice, had already read before translating, he says: “I knew it was a damn good book, but it wasn’t as much fun knowing all about it”. Rabassa may talk about the English words hiding behind the Spanish – about reading Dante in translation, he says he can enjoy it because “all the while...the Tuscan is lurking behind the English words” – but in the end it is instinct that pinpoints them. “You have to just hit it right,” he says. “I’m never sure whether something is right, but I know damn well when something is wrong.”

At first I found the final section disappointing. Instead of drawing the threads together and coming to a “Conclusion” with a capital “C”, Rabassa’s “Verdict” in the end is that there are no certain answers and “translation is but another version of the truth”. It is the “Not Proven” verdict permissible in Scots law and is consistent with what Rabassa describes as his “ambivalent and ambiguous nature” that makes reaching a verdict seem like approaching the impossible. But what was I expecting? The “Not Proven” verdict is also consistent with the ambivalences and ambiguities of the act of translation itself: indeed translation approaches the possible and never gets there. And so Rabassa’s translator is left in limbo, neither guilty of treason nor freed of his own doubts. And if betrayals are inherent to the act of translation, as Rabassa says they are, so too it seems is paradox.

Can Rabassa’s experiences be said to reflect a universal norm? I suspect so, if my own encounters with the art are evidential. I too prefer to interact with my authors as I work, and like Rabassa I never read a book in its entirety before translating it, preferring to follow the text instead to see where it leads me. I admit to a certain degree of “controlled schizophrenia” and am not adverse to “mutability”. Am I ever guilty of treason? Am I ever truly satisfied with a translation? The verdict remains “Not Proven”.

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