

EDUARDO HALFON

The Purest Form of Writing, the Most Intimate Form of Reading

Eduardo Halfon, in conversation with his translators

Lisa Dillman and Daniel Hahn, with Avinoam Patt, moderator

EDITOR'S NOTE:

ON MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2019, at the Mandell Jewish Community Center in West Hartford, Connecticut, Eduardo Halfon was awarded the 2018 Edward Lewis Wallant Award for the English translation of his novel *Duelo*. The English version, titled *Mourning*, was cotranslated by Lisa Dillman and Daniel Hahn; both translators were also in attendance at the award ceremony—the first time that these three had appeared together at a public event.

The Wallant Award was established in 1963 by Dr. and Mrs. Irving Waltman of West Hartford to honor the memory of the late writer Edward Lewis Wallant, author of *The Pawnbroker*. This prize—one of the oldest and most prestigious Jewish literary awards in the United States—is presented annually to a Jewish writer whose published creative work of fiction is deemed to have significance for the American Jew. Following the presentation of the award, Professor Avinoam Patt from the University of Hartford moderated a conversation between the author and his translators.

Eduardo Halfon began the discussion by recounting an earlier interview—one in which the conversation began with an unusual question: *What are the two books that you've never read which have influenced you the most?*

EDUARDO HALFON: My first thought was, *That's got to be the dumbest question I've ever heard.* And then, my second thought was, *No, that is the smartest question I've ever heard, or the best.* And I immediately

knew the answer. Two books, actually. The two books which have influenced me the most, and which I've never read. One: *The Popul Vuh*—the cultural narrative of the Mayan people. I am Guatemalan. I am from their land. This narrative comes from the K'iche, the people of the Mayan highlands. It is their Bible, their oral tradition, their history. Never read it. And two: the Torah. Never read it. Besides the phonetically memorized part for my bar mitzvah, I've never read the Torah. I've never read *The Popul Vuh* and I've never read the Torah. I don't want to. I refuse to. Yet I know that those are the two main pillars of my house. Everything I am rests on those two pillars. My Jewish identity. And my Guatemalan identity: I was born there, I spent my childhood there, I moved when I was ten to Florida—that's why my English is. . . my English—but I'm from Guatemala. My family's still there. My house, then, is built on those two pillars. But a writer must begin by destroying one's house.

So, *Mourning*—a difficult book to summarize.¹ It's a book about names. It's a book about mourning, as the title suggests, but the title in English is very tricky. It's not the same as the title in Spanish. The title in Spanish is *Duelo*, which has three meanings: *duelo* can mean “mourning,” but *duelo* can also mean “duel,” as in combat, and it can also mean “pain,” *dolor, yo duelo*, “I hurt.” These three ideas are very present in the book: the one book where finally, or ultimately, or profoundly, these two parts of my identity, the Guatemalan and the Jewish, come together. This is a very Guatemalan book—it's about going back to Guatemala—and it's also a very Jewish book. In sum, a search for what these identities mean for me: What does it mean to be Guatemalan, and what does it mean to be Jewish?

I think most of what I write stems from those two questions. And I don't have an answer for either of them. That's why I write, because I don't have an answer, or because I long for an answer. I straddle these words—Guatemalan, Jewish—and that comes through. It's almost like living in a permanent diaspora, away from a homeland and away from a religion and away from language itself. I straddle two languages: I write only in Spanish, yet I think in English, I live in English. In the novel, all of this is very very present. For me, the book actually begins with, not the first page, but with the first line of the title story, the third story in the book, “Mourning.” The line is very simple, *Se llamaba Salomón*, “His name was Salomón.” That's where it begins. This

story is about a search for my father's older brother, that is, he who would have been my father's older brother, but who died when he was a child. The search for that story is *Mourning*. But the novel is not just that. Again, it's a book that is very difficult to summarize into one idea. The three of us might do that tonight, or try to.

AVINOAM PATT: I'll start us off with a number of questions, and then maybe we'll open it up for a broader discussion.

This year's judges, along with me, were Josh Lambert, Academic Director of the Yiddish Book Center and Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Victoria Aarons, O.R. & Eva Mitchell Distinguished Professor in English at Trinity College, Hartford. Josh's wife, Sarah Kippur, is a French professor at Trinity and an expert on translation—specifically on the process of self-translation, i.e., when writers translate their own work. It was Josh's and Sarah's idea to invite the translators along with our prizewinner.

And so, with Sarah's research in mind, I'd like to begin by asking the three of you about process. How does it actually work? Eduardo, you live in English and write your work in Spanish, so there must be some form of self-translating. And then Lisa and Daniel, can you talk about how it works when you're translating somebody else's work collaboratively?

EH: Well, actually, there's no self-translating. I try to avoid that.

DANIEL HAHN: I'm going to interrupt him. I apologize, you almost got a whole sentence out of him. Eduardo, you said there's no self-translating, but actually you're translating into Spanish when you write. When you start. So, I need to hijack this conversation briefly. Eduardo, will you start with describing your writing in Spanish? Because, for those of us who translate that writing into English, there's a really interesting process where we're aware of some amount of English which is happening in his head when he's writing in Spanish. He's very odd. So, please explain that.

EH: Thank you for the hijacking. That's correct. In fact there is self-translation, just not in the direction that the question intended.

My case is very odd, yes, because when I came to the United States

at the age of ten, I immediately discarded Spanish. This was just a natural reaction on my part, my brother's part, and my sister's part, all three of us. It was a survival thing: you have to learn your new language quickly. If you want friends, you have to speak like they do. And that meant letting go of Spanish. Our parents would keep speaking to us in Spanish, for years, but we would just answer in English. When I finally went back to Guatemala, because I had to (after college, so twelve years later), I had almost forgotten my Spanish. I could understand it, but I could barely speak. I had a very strong accent. I would speak to everybody in "usted," how do you say that in English?, I couldn't speak in "tu," and I had to get that back. Slowly, I did start to get it back, while I was living in Guatemala. But what ultimately helped was finding literature. I stumbled onto literature very late. I was in my late twenties. When I say I stumbled onto literature that means I found books. I didn't know books existed, I'm an engineer. I was always the math kid in school. I would read with the least amount of effort possible. My mom would read for me, and also wrote some of my book reports, I'm sure. I just never got it, I never understood literature, I never knew what it was about. And then something happened. (I think I'm giving a different answer, to a different question.) Something happened in my late twenties, in Guatemala, that led me to stumble onto reading. It was an accident. I fell in love with fiction, short stories especially, and I just began to read and read and read for the next few years, maybe three or four years. And the consequence of that was writing. I never intended to become a writer. I never thought one could be. It wasn't in my reality. It just happened.

And when I started writing, I started writing in Spanish. It was never a question. I never sat down and said, *Okay, should I write in English, should I write in Spanish?* It just came out in Spanish. Maybe because I was living back in Guatemala when this happened. Maybe because I was reading and taking classes at the university in Spanish. But I think the truer answer is because my childhood was in Spanish. When writing, I was going back to those first ten years, and I'm still going back there. Every time I write, it's my grandfather's number, it's the relationship with my brother, it's leaving Guatemala, it's my father, it's my mother, it's my sister, it's all based there, in the seventies, and that was in Spanish.

When I first started writing, English was very present, obviously. Much more so than it is now. Much more. I would think of a sentence in English, I knew what I wanted to say in English, and somewhere

between my head and the page those words turned into Spanish. Needless to say, the first few stories, the first few books, needed a lot of editing, because it was not proper Spanish. It still isn't proper Spanish, it's still a little odd for Spanish readers. Back then, to give you an example, I was using too many adverbs, which is okay in English, but it's very frowned upon in Spanish, they sound too heavy in Spanish. My adjective placement was wrong. My comma usage was more like English. Little things, things that you could tell were way too influenced by English. So, what happens when one of those stories wants to find its way back into English? Which is what's happening now.

In short, I'm self-translating when I'm writing. I still do that. I still know what I want to say in English, and sometimes I have to go look up the word in Spanish. But what happens, then, when I give them the story? Okay, could you now work this back into English for me? And when they give me their first draft, I say, well, that's not what was in my head.

DH: (jokingly) Does this seem reasonable to anyone? Lisa, does this seem reasonable to you?

LISA DILLMAN: I'm going to jump in and say something that is slightly tangential. I don't recall, Eduardo, that I have ever heard you say before that your Spanish is awkward and unnatural. As someone who teaches in a U.S. university, one with an increasingly Latino population, and a tremendous number of second- and third- and first-generation speakers, what immediately comes to mind is that English-inflected Spanish in the United States, these days, is absolutely normal. It's absolutely normal. Yet I am very cognizant of the fact that, particularly if you are thinking of Castilian Spanish, and comparing it to Spain, there have probably been editorial decisions or comments or . . .

EH: Or editors wanting to fix it . . .

LD: Yes, yes. That's not unusual in Spain. But in the United States, in the rapidly growing generations of Latino writers, I don't know—I think you need to big yourself up a little there.

EH: Yes, but remember, I'm thinking of Latin American readers. When they look at my books, they say, *Oh, this sounds a little strange.*

Much more so at the beginning than now; I can see the difference as I grow as a writer. Those first few books were tainted with English. For Latin American readers, not for U.S. Spanish readers.

LD: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

DH: That creates a potential problem for translators which we haven't really talked about over these many years of working together. When we're creating something in English (even if there is sort of an English original, one that hasn't ever manifested itself outside his brain), Lisa and I and all the other translators, we have to find our way to an English for an English language reader. But there is a question: whether—if we're starting with a Spanish which has slightly unusual rhythms or which is inflected in a slightly peculiar way because of its contact with English—we should in fact also be trying to do that in English. Whether we should be producing an English that people read and say to themselves, *There's something funny going on here*. In the way that a Guatemalan reader might read you and say, *There is some American English, there are some American inflections*. Instead we're aiming for an English which is very close to the English you have when you speak, and very close to the English you have when you do write in English. This English is very natural and very fluid and so forth, and it doesn't feel like it has any weird inflections from anything else. But that's a problem, because when you're translating you're not necessarily trying to make something to feel natural if the thing you're translating has a strange rhythm or a strange color or a strange register. You're trying to create something which has all of those same characteristics.

Actually, we might have missed the trick here. One of the things that we haven't talked about over these books is whether we should be producing an English which reveals something of the Spanish behind it. In the same way that the Spanish reveals something of the English behind that. Of course, it's too late now. They are still very good. It's not that I don't love them. Actually, it's a complex thing, the more you talk about it, the more you think that there should be some way of reflecting the fact that we don't quite know what the original of this is. We don't quite know what, as it were, the natural language of these stories is. That is an added richness, one which readers should know about.

LD: To be explored in future works . . .

DH: Yes, we'll fix it next time. Book Four. Book Four will be amazing! Please, don't read these, read Book Four. Wait for Book Four, we've just now cracked it. In real time, you've just seen us figure out . . .

EH: But I still have to write Book Four. I have to write it first . . .

DH: Yes, well, get on with it.

EH: The process (for us, at least, because I don't know how you two work with other writers), our process is a little tricky. Given that not only am I going to be very present in their translation, I am very neurotic. No?

DH: No argument. Lisa is completely silent.

LD: (laughing)

EH: For the first book of the trilogy, *The Polish Boxer*, there were five of them. Five friends who workshopped the book: they divided it up, they each translated parts, and then they sent those parts to each other. Isn't that the way it worked? It was a mess. A lot of tracked changes.

DH: It was an amazing thing. There were five of us, working in three different time zones, and we had to do it quite quickly, because the publisher was very keen to publish the book really quickly. So we used the fact that we would each translate a little bit of it as a first draft as a way of speeding it up; it's not a very long book and it shouldn't take very long to translate. But of course if every bit of it is going to be edited by four other people (even before we get to this gentleman here to my left, whom we will talk about in a moment), just that process of each of us editing the other people's work required . . . Well, I still have somewhere this amazing spreadsheet which said: Section One will go to Lisa on Monday, and Lisa at the end of Monday will send Section One and her draft of Section Two to Tom, because Tom will be waking up around the time that Lisa is going to bed, so he can start, and then his bit will go to Anne, who is in Toronto now. In fact, in the end it only took about two weeks, but it was two weeks of very intensive work: you would wake up in the morning with some

nightmarish thing having arrived in your inbox overnight. But it was actually incredibly enjoyable, and in some ways very easy. But here's the weird thing, and Lisa may have thoughts about it, because I hadn't done much cotranslating before that book. What surprised me wasn't that we could do it quickly, and it wasn't that it was really fun, what surprised me was we ended up with a really good book.

We know translation is a creative process, not just a mechanical one, and we know that it's an expressive thing, that it's about choosing words, and it's about making a voice. So you wouldn't think that translating together would naturally produce something good. Translating by committee would seem like it's going to produce something either very uneven or very dead or very something. But actually one of the things I learned with *The Polish Boxer*, and with many books that I've cotranslated since, is that there's something about the process that actually allowed you not only to enjoy yourselves and work really quickly, but also produce things that you're incredibly proud of. It's always gratifying when people read these books and like them. I think they read beautifully, and interestingly, and richly. I don't know, Lisa, whether you feel the same. There's something special about what we get from the fact of cotranslating—as opposed to sitting quietly on the ground and not bothering anyone.

LD: Yes, I agree entirely. I also think that one of the reasons we were able to come out with something we were all quite pleased with is that we were all experienced translators. Because, as you know, there are probably an endless number of syntactical elements that differ between Spanish and English, but some of them are extremely obvious immediately. For instance, in Spanish you don't need and generally don't use the subject pronoun. So, in Spanish, rather than saying, I woke up and I put on my shirt, you just say verb verb verb verb, which is something that can be monotonously repetitive in English, to have several *shes* and *hers* in a row. There are a number of quite common lexical problems, I would say, of that sort. When translating with a group of people who are all familiar with what these problems are, you each might have a handful of potential strategies that you could use to deal with solving them. And so perhaps one of us would suggest something, and either the rest of us would already agree—that, yes, that is the strategy that works in this instance—or someone would say, actually, I think in this instance we should instead

rework the order of the sentence, so that it begins with a gerund, so that you can say, Walking through the door, instead of He walked through the door, and save yourself a *he*. In short, another person coming up with something from a slightly different angle can make other elements fall into place, and I think that facilitates things quite a bit. Or it did in our case. I think we were quite lucky as well.

DH: We also, all five of us, had translated something of Ed's before, so we all knew his work. We also all knew Ed personally; I think all of us had met you. And because we had translated you before, it meant we already had the experience of working with you, because Ed, as he suggests, works quite closely with translations.

EH: Just English translations.

DH: English translations, yes. No one else is so blessed. But it meant that the five of us, we also all knew what we were aiming for. I don't think that our first drafts were wildly different from each other.

LD: No, not at all.

DH: I think we all knew, roughly, what this thing was supposed to sound like. We knew what it was going to sound like coming out of your mouth. And so we weren't all going off wildly in different directions; we just had this nightmarish Excel spreadsheet to help make this into one novel.

AP: And so, my second question . . . (General laughter)

My second question goes back to your voice. You alluded to the two pillars of your house. So much of your writing focuses on issues of identity, explorations of identity, and the question *Who am I?* The journeys in your books are part of that exploration, and you also use the word *diaspora*. This is in one sense a very Jewish idea, living in dispersion, a feeling of rootlessness and homelessness, but for you it's also about finding your voice once you're doubly displaced: away from Guatemala, then back in Guatemala; trying to find your voice and trying to write in that voice. And, at the same time, you're here this evening and you're receiving an American Jewish book award. So here you are, you're a writer born in Guatemala, a descendant of Jews from

Poland and Lebanon, who ended up in Guatemala, raised until the age of ten in Guatemala, then in Florida, now teaching in the Midwest, writing in Spanish. Clearly diasporic identity is central in terms of your writing. There's even a moment in *Monastery* where the character Eduardo is exploring the Guatemalan countryside and he asserts to the so-called natives that he's also native, that he's Guatemalan. And then at the same time, when your character is in Israel, he feels removed from the Jews in Israel, not of the place.

So I simply want to ask you a question that gets to this issue of place. Where do you see your place? Among categories of writers: you've received Guatemalan book awards, American book awards, Jewish book awards—so how do you react to these categories, what do they have to do with the identity that comes through in your work?

EH: You know, Avi, when you were speaking, I was thinking of a few examples, but they're almost jokes. I find that people, for some reason, everywhere, need to categorize what kind of writer I am. Or what kind of book I write. Is this a book of short stories, is this a novel, is this autobiography, is it fiction, what is this? There's this need to place something.

A few years ago I was invited to Japan for the first time. *As a Lebanese writer*. My grandfather, my paternal grandfather, was a Jew from Beirut who wound up in Guatemala. I was invited to a Lebanese writers' conference. I accepted. I said, why not? I can play the part. I can take that costume out from the closet and pretend to be Lebanese for a few days, if that means going to Japan. In other words, there are all these parts of my identity that can be placed, or exalted—I'm all of them. I *am* an American Jew. I grew up here, I'm still here. Yet I'll probably reject that at some point, just because I wind up rejecting most of those impositions. You know? *No, I'm not Guatemalan*. In the book there are a few moments where the narrator jokingly dismisses his Jewishness. *I'm not Jewish, I'm retired*. I think that's one of them. It goes back to that theme of destroying the house I mentioned a little while ago. I think I need to write from zero. Without these labels. Because if I'm aware of these labels, if I'm conscious of these labels, they can influence or direct the narrative. And I don't direct the narrative. I don't know where these things are going when I start writing.

I also almost like being a nomad. I almost search for the rootlessness, which I've known all my life. I haven't known the other part. I

never had roots. Even growing up in Guatemala, those first ten years. I've said this before: Guatemala back then was an exclusively Catholic country. There were maybe seven hundred Jews, total. And growing up in that atmosphere, in a country so Catholic that everything runs on the Catholic calendar—the school holidays, the national dishes, everything was Catholic. All my friends were Catholic. *But why can't I do what they do? Why can't I have a first communion? Why don't we celebrate Christmas? Why don't we do that thing they do on the first of November?* It's almost like growing up not being allowed to play. That's how I describe it. You can watch from the sidelines, but you're not allowed to play. So the feeling of being outside has always been with me. I've never known the other side.

AP: I'll ask one more question. In so much of the writing, or at least in the three novels that I've read, Eduardo is on a journey. I'm referring to you in the third person, because as you say, this is a fictional character, right? Yet we, as readers, want to ask the question How much is autobiographical? This is a fictional character, and yet Eduardo is on a journey. You must travel a lot. Does that help your process—as the outsider who is on a quest for understanding?

EH: That question, Avi, opens a can of worms. Because I have to speak a little bit about that narrator that has my name. For those of you who haven't read the books: these three books, in particular, work really well together, because it's one man's journey. One guy, named Eduardo Halfon: he looks a lot like me, and he smokes a lot—I don't smoke. And yet everywhere I go they've always reserved for me a smoking room, everywhere. I check into hotels and people have already reserved it for me, because they think—which is what I want them to think—that he's me. He's not. He first appeared in 2008, with a small book, a slender book in Spanish called *El boxeador polaco*, the Polish boxer. *The Polish Boxer* in Spanish was a five-story collection, barely one hundred pages, and told stories of this one man's travels, so to speak, or episodes, as if they were episodes in a novel, an episodic novel. And in these stories he would meet people. I wrote all of this first book as short stories—that's important—which means I wrote all of them as independent pieces. Although they share the narrator, this one guy going all over the place, they were written as independent pieces.

But in all of them a Polish boxer would pop his head up and then

hide again. As if the story of the Polish boxer, which was my grandfather's story in Auschwitz, would try to come out, and then timidly hide again. At least until you get to the end of the book, then I tell you that story. There's a buildup, in the first four stories, to that final, title piece. And because of that, the book almost reads as a novel.

Two or three years later, one of those stories, "Epystrophy," becomes a chapter in another book, called *The Pirouette*. And so that story continues as well. It's a trip to the Balkans, to Serbia. A few years later, another of those original stories becomes a chapter in another book called *Monastery*: it's a trip to Israel, to a sister's Orthodox wedding—although that's just a backdrop. In other words, that first book, that first 2008 story collection, starts to spawn other books, almost as if it were a mother book, and it does so without me knowing it. This was never planned out, never blueprinted. I don't know what is going to happen next. I don't know what character is going to come back, what story's going to continue. The next book was *Signor Hoffman* (which is one of the stories in *Mourning*), and then came the story "Mourning," a few years ago. So, this project has been growing. In Spanish I publish them in very slim volumes, almost serially, as I write them. And then in English we put several of them together in a way that makes sense. I think that *Mourning* works really well. As for *Monastery* I have a few doubts about one or two stories that we include. But I think the three stories in *Mourning* work really well together. There's a few themes that bounce off each other.

So, yes, it's this guy, this Eduardo Halfon, who keeps traveling. I don't travel. Especially since my son was born, a few years ago. I don't travel anymore. I've lessened that. But I find that if I want to write about some place, I do need to go. And it's more, Avi, about the smell of the place. What you then read is not my trip. To Israel, or to Serbia, or to Japan, or to wherever. I just need to get a sense of the place, and then I can create a drama within that space.

AP: A question, then, for the translators, Lisa and Danny. You have to translate word by word, sentence by sentence, story by story, but you are also creating a part of a total whole. How much do you focus on having a consistent voice and language through all of the works that you're translating? This book is part of a multivolume project. Are you conscious of that consistency, or do you just look at it on a microlevel, and are you not as concerned with the bigger picture?

DH: It's really interesting to hear readers talk about the big picture, when they discuss a book I've translated, one where I've been looking at sentences and words and syllables and commas, and not really having to think about themes very much. There's a great translator, Gregory Rabassa, who translated from Spanish and Portuguese; if you read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in English, that was him. Rabassa once described translation as "the purest form of writing." And I think he meant that, if you're translating, you're only concerned with the writing. You're not thinking about plot or themes, all those "trivial" things. We don't worry our little heads about such things. We're just thinking about the language, which is to say the delivery mechanism, we're choosing words and syllables and whatever. And so, when you hear someone describing, as you were doing, Avi, what you and the other judges for the Wallant Award have found in *Mourning*, it's really interesting to hear, as someone who has only had an experience of these books from right up close. In one sense it's actually revealing, because a lot of the things that seem like big thematic things are completely reflected in what happens on a sentence-by-sentence level.

Ed was describing the questioning that drives the books, the questioning of identity, that particular form of uncertainty, and it's actually one of the things that's a recurring rhythm of a lot of the sentences. There are sentences which say, "There was a man who came through the door wearing a hat, or maybe it wasn't a hat, it just looked like a hat, or maybe it wasn't . . ." There are a lot of sentences which second-guess themselves slightly. I think this is probably true about any really great writing: it's probably very hard to separate the form and style from content and thematics and things. And so, even though Lisa and I are dealing with the really micro, and we've *never* had a conversation about the themes in these books (whereas the three of us, we have Skyped and argued about punctuation), actually those things do marry together in a really lovely way when you suddenly look at it, when you take a step back. In a sense, I think because we're trying to get things right on that really atomic level, everything else follows. The attention we pay is to individual syllables, and to what happens when you get to the end of a sentence and there's one syllable too many, when it somehow sounds wrong and you have to read it aloud, because you know that there's something funny with the sentence. And then you figure it out: *I know what it is, there's one syllable too many.* But

actually that does translate, as it were, into a bigger issue, into form, and it encapsulates this big picture you're describing. Is that also your experience, Lisa?

LD: Yes, yes. I think it's quite interesting. I also remember someone saying that translation is the most intimate form of reading.² That is something that has stayed with me forever; I think is both beautiful and true. Often when you read, you do a bit of glossing over, you space out for a paragraph. When you're translating, you cannot space out for a single syllable. So it's an intimate act, it's a respectful act, and it's a creative act. But to say that translation is the most intimate form of reading also recognizes the fact that every act of reading is an act of interpretation. All readers, I would argue, are cocreators of meaning. There may be particular elements that have a particular resonance for you, a resonance reflective of something in your background: maybe you were at this place as well, maybe you ate this precise dish too, maybe you remember that smell on the street—and this evokes something in your mind that then creates a larger meaning. That is an interpretation and a creation of meaning, and it's absolutely valid, right?

I think it might have been you, Ed, that told me about once reading a review of your book where they said, *The obvious overtones of . . .* I can't remember who, fill-in-the-blank writer . . . Who would it have been?

DH: E.g.: This writer has obviously been reading the Torah . . .

LD: Yes, it was that sort of thing. *You can really see the Faulkner in this*, and then the author says, *I've never read Faulkner in my life*. In other words, the critic had just interpreted, based on their own mindset, and imputed something to the original—

EH: Sebald!

LD: Yes! Yes, that's what it was. That's precisely what it was.

EH: After I read that review, I did read Sebald. Just to see what the reviewer was talking about.

LD: On the one hand, we could scoff and say, *Isn't that silly, isn't that ridiculous*. And on the other hand, we could say, *Isn't that valid*—be-

cause it's a creative interpretation, a cocreation, a making of meaning. And what Danny was saying is true, about us translators not having to think on the metalevel, on the thematic level, as much as we do on the syntactic and semantic, the immediate level.

By the same token, I've taught *Monasterio* and *Duelo*—I teach Spanish literature, so I've taught the originals in both of my classes—and sometimes my students, who are often quite good, write interpretive papers that blow me away. There was at least one or two times that I sent Eduardo something and said, *Look what my student said about you*. They caused me to have new insight into a book that, on some levels, I know better than anyone, except Eduardo and Danny. Someone's interpretation about what water symbolizes in this novel, or something along those lines: there might be something that I have not, or we have not, as translators, reflected on, not at that level. And yet it's there, and someone else teasing out, or parsing, these sorts of interpretations is proof of what Danny was saying. You can't separate form and content. It's all interwoven.

DH: It also reveals what's in the books that the writer doesn't necessarily have to intend. Assuming you've read Sebald when you haven't is one thing, but there are always things in books that an author didn't intend and someone else has to point out. Because even though Ed is an incredibly deliberate and careful and thoughtful writer, there are always going to be things happening that are either slightly beyond his control or that he can't see because they're too close.

I've worked with a number of writers and I've talked with them about their work. I might say, *It's so interesting how much you use such-and-such a word*, and the writer will respond, *I don't use that word*. And I say, *Look, it's not a very common word and in this novel you use it forty-seven times*. And you can count them. This isn't an interpretation, you can count the number of times you use this word. Writers don't notice, because it's so much a part of their writing DNA, and they're not even aware of it. I did this with one writer, and he became incredibly self-conscious; he found himself in the middle of the night trying to excise his every use of the word. Ultimately, this means, as I think Lisa was saying, when she described the really really intimate reading that a translator gives a text, that every reader, because they bring different things to a text, will find different things. These things may be intended or not, but if they're there, they're there.

NOTES

¹. At present, of his twelve books written in Spanish, only a trilogy of Eduardo Halfon's novels has thus far appeared in English: *The Polish Boxer*, *Monastery*, and *Mourning*—the last, winner of the Wallant Award. In addition to these three, a novella, *Tomorrow We Never Did Talk About It* (translated by Anne McLean), has been published in the Working Titles series by the *Massachusetts Review*.

². Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation." *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, vol. 140, Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 1993. pp. 179–200: "First then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner . . . Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text (183)."