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# Nimble Tongues: Studies in Literary Translingualism

Steven G. Kellman

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# NIMBLE TONGUES

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# Nimble Tongues

## Studies in Literary Translingualism

Steven G. Kellman

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# Preface

The motives for literary translingualism—the practice of writing in more than one language or in a language other than one's native tongue—are varied, but its history is long, dating back to the infancy of verbal art. However, war, disease, famine, tyranny, terrorism, natural disaster, and economic hardship have contributed to an unprecedented movement of human beings in recent decades. According to a report released in 2017 by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "there are now an estimated 258 million people living in a country other than their country of birth—an increase of 49% since 2000" ("International Migration Report"). Migrants now constitute 3.4 percent of the world's population. Many of them adopt the language of their new host nation. Not all migrants are writers, and not all translinguals are migrants, but unprecedented mobility is surely a factor in the burgeoning of translingual literature discussed in this book.

And where literature leads, analysis follows. A Google search of "translingualism" yields more than twelve thousand entries. A search of "translingual literature" yields more than three thousand. Internet search engines were still quite primitive in 2000 when I published *The Translingual Imagination*. And when I edited *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft* in 2003, Google had not yet

developed its "universal search" algorithm. However, it is safe to say that the explosion of interest in translingual literature during the past two decades is not simply a function of more inclusive search engines. Books, articles, dissertations, conferences, and special issues on the subject have proliferated. Natasha Lvovich and I assembled a partial bibliography of primary and secondary sources when we co-edited a special issue of *L2 Journal* in 2015 ("Selective Bibliography"). Because no one can be fluent in the thousands of languages that authors have switched to and from, no single scholar can claim mastery of the field, and it has been enlightening and inspiring to interact with many others in many countries who have taken up the subject. The study of authors who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one intersects with many vital disciplines, including literary history, stylistics, biography, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies, and immigration studies. It is a microcosm of the entire field of comparative literature, the discipline that examines literature in ways that transcend the boundaries of language and nationality.

My study of translingualism has continued beyond *The Translingual Imagination* and *Switching Languages*. It has taken me to presentations in Amherst, Edmonton, Kuwait City, Los Angeles, Moscow, New Orleans, Oslo, Paris, Uppsala, and Utrecht and to the discovery of how nimble-tongued authors have explored the spaces, links, and barriers between languages. If the phenomenon of translingual writing is anything more than just a quaint curiosity, it has to be because of the power of language to shape—if not determine—perception and identity. The adoption of a particular language has profound implications for social justice and geopolitics.

Although the chapters in this volume originated as discrete essays or presentations, they form a continuous discussion of how linguistic choice is fundamental to the way we present ourselves and who we are.

Over the years, my thoughts about the nimbleness of tongues have been enlarged and enriched by the global community of translingualism scholars, including Michael Boyden, Rachael Gilmour, Julie Hansen, Eugenia Kelbert, Natasha Lvovich, Ania Spyra, Ilan Stavans, Tamar Steinitz, Adrian Wanner, and Elaine Wong. I am grateful to Justin Race, director of Purdue University Press, and Katherine Purple, editorial,

design, and production manager, for the hospitality of their publishing house. I am especially indebted to Kelley Kimm for her astute and meticulous copyediting. And no language can express my gratitude—and love—to my wife, the poet Wendy Barker.

# Does Translingualism Matter?

When Swedes speak English, evidence of their primary language often peeks through via vocabulary or intonation. A Stockholmer who asks, “What’s the clock?” is probably inquiring about what time it is. Since Swedish lacks the affricate /dʒ/, usually represented in English by the letter “j,” a Swede who is confined to jail might sound as if enrolled at Yale. The layering of languages was also common in early European manuscripts. Because of the scarcity of writing material, medieval scribes often recycled precious parchment by scraping away earlier texts before inscribing anything new. The result, a palimpsest, might bear faint traces of lower layers, but the practice sometimes eradicated the only copies of important works. However, except for the fact that it is a translation, one of the treasures of the Carolina Rediviva Library at Sweden’s Uppsala University lacks any marks of an earlier text. A sixth-century manuscript of a fourth-century translation of the Bible into Gothic, the Codex Argenteus offers one of the few surviving specimens of the Gothic language. Scholars are able to study it because its parchment somehow escaped the fate of other medieval manuscripts—use as a palimpsest. Its Gothic text was not scraped away to make room for another document. Palimpsest, the layering of texts, is an apt metaphor for literary translingualism—the phenomenon of writers who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary.

During the course of articulating a theory of translation in his 1813 essay "Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens" ("On the Different Methods of Translating"), Friedrich Schleiermacher casually denies the possibility of translingual literature, declaring that it is not possible to write something of artistic merit in a foreign language—"es nicht möglich ist etwas der Uebersetzung, sofern sie Kunst ist, würdiges und zugleich bedürftiges urspränglich in einer fremden Sprache zu schreiben" (77). Schleiermacher concedes the possibility of writing in an adopted language, but dismisses it as a rare and wonderful anomaly—"eine seltene und wunderbare Ausnahme" (77). As the numerous examples adduce throughout this book, from the earliest texts to the present, translingual literature is possible and even plentiful, as well as wonderful. While systematic study of translingualism was rare before the twenty-first century, it has proliferated during the past two decades. In numerous books, dissertations, articles, entire journals, conference sessions, and entire conferences, scholars have examined particular authors and texts as well as more general considerations of literary multilingualism, translation, and autotranslation. My own contributions have included two books: *The Translingual Imagination* (2000) and *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft* (2003). But because no one scholar can master more than a handful of languages, the study of translingualism must be a collective enterprise.

Thus far, scholarship on translingualism has tended to concentrate on literature of the past 150 years and in Western languages, though Yoko Tawada, who writes in Japanese and German, has called attention to what she calls *exophony*, traveling out of one's native tongue, among Asian writers (Tawada). Much attention has, deservedly, been devoted to the modernist trinity of Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, and Vladimir Nabokov. And the fact that postcolonial authors such as Chinua Achebe, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Raja Rao wrote in the languages of European empires has not been ignored. In addition, the global profusion of refugees, migrants, and travelers in recent years has produced a rich body of translingual writing and of scholarship on that oeuvre. Notable contemporary authors who have migrated into English include André Aciman, Rabih Alameddine, Daniel Alarcón, Julia Alvarez, Louis Begley, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Ariel Dorfman, Cristina García,

Olga Grushin, Ursula Hegi, Aleksandar Hemon, Ha Jin, Andrew Lam, Li-Young Lee, Yiyun Li, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Hisham Matar, Dinaw Mengestu, Téa Obreht, Luc Sante, Gary Shteyngart, and Charles Simic. Though the French are so proud of their language they enforce its purity through diktats from the Académie Française, they have nevertheless bestowed glittering prizes on linguistic interlopers such as Vassilis Alexakis, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Hector Bianciotti, Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar, Romain Gary, Nancy Huston, Milan Kundera, Jonathan Littell, Amin Maalouf, Andreï Makine, Alain Mabanckou, Irène Némirovsky, Atiq Rahimi, André Schwarz-Bart, Jorge Semprún, Dai Sijie, Henri Troyat, and Elie Wiesel. Germany even created a special award, the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize (named for the nineteenth-century German poet who was born in France), for translinguals—such as Zehra Çirak, Emine Sevgi Őzdamar, and Yoko Tawada—who write in German. (Because of concerns that it stigmatizes translinguals instead of honoring their contributions to literature in German, the Chamisso Prize was discontinued in 2016.) Translingual literature has proliferated not only in such widely spoken languages as English, French, and German, but even in Swedish—in work by, for example, Mehmed Uzun (first language Kurdish), Guilem Rodrigues da Silva (Portuguese), Theodor Kallifatides (Greek), Azar Mahloujian (Farsi), and Fateme Behros (Farsi). Modern Hebrew literature was created by writers—including S. Y. Agnon, Yehudah Amichai, Aharon Appelfeld, Chaim Nachman Bialik, Yosef Chaim Brenner, and Shaul Tchernichovsky—who came to Hebrew from Yiddish, Russian, Polish, German, and other European languages. With his 1992 novel *Seijouki no kikoenai heya* (*A Room Where the Star Spangled Banner Cannot Be Heard* [2011]), Hideo Levy established his reputation as the first American to write fiction in Japanese.

However, translingual texts have an ancient pedigree, predating even Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, René Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*—all written in Latin. Translingual writing may well have developed as a practical matter shortly after the invention of writing itself. It is quite possible that Etruscans, Anatolians, Carthaginians, and other peoples of the Mediterranean basin and Asia Minor appropriated the newly devised alphabet brought by the seafaring Phoenicians not only by adapting it to

their own unlettered tongues but also by writing in Phoenician—probably not epic poetry, but at least invoices for their commercial transactions with the Phoenicians. Even earlier, as far back as the twenty-third century BCE, the first poet history knows by name, Enheduanna, the only daughter of the powerful Akkadian King Sargon, composed her poetry in Sumerian, though her first language was probably Akkadian. Within the far-flung empires of antiquity, citizens wrote in the imperial language—Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Sanskrit—regardless of what they spoke at home. Indeed, Yasemin Yildiz argues persuasively that what she calls the "monolingual paradigm" (2) first emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe, about the time that Schleiermacher was beginning to use it as a prism through which to (mis)understand literary creation. Throughout the rest of history, multilingualism has otherwise been the norm.

Charting that history requires the talents and energies of generations of scholars. No one researcher possesses the linguistic equipment to take on the task alone. If there are approximately 5,000 languages in the world, the number of translingual possibilities would equal 5,000 × 4,999 ÷ 2 = 12,497,500. And that is only calculating the number of *bilingual* translingual possibilities; authors who, like Kamala Das, Vladimir Nabokov, and George Steiner, move among three or more languages add even more possibilities to the challenge of mapping out the universe of translingual literature.

I do not presume to take on that task in this chapter. Instead, I would like to pose some fundamental—even elementary—questions about the translingual project, the kinds of basic questions that arose in an undergraduate seminar on translingual literature that I have taught in Texas. Before we begin, for example, to juxtapose details of Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (1937) with those of her own version of it in Danish, as *Den afrikanske farm* (1937), it is appropriate to ask: Why is such an analysis important? I do not necessarily mean that as an ethical or political challenge—that is, Why should we be studying literature at all as long as human beings are suffering war, famine, disease, and injustice? This is not the occasion to address that important question, though I trust that each reader in one way or another believes that a world devoid of literary studies is a world that has surrendered to the primitive forces of war, famine, disease, and injustice.

Instead, I would pose this question: Given that the study of literature is a worthy, even edifying and civilizing, endeavor, what difference does it make that a given text was written in an adopted language—in L2 (a speaker's or writer's first acquired language), or even L3 or L4, what John Skinner dubbed "the stepmother tongue" (Skinner)? We can break that down into two questions: what difference does translingualism make to the author and what difference does translingualism make to the reader? Is a translingual text inherently distinguishable from a monolingual one? Is it inherently superior?

As a preliminary caveat, it is necessary to recognize that languages are dynamic continuums, not discrete, static entities. To enter into a particular linguistic community is to jump into a rushing current that is not entirely isolated from other flows. All languages are mongrels and carry echoes of the babel from which they emerge. And, as Rebecca L. Walkowitz observes, it is a mistake to pigeonhole many contemporary texts within a single linguistic category. Numerous works are, as she puts it in the title of her 2015 book, "born translated," existing simultaneously in more than one language. Because genocide and assimilation had eliminated most of the readership for his primary language, Yiddish, Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote to be read in translation, though he stubbornly continued to compose his fictions in his *mame loshn*. Furthermore, if we consider that even the most obdurate xenophobe who refuses to learn anything but L1 (his or her first language) negotiates several registers (slang, formal, intimate, regional, standard, etc.) of just L1 each day, we are *all* multilingual, and all texts are translingual. Nevertheless, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1953), written in the Irish author's adopted French, is a different kind of creation from, say, *Candide* (1759), which, on its title page, Voltaire flippantly claimed was "traduit de l'allemand de Mr. le Docteur Ralph" 'translated from the German of Doctor Ralph' but which he in fact composed himself in his native French. Is the difference an important one? Or is the category of "translingual literature" an arbitrary, pedantic contrivance?

To answer the question of whether writing in an adopted language makes much difference to the writer, we can turn to a large body of translingual memoirs, interviews with translingual writers, and empirical studies in socio- and psycholinguistics. The Indian novelist Raja Rao dismissed the whole subject. "The important thing," he contended, in

English, not in his native Kannada, "is not what language one writes in, for language is really an accidental thing. What matters is the authenticity of experience, and this can generally be achieved in any language" (147). Most other translinguals disagree. They are implicitly, or even explicitly, Whorfians, for whom each language entails a unique Weltanschauung. Otherwise, if languages were perfectly interchangeable, there would be little reason to undertake the arduous task of switching languages.

Many translinguals describe a sensation of split personalities, as if each language embodied a different self. An extreme example is Louis Wolfson, who was diagnosed as schizophrenic and whose 1970 memoir, *Le Schizo et les langues*, is a curious amalgam of French, Hebrew, Russian, and German—anything but English, the mother tongue he detested in part because of a strained relationship with his biological mother. Rosario Ferré, the Puerto Rican author who writes alternately in Spanish and English, contends that "a bilingual writer is really two different writers, has two very different voices, writes in two different styles, and, most important, looks at the world through two different sets of glasses. This takes a splitting of the self that doesn't come easily and can be dangerous" (138). Ariel Dorfman, split between a South American and a North American identity, signals the same truth in the very title of his 1998 memoir, *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey*. After completing his book in English, Dorfman, a self-proclaimed "bigamist of language" (*Heading South* 270), immediately reconceived it in Spanish as *Rumbo al sur, deseando el norte* (1998). Luc Sante, who grew up in Belgium speaking French, finds the English language inadequate to recall his earlier self. "In order to speak of my childhood," he notes, in English, in his 1998 memoir, *The Factory of Facts*, "I have to translate. It is as if I were writing about someone else. The words don't fit because they are in English, and languages are not equivalent one to another" (261). For Eva Hoffman, the title of whose 1989 memoir declares that she is *Lost in Translation*, there is an insurmountable chasm between Polish-speaking Ewa Wydra and English-speaking Eva Hoffman that she attempts to overcome by staging dialogues between the two. Wistful over her inability to recover her Polish self, Anglophone Eva invokes a Polish word, *tęsknota*, to convey her nostalgia, sadness, and longing, even while noting that those English words are incommensurate with the Polish (4).

Nevertheless, translingual authors do not always conceive of their condition in terms of loss. "I see no reason to give up one language if I can help it," declares Rosario Ferré. "Having two different views of the world is profoundly enriching" (138). For Anton Shammās, a Palestinian Arab, writing in Hebrew was an act of liberation: "You cannot write about the people whom you love in a language that they understand; you can't write freely. In order not to feel my heroes breathing down my neck all the time, I used Hebrew" ("My Case" 48). Jerzy Kosinski, who wrote in English rather than his native Polish, recalled, "It was a great surprise to me, one of many surprises of my life, that when I began speaking English, I felt freer to express myself, not just my views but my personal history, my quite private drives, all the thoughts that I would have found difficult to reveal in my native tongue" (125). Speaking French rather than his native German is similarly emancipating for Hans Castorp in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*. It enables him to overcome his inhibitions about flirting with the married Clavdia Chauchat. As he tells her, *en français*, using the intimate *tu*, though he would not have dared to address her as *du* in German, "Moi, tu le remarques bien, je ne parle guère le français. Pourtant, avec toi, je préfère cette langue à la mienne, car pour moi, parler français, c'est parler sans parler, en quelque manière, sans responsabilité, ou, comme nous parlons en rêve" 'As you've surely noticed, I barely speak French. All the same, I would rather speak with you in it than in my own language, since for me speaking French is like speaking without saying anything somehow—with no responsibilities, the way we speak in a dream' (*Zauberberg* 407; *Magic Mountain* 401).

For Oscar Wilde, writing his play *Salomé* in French rather than in his native tongue was an additional way to shock and offend the English, the colonialist usurpers whom he, as a proud son of Ireland, despised. There are almost as many reasons to switch languages as there are writers who adopt another tongue. Every translingual is happy or unhappy in his or her own way. But whether they view the switch positively or not, almost all acknowledge that switching languages makes a profound difference in what—and certainly how—they write.

More significant than the way that translingualism makes a difference for the writer is the way that it makes a difference for the text, which means the difference that it makes for the reader. Does it really matter

whether a novel, story, poem, or play was written in L1, L2, L3, or L4? I would like to suggest a thought experiment. Let's apply a blind test. Could we take an unknown work and tell merely from textual evidence whether it was or was not written in the primary language of its author? If we could tell, would the fact of its translingualism mean a profound difference in style or content or quality?

One way to pursue this inquiry is to take a work by a patently monolingual writer and compare it to a work by a translingual. We can of course easily name hundreds, if not thousands, of important translinguals writers, from Chinua Achebe, who wrote in English rather than Igbo, to Feridun Zaimoğlu, who writes in German, not Turkish. But it is much more difficult to identify a writer who is completely monolingual. Jacobean England was separated from and suspicious of the rest of Europe. However, though Ben Jonson famously wrote that William Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek" ("To the Memory of My Beloved Master" 263), the speech in *Henry V* in which Alice, the lady-in-waiting, tries to teach Catherine, a French princess who is to marry Henry, the English words for parts of the body is conducted in French (Act 3 Scene 4). Nor did John Milton, a few decades later, restrict himself to English only. Though Samuel Johnson, impatient with the polyglot, polymath John Milton, would complain that he "wrote no language" (442), the author of *Paradise Lost* in fact wrote poetry in Greek, Italian, and Latin, in addition to English.

There are probably some monolingual writers in North Korea, perhaps the most insular and isolated nation in the world, where writers are reportedly constrained to employ their talents extolling the supreme leader. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il themselves both published books, and, according to his official—and incredible—biography, the current supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, wrote fifteen hundred books during his three years at Kim Il-sung University. In any case, before assuming power, each of the Kims lived abroad and no doubt acquired some knowledge of languages other than Korean. Japan is a notoriously insular culture, though studying English has become fashionable there. And the best-known Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami, knows English well enough to have translated Truman Capote, Raymond Carver, and F. Scott Fitzgerald into Japanese.

So perhaps it is to the United States, the nation of immigrants where the second and third generations strive to assimilate to English-only, that we must turn to find the best specimen of monolingual writing. According to one report, "less than 1 percent of American adults today are proficient in a foreign language that they studied in a U.S. classroom," and "only 7 percent of college students in America are enrolled in a language course" (Friedman). However, monolingualism is not conspicuous among major American writers of the nineteenth century, most of whom were educated in Latin and Greek. If we are looking for a monolingual author, it would certainly not be the polyglot poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who translated from French, Italian, and Spanish and was a professor of modern languages at Harvard. Nor would it be Washington Irving, who spent twenty years as a diplomat in Spain. Nor Herman Melville, who traveled widely as a sailor before settling down to write. Mark Twain wrote vivid accounts of his travels abroad, and in an 1880 essay titled "The Awful Language," described his struggles learning German. Though he recalled, approvingly, a Californian who "would rather decline two drinks than one German adjective," Twain was conversant enough in the language to deliver a humorous lecture in Vienna in 1897 titled "Die Schrecken der deutschen Sprache." And of course much has been made of Twain's mastery, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, of vernacular English and of what has come to be called Ebonics. The ventriloquism of American speech that Twain orchestrates in his novel led Shelley Fisher Fishkin to hear the echoes of African American voices (Fishkin). Henry James, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and Saul Bellow were certainly not monolingual. Even Emily Dickinson, who rarely strayed outside her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, studied Latin, and the quantitative prosody of Latin poetry was a model for her own work (Cuddy).

The Jim Crow South was probably the most isolated part of the United States, and its bard was William Faulkner, who concentrated almost all of his fiction in rural Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. Faulkner himself never finished high school and, aside from training as a pilot in Canada, had no experience abroad until after he won the Nobel Prize. Creolization—the mixture of cultures, races, and languages—is the ultimate horror for the characters in the Yoknapatawpha cycle. Yet even

Faulkner's Anglophone Mississippi bears traces of French—in names such as Lucas Beauchamp and Charles Bon. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Thomas Sutpen brings a cargo of African slaves back from Haiti to work his plantation, we are told "the negroes could speak no English yet and doubtless there were more than Akers who did not know that the language in which they and Sutpen communicated was a sort of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own" (Faulkner 27). Thus is another language, in this case Haitian Creole, inscribed into Faulkner's monolingual text as an object of dread.

To find a genuinely monolingual control against which to test the difference made by translingualism, we might have to turn to the isolated Pirahã people of the Amazon. However, as studied by Daniel Everett, their language, unrelated to any other extant language, lacks an alphabet and thus any written texts to compare to those of Beckett, Conrad, and Nabokov (Everett). Moreover, if Proust is right and "les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère" 'beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language' (*Contre* 305; *Against* 93), then *all* literature aspires to translingualism.

So, for a clearer test of whether translingualism matters, we might instead turn to the antithesis of writers who switch languages—those writers who cling to their primary language despite living in an environment where another language dominates. Lars Gustafsson wrote much of the poetry and fiction that secured his reputation as a leading Swedish author during the twenty years he lived in Austin, Texas. Witold Gombrowicz continued writing in Polish during the twenty-four years he spent in Argentina, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn persisted in using Russian to expose the Soviet gulags during the twenty years he spent in exile, mostly in Vermont. Robert Penn Warren, who stuck to English even when living in Italy, once explained, "I like to write in foreign countries, where the language is not your own, and you are forced into yourself in a special way" (5). Therefore, when they are forced into themselves, which means into their own primary languages, is the result any different from what occurs when a writer moves out into another language? Since those very sophisticated writers did know other languages and were alert to the different registers of their primary tongues, even they cannot function as a useful contrast to overtly translingual writers. In fact, since most

writers are multilingual or at least vary the registers of their primary language, it is probably more precise to refer to them not as monolingual but rather as isolingual. An isolingual writer is one who writes in a language identical with his or her L1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who studied Latin, Greek, French, Italian, English, and Hebrew, was multilingual, but, because he wrote exclusively in his native German, Goethe must be considered isolingual.

So we are left with this question: Are there any specific markers that signal the translingual origins of a text? When not altered by scrupulous book editors, the existence of calques—examples of locutions transposed from one language directly into another in which they are at best awkward—would certainly be evidence of a prior language. According to his wife, Jessie, Joseph Conrad (*né* Józef Teodor Konrad Nalécz Korzeniowski) spoke English with a thick Polish accent. And his English prose is a palimpsest of English superimposed over his L2, French, over his L1, Polish. In *The Secret Agent* (1907), when Conrad states that Adolf Verloc "pulled up violently the venetian blind" (84) and that, gazing at Winnie Verloc, Ossipon "was excessively terrified at her" (254), the word order and choice betray the fact that the author is not a native speaker of English. Arguing that Conrad's prose is haunted by French ("l'anglais de Joseph Conrad est littéralement hanté par le français"), Claude Maisonnat has documented a large quantity of gallicisms spread throughout his fiction (par. 29). Nevertheless, a reader in search of something distinctive about translingual writing ought not to be reduced to hunting for calques. Is there not something more significant that distinguishes translingual writing?

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "the dialogic imagination" owes much to assumptions about multilingualism. Bakhtin argued that echoes of other languages accounted for the heteroglossia of classical Latin literature. "Roman literary consciousness," he wrote, "was bilingual. . . . From start to finish, the creative literary consciousness of the Romans functioned against the background of the Greek language and Greek forms. From its very first steps, the Latin literary world viewed itself in light of the Greek word, through the eyes of the Greek word" (61). Bakhtin goes on to note that both Aramaic and Oscan were also part of the linguistic mix of the Roman Empire and to contend that multilingualism alone enables

us to step outside any particular language and realize that what we take for granted as "natural" is in fact a function of that specific language. However, Bakhtin's claim that all genuine novels are dialogic would include works by isolingual authors and recognize that the ability to switch voices is not unique to translinguals.

Nevertheless, most of us who have ventured at all beyond L1 become Whorfians to the extent that we sense that each language offers its own template through which to process space, time, number, self, and other fundamental categories of experience. All things being equal (though they often are not), translingual authors are better equipped than isolinguals to step outside the prison-house of language—or at least of L1—and to make us aware of the factitiousness of verbal constructions. Translingual texts are often metalingual in their self-consciousness about their own linguistic medium, the way they make language itself strange, subjecting it to what Viktor Shklovsky called *ostranenie*—defamiliarization (Shklovsky). Nabokov's love of puns, anagrams, and palinodes foregrounds his linguistic medium. In *Pale Fire*, when he makes translation from the fictional language Zemblan a crucial element of the story, a reader is obliged to think about the nature of language itself. *La Leçon* (1951) by Eugène Ionesco, who wrote in French, not his native Romanian, dramatizes the absurdity of primers for learning English. Andreï Makine's novel *Le Testament français* (1995; *Dreams of My Russian Summers* [1997]) is in effect a paean to the Russian-born author's first love: his second language, French. In *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014), Rabih Alameddine, who writes in English rather than his native Arabic, foregrounds language by telling the story of an elderly woman whose meager life revolves around secondary translation—rendering into Arabic novels that have already been translated into English or French. Autobiographies by many translingual authors—among them Ariel Dorfman, Eva Hoffman, Hugo Hamilton, and Luc Sante—are in effect self-begetting linguistic memoirs, the story of how the author achieved enough fluency in a second language to use it to write the book we are reading.

Yet not all translingual texts are reflexive, and not all call attention to language. Writing thirty-one novels, including popular successes such as *Captain Blood* (1922), *Scaramouche* (1921), and *The Sea Hawk* (1915), in his sixth language, English, Rafael Sabatini aimed for a transparent

style that does not call attention to itself but instead invites readers to lose themselves in the colorful adventures of his characters. Writing in English rather than her native Russian, Ayn Rand was more interested in pushing her polemics about what she called "ethical egoism" than in reflecting on the medium of those polemics. Nor do translinguals possess a monopoly on reflexive fictions, as evidenced by *The Tempest*, *Don Quixote*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*—all written by isolinguals.

In her book *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration*, Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour finds "cognitive flexibility," "tolerance for ambiguity," and "greater awareness of the relativity of things" to be characteristic of the Russian translinguals she studies (102). It is tempting to apply those terms to all translingual writers, since all evince a willingness to readjust such categories as time, space, quantity, color, and gender through which language helps them apprehend the world. However, some distinctions ought to be made. Ambilingual translinguals—those who, like Fernando Pessoa (Portuguese and English), Mendele Mocher Sforim (Yiddish and Hebrew), Premchand (Hindi and Urdu), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (English and Gikuyu), and André Brink (Afrikaans and English) write in more than one language—probably demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility than writers such as Julia Alvarez, Aharon Appelfeld, Edwidge Danticat, Assia Djebar, and Irène Némirovsky who choose a language other than their L1 and stubbornly stick with it as their sole medium of literary expression.

Aneta Pavlenko argues that the age at which a second language is acquired is a crucial factor in differentiating among bilinguals. Age of acquisition would probably also be useful in making distinctions among translingual authors and their texts; the fact that Nathalie Sarraute began learning French as a little girl when she moved to Paris from Russia marks her as a different kind of translingual from Jerzy Kosinski, who began learning English in his twenties when he emigrated to the United States from Poland. Pavlenko also distinguishes among coordinate bilinguals ("who learned their languages in distinct environments and have two conceptual systems associated with their two lexicons"), compound bilinguals (who "learned their languages in a single environment and, consequently, have a single underlying and undifferentiated conceptual

system linked to the two lexicons"), and subordinate bilinguals ("typically classroom learned who learned the second language via the means of the first, have a single system where the second-language lexicon is linked to conceptual representations through first-language words") (*The Bilingual Mind* 18).

In speciesist English, "to parrot" is to repeat something mindlessly. Yet birds clearly do have minds, albeit nonhuman, of their own. In 2014, when a parrot named Nigel was returned to his British human companion, Darren Chick, four years after disappearing, Nigel spoke Spanish rather than the clipped English that Chick had taught him ("Missing Parrot Turns Up"). "¿Que pasó?" is the way he greeted his old companion at their reunion. If Nigel could be called an avian translingual, he would also have to be classified as a coordinate translingual. Other examples of coordinate translinguals might be Gary Shteyngart, who grew up speaking Russian in Leningrad but switched to English after moving to the United States at age seven, and Aharon Appelfeld, who, a native speaker of German, did not begin learning Hebrew, the only language he wrote in, until he left Bukovina for Palestine at age fourteen. Examples of compound translinguals might be Breyten Breytenbach, who grew up speaking both Afrikaans and English, and Anita Desai, who grew up speaking German, Bengali, and English. Examples of subordinate translinguals are Samuel Beckett, who grew up speaking English but studied French at school, and René Descartes, who grew up speaking French but studied Latin at school.

All things are rarely equal, but when they are, compound translinguals would seem most gifted with cognitive flexibility. The compound translingual's ability from an early age to balance two or more separate linguistic systems simultaneously probably demands a greater awareness of the relativity of things than the sequential initiation into another linguistic template involved with both coordinate and subordinate translinguals. However, most translingual writers would seem more attuned to ambiguity than most isolingual writers. Translingualism would seem to incline writers toward metalingual awareness, manifested in ostentatious verbal play and in reflexive constructions that lay bare the devices of their art. Nevertheless, some translingual writers are largely indifferent to the linguistic medium they happen to be using. And, conversely, work

by some isolingual writers is acutely self-aware. William Shakespeare's plays-within-plays and the metafictional architecture of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* were not produced by switching languages. Moreover, even the most dedicated scholar of translingual literature could not contend that it is somehow superior to isolingual literature. To do so would be to deprecate the achievements of Cervantes, Goethe, Li Po, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Virgil in favor of Agnon, Beckett, Conrad, Dante, Nabokov, Pessoa, and Rilke.

Therefore, if it is hard to isolate anything unique to translingual literature, and if translingual literature is not necessarily superior to any other, should we be making a fuss over it? Every translingual is translingual in his or her own way, and their lives are of considerable anecdotal interest. The texts they have produced are marvels of adaptation and invention. The poems, plays, novels, short stories, and essays by writers who have switched languages offer rich material for understanding language, the imagination, and the experience of what it is to be human, or even a parrot.

# About the Author

Steven G. Kellman is author of *The Restless Ilan Stavans: Outsider on the Inside* (Pittsburgh); *American Suite: A Literary History of the United States* (Finishing Line); *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth* (Norton); *The Translingual Imagination* (Nebraska); *The Plague: Fiction and Resistance* (Twayne); *Loving Reading: Erotics of the Text* (Archon); and *The Self-Begetting Novel* (Columbia). He edited *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft* (Nebraska); *UnderWords: Perspectives on DeLillo's Underworld* (Delaware); *Torpid Smoke: Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (Rodopi); and *Leslie Fiedler and American Culture* (Delaware). A widely published critic and essayist, Kellman served four terms on the board of directors of the National Book Critics Circle and received its coveted Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. He has taught at Tel-Aviv University, the University of California campuses at Irvine and Berkeley, Tbilisi State University, and the University of Sofia. He is professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio.