Arts & Humanities

The Peculiar Perils of Literary Translation

In balancing authenticity with readability, translators tackle a seemingly impossible art — and rarely receive enough credit.

By
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|
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Melinda Beck

In 1978, Gregory Rabassa ’54GSAS, famed translator of Gabriel García Márquez ’71HON, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, was asked about a review in the *Washington Post* of a novel by the Guatemalan writer and Nobel Prize winner Miguel

Ángel Asturias. Rabassa had translated the book from Spanish into English, and though the reviewer praised the richness of Asturias's language, he never once mentioned Rabassa. It was as if the reader had absorbed the author's words directly, without any mediator. Rabassa, who taught Spanish and Portuguese at Columbia from 1948 to 1969, wryly wondered aloud whether the reviewer even knew the book had been translated. "This would seem to be an additional argument," Rabassa quipped, "for the placing of the translator's name on the dust jacket of the book."

At least since *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was translated from Sumerian into Akkadian four thousand years ago, translators have been unsung conduits of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exchange. The verb "translate" is rooted in the Latin *translatus*, meaning "to bear across," and indeed translators, living on the edges of two languages, must ferry meaning across a churning sea of possibilities. In doing this they have faced skepticism and worse. An early martyr of translation, the English scholar William Tyndale, was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536 for violating a papal decree against translating the Latin Bible into local languages, and in the sixteenth century, Italians angered by French translations of Dante, which they felt betrayed the poetry, hurled the phrase *traduttore, traditore*, or "translator, traitor" (a sentiment shared by many authors whose work has been shabbily translated — allusions disfigured, humor gone flat). Given the nuances and resonances of any two languages and the unachievable ideal of perfect lexical equivalence, writers from Voltaire to Virginia Woolf have decried the futility of translation, and the philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt declared it "impossible." Science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin '52GSAS, herself an amateur translator, called the act "entirely mysterious."

Impossible, mysterious, traitorous, or plain misunderstood, literary translation remains a powerful vehicle for the transmission of stories and ideas around the globe. Today, in the US, recently translated books by Elena Ferrante (Italy), Roberto Bolaño (Chile), Stieg Larsson (Sweden), Liu Cixin (China), Haruki Murakami (Japan), Olga Tokarczuk (Poland), and Karl Ove Knausgård (Norway), among others, are as readily seen in coffee shops as those by English-language authors. Yet in most cases the translators are only discreetly acknowledged. And while a few practitioners like Rabassa, Constance Garnett (best known for her Tolstoy), C. K. Scott Moncrieff (Proust), and professor emeritus Richard Howard '51CC (Baudelaire, Robbe-Grillet, Stendhal) are well known, the vast majority of translators toil in relative anonymity, quietly bearing an author's words across the waters.

“Translation is an art,” says writer and translator Mark Polizzotti ’82GSAS, who has rendered the French of Rimbaud, Flaubert, and Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano. “When you read a translation it doesn’t mean it’s a secondary experience. It doesn’t mean you’re not reading the author. It means you are reading the product of *two* authors: the original author and the translator, who has to read the text, interpret it, and regenerate it in terms that make linguistic sense.”

“Translation is writing,” says Katrine Øgaard Jensen ’17SOA, an award-winning translator of Danish poetry into English. “It’s rewriting a literary work. You write the same book but in a different language, which means it’s not the same book anymore. It’s a sibling. It’s not a twin.” Richard Howard, who received a National Book Award for his 1982 translation of Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*, once put it this way: “Since it’s almost impossible to translate *the line* in most poetry, one is not translating poetry at all, one is translating what the poetry says, which is a very different thing. One is translating the *myth* of the poem.”

Susan Bernofsky, a translator of German literature, is the director of Literary Translation at Columbia (LTAC), part of the graduate writing program in the School of the Arts. Created in 2012, LTAC offers classes and workshops for all writing students — not as a training program for translation but as a tool to improve writing skills. “Translation affords opportunities to think about what English can do and what English can be asked to do,” Bernofsky says. “It forces you to solve aesthetic problems that you wouldn’t have to solve writing your own material.”

In its decade-long existence, LTAC has helped educate world-class translators, burnishing the reputation of a university whose signature undergraduate program, the Core Curriculum, is based on reading classical works in translation, and whose graduates include some of the most venerated names in the field. There are Rabassa and Howard, as well as professors Burton Watson ’50CC, ’56GSAS and Donald Keene ’42CC, ’50GSAS, ’97HON, whose English translations of classical Japanese and Chinese literature and modern Japanese literature introduced Westerners to the literary art of East Asia. Ambitious twenty-first-century biblical translations by Robert Alter ’57CC (Old Testament) and Willis Barnstone ’56GSAS (New Testament) have won high praise. And it was Moses Hadas ’30GSAS, a translator of Greek and Latin who taught at Columbia College from 1925 until his death in 1966, who advocated for teaching the classics not only in English translation (sacrilege to some) but in contemporary English, saying, “Let each age put down the classics in its own language, just so long as they keep the spirit of the

original.”

Today, alumni translators are applying their powers to other canonical works: poet Mary Jo Bang ’98SOA is translating Dante’s narrative poem *The Divine Comedy* (*Purgatorio*, its second part, was published last summer to glowing reviews), and next year, W. W. Norton will publish a new English version of Miguel de Cervantes’s towering seventeenth-century novel *Don Quixote*, translated by Kimi Traube ’08CC, ’14SOA.

For Bernofsky, the biggest misconception about translation is the notion “that translators just look up each word in the dictionary — which couldn’t be further from what we do,” she says. “Every language has its own way of doing business. German, for example, is a highly inflected language that gives you more syntactical flexibility than English, which means you can arrange your sentences rhythmically in ways that aren’t available to English-language writers. And you can change word order around a lot in German without changing the meaning of the sentence — whereas in English, if you switch the nouns in the sentence *I gave the man a hat*, it’s a different meaning.”

Bernofsky is working on Thomas Mann’s 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain* (to be published by Norton) and has translated Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and the fiction of Swiss-German writer (and Kafka forerunner) Robert Walser. She notes that translation requires skills far beyond fluency. “When a literary translation falls down, it’s not because the person didn’t know the other language well enough,” she says. “It’s because the person isn’t a strong enough writer.” (Rabassa, asked if his Spanish was good enough to translate García Márquez, replied, “The question should be: Is my English good enough?”)

A good translator, then, not only possesses a flair for language but is also intuitive, resourceful, and sensitive to the essential qualities of the source text. “Nuances of tone are everything in literature, and figuring out the voice in another language is extremely difficult,” Bernofsky says. “For *The Magic Mountain* it took me a really long time.” In one scene, the protagonist, Hans Castorp, still a child, is confronted with the dead body of his beloved grandfather lying in state before burial. “The tone is very complicated, because on the one hand there’s a sense of mourning and reverence, while on the other Mann is undercutting the solemnity by focusing on disruptive features of the scene: a fly landing on the corpse and the perceptible smell of decay despite all the flowers brought in to disguise the odor. This is a

typical Mann situation (which people generally talk about in terms of irony), with conflicting moods expressed in a single passage or sentence."

Jensen, who was born in Denmark and teaches in LTAC, explains that a literary translator "must have a feeling for the style of the work, the pace of the sentences, the rhythm, as well as the exciting word choices that make you want to keep reading. A word-for-word translation can work for a recipe, but it can't work for literature."

Jensen's translation of *Third-Millennium Heart*, a poetry collection by the prominent Danish poet Ursula Andkjær Olsen, is a case in point. "This was a highly experimental work, and I was worried about how to convey it in English," Jensen says. For one thing, Olsen used neologisms that have no English parallel, and Jensen wrestled with what to do. Should she go for a literal translation, even if it didn't make sense? "In the end, I chose to invent my own words — ones that hit the same sort of tone and give the English reader a similar experience," she says. "For instance, to make a reference to capitalism slightly clearer, I translated the neologism *væksthund* (direct translation: growth-dog) to 'charging bulldog,' replacing 'growth' with a reference to Wall Street's *Charging Bull*, an American symbol of aggressive financial optimism."

The book, which was Jensen's MFA thesis, won the 2018 National Translation Award in Poetry. "You have to take some risks," Jensen says, "if you want to create something interesting for the reader."

Idra Novey '00BC, '07SOA, a novelist, poet, and translator, knows this well. In 2012, New Directions published Novey's English version of *The Passion According to G. H.*, a 1964 novel by Clarice Lispector, the acclaimed Ukrainian-Brazilian writer whose interior, stream-of-consciousness style presented a daunting but seductive task. "Translating Clarice was a master class in risky prose," says Novey, who grew up in western Pennsylvania, taught in Chile after college, and later moved to Brazil to improve her Portuguese. "I tried not to explain or interpret her writing but to recreate the mystery. That's the translator's job: you're there to make the magic happen again in another language."

To achieve this subtle alchemy, translators must shrewdly address common textual problems. "Proper nouns, wordplay, jokes, dialects, idioms, slang, pop-cultural references specific to the country, the texture of a conversation, or even characters'

names — translating these things can create headaches," says Jae Won Edward Chung '08SOA, '17GSAS, a professor of Korean literature at Rutgers who has translated excerpts from the novels *Whale*, by Cheon Myeong-kwan, and *A World History of Second Sons*, by Lee Kiho, as well as short fiction and poetry. "When you turn certain words and phrases into English, they can look or sound weird."

Chung points to the name of the main character of *A World History of Second Sons*, which is □□□, pronounced Nah Bok Mahn. "The name is meant to be ironic, because it literally means 'Only Fortune for Me,' but Na's fate is anything but lucky," Chung says. "He's framed as a spy and destroyed by the government. Existing romanization standards suggest Na Pokman or Na Pongman or even Na Bogman. Though I like their whimsical feel, which is consistent with the tone of the novel, I don't necessarily want the reader thinking of the character as a 'bog man' or a Pokémon. So though imperfect, I went for 'Na Bogmahn,' which better approximates the sound of the original. The playfulness of the original is gone, but so be it. You have to prioritize certain things over others if you want a readable translation."

This regard for the reader's experience touches on an age-old debate among translators that Mark Polizzotti, in his 2018 manifesto on translation titled *Sympathy for the Traitor*, calls the "fidelity versus felicity" divide. "On one side are those who think there's a single meaning to a word and you adhere strictly to that meaning and follow the words of the author precisely, regardless of how strange they might sound, because you want to be as 'faithful' as possible," Polizzotti says. "The other side believes that style is integral to the text, and that what you're trying to bring forward, knowing that languages work differently, is the music. So in order to make the translation give the same pleasure of the text — and I'm a big believer in the pleasure of the text — the translator will have to make choices and take some liberties."

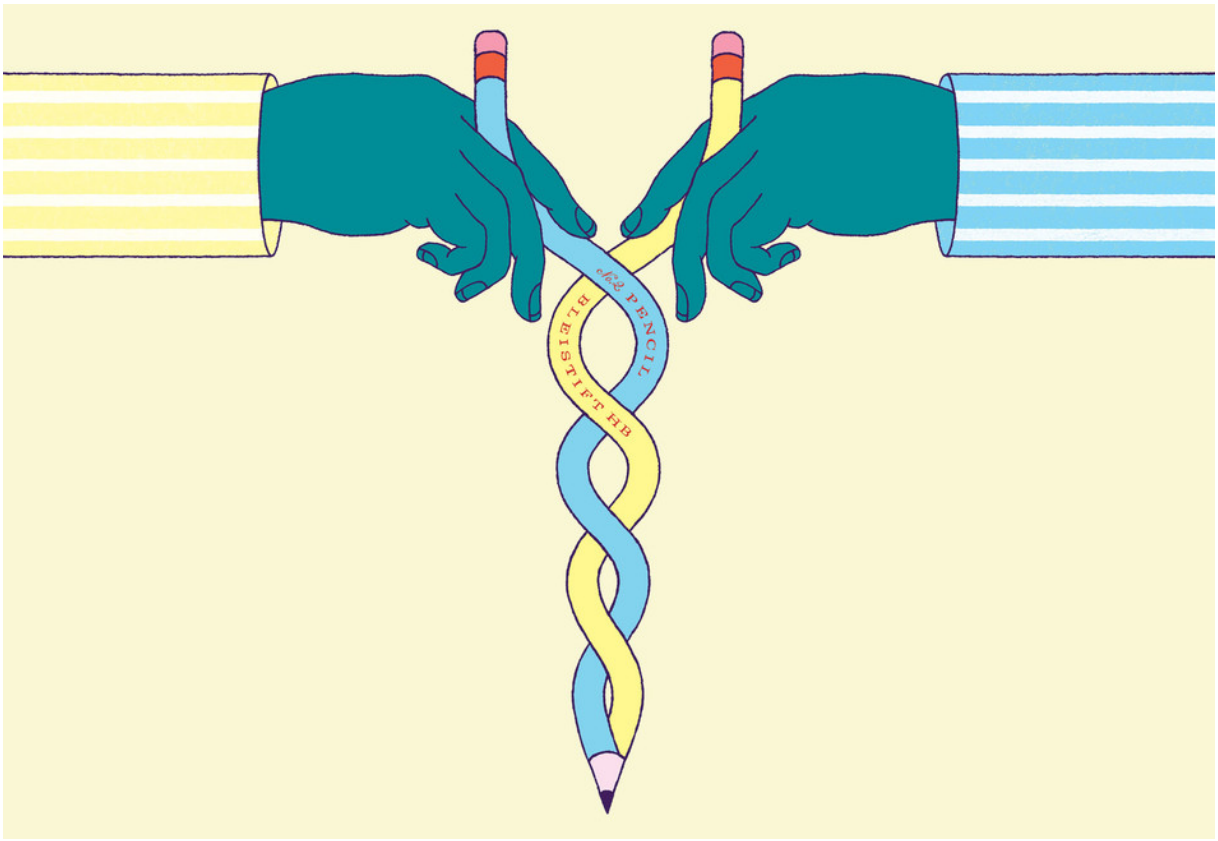
This high degree of subjectivity, together with the fluidity of language and culture, casts doubt on the notion that any single translation of a work can be definitive. While some translations have attained classic status (Garnett's *Anna Karenina*, Rabassa's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), that doesn't stop translators from attempting the task again and again. Rabassa once said, "I have always felt that while the original endures and remains eternally young, the translation ages and must be replaced."

Bernofsky isn't so sure. "I am not convinced that a good translation 'ages' as fast or as fully as some like to claim," she says. "I love the early-twentieth-century feel of Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter's 1927 translation of *The Magic Mountain*. When I think about 'updating' it, it's less because the language needs replacing than it is that I, in the twenty-first century, see different things in Mann's text. For example, I noticed the colonialist chain of association that is evoked by Mann's metaphorical invocation of an elephant when describing loading docks in Hamburg. To make the association clear, I used the word 'plantations' in my translation (Lowe-Porter uses the more literal 'colonial produce' where I have 'spices and fruit from colonial plantations,' since readers today might not be as aware of what 'colonial produce' in Germany might have consisted of more than a hundred years ago). And I write that the elephants are 'pressed into service,' where Lowe-Porter has 'elephants at work' — whereas a literal translation of Mann's German ('serving elephants') is somewhere in between. The combination of 'pressed' and 'plantation' — both still reasonable interpretations of the German — help reveal the colonial power structures that underlie this picture of a Hamburg wharf."

Don Quixote, regarded by some critics as the greatest novel ever written, has been translated into English more than a dozen times, including a much-lauded version by LTAC faculty member Edith Grossman in 2003. The new translation by Kimi Traube will inevitably capture not just the art of Cervantes but also the cultural and historical moment in which the translation was produced.

"When we translate a text, whether it was written four years ago or four hundred, we are seeking to bring the beating heart of it — the particular piece of humanity it explores — to a new life in a new context," says Traube, who also teaches in LTAC. "My job is to help bring forth both the humor and the striking similarities with our own world, and the way the problems Cervantes was lampooning continue to resonate. That's something translation allows us to do, across time and space."

This echoes a statement that Italo Calvino once made to Columbia writing professor Frank MacShane, a literary biographer and translator who in 1967 founded the graduate writing program in the School of the Arts. "Without translation, I would be limited to the borders of my own country," Calvino said. "The translator is my most important ally. He introduces me to the world."



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Since the beginning, translators have grappled with how best to go about their work. Some believe that a translation should be chiefly concerned with imparting the *sense* of the text — the gist, the drift — even if it means straying from the author's words. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, a translator of Greek to Latin, wrote, "I did not think I ought to count [the words] out to the reader like coins but to pay them by weight, as it were." St. Jerome, the fourth-century Christian scholar and patron saint of translators who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, stated that "in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures, where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word."

Standing in opposition to this school are the partisans of the "servile path" theory, a term taken from a 1648 poem by Sir John Denham ("That servile path thou nobly dost decline / of tracing word by word, and line by line"). This side holds that translators are servants to the author, and should not stray an inch from the work lest they be tempted to rewrite it in their own image.

In the fall of 1960, Michael Scammell '85GSAS, an English-born graduate student of Russian at Columbia, received a dramatic lesson in this dispute. He had started translating, for his own edification, a novel by a Soviet author. He shared his work

with his professor, the poet and Russian scholar Franklin Reeve ’58GSAS (father of actor Christopher Reeve). Reeve was impressed and got Scammell a job translating the whole book.

Meanwhile, Scammell had rented a room in a house near campus belonging to a woman named Anna Fagan, a Russian émigrée by way of Paris and Berlin. One day, Fagan asked him to Sunday tea. Scammell arrived to find that three other people had also been invited, including a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman who immediately caught Scammell’s attention. “I’d like to introduce you,” Fagan said, “to Mr. Vladimir Nabokov.”

The men shook hands, and the author of *Lolita* broke into a rather one-sided discussion of translation.

“Nabokov was very opinionated about the subject,” Scammell says. “He had translated some very difficult authors, so he knew what he was talking about.” Nabokov was looking for an English translator for his Russian novel *The Gift*. “I want the servile path,” he announced — and would Scammell be interested? “He gave me explicit instructions to follow the original sentences very closely,” Scammell recalls. “At the time I agreed with the servile path — not departing from the original by a comma — and I enjoyed that challenge.”

While Scammell labored, Nabokov was in Los Angeles working on the script for the film version of *Lolita*. When Scammell was done, he mailed the manuscript to the author. Nabokov was pleased. “That was my training,” says Scammell, who went on to translate Nabokov’s *The Defense*, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*. He also abandoned the servile path.

“Other languages have different registers of style, and I believe that the English reader should feel completely comfortable reading a translation,” he says. “But there is another school of thought — I haven’t come across it in any other country but it’s very strong in America — which says that it’s a betrayal to make a translation sound like American English. ‘It’s a translation, therefore it should *sound* like a translation’ — it should have a sprinkling of words and phrases in the other language, and different word orders to match the syntax of the original, regardless of how it sounds in English. Which to me was always heresy.”

This contrast — between “domesticating” and “foreignizing” translators, to use the terminology of translation theorist Lawrence Venuti ’80GSAS — is central to debates

among literary translators today. According to Seth Schein ’63CC, ’67GSAS, a classicist who has translated Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher described a similar dichotomy in his 1813 lecture “On the Different Methods of Translating.” Schleiermacher, Schein says, favors the translator who “moves the reader toward the author” (the “foreignizing” translator) over the translator who “moves the author toward the reader” by using contemporary style and language (the “domesticating” translator). Schein, who translates with pedagogy in mind, finds a foreignizing translation more effective in the classroom. “I think it’s also a good way to translate for general readers,” he says. “Others believe that giving readers the easiest access to the text is what makes them want to go further. But I think it’s the foreignizing translation, with all its idiosyncrasies, that engages readers best.”

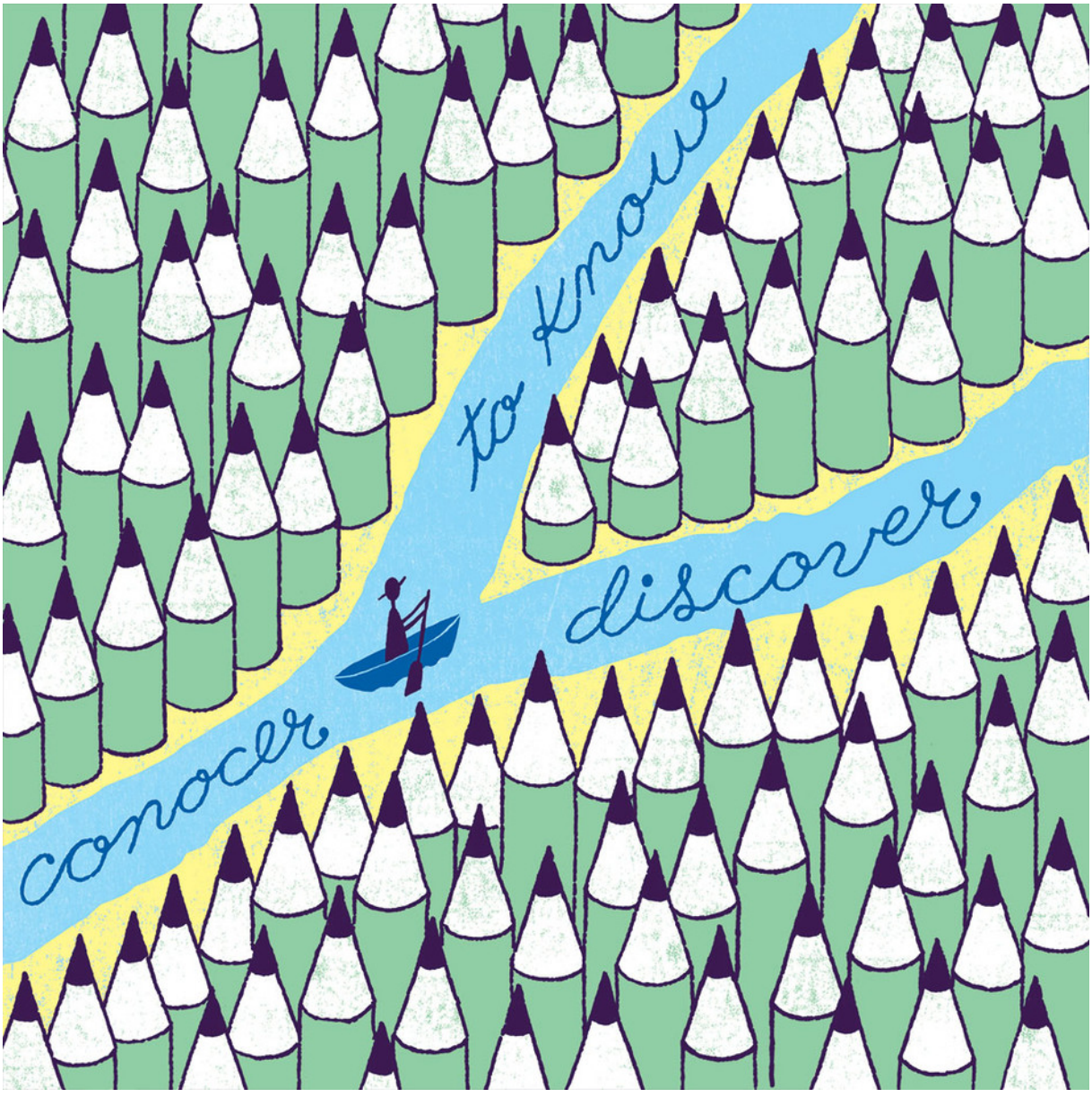
Despite these differences, most translators agree on one thing: they deserve more respect. “The attitude toward translators has been a scandal from day one,” says Scammell. “As for leaving translators’ names off the covers, it’s disgraceful. With globalism being such a normal part of life, people have a better understanding of the importance of translating books from other countries. I’m shocked it’s even an issue.”

The situation has given rise to translation-centric publishers like Transit Books, founded in 2015 by writer Ashley Nelson Levy ’12SOA and translator Adam Levy ’12SOA, a married couple who met in Columbia’s MFA program and later relocated to the Bay Area. “We want visibility for translators,” says Ashley. “We always put their names on the covers, and in the back of the books we try to add supplementary content on the art of translation.” Says Adam, “Our philosophy is that you can sell a book while bringing translation to the fore. It’s not just putting the translator’s name on the cover — it’s bringing the translator into the conversation.” Asked to quantify the collaboration between author and translator, he says, “It’s not so much 50–50 as it is 100–100.”

In his manifesto, Polizzotti asks readers to embrace the idea that “translators are creative artists in their own right, on a par and in partnership with the author being translated.” He observes, too, that some of “the most beautifully realized translations have been successful precisely because the personality of the translator shone through and made itself felt.”

And that’s the heart of it for these literary artists: putting a translator’s name on the front cover isn’t a concession — it’s an accurate reflection of the collaborative nature of the work.

“A translation is a fusion, absolutely,” says Idra Novey. “Without it, we wouldn’t have access to so much phenomenal literature. So why not delight in the fusion?”



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Translation Navigation

Gregory Rabassa is best known for his 1970 translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez that embodies the genre known as magical realism. In his memoir If *This Be Treason*, Rabassa shares his thinking about the intricacies of word choice. The novel opens with the sentence “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.” Rabassa famously translated this into: “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.”

“I chose *remember* over *recall*,” Rabassa writes, “because I feel that it conveys a deeper memory … Also, I liked *distant* when used with time … The real problem for choice was with *conocer*,” the Spanish verb for “to know,” which Rabassa translated as “to discover” — though he had plenty of options. “What is happening here is a first-time meeting, or learning,” he explains. “García Márquez has used the Spanish word here with all its connotations. But to know ice just won’t do in English. It implies, ‘How do you do, ice?’ It could be ‘to experience ice.’ The first is foolish, the second is silly. When you get to know something for the first time, you’ve discovered it.”

Rabassa’s thoughtful decisions paid off: his English version became a benchmark for literary translation, and García Márquez himself deemed it better than the original.

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