

# McCulture

*Americans have developed an admirable fondness for books, food, and music that preprocess other cultures. But for all our enthusiasm, have we lost our taste for the truly foreign?*

BY AVIYA KUSHNER

AS A CHILD, I LIVED IN A HOUSE WHERE WE spoke only Hebrew. I remember relatives from the American side of the family complaining about my parents' language policy when they visited our house in New York. "She'll suffer if she doesn't speak English at home," one worried. "She won't be able to write well enough to get into college." But something unexpected happened as my Israeli mother sang the Psalms to my siblings and me while we bathed: Empires fell. The Berlin Wall literally came down. Drove of immigrants and refugees—huddled masses who had long yearned to be free—changed London, Berlin, Tel Aviv, and New York. India rose, China skyrocketed, and four young Israelis invented instant messaging. Bilingual kids like me, toting odd foods at lunch and speaking with their mothers in something unintelligible, were suddenly not the problem, but the glittering future.

I did learn to write in English well enough to get into college. So did an entire generation of bilingual writers who discovered that another language rumbling in their ears was an advantage on the page, a double richness. For a third of the 21 writers on

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*Granta's* 2007 Best Young American Novelists list, English is a second language.

It's not just in the literary world where attitudes have changed. A name Americans have a hard time pronouncing, like Aviya, used to be a problem. I was urged to take a nickname to make things easier, by well-meaning dorm neighbors and even people I interviewed over the years, who asked if they could "call you something else." No one says that anymore. Instead, I get asked what *Aviya* means. With the election of a man named Barack Obama to the presidency, a man who introduced himself to the country at the 2004 Democratic convention with a speech about having an unusual name and a dual background, a new kind of translator is moving to the forefront of American culture. It is now cool to be half.

In areas ranging from politics to food to music to literature, suddenly we want to hear as much as possible from people who grew up in two worlds at once. The trend is especially noticeable in literature, where plenty of the best new writing in English seems to meld two languages and two ways of thought—the farther apart and more exotic, and the more seamlessly combined, the better. Obama himself has written a border-crossing memoir that leaps from Hawaii to Kenya to Chicago.

If a collection of stories about China written in English gains attention, or a memoir about growing up half-



*Profil en Face, 1929, by Herbert Bayer*

Kenyan, then you might think a translation of a work by a major Chinese writer or a leading Kenyan novelist would sell out. But the reverse seems to be true. Trans-

lations are rarely bestsellers; it can be hard to find a newly translated book at a megabookstore, even if that book was hugely important in its home country. Solid

numbers on translated books published in the United States are difficult to come by, but in a 2007 *New York Times* report on the international book market, writer Jascha Hoffman determined that less than three percent of all books published in the United States in 2004 were translated; 3.54 percent of new adult fiction published in the United States in 2005 was translated.

Others who track translations say that more recent

**WE CONGRATULATE OURSELVES on our globalized worldview, but we read ethnic literature the way we down an ethnic meal: It's adjusted especially for our taste.**

numbers are also embarrassingly low. Chad W. Post, who runs the Open Letter press at the University of Rochester, which publishes literature in translation, and Three Percent, a blog on international literature, estimates that 356 new translated fiction and poetry titles were published in the United States in 2008. He doesn't include retranslations—say, a new Jorge Luis Borges—in his count because he wants to know who the new voices are. “You could probably almost read all the translations that come out in a year,” he says.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world is reading outside the lines, as anyone who walks through a European airport bookstore can attest: Twenty-five percent of books published in Spain in 2004 were translations, according to Hoffman's study. In Italy the figure was 22 percent, and in South Korea 29 percent. Even China, with four percent, had a higher proportion of translations than the United States.

**T**he world has noticed our resistance to translation. The head of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, caused a furor last fall when he dismissed American literature several days before the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to a Frenchman many Americans had never heard of. “The U.S. is too isolated, too insular,”

Engdahl told The Associated Press, explaining why he sees Europe, not the United States, as the center of the literary world. “They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature.” Engdahl stated the case too strongly, but I hear his worry—that the way Americans read is making us smaller.

It's not that Americans aren't interested in the world at all. It's just that we seem to want someone else to do

the heavy lifting required to make a cultural connection. As the Peruvian-born writer Daniel Alarcón observes, Americans would rather read stories by an American about Peru than a Peruvian writer translated into English. “There's a certain curiosity about the world that's not matched by a willingness

to do the work,” Alarcón said in a phone interview from his home in Oakland, California. “So what happens is that writers of foreign extraction end up writing about the world for Americans.”

Perhaps it's not laziness or insularity, but just being overwhelmed by a barrage of information. We are now expected to keep up with what's going on in China, Russia, and India, just to keep our jobs. The work of writers in smaller or low-profile countries, like most of Africa? Well, we just don't have the time to hear from them directly. And we'll survive—or so we think.

The writers' organization PEN has been working to identify important books that should be translated into English. Picks include *Selected Works*, by Suzan Samanci, a Turkish Kurd, and *Terra Sonâmbula*, by Mia Couto of Mozambique, which was on the 12-book short list of Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th Century, a project of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. Works from minority communities, including the Kurds and the Roma, also stand little chance of reaching our bookshelves. Masterpieces of the widely exterminated, such as Yiddish short stories, can sit untranslated for decades. When *The Shadows of Berlin*, by Dovid Bergelson, made it to English in 2005, I was amazed that we had waited so long to have all these hilarious and haunting stories from prewar



Daniel Alarcón

Berlin, such as the one in which a woman falls in love with a murderous dog, and the dog with her.

The dog growled, the woman was delighted, and Bergelson saw the future.

But maybe we don't want a direct window into a culture in which canines eventually ruled people. Maybe we don't want to remember that Bergelson was killed in the last of Stalin's purges of Yiddish writers, in 1952, possibly because Stalin worried—correctly—that he had something dangerous, and essential, to say. We don't have much time, so we want a taste, some fast food to go. And so we read ethnic literature the way we down an ethnic meal. We can get a burrito almost anywhere, but it's often mildly spiced, adjusted just for us, and wrapped for those in a rush. So we're eating a translated burrito, and we're reading a world prepared especially for us. But we don't believe anything is missing. After all, we eat "ethnic" food, and often.

Sure, Ricky Martin topped the charts with a song built around a lone half-Spanish phrase, "livin' *la vida loca*." Despite that hit, all-Spanish songs are still segregated on their own radio station in most cities. This

trend of protecting Americans from any unnecessary non-English interference in their day even seeps into places where you might expect language skills to be valued. At the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, a screen on the back of every chair flashes English subtitles (originally introduced for those with disabilities). Now someone like me, with the tiniest bit of Italian but decent French, doesn't have to exert herself to muddle along, as I used to in high school.

It's easy to miss the subtitle factor as we congratulate ourselves on our globalized worldview, our ethnic restaurants in every downtown. Sure, we see some Spanish, on subway doors, and in political speeches when the candidate wants some Texas votes. But it's a bit like learning about the Middle East by listening to Shakira, a Colombian/Italian/Lebanese pop singer. You get a little bit of the rhythm, but not the whole thing.

For the past six years I have been intensively reading the King James Bible, to learn what the Bible in English looks and sounds like. I have been surprised and moved by the translation, sometimes baffled and sometimes angered. Adam, for example, the first man of all, comes from the word *adama*—earth—in Hebrew. In English, Adam's name is suddenly earth-less and, therefore, meaningless. Throughout the Bible, what is obvious in Hebrew, like man's roots in earth, is often not so in English translation, and vice versa. Something that English makes obvious—for example, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," followed by a period—is far more ambiguous in Hebrew, and therefore a matter of debate among the rabbis.

I often think about the men who perhaps struggled over what to name Adam in English. The lives and deaths of Biblical translators were awful; William Tyndale, the first to use Hebrew and Greek versions as he translated, and whose work eventually made its way into the 1611 King James, was tried for heresy, strangled, and burned at the stake in 1536. Previously there was John Wycliffe, who directed the translation of the Latin Vulgate—a fifth-century translation from the Hebrew by Jerome—into the English vernacular in the latter 1300s. Though he managed to die naturally, of a stroke, in 1384, his remains were exhumed in 1428, burned to ashes, and thrown into the River Swift. Sometimes,

reading peacefully in America, I think of how much translators suffered so English readers could hold this text in their hands.

For centuries, translating a text signified that it was essential, worthy of preservation and dissemination. The first translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, was commissioned for the Greek-speaking Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt, who feared that Jews could no longer read Hebrew. To keep the Torah alive, they translated it. It was not an easy decision. The Talmud, in fact, recounts that the day the Torah was translated into Greek, “a darkness descended over the world.” Translation, then, has long been frowned upon, especially if it involves moving from a holy tongue.

My parents wanted me to speak Hebrew so I could read without a translator and understand my grandfather without an interpreter. They wanted me to see for myself that man and earth are intimately linked. They wanted me to understand the resonances of a Hebrew word like *kabed*, the imperative verb meaning “honor,” as in the Ten Commandments phrase “Honor thy father and thy mother.” Well, that “honor” is rooted in the Hebrew word for heaviness, and the word can also mean glory, or awe. And then, God himself is referred to as *melech ha’kavod*—the king of honor, maybe, but, more likely, the king of awe or glory. So many layers of man’s relationship to his parents, and also to God, are in that word.

What a foreign-born writer or a second-language writer does is pick one layer. Someone like me says, I will choose honor, or respect, or heft, or glory, but not all. I won’t—I can’t—explain all the references to that word in other contexts, because it’s too much information and will create an awkward reading experience. And if that word appears in a contemporary Israeli novel, the English reader of it in translation might never hear the echo of the Ten Commandments, or the whisper of a remembered psalm.

This is the gritty work of translation—to decide that

“glory” makes more sense and sounds better than “honor.” A translator might try to get “weighty” and “glorious” into the same word, and might succeed—or not. But as we reward such condensing of experience in our *original* literature, as opposed to our translated literature, we are creating a new kind of translator: a writer.

One being, not two, making all the calls.

“So many writers nowadays come from different cultures, and I wonder if that compensates for the lack of interest in other cultures,” says Moscow-born novelist Olga Grushin, author of *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*

(2006), who writes in English and now lives near Washington, D.C. “In a way, if Americans will not go to other cultures, then other cultures will have to come here and speak about themselves.”

But from the first translation of the Bible onward, what Grushin describes was always the translator’s role: to go to another culture and bring back what matters. It was sort of like immigration with a built-in return trip. A good translator must create and inhabit a place that does not fully exist—a land between languages—because it is impossible to reproduce another language exactly. A translator must bring over what is most important, as accurately as possible.

A bilingual writer, on the other hand, might omit the dirty laundry, inside jokes, or other intimate markers of a culture, such as a scandalous reference to a prime minister’s sexual harassment travails that matter only to the small number of residents of his country, or a joke on, say, Chairman Mao’s appearance. A novelist is more interested in story than in accuracy, but most translators think about exactness, and try to honor it, in their way.

Now, sadly, we have forgotten what it is to live between languages, to have translators who inhabit the space between tongues. We prefer to read of a Bosnian immigrant in New York instead of a Bosnian man in Sarajevo, written by a Bosnian. This way, at least we can recognize New York.



Jhumpa Lahiri

Immigration, from Bosnia or elsewhere, is not a new topic in American literature. In the 1950s, Bernard Malamud wrote of struggling grocers like his parents, who spoke Yiddish-thickened English, and a refugee from Hitler's Europe who accepts a paltry salary as a shoemaker's assistant, pounding leather in hopes that it will win him love. But now we have a new kind of immigrant hero, someone like the father described in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent," part of her Pulitzer Prize-winning story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

The father comes to America from India to get a Ph.D., not to escape the gas chambers. He finds himself boarding with a 103-year-old woman in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who is always talking about the amazing fact that a man has landed on the moon.

At the end of the story, he says: "I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I

have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination."

That Indian father is not unlike Obama's father: a man from a faraway land who came to America for an education. Both Obama and Lahiri are in that line of the new kind of translator Americans demand. Lahiri translates the immigrant experience for us, often lyrically; as the English-born child of immigrants, she can move smoothly between the two worlds, marveling and assuring us that, yes, it will be all right. Lahiri's immigrant characters can express sentiments like "it is beyond my imagination." In previous generations, such characters were working too hard to eat to have time to be amazed. And while a lot of accomplished fiction about immigrants was long ignored—Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) was out of print for nearly 30 years, though to be fair, when it was first published some critics called it a masterpiece—Lahiri's work has had a different fate. It has struck a note with our a-little-ethnic-is-good culture, garnering prizes, a large readership, and numerous printings.

Throughout American history, certain books precipitated changes in the nation's thinking. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) energized the antislavery movement; Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) publicized food safety issues (though Sinclair wanted the focus to be on appalling labor conditions). Our reading can affect our voting, our eating, and our deepest beliefs. So we need to look hard at why we love bilingual or bicultural writers so much, and why we are still afraid of translation.

It is not that Americans lack curiosity of any kind—but that we seem to lack the right kind. Europe is overrun with young American tourists. Unfortunately, these college students tend to pack a dozen countries into a month or less. They often tote guides such as *Let's Go*, which highlight the greatest hits

## OUR READING CAN affect our voting, our eating, and our deepest beliefs.

and cheapest places and are written by, you guessed it, other American college students. That's how we seem to read international literature as well. Let's go, we might say, but let's go easy. And cheap.

I remember taking the placement exam for foreign students at the Sorbonne in 1994. The registration desk was staffed by several well-coiffed Frenchwomen. The giant exam room was crammed with very thin European students: Italians, Swiss, Germans, some British, and only a handful of Americans. Yet plenty of American college students were studying in Paris. There were entire dormitories full of them. These students went to all-American programs, often run by prestigious universities. They went to French class, sure, but their classmates were American; they lived with other Americans, and so missed out on bathroom French, kitchen French, and get-out-of-my-way-I'm-getting-ready French, which I learned from my French roommate, Stéphanie, in an international dorm.

What is going on in our reading habits is that we want to know, but we want to go home at night to an Anglophone dorm, instead of negotiating with a French-speaking neighbor to stop cooking that awful-smelling thing at 3 AM. We want someone to address us directly, to write something just for us. Bilingual writers can slip in locales that speak to us, or brand names we recognize, or concerns that we have as Americans, such as whether sending an elderly parent to a nursing home is a reasonably compassionate choice. That's why they tend to fare better than writers whose work is translated, who focus on whether that new yurt was worth the cow-price. No matter that it's the same big issue: whether the cost is justified, whether the larger goal justifies the sacrifice. We want those concerns translated into familiar terms. We want to see our lives, our exact worries, already there on the page.

To be fair, it is not the worst of times for literary translation in America. Publishers of works in translation say that since 9/11, more Americans are worried about the cost of isolation, and it is easier to attract funding and media attention. The National Endowment for the Arts has expanded funding for translation fellowships, and more universities are offering translation courses. Publishing houses devoted to translation and new translation imprints are on the rise. In 2005, PEN launched its World Voices Festival, an annual affair in New York that showcases international writers, and independent booksellers began a project called Reading the World, committing to display 25 books of literature in translation during the month of June. The organization Words Without Borders, which translates, publishes, and promotes international literature through its online magazine and other channels, was established in 2003.

Still, the road ahead probably won't be easy, for translators or their publishers. As the demand for translations in the United States is still low, smaller publishers often struggle to break even. Typical sales of 2,000 to 3,000 copies simply don't cover the costs of securing rights, printing, salaries, translator fees, and overhead. Universities, foundations, and foreign governments often help to fund the publication of books in translation, in the absence of thousands of readers willing to pay \$15 to \$25 for a translated book. Trans-

lators' fees remain paltry, and most American translators have a day job—professor, journalist, or even novelist. Saul Bellow, after all, translated the Isaac Bashevis Singer story “Gimpel the Fool” into English in 1953, lending Singer instant literary credibility in the English-reading world.

Lately, we've seen important new translations of classics: Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky published a new *War and Peace* in 2007; *Don Quixote*, translated by Edith Grossman, came out in 2003. Both translations received major attention. But those books fit the general pattern—well-known names such as Cervantes and Tolstoy, and languages we tend to translate more often, such as Spanish and Russian.

Occasionally, a writer in translation makes headlines or cracks the bestseller list. For some reason, it most often happens posthumously. *Suite Française*, by Irène Némirovsky, who perished at the hands of the Nazis, appeared in translation in the United States in 2006, and 900,000 English-language copies have since been sold here. I was thrilled to see stacks of *Suite Française* in an airport bookstore in Chicago. Then there is the Roberto Bolaño phenomenon. Since his death in 2003 at age 50, of liver failure, several of his books have appeared in translation, to wide acclaim; last year, his 900-page magnum opus, *2666*, which centers on unsolved sex crimes in Mexico, was published to laudatory reviews. Greatness is a huge factor in the success of these authors, of course, as is historical relevance, but it isn't always enough to attract Americans' attention, especially if that greatness isn't expressed in a language that plenty of English-language translators can handle.

Sadly, the Mongolian Tolstoy, if there is one, stands less of a chance. While studying at the University of Iowa a few years ago, I was lucky enough to read a short story translated by a classmate who had lived in Mongolia during a stint in the Peace Corps, in a translation workshop that paired a dozen student translators with visiting international writers. It was clear to me that the old man who sat next to my classmate was a major writer, who simply had never encountered an American reader who could write well enough to move his work to this world.

America, protected by water on two sides and friends on two borders, is at a crucial point in its history. We are at war in a part of the world that speaks Arabic, a lan-



The Latin Bible was sacrosanct to the medieval Catholic Church, and early English translators faced denunciation, even death. In this 1407 Latin text, “Petrus” (Peter) begins with an illuminated P.

guage woefully underrepresented in American schools and bookshelves. For the first time, an immigrant tongue—Spanish—is close to becoming a second language. From the beginning, America’s future has depended on deep curiosity, not just the look and sound of it. We have gone to the continent’s edge, we have gone to the moon, we have created forms of government that were previously just dreams. The pioneers knew it, the colonists knew it: There are certain things we must know personally if we want to create a dream of a future.

**F**or years I struggled with the question, Should I write in Hebrew or English? For me it was as deep, as splitting, as life altering as the question of whether to write poetry or prose. Eventually I decided I did not have to choose: I could move what I loved of Hebrew to English, and I could move poetry to prose, and then I could move back and forth between the languages and the genres. I imagine that for every second-language writer there is a moment of choice, and then, after that, probably many additional moments of choosing.

A writer who chooses English today chooses to be

both read more and paid better. But though she may gain the world, she stands to lose the chance to speak directly to family and community in a home language, in my case the holy language of prayer and Torah and Isaiah’s screams. By encouraging a writer to move to a dominant tongue, we forgo the chance to listen in on intimate communication, with a home community.

There’s another risk, too. Trusting bicultural writers to be the sole transporters of the rest of the world also means that that we are losing different ways to conceive of story. International fiction doesn’t always follow the traditional American and British structure of beginning, struggle, climax, and ending, which also governs the average U.S. television sitcom and the standard Shakespearean play.

Latin American magical realism, for example, usually works differently. Borges would probably sneer at the idea of plot as a triangle, with action rising and then descending. Too simple, too angular, too Anglo, he might laugh. How we tell our stories matters almost as much as our stories themselves. Story structure affects how we see history, and, of course, ourselves.

This is not to discount the value of bilingual writers. There are bilingual writers who feel a special freedom in English: a rebirth, they say, without the weight of culture or history, the taste of prayer or the memory of genocide. Olga Grushin, at the end of our conversation, quoted Charlemagne, who said that to have a second language is to possess a second soul.

I was moved by the idea of another soul. But then I thought it over, as reader instead of writer. As praise is heaped on people who have mastered English, we are rewarding writers for selling their first soul. A culture with a healthier translation climate would create a space between languages, a space between souls. As readers, we’d win. We’d be able to hear the sound of all sorts of souls on the page—whether a first soul or, as Charlemagne claimed, a second soul, trying to speak, or perhaps, with luck, sing. ■