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María Constanza Guzmán

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# Rabassa and the “Narrow Act”: Between Possibility and an Ethics of Doubt

María Constanza Guzmán

*Things have a built-in ambiguity about them.*  
- Gregory Rabassa

During the past five decades, North American translator Gregory Rabassa has translated over fifty Latin American novels from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to this day is one of the most prominent translators of literature from Spanish and Portuguese. Rabassa’s first book-length translation was Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963). The first edition, *Hopscotch* (1966), won the first National Book Award for Translation in the United States in 1967. Rabassa has been translating ever since the publication of *Hopscotch*; he has translated more than fifty novels by Latin American as well as European authors. Among his most recognized translations of Latin American works are *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), by the Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez; *Paradiso* (1974), by the Cuban author José Lezama Lima; and *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* (1997), by the Brazilian author Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. Rabassa has been strongly committed to the dissemination of Latin American literature to an English-speaking readership. His pivotal role in the internationalization of several Latin American writers led to the formation of a canon and, significantly, to the construction of the most prevalent images of Latin American literature from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rabassa’s translations have

been crucial in the way in which the Latin American literary tradition has inscribed the Western canon.

A quick glance at Rabassa's biography shows the impressive scale of his legacy. He constitutes a somehow unique case in the history of contemporary translation given that, contrary to prevailing conceptions and representations of translators—and without having been first known as a writer of literature—Rabassa is particularly visible as a translating subject. To this day, he has institutional importance as a translator: he writes about and reviews translations, and his status and criteria as a specialist are taken into consideration when making decisions about commissioning translations. His translations are visible works: they are widely read and recognized. Rabassa has received numerous awards and with his work has helped give Latin America the literary voice it has at present.

Traditional characterizations of the translator's role as secondary and of translations as derivative works—or “literary suburbs” (Rabassa, 1984a, p. 21)—make the study of the translator's task and of its influence elusive. Nevertheless, it is vital to place translators at the center of critical inquiry in order to examine the realms in which their legacy manifests itself and the multiplicity of spaces where it operates. Consequently, besides the translations themselves, translators' documents are relevant material to trace the relations inherent in translation. They help conceptualize the figure of the translating subject, as they reveal the complexity of the translator's experience and the tensions involved in translators' attempts to write about or otherwise articulate their own practice, as well as of the images with which translators relate themselves and see their role and status in society.

In this article I look at some of Rabassa's articles and prefaces to his translations, as well as his recently published book *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents*, in order to discuss the conceptions of language and translation that underlie his statements. I concentrate on the way Rabassa imagines himself as a translator—inasmuch as this can be traced in his writings—and on his reflections on language, translation, and his

own practice, in order to gain some understanding about the way in which these notions inform his reflections on his practice and about the tensions they reveal.

### Venuti's Self-Effacement "Thesis"

In the introduction to his recently published book, *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents*, Gregory Rabassa affirms that "the facelessness imposed on the translator, so often thought of as an ideal, can only mean incarceration in Segismundo's tower in the end"<sup>1</sup> (2005, p. 4). This statement, which characterizes "facelessness" as "imprisonment," illustrates Rabassa's impulse to affirm that translators are writers, that is, subjects who are visible and present in the texts that they translate. Nevertheless, if we look closely at Rabassa's texts, we find that several of his remarks would conflict with this statement; there appear to be tensions, at times contradictions, among his conceptions about translation.

Lawrence Venuti has stated that he finds in Rabassa's comments some of the self-effacing attitudes common to most translators, and that in Rabassa this is manifested mainly by a romantic conception of authorship, in which the original is seen as an unchanging monument of the human imagination (genius), transcending the linguistic, cultural, and social changes of which the translation is a determinate effect (Venuti, 1992, p. 3). Venuti finds an instance of this self-effacing attitude in Rabassa's belief that it is necessary to retranslate literary works:

The fact is that there is a kind of continental drift that slowly works on language as words wander away from their original spot in the lexicon and suffer the accretion of subtle new nuances, which result from distortions brought about by time and the events that people it. The choice made by an earlier translator, then, no longer obtains and we must choose again. Through some instinct wrought of genius, the author's original choices of word and idiom seem to endure. (Rabassa in Venuti, 1992, p. 3)

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1 Prince and protagonist of Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream* (*La vida es sueño*).

Venuti argues that the view that the original endures, that it is “eternal,” whereas a translation dates, reveals the perception that the original is a form of self-expression appropriate to the author, a copy true to his personality or intention, which is the authorized copy, to be distinguished from the translation, a simulacrum that deviates from the author (Venuti, 1992, p. 3); because of this, “translation provokes the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination” (Venuti, 1998, p. 31). Rosemary Arrojo characterizes this view of the relationship between the original and the translation along the same lines:

If the conscious presence of the author is somehow expected to be found in her or his writing, and if the original is seen as the true recipient of its creator’s intentions and expression, any translation is, by definition, devalued since it necessarily represents a form of falsification, always removed from the original and its author. (1997, p. 21)

Venuti explains that the implications of prevailing ideas of originality, on which the translator’s invisibility is founded, are problematic because “the effect of transparency masks the mediations between and within copy and original and eclipses the translator’s labor with an illusion of authorial presence,” thus reproducing translation’s cultural marginality (Venuti, 1995, p. 290). Therefore, in connection with these ideas of originality, Venuti finds views such as Rabassa’s to be problematic, not only at the level of the social status of translation, but also at the level of the particular strategies according to which texts are translated. That is to say, when the self-effacing attitude of translators—a vanishing act—is performed in language, it results in discursive strategies that privilege fluency and that erase “any textual effect, any play of the signifier, which calls attention to the materiality of language, to words as words, their opacity, their resistance to empathic response and interpretive mastery” (Venuti, 1992, p. 4).

If it is true that, according to Venuti, some of Rabassa’s articulations of his practice are in fact self-effacing, it follows that even though in his writings Rabassa recognizes the transformative character of translation—he does not believe that the translation should be “a clone” of the original (2005, p. 234)—and acknowledges that the translator’s experience is expressed in the

text s/he produces, he does not grant translation the originality that would make it a text of the same order of the original or "the authorized copy" (Venuti, 1992, p. 4). Nevertheless, the assumption that Rabassa's general perception and understanding about himself and what he does is self-effacing is debatable. In fact, we can begin to contest it with Rabassa's analogy between the faceless translator and the imprisonment of Prince Segismundo. Thus, it is worth interrogating Venuti's opinion about Rabassa's ways of representing and understanding himself.

For decades, Rabassa has been one of the most renowned and influential translators into English. In Sara Blackburn's article about the translator from 1974, for instance, it is evident that Rabassa was already well-known and established at the time. As she put it, given the increasing acceptance of Spanish-language literature in the seventies and Rabassa's own reputation, he could choose which works he wanted to translate; he was also able to recommend to the publishers new writers or authors he admired (1974, p. 495). Thomas Hoaksema described Rabassa's status along the same lines in an introduction to his interview with the translator in 1978: "at a time when many translators receive and are content with minimal recognition, Rabassa is accorded nearly co-creative status with the original author" (1978, p. 8). From the seventies to this day, Rabassa's recognition has continued to increase.

Venuti chooses to use Rabassa's name precisely because it is a proper name that is recognizable in a similar way that an author's name is also recognizable. He has chosen a translator who is not anonymous, at least in the Anglo-American cultural community. Precisely because of his visibility and status, Rabassa's remarks must be viewed in the context in which they are expressed, for they are articulated in relation to the cultural community—or communities—to which he belongs and where he is a visible cultural agent. Taking into account Rabassa's location, the tensions and contradictions of his statements may suggest, for example, that besides being influenced by the way theories and discourses about translation have traditionally treated and constructed authors, translators, and originals, Rabassa's statements are also influenced by the discursive space in which he operates at a certain

time and under particular circumstances. It is, therefore, necessary to contextualize his statements to understand to what extent, as a totality, they can be said to represent a self-effacing attitude on the part of Rabassa. This may, in turn, shed light on whether Rabassa's practice, experience, ways of representing himself, and also his legacy at large, in fact reflect or reproduce conceptions, beliefs and expectations about language and translation that advocate the invisibility of the translator or that see translation as transparent reproduction or as mediation without interference.

### **Translating as the “Narrow Act”: Translation, Originality, and Writing**

Venuti's statement on Rabassa's self-effacement might be proven right if one looks at some of his remarks about translation, especially at his early writings. Nevertheless, Rabassa opposes a representation of translation as a practice of invisibility and subservience from the start. In the article “If this Be Treason: Translation and its Possibilities,” first published in *American Scholar* in 1974, it is evident that he places translation alongside writing, and that he accords translation similar characteristics to those of writing. Even though in his texts Rabassa cautions of the difficult search for balance imposed by what Ronald Christ has called “the narrow act”—i.e., the act of translating and its limitations compared to the act of writing (Rabassa, 1984a, p. 22)—, it is clear that he characterizes translation as a creative act. He sees it as a “flux of matter” which results from a “creative urge” (Rabassa, 1982, p. 1), and which, consequently, entails transformation. Rabassa sees the translator as a writer whose practice is limited by a number of particular constraints. He notes that, as a writer, the translator has great limitations: “In many ways he can be compared to the poets of the neo-classical period, when so much had been set forth and with so many accepted ideas that their skill was often confined to a sense of beauty and accuracy in the use of language” (Rabassa, 1984c, p. 36). Rabassa speaks of the limits of translation as being different, albeit analogous, to those of writing. He believes the translator's space to be “narrow” and constrained, and at the same time he conceives of writing, too, as being subject to constraints of its own; he sees these constraints as a condition of writing.

It is clear, in numerous writings of Rabassa's, that he adheres to a conception according to which the translator's search for the *mot juste* is analogous to the same search on the part of the writer. This emphasis on viewing translation as writing, which prevails in Rabassa's texts about translation, is relevant to question Venuti's self-effacement "thesis." Thinking about the constraints of writing reinforces the analogy between translation and other writing practices, which remain creative while at the same time being confined to the limits set forth by norms and standards at various levels. As a translator of radically experimental, "untranslatable" authors—e.g., Lezama Lima, Cortázar, and more recently Lobo Antunes—Rabassa does not dwell on the nostalgia for the lost original. He treats "untranslatability" as part of the regular, everyday experience of the translator (i.e., of language) and does not abide to the dogma of impossibility, nor depicts translation as failure or defeat. Translation, Rabassa states, can never be reproduction; "As the Latin root shows, it is a leading across to the other side, a setting-over, as the Germans call it" (Rabassa, 1984a, p. 22). Understood as a "setting-over," translation has a path and a purpose; this, however, does not contradict its creative nature.

Rabassa's belief that translation is writing presupposes the presence of a writing subject who produces a text that is the result of a creative, intellectual endeavor rather than an act of mechanical reproduction.

As Douglas Robinson notes, a translator does not become *the* writer but, rather, *a* writer, who is much like the original author "because they both write, and in much the same way, drawing on their own experiences of language and the world to formulate effective discourse" (2001, p. 3). Inasmuch as the images of the translator-author relationship and status manifest themselves in translators' subjectivities and inform translators' perceptions and ways of thinking of and representing themselves, Rabassa's characterization of translators as writers is revealing about his own self-understanding. As a translator who sees himself as a writer, Rabassa does not operate according to the desire that the "invisible hand" of the author will write the



translated text—and sign it.<sup>2</sup> He is a participant in the ongoing meaning-making process and the rightful translator-writer of an original text for which the correct perception is, at all times, provisional. Undoubtedly, this view of translation has an effect on the translator’s self-image. It conflicts with the complicated implications of common-sense views that underlie, as Robinson points out, the translator’s “desirable subordinated or instrumentalized subjectivity” (2001, p. 7). As a result, it exposes the tensions associated with the expectations that surround translation and with the translator’s self-awareness. It also provides a space for a reflection of the translator’s “task” in terms of ethics.

### ***If This Be Treason: From the Accusation to the Verdict***

Up until 2005, most of Rabassa’s writings on translation were limited to a number of articles in newspapers or literature and translation journals, a few translation prefaces, and a couple of interviews. In his writings, Gregory Rabassa often alludes to the Italian cliché *traduttore traditore*, which in his view portrays translators “worse than unfortunate bunglers, as treacherous knaves” (2005, p. 3). From his early writings, when addressing this common-sense image of translation as “treason,” Rabassa presents it as a proof of the stigmatization of translation; he explains that

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2 With the exception of Machado de Assis, Rabassa has always translated works written by living authors. He has often established a remarkably convivial dialogue with them. He sees himself as one of the participants in the process through which narratives move into English. His translation practice takes place in a space that is, by definition, historically-bound, plural, and collective: “I wonder now in my ninth decade as I watch words fade and then glimmer back into new meanings and nuances if someone will be following me at some future time into a reproduction of what Julio [Cortázar] wrote. It could go on and on, for translations have the strange progressive literary virtue of never being finished. If we have read *Hopscotch* properly we can see that it, too, was never really finished, that Cortázar is inviting us to do what he had not done” (61). Rabassa does not expect the author’s signature to be the one signing the translation. Nevertheless, he invites his authors—also his readers—to write with him.

translation has traditionally been stigmatized precisely because it is a form of writing:

Problem-seekers will find an inordinate amount of material in translation, precisely because it partakes of other, more definable aspects of writing. It is a sort of literary suburb, lacking a core or personality of its own. It is not clearly derivative, it is, then, treasonous and even treacherous, for it will be *misleading*. (1984a, p. 21; emphasis added)

According to this view, translation is looked upon with suspicion precisely because it is not writing *stricto sensu* but it is not neutral or innocent either; it is being conceived as an “intermediary form”, which makes it “always vulnerable to attack” (Rabassa, 1984a, p. 21).

In April of 2005, Rabassa published *If this be Treason: Translation and its Dyscontents*, his translator’s memoir, which is structured on the basis of a judicial metaphor. The book is constructed as if the translator appeared before the jury and addressed it. It starts out as follows:

Let us submit the practice of translation to a judicial inquiry into its various ways and means and in this display seek out the many varieties of betrayal which might be inherent to its art (...) There are many spots where translation can be accused of treason, all inevitably interconnected in such diverse ways that an overall view is needed to reveal the many facets of the treason the Italians purport to see. (Rabassa, 2005, p. 3)

*If This Be Treason* is Rabassa’s statement before the jury. It is the translator’s response to an accusation, that of treason. In the book, the translator places himself as the object of the accusation and, in so doing, he interrogates the very accusation—he does not endorse it. The translator is deemed accountable because s/he is an agent of a practice that is “blasphemous.” What the translator does is “treasonous and even treacherous” (Rabassa, 1984a, p. 21).<sup>3</sup> As he puts it in one of his articles:

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3 For an insightful proposal about how to study translators’ social agency in their “deviance” to historical, context-bound norms through their “heretical” versions see Daniel Simeoni’s 2007 article “Between Sociology and History: Method in Context and in Practice.”

After the masons mumbled their different ways down from Babel's tower and went their separate ways, each to breed his one-tongued kind, God saw that his punishment was meetly condign and that it would go on to harass and hamper mankind forever after. But then there were Promethean stirrings as those of different languages attempted to be understood by one another and man's hubris was served. Translation is blasphemous by these lights, then, and it has often been treated so. (1984b, p. 30)

The stigma of translation, according to this statement, emerges from the violation of a law of unintelligibility in an effort to share meaning. As a consequence, and given these accusations and the treatment to which translation has been subjected, instead of doing a straightforward defense, Rabassa uses the judicial metaphor to put translation "in the courtroom" (Rabassa, 2006, p. 219), setting treason as the book's premise.

For his translator's memoir Rabassa uses the title of his 1974 article, "If this be Treason: Translation and its Possibilities," in which he included the epigraph "*traduttore, traditore.*" In his 2005 book he adds an element to that epigraph, which is Patrick Henry's phrase: "If this be treason, make the most of it." Instead of concealing the alleged treason, what the translator does in *If This Be Treason: Translation and its Dyscontents* is "admit" the treason, face the charge.

Following the supposed recognition of his guilt, in the book Rabassa lists the many aspects of translation that are, either potentially or actually, treasonous. He begins speaking of the betrayal translation inflicts onto words, which are "the metaphors for all the things we see, feel, and imagine" (2005, p. 4). Then there is a betrayal to language (in both directions), and consequently to culture, of which languages are products (2005, p. 4). Then, says Rabassa, we have the personal betrayals, first to the author: "Can we ever make a different-colored clone of what he has done? Can we ever feel what the author felt as he wrote the words we are transforming?" (2005, p. 4), and second to the reader: "As we betray the author we betray our variegated reader and at the same time we are passing on whatever bit of betrayal the author himself may have foisted on them in the original" (2005, p. 4). As

the list of betrayals unfolds, another set of betrayals emerges: that of language itself and its conventionality: "Words are treacherous things, much more so than any translator could ever be" (2005, p. 4); in addition, says Rabassa, language betrays words for, as it moves ahead, it will load them with "all manner of cultural barnacles" (2005, p. 6). Subsequently the author's betrayal emerges for s/he is a compendium of all these factors: language, culture, and individual words. These are inseparable, and the author is their product, just like what s/he writes; "His free will and originality only exist within the bounds of his culture" (2005, p. 7). In turn, readers "betray" authors and texts as they make them their own in reading. Finally, Rabassa cautions in *If This Be Treason*, comes translators' betrayal to themselves. To him this last betrayal is "the saddest treason of all" (2005, p. 8) because translators are writers. Since for Rabassa translation is creation, translators must keep "a careful confidence in themselves," look for the "proper" words instead of using the "standard" words or norms; that, to him, would "betray the task we are set to do" (2005, p. 9).

As Rabassa unpacks the treasons of translation—to language, to authors, to texts, and, in turn, of language, authors and texts themselves—what surfaces is a chain of treasonous events beyond the translation event itself and which are mutually interconnected (2005, p. 4). The treason occurs as a continuum; it occurs in and because of language at large. Thus, following Rabassa, the treason in translation is a condition of language.

Rabassa's writing is playful and ironic. For his memoir Rabassa chose the metaphor of treason not because the book is deeply rooted in the Italian cliché. From the start Rabassa interrogates the cliché, he magnifies it and displaces it—this is suggested from the initial invitation to make *the most* of the treason. *If This Be Treason* engages the translator-traitor cliché and reworks it from within. Instead of defending himself in his memoir, the translator admits his guilt (i.e., translation's guilt) and, by exposing the endless chain of treasons that precede the act(s) of translation and those that follow it, he exposes the absurdity of signaling translation out for violation. Associating treason with translation, Rabassa underscores the treason of

language itself: “words are more treacherous than any translator could ever be” (2005, p. 4).

Rabassa mentions the treasons of language and of the author. He believes that the author’s treason is not visible for: “If he is to betray it [his culture], he betrays it from within, which connotes intimate knowledge, while the translator betrays it from without, from an acquired reflective, not reflexive awareness” (2005, p. 7). Thus, although translation is treasonous in a way that is similar to that in which language, and the author, are treasonous, translation is signaled out as treasonous because it is not familiar or intimate enough—it embodies that which is foreign. Translation does not enjoy the kind of complicity with language and with the community or communities involved that would allow it to engage with language and text(s) in the way that the author’s text enjoys; consequently, it is the complicity between the author, language, and the community, which conceals the author’s treason.

Finally, Rabassa extrapolates the active “betrayal” of/ to language, to experience. He relates the arbitrary, metaphoric nature of language to the experiential version of the “world” we inhabit, which we construct according to our existence in it:

The personal aspect of language can be extended to life itself. As far as the individual is concerned, life truly exists only as he feels it and thereby ponders it. It follows, therefore, that life is an idea, a word, in short, a metaphor for conscious existence and hence a translation. We are translating our existence and our circumstance as we go along living and before we are fatally assigned the translator’s lot once the treason has been done: Segismundo’s tower or tomb. (2005, p. 13)

If we stop translating—that is, using language—we are, in Rabassa’s view, deemed to return to Segismundo’s tower, to give up the illusion of intelligibility. As he puts it we may even, as Swift’s project suggests, “get about rebuilding Babel” (2005, p. 5).

In *If This Be Treason* Rabassa uses the stigmatization of translation as treason as a rhetorical response to the common-sense, prevalent criticism of what happens to originals in translation. Instead of giving a direct response, he resorts to letting his memoir

unfold in such a way that the accusation seems overly negative, unproductive, and ultimately irrelevant. By enumerating a long list of betrayals, Rabassa takes up the accusation and magnifies it to the point of rendering it absurd. Rabassa believes that, whether we call it treason or anything else, translation remains a form of writing (i.e., inscribing) a text, and that this is not only true but also desirable: "The translator, who is most often adjured to be faithful, must also be inventive. Let us remember that the same language that gave us the canard *traduttore, traditore* also gave us *se non è vero, è ben trovato*" (Rabassa, 1991, p. 42). For Rabassa, what is found in the process through which the translated text emerges is legitimate and welcome.

In his memoir, Rabassa follows his reflection about the treasons of translation with stories about "his" authors and translations. He then concludes by taking the judicial inquiry to its last consequences and ends the book with the final verdict. Is translation treason? Is the translator a traitor? *A la hora de la verdad*, says Rabassa, when the time for a verdict comes, there is no "competent" juror. Who is there to determine the treason? "That is why I ended up with what they call the Scots verdict," he says; in Scottish jurisprudence the jury can come up with a third verdict, which he finds to be "very handy": neither guilty, nor innocent, but "not proven"; the treason has not been proven, but it may be there (2006, p. 218).

This ambiguous, open-ended verdict could be taken as a means of putting an end to a discussion that is ultimately unresolved, in which case "not proven" would stand for "not known." The Scots verdict is consistent with the fact that the accusation of treason has, in the end, not really been deemed a legitimate charge or, if it is, it is a weak or incomplete one at most. Nevertheless, this verdict-end to Rabassa's translation "memoir" can also be read as a statement.

### **The Practitioner as Theorist**

At this point it is worth returning to Venuti's self-effacement "thesis" and examining it in light of the significance of the Scots verdict at the end of *If This Be Treason*. In his memoir, as well as in

several of his writings, Rabassa reinforces an image of translation as a legitimate cultural practice. The book is also an attempt to rework and resolve in and through writing the tensions of the translator's experience. In his writings, Rabassa moves across conceptual boundaries in ways that do not really allow for a framing of his viewpoint as being essentially one or another. An attempt to conceptualize his self-understanding must reveal the complexity of the task itself and take into account Rabassa's own history to understand how he speaks from his location and how his reflections are interwoven with his practice. When looking at Rabassa's "theories" in this light it becomes evident that, when he tries to articulate his practice—and this may apply to other translators—there is a wide and multiple range of possibilities, many of which circumstantial, that show that what may seem desirable, appropriate, or ethical, in some cases, may not be so in others. There is a tension between viewing translation as intellectual and creative and also speaking to a sense of responsibility. Rabassa sees translation as a limited writing practice—"the narrow path"—and also calls attention to the fact that writing responds to—often unacknowledged—constraints of time, rhetorical standards, and so on, which are played out and negotiated in texts in a seamless fashion. According to the translator, this negotiation is not equally seamless in translation, which is why translators are looked upon with suspicion. In sum, if as Venuti states, self-effacement is "a weird form of self-annihilation" (Venuti, 1995, p. 8), that would not be an accurate characterization of Rabassa's understanding of himself and his practice.

Rabassa has been vocal in regard to the institutional aspects of the translating practice for decades. In 1971 he directed the PEN conference for translator's visibility and rights (co-sponsored by the Center for Inter-American Relations), which aimed to advocate for better pay, credit for the translator on the title page, book jacket, and in all publicity and advertisement, and minimum translation rates (Kihss, 1971, p. 25). Rabassa stresses the need to translate so that narratives and literatures (and their narratives) continue to disseminate. From his privileged position in the cultural milieu and in academia in the United States, when he discusses the political and institutional problems that affect the

practice of translation, Rabassa addresses translators' freedoms, loyalties, and responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> He realizes that, as a translator, he is subject to the demands of a system that has particularly domesticating translation standards.

Rabassa is undoubtedly positioned in the Anglo-American social, economic, and linguistic context that Venuti describes, which is where he operates and negotiates; moreover, he is in a privileged position within it. It is its rules and standards that determine his choices in regard to the discursive strategies and institutional structures that mediate in the production, circulation, and reception of his translations. As Venuti notes, "the cultural dominance of Anglo-American individualism represents foreign cultures with ideological discourses specific to English-language discourses but conceals all these determinations and effects under the veil of transparency" (Venuti, 1992, p. 6). Following Venuti's logic, translation as a practice cannot be seen as produced, practiced, or consumed by ahistorical subjects, but should be studied, instead, in relation to the community or communities in which it is produced, occurs, and circulates. This leads us to address the power tensions embedded in the relations between the communities that interact in translation so as to see how these communities not only assign a text-translation its meaning at given spaces and times, but also determine its value, and even allow for its very existence.

In regard to the individual/social/ideological configuration that underlies Rabassa's ideas, Venuti has found a similar attitude in relation to the study of translation in the views of literary translator William Weaver. Weaver is a somewhat

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4 Although he advocates visibility and artistic recognition to translators, when it comes to the study of translation he does not see that it has any relevance beyond the realm of Stylistics. Therefore, he grants the study of translation—and the field of Translation Studies itself—a reduced range of critical possibilities for, according to this view, the very questions for which he advocates about translation would be excluded from the analysis—i.e., such questions as those pertaining to the agency and responsibility of translators in the formation of traditions, or to the role of translation in the way cultural values are played out, reproduced, or erased. There is, once again, a conceptual tension at play.



analogous figure to Rabassa: he has been recognized as the major English-language translator of modern Italian literature—he has translated roughly sixty works and received a number of literary awards. According to Venuti, Weaver’s views about his practice presuppose that translation is a largely “unreflective process” where the decisions a translator makes are not only unarticulated but also “unknown.” Venuti questions Weaver’s statements about his practice as follows:

Although in describing one such translation process Weaver gives reasons for his choices, none of these reasons takes the form of an explanation that extends beyond a brief semantic or stylistic comment on the Italian word or on a possible English equivalent (...) Many choices seem to be based either on linguistic and cultural values that remain unstated or on sheer personal preference (...) Weaver’s essay certainly documents his own translation process, even if he does not actually explain it. (Venuti, 2002, p. 215)

Rabassa’s statements about his translation decisions are along the same lines as Weaver’s; this can be seen, for instance, when he states that “the translator must have some inner instinct for what is just right” (Rabassa, 1991, p. 39), or when he explains: “I know that a translation is going well when I get the feeling that the English is sounding just the way the author sounded in the original. This is completely instinctive, and I cannot explain it in any rational way, but it is there” (Rabassa, 2001, p. 121). Although in the form of explanations, these statements do not show intent to explain what goes on in the process through which the translator renders her or his work.<sup>5</sup> Like Weaver’s, Rabassa’s

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5 Venuti critiques Weaver’s writings using a psychoanalytical framework to explain how Weaver’s argument that he cannot explain his choices because they are “unconscious” is not justifiable. He argues that a psychoanalytical approach helps to differentiate aspects of the translator’s unconscious, between the “translatorly” and “the personal, the cultural and the political” (Venuti, 2002, p. 215). Several other translation theorists insist on the importance of contesting statements about “instinctive” or “unconscious” decision-making as they find that some so-called instinctive choices, that some of the translator’s “unconscious” (or “instinctive”) decisions, and also some effects and connections (or errors), may in fact be conscious. Others, as Venuti puts

way of explaining his decision-making process is significantly different from critical perspectives that place the translator's work as part of larger structures and systems, that is, from perspectives that would consider the work of these translators themselves in terms of social and institutional practices and processes of textual and cultural production.

Venuti advocates a historicized analysis of the translator and her/his decisions because, as he puts it, since translation creates difference, it is difference; therefore, we must find ways to articulate the translator's difference. As he explains, although that difference is what translating is supposed to negotiate or resolve in the first place, it ultimately winds up multiplying and exacerbating it, sometimes without the translator's awareness and almost always without the awareness of the audience for whom the translation is produced (2002, p. 216). We must study these differences, not in the hope of eradicating them completely—they can't be eradicated, and some should not be, since they are necessary to see the foreignness in the foreign text (2002, p. 216). According to Venuti the goal we should set for translation studies is the "ultimately ethical one of developing methods of translation research and practice that describe, explain, and take responsibility for the differences that translation inevitably makes" (2002, p. 216).

## **The Translator's Documents**

A question worth posing at this point would be: What do translators do as they write about their work? How do we look at translators' writings about their practice? *What do we translators do when we write about our work?*

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it, may exceed even the experienced translator's conscious intention, taking the form of misconstructions or misreadings that are symptomatic of an unconscious motivation. Others may be caused by the foreign text, its formal and thematic features, and yet others may be triggered by something that lies outside of the immediate context of the error but is nonetheless connected to it, the larger cultural and social situation in which the translation is produced (2002, p. 238).

Rabassa's documents—his articles and reviews, his memoir, as well as drafts and interviews—are part of the totality of the translator's body of work. As a result, they must be accounted for in a study about the translator. They are also a way of rendering the translator's voice. Besides, as Suzanne Jill Levine proposes in her introduction to *The Subversive Scribe*, “self-referential inquisitions by prose translators should provide useful models for translation studies as well as models of self-questioning for all interpreters” (1991, p. xiii). Translators' documents are symptomatic, or rather, reflexive, of the translator's practice. A comprehensive, conscious, and fully self-aware account of every decision is not to be found in a translator's writings, and such an expectation would not even be desirable. It is not possible either to establish whether that is the type of account a particular translator aims for as s/he writes in the first place, since s/he speaks in particular rhetorical spaces, which affect the content, the tone, and the way in which s/he positions her/himself in relation to translation—in the case of Rabassa, for example, was he using self-effacing “wit” in order to appear humble?<sup>6</sup> The writing space can also pose pragmatic limitations—as is the case with prefaces or interviews; there are rules and constraints in regard to both form and content; thus, these texts can have a purpose that may not lend itself to candid self-reflection.

Reading translators' accounts does not lead to the comprehensive image that translators have of themselves. Therefore, it is important to seek a balance between engaging these texts while at the same time avoiding taking them strictly at face value. Translators' documents may be read as part of the process of translating itself, the part that has to do with an ongoing process of making sense of one's own creative process. They may also be looked at as symptoms of particular translating experiences bound to a multiplicity of complex circumstances, as examples of theories of textuality and translation at work, or as channels—both contexts and conceptual frameworks—that translators choose for self reflection.

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6 Sara Blackburn comments that Rabassa's attitude toward his own accomplishments is so modest as to appear self-effacing (1974, p. 495).

## A Labor of Sisyphus? Between Possibility and an Ethics of Doubt

Rabassa's reflections illustrate the tensions he faces as a translating subject. They also reveal his conceptions about language, textuality, and translation, and are indicative of the translator's ethical configuration. Rabassa repeatedly describes translation as an "ambiguous" practice—the notion of ambiguity comes up recurrently in his writings. He finds ambiguity to be a common presence in language, author-text relations, language-culture interactions, and also in the translator's space. On the one hand, the suggestion that words and translation have a "built-in ambiguity" about them is in itself a resistance to a dualistic logic, which is consonant with other ways in which Rabassa resists certain forms of dualistic ordering. Alongside the recognition that translation is writing and that, if it is treasonous, it is so inasmuch as language is also treasonous, Rabassa points to the notion of uncertainty, which he conceives of as embedded in translation, inherent to it. Rabassa emphasizes the fact that the whole process of translation is a matter of choice, and that the "proper" choice is hardly ever definable. He says that translation is "on-going," "a labor of Sisyphus, as it were," and calls it "disturbing" because translators can only have little certainty about what they are doing (Rabassa, 1989, p. 12).

As a cultural practice in a larger sense, Rabassa sees translation as an ongoing, unfinished conversation at least in two respects. As part of the process and in regard to the translator-author relationship *per se*, he sees it as a dialogue that fosters a sense of proximity and as a way to engage language and exchange through camaraderie—perhaps even a certain complicity—in the dynamics of meaning and understanding. As a product, translation is the logical continuation of the author's writing. Translation is part of the work, and the work itself is part of a continuum, which neither starts with the author, nor ends with the translator.

As a translator, Rabassa sees himself as a creator and does not believe he ought to occupy a position of invisibility or subordination. He still argues that the translator must be a doubter at all times (1991, p. 39). Is this a contradiction? Can

a translator be non self-effacing, advocate visibility, and remain uncertain? Rabassa embraces uncertainty in a similar way in which he embraces the arbitrariness of language. For him, uncertainty does not revert into a sense of failure, neither does it lead to a nostalgia for a lost original. What to make, then, of this uncertainty? Let us look back at Rabassa's Scots verdict:

All of this has been borne out by my ultimate dissatisfaction with any translation I have done, even the most praise-worthy. This would suggest, then, that there has been some kind of treason afoot. As judge, therefore, I must render what is called a Scots verdict: not proven. We translators will not be shot at 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. (2005, p. 189)

In *If This Be Treason* Rabassa acknowledges both his authority and his subjectivity, while presenting an unpretentious account of his life as a translator. According to Rabassa, the ultimate dissatisfaction is none other than the translator's, since s/he is the one who, after ruling out all possible judges—out of incompetence—remains her/his own judge. These statements are not complacent, but they are not self-condemning either (the treason is not proven, after all, though “it may be there.”) In the end, from his discursive location he has chosen not to issue a univocal judgment. Thus, rather than an unresolved answer, the verdict at the end of Rabassa's *If This Be Treason* points to the question of responsibility; it is an ethical call.

First, Rabassa is speaking, here again, of ambiguity in translation alongside the ambiguity of the original:

I don't think that any translation can really be called either definitive or final. Ambivalence and ambiguity come to the fore; words change subtly over the years; there is a sort of Doppler effect in meaning as time passes, so that *both translation and original* will present a different meaning now from what they did a hundred years ago.” (Rabassa, 2001, p. 120; emphasis added)

Second, if we look back at Rabassa's position in the world map, we see him seated at the center of power, as a member of a

hegemonic social and linguistic community. In this context, given the way cultures are represented in and through translation, I find Rabassa's acknowledgment of a permanent sense of doubt and the need for caution to be pertinent. If translation were believed to be completely derivative, it would be a disinterested copy of an original. However, Rabassa is saying that it is not: it is actually a form of writing, which makes it potentially "misleading" (1984a, p. 21). How can translators claim to be completely sure of what they are doing to a text by writing it and rewriting it? Would it be possible for translators to be aware and know (i.e., control) what will become of it? What would it mean for a translator from such a privileged position to hold definitive and conclusive opinions in regard to what ought to be done to texts in translation? Would complete certainty be desirable at all?

Rabassa's translations of Latin American literature have played a crucial role in the construction of collective narratives and representations of Latin American literature and of "Latin America" in its literature. Given the linguistic hegemony of the United States in general as well as in the production and circulation of cultural capital, and given the cultural complexities of the Americas—the north-south divide, the neocolonial reality—it is important for translators to remember that they, along with their work, can be "misleading."<sup>7</sup> Thus, translators should remain aware of the potential violence of any form of cultural appropriation. As a consequence, a certainty principle may in fact be problematic. Judgment, when it comes to translation, should befit the location and position(s) of the parties—i.e, a plurality of authors, translators, languages, communities—within a set of hierarchies, privileges, and opportunities given or taken away in the context of particular power structures.

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7 Susan Sontag articulates the relationship between the lack of interest in foreign translations and the hegemony of English—which she calls a contemporary "colonial" language. She believes that the notion of English as a world language, which is, also, the one spoken by the richest and most powerful nation, has a great deal of power in deciding what is translated and what—i.e., large infusions of foreign literature—is simply not allowed to enter (2005, p. 139). The choices made by Anglo-American translators have an effect on translation worldwide.

Translation occurs in a collective space of negotiation. As with any form of writing, social, political and institutional “ambiguities” exist given the maneuvers of the institution of culture; the translator, in isolation, is not responsible for the entire translating event. Thus, since the many variables surrounding translators make it impossible for them to have full control over the event, it may be salubrious to recognize that uncertainty is inescapably part of it.

When he interrogates William Weaver’s ways of representing himself as a translator, Venuti quotes Derrida in regard to the “body” or “materiality” of the text: “The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry” (2002, p. 217). Venuti discusses this passage by explaining that, in Derrida’s view, the body (*le corps*) of the foreign text, its materiality in the sense of the specific chain of acoustic or typographical signifiers that constitute it, cannot be reproduced in translation and therefore is inevitably dropped by the translator. This, according to Venuti, is the “decontextualizing” aspect of translation (2002, p. 217). Derrida, says Venuti, also observes that when translation restores a body, a materiality in the sense of another chain of signifiers in another language (...) translation means displacement in that it “creates another signifying chain accompanied by intratextual effects and intertextual relations that are designed to reproduce the foreign text, but that also work in the translating language and culture” (2002, p. 217). This is the “recontextualizing” aspect of translation, which takes up a different body:

The creation of a different signifying chain proliferates semantic possibilities as the translator seeks to fix a signified that answers not only to the foreign text, but to the intelligibilities and interests in the translating culture. In restoring a materiality, in creating a text, translation is radically recontextualizing and thus produces a second difference, in fact a set of linguistic and cultural differences that are inscribed in the foreign text. (Venuti, 2002, p. 217)

This difference, says Venuti, is irreducible: "Despite what may seem to be analogous linguistic and discursive structures between a foreign text and its translation, no similarity of form and meaning or of reception pre-exists the translating process (2002, p. 216). Thus, contexts are dismantled, negotiated, multiplied, and articulated. Difference is not "resolved" or settled.

Rabassa's translations are famous and often considered "masterful." They have been accepted, authorized, and have become uncontested literary products in themselves. Let us look at the opening lines of his most famous translation:

Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo.<sup>8</sup>

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.<sup>9</sup>

Shall we say that the first text is the second? Rabassa's translation does not look like the original text. It does not sound like it either. It is not the original. Translation is writing. One text is not the clone of another. The sound of Rabassa's translation of *Cien Años de Soledad* is an English language sound. As Rabassa says, quoting Ortega y Gasset, he is a translator "within" his circumstance. If the translation aspect of his text is not acknowledged, the text can be "misleading." Translation, like dialogue, is populated with misunderstandings, interferences, silences (deliberate and otherwise), etc. As Michael Cronin puts it, the power nexus between languages is constantly shifting, so the relationships of translation have to be endlessly calibrated (1998, p. 161). Narratives in translation exist in that continuum, which is connected to that of the contact between languages

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8 Opening lines of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1967.

9 Opening lines of Rabassa's English translation of García Márquez's novel, entitled *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.



and communities. Why do certain works “travel”? Why certain writers? What do the narratives of translation confirm? What do they represent? As Franco Moretti remarks, literary conventions “enlist support” for particular systems of values (1996, p. 3). It is crucial to understand translation as one of the forms through which culture produces itself and address the way literary choices and conventions influence works, traditions, and symbolic orderings. Practices of cultural production ought to be constantly, and productively, interrogated.

Consequently, within the multivalent and collective spaces of translation, Rabassa’s opening to uncertainty after the verdict may be seen as a call for responsibility in relation to the potential violence exercised by translation and its mediating nature.

Rabassa speaks of “misunderstanding” as a most important word in almost any sphere of life: “We have international misunderstandings that can lead to war, although sometimes said misunderstanding is cultivated and intentional [...] every so often the misunderstanding does not come from a wrong interpretation of the words involved but, rather, from a misconception of what they stand for (Rabassa, 1991, p. 35). This, I believe, is a form of recognition that there is room for “treason” in creating and disseminating narratives in translation as much as there is room for treason in writing and in using language. Hence, the recognition of doubt, of uncertainty, as inherent to translation, may function—between impossibility and possibility—as an ethics of doubt.

I read Rabassa’s verdict as a statement that, whether desirable or not, indeterminacy is part of the nature of translation; that translation has a quality of ongoing questioning to it. It is a call for translators to be attentive to the circumstances surrounding the translating situation and to translate “with their eyes open.”<sup>10</sup> Rabassa sees uncertainty, for translators, as

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10 As R. Barsky remarked in a paper entitled “Translating into Fifteen Years of Prison or When Not to Say ‘You May, Officer’” presented during the *Translation and Social Activism Conference* at Glendon College, York University (October 20, 2005).

strength. As a translator who embodies a particular experience of cultural and linguistic contact, his embracing uncertainty is significant. Rabassa's words at the end of *If This Be Treason* leave an opening to uncertainty which, if seen as an ethical stance and in light of Rabassa's thoughts about language, suggests a call for self-reflection and, also, openness to worldly fluidity, to time and space, to continuance, and to change.

YORK UNIVERSITY, GLENDON COLLEGE

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**ABSTRACT: Rabassa and the "Narrow Act": Between Possibility and an Ethics of Doubt** — In this article I examine the writings about translation by Gregory Rabassa, translator into English of such canonical novels as Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* and Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*. I look at some of Rabassa's articles about translation and at his recently published book *If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents*, in light of contemporary approaches in translation studies that conceptualize the translator and translators' self-images and representations. I examine the conceptions of language and translation that underlie Rabassa's statements in general, and look at them in light of Lawrence Venuti's idea of the translator's self-effacement. I discuss the way in which translators' ideas about

translation in general and about their own practice in particular can inform conceptualizations about the figure and status of the translator.

**RÉSUMÉ : Rabassa et la traduction : entre possibilité et éthique du doute** — L'objet de cet article est d'analyser les écrits sur la traduction de Gregory Rabassa, traducteur vers l'anglais de romans canoniques tels *Cien años de soledad* de Gabriel García Márquez et *Rayuela* de Julio Cortázar. Dans un premier temps, nous examinons quelques articles de Rabassa sur la traduction ainsi que son livre récent, *If This Be Treason: Translation and its Dyscontents*, à la lumière de conceptualisations contemporaines du traducteur, de l'image de soi du traducteur et des différentes représentations du traducteur. Dans un deuxième temps, nous examinons les concepts de la langue et de la traduction qui sous-tendent les écrits de Rabassa et nous les analysons à la lumière du concept de l'effacement de soi de Lawrence Venuti. Enfin, l'article présente une réflexion sur la manière dont la perception générale du traducteur quant à la traduction et à sa pratique particulière de la traduction peut informer les conceptualisations de la figure et du statut du traducteur.

**Keywords:** Gregory Rabassa, Latin-American literature, translator's invisibility, translator's self-representation, translation as writing

**Mots-clés :** Gregory Rabassa, littérature latino-américaine, invisibilité du traducteur, auto-représentation du traducteur, traduction-écriture

**María Constanza Guzmán**

School of Translation/Hispanic Studies

York University, Glendon College

2275 Bayview Avenue

Toronto (Ontario) M4N 3M6

mguzman@glendon.yorku.ca