



If This Be Treason

Translation and Its Dyscontents, A Memoir

by Gregory Rabassa

Review by Anne Milano Appel

Gregory Rabassa's long-awaited memoir takes the form of an inquiry into the varieties of perfidy and treason implied in *traduttore/traditore*, with Rabassa himself as the (self-)accused as well as judge-and-jury. 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. Along the way he repeats unanswerables, such as the facelessness imposed on the translator (an invisibility that we have come to cherish as "ideal"), the treachery of words (can a stone ever be a 'pierre' or a 'pierre' a stone?), and the fact that translation is about value judgment and personal choice 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."

To those in translation circles, Gregory Rabassa needs no introduction. Now in his eighties, he is a giant who translated the masters of Latin American magic realism. Having translated over 50 works by such luminaries as Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, his accomplishments are uncontested.

The case studies that Rabassa includes

are, by his own admission, a kind of "rap sheet" of his experiences with his authors, and will resonate with any translator. His testimony that his relationship with these writers was personal in some cases, while "regretfully only through their work" in others, 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."

The verdict (also the title of the book's final section) 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 of Scots law, consistent with the ambivalencies implicit in translation. And so Rabassa's translator is left in limbo, where many of us live and work, neither guilty of treason nor free of doubts. Can Rabassa's experiences be said to

reflect a certain universality? Yes, judging by my own encounters with translation. I, too, relish interaction with my authors, and like Rabassa I never read a book in its entirety before translating it, preferring to follow the text to see where it leads. 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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