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Reviews
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REVIEWS

Edith Grossman's valuable little book, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010) has, happily, attracted much attention. Below are two reviews, by Brian Nelson and Jorge Salavert. Nelson's review (which appeared in the Australian Literary Review, November 2010, as "The great impersonators") also considers Umberto Eco's *Experiences in Translation*, translated by Alastair McEwan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008 [paperback], 2001 [hardback]) and Antoine Berman's *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*, translated and edited by Françoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2009).

"When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate." Thus wrote Mexican writer Octavio Paz, whom Edith Grossman cites. She also might have cited George Steiner: "To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate," a statement that places translation at the heart of perception itself and thus at the centre of all intellectual processes.

Historically, however, translators have not had a good press. Jerome was forced to flee Rome when he decided, at the end of the 4th century, to translate the Bible into everyday Latin. John Wycliffe, who produced the first English Bible in the 14th century, also believed the Bible should be made available to his countrymen in their own language. The Anglican Church responded by arranging for his corpse to be dug up and his bones burned for heresy. In the early 16th century, William Tyndale's translation of the Bible appeared. Tyndale was sentenced to death: first strangled and then burned at the stake. His last words were: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." In the early 17th century a Bible commissioned by James I was authorised by the Church of England. It is worth recalling that the King James Bible, which appeared in 1611, is a work of translation.

Punishment through death and exile has tended to diminish over the years as a critical response to the work of translators, but the way translation is viewed, especially in the English-speaking world, remains quite negative. Translation tends to be seen as an unfortunate necessity at best and, at worst, as a terrible form of treachery.

Grossman's aim in her valuable little book is "to stimulate a new consideration of an area of literature that is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented". She argues eloquently for a greater understanding of the cultural importance of translation and a more nuanced appreciation of the translator's role. She knows what she's talking about, for she is the Amercian translator of García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes and other Spanish language texts. Her

translation of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* was widely praised when it was published in 2003.

Grossman has some acerbic things to say about all those who fail to recognise the value of translation. She targets mainstream commercial publishers for their reluctance to publish translations despite their commercial success and the cultural cachet enjoyed by titles such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, and anything by Roberto Bolaño. Most American and British publishers, she argues, "resist the very idea of translation and persistently hold the line against the presence of too many translated works in their catalogues". She flagellates reviewers for their ignorance: "many reviewers write as if the English text had somehow sprung into existence independently. What these same reviewers do would be iniquitous if it did not have its own kind of lunatic humour: they are fond of quoting from the translated text in order to praise the author's style without once mentioning the fact that what they are citing is the translator's writing – unless, of course, they do not like the book or the author's style, and then the blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of the translator."

She marvels at the academic world for its blindness: "There are still promotion and tenure committees that do not consider translations to be serious publications." And she laments the naivety that informs popular notions of translation: "We read translations all the time, but of all the interpretive arts, it is fascinating and puzzling to realize that only translation has to fend off the insidious, damaging question of whether or not it is, can be, or should be possible. It would never occur to anyone to ask whether it is feasible for an actor to perform a dramatic role or a musician to interpret a piece of music."

Are these charges well grounded? Unfortunately, despite the fact that the case for translation is obviously compelling, they are. Though translation plays an indispensable role in creating a space of real cultural encounter, less than 3 per cent of works published in the English-speaking world are translations, whereas the corresponding figure for most European countries is at least 10 times greater. That pitiful statistic is fraught with danger: the danger of consolidating the global domination of English, accelerating the ever-dwindling number of world languages taught and impoverishing non-anglophone cultures by encouraging them to write in English in order to be heard by the rest of the world.

The cultural importance of translation, as the circulatory system of the world's literatures, cannot be overstated. That importance is particularly pronounced, of course, in relation to works written in less widely spoken languages. Without translation, Orhan Pamuk, Imre Kertész, José Saramago and Naguib Mahfouz, all Nobel Prize winners, would not be known outside their native countries of Turkey, Hungary, Portugal and Egypt respectively.

The most ingrained popular stereotype about translation is that it always entails loss, is somehow always inadequate. As for the academic world, despite the mushrooming of programs in translation studies during the past few decades, and a

corresponding rise of interest in translation (which was a major focus of last year's 2009 Modern Language Association conference in the US), it has hitherto failed to give full recognition to literary translation, though such translation combines creative and scholarly work.

Literary translation is an intrinsically creative activity, involving a multiplicity of exact choices about voice, tone, register, rhythm, syntax, echoes, sounds, connotations and denotations: all those factors that make up style. In that sense literary translation can be seen as a form of close reading of a text in its totality; translators are first of all readers, and no other readers will penetrate the original text as deeply. Moreover, translation is the result not only of critical interpretation and scholarly research, but also in many cases (particularly with regard to the classics) of scholarly reappropriation and recontextualisation.

Grossman is at her most eloquent when she discusses, on the basis of her own practice, what a translator does (or should do), and communicates some of the joy of that experience. She rightly stresses the translator's creativity. The words we read in translation, she asserts, are the translator's as much as they are the author's:

> One of the brightest students in a seminar I taught recently asked whether, in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, we were reading [translator Gregory] Rabassa or Garcia Marquez. My first, unthinking response was "Rabassa, of course," and then a beat later, I added, "and Garcia Marquez." The ensuing discussion of how difficult it is to separate the two, and what it meant to us as readers, writers, and critics to make the attempt, was one of the liveliest and most engrossing we had that semester.

Grossman describes as follows the characteristics of a good translation:

> […] the most fundamental description of what translators do is that we write – or perhaps rewrite – in language B a work of literature originally composed in language A, hoping that readers of the second language – I mean, of course, readers of the translation – will perceive the text, emotionally and artistically, in a manner that parallels and corresponds to the aesthetic experience of its first readers.

This leads Grossman to make some incisive remarks about the key question of fidelity. Fidelity to the original text should be the translator's ultimate goal, but not in any literal sense. A translation is not made with tracing paper laid over the original, the translator mechanically transposing what the dictionary says rather than making creative choices of their own. Translation is anything but a mechanical process, for it is an act of critical interpretation, the result of a series of creative decisions.

A translation can rarely be faithful to words or syntax, for these are peculiar to languages and are not transferable; but it can (and should) be faithful to tone and intention, to meaning: Jorge Luis Borges, as Grossman reminds us, reportedly told his translator not to write what he said but what he meant to say. To re-create

significance for a new set of readers, translators must make the effort to get into the mind of the author through the text and to find the voice in English that matches the author's voice in another language.

The translator's challenge is "to impersonate his author". Grossman endorses the analogy used by the great translator from German, Ralph Manheim, who compared the translator to an actor who spoke as the author would if the author spoke English. The better the original writing, the more exciting and challenging the process. And there is of course no "correct" translation (just as it would hardly be useful to describe, say, Ian McKellen's wonderful performance as Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as "correct"), which is why great works are translated so many times. Each translation is different because each translator brings an individual sensibility and a particular literary experience to the task.

One way of redressing negative or naïve views of translation is to foster a clearer appreciation of the fact that every translation of a text is, as Grossman and Manheim argue, a performance of that text as reflected in the selection and sequence of words on a page. If we are able to appreciate the dimension of performance in relation to music or theatre, why not also in relation to translation? The more good translations and retranslations are produced, the easier it will be to effect an appreciation of translation as performance. An encouraging sign in recent years is that retranslations of Proust, Tolstoy, Cervantes and others have engendered extensive and sometimes heated debate about the prowess (or otherwise) of the translators.

It is certainly the case that, in relation to the classics, there is an increasing willingness to discuss the translator's performance. The translators of Proust, for example. Scott Moncrieff in the 1920s, Terence Kilmartin in the 80s, D.J. Enright in the 90s, Lydia Davies, James Grieve and the other members of the Penguin team a decade ago, have all been compared in their ability to deal with the intricate twists and folds, the carefully modulated rhythms and shapes, of Proust's long sentences, his cadences, his register, his inflections. And the stakes could not be higher, in the sense that form translates thought: style is vision; if you don't get the style, you miss the vision.

Where literature exists, translation exists. Grossman shows how the notion of literature would be inconceivable without translation, citing Goethe's belief that without outside influences national literatures rapidly stagnate. Authors have always borrowed and been influenced by writers in other languages. Grossman celebrates the way literary traditions traverse national and cultural borders. When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* 400 years ago, he created "the form and shape of modern fiction". Cervantes's novel was translated almost immediately into English, where it changed the course of English literature, influencing writers, directly or indirectly, all the way to William Faulkner.

Faulkner, for his part, was hugely popular in Latin America during the post-war period. Márquez was such a big fan that he and his young family

travelled through the south of the US by Greyhound bus in 1961 as a kind of pilgrimage. His novels were, in turn, translated into English, influencing English-language authors such as Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo and Michael Chabon.

The argument could be pushed a little further: the entire history of literature, we might say, is informed by a process of transmission; a great work of literature, indeed any text, is able to enrich itself by generating new meanings as it enters new contexts. Translation can be seen in this perspective as the secret metaphor of all literary communication. A proper consideration of the art of literary translation is, then, a claim for the value of literature itself. Translators are engaged in much the same activity as their authors; they are, indeed, writers themselves.

The more attention is paid to translation, and the more translators are treated as creative writers whose work can greatly enrich the texts they translate, the more recognition there will be of the vital role translation plays in literary culture.

Translators should not only be given due credit for their work but should also be empowered. By this I mean that translators are able to play a valuable role within a given literary culture as prominent spokespeople for texts in other languages, not just by enlarging, through their own translations, the readership of books deemed to be important but by proposing texts for translation and by talking publicly and writing critically and sympathetically about texts from other languages.

To take a local example: Julie Rose, the Sydney-based translator whose new translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* was reviewed in these pages last year ("Invisible labour", May 2009) has clearly made a significant contribution in these terms to a revaluation of Hugo as a writer.

Experiences in Translation is based on a series of public lectures given by Eco in 1998. The book is divided into two parts: Translating and Being Translated deals with Eco's experiences and practice in translation, as a translator (of Gérard de Nerval's *Sylvie* and Raymond Queneau's *Exercises de style*) and, especially, as a novelist who has been translated; Translation and Interpretation considers theoretical aspects of translation.

The theoretical part of Eco's book contributes little to discussion of the issues that have concerned Translation Studies in recent decades. His discussion of translators' choices in rendering his novels in foreign languages is far more interesting, and is well illustrated by concrete examples. By showing a variety of approaches, depending both on language and translator, Eco helps to make clear some central translation issues: the cultural differences between languages, "foreignization" v "domestication", the general absence of complete synonymy of words, the sacrifice of a literal translation for the sake of preserving an appropriate style, and so on.

Like Grossman, Eco appeals to the principle of fidelity ("the intention of the text"). Equivalence in meaning cannot be taken as a satisfactory criterion for a good translation, he argues. The translator rewrites a text "on the basis of the whole history of two literatures. Therefore translating is not only connected with linguistic competence but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence." A good translation "must generate the same effect aimed at by the original", which implies an act of interpretation on the part of the translator and the variability of interpretative hypotheses that can be made about the same text. Eco's book is illuminating and witty, and converges with Grossman's as an introduction to the process of translation.

Whereas Grossman's *Why Translation Matters* is a passionate personal introduction to translation, conversational and unsystematic, Antoine Berman's *Toward a Translation Criticism* is a theoretically sophisticated exploration of the ways in which translation is a critical process as well as a creative one. Grossman uses striking and apposite metaphors (tracing paper, acting, impersonation) to convey the nature of translation and she wonders whether one of the reasons why translations tend to be overlooked or even disparaged by reviewers, critics and editors is because they simply do not know what to make of them, in theory or in actuality.

"We really are lacking in an adequate vocabulary for discussing translation intelligently," she writes. She mentions the suggestion made to her by an academic friend that the next great push in literary studies may be to conceptualise and formulate the missing critical vocabulary pertaining to translation.

If this is so, then Berman would be considered, in this context, a major pioneer. A foundational text in translation studies, *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne* (published in French in 1995) argues for the development of translation criticism as a specific genre within the broader field of literary criticism. Berman develops an original methodology for such criticism through a detailed comparative discussion, combining hermeneutic and stylistic analysis, of the French translations of John Donne's elegy *To His Mistress, on Going to Bed.* To treat the work of the translator as seriously as the best criticism treats non-translated literature, he contends, will rescue translators from invisibility and give them the recognition they deserve.

To return to the question of why translation matters: it matters, Grossman argues, for the same reason and in the same way that literature matters – because it is an expression of our humanity. 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."

BRIAN NELSON

For those of us familiar with English translations of Spanish-language literature, Edith Grossman needs no presentation. Her numerous high-quality translations (her *Don Quixote* is the best modern translation of Cervantes' immortal novel) speak for themselves and are probably the best credentials one could refer to in order to prove (if it were necessary) her status as a truly knowledgeable professional.

Why Translation Matters is a welcome addition to the ever-increasing supply of books on translation. In the preface, Grossman declares her intention "to stimulate a new consideration of an area of literature that is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented". This is in itself significant. For too long literary translation has been wrongly placed outside the realm of literary activity. I often despair at the oft-encountered ill-founded notion that literary or scholarly translation cannot stake a claim to (or as) research, for instance. As Grossman says, translation is "a kind of reading as deep as any encounter with a literary text can be". If anything, I would go so far as to suggest there might be numerous cases where literary translation surpasses other kinds of textual research in a myriad of ways.

Yet it is unfortunately true that translation has had a bad name throughout history. Also, translators have been persecuted. Let us not forget that interpreters and translators have been and continue to be murdered in current conflicts around the world for the sole reason that they were helping people communicate with each other.

Moreover, the practice of literary translation has been generally derided as treason to the original work. Yet translation as a discipline has extended over the restrictive area it was once confined to, and that is in itself a good thing for translators. That derisive labels continue to be applied to translation and its practitioners is a sad predicament in the 21st century.

Grossman's book is sound evidence that the discipline of translation has many compelling arguments with which to defend itself. It is also a necessary book: it is not at all like the many arid, insipid, vacuous and impractical volumes that deal with theoretical aspects of translation. It is nevertheless a modest yet significant essay on translation.

And of course it had to be modest, like the author: in 2006 I had the pleasure of meeting Edith at a dinner-cum-event an overambitious Dean of Arts organised to curry favour with a foreign embassy, and she struck me as one of the most honest, down-to-earth persons I had ever met.

For all her modesty, Grossman can still ask some very crucial questions: "Why does [translation] not matter to most publishers and book reviewers? … What is its contribution to the civilized life of the world?" While she does not have all the answers (and who does?), Grossman does point out that, as a consequence of the publishing world's resistance to translation, we are being denied access to an extremely large part of the world's literature. That is impoverishing us all.

The book comprises an introduction and three fairly brief chapters. The introduction and the first two chapters are based on lectures Grossman gave at Yale. The delicious final chapter deals with the translation of poetry. Because the first two chapters are based on lectures, they are occasionally repetitious; Grossman does at times stray from her main purpose, that is, to account for translation and why it matters, but the general thrust is one of purpose and self-confidence.

Grossman provides the reader with invaluable insights into the translation process. Her ample experience as a renowned professional translator endorses not only the validity of her appreciations but also the strong reasoning that backs her opinions, in particular on the dreadful treatment translators still receive from critics, from unwarranted criticism to invisibility.

By far the most revealing are her comments on her own translations of Spanish poetry, which she began as a university student for the campus literary magazine – an experience many of us are likely to have had. Grossman acknowledges the aesthetic pleasure that can (or I should say, should) be derived from translating poetry.

She presents her interesting choices and bravely defends the reasons why she made such choices; it is thus one of the most honest accounts we can find on the eternally challenging subject of the arduous process of translating poetry in recent times. Grossman argues that the most important poetic element when translating poetry is rhythm. "[I]f the translation succeeds—English-language readers have the opportunity to read a convincing poem in their own language, repeating an experience comparable to that of their Spanish-speaking counterparts."

Giving more importance to rhythm over other poetic elements may have its downside, though. Her translations of Golden Age sonnets renounce rhyme for the sake of rhythm as a principle. I would however counter that in quite a few cases—to my mind comes Lope de Vega's famous and many times anthologised *improvised* sonnet, truly a little gem of poetic skill, which ironically exemplifies how to write a sonnet—not reproducing a rhyming scheme might let down the poetic essence of the original. Naturally, Grossman is quite right in identifying the musicality of poetry as the fundamental aspect to carry over in any translation of poetry, but discarding rhyme on the grounds of expediency might also deprive readers of other possibilities just as exciting.

Throughout the book Grossman defends the importance of translation and translators *a capa y espada* [tooth and nail], a phrase from the Golden Age of Spanish literature she loves so much, one she would no doubt recognise immediately and to which, I believe, she would subscribe.

Equally significant for practising translators are her views on fidelity: "a translator's fidelity is not to lexical paintings but to context—the implications and echoes of the first author's tone, intention, and level of discourse". Hers is one of the lengthiest professional careers, throughout which she has encountered innumerable dilemmas and complexities, and *Why Translation Matters* bears

witness to this. It is hardly surprising that her acumen brings out little gems like this one: "I have been intrigued by the idea that literary language may, in fact, be a form of translation. And here I mean translation … as a living bridge between two realms of discourse, two realms of experience." I suspect she may be closer to the truth than most of us even stop to consider.

JORGE SALAVERT