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## QUIXOTIC

Edith Grossman

*Trying to translate a 400-year old masterpiece like Don Quixote into modern English would be folly, even Quixotic. But that's what Edith Grossman does.*

Octavio Paz, the Nobel Prize-winning Mexican writer, begins his essay “Translation: Literature and Letters” with the sentence: “When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate.” He states that children translate the unknown into a language that slowly becomes familiar to them, and that all of us are continually engaged in the translation of thoughts into language. Then he develops an even more suggestive notion: no written or spoken text is “original” at all, since language, what ever else it may be, is a translation of the nonverbal world, and each linguistic sign and phrase translates another sign and phrase. And this means, in an absolutely utopian sense, that the most human of phenomena—the acquisition and use of language—is, according to Paz, actually an ongoing, endless process of translation; and by extension, the most

creative use of language—that is, literature is also a process of translation: not the transmutation of the text into another language but the transformation and concretization of the content of the writer’s imagination into a literary artifact. As many observers, including John Felstiner and Yves Bonnefoy, have suggested, the translator who struggles to re-create a writer’s words in the words of a foreign language in fact continues the original struggle of the writer to transpose nonverbal realities into language. In short, as they move from the workings of the imagination to the written word, authors engage in a process that is parallel to what translators do as we move from one language to another.

If writing literature is a transfer or transcription of internal experience and imaginative states into the external world, then even when authors and readers speak the same language, writers are obliged to translate, to engage in the immense, utopian effort to transform the images and ideas flowing through their most intimate spaces into material, legible terms to which readers have access. And if this is so, the doubts and paradoxical questions that pursue translators must also arise for authors: Is their text an inevitable betrayal of the imagination and the creative impulse? Is what they do even possible? Can the written work ever be a perfect fit with that imaginative, creative original when two different languages, two realms of experience, can only approximate each other?

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To follow and expand on the terms of this analogy, a literary text can be thought of as written in what is called, clumsily enough, the translation language, or target language, even though it is presented to readers as if it were written in the original, or source language. If the work is successful, it is read as “seamless” (the description that strikes terror in the hearts of all translators), but here the word means that when readers hold the work of literature in their hands, it has at last cut free and begun a life independent of the original—independent, that is, of the simultaneous internal states, the concurrent acts of imagination that initiate the writer’s creative process. Language as the external artifact created by the writer needs metaphor to express the same internal states and acts of imagination that inspire the work, yet always looming in the background of all literary endeavor, establishing a gloomy, compelling counterpoint to the utopian model, is Flaubert’s melancholy observation: “Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat

out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.”

These kinds of considerations and speculations and problematic questions are always in my mind whenever I think about translation, especially when I am actually engaged in bringing a work of literature over into English. They certainly occupied a vast amount of mental space when I agreed to take on the immense task of translating *Don Quixote*, but only after I had repeatedly asked the publisher whether he was certain he had called the right Grossman, because my work as a translator had been focused on contemporary Latin American writers, not giants of the Renaissance in Spain. Much to my joy, he assured me that in fact I was the Grossman he wanted, and so my intimate, translatorial connection to the great novel began.

But there was more: hovering over me were dark *sui generis* clouds of intense trepidation, vast areas of apprehension and disquiet peculiar to this project. You can probably imagine what they were (just think what it would mean to an English-Spanish translator to take on the work of Shakespeare), but I will try to clarify a few of them for you.

There were the centuries of Cervantean scholarship, the specialized studies, the meticulous research, the untold numbers of books, monographs, articles, and scholarly editions devoted to this fiction-defining novel and its groundbreaking creator. Was it my obligation to read and reread all of these publications before embarking on the translation? A lifetime would not be enough time to do this scholarly tradition justice, I was no longer a young woman, and I had a two-year contract with the publisher.

There were other translations into English—at least twenty, by someone’s count—a few of them recent and others, like Tobias Smollett’s eighteenth-century version, considered classics in their own right. Was it my professional duty to study all of them? Before I took on the project, I recalled having read *Don Quixote* at least ten times, as a student and as a teacher, but always in Spanish except for my first encounter with the novel, in Samuel Putnam’s 1949 translation, when I was a teenager. I had read no other translations since then. Was I willing to delay the work by years to give myself time to read each English-language version with care? To what end? Did I really want to fill my mind with the echoes of other translators’ perceptions and interpretations?

Then there was the question of temporal distance, a chasm of four centuries separating me from Cervantes and the world in which he composed his extraordinary novel. I had translated complex and difficult texts before, some of them exceptionally obscure and challenging, in fact, but they were all modern works by living writers. Would I be able to transfer my contemporary experience as a translator to the past and feel some measure of ease as I brought the Spanish of the seventeenth century over into the English of the twenty-first? As a student I had spent a good number of years studying the prose writers and poets of the Spanish Golden Age, Cervantes among them, with some of the most erudite specialists in the field, including Joaquín Casaldüero, Otis Green, Antonio Rodríguez-Moñino, and José Montesinos, but was this sufficient preparation for undertaking the translation of a book that has the hallowed stature of a sacred text? Would my efforts—my incursions into the sacrosanct—amount to blasphemy?

*Would I be able to catch at least a glimpse of Cervantes's mind as I listened to his prose and began to live with his characters, and would I be able to keep that image intact as I searched for equivalent voices in English?*

What was I to do about the inevitable lexical difficulties and obscure passages? These occur in prodigious numbers in contemporary works and were bound to reach astronomical proportions in a work that is four hundred years old. As I've said, normally when I translate I dig through countless dictionaries and other kinds of references—most recently Google—for the meaning of words I don't know, and then my usual practice is to talk with those kind, patient, and generous friends who are from the same country as the author, and preferably from the same region within the country. As a last step in my lexical searches, I generally consult with the original writer, not for the translation of a word or phrase but for clarification of his or her intention and meaning. But *Don Quixote* clearly was a different matter: none of my friends came from the Spain of the early seventeenth century, and short of channeling, I had no way to consult with Cervantes. I was, I told myself in a tremulous voice, fervently wishing it were otherwise, completely on my own.



**Don Quixote de la Mancha and Sancho Panza,  
1863, by Gustave Doré**

Two things came to my immediate rescue: the first was Martín de Riquer's informative notes in the Spanish edition of the book I used for the translation (I told García Márquez, whose *Living to Tell the Tale* I worked on immediately after *Don Quixote*, that Cervantes was easier to translate than he was because at least in a text by Cervantes there were notes at the bottom of the page). Riquer's editorial comments shed light on countless historical, geographical, literary, and mythical references, which I think tend to be more obscure for a modern reader than individual lexical items. Throughout his edition, Riquer takes on particularly problematic words by comparing their renderings in the earliest translations of *Don Quixote* into English, French, and Italian, and I have always found this—one language helping to explicate another—especially illuminating. The second piece of invaluable assistance came from an old friend, the Mexican writer Homero Aridjis, who sent me a photocopy of a dictionary he had found in Holland when he was a diplomat there: a seventeenth-century Spanish-English dictionary first published by a certain gentleman named Percivale, then en-

larged by a professor of languages named Minsheu, and printed in London in 1623. The dictionary was immensely helpful at those dreadful times when a word was not to be found in María Moliner, or in the dictionary of the Real Academia, or in Simon and Schuster, Larousse, Collins, or Williams. I do not mean to suggest that there were no excruciatingly obscure or archaic phrases in *Don Quixote*—it has a lifetime supply of those—but despite all the difficulties I was fascinated to realize how constant and steady Spanish has remained over the centuries (as compared with English, for example), which meant that I could often use contemporary word-books to help shed light on a seventeenth-century text.

I wondered, too, if the novel would open to me as contemporary works sometimes do, and permit me to immerse myself in the intricacies of its language and intention. Would I be able to catch at least a glimpse of Cervantes's mind as I listened to his prose and began to live with his characters, and would I be able to keep that image intact as I searched for equivalent voices in English? On occasion, at a certain point in the translation of a book, I have been lucky enough to hit the sweet spot, when I can begin to imagine that the author and I have started to speak together—never in unison, certainly, but in a kind of satisfying harmony. In those instances it seems as if I can hear the author's voice in my mind speaking in Spanish at the same time that I manage to find a way to speak the work in English. The experience is exhilarating, symbiotic, certainly metaphorical, and absolutely crucial if I am to do what I am supposed to do—somehow 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.

And here I must repeat Ralph Manheim's observation comparing the translator to an actor who speaks as the author would if the author could speak English. A difficult role, and arduous enough with contemporary writers. What would happen to my performance when I began to interpret the work of an author who wrote in the seventeenth century—and not just an ordinary author but the remarkable man who is one of a handful of splendid writers who have determined the course of literature in the Western tradition? Despite all my years of study, I am not a Golden Age specialist: would I be able to play the Cervantean part and speak those memorable lines, or would the entire quixotic enterprise close down on its first night out of town, before it ever got to Broadway? Would I, in short, be able to write passages that would afford English-language readers access to this marvelous novel, allow them to experience the text in a way that approaches how readers in Spanish experience it now, and how readers experienced it four hundred

years ago? These were some of the fears that plagued me as I prepared to take on the project, but the prospect was not entirely bleak, dire, and menacing, of course. The idea of working on *Don Quixote* was one of the most exciting things that had happened to me as a translator. It was a privilege, an honor, and a glorious opportunity—thrilling, overwhelming, and terrifying. At this point I had the exchange with Julián Ríos that I mention in my translator’s note to *Don Quixote*. I told Julián about the project, and about the apprehension I felt, and he told me not to be afraid because, he said, Cervantes was our most modern writer. All I had to do, according to Julián, was translate Cervantes the way I translated everyone else, meaning the contemporary authors whose works—Ríos’s included—I had brought over into English. As I said in the note, this was “a revelation; it desacralized the project and allowed me, finally, to confront the text and find the voice in English”—in other words, Julián’s comments permitted me to begin the process of translation. In the back of my mind was the rather fanciful notion that if I could successfully translate the opening phrase—probably the most famous words in Spanish, comparable to the opening lines of Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy in English, or, in Italian, the inscription over the gate to hell envisioned by Dante in the *Commedia*, and known even to people who have not read the entire work—then the rest of the novel would somehow fall into place. The first part of the sentence in Spanish reads: “En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme...” I recited those words to myself as if they were a mantra, until an English phrase materialized that seemed to have a comparable rhythm and drive, that played with the multiple meanings of the word lugar (both “place” and “village”), and that echoed some of the sound of the original: “Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember...” It felt right to me, and with a rush of euphoric satisfaction I told myself I might actually be able to translate this grand masterpiece of a book.

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Another major consideration was the question of which edition of *Don Quixote* to use for the translation. As with any classic work, there are many beautiful and valuable editions of the book; despite the mean-spirited speculation of one reviewer, whose name I do not care to remember, I did know about the highly acclaimed recent edition by Francisco Rico, but as I have already indicated, for reasons both critical and sentimental I decided to use Martín de

Riquer's earlier one. Based on the first printing of the book, it includes all the oversights, lapses, and slips in Part One that Cervantes subsequently tried to correct, and to which he refers in Part Two, published ten years later. I have always loved the errors in the first printing and been charmed by the companionable feeling toward Cervantes that they create in me. Someone—one of the book's translators, I think—called *Don Quixote* the most careless masterwork ever written, and I thought it would be a shame if my translation lost or smoothed over or scholarshipped away that enthusiastic, ebullient quality, what I think of as the creative surge that allowed Cervantes to make those all-too-human mistakes and still write his crucially important and utterly original book. I am not suggesting, by the way, that Cervantes was a primitive savant or a man not fully conscious of the ramifications and implications of his art. He was, however, harried, financially hard-pressed, and overworked. Conventional wisdom informs us that even Homer nodded, and as every writer knows, in the urgency of getting a book into print, the strangest mistakes appear in the oddest places.

I decided, too, that I was not creating a scholarly work or an academic book, and therefore I would not study and compare editions—no more than I would begin my work by checking on how other translators had done theirs. And yet, despite my lack of academic intention, pretension, and purpose, for the first time in my translating career I chose to use footnotes, many of them based on the notes in Riquer's edition, and the others the result of my seemingly endless perusals of encyclopedias, dictionaries, and histories. These notes, which I wanted to be as unobtrusive and helpful as possible, were not meant as records or proofs of scholarly research but as clarifications for the reader of possibly obscure references and allusions—the kinds of clarifications made necessary in a contemporary version of the novel by external factors such as the passage of time, changes in education, transformations in the reading public, and the cultural differences between the United States in the twenty-first century and Spain in the seventeenth. There was no reason I could think of for an intelligent modern reader to be put off by difficulties in the text that were not intended by the author. For instance, the ballads or romances cited so frequently in *Don Quixote* by the characters and by Cervantes himself in the guise of the narrator were common knowledge at the time, familiar to everyone in Spain, including the illiterate. For a modern reader, however, especially one who reads the book in translation or is not conversant with the rich Spanish ballad tradition, the romances are unfamiliar, perhaps exotic, even though they are utterly unproblematic in the intention and structure of the novel. The same is true of allusions to figures and events from the history of Spain—not




obscure in and of themselves, but probably not known to most modern readers of *Don Quixote*, regardless of the language in which they read it. For instance, in the course of the novel, Cervantes mentions well-known underworld haunts, famous battle sites and fortresses in North Africa and Europe, popular authors and major military figures of the sixteenth century. These were the kinds of references that I did my best to explain in the notes.

Cervantistas have always loved to disagree and argue, often with venom and vehemence, but I concluded that my primary task was not to become involved in academic disputation or to take sides in any scholarly polemic but to create a translation that could be read with pleasure by as many people as possible. I wanted English-language readers to savor its humor, its melancholy, its originality, its intellectual and esthetic complexity; I wanted them to know why the entire world thinks this is a great masterwork by an incomparable novelist. In the end, my primary consideration was this: *Don Quixote* is not essentially a puzzle for academics, a repository of Renaissance usage, a historical monument, or a text for the classroom. It is a work of literature, and my concern as a literary translator was to create a piece of writing in English that perhaps could be called literature too.

Finally, my formal apology. I would like to cite the last paragraph of my translator's note:

"I began the work in February 2001 and completed it two years later, but it is important for you to know that 'final' versions are determined more by a publisher's due date than by any sense on my part that the work is actually finished. Even so, I hope you find it deeply amusing and truly compelling. If not, you can be certain the fault is mine."

To this I should add a phrase attributed to Samuel Beckett: "Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." That is all any of us can do. 

**Edith Grossman** is considered the most noted translator of Spanish literature into English working today. She has translated many works of Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and what is considered the greatest Spanish classic ever written - the novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. That translation has been acclaimed as the definitive English version of the great classic.

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