

Unique Voices and Tricky Choices

By Tony Beckwith

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Gabriel García Márquez

died on April 17, 2014, and the world of Spanish letters was instantly plunged into mourning. The sadness and sense of loss spread even farther afield, however, for his writing had made him famous everywhere. “Each new work of his is received by expectant critics and readers as an event of world importance,” said the Swedish Academy of Letters when it awarded him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.

In the days after his death, online translation sites were abuzz with conversations about the legendary Colombian writer. This was as it should be because in his own way Gabo—as he was widely known—made an unprecedented contribution to the art of translation in 1970 when his extraordinary book, *Cien años de soledad*, was translated by Gregory Rabassa and published in the U.S. as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A generation of American readers was thus introduced to Latin American literature in particular, and to literature in translation in general. The book's phenomenal success was not lost on the publishing industry, which began to take a greater interest in authors writing in Spanish and other languages, and it was a good time for



Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez (Edgard Garrido/Reuters)

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literary translators in this country.

Inevitably, the focus of the chatter on these sites soon shifted from the big picture of García Márquez's passing and what that meant in a variety of contexts, to the rubber-meets-the-road aspect of translating the work of a writer of his stature. Stories and rumors bounced back and forth, generously seasoned with gossip and speculation, and then a particular thread caught my attention. The subject of the conversation was Gabo's apparent aversion to the use of adverbs in his writing. I confess I had never heard about this fetish (if that is the right term) and was intrigued. The chatter went on to claim that he was not alone in this particular area. The writer Stephen King, for one, has very definite ideas about the subject. In his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, King cautions that “The adverb is not your friend,” and goes on to say: “I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs.” Well!

I searched my mental hard drive for similar literary examples of adverb aversion syndrome and

recalled that, in one of his greatest poems, the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas wrote: “Do not go gentle into that good night.” Did he consciously choose to say “gentle” rather than “gently” because he disliked adverbs? Would it have made any difference? I also remembered *Truly Madly Deeply*, the 1990 movie directed by Anthony Minghella. Gabo might have thought, “Three strikes, you're out,” but I loved the movie and thought the title was terrific, even if it was nothing but adverbs.

But there is more than one kind of adverb, so which kind did García Márquez prefer not to use? In an interview in *The Washington Post*, Carlos Lozada asked Edith Grossman, who has translated several of Gabo's books, about his rules.¹ Grossman said: “He did not like adverbs that ended in *-mente* (in Spanish; the English equivalent is *-ly*). I sometimes felt like a contortionist as I searched out alternatives.” One can sympathize. Adverbs, after all, are here for a reason. I shudder to think that Minghella's

movie might have been titled: *In a True Way, a Mad Way, a Deep Way*.

Respecting a Writer's Decisions

There have, of course, always been writers with fixations and suggestions. Mark Twain made lists of rules, and urged writers to: "Use the right word, not its second cousin; avoid slovenliness of form; and employ a simple and straightforward style." Hard to argue with any of that, or with Isabel Allende, who encourages us to: "Just use one good noun instead of three adjectives."² As a more extreme example, in 1939, one Ernest Vincent Wright wrote a novel, *Gadsby*, that managed to rattle on for over 50,000 words without using a single letter *e*. The novel was written as a lipogram (ancient Greek for "leaving out a letter"), which is a form of constrained writing, a literary technique that prohibits certain things or imposes a pattern of some kind. One can only imagine the challenges facing a conscientious translator of a book like that.

From a translator's point of view, of course, one of the essential challenges is always to capture the writer's voice, the *sound* of the work. To achieve that we must zoom in on each word and sentence to grasp not just the meaning but the rhythm, the tone, and the structure of the original. If the writer prefers to avoid a particular figure of speech or grammatical construct, then that decision is something we must respect and come to terms with.

But I am far more interested in the words a writer does use than the ones he or she does not. Those words are, after all, the essential building blocks of the story or poem I would like to translate. They have particular meanings, certainly, but they also have particular sounds and connotations that I must take into account and attempt to replicate. If I were translating the Irish poet Seamus Heaney³, for example, I would have to keep in mind that he used ordinary Anglo-Saxon words like "sod," "drain," and "rot" to make his poems sing. He said he wanted to write with "a musically satisfying order of sounds," so that is what a translation of

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his work should aim for. The target language should somehow convey "the squelch and slap of the soggy peat."⁴

If, on the other hand, I wanted to translate the work of Billy Collins—U.S. poet laureate from 2001 to 2003—I would have to remember that he said, "My poetry is suburban, it's domestic, it's middle class, and it's sort of unashamedly that, but I hope there's enough imaginative play in there that it's not simply poems about barbecuing." His poems are conversational, whimsical, and witty with a deceptive simplicity that beguiles the reader and could easily trip up the unwary translator. For example:

I closed my eyes and thought
about the alphabet,
the letters filling out the halls of
kindergarten
to become literature.
If the British call *z* zed,
I wondered, why not call *b* bed
and *d* dead?⁵

Speaking of deceptively simple poems, I would love to translate Wislawa Szymborska, but I do not speak a word of Polish. Instead I read what sound like exquisite versions by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak:

No day copies yesterday
no two nights will teach what bliss is
in precisely the same way
with exactly the same kisses.⁶

In a review of *Here*, the collection of Szymborska's poems translated by the same team and published in 2010, Hanna Gil, writing for the Polish Book Club in Seattle, said: "Her poetic images are universal, and for that reason her poems might seem easy to translate. However, it appears the opposite is true; because their

language is so simple, they are very difficult. Poetry needs to be effortlessly transformed in English, not by simple words but by something difficult to grasp, by the poem's mood."

A Transformative Experience

On the subject of translation as transformation, Edith Grossman discussed this idea with Maria Cecilia Salisbury in her interview for the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas⁷ and refers to "... the translator's obligation to recreate, in another language, the tone, sense, and impact of the original. In order to fulfill that obligation, literary translators must be sensitive writers in English ...". In the interview in *The Washington Post* mentioned earlier, Grossman said: "Translating means expressing an idea or a concept in a way that's entirely different from the original, since each language is a separate system. And so, in fact, when I translate a book written in Spanish, I'm actually writing another book in English."

When contemplating certain projects, then, instead of wondering "How good a translator am I?" perhaps we should be asking "How good a writer am I?" How sensitive are we to the nuances of the source text and how well can we express them in the translation?

For example, if we are translating the work of a poet like Billy Collins, can we recreate in another language the essentially American feeling conveyed by, say, a Norman Rockwell painting? How do we do that? In her book, *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman talks about the daunting challenge of working on the opening words in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, arguably the most famous phrase in Spanish literature: "*En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme*." She recited those

words to herself “as if they were a mantra,” searching for an English phrase with comparable rhythm, “that echoed some of the sound of the original,” trying to recapture how readers might have experienced it centuries ago. The words came to her, and she wrote: “Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember.” The resulting “rush of euphoric satisfaction” that she felt is the *translator’s high* we can all recognize and relate to. Over and above the fee we may earn and the applause we may enjoy, that euphoria is our most intimate reward for immersing ourselves in the words and ideas of a writer whose work we want to carry into another language.

Once I have finished a translation and the euphoria has died down, I am usually ready to dive into the next one. But apparently not everyone feels that way. “When I finished one book, I wouldn’t write for a while,” García Márquez once said. “Then I had to learn how to do it all over again. The arm goes cold; there’s a learning

process you have to go through again before you rediscover the warmth that comes over you when you are writing.” I imagine we can all understand what Gabo means, since we must all be familiar with the warmth that comes over us when we are translating. ■

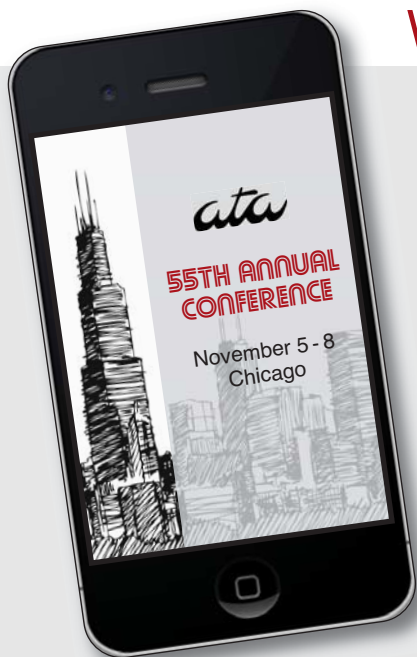
Notes

1. Lozada, Carlos. “‘Everything He Wrote Was Gold’: An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez’s Translator,” *The Washington Post* (April 18, 2014), <http://bit.ly/Post-Gabriel-García-Márquez>.
2. Meredith Maran, Ed. *Why We Write: 20 Acclaimed Authors on How and Why They Do What They Do* (Plume, 2013).
3. Seamus Heaney won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995.
4. “Digging,” from Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966.
5. “The Long Day,” from Billy Collins’ *The Trouble with Poetry and other Poems* (New York: Random House, 2005).
6. “Nothing Twice,” from *View With a Grain of Salt*, by Wislawa Szymborska, winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature “for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality.”
7. Salisbury, Maria Cecilia. “The Making of a Translator: An Interview with Edith Grossman,” UT Dallas Center for Translation Studies, University of Texas at Dallas, (June 8, 2014), <http://bit.ly/UTDallas-Edith-Grossman>; Also see: Winter, Julie. “Edith Grossman: On Translating García Márquez,” *Source* (ATA Literary Division), [www.ata-divisions.org/LD/newsletter/2014/Source Summer2014.pdf](http://www.ata-divisions.org/LD/newsletter/2014/Source%20Summer2014.pdf).

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