

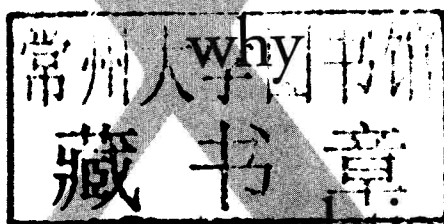


why **translation** matters

Edith Grossman

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grossman



translation

matters

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selected translations by edith grossman

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

*The Golden Age: Poems of the Spanish Renaissance*

Gabriel García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy*

*Whores; Living to Tell the Tale; News of a Kidnapping;  
Of Love and Other Demons; Strange Pilgrims; The  
General in His Labyrinth; Love in the Time of Cholera*

Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Bad Girl; The Feast of the Goat;*

*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto; Death in the Andes*

Mayra Montero, *Dancing to "Almendra"; Captain of the*

*Sleepers; Deep Purple; The Red of His Shadow; The Last  
Night I Spent With You; The Messenger; In the Palm of  
Darkness*

Julián Ríos, *Monstruary; Loves That Bind*

Carmen Laforet, *Nada*

Alvaro Mutis, *The Adventures and Misadventures of  
Magroll*

Carlos Fuentes, *Happy Families*

Antonio Muñoz Molina, *A Manuscript of Ashes*

Santiago Roncagliolo, *Red April*

Eliseo Alberto, *Caracol Beach*

Augusto Monterroso, *Complete Works and Other Stories*

## preface

In 2007 Professor María Rosa Menocal invited me to Yale University to initiate an annual lecture series under the auspices of the Whitney Center for the Humanities. The general title of the series was to be *Why X Matters*, the X depending on the field or area of specialization of the person delivering the lectures. In my case, naturally, that fearsome unknown quantity was translation.

I agreed immediately. I have always enjoyed my visits to Yale and the opportunity to talk to the intelligent, enthusiastic students and committed faculty I meet there. Then too, I invariably take great pleasure in speaking about translation, in all kinds of settings, formal and informal, casual and academic.

The introduction and first two chapters of the book are based on three talks I gave at the Whitney Center in the spring

of 2008. The final chapter, “Translating Poetry,” was written especially for this volume. It was inspired by recent work I had either completed or was about to begin: the selection of Renaissance poems I had translated a few years earlier for Norton, which were published in 2006 in *The Golden Age: Poems of the Spanish Renaissance*, and, under the aegis of the Guggenheim Foundation, the major translating project—Luis de Góngora’s *Soledades*—that would occupy most of my time in 2009. I had frequently discussed the issues involved in the translation of fiction, but preparing this book seemed the perfect moment to begin to address the even more problematic question of how one transfers a poem from one language to another.

I hope the reading of these essays inspires other ways to think about and talk about translation. My intention is to stimulate a new consideration of an area of literature that is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented. As the world seems to grow smaller and more interdependent and interconnected while, at the same time, nations and peoples paradoxically become increasingly antagonistic to one another, translation has an important function to fulfill that I believe must be cherished and nurtured. 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 relation-

ships to those with whom we may not 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.



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introduction:

why

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No problem is as consubstantial  
with literature and its modest  
mystery as the one posed by  
translation.

— JORGE LUIS BORGES,

“Las versiones homéricas”



To introduce these essays, I thought it would be useful to pass along some incidental information about my background and the circumstances that led me, however indirectly, to a career in translation.

When I was young—a high school student—it was not my intention to be a translator. I knew I wanted to learn languages and had a vague idea about being an interpreter. (I wasn't quite sure what the difference between the two professions was, but interpreting sounded more exciting; it suggested travel, exotic places, important events, world-shaking conferences at the United Nations.) As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I changed direction and decided my ambition was to be a literary critic and scholar, even though, operating under the mistaken assumption that apparently simple poetry was simple to translate, I do recall submitting a few poems by Juan Ramón Jiménez and, if I remember correctly, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, to the campus literary magazine. I embarked on an academic career, served my time in several graduate schools, and moved from a focus on medieval and baroque

peninsular verse, first the Galician-Portuguese love lyrics and then the sonnets of Francisco de Quevedo, to contemporary Latin American poetry, a change brought about by my first reading of works by Pablo Neruda, and soon after that César Vallejo. (I came on this stunning poetry fairly late in my student career: I have no memory of reading any Latin American literature written after the Mexican Revolution until I made the cross-country trek to Berkeley.) Neruda's *Residencia en la tierra* in particular was a revelation that altered radically the professional direction I followed and actually changed the tenor of my life. It elucidated for me, as if for the first time, the possibilities of poetry in a contemporary environment. Above all, it underscored the central position of Latin America in the literature of the world, its impact made possible and even more telling by means of translation.

I began teaching while I was a graduate student, and then continued giving classes full-time when I moved back east and enrolled in New York University. During most of this time I was thinking more about my dissertation than about translation. But one day Ronald Christ, a friend who edited the magazine *Review*, the publication of the organization once called the Center for Inter-American Relations and now known as the Americas Society, asked me to translate a story by the Argentine Macedonio Fernández, a writer of the generation just before Borges. I said I was a critic, not a translator, and he said that

might be true, but he thought I could do a good job with the piece. I agreed to translate it, more out of curiosity about its wildly eccentric author and the process of translation than for any other reason. I discovered to my surprise that I not only enjoyed the work more than I had imagined but could do it at home, an arrangement that seemed very attractive then, and still does.

My translation of Macedonio's "The Surgery of Psychic Removal" was published in *Review* in 1973. From that time on, I moonlighted as a translator of poetry and fiction in a fairly regular way while I sunlighted as a college instructor until 1990, when I left teaching to devote myself full-time to translation. I have been a visiting professor several times since then, and when I am not teaching I miss being in a classroom and talking to students, but my main concentration and professional focus have been on translation. And I have been very fortunate: I have liked, and often loved, practically every piece of writing I have brought over into English, and after all these years I still find the work intriguing, mysterious, and endlessly challenging.

Why translation matters: the subject is so huge, so complex, and so dear to my heart that I have decided to begin my approach to it by answering the implicit question with another question, using the technique of query-as-response—a tradi-

tional, perhaps time-honored method of indicating the almost impenetrable difficulty of a subject, and certainly, as every pedagogue knows, a good way to delay and even confound the questioner until you can think of an acceptable answer that has at least a glimmer of coherence. My variation on that traditional ploy consists of breaking the question into still smaller components in order to refocus the inquiry and ask not only why translation matters, but also whether it matters at all, and if in fact it does have importance, who exactly cares about it. The answers that emerge may really depend on how the questions are formulated: Why, for example, does translation matter to translators, authors, and readers? Why does it not matter to most publishers and book reviewers? What is its relevance to the literary tradition in any number of languages? What is its contribution to the civilized life of the world? My attempt to devise a response to these various elements constitutes a kind of preliminary appraisal of some of the thorny, ongoing, apparently never-to-be-resolved problems that surround the question of literary translation, beginning with the old chestnut of whether it is possible at all, and moving on to what it actually does, and what its proper place in the universe of literature should be.

I believe that serious professional translators, often in private, think of themselves—forgive me, I mean ourselves—as writers,

no matter what else may cross our minds when we ponder the work we do, and I also believe we are correct to do so. Is this sheer presumption, a heady kind of immodesty on our part? What exactly do we literary translators do to justify the notion that the term “writer” actually applies to us? Aren’t we simply the humble, anonymous handmaids-and-men of literature, the grateful, ever-obsequious servants of the publishing industry? In the most resounding yet decorous terms I can muster, the answer is no, for 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 esthetic experience of its first readers. This is the translator’s grand ambition. Good translations approach that purpose. Bad translations never leave the starting line.

As a first step toward accomplishing so exemplary an end, translators need to develop a keen sense of style in both languages, honing and expanding our critical awareness of the emotional impact of words, the social aura that surrounds them, the setting and mood that informs them, the atmosphere they create. We struggle to sharpen and elaborate our perception of the connotations and implications behind basic denotative meaning in a process not dissimilar to the efforts writers



make to increase their familiarity with and competence in a given literary idiom.

Writing, like any other artistic practice, is a vocation that calls to deep, resonating parts of our psyches; it is not something translators or writers can be dissuaded from doing or would abandon easily. It seems strikingly paradoxical, but although translators obviously are writing someone else's work, there is no shame or subterfuge in this despite the peculiar disparagement and continual undervaluing of what we do by some publishers and many reviewers.

As William Carlos Williams said in a letter written in 1940 to the art critic and poet Nicolas Calas (and my thanks to Jonathan Cohen, the scholar of inter-American literature, for sharing the quotation with me):

If I do original work all well and good. But if I can say it (the matter of form I mean) by translating the work of others that also is valuable. What difference does it make?

The undeniable reality is that the work becomes the translator's (while simultaneously and mysteriously somehow remaining the work of the original author) as we transmute it into a second language. Perhaps *transmute* is the wrong verb; what we do is not an act of magic, like altering base metals into precious ones, but the result of a series of creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism. In the process of translating, we endeavor