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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2013v1n31p230>

Grossman, Edith. *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven and London: Yale University and Press, 2010, 135 p.

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Edith Grossman is one of the most successful Spanish-English translators of the twenty-first century, and is best known for her translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in 2003. Grossman is also the acclaimed translator of works by crucial Hispanic American authors, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes and Mayra Montero. She has received many prizes for her work, including the Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation by PEN in 2006 and an award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2008. Today, Grossman is a Guggenheim Fellow and continues to translate out of New York City.

Grossman's *Why Translation Matters* is an autobiographical compilation in the form of four essays. Three of these, including the introduction entitled "Why Translation Matters", "Authors, Translators and Readers Today", "Translating Cervantes", are based on talks that Grossman gave at Yale University in the spring of 2008. The last chapter, "Translating Poetry" was written specifically for *Why Translation Matters* and was inspired by Grossman's recent translations of a variety of Spanish and Hispanic American poets from across the ages. The audience intended for this book is general, hence the personal tone of her writing.

Grossman states in the preface, "I hope the reading of these essays inspires other ways to think about and talk about translation". Grossman intends to stimulate a new consideration for translation, an area of literature that as Grossman describes "is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented". In Grossman's opinion, translation offers "access to literature originally written in

one of the countless languages we cannot read". As the world becomes more intertwined and interconnected than ever before, "we have a critical need for that kind of understanding and insight".

In "Why Translation Matters", Grossman presents herself and explains the circumstances that led her to become a translator. Reading Neruda's *Residencia en la tierra* was a revelation for Grossman that altered "radically" her professional direction by bringing to light the impact Latin American literature could have on a contemporary audience through translation. Soon after, Grossman was asked to translate a story by the early twentieth century Argentine writer, Macedonio Fernández, by her friend Ronald Christ, who published and edited the center for Inter-American Relations journal *Review*. Grossman replied by saying that she was a "critic, not a translator", but Christ insisted that she do it. Grossman agreed more out of "curiosity" than anything else and discovered that

she enjoyed the work and could do it from home. This arrangement "seemed very attractive then, and still does". After Grossman's translation of Fernández's "The Surgery of Psychic Removal" was published in 1973, she left her profession as a literary critic to become a full time translator. After all these years, she still finds the work "intriguing, mysterious, and endlessly challenging".

At the end of her introduction, Grossman personifies literature and translation as a couple. She describes them as being "joined at the hip" and "absolutely inseparable". As long as literature exists, so will translation. As she describes it, "what happens to one happens to the other". Grossman concludes that "despite all the difficulties the two have faced, sometimes separately, usually together, they need and nurture each other, and their long-term relationship, often problematic but always illuminating, will surely continue for as long as they both shall live". In Grossman's opinion, literature and translation are equals, working together to

allow human society a larger perspective on the world around them.

In "Authors, Translators, and Readers Today" she highlights the obstacles that translation faces. Today, publishers and literature reviewers do not recognize its importance. Their ignorance, according to Grossman, is driven by "cultural dogmatism and linguistic isolationism". This inhibits translation, diminishing the overall number of works available to readers. Valuing translation in this manner is a new phenomenon. Grossman quotes a more salutary approach from King James' version of the Bible produced in 1611: "Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell". She goes on to discuss Cervantes' opinion that reading a translation is like looking at a tapestry from the back, though the Spanish author did not once "deny the inherent value of the enterprise". Grossman wonders why the value of translation changed so dramatically in the twenty first

century and offers ignorance, censorship and oppressive regimes as the main answers.

This is a problem because many books, in order to be translated into varying languages, first need to be translated into English, their "linguistic bridge", as she puts it. If American and British publishing houses refuse to do these translations, the literary works have nowhere to grow. Grossman concludes that translation is "not a possibility we can safely turn our backs on", since it turns the "menacing babble of incomprehensible tongues and closed frontiers into the possibility of mutual comprehension".

Grossman begins "Translating Cervantes" with an edgy statement: "Translation is a strange craft, generally appreciated by writers, undervalued by publishers, trivialized by the academic world, and practically ignored by reviewers". Why then does she agree to take on the massive project to translate Cervantes' *Don Quixote*? In her words, it is because she finds the

work “joyous and remarkable and intrinsically valuable”. She disagrees with Robert Frost’s definition of poetry as what gets lost in translation and also with the “thundering Italian accusation” that all translators are traitors (*traduttore é traditore*). Grossman was lost before starting her translation of Don Quixote. Normally, before beginning a translation, Grossman “digs through dictionaries and other kinds of references, talks to those kind, patient, and generous friends who are from the same country as the author, and, as a last step, consults with the original writer for clarification of his or her intention and meaning”. However, in this case, Grossman did not have any friends in Spain and Cervantes was dead. Two things came to her immediate rescue. The first was Martin de Riquer’s informative notes in the Spanish edition of the book that Grossman used for her translation. The second was a seventeenth-century Spanish-English dictionary. These two things along with other extensive

research allowed Grossman to “get into the author’s head and behind the author’s eyes and re-create in English the writer’s linguistic perceptions of the world”. In the end, Grossman created a translation that savored the original text’s “humor, melancholy, originality, and intellectual and esthetic complexity”. It opened the “great masterwork” to a new world and showed Cervantes as an “incomparable novelist”.

In Grossman’s final chapter “Translating Poetry”, she discusses the English versions of five poems including: “Mambo” by Jaime Manrique, “El tren instantáneo” by Nicanor Parra, “Soneto 145” by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “Soneto CLXV” by Luis de Góngora, y “Décime” by Fray Luis de León. For Grossman, staying true to the rhythm of the poems is essential. She attempts “to have the stresses fall on the same syllables in English and in Spanish”. Grossman finishes this chapter with Alastair Reid’s “Lo Que Se Pierde/What Gets Lost”. This poem is written in Spanglish

and, in Grossman's opinion, exemplifies the "formidable, irresistible act of translation".

Edith Grossman is respected as one of the English-speaking world's most successful contemporary translators. Her book *Why Translation Matters* values translation because it allows society to see into other worlds and also because it enables literature to live on forever. As Grossman says, "translation represents a concrete literary presence with the crucial

capacity to ease and make more meaningful our relationships to those with whom we may not have 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"

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