
If This be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents: A Memoir. Gregory Rabassa. New York: New Directions, 2005, 189 p.

Gregory Rabassa's memoir *If This be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents* tracks the translator's exceptionally successful career and also provides theoretical insight into Rabassa's approach to literary translation. Most famously known for his translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, Rabassa is also the recipient of the National Book Award and the PEN Translation Prize, among various other honors.

If This be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents is separated into three parts of different weight: Part One: The Onset of Perfidy; Part Two: The Bill of Particulars; and Part Three: By Way of a Verdict. In the first section, Rabassa explains several theories and strategies related to literary translation. The weight of the book falls mainly in the second part, which is comprised

of Rabassa's memoir-style reflections on works and authors from his "rap sheet," a sort of who's who of twentieth century Latin American literature including names such as Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, António Lobo Antunes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and others. Part Three is a very brief recounting of Rabassa's theme of treason.

Rabassa prefaces his book with the Italian cliché "traduttore, traditore" and a quotation from Patrick Henry: "If this be treason, make the most of it." The idea of translation as treason, the major theme carried throughout the book, is a main focus for Rabassa in Part One, which consists of six sections on translation theory as well as autobiographical background. The relationship between the Italian words for translator and traitor leads Rabassa to examine the distinction between "betrayal of language" and "personal betrayal" as two facets of treason in Section One, "The Many Faces of Treason." Rabassa explains that treason against the language of origin is considered treason against the entire culture that is represented by that language. Personal betrayals are distinguished as treason

committed against the author, against the readership, or against the translator himself, which Rabassa deems “the saddest treason of all.” Anecdotal and personal examples bring to life many of Rabassa’s explanations. The second half of Part One traces Rabassa’s entry into the field of literary translation of Spanish and Portuguese language works from Dartmouth College to military cryptography to graduate school.

Part Two: The Bill of Particulars, which constitutes the majority of the book, tells of Rabassa’s experiences with each author and his or her work. All but one of the sections in Part Two is titled with an author’s name, followed by the title of Rabassa’s translation of his or her work, and also the title of the original work, as well as the bibliographical information for that translation. In some cases, Rabassa has translated multiple works by the same author. For example, Rabassa did six works apiece for both Julio Cortázar and Gabriel Garcia Márquez. The authors’ sections treat Rabassa’s unique experiences with each person, near, distant, or deceased, and each work. Here, there are glimpses into Rabassa’s process as a trans-

lator. Sometimes he reflects on a word that does not carry the same meaning in its English equivalent. Other times he meditates on a particular protagonist with a complex background. In the case of his translation of José Donoso’s *Still Life with Pipe*, Rabassa is faced with a contextual dilemma in translating the street name “Calle 18,” or “18th Street.” Rabassa chose to name the street “Calle Dieciocho” in recognition of the fact that the English translation automatically carries the reader to New York City, away from Santiago, Chile where the novel by Donoso takes place.

Julio Cortázar is the first author that Rabassa considers in Part Two. Rabassa credits Cortázar, author of *Hopscotch*, with connecting him with Gabriel Garcia Márquez and the renowned novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Rabassa says that *Hopscotch* was for him “what the hydrographic cliché calls a watershed moment as my life took the direction it was to follow from then on.” Part of this section about the translation of *Hopscotch* describes Rabassa’s adaptation of a “made up language” by Cortázar called “gíglico,” which he uses

to describe “amorous activity.” Rabassa’s task was to translate Cortázar’s “gíglico” into an English-based version of the invented language, which he called “Giglish.”

In another section, Rabassa reveals some of the challenges he faced in his translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* from the title to the names of characters to the melodious sounds of García Márquez’s prose. For example, Rabassa reveals his thought process during the translation of the acclaimed novel’s opening line. Defending each word choice by explaining their different connotations, Rabassa invites readers to experience his process of translating one pivotal sentence.

While both Cortázar and Márquez are authors whose works Rabassa has translated remarkably, it is clear from his memoirs the friendships he had with the authors themselves differed greatly. There is a charming camaraderie that comes through in Rabassa’s section on the Argentine that is lacking in his descrip-

tion of the working relationship with the Colombian author.

Part Three: By Way of a Verdict is a very brief section entitled “How Say You?” that concludes Rabassa’s translation memoir.

In his examination of whether or not translation may be considered treason, Rabassa comes to an ambiguous conclusion. As Rabassa writes, “we translators will not be shot at the cock’s crow, but neither shall we walk about free of our own doubts that we may have somehow done something treasonable in our work.”

If This be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents, the memoir by Gregory Rabassa, captures a lifetime of work in literary translation through a combination of theory developed over time and from experience and personal anecdotes about the translations of an array of authors. This book captures Rabassa’s enormous expertise in his field while conveying his humility and good humor at a level that can be appreciated by a general audience.

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