
The Translingual Sensibility: A Conversation between Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans

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Dialogue might be the most appropriate medium for reflections on translingualism. In a dialogue conducted by email over the course of ten days, Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans consider the validity and implications of linguistic determinism. Their conversation examines whether some words that seem to embody the unique *Weltanschauung* of a particular culture — such as *Schadenfreude*, *duende*, or *mångata* can be appropriated, if not translated, into another culture. Pondering whether there are any inherent qualities that distinguish texts by monolingual writers, such as Jane Austen and William Faulkner, from work by authors who switch languages, such as Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, they agree on the usefulness of thinking in terms of a translingual sensibility. Apart from the biographical circumstances of the author, a text possesses a translingual sensibility if it embodies an awareness of both the power and the limitations of its own verbal medium.

INTRODUCTION

If there are approximately 5,000 languages in the world, the number of bilingual combinations is $5,000 \times 4,999 = 24,995,000$. Because no individual can possibly be fluent in enough languages to master all the myriad possibilities of language-switching, the study of translingual literature has to be a collective project. That is the rationale for assembling pieces by disparate scholars for this special issue of *L2 Journal*. And it is why discussions of translingualism might be more convincing as conversations than as monographs.

I invited Ilan Stavans, a prominent translingual author, translator, lexicographer, and scholar of translingual literature, to converse with me about our topic. The Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College, Stavans has worked in Spanish, English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Among the more than fifty books that he has written or edited, of particular relevance to translingualism are: *Resurrecting Hebrew* (2008), *Love & Language* (2007), *Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion* (2005), and *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language* (2003). The following dialogue was conducted by email over the course of about ten days in June 2014.

-Steven G. Kellman

Steven G. Kellman (SGK):

The Sapir-Whorf thesis of linguistic determinism — the contention that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt*" ["The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"] (Wittgenstein, 1981, p. 148-149) remains the object of fierce debate among linguists. John McWhorter devotes most of his feisty new book *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* (2014) to an attempt at debunking Sapir-Whorf. Meanwhile, cognitive psychologists continue to publish research suggesting that language indeed shapes perception. Aneta Pavlenko's latest book *The Bilingual Mind: And What It Tells Us about Language and Thought* (2014) offers a thorough examination of the controversies surround the subject. However, among literary folk, in any case, linguistic determinism often functions at least as a useful metaphor.

You have written extensively and eloquently about your own life among four languages: Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. Benjamin Whorf declared: "We dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native languages" (Whorf, 1956, p. 213), but has that been true for you? How, if at all, has your choice of a particular language shaped your perceptions?

Ilan Stavans (IS):

Does John McWhorter speak a language other than English? Ironically, although he is a relative of mine (his wife is my wife's second cousin), and while we've participated in the same projects, we are yet to meet *cara a cara*, so I don't know the answer. He is probably fluent in an American jargon, as am I (Ebonics in his case, Spanglish in mine). This surely counts as polyglotism, in which case McWhorter should know better. Yes, the world is the same for everyone, as is a watermelon when more than one hungry eater delves into it. But who is to say it tastes the same? This conundrum makes me think of Hume's empiricism. Knowledge comes through the senses. In the case of language, the senses are surely the tool.

Is love the same when expressed as *amor*, *amour*, *amore*, *liebe*, and *ahava*? I've delved into this topic in *Dictionary Days* (2005). Honestly, I don't believe these words refer to the same emotion. Proof of it is the different lexicographic definitions available in each of their languages. I have no doubt that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein stated, the limits of my language means the limits of my world. He also stated that "whereof one cannot speak thereof one must remain silent." Words exist in certain dictionaries that are unavailable in others. For instance, the German word *Schadenfreude*. In Spanish, no one knows about the joy of seeing other people suffer.

SGK: Many words (*duende*, *mensch*, *sprezzatura*) are thought of as untranslatable because they embody the unique *weltanschauung* (!) of another culture. A language can either import them (*déjà vu*, *trek*, and *algebra* have become standard English) or else regard them, if at all, as quaint exoticisms (I am fond of the Swedish *mångata*, which means something like the shimmering, road-like reflection of the moon on water, but perhaps not enough Anglophones live near lakes for the word to be useful). English makes do with one all-purpose word, *uncle*, to refer to a variety of possible family relationships, whereas a Mandarin-speaker must choose among *bóbo* (father's elder brother), *shūshu* (father's younger brother), *gūzhàng* (father's sister's husband), *jiùjiù* (mother's brother), and *yízhàng* (mother's sister's husband). Though the culture that

produced *Moby-Dick* (1851/1992) can get by without being specific about kinship, the culture that produced Cao Xueqin's dynastic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1791/1974-86) needs precise linguistic tools to think through blood ties.

I have often thought that the elaborate system of subjunctives in Spanish equips its speakers with a nuanced sense of ambivalence and irony. So, Ian, I wonder whether you, as a Spanish-speaker, were being sardonic when, noting that *Schadenfreude* is a distinctively German word, you declared that: "In Spanish, no one knows about the joy of seeing other people suffer." Tomás de Torquemado, the infamous Grand Inquisitor, surely derived intense pleasure from torturing and incinerating hundreds of his fellow Spaniards. And on July 20, 1936, when General José Sanjurjo, returning from exile in order to lead a coup against the Second Spanish Republic, was killed in a plane crash, Loyalists no doubt exulted – though their glee was short-lived, since General Francisco Franco took over the Nationalist leadership and brutalized his country until his death in 1975. As the French say, *Qui rit le dernier rit le mieux* (He who laughs last laughs best). Perhaps the French, who were conquered several times by the Germans, have had to adopt a longer view than the immediate gratification of German *Schadenfreude*.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Schadenfreude* did not enter English until the middle of the nineteenth century. However, that did not prevent Shakespeare, using early seventeenth-century English, from creating Iago (who probably spoke Venetian), one of the great connoisseurs of others' suffering. The greatest was perhaps the Marquis de Sade, whose eighteenth-century French vocabulary lacked the word *Schadenfreude* when he took delight in imagining torment. There may or may not be a universal grammar, but certain emotions – with or without the linguistic tools to express them — transcend the boundaries of particular cultures.

How fortuitous that John McWhorter's wife is your wife's second cousin (and how much more precise to conceive of his spouse in Spanish, as *la prima segunda de tu esposa*). Though he graduated from Rutgers with a B.A. in French and specializes in creoles, he might not be fluent enough to think in any language other than English. But, as you suggest, even the most stubbornly monolingual of us move from register to register – hence in and out of any particular linguistic *weltanschauung* – throughout the day. The implication of that, it seems to me, is that what we call "translingual writers" are merely a more dramatic case of the situation of all writers. N'est-ce pas?

IS: By Mandarin's having such nuanced terms in regards to kinship, an entire world opens up. Of course, a father's younger brother is the same in any culture. Or is it? By granting it its own word, the dimension of such relationship acquires a particular taste; it receives its own location in the lexicon of the mind. To have a word is to exist, to have recognition. Isn't that what we refer to when, suffering from an illness, we are anxious for the doctor to give it a diagnosis, to name it? The moment our suffering has a name, it is comprehended.

I'm not a scientist, let alone an expert in snow. My instinct is to think that the snow that visits me in New England year after year is extraordinarily complex. On a superficial level, there is soft snow and hard snow. There are large snowflakes as well as thin, light ones. But what I see when that gorgeous whiteness enwraps me is only snow: no variety, no sophistication. I wish my vocabulary were more detailed.

Not quite the same happens with *Schadenfreude*. Everyone knows the suffering of others, for there is no aspect of civilization, no matter how insignificant, that doesn't involve a degree of violence, and the violence against others, especially when they are our rivals, generates a unique type of pleasure. It appeases jealousy. Yet only the Germans, to the best of my knowledge, have a word to describe such an emotion.

Talking about emotions, I am in awe of Spinoza's attempt, in *The Ethics* (1677/2008) Part III, geometrical as he was in his approach to life, to make a catalogue of all of the human emotions. I have done the experiment with my students—trying to list them, one by one—and the enterprise is altogether daunting. Love, hate, compassion, regret, contempt, pain, pleasure, desire, ambition, avarice, lust.... For instance, Spinoza includes luxury. Would you list it in your catalogue? Might this be a mistranslation? He also includes drunkenness. Personally, I don't see that as an emotion. He says that "By 'emotion' I mean the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications" (Spinoza, 2008, p. 52). The definition itself is magical.

SGK: I, too, am puzzled by Spinoza's cataloging of luxury as an emotion, rather than the cause of emotion. The possession of something sumptuous or extravagant can – depending on the person – arouse feelings of rapture, envy, consternation, or guilt. But the sumptuous, extravagant possession is not itself an emotion. Because its price tag is £122,380, a 12-liter bottle of Chateau Margaux 2009 certainly qualifies as a luxury, one most people in the world could not afford. But a container of fermented grape juice in itself has no feelings. The feeling arises in the owner who savors the exquisite taste and, perhaps even more, his own good fortune at being able to savor the exquisite taste. Or it might arise in observers who regret that their own budgets limit them to a six-pack of beer or who, in a world of widespread suffering and famine, condemn such profligate waste of money on a mere beverage.

However, Spinoza wrote his *Ethics* — *Ethica, ordine geometrica demonstrata* — in Latin, and the word that he used is *luxuria*. (Spinoza was a notable translingual; his maternal tongue was Portuguese, and he learned Latin only after Hebrew, Spanish, and Dutch). R.H.M. Elwes does indeed translate *luxuria* as *luxury*, and Samuel Shirley renders it — also problematically — as *dissipation*, which is an action, not an emotion (Spinoza, 2006, p. 90). However, *extravagance* and *exuberance* are other definitions that dictionaries offer for *luxuria*. Spinoza never went sky-diving or bungee-jumping, but it is possible that the profligate thrill he felt in defying the Amsterdam synagogue that excommunicated him could qualify as *luxuria*.

The luxury – and imprecision – of translation, of daring to bungee-jump from one language into another, brings us back to the question of translingualism. I am wondering whether, aside from their obvious verbal facility, there is anything unique about translingual authors, authors whom, in one of your essays, you call "tongue-snatchers" (Stavans, 1995, p. 205). It is true that most people in the world are at least bilingual, though most people in the world are not writers, and most writers are not translingual. Earlier, you suggested that if the limits of one's language are the limits of one's mind, one might long to expand the possibilities of mind and imagination through other linguistic templates. Benjamin Lee Whorf gained access to a whole new way of conceiving time – and the very discipline of linguistics – through his

work on the Hopi language, which lacks the linear past-present-future tense structure of European languages. On the face of it, it would seem that a polyglot would enjoy an enlarged variety of ways of thinking about gender, color, possession, rank, quantity, and other elements embedded differently in different languages.

So I am wondering what we can say about those writers who are obdurately monolingual. Are their accomplishments necessarily more limited than those of writers who cross linguistic boundaries and thereby have access to more than one way of apprehending experience? A basic principle of epistemology is that in order to know X, we must understand not-X. If so, in order to understand the phenomenon of translingual writing, we must come to terms with literature by writers who never switch languages.

Though he never graduated from high school, William Faulkner, for example, was a master of Mississippi English, and, while able to switch into other registers of English during sojourns in Hollywood and at the University of Virginia, he was limited to writing exclusively in English. Jane Austen studied French during her one year of boarding school, but that was surely insufficient for attaining fluency, and she, too, was a monolingual novelist. Furthermore, though Emily Dickinson studied some Latin as a pupil at the Amherst Academy, she was — unlike Fernando Pessoa, who wrote in both Portuguese and English, or Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote in both German and French — a monolingual poet.

The question that poses itself, then, is whether the monolingual oeuvre of Austen, Dickinson, and Faulkner is a lesser achievement than the translingual work of Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, and Vladimir Nabokov. Aside from questions of merit, is there any quality intrinsic to the writings of monolingual authors that would distinguish them from the writings of translinguals? Is there a blind test that we could apply to an unknown text that would immediately identify whether its author was monolingual or translingual?

IS: Aha! The word we're looking for, the emotion Spinoza is referring to, is lust. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin *luxus*: abundance, exuberance. This is, indeed, a problem of rendition, or else, of the rapid transformation of language. While *luxuria* might have been translated once as luxury, the reference, it seems to be, is to the uncontrollable desire for an object.

As for your question, Steve, let me answer by invoking a conversation I had with American poet Richard Wilbur a few years ago. I mentioned to him that as a historical lexicon, the *OED* includes far more words in English — its total is close to a million — than the *Diccionario de la Real Academia*. Does this mean a Spanish writer has fewer tools at her disposal to build a poem? And does this mean that poetry in Spanish, at least numerically, is poorer? Of course not. It doesn't matter how many words a language has; what matters is what its users, in this case the literati, do with it.

In art, there is no higher or lesser achievement because theater, poetry, fiction, memoir — none of these genres — is a competition. Shakespeare, Poe, Dickinson, Faulkner, Morrison — they all sit together on the shelf. Being multilingual is simply a way to see the world, one allowing for a multifaceted perspective. In and of itself, that might give a person an advantage when it comes to communication. But talent

isn't about advantage; it's about what each of us does with the deck of cards we have been handed. Life might fool us to think that some of us are more equipped than others to handle our affairs. However, death, as the great equalizer, is really the litmus test: what did we do with the time allocated to us, with the opportunities we were handed in, and with the disposition — call it “our individual nature” — that distinguishes us?

SGK: If, by specifying *luxuria* as one of the emotions, Spinoza really meant *lust*, that provides “The Spinoza of Market Street” (Singer, 1983) with added poignancy. In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s famous story, an aging scholar who has devoted his entire existence to studying Spinoza’s *Ethics* and to emulating the master’s rational, ascetic way of life is transformed by a sexual awakening.

Lacking a Borgesian universal bookshelf capacious enough to hold every book that was ever written, will be written, or could be written, we must make selections. Shakespeare, Poe, Dickinson, Faulkner, and Morrison might well find a place on our bookshelf, but numerous works written according to formula or without grace probably would not. Book editors, acquisition librarians, and the general public all recognize that choice is an unavoidable element of reading. Of course, choices are sometimes frivolous or arbitrary or momentary; *Moby-Dick* (Melville, 1851/1992), *The Awakening* (Chopin, 1899/1993), and *Call It Sleep* (Roth, 1934/ 1992) all had to be rediscovered after vanishing from the communal bookshelf. And writing, as you note, is not a competition, except for immortality. Will our words survive us?

However, I invoked the names of Austen, Dickinson, and Faulkner and of Beckett, Conrad, and Nabokov not so much to invite an evaluative ranking as to raise the question of whether there is anything distinctive about translingual literature. I chose six authors who are all major figures in world literature. Three of them — Austen, Dickinson, and Faulkner — never wrote in any language other than English; in fact, to make the distinctions even more clear-cut, I chose three major monolingual authors who had very little knowledge of any language other than English. The other three — Beckett, Conrad, and Nabokov — switched languages. Obviously, the decision to cease writing in Yiddish and do all of his subsequent work in French (despite his facility also in Hebrew, English, German, Romanian, and Hungarian) was a momentous one for Elie Wiesel. And Thomas Mann’s loyalty to his native German even while living in California shaped his exile experience. But I am less interested in the experiences of monolingual and translingual authors than in the literature that they produced. Is there anything intrinsic to *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813/2010) that would reveal to a reader who knew nothing about its provenance that its author was monolingual? Is there anything intrinsic to *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1899/2005) that would reveal to a reader who knew nothing about its provenance that its author — né Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski — was writing in a third language, after Polish and French? Is there a recognizable difference between texts by monolingual authors and texts by authors who switch languages? Is the attention devoted to translingual literature in a growing body of books, dissertations, articles, and conference presentations (as well as in this special issue of *L2 Journal*) much ado about nothing?

Certainly, to use your poker metaphor, we must all make the best use of the hand we are dealt, but what about the deck from which it is drawn? It is clearly simplistic

to assume that because the *OED* is much, much larger than the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* and the unabridged dictionaries of most other languages that Anglophone writers are necessarily best equipped to compose masterpieces. Language is much more than lexicon. At least as telling are syntax, phonology, and all the other elements that combine to make the user of a language accept certain assumptions about space, time, social status, quantity, gender, and other factors. And I am less interested in ranking languages (Is French inherently more “poetic” than Norwegian? Is German “harsher” than Japanese?) than in the question of whether stepping outside of the prison house of one language into the prison house of another creates different literary possibilities. Is the literature produced by those who jump languages recognizably different – not better or worse – from the literature of those who do not?

IS: I finally got your point, Steve — apologies for my slowness, — and it is excellent. My answer is a resounding yes, but let me qualify that yes by calling attention to another tradition, Jewish literature.

As you know, the question of what makes literature Jewish isn’t easy to solve. Religion certainly doesn’t define it, as countless writers who belong to it don’t define themselves as believers. Nationality? Of course not, because the Jewish diaspora is about multiple citizenships, or at least about dual loyalties. Culture? Sure, but what does one mean by it? *Call It Sleep* (1934) is about Jewish immigrants to New York. Its author, Henry Roth, is Jewish. But Kafka doesn’t mention the word Jew anywhere in his fiction, from *The Metamorphosis* (1915/2008) to *The Trial* (1925/1999), onward to *Amerika* (1927/2011). Yet I don’t think there is a writer more Jewish than him. Does the author have to talk about either Judaism or Jewishness to make the book Jewish? The answer, obviously, is no. Yet does the author need to be Jewish for the book to be too? We’ve entered a complicated web. *The Merchant of Venice* deals with Jewish themes.

One answer is that it’s the reader who makes a book what it is, not its author. If the reader brings a Jewish affinity to the book, then the spark I’m talking about takes place. But I’m not fully satisfied with this approach. I would rather talk about a Jewish sensibility. Jewish literature is Jewish not because of its themes but because of its sensibility. And what is a sensibility? The appreciation, the response, the disposition one has — largely because of cultural empathies — toward a certain worldview.

I think along the same ways in regards to translingualism. One doesn’t need to have this as a topic, as is the case of *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*] (Beckett, 1952), *The Secret Agent* (Conrad, 1907/2001), and *Lolita* (Nabokov, 1955/1991). The sensibility, however, is there. And is it still there if the book by any of the authors you listed writes in his first tongue? It depends. I have spent my life writing in five languages—Spanish, English, Spanglish, Yiddish, and Hebrew—in the first three much more actively. My feeling is that, no matter in what languages I’m writing, my disposition toward the world — and to language as a key to decipher it — is constantly there. That is, I don’t have to talk about words to emphasize my verbal preoccupations. I would even describe my beginnings as a writer, when I was growing up in Yiddish and Spanish in Mexico, as setting the stage already from my translingual sensibility.

Still, I can imagine the case of a writer born into a strictly monolingual environment who, because of unexpected circumstances, needs to become a polyglot, and that strategy reshapes her approach to everything. Should that writer's monolingual beginnings be part of the translingual sensibility? This is a harder question to answer. My response is that it would depend on a case-to-case basis.

In any event, the central issue now comes to the fore: how to describe a translingual sensibility? What is it that makes all these writers part of a tradition?

The profound conviction that words are more than instruments to portray the universe. That they are universes in themselves. That words are interchangeable yet irreplaceable. That fine literature isn't only saying something well but saying it with the exact words and in the appropriate language.

So there you have it, Steve.

One more question: what is a tradition? Ah, here I am less certain. It is the membership in a club that, in and of itself, doesn't see itself as such. It is a sense of belonging to a historical ascendancy. It is the conviction not only that we aren't alone but that we aren't free either, because once you belong to a tradition, you realize you do things because you're willing but also in spite of your own volition — by inertia, or perhaps by osmosis.

SGK: Ilan, difficult as it is to pin down, I think that your concept of a “translingual sensibility” is a promising way to begin to approach the phenomenon of writers who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one, as well as of monolingual writers who aspire to translingualism. In her 1989 study *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the “First” Emigration*, Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour identifies “cognitive flexibility,” “tolerance for ambiguity,” and “greater awareness of the relativity of things” as the distinguishing qualities of Russian émigrés who wrote in French (Beaujour, 1989, p. 14). Is that what we mean by “translingual sensibility?” Does it apply, as well, to Japanese poets who wrote in Chinese, to Turkish transplants who wrote in German, and Yiddish-speakers who wrote in Hebrew? However, cannot it also apply to monolingual writers? With his disorienting time shifts and his use of multiple unreliable points of view, it seems to me that, though he stuck stubbornly to English, Faulkner's ambiguous fictions exhibit an exquisite awareness of the relativity of things.

The critic John Rodker once quipped that Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915/ 2012) is “the finest French novel in the English language” (MacShane, 1965, p. 119). Though his father was German, Ford was a native speaker of English, and he wrote his novel in English. However, he also spoke French and, steeped in French literary culture, was as much influenced by Flaubert and Stendhal as by Dickens and the Brontës. Perhaps, beyond identifying the elective cultural affinities of *The Good Soldier*, Rodker's witticism recognizes a “translingual sensibility” behind Ford's ambiguous novel of erotic deceptions and self-deceptions.

This could at least be an entertaining parlor game of translingual transpositions: Is Ezra Pound's “The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter” (1917/1957) the finest Chinese poem in the English language? Is Jean Racine's *Phedre* (1677/1992) the finest Greek tragedy in the French language? Is Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959/2009) the finest Latin American novel in the German language? Is Luís Vaz de Camões'

The Lusíads (1572/2008) the finest Latin epic in the Portuguese language? All of these examples seem to aspire, in one way or another, to a translingual sensibility — or at least to a sensibility alien to the one normally embedded in the language in which they were written. But perhaps those two kinds of sensibility are not quite the same. Perhaps a genuinely translingual sensibility is one that does not just covet another language but that is permeated by an awareness of the relativity of languages. A poem in Bengali with a truly translingual sensibility would not just emulate poetry in Italian; it would also possess a built-in reflexive sense of the gap between Bengali and Italian.

A similar dynamic is at work in pseudo-translations. In 1946, when Boris Vian tried to pass off his hard-boiled detective novel *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* [*I Spit On Your Graves*] as “traduit de l'américain de Vernon Sullivan” [“translated from the American of Vernon Sullivan”] (Vian, 1946, title page), he was, even while sticking to his native French, aspiring to leap between languages and literary traditions. So was Horace Walpole when he pretended that his gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764/2002) was translated from Italian. When Cervantes presents *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615/2002) as a translation from the Arabic of Cide Hamete Benengeli, he provides a liberating reminder of the dangers of limiting oneself to a single language and literary tradition, as the gentleman from La Mancha does when he allows the Spanish romance *Amadis de Gaula* (1304) to monopolize his life. Is there not as well a translingual sensibility, an awareness of the relativity of languages and literatures, in Voltaire's facetious claim — mocking the ponderous philosophical treatises of Leibnitz and other Germans — that *Candide* (1759/1975) was “Traduit de L'Allemand de Mr Le Docteur Ralph” [“translated from the German of Doctor Ralph”] (Voltaire, 1975, title page)?

IS: Let me go even further by invoking the case of Roberto Bolaño, another monolingual with a translingual sensibility. Even in your most suggestive catalogue of examples, he is a *rara avis*, which makes him, in my view, twice as interesting. All of Bolaño's oeuvre is written in Spanish. That, however, is a simplification, for what he excelled at, what he taught us to see under a refreshingly new lens, are the nuances — I would even say the polyglotism — of the monolingual writer.

As you know, in spite of there being approximately 450 million Spanish-language speakers, there isn't really a Spanish language. Or else, there are multiple varieties, defined by nationality, and within that category, by geography, age, profession, and so on. In other words, an Argentine Spanish speaker employs the language differently than a Mexican Spanish speaker, and so on, and inside those national categories, a *porteño* speaks Spanish differently than a citizen of La Plata. Those nuances might be reduced even more: the *habla porteña* has numerous subdivisions, historically as well as longitudinally. The language of prostitution and crime is different from the language of sports, the language of adolescents in a neighborhood like Puerto Madero, San Telmo, or Barrio Norte.

Bolaño, a Chilean by birth, wrote the best Mexican novel of the end of the 20th century: *Los detectives salvajes* [*The Savage Detectives*] (1998). Set in Mexico, it follows two rambunctious protagonists, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, in their quest for the poetic epicenter of Mexican culture. Bolaño, who spent his adolescence and young adulthood in Mexico, reproduces admirably the parlance of various segments of

Mexican society. Then, in stories like “The Insufferable Gaucho” (2003), he does the same with various linguistic manifestations in Argentina. In novellas such as *Estrella distante* [*Distant Star*] (1996) and *Nocturno de Chile* [*By Night in Chile*] (2000), he does the same with Chilean Spanish. And in *2666* (2005), he mimics, among other things, Iberian Spanish. Quite a feat!

Such is Bolaño’s mastery; I have no hesitation in describing him as a multi-author. The translingual sensibility we’ve pinpointed is vividly expressed in his pages.

Your comments on Ezra Pound, Racine, Grass, and Camões make me want to add Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, which to my mind is a superb example of the encyclopedic Latin American novel à la *Terra Nostra* (Fuentes, 1975), *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*] (Cortázar, 1963), and *Tres tristes tigres* [*Three Trapped Tigers*] (Cabrera Infante, 1967). And the translation games you’ve listed are the tip of the iceberg. The *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (*The Book of the Zohar*) one of the most canonical books in Jewish Kabbalah, pretends to be written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, a sage of ancient Israel who was a pupil of Rabbi Akiva, although in truth it was crafted by the 13th-century Spanish mystic Moisés de León. Borges’ translation of Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” (Borges, 1910) was done by a young eleven-year-old Borges, although for a long time it was attributed to either his father or his mother.

Authorship is complicated and so is the legitimacy of the author’s language. Shakespeare’s identity has been put into question ever since he died. Do we know who Homer was? And is the Bible the work of God or the byproduct of a series of amanuenses? How about the King James Version: is it really possible to translate a book by committee? These are and aren’t pertinent responses to your argument. I bring them up because the translation sensibility we’ve been addressing is indeed an evasive, elusive concept. Translingual authors are its conduits as are monolinguals with panache for verbal wizardry. As in all cases artistic, I’m reluctant to turn a definition into a straitjacket. Let me bring up jazz. The best attempt I’ve ever encountered of what it is comes from Herbie Hancock. When asked to describe jazz, he said he wouldn’t know where to start. However, the moment he heard it, he recognizes it automatically and immediately. I say the same about the translingual sensibility.

SGK: If so, the translingual sensibility is a tragic awareness of the inadequacy of any one language, a utopian aspiration to overcome the blight of Babel through embrace of all languages. However, even Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti, the legendary nineteenth-century hyperglot, knew “only” seventy-two languages. Panlingualism is of course as much an impossible ideal as is fluency in the original pure language that the Deity employed for the performative utterance that let there be light. Keenly aware of the imperfection of human expression, authors who leap from language to language testify both to the vibrancy of the imagination and to its limitations.

All of which is to say that discussions of translingualism, in whatever language they are conducted, are necessarily fragmentary — broken shards of that perfect discourse unavailable to mortals locked within particular times and spaces. As a complement to the phenomenon of pseudo-translations, which are themselves a compliment to the power of linguistic difference, we might try to imagine the consummate instance of pseudo-translingualism, the semblance of an intelligence that could move freely among all possible languages. If machine translation ever

became capable of grasping context, nuance, and ambiguity, that would be artificial intelligence. However, for biological human beings, the instance of translingualism that comes closest to being comprehensive would be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*, is the “most translated document” in the world (para. 1). The UDHR currently exists in more than 300 languages, though that is at least 4,500 short of the full range of extant languages. Since each linguistic rendition is supposed to be equally valid and binding, they are not so much translations as versions of the same Platonic Ur-Text, written in the One language that subsumes all. A translingual sensibility of that magnitude, Ilan, beggars the imagination and leaves us at a loss for words.

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