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Gregory Rabassa: An Interview

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It has been 40 years since Julio Cortázar's Hopscotch burst into the English-speaking world, and Spanish- and Portuguese-language specialist Gregory Rabassa has already published nearly 50 more book-length translations. Yet here he is, still scooting inconspicuously along the hallways of Queens College with no intention whatsoever of retiring. What was it like listening to Gregory Rabassa lecture, as he digressed in a gravel baritone from philosophical musings on Don Quixote to slightly off-color puns, to the niceties of literary translation for almost six months? "He doesn't so much teach," said one of many admirers in the City of New York's massive university system, "as narrate."

Gregory Rabassa's Beat

You were born in 1922; how heavily were you influenced by writers of the Lost Generation?

During the 1930s, for me it was Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. We read *Tender is the Night*. At that age, I looked to Fitzgerald as a kind of role model -- boozing, carousing and so forth.

Who were some of your drinking buddies in Greenwich Village during the 1940s and 50s?

e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas -- not only did they steal his name; they stole his saloon!

The White Horse Tavern?

No, that's where he ended up later. First, they drove him out of the San Remo, on Mac Dougal Street. Bob Dylan came along, stole his name, and then all these folkies came in and sat around on the floor listening to "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" on the jukebox. Dylan Thomas hated it. So, he decamped to Louie's Tavern over on Sheridan Square, where he held forth till they shut the place down. Finally, he moved on to the White Horse. Those were the good old days!

Did you consciously decide to become a translator, or did you just sort of fall into it?

I got into it by accident. As a cryptographer during World War II, I was unaware that I was already doing translation. Then, up at Columbia in the late 50s, a bunch of us starting publishing the *Odyssey Review*, a magazine based on translated works. I was supposed to pick out good stories, poetry and what not. We had to have somebody to translate them. So, I did. I even used pseudonyms! We couldn't have everything translated by the same person.

Ventriloquism

Many of the great musicians of English prose and poetry echo behind Rabassa's 50 years of transcriptions from Spanish and Portuguese. Like the voice of a major jazz soloist, Rabassa's voice is uniquely his own. Yet the transparency of his readings is such that each author's idiosyncrasy sings through without drawing undue attention to the accompaniment.

In the classroom, at any rate, "translation theory" was not something he went on and on about. Clearly, he'd thought long and hard about his underrated art form, and published a memoir rich in tradecraft. (1) Ultimately, however, he likened literary translation to orchestrating music. And "music rots," translator Ezra Pound once said, "when it gets too far from the dance."(2)

Who are some of your favorite writers in English?

Marlowe. I like *Dr. Faustus*. And then there's Dickens. Over here, Faulkner, of course. And Dos Passos. I think he needs another look: *USA*; *Manhattan Transfer*. He was a bit ahead of his time in terms of technique.

Certain books and authors do go out of fashion. One hates that trend, but Dos Passos is definitely a writer who is currently out of fashion.

His politics may have affected his reputation. He was a member of the left wing when he did his best writing, but turned to the right.

What translators from previous generations were you influenced by before you yourself became one?

I don't know that I was so conscious of translation back then. You just read the book in English and didn't think too much about it. I studied Latin: Caesar, Cicero, Virgil. So, of course, there were the classics: the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*.

In Alexander Pope's translations?

I was conscious of those because I was teaching the Great Books at Columbia .

You alluded earlier to the study of Latin. Up till the time people stopped studying Latin after Vatican II, many writers had studied classics. Translating was something you naturally did. That's how you acquired a liberal education, right? So, translating and literature weren't rigidly separate things. Translating was just a part of the process of becoming a writer. From the very beginning, there were always many great writers who happened to translate. I mean, there are famous translations of famous books -- Hobbes' translations of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian Wars*, the *King James Bible*. So I see what you mean by saying that you didn't consciously distinguish between writers who translated and translators who wrote.

Take Baudelaire, who translated Poe. The French think the world of Poe -- more so than we do. I wonder if that might be due to Baudelaire.

How did you learn Spanish and Portuguese?

The way they taught language in the old days: You got 10 sentences to translate into Spanish. The next part of the exam was a paragraph you had to translate into English. Of course, they've now abandoned the grammar component for the direct method and so forth. I like the previous system better. One of these intensive immersion courses amounts to about four days in Acapulco. How much Spanish can you learn in four days at Acapulco? I learned languages the old-fashioned way. And then I knocked around in Acapulco. And Brazil. And Peru. And Puerto Rico. (With an evil grin) Any Spanish swear words you want to know?

You're famous for translating "difficult" books like Luis Rafael Sánchez' *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (*Macho Camacho's Beat*) --

-- The most Puerto Rican novel ever written. Of course, I knew Wigo. We spent quite a lot of time together, on and off; put our heads together.

When dealing with texts heavy on dialect, is there a particular strategy you adopt to universalize them?

I try not to use too much slang, but sometimes you can invent your own. For example, in one chapter of *Hopscotch*, I just Anglicized Gliglish, the language Julio Cortázar had made up.

Can you tell us more about your approach to translation?

El diablo sabe más por viejo que por diablo . "The devil knows more because he's old than because he's the devil."

Would you care to elaborate?

(*Shrugs*) I just let the text lead me along. In my mind, the book I'm translating exists in English even before it's translated. I just have to pull it out. I do a first draft, "write" the book as the author him- or herself would have written it if they'd spoken English. Ideally, a different style emerges for each author being translated.

So, you're not enslaved to the original the second or third time around?

I may change the vocabulary, just to get a better word choice I didn't think of the first time around. But I don't change the meaning. You have to enter into the flow of the narration. The first draft sometimes doesn't have that flow. So, in the second draft you start moving things around. Sometimes I even do a third draft. As Burton Pike, my old Queens College colleague, used to say to his students, "do the first draft, then throw away the dictionary. Trust your meaning, and try to make it sing."

How do you rate post war English-speaking translators?

William Weaver is good. Richard Howard was supposed to do a new translation of Proust, but there's been so much flak about previous versions in the *New York Review of Books* that I think he's gone into hiding!

Nowadays, when I think Italo Calvino I think William Weaver. When I think Roland Barthes, I think Richard Howard. What was the case with you and Gabriel García Márquez before *100 Years of Solitude*?

He'd had had some short stories out, but that was about it. After *100 Years of Solitude*, I did his first novel, *Leafstorm*. Those put people onto his longer stuff.

Are there rising young translators, protégés of yours, we should be on the lookout for?

One of my students from Columbia, Michael Henry Heim, has translated quite of bit of German and Russian. I taught Earl Fitts in the Portuguese program at Queens College. His son, Ezra Fitz, has also done some translation. Translation is like writing in that you can teach grammar; can edit somebody's work; can even give a little direction here and there. But you can't really teach translation.

So, a translator has to be a good writer to begin with?

Usually, the person you're working on is an excellent writer. You don't translate the bum writers.

What's next?

In English, João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* is called *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands* – a cutesy title for a not very cutesy book. I'd like to do a retranslation of that if I can ever get around to it.

The Boom Years In Latin American Literature: A Personal History

He wasn't really old fashioned; he was old school. Rabassa had crammed French even before going off to college. He then read Spanish and Portuguese while attending Dartmouth, Italian while on wartime duty in Southern Italy as a code breaker for the OSS, and German later on at Columbia. As students, of course, we respectfully addressed him as doctor or professor. But you got the feeling, as much from his unaffected manner as from his satirical remarks, that both false modesty and pompousness equally offended his New Hampshire farm boy notions of common sense and good taste. Colleagues simply called him "Greg".

Contemporary Latin American literature, viewed through the lens of North American publishing, seems oddly distorted. Surely, there's room for more than just a few fiction writers from each country? Each of them has at least half a dozen important writers in every genre.

In Mexico, Elena Poniatowska is very good. You also have Álvaro Mutis, a Colombian writer and friend of Gabriel García Márquez. Because it's bigger, I suppose, there seem to be more writers in Brazil, a country whose great books are not all that well known abroad.

Is there still a Great Divide between Brazil and the rest of Latin American?

They're as physically and culturally isolated from each other as are Portugal and Spain. Even back in the mother countries, very few Spaniards know anything about Portugal, or vice versa.

What are some of your favorite books in Spanish ?

Don Quixote, of course. Lope was a prodigy who never wrote a masterpiece. Calderón wrote fewer but meatier plays. I mean, it takes genius to write thousands of plays to order in verse. But he was no Shakespeare. Obviously, I can't leave out the ones I've translated: Demetrio Aguilera-Malta's *Seven Serpents and Seven Moons*; Juan Benet's *Meditation and Return to Región*; José Donoso's *Still Life with Pipe*; Jorge Franco's *Rosario Tijeras*; Juan Goytisolo's *Marks of Identity*; José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*; Ana Teresa Torres' *Doña Inés v. Oblivion*; Luisa Valenzuela's *The Lizard's Tail*; Irene Vilar's *Message from God in the Atomic Age*; Jesús Zárata's *Jail*. I like those.

You once said you thought Sor Juana was the greatest Spanish-language poet of the 17th century--which made me think of Góngora. Is Sor Juana his equal?

She's better than Góngora! She's smarter. Sor Juana escaped into the convent, not to restrict herself but to free herself from what her life would have been as a woman of that era. She was far freer inside the convent than she

would have been outside in Mexican society.

Which Spanish-English translators do you admire?

Margaret Sayers Peden is very strong in Mexican literature. She has translated a lot of Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz. She also kind of helped discover Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits*. Edith Grossman, who picked up Gabriel García Márquez after me, is good.

Picked up García Márquez because you'd moved on to other things?

Yes. I don't regret it, though. Between García Márquez and Vargas Llosa, I think I had already translated their best stuff.

There are those who think *Cien Años* is García Márquez' most famous novel but not necessarily his best.

In *Autumn of the Patriarch*, he was doing more things. *Love in the Time of Cholera* doesn't seem to have the substance of, say, *Autumn of the Patriarch*, which I sometimes like even better than *100 Years of Solitude*.

What are some of your favorite Portuguese-language books?

That epic poem, *The Lusíads*. One of Lúcio Cardoso's books intrigues me: *Crónica da asa assassinada* [*Chronicle of the Murdered House*], a fantastic title for a more or less realistic novel about a family. Some consider Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro* a better novel, but I prefer *Brás Cubas*.

Judging from *Brás Cubas*, at least, you can see why Borges admired Machado de Assis.

The butterfly scene in *Brás Cubas* is very much like Borges, who liked Machado very much. Like Borges, Machado's style is very direct. It's the ideas that fool you.

Which Portuguese -English translators do you admire?

Helen Lane. Margaret Jull Costa's translation of Eça de Queiroz' *Crime of Father Amaro*. Another very good translator from the Portuguese is Richard Zenith. He did some Fernando Pessoa and António Lobo Antunes, a writer I've also worked on. Giovanni Pontiero did some Clarice Lispector and some José Saramago, but died too young [1997].

What do you recommend by Saramago?

The Stone Raft, a quasi-realistic fantasy about the Iberian Peninsula breaking off from Europe and drifting out to sea.

What books still need translating into English?

Brazilian writer Nérida Piñon's early novels should be translated, I think. They're very difficult, wild. I sort of like them best of all her work.

El señor presidente

We hear comparatively little about Dominican writers. Which do you like?

Juan Bosch.

Amazing short story writer, isn't he?

He should have remained President of the Dominican Republic. Vargas Llosa wanted to be President of Peru, you know; didn't stand a chance; would have made a rotten president.

Some translators specialize in the dead. You've mostly translated your contemporaries. Is there an advantage to being able to call them up?

Sometimes it's a disadvantage.

To have them looking over your shoulder while you work?

Some writers just don't realize what translation is all about. Julio Cortázar was very helpful. Gabriel García

Márquez, too. They left me alone.

Didn't second-guess you too much?

Vargas Llosa did, on occasion. He was invariably wrong. . . .

The Comic Sense of Life

Virginia Woolf once said, "marriage is the art of choosing the human being with whom to live life successfully." You've been married how many years now?

Going on 40!

And you both live in a house full of books?

Three houses full of books: two in the country and one in the city. We go back and forth on weekends and during the summer.

What would you list among your greatest accomplishments?

In Lisbon, I taught Derek Walcott the correct pronunciation of the word "motherfucker". He was using one syllable too many.

Notes

1 *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents* . New Directions (2005). [Return](#)

2 *How To Read* (1931) [Return](#)