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## Duet for Two Pens

By RICHARD HOWARD

Does translation matter? Edith Grossman’s new book argues that it does, right in the title, and she ought to know. “Why Translation Matters” (an extended essay, really) is one of the first texts in Yale’s energetic new series, Why X Matters, each volume of which is to present a “concise argument for the continuing relevance of an important person or idea.” Certainly when X equals translation, I can imagine no defender more qualified — or, as it turns out, more querulous — than Grossman, whose version of “Don Quixote” a few years back caused a sensation in the shadowy realm of newly translated classics, and whose ulterior dealings with Hispanic splendors, ancient and modern, have stirred even so mild-mannered an assessor of cultural accomplishments as [Harold Bloom](#) to proclaim her, ominously enough, the [Glenn Gould](#) of translators.

The occasion to which Grossman now speaks, once she blows the froth of professional courtesy off her brew, is the drastic inadequacy of the treatment generally offered to translated literature in this country. By publishers: “Our world as dedicated readers depends on the availability of translated works, classical and contemporary, yet in English-speaking nations, major commercial publishers are strangely resistant to publishing them.”

And by reviewers: “So few of them have devised an intelligent way to review both the original and its translation within the space limitations imposed by the publication. . . . Their inability to do so is a product of intransigent dilettantism and tenacious amateurism, the menacing two-headed monster that runs rampant through the inhospitable landscape peopled by those who write reviews.”

And by academics: Translators “seem to be a familiar part of the natural landscape, so customary and commonplace that we run the risk of becoming invisible. This may be why many university English departments often declare a monopoly on the teaching of what they choose to call world literature or humanities. . . . I cannot quarrel with the inclusion of translations on any reading list, yet in the process foreign-language departments and their teachers of literature, the ones with real expertise in the works studied, are effectively snubbed. I have never been able to find the logic or coherence in that. Is there someone on a curriculum committee somewhere who does not know or cannot tell the difference between works in English and works in translation? The best face I can put on it is that the ironic disconnect may be an academic trait.”

And even by readers, common or otherwise: “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.”

But once we move beyond these obstacles, far deeper in the bitter concoction translators are fated to imbibe is the redeeming awareness that despite all the insults and impositions translation sustains in our culture, it is crucial to our sense of ourselves as human. Grossman is at her eloquent best not when she makes plaintive, resentful demands that the “bloated international conglomerates” owning the major publishing houses face up to their responsibility to foster literature in translation, but rather when she reveals her joy in her work and her true inspiration:

“Where literature exists, translation exists. Joined at the hip, they are absolutely inseparable, and, in the long run, what happens to one happens to the other. 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.”

I believe — and I sense from her later chapters that Grossman also believes — that the effective audience for her appropriately sharp-tongued revelations about translation and its commercial ventures and venues is actually the occasionally resistant, occasionally cynical reader-as-listener who may want to become the next Edith Grossman. Translation’s fate must be determined in those ears and minds, not in the offices of various foundations and publishers; hence her essay.

So it is heartening, even comforting, to learn that Grossman spends her hours, when she is not translating, in those arduous yet often ardent university classrooms where she can expound and clarify the nature of her art. Her clues, seeded throughout this essay, as to how to go about creating, completing and correcting a translation as an authentic work in another language (she writhes at the metaphor of “the target language”) are exactly what a reader, especially a nontranslating reader, requires.

Meanwhile, in spite of the cruel and unusual punishment that translation faces in the culture at large, Grossman and others like her continue to offer us enlightenment. Gradually and laboriously, a genuine contemporary achievement in the teaching and consequent production of translations of classical European literature, particularly poetry, has flourished, or at least sprouted, in the last decade. The Greek translations of Guy Davenport and Anne Carson; half a dozen versions of “The Divine Comedy,” including translations from W. S. Merwin, [Robert Pinsky](#) and Mary Jo Bang; Rika Lesser’s inspired versions of the Swedish poets Ekelof and Sonnevi; translations of virtually the entire corpus of the great 19th-century Russians by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, which smoothly correct the odd imbalance of Constance Garnett’s peculiar effort to make all Russian authors sound alike; and quite recently the surprising restoration of [Thomas Mann](#) by John Woods (who captures Mann’s endemic humor, transforming every great tome into an ironic treasury). Against the odds, all these gifts have come our way in recent years. We have also been vouchsafed an enormous and quite unsuspected library of Portuguese and Spanish poetry (from Richard Zenith’s Pessoa to John Felstiner’s Neruda), which returns me to Edith Grossman’s poetry of the Golden Age; her last chapter is called, without the shadow of an apology, “Translating Poetry.” Here Grossman triumphs over her resentments of our culture’s scandalous abuse of translation. Her account of what she calls “the endless quandary of writing and of writing as a translator” is passionately explored and patiently explained.

In the end, Grossman warmly (after all) and gratefully rehearses the twofold answer to the question of her title: translation matters because it is an expression and an extension of our humanity, the secret metaphor of all literary communication; and because the creation of any literary translation is (or at least must be) an original writing, not a pathetic shadow or tracing of the inaccessible “original” but the creation, indeed, of a second — and as we have seen, a third and a ninth — but always a new work, in another language.

*Richard Howard’s latest translation from the French is Maupassant’s novel “Alien Hearts.”*