

Does Translation Matter?

By Susan Welsh

Edith Grossman is an award-winning translator of Latin American and Spanish literature, ranging from Don Quixote and poetry of the Spanish Golden Age, to contemporary works by Gabriel García Márquez, Antonio Muñoz Molina, and Carlos Fuentes. Her most recent book is Why Translation Matters, published by Yale University Press in 2010 (hardbound, 135 pages with index, \$24.00).

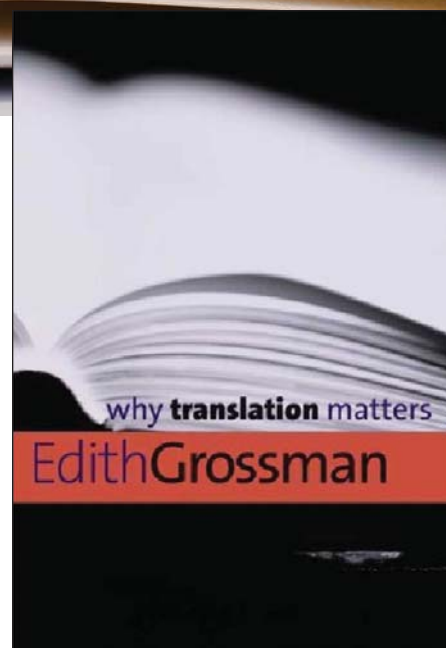
A young person who loves languages and literature and is considering becoming a literary translator could get the idea from surfing the translators' blogosphere that: 1) this profession is poorly paid and even headed for extinction; and 2) human beings are destined to be replaced by computers or to spend their lives in drudgery, post-editing the slop that machine translation spits out.¹

That person can take heart from Edith Grossman's book, *Why Translation Matters*, which makes a

thoughtful and eloquent case that literary translation not only matters but is something a civilized society cannot do without. After all, she writes, translation "almost defines the European Renaissance," when the classics of ancient Greece that had been lost to Christian Europe for centuries were translated into Latin and then the vernacular languages of Europe. These works provided the springboard for the new discoveries of the Renaissance itself.

Yet today, the U.S. is fighting two wars in countries that most Americans could not find on a map, and about whose people, language, and culture they know nothing. Former National Intelligence Director John Negroponte laments that in the American Foreign Service, the "greatest challenge" is the need for officers who can speak the languages of the places to which they are deployed.²

Grossman views this gap as potentially catastrophic. She writes:



"Translation not only plays its important traditional role as the means that allows us access to literature originally written in one of the countless languages we cannot read, but it also represents a concrete literary presence with the crucial capacity to ease and make more meaningful our relationships to those with whom we may not ➤

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have had a connection before. Translation always helps us to know, to see from a different angle, to attribute new value to what once may have been unfamiliar. As nations and as individuals, we have a critical need for that kind of understanding and insight. The alternative is unthinkable.”

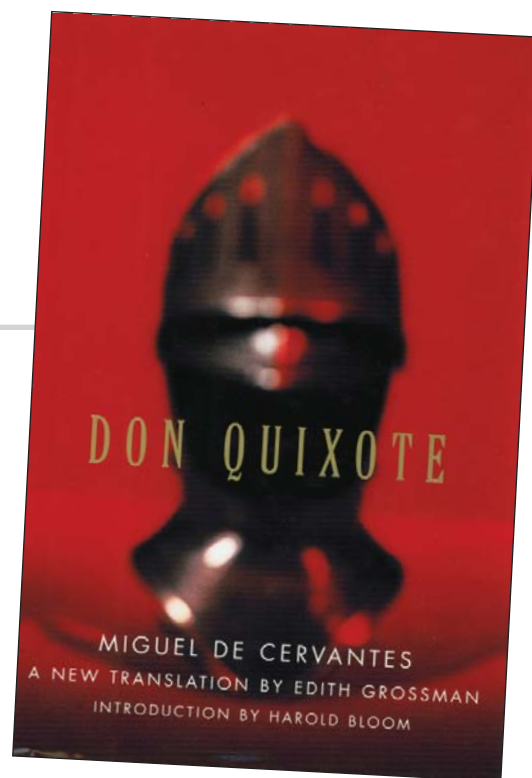
For readers of *The ATA Chronicle*, it goes without saying that translation “matters,” on some level, or we would not be doing it. But here we are addressing literary translation specifically, as Grossman does, which is both so challenging and so poorly paid, except for those at the top of the profession, that many are forced to do it only as a hobby. When I discussed this with Grossman in an interview, she said that too often translators “are treated the way librarians and schoolteachers used to be treated: that this work was for ‘ladies who didn’t mind genteel poverty’—and that is all in quotation marks.”

A Paradox

Grossman’s book addresses the “dire state” of publishing in the U.S. and the U.K. today, where, she says, only 2-3% of the books published each year are literary translations, whereas in western Europe and Latin America, the number is anywhere from 25 to 40%. Prestigious publishers put quotas on the number of literary translations—two in one case that Grossman mentions—and dismiss translators cavalierly, she writes, often omitting even to put their names “in legible size” on the cover. Reviewers often seem blind to the fact that the words of the book they have read (or not read, as the case may be) are those of the translator, not the author, and the same “disconnect” is prevalent in academia.³ Most large

English-language publishers are convinced that translated literature will not sell, and are seldom willing to go to bat for a new translation, especially given that book sales overall are declining. Grossman identifies the insularity of both U.S. and British cultures and “a deeply imprinted cultural dogmatism and linguistic isolationism that may constitute the primary obstacle to literary translation in the English-speaking world.”

But, then, how to understand the stunning success of both Grossman’s *Don Quixote* (more than 100,000 copies sold) and Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf* (more than 80,000 sold)? Or the popular Millennium Trilogy by the late Stieg Larsson? (*The Girl Who Plays with Fire* was the first translated work in 25 years to get to #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list for hardcover fiction, and *The Girl with the Dragon*



More than 100,000 copies of Grossman’s translation of *Don Quixote* have sold in the U.S.

day, on the other hand, there is a sizable number of people who long for books of substance. How else explain [the success of] *Don Quixote*? Why would anyone read a 400-year-old novel? Or the success of *Beowulf*: I mean, it’s almost a thousand-year-old poem! I think there is an audience for it...Right after [my] book came out, the pub-

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” — Percy B. Shelley

Tattoo has sold 764,000 in the U.S. alone.)⁴

When I asked Grossman that question, she replied:

“I think there is a public hungry for those works. There’s no other way, to my mind, to account for that. So even if, on the one hand, we can say that the number of people who read seriously is diminishing every

lisher’s assistant called me and said, ‘It’s #8 on Amazon!’ and I said, ‘What’s #8 on Amazon?’ And it was *Don Quixote*. That’s astonishing!...I don’t think there’s a resistance to translation as such.”

Is There a Solution?

Still, even with sales of 100,000, we are talking about a very small slice of the American population, and, espe-

Keats on Translation

One of John Keats's (1795-1821) best-known poems is about his experience in reading a translation of Homer by George Chapman (1559-1634).

On first looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

cially among the young, the number of people who read *anything* longer and more intellectually challenging than a text message or a 140-character Tweet is declining precipitously. We obviously confront a cultural problem that goes much deeper than the shriveled souls of certain English-language publishers.

While I thought Grossman's book was well-written and compelling, I wish she had addressed the question of what could be done. In our discussion, she said frankly that she does not have a solution, which is why she did not offer any. Her internalized audience is not publishers, since "publishers will do what they will do." It is, rather, "people who read, who read literature—poetry and so forth." What about the rest? "Our education has failed, terribly," she said, "and we continue to graduate semi-literate students. The access to images, as opposed to words, through television and now the computer, has pulled people who have not been educated to read even farther away from the book—any kind of book."

My own view is that history shows—from the American Revolution to Pearl Harbor to the Civil Rights Movement—that deep cultural change goes alongside political change and inspired leadership, and that poet and translator Percy B. Shelley had it right when he wrote:

"The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods, there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of

Most large English-language publishers are convinced that translated literature will not sell, and are seldom willing to go to bat for a new translation.

their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric fire which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifesta-

tions; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present....Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."⁵

Political change and cultural change can reciprocally reinforce one another, as such periods of "the awakening of a great people" generate more hunger for great literature, and also inspire its creation.

It is the generation of our young would-be translator (or poet) who will have to satisfy that need in decades ➡

Some Literary Publishers

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to come. And when young people decide that there must be more to life than a fast buck, a cool car, the latest techno-gadget, and a hookup—existence means nothing if you leave nothing of value to those who come after you—then the world’s great literature will have to be there for them. It will have to include excellent translations crafted by people who sweated over them for months or years, struggling to convey the author’s meaning in the way most faithful to both sense and artistry, yet in the idiom and form of the target language.⁶

Which brings me to Edith Grossman’s concluding advice to aspiring literary translators: “You really have to love the work. You have to go into it the way a kid who goes into the arts loves art. You have to be willing to be poor and you have to be willing, perhaps, to have a day job, and do the work you love at night. But you have to love it.”

Notes

1. I recognize that machine translation is getting better and better for some language pairs and can be useful in some contexts. But that is not the subject of this article and has nothing to do with the translation of literature.
2. Davidson, Joe. “Language Proficiency is Foreign Service’s ‘Greatest Challenge,’ Negroponte Says.” *The Washington Post* (April 8, 2010). The General Accountability Office says that in Iraq, 57% of Foreign Service officers lack sufficient language skills, while in Afghanistan, 73% cannot directly communicate with the country’s people. See www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/07/AR2010040704503.html?sub=AR.

Edith Grossman says that despite the attitude of most large publishing houses, “there are many more small presses that are publishing translations now than there were even 10 or 20 years ago. They usually don’t put out books with huge sales, because their budgets are very, very limited. Certainly, translated poetry and translated novels are being published more than they have been in the past. They just don’t have the chance that a commercial publisher would give them.”

Here are a few such presses that I have run across; there are undoubtedly more:

Open Letter Literary Translation at the University of Rochester

Rochester, New York

<http://openletterbooks.org>
and

www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threeperecent

Autumn Hill Books

Iowa City, Iowa

www.autumnhillbooks.com

In addition to these small publishers, on May 18, Amazon.com, Inc. announced a new publishing imprint, **AmazonCrossing**, which will issue English translations of foreign literature, beginning with Tierno Monénembo’s novel *The King of Kahel*, which was written in French.

3. See also: Howard, Jennifer. “Translators Struggle to Prove Their Academic Bona Fides.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 17, 2010), <http://chronicle.com/article/Translators-Struggle-to-Prove/63542>.
4. The figures are from Nielsen BookScan, but its data are only available to subscribers. These numbers come from online secondary sources, and may not be fully commensurable; they are intended only to give the order of magnitude. For comparison, the Millennium Trilogy has sold 27 million copies in 35
5. Shelly, Percy B. *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), www.bartleby.com/27/23.html.
6. Grossman presents numerous examples of how she does this in her translations, notably in poetry.

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