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Translating Just For Fun

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In 2007 I walked into the airport bookshop in Bogotá to find something to read on my way home to Sydney. Instead of the usual tawdry airport collection, this was a real bookshop. I bought *El Olvido Que Seremos*[1] by Héctor Abad Faciolince, a writer whose columns I occasionally read in the Colombian magazine, *Semana*. I was fascinated and enthralled by his book, practically finishing it in one sitting on the plane. I wanted my friends to read it, but they couldn't read Spanish, and there was no translation available – it had not yet become a No.1 bestseller. I had at that time been teaching myself Spanish for about ten years and was always looking for more interesting ways to improve my vocabulary. I wrote to Héctor Abad seeking his permission to translate *El Olvido Que Seremos* so that I could give it to my friends. Héctor replied that this was a most unusual request because translating is a lot of hard and often tedious work. He knew, because for many years he worked as a translator from Italian to Spanish. I knew too, but thought that burying my head in a dictionary for a few months was a good way to expand my Spanish vocabulary. I told him he could have the copyright in my translation, for what it was worth, but if he wanted to use it for publication, he should have someone look at it, because I was not even confident that it would be accurate, let alone well written. He very graciously agreed.

Several months later I gave him the translation. My friends were also enthralled by the book. Several used it for their book club discussions. Héctor was amused and flattered to think that someone in "las Antipodas" had translated it "por puro deporte", just for fun.[2] A year later I picked up my translation and leafed through it again and immediately saw that parts of it didn't read well. So I revised it completely. Early in 2010, Héctor told me that an English translation of *El Olvido Que Seremos* was finally going to be published in October and that the publishers had commissioned two distinguished translators, Anne McLean from Canada and Rosalind Harvey from Great Britain. I anxiously awaited *Oblivion: A Memoir*[3] to see how mine fared against theirs. I had a few more disappointing moments comparing the two versions, but they were far fewer and less anguished than would have been the case with my first version.

In my professional life as a lawyer, I always received feedback on whatever I wrote, be it an advice to a client or a submission to the Court. It might be positive, or I might be told it was a load of rubbish – whether by the judge, my opposing lawyers or my client. But there was always feedback. Then I was appointed a part-time judge. I wrote judgments and handed them down, and unless the matter went on appeal, I never received any feedback. No one came up to me in the street to say that my judgment was dripping with wisdom and wit, or that it was a load of codswallop. It just floated out into the ether and disappeared. I really missed that feedback, even the negative stuff, like a lonely child needing attention. I sometimes think that translators are like that because their names are hidden in small print at the front of the book as if they were just typists. Book reviews rarely comment on the translation and, if they do, the comments are usually anodyne, "beautifully translated by…" or something even more banal. Part of the reason has to be that the reviewer will rarely be competent to comment on the translation. In Anne McLean's view, "[w]hen an author's prose is praised by a reviewer who

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[1] Editorial Planeta Colombiana, SA, Bogotá 2006.

[2] Interview with Héctor Abad in the Colombian daily, *El Tiempo*, 4 March 2008. He also mentioned that someone else had done the same thing, translating it into Danish, just for fun.
http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2849939

[3] London: Old Street Publishing Ltd., 2010.

doesn't think to mention, or maybe doesn't even notice the fact that it was originally written in another language, that means I've done my job".[4] While not being noticed may be a virtue, translators must still feel like abandoned orphans from time to time. As I compared the two translations, and without wishing to be too presumptuous, I passed on my comments to Anne McLean and Rosalind Harvey. Their response was gracious, grateful, and their comments most helpful.

Boyd Tonkin considered that Abad's family memoir deserved classic status.[5] Mario Vargas Llosa writes on the cover jacket: "It is very difficult to summarize *Oblivion: A Memoir* without betraying it, because, like all great works, it is many things at once". Having thus been warned, let me try to summarize it without betraying it. It is essentially a biography of the author's father, Héctor Abad Gómez, a Professor of Public Health at the University of Antioquia who was assassinated by right-wing paramilitaries in August 1987 at a time when, as head of a Human Rights organization, he was condemning the violence on both sides of the conflict in Colombia. Being a biography of the author's father inevitably means it is also an autobiography and, to quote Vargas Llosa again, it is "a true story that is also fiction due to the way it's written and constructed and one of the most eloquent arguments written in our time or any time against terror as an instrument of political action". All autobiography is fiction to some extent because our memories pass through filters. Memories become distorted with time so as to be coherent with our own ideas and image before they become, in author Antonio Vélez's words, "pickled".[6] In chapter 24 of his book, Héctor Abad accepts the fact that all memories are "pickled" versions – a topic to which he returned in a later work, *Traiciones de La Memoria*.[7] But this element of the personal viewpoint also makes an autobiography interesting.

Oblivion: A Memoir has the suspense of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*.[8] You know a murder is going to take place, and little bits and pieces are dribbled out in the course of the narrative. It became the No.1 bestseller in South America, much to the author's surprise because he thought it was just a "Colombian story".[9] But clearly it had universal appeal, not the least for Héctor's description of the extraordinary relationship he had with his father. The book's title comes from the first line of a poem by Jorge Luis Borges, "*El olvido que seremos"*, which was scribbled out in his father's handwriting on a piece of paper found in his pocket on the day he was assassinated, together with the paramilitaries' hit list on which his name appeared. The piece of paper had the words "JLB" at the bottom. The poem itself became the reason for another book by Abad, because after the publication of *El Olvido*, a Colombian poet, Harold Alvarado Tenorio, claimed it was not written by Borges but by Tenorio himself, imitating Borges's style, six years after the assassination. In other words, the story about the Borges poem in his father's pocket was pure fiction. *Traiciones de La Memoria*[10] is a wonderful literary detective story about how Abad finally tracked down the poem to the authorship of the blind Borges who died in 1986, the year before the assassination. The book is a non-fiction literary thriller with a touch of Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind.*[11]

The McLean and Harvey translation of *El Olvido Que Seremos* is exquisitely written. I only have to go back to my original translation to realize how easy it can be to butcher a great book. My second attempt has not fared so badly, but almost invariably the flow of their

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[4] Personal correspondence, 28 November 2010.

[5] http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/oblivion-a-memoir-by-hector-abad-6256582.html

[6] Antonio Vélez, *Homo Sapiens* (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2006), Ch. 7.

[7] Bogotá: Alfaguara, 2009.

[8] Gabriel García Márquez (Vintage, 2003).

[9] Interview with Héctor Abad in the Colombian daily, *El Tiempo* 4 March 2008. http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2849939

[10] Alfaguara, 2009.

[11] Weidenfeld & Nicolson (2001), original title *La Sombra del Viento* (Editorial Planeta S.A., 2002).

language is still better than mine. There were times when I fell into what Anne Pasternak Slater described when reviewing Volokhonsky and Pevear's new translation of her uncle's Dr. Zhivago, "[the translator's] main pitfall is to drift unconsciously into the linguistic aura of his original – in this case, to write a kind of Russified English".[12] In the example below, I drifted right into this pitfall by following the Spanish too closely, while McLean and Harvey neatly sidestepped it with a very concise rendition.

HAF La idea más insoportable de mi infancia era imaginar que mi papá se pudiera morir, y *por eso yo había resuelto tirarme al río Medellín si él llegaba a morirse.*

AMHR As a child the most unbearable idea was that my papa might die, *and I resolved to throw myself into the River Medellin if he did.*[13]

KT The most unbearable thought of my childhood was to imagine that my father could die, and for that reason, *I had resolved to throw myself into the Medellin River if it ever happened that he died.*

There are, of course, many other examples. I subjected my second version to a kind of blind literary tasting by giving some well read friends a collection of some thirty passages from the two translations (including the one above) without identifying which was which and asked them for their preference in terms of ease of reading. The results confirmed my own belief. It was not a clean sweep, but they were two to one in favour of the McLean and Harvey version.

The book presents many of the classic challenges that translators have to face, as well as the normal issues of tone and flavour. For example, it is always difficult to decide whether to leave in some foreign words to keep some of the atmosphere of the original. I first translated "mama" and "papa" to "mum" and "dad" and occasionally dropped into "mother" and "father" in longer paragraphs. When I gave a copy to some friends, they asked me why I had not left it as "mama" and "papa", because every English speaker has heard of "The Mamas and the Papas". So, in the revised version, I took out all the mums and dads and threw in the mamas and the papas. McLean and Harvey opted for my first choice, while generally preferring the more formal "mother" and "father". Anne McLean told me that the reason for their choice was because the author told her that "'papa' is absolutely standard in Medellin and that 'mi papa' is the equivalent of 'mi padre' in Madrid or as far away as Bogotá". Local knowledge always helps in making such choices. McLean and Harvey do occasionally keep some Spanish words to create the local flavour.

HAF —¡*Niñas*! Mi mamá decía siempre «*niñas*» porque las niñas eran más y entonces esa regla gramatical (un hombre entre mil mujeres convierte todo al género masculino) para ella no contaba.

AMRH *Niñas* – !' My mother always called us *niñas* because the girls were a clear majority so therefore the grammatical rule (one man among a thousand women turns the whole group masculine) didn't count for her. (p. 4)

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[12] Anne Pasternak Slater, "Re-reading Dr. Zhivago", *The Guardian*, 6 November 2010. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/nov/06/doctor-zhivago-boris-pasternak-translation

[13] *Oblivion: A Memoir*, p. 2. All subsequent page references to this translation will be given in brackets in the body of this article. The initials "HAF" refer to the original Spanish version of Héctor Abad Faciolince, "AMRH" refers to the Anne McLean and Rosalind Harvey translation, and "KT" to my translation.

KT "*Girls*." My mama always said, "*Girls*", because there were more girls, and then the Spanish grammar rule (one man amongst a thousand women, turns all into the masculine gender), counted for nothing.

"Niña" (girl) is not a word with which many English speakers would be familiar except as a nickname for one phase of the Southern Oscillation Index currently causing havoc in Australia. However, the narrative makes it clear what it means.

It is inevitable that one's own life experiences and cultural background come into play in the choice of language in any translation.[14] The author describes a Colombian shock jock, a Catholic priest, Father Fernando Gómez Mejía who used to attack Héctor Abad Gómez vehemently for his supposed left wing views.

HAF Tenía una columna fija en el diario conservador *El Colombiano*, y un programa radial los domingos, «La Hora Católica».Este presbítero era un fanático botafuegos … que en todo sospechaba pecados de la carne, repartía anatemas a diestra y siniestra, con un sonsonete atrabiliario tan alto y repetitivo que su programa acabó siendo conocido como «La Lora Católica».

AMRH He had a regular column in the Conservative daily *El Colombiano*, and every Sunday presented the radio programme 'Catholic Hour'. This priest was a fanatical troublemaker… He suspected everyone of committing terrible sins of the flesh, and dealt out anathemas left and right, in an irritating drone so high-pitched and monotonous that his programme became known as "Sour-Hour". (p. 40)

KT He had a regular column in the conservative daily, *El Colombiano*, and a radio program on Sundays, called the "Catholic Hour". This priest was a fanatical firebrand… who suspected the sins of the flesh in everything and spewed out anathemas to the left and to the right with a troubled drone so high pitched, that he finished up being called, "The Catholic Parrot".

This passage presents one of those insoluble problems for translators. There is the obvious play on words in the Spanish, "La Hora Católica" with "La Lora Católica", which cannot be reproduced in English. The McLean and Harvey solution was to preserve the word play as best they could with "Sour Hour", although "the Catholic Cockatoo" would also have maintained some alliteration. But for me the most natural solution was to call him "The Catholic Parrot", abandoning the word play, but introducing an allusion for Australian readers to the radio shock jock Alan Jones, who sounds like the secular equivalent of Mejía, droning on in the same monotonous fashion, spewing out his own anathemas through his peculiarly shaped mouth, which earned him the nickname, "The Parrot". The "Catholic Parrot" fitted like a glove as well as being an accurate translation of "La Lora Católica".

The problem of a translation being too literal was a trap, into which I often fell, but there was one occasion when I thought McLean and Harvey did too. The author describes how a resourceful uncle paid for his architecture studies by playing his violin at "serenatas", which McLean and Harvey translate as "serenades" and which I translated as "by busking". My image of a serenade is of a love-sick poetry student, starving in a garret, playing his guitar to his beloved under her window while her parents keep the front door firmly locked in the hope that she might show some interest in her other suitor, the ambitious young stockbroker with a Porsche. The idea that anyone would be paid for "serenades" seemed to me to reduce it to the

[14] For an interesting and more detailed discussion of the influence of a translator's background on a translation, see Peter Bush, "The Centrality of a Translator's Culture: Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina* and the Creation of Style in Translation", *The AALITRA Review*, 2 (November 2010), 21-36.

level of the bordello. I thought "busking" was not only more contemporary, but stopped the serenade from being wrenched from the realm of the romantic into the world of the bottom line.

The following passage is another illustration of a classic conundrum in translation. The author writes about their maid from Medellin who came to live with them in Mexico where his father was the cultural ambassador. As a result of the trip, the maid adopted Mexican idioms which she still uses today.

HAF	No dice «a la orden», como nosotros, sino «mande»; y no dice «¡cuidado!» sino «¡aguas!», ni «vamos», sino «ándele».
AMRH	She doesn't say "a la orden" for "how can I help you?" like we do here but "mande"; she doesn't say "cuidado!*"* (look out!) but "aguas!*"*, and not "vamos!*"* (let's go), but "ándele!*"*. (p. 178)
KT	She does not say, "at your service", like we do, but "it's a pleasure". She does not say, "take care" but "keep calm", she does not say, "let's go", but "let's hit it".

My "Mexicanisms" are entirely and necessarily fictional and I am not sure which solution is better.

Another problem that arises these days in translation is what might loosely be termed "politically correct" language. In Chapter 8 the author tells the story about an adversary of his father at the University, whose nickname was "El Tuerto Jaramillo", "tuerto" meaning "one-eyed". I translated this as "One-Eyed Jaramillo", without missing a beat. If Dr. Jaramillo had lived in Australia, he might well have been called "Cyclops", and I would have used it in my translation had I thought of it at the time. However, McLean and Harvey make no reference to the nickname. The same thing happens in Chapter 41 when the narrator is talking about his exile in Madrid where he meets up with the slightly mad Alberto Aguirre who recites the poetry of "El Tuerto López". McLean and Harvey use his given name, Luis Carlos López,[15] whereas I went for the "One-Eyed López" again. These omissions may have been an editor's concession to political correctness. But if the editors were inclined to succumb to political correctness there, it did not happen in Chapter 21 where a black swimming coach, referred to as "el negro Torres" in the Spanish, becomes a nickname "El Negro Torres" in the McLean and Harvey translation. "Negro" in South America is a common enough nickname without having the pejorative overtones that it has in the English-speaking world. I was the one to succumb this time to political correctness by calling him "a black man named Torres". I also suspected that McLean and Harvey had succumbed to avoiding gender bias when translating "sobrinos" in a chant by a madman in an asylum: "Yo tengo unos sobrinos bananeros que viven en Apartadó" ("I have some nephews, banana growers, who live in Apartadó") (pp. 172 and 174). "Sobrinos" means nephews, but it can also mean nephews and nieces following the Spanish grammar rule that if one member of a group is male, then the masculine form is used.[16] In the McLean and Harvey version this becomes "cousins" which is gender neutral in English, but I simply translated it as "nephews", with the understandable excuse that if they were growing bananas in Apartadó, they were more likely to be male anyway. However, Anne McLean told me that they were not being politically correct at all. It was a genuine mistake which will be corrected in the next edition.

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[15] It seems he was popularly known as "Tuerto López".
http://www.encolombia.com/medicina/academedicina/academ25161-comentariotuerto.htm

[16] This is the same rule referred to earlier, where the author's mother always called the children "girls" ("niñas"), ignoring the rule that just one boy would turn them all into "niños".

Another problem that frequently arises in translation is whether or not one should try and imitate the author's style. Abad is a great admirer of Proust[17] and in chapter 18 there are hilarious descriptions of people attending some Catholic devotions, where ten sentences contain between seventeen and twenty-eight lines each, imitating the French master. I did the best I could to preserve that, but sometimes had to cut it in a few places for it to flow in English. One sentence of twenty eight lines which I did manage to preserve, McLean and Harvey (p. 106) cut into six shorter sentences. Anne McLean explained the reason for this:

> In general, I almost always try to translate into sentences as long as those of the authors I translate, even though it's very conventional in Spanish and not so in English. But there are lots of serious writers in English who do write long sentences. In this case, however, our editor persuaded me that we should aim for clarity above all else. The story had to have every chance to come out as simply as possible, which really isn't easy for readers in English with page-long sentences. So, we all agreed he was right to chop up quite a few of our long sentences we'd sweated over.

I have to admit, their translation of these sections is much easier to read.

One word that is repeated throughout the book when describing Héctor Abad Gómez's reactions to something is a "carcajada". The Academia Real Española says it means "risa impetuosa y ruidosa", or an "impulsive, noisy laugh". The Oxford Spanish Dictionary says it means a "guffaw" which generally appears in English dictionaries as a "loud and hearty laugh" or something similar. The English word lacks the onomatopoeic attraction of the Spanish and maybe for this reason is not often used. There does not seem to be much doubt that "carcajada" means something more than just laughter. However, McLean and Harvey translate it in three places (pp. 10, 13, 20) as a "chuckle", and in one place, when Héctor's sisters laugh at the way he parts his hair, it becomes a "chorus of giggles" (p. 5). In eight other places (pp. 28, 39, 42, 47,102, 114, 142, 241) McLean and Harvey raised the decibel level from a "chuckle" to a "laugh" but no further. And in one place (p. 238), but not in relation to Héctor Abad Gómez, it is not translated at all. Four times McLean and Harvey give it the dictionary meaning where it could not be avoided: "riéndose a las carcajadas" becomes "roaring with laughter" (p. 29), soltó una carcajada becomes "bursting with laughter" (p. 127) and "laughed out loud" (p.181), "estruendosas carcajadas" becomes "resounding laughter" (p.114). But most of the time, the decibel level in their translation has been reduced. I also reduced "carcajada" to a "laugh" on five occasions, sometimes to avoid repetition and sometimes where "roaring with laughter" or something similar did not seem to fit in with the mood. But in the rest of my version, Héctor Abad Gómez is laughing loudly, roaring, bursting, cackling, cracking up, splitting his sides or letting out streams of it. This would not matter in the overall context of a superb translation, except that the word "carcajada" occurs fifteen times throughout the text and in all but two instances it refers to Héctor Abad Gomez's reaction to many of the situations he confronted. Here some examples of the differences in tone and volume:

HAF —¡ Muy bien! —decía mi papá con *una carcajada de satisfacción*, y me felicitaba con un gran beso en la mejilla, al lado de la oreja. Sus besos, grandes y sonoros, nos aturdían *y se quedaban retumbando en el tímpano, como un recuerdo doloroso y feliz, durante mucho tiempo*.

AMRH "Very good", my father would say with a *satisfied chuckle*, and congratulate me with a big kiss on the cheek, next to my ear. His kisses, large and resounding, deafened us and *rang in our ears for a long time afterwards, like a memory at once happy and painful.* (p.10)

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[17] "Some people find Proust boring and Joyce fascinating; for me it is the exact opposite" (pp. 179-80).

KT "Very good", my papa used to say, with a *satisfied roar of laughter*, and he congratulated me with a big kiss on the cheek, close to my ear. His big and noisy kisses used to deafen us, and *they hung about booming in our eardrums for a long time, like a painful but happy memory*.

In chapter 10, the author states how a gynaecologist friend of his father's made quite a handsome living out of removing the wombs of nuns on the basis of an outlandish and concocted theory that unused wombs gave birth to fibrous tumours.

HAF Mi papá, con una picardía que ni mi mamá ni el arzobispo ni la madre Berenice aprobaban, decía que este doctor no hacía eso como negocio, ni mucho menos, sino para evitar problemas con las anunciaciones de los ángeles o del Espíritu Santo. Y soltaba *una carcajada blasfema* mientras recitaba unas coplas famosas de Ñito Restrepo:

> Una monja se embuchó
> De tomar agua bendita
> Y el embuche que tenía
> Era una monja chiquita.

AMRH My father, with a mischievous impiety neither my mother nor Mother Berenice, let alone the archbishop, approved of, would joke that the doctor's motive was not to make money, but to avoid any awkwardness between the angels of the Annunciation and the "Holy Spirit". Then he'd *laugh blasphemously* and recite some famous lines by Antonio José "Ñito" Restrepo:

> A nun swelled up
>
> After drinking holy water
>
> And the swelling she had
>
> Was a little holy daughter. (p.47)

KT My papa made a mischievous comment that my mama, the Archbishop, and Mother Berenice did not appreciate, when he said that this doctor was not performing these operations so much for his medical business, but to get around the problems that arose when the nuns were visited by the angels or the Holy Spirit. And he *let out a blasphemous cackle* while he recited a famous verse of Nito Restrepo

> A nun grew a gut
>
> From holy water she sup't
>
> But the gut was so often
>
> A little nun in the oven.

This is one of the very few times when I think the McLean and Harvey version does not accurately reflect the meaning of the Spanish text. The point about the limerick is a reference to the Annunciation where Mary was visited by the Angel and the Holy Spirit and she becomes pregnant, "to the Holy Spirit", and not to her husband, Joseph. The awkwardness was not "between the angels of the Annunciation and the 'Holy Spirit" – there never was any

awkwardness between them according to Luke's Gospel. They were colleagues of the Incarnation. The awkwardness (or "problems" in my version) was convincing everyone that once again a nun had become pregnant to the Holy Spirit. The removal of the womb removed the problem because they couldn't get pregnant, something which is made obvious in the next paragraph. As to the limerick, well, mine doesn't quite rhyme in the last line, and the metre (so far as my poetic deafness can detect it) in theirs is better. But mine sounds a bit more blasphemous and disrespectful. And I think a "blasphemous cackle" is a bit closer to the "carcajada" mark than "laughing blasphemously".

Another example of more restrained language occurs in this passage:

HAF Cuando mi papá llegaba de su trabajo en la Universidad, podía venir de dos maneras: de mal genio, o de buen genio. Si llegaba de buen genio —lo cual ocurría casi siempre pues era una persona casi siempre feliz— *desde que entraba se oían* sus *maravillosas, estruendosas carcajadas, como campanadas de risa y alegría.*

AMRH When my father got back from the university, he would arrive in one of two states: in a bad mood, or a good mood. If he arrived in a good mood – which was almost always as he was a generally happy person – *you could hear his wonderful, resounding laughter, like the chiming of joyous bells*, *from the moment he came through the door.* (p.114)

McLean and Harvey's "resounding laughter" hit a similar decibel level to my "thunderous laughter" for "estruendosas carcajadas", but I had other visions of that belfry.

KT When my papa came home from work at the University, he could be in a good mood or a bad one. If he arrived in a good mood, - which normally happened as he was generally a happy person, *–his amazing thunderous laughter rang out from the time he came in, like a belfry gone bonkers with happiness*.

McLean, Harvey and I are agreed on one thing: none of us wanted to use "guffaw" for "carcajada", despite the dictionary meaning. Most of the time I thought "bursting with laughter" or something similar did fit, and that is what the Spanish said. It was this exuberant characteristic of his father that I felt the author wanted to get across. As I read the book, Héctor Abad Gómez didn't just laugh, let alone chuckle. He nearly wet himself. And not just a couple of times, but regularly and sometimes inappropriately. The whole book is an impressionistic painting of Héctor Abad Gómez, and everywhere it has been beautifully painted in English by Anne McLean and Rosalind Harvey. But in one tiny corner of this Colombian painting, I saw a brilliant red, the "carcajada". In their version, in all other respects as good as the original and maybe even better, this brilliant red has been photoshopped into a reddish brown.

This toning down of "carcajada" is consistent with the whole McLean and Harvey translation, which uses much more restrained language than mine. There are other indications of a more restrained mood. In chapter 3, the author describes how he used to ask his father to let him see a dead body in the anatomy room at the University. Finally his father relented but the effect on the young Héctor was to terrify him so that he became aware "que en el pecho me palpitaba el corazon". For McLean and Harvey that became, "of my heart beating in my chest", whereas in my version it was "of my heart belting away in my chest". In chapter 6, the author writes about the general Colombian stand offish attitude amongst males in showing affection to each other, except by grandes palmadas. This becomes in their version, "backslapping" (p.241), whereas I thought the Spanish was stronger and preferred "vigorous backslapping". In

chapter 7, the Spanish is "las barriadas más miserables de Medellín". McLean and Harvey translate this as "the poorest neighbourhoods of Medellín (p.31) whereas my version is "the most miserable slums of Medellin" (and having seen some of them, this is not too strong.) Again, in another place, the softer "poor neighbourhoods" is used in preference to "slums". In chapter 11, the author describes his holiday employment in his mother's strata management business where he had to deal with such thorny issues like "excrementos de perros", which in the McLean and Harvey translation is "dog excrement" (p.61) whereas in mine it is "dog shit". Likewise, where Héctor describes moving to an all boys school where the only objects of sexual desire were other boys, McLean and Harvey have, "the most libidinous of us could not help being turned on" (p.52), whereas mine, more concise for a change, is "We horny ones got turned on." Anne McLean told me that their original version used "horny", but the editor decided to tone it down. In chapter 9, the author describes the Archbishop of Medellín as having a "barriga…prominente", which, for McLean and Harvey becomes "prominent belly" (p.41). I was less flattering, describing it as a "huge beer gut". When Héctor is talking about the school he attended he says that the teachers followed "las sutilezas mentales del doctor de la Iglesia, Santo Tomás de Aquino", which for McLean and Harvey became "the intricate intellectual pathways laid by the Church's doctor, Saint Thomas Aquinas" (p.81). My translation, influenced partly by a personal view of the Angelic Doctor, and partly because I thought Abad was being ironic, is somewhat harsher: "following the mental gymnastics of St. Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Church". Another example of the restraint is where the author is talking about a family member who was the Consul in Havana. He is described as "un poco más vividor que sus hermanos". McLean and Harvey translate this as "a little livelier than his brothers" (p.91). The dictionary meaning of "vividor" is of a playboy or bon vivant, the word which I chose. That is not to say that "vividor" could not have their extended meaning, but it is another instance of choosing the more restrained of a choice of meanings. In chapter 33, the author describes being handed over to the "loqueros" in a lunatic asylum after a car accident. McLean and Harvey describe them as "attendants" (p.172), but I could not resist the more colloquial "loony bin nurses". I have already mentioned the shock jock priest who, according to the original Spanish "repartía anatemas…". In McLean and Harvey's translation, the *priest "dealt out anathemas"* (p.40), whereas for me, he "spewed" them out.

These comments about Anne McLean and Rosalind Harvey's more restrained and gentler translation are not meant to be a criticism, but an indication of a preference in interpretation. I can't help thinking that mine, stereotypically, is a more aggressive, masculine translation and theirs is a gentler, more lyrical and feminine one, and therefore, for some people, more attractive. The difference reflects very well Edith Grossmann's view in *Why Translation Matters*,[18] that translation is an interpretative act: just as there will be different interpretations of Bach's Goldberg Variations, so there will also be in choosing translated text for a foreign language. One has to expect that there will be differences in tone, texture and colour. And likewise different people will warm to those differences in different ways, or be turned off by them. And just as a pianist in playing the Goldberg Variations can hit a wrong note, where it is not really a matter of interpretation, so too can the translator. I hit several "wrong notes" and I found a couple of McLean and Harvey's rare ones. Where the right notes have been hit, but are played differently, they reflect the different choices of interpretation that we have made.

But leaving aside any wrong notes, there is an interesting difference in tone, texture and colour that seems to be consistent throughout both translations. Part of the reason for this may be that McLean and Harvey had the advantage of discussions with the author, whereas once he gave me permission to do the unofficial translation, I did not feel like bothering a busy man. That does not make my stronger version any less valid, any more than Stravinski's conducting

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[18] Yale University Press, 2010. See the reviews by Brian Nelson and Jorge Salavert: *The AALITRA Review*, 2 (November 2010), 48-56, and a somewhat more critical review by M.A. Ortofer at http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/translate/grossme.htm.

his own *Firebird Suite* has set his music in concrete. But I think most people would find – as my friends in the blind literary tasting did – that the McLean and Harvey version is more attractive, even for those who might prefer my stronger language, because theirs is much more concise. One of the things I most admired is their taking the meaning from the Spanish text and reducing it into very simple, concise English. It is not surprising that a word count reveals that their version is ten percent shorter than mine with no loss of meaning. Perhaps my verbosity derives from the lawyers' practice of charging by the folio.

At the end of many months buried in dictionaries on two separate occasions with *El Olvido Que Seremos*, I came away with a much expanded vocabulary – I learned a lot about hitting the right notes. Another few months spent comparing the McLean and Harvey version with mine did not add so much to my vocabulary – the lure of those translation sirens, the "false friends", entrapped me only a few times, and there was the occasional miss of an idiomatic saying. I had, by and large, hit the right notes. But Anne McLean and Rosalind Harvey showed me how to avoid the "linguistic aura of the original Spanish" and to wean myself off four decades of legalese and the osmotic habits accumulated from reading thousands of generally dreary court judgments. They gave me some great lessons in how to write simple, concise, and exquisite English, even when it is just for fun.