Books

Gained in Translation

If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents, by Gregory Rabassa ’54GSAS. (New Directions, 2005. 200 pages, $21.95)

By
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The mantle of the translator is a garment often diffidently worn. Self-effacement is part of the job, and despite assurances that translation is a noble art, the translator may feel like a traitor when faced with the impossible challenge of fidelity to two languages at once. In this gracefully self-deprecating memoir, Gregory Rabassa takes the sting out of the dread accusation “Traduttore, traditore,” and rolls up his sleeves to engage with the specific demands of the translation of novels by a roster of authors that begins with Julio Cortázar and includes Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Goytisolo, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Jorge Amado.

This is essentially the memoir of a working life. Rabassa is more interested in literary and linguistic explorations than in personal revelations, and the modesty of the translator carries over into his account. Instead of trudging through a recitation of dates and degrees, he alights on key moments in his formation (conscious and unconscious) as a language artist. His curiosity, flexibility of mind, and appreciation of the surreal come across clearly in his recollection of elaborate family nicknames (“Dootsus-Wootus was my brother Jerome [also known as Dito or Deet, wherein lies another tale of nomenclature], Obsty-Bobsty was brother Bob, and I was Gozy-Wozy”), and in his memory of looking at the façades of houses, “giving them faces and making them, to my mind’s eye and ear, speak the names of their owners.” His father was Cuban, but he learned little Spanish as a boy, growing up on a farm in New Hampshire, near Dartmouth. He later attended Dartmouth, and then was called up for service as a cryptographer during World War II, “doing what I would be doing years later, not aware that I was already doing translation.”

His real work as a translator began when he was a young professor at Columbia, where he had received his doctorate in Spanish and Portuguese literature. (He taught here from 1957 to 1968.) A call came one day from an editor at Pantheon Books, who asked whether he would translate a novel by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar. The book was Rayuela (which would appear in English as Hopscotch), one of the classics of 20th-century Latin-American literature. Rabassa tackled this daunting assignment with characteristic nonchalance: “True to my original instincts (or perhaps my inherent laziness and impatience) and to the subsequent amazement of those to whom I confessed my hubristic ploy, I translated the book as I read it for the first time.” This sort of candor is manifest throughout the memoir, and it brings constant freshness to Rabassa’s discussion of translation. To his thinking, there is nothing sacred about the endeavor. It is simply an elaborate game that must be approached with a certain levity and openness to chance. As he puts it: “I continue to feel comfortable as an amateur and a dilettante, it makes life freer and more friendly for me.”

And yet it comes as no surprise that his descriptions of the mechanics of translation are at once sophisticated and satisfy-ingly concrete, giving a rare view of a process that takes place inside the head and is often as instinctive as it is learned. He has worked closely with a few writers (Julio Cortázar most specifically), but otherwise his labors are solitary. “I follow the text,” he says. “I let it lead me along, and a different and it is to be hoped proper style will emerge for each author.”This style comes more or less naturally, depending on the writer, and it isn’t always obvious which writers will be the easiest to translate. Rabassa is particularly pleased by the natural flow of his translations of García Márquez (the first being *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), which he came to see as most like musical transpositions. He is equally thoughtful in his discussion of translations that he believes worked less well, including a trilogy by Guatemalan novelist-folklorist Miguel Ángel Asturias, who produced what Rabassa calls “the raw meat of magical realism.”

Throughout his career, Rabassa gravitated toward what are described as “diffi- cult” writers. His advice to readers who tackle novels by the likes of Brazilian novelist António Lobo Antunes (“strange, baroque, and sometimes surreal”) is much the same as the strategy he follows himself in translating them: “simply to read, approach [the novels] once again . . . as though [the reader] were listening to one of Beethoven’s late quartets through sheer hearing.” One of the pleasures of this memoir is the distinctiveness of Rabassa’s own voice, despite his decades of

listening. Cheerfully idiosyncratic and given to metaphysical punning (as he advertises in his subtitle), he is not difficult himself, but never predictable, either.

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