

# Bonifaz the Philologist Is Fine

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Any statement praising Bonifaz is right, and without false modesty, that is how he accepted every distinction and honor bestowed upon him as a poet, as a philologist, as a fully committed faculty member. Here, to honor his memory, I have chosen to recall some aspects of his philology.

I cannot say he was unrivalled as a philologist, because that would put me in grave danger of contravening the precept of rhetoric that forbids maligning one person in order to praise another. So let me replace the predicate “unrivalled,” which requires comparison, with “optimum,” which can be applied to everyone who strives for this quality that is also a self-contained form of praise, thus freeing me to praise the virtues of other academics elsewhere.

In Rubén’s prefaces to his versions of Greek or Latin texts in the *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Mexicana* collection —although I refer specifically to those he wrote when he was still in full command of the physical faculties required for someone whose life revolves around reading, and when he was yet to depend on me to revise his translations, which his later failing eyesight had previously allowed him to do on his own, or simply to listen to the original texts— in these prefaces, I repeat, two qualities are clear: the humanism of the poet, and the poetry of the humanist. Elsewhere, I found how, under the pretext of teaching classics, the poet Bonifaz Nuño becomes a humanist, but the humanist remains a poet.



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Readers of his prefaces are doubly blessed: they receive the reliable instruction about the life and work of classical texts studied by Bonifaz Nuño, with the added bonus of the pleasure of the reading itself. This reveals the power of literature over human life and the writer’s influence on the development of society, since Bonifaz puts life itself before our eyes: injustice, the tribulations of youth, the obligations and limitations of old age, the frailty of human nature, and frequently he does so using Aristotelian poetics. This leads the

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poet to invert the world at will and to recreate it, not in order to match reality but as he wishes it to be. I know of lives that have been changed by words as simple as these: “All youth is pain” (the opening words of his work *The Carmina of Catullus*), or, “When man has aged carelessly, he tends to long for his bygone youth as though it had really been better.” These words help others to consider things more carefully before it is too late.

He is the most prolific author of the *la Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Mexicana* collection. Eight years ago I drew up a list of his works in this collection: Virgil, *Georgics* (1963) and *Bucolics* (1967); *The Carmina of Catullus* (1969); Virgil, *Aeneid* (1972 and 1973); Propertius, *The Elegies* (1974); Ovid, *Art of Love. The Cure for Love* (1975); Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (1979 and 1980); Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (1984); Horace, *Satires* (1993); Caesar, *The Gallic Wars* (1994); Homer, *The Iliad* (1996-1997 and 2005); Euripides, *Hippolytus* (1998); Lucan, *Pharsalia*, with Amparo Gaos (2004); and Pindar, *Odes: Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, Isthmian* (2005).

Today I must add these three volumes: Horace, *Epodes, Odes and Secular Hymn* (2007); Cicero, *On Duties* (2009); and Rutilius Claudius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, with Amparo Gaos (2009). From 2010 until his death he gave me the honor of co-authoring his work on *Epigrams* by Martial.

Rubén had handwritten his translation of *On Duties*, but the cruel darkness in which he lived during the editing process of his work prevented him from comparing the originals against the typed manuscript prepared by Silvia Carrillo, let alone do the proof-reading. The errata in the book must be attributed to me, since the revision process had been my responsibility since the publication of his *Gallic Wars*, in which, aided by my son Omar Reyes, I had corrected around 400 errata. This was still in the days—do you remember?—when photosetting was still in use and the PC had yet to establish its reign, and the book could be at the printer’s on average five years.

I spoke with Rubén on one of the last days that his face could still be seen; since he seemed less weak and his voice slightly easier to understand, I hastened to invite him to work and, without a moment’s hesitation, he told me clearly, “I’ll expect you tomorrow at our usual time.” Our usual time was always at midday. Our usual time was. It no longer is. I brought to his bedside a copy of the Latin author Martial’s epigrams which, as I mentioned earlier, we had been working on together for the past couple of years. (I could not hold back my tears because his bed reminded me of other deathbeds almost con-

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tingents of other loved ones: one aunt, another aunt; a first cousin and his sister, another first cousin, with all of whom I had lived when misfortune did not keep us apart.)

That day, as if everything was normal, I greeted him with my usual attempted jokes and we immediately set to work: Rubén adopted a certain posture indicating he was paying attention—by which I mean his nurses put him in a less horizontal position—and I dug around in my backpack for the photocopy of the Latin text edited in Cambridge by Walter C. A. Ker, as well as my translation and a pen.

“Ready, Maestro?”

“Go ahead!” he replied with difficulty.

As always, I started out by telling him the type of meter we were going to be dealing with, and then I read out the Latin text loudly and slowly for him to enjoy; then, in the same way, I read the translation, repeating it several times until I was sure that he had memorized it, and then I kept quiet. Silence for creation. Perhaps this explains the government artist sponsorship program. I transcribe below one of the four different elegiacs that we discussed during that final day we spent working together,

*Martial’s original text:*

Non possum vetulam. Quereris, Matrinia? Possum  
Et vetulam, sed tu mortua, non vetula es.  
(Martial, III, XXXII)

*My translation:*

No puedo a una vieja. ¿Te quejas, Matronia? Puedo  
también a una vieja; pero tú, muerta, no eres vieja.

*Rubén’s rhythmic version:*

No puedo a una viejita. ¿Matronia, te quejas? Yo puedo  
aun a viejita; mas tú, no eres viejita, muerta.<sup>1</sup>

I obviously took note of the changes he suggested, or rather ordered; although naturally I have had to examine them with utmost care, even as I am writing now. Apart from these obvious changes, I can say that he corrected the accent on the

final five syllables of the hexameter verse and adjusted their number in the pentameter, without forgetting to remind me, *ex cathedra*—as if trying to stand up so his voice could be heard beyond the minuscule, cold four-by-three meter space that was warmed up through artifice and which would eventually claim the prisoner from his misfortune—to remind me, I repeat, that he had once had a general discussion with Salvador Díaz Cíntora about translation systems in general, and in particular, respect for diminutive in Latin, an argument he had surely won. Those with knowledge of this art must recognize, though not necessarily accept, the dignity and coherence of his thinking on the subject, which he maintained until the end of his days. It was a very difficult, very hard day; his voice was dim, faltering, but I could understand what he wanted.

He was in the literal translation camp, convinced that this was the most trustworthy way of putting an author into another language. I know from my own experience that this type of translation strives to respect the original in order to reveal the culture it describes. As a principle, it tends to respect the author, so that the reader enjoys, or suffers, in the same way as the translator does, and joins him or her in the process of interpreting the text, when this is necessary or desirable, because after the text has been transferred to their shared language, both translator and reader are on an equal hermeneutic

footing, an equality that is lacking in other translation methods in which the reader loses the opportunity of the initial experience, on account of being subjected to the effect of the adaptation made by the translator: an adaptation, of course, to which the exegesis must be applied that, in turn, requires the translator's creativity. In *ad hoc* circumstances I might be inclined to accept this argument, although my reasoning would doubtlessly be inferior; but here, in honor of Rubén's memory, I can only confess that I am in the same camp. In any case, in the prefaces to my works I include many arguments on this point.

I am writing to attest that Rubén worked until the very end; that he had full control over his mental faculties, and that he was aware of this fact, which must have been most painful of all for him because, after losing his sight he then largely lost his hearing and his voice became practically incomprehensible, but I can also say that little was lacking for his final breaths to be rhythmic. However, I can assure you that Bonifaz is fine: he defended his philology, I repeat, until the end of our last day spent working together. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ker's English version reads, "Can I love an old woman?' you ask me, Matronia. I can even an old woman; but you are a corpse, not an old woman." [Translator's Note.]