

The Contemporary Novel  
in an Age of  
World Literature

• *Born  
Translated*

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# BORN TRANSLATED

*Literature Now*

# INTRODUCTION

## Theory of World Literature Now

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*Theresa would read the originals and I would read the translations and the translations would become the originals as we read.*

—Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*

## THE LOCATION OF LITERATURE

There is nothing easier and nothing more contemporary than translation. Nothing easier because all you have to do is press that *translate* button at the top of your Internet browser. *Go ahead. Appuyez dès maintenant.* There's nothing more contemporary because Google and Google Translate seem to go hand in hand. It's hard to imagine the immediate gratifications of the digital age without the immediate gratifications of digital translation: new words, in a new language, at your service. Translation saturates our everyday culture of reading, writing, and viewing. Whether you're searching the Internet or streaming a video on Netflix, languages seem to be readily available and more or less interchangeable. Films and books, too, are saturated by translation, and indeed the lines between established and emergent media are not so clear. Consider that many books are released—or as we say, delivered—not only in print, as clothbound or paperback editions, but also in electronic files as DVD, MP3, or Kindle editions.<sup>1</sup> Pages can be heard or swiped as well as turned, and expanding formats redouble the impression of proliferating originals, even in a single language.<sup>2</sup>

But many books do not appear at first only in a single language. Instead, they appear simultaneously or nearly simultaneously in multiple languages. They start as world literature. Of course, long before the twenty-first century there were literary works that traveled from their first language into multiple languages, geographies, and national editions. Yet these travels were relatively slow and initially confined to regional distribution. Take several well-known examples. The international bestseller *Don Quixote*, famous for its exceptionally fast absorption into many language systems, took fifty-one years, from 1605 to 1656, to find its way from Spanish into five national languages; and it was only in 1769 that the novel was published outside of Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678, has been translated from English into more than two hundred languages, including eighty African languages, but it began its migration beyond Europe and the North Atlantic in 1835.<sup>4</sup> *The Communist Manifesto's* Swedish, English, Russian, Serbian, and French

editions followed the 1848 German edition within a speedy twenty-four years; yet the first edition printed in a non-European language was the Japanese translation, published in 1904.<sup>5</sup> Many of the most popular novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, published before the era of robust international copyright, were translated within a few weeks or months, sometimes appearing in competing editions in the same language.<sup>6</sup> However, those novels generally circulated within Europe. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the most successful novels of the early eighteenth century, was published in English in 1719 and by the end of 1720 had appeared in German, French, and Dutch.<sup>7</sup> But it arrived in Japanese, translated through a Dutch edition, in 1857.<sup>8</sup>

The translation and circulation of literature today is historically unprecedented once we consider how quickly books enter various national markets, small and large, across several continents. While I discuss the translation of several genres of literature, including poetry and digital art, my account of translation focuses on the novel because the novel is the most international genre, measured by worldwide translation, and because the novel today solicits as well as incorporates translation, in substantial ways.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary novels enter new markets with exceptional speed. By "enter," I mean that they are published in different editions in the same language (Australian, U.K., U.S., British, and South African English; or, Argentinean and Iberian Spanish) and in different editions in different languages (French, Mandarin, and Hebrew). Examples from the past decade are telling. Between July and December of 2005, the phenomenally successful sixth installment of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, appeared in fifteen languages, including Vietnamese, Afrikaans, and Estonian.<sup>10</sup> And even more recently: between February and December 2013, J. M. Coetzee's *Childhood of Jesus* was published on five continents in nine languages, including Chinese, Polish, and two versions of Portuguese.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the circulation and reception of Coetzee's book has been different from the circulation and reception of Rowling's, and that's to be expected. Rowling's character-rich fantasy, marketed through films, merchandise, and worldwide distribution events, sold a record number of copies; Coetzee's slow-moving allegory prompted speculation about a third Booker Prize.<sup>12</sup>

Yet there are two surprises. First, *Childhood* appeared in translation faster than *Harry Potter* did. In fact, Coetzee's novel initially appeared in Dutch, though Coetzee, born in South Africa and now living in Australia, composes his works in English. Piracy concerns delayed the initial translation of Rowling's novel by two months, whereas Coetzee's novel could be translated, as it were, before it was published in the original.<sup>13</sup> Global demand for the Harry Potter novels—fans were clamoring to produce their own unofficial (and illegal) translations—actually slowed global distribution. The second surprise: global demand drives translation only up to a point. The language of Coetzee's first edition can be explained personally as well as commercially. Coetzee has an ongoing relationship with his Dutch translator; he was raised speaking Afrikaans (closely related to Dutch), and he has translated several

works of Dutch poetry and prose into English.<sup>14</sup> And as the story of *Robinson Crusoe*'s circulation reminds us, there is a long and distinguished history of English-language novels traveling the world as Dutch books.<sup>15</sup>

Paying homage to the past, many novels do not simply appear in translation. They have been written for translation from the start. Adapting a phrase for artworks produced for the computer ("born digital"), I call these novels *born translated*.<sup>16</sup> Like born-digital literature, which is made on or for the computer, born-translated literature approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought.<sup>17</sup> Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a condition of their production. Globalization bears on all writers working in English today. However, it bears on them differently. Some works of fiction are sure to be translated. Others hope to achieve it. Some novelists are closely tied to the mass market, some to prestige cultures, and others to avant-garde communities. But even those novelists who don't plan on translation participate in a literary system attuned to multiple formats, media, and languages. Born-translated novels approach this system opportunistically.

How does translation shape the narrative structure of the contemporary novel?<sup>18</sup> To begin, we can observe that Coetzee's *Childhood* is born translated in at least two ways: it appeared first in Dutch, and it pretends to take place in Spanish.<sup>19</sup> For its principal characters, Simón and David, English is a foreign language. David, a young boy, recites a stanza from a German song, but both he and Simón mistake the source of the lyrics. "What does it mean, *Wer reitet so?*" David asks.<sup>20</sup> "I don't know. I don't speak English," Simón replies. He doesn't speak German either.<sup>21</sup> It turns out that you need to have at least a passing acquaintance with a language in order to recognize it as the one you are missing. Simón lacks even that little bit, and thus Coetzee imagines a world in which English is so distant, or so insignificant, that it can be confused with a neighboring tongue.

In born-translated novels, translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device. These works are *written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed. Sometimes they present themselves as fake or fictional editions: subsequent versions (in English) of an original text (in some other language), which doesn't really exist. They are also frequently *written from translation*. Pointing backward as well as forward, they present translation as a spur to literary innovation, including their own. Coetzee makes this point by incorporating a novel whose actual translation was crucial to the development of anglophone fiction. Simón is reading a version of *Don Quixote*. Cervantes's work is itself a fake translation, from Arabic into Spanish, whose four-hundred-year absorption into many languages has shaped the writing of subsequent novels throughout the world. By adopting some of the thematic features of *Don Quixote*, *Childhood of Jesus* imitates its content and structure—as well as its reception.



In Coetzee's imitation of *Don Quixote*, he attributes authorship not to Cervantes but to "Señor Benengeli," the fictional author of the fictional Arabic original. He thus also imitates Jorge Luis Borges's story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1939). According to Borges's fiction, presented as a posthumous appreciation, Menard was an underappreciated French writer who created new chapters of *Don Quixote* by producing words that "coincide" perfectly with the words in Cervantes's novel.<sup>22</sup> Claiming that Menard's chapters were "verbally identical" but nevertheless unique, the story's narrator presents repetition as a strategy of invention and celebrates the creative energies of foreign readers.<sup>23</sup> With tongue-in-cheek, Borges seems to applaud the anachronism of Menard's project, producing a seventeenth-century Spanish novel in twentieth-century France, and seems to suggest that changing the context, placing the same words in a new time and place, can be a way of changing the work. Embracing this tradition, Coetzee animates the rich conceptual history of translation. Moreover, he shows that his Australian novel is indebted, fictionally as well as literally, to translation's past and to the literatures of Argentina and Spain. And of course this is not Coetzee's debt alone, since Spanish literature of the Golden Age was exported internationally before its English counterpart. Shakespeare probably read Cervantes, but Cervantes is unlikely to have read Shakespeare.<sup>24</sup> Coetzee uses Spanish to remind us that English has not always been the principal medium of literary circulation and that Spanish remains today, in the wake of its own empire, a source of many national literatures. Coetzee's English-language novel activates the histories of Spanish, which has functioned variously and sometimes antagonistically as a language of colonialism, utopian aspiration, exile, migration, and European *lingua franca*.<sup>25</sup>

As Coetzee's novel shows, then, there is nothing older than translation. Translation is the engine rather than the caboose of literary history. Considering for a moment only the history of literature in English, there would be no *Hamlet*, no *Pilgrim's Progress*, no *Absalom, Absalom!*, and no *Mrs. Dalloway* without it.<sup>26</sup> Yet translation is contemporary because it allows us to consider that the work we are reading includes subsequent editions as well as previous ones. Encountered on the page, translation announces that the work is still arriving: we have before us a language on its way from somewhere else—literature produced for other readers. That is translation's paradox: it is contemporary, above all, because it is historical. In translation, literature has a past as well as a future. While many books produced today seek to entice or accommodate translation, aiming to increase their audiences and the market-share of their publishers, born-translated works are notable because they highlight the effects of circulation on production. Not only are they quickly and widely translated, they are also engaged in thinking about that process. They increase translation's visibility, both historically and proleptically: they are trying to be translated, but in important ways they are also trying to keep being translated. They find ways to register their debts to translation even as they travel into additional languages. Most of all, whether or not they manage to circulate globally, today's born-translated works block readers from being "native readers," those who assume

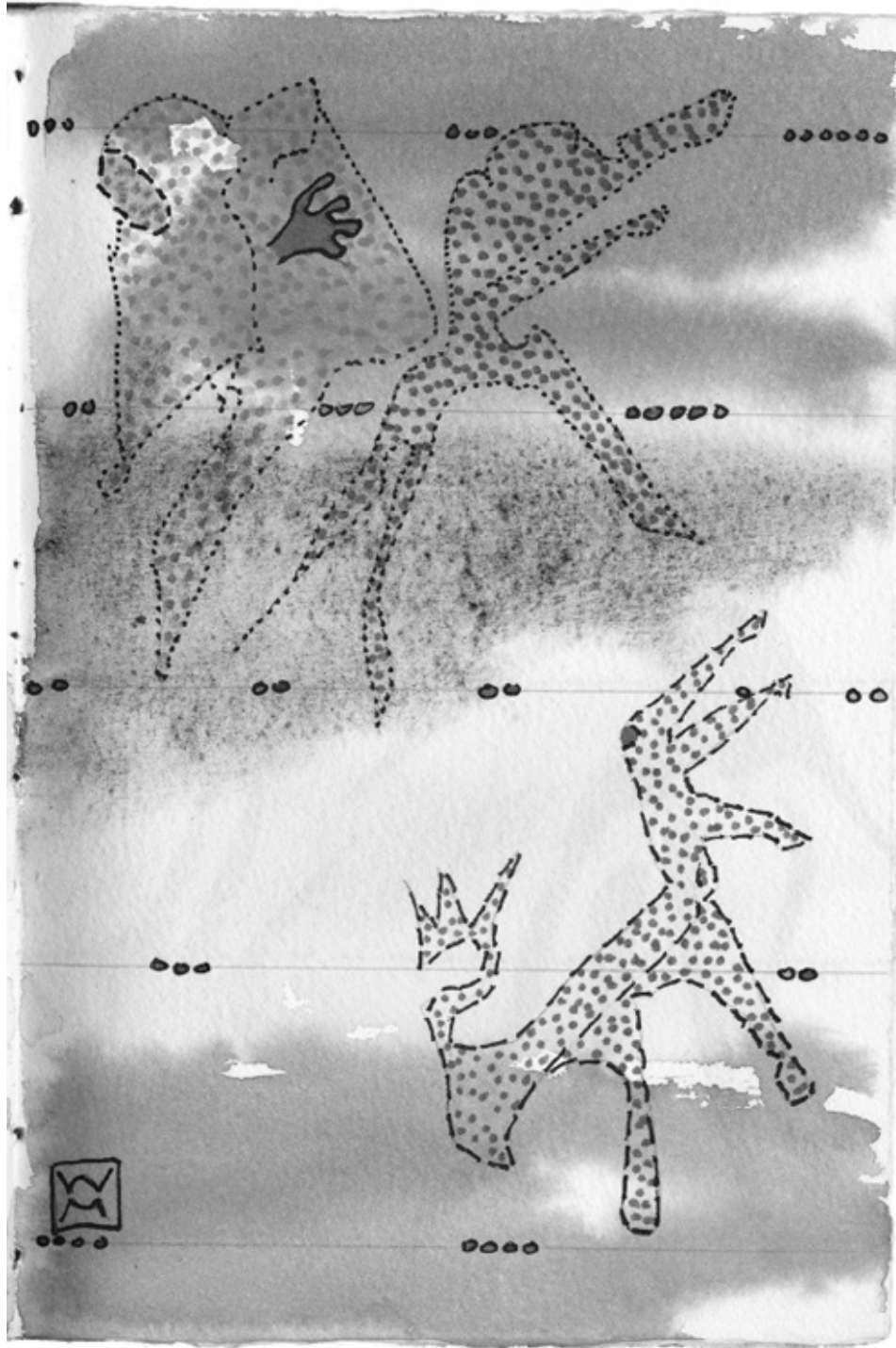
that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs.<sup>27</sup> Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time. They build translation into their form.

Whereas Coetzee's literary fictions approach translation explicitly, asking readers to imagine English-language novels that began in Spanish, Portuguese, Afrikaans, and German, other writers approach translation conceptually and sometimes fantastically. Continuing with English-language examples for the moment, we can observe the enormous range of approaches by looking at the genre fiction of British novelist China Miéville and the visual writing of U.S. novelist Walter Mosley. Miéville is unusual because he uses the stock devices of science fiction, fantasy, and police procedural to raise complex questions about the politics of language.<sup>28</sup> His most substantial engagement with translation is *The City, The City* (2009), in which two nations share the same territorial space, and citizenship is a matter of cultural rather than corporeal topography. Where you are legally, in the book's logic, depends on how you walk, what you wear, how you speak, what you acknowledge, and what passport you hold. Every place is thus two places, both "the city" and "the city," though most of the inhabitants have learned to live as if there were only one. The novel suggests that political disavowal is managed in part by linguistic disavowal, and thus the fiction of homogeneity is expressed through heterogeneous syntax. Instead of altering the novel's diction to incorporate the sounds or even the vocabulary of two languages, a more typical way to represent multilingualism, Miéville represents a binational society by creating a bifurcated sentence structure. Accidentally seeing a woman who is not a citizen of his country, the narrator "looked carefully *instead of at her in her foreign street* at the façades of the nearby and local GunterStrász. ..." <sup>29</sup> Later he describes the experience of "standing in a near-deserted part [of his own city] ... surrounded by a busy *unheard* throng."<sup>30</sup> Only unhearing and unseeing, Miéville suggests, allows the city to appear as one. Making foreignness audible and visible, the novel generates alternatives to the experience of native reading.

Walter Mosley, best known as the author of the hugely successful and widely translated Easy Rawlins mysteries, launched by *Devil in a Blue Dress* in 1990, has produced more than thirty-seven books in several genres, including memoir and science fiction in addition to detective fiction. *Devil in a Blue Dress* does not reflect on translation and in fact incorporates variations in diction and vernacular dialogue, which can make translation difficult. But in an ongoing series of drawings that is also a series of writings, subsumed under the heading of *Alien Script*, Mosley has extended his exploration of subterranean and counterfactual worlds to the exploration of subterranean and counterfactual languages. The images can be understood both as pictures and as words (figures 0.1 and 0.2).

The works are not individually titled. All are part of the collective, *Alien Script*. A script can be a writing system, as in Roman or Cyrillic script, and it can also refer to cinematic or theatrical instructions, as in a film or play script. Mosley has produced

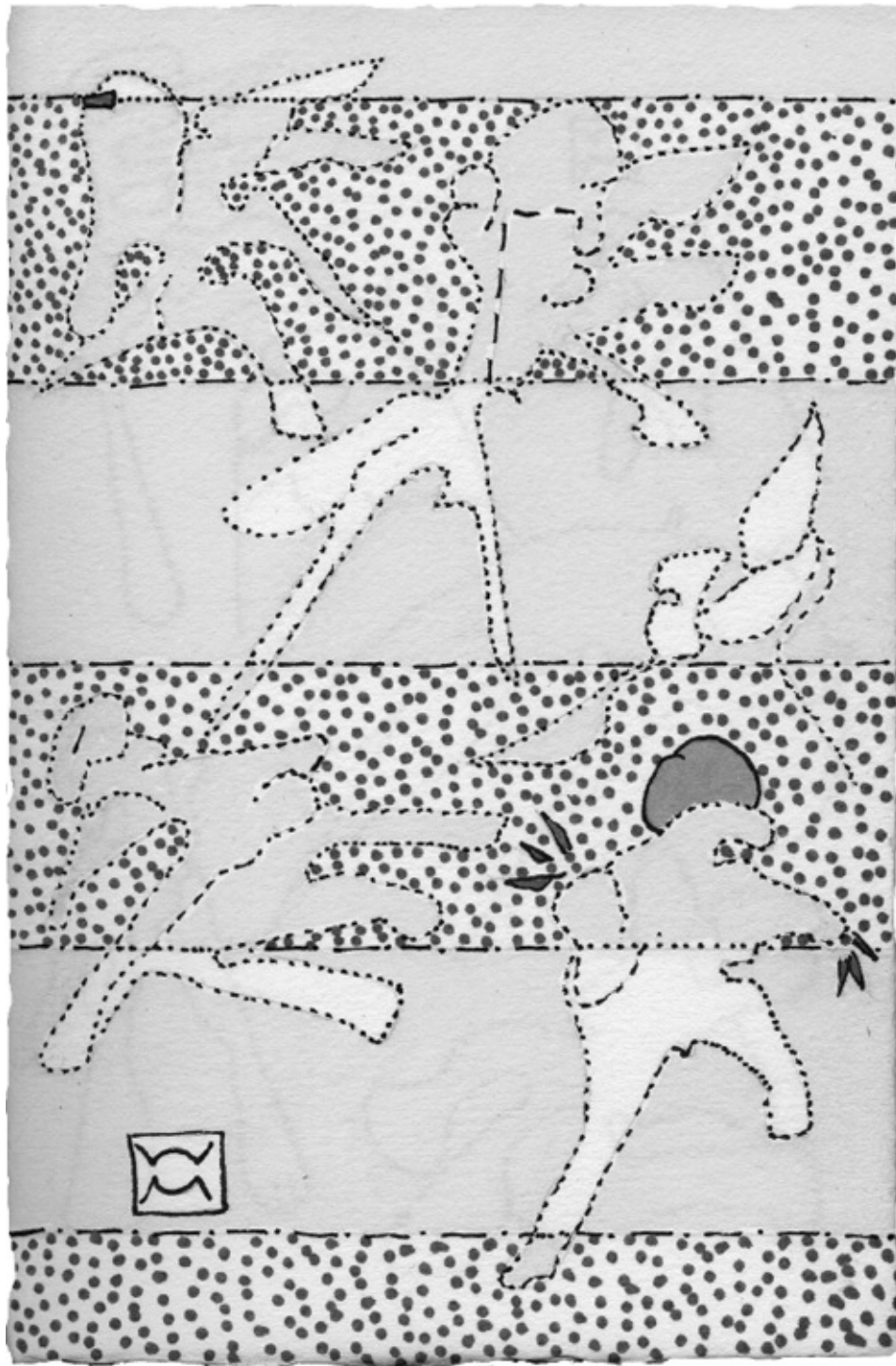
dozens of these sheets, and continues to produce them, and thus the work is an open series. The colors, shapes, and patterns vary, but all of them are made on lined notebook paper. The lines create the structure and retain the impression of writing generated by hand.



**FIGURE 0.1** Image from Walter Mosley, *Alien Script*.

Reprinted by permission of Walter Mosley and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.





**FIGURE 0.2** Image from Walter Mosley, *Alien Script*.

Reprinted by permission of Walter Mosley and the Watkins/Loomis Agency.

Mosley's scripts seem "alien" in a variety of ways: the kinetic forms are uncanny; they are almost but not quite human bodies, which seem to be wearing something like human clothing. They are also alien because they are, literally, outside the bounds: under, over, and on top of the lines. Finally, they are alien because they thwart our ability to read them, or even to isolate their constituent parts. Are we looking at letters? Hieroglyphs? Characters? What is the alphabet from which this writing has

been made? This sense of alien extends beyond Mosley's work: illegible and unrecognizable, writing becomes alien when readers project their own estrangement onto the pages. Unknown marks or letters will seem to block expressivity. Yet Mosley's *Script* also affirms an infinite expressivity: there is always another pattern, another color, and another shape. The work's futurity is suggested by a recent exhibit of the drawings, in which curator Lydie Diakhaté placed eighteen of the *Alien Script* pages next to nine iterations, in different languages, of the first paragraph of *Devil in a Blue Dress*.<sup>31</sup> For most viewers, at least one of those languages was "alien," and thus the scripts could serve as allegories or illustrations for the texts. But the scripts also assert their difference from the texts: while the paragraphs register a world system of literatures and the commercial logic of international publishing, the alien scripts—hand-made and irreducible to place or territory—aspire to new systems. While the pages evoke various traditions in dance, fabric, typography, and painting, their insouciant forms, at once overflowing and extracted, retro and sci-fi, hint at moorings to come.

## ENGLISH LAST

Embracing fake translation, genre fiction, and visual media, Coetzee, Miéville, and Mosley are deploying aesthetic strategies that are used by writers in many other languages. It is not only—or even primarily—English-language novels that address themselves to multiple audiences. In fact, in the invention of born-translated fiction, anglophone writers are the followers, not the leaders. This makes sense when we consider that anglophone works can succeed without being translated. English is the dominant language of commerce and technology, at least for the moment, and it has the greatest number of readers, once we include second- and third- as well as first-language users throughout the world.<sup>32</sup> Those who write in English can therefore expect their works to be published in the original and to reach many audiences in English-language editions. But writers in smaller languages, meaning languages for which there are fewer readers and publishers, have had to depend on translation for survival. Translation into English and into other major languages such as French and Spanish has been for some a condition of publication and for many a path to translation into subsequent national editions. Those who publish in major languages also have better access to lucrative international prizes.<sup>33</sup>

Some writers have tried to mitigate the need for translation by choosing to write in a dominant language, if they can. We could call this strategy preemptive translation. This is in some ways an old strategy. Late Medieval and early modern European writers often circulated their work both in Latin and in vernacular languages in order to reach secular as well as clerical audiences. A language of commerce and international exchange, read and sometimes spoken across many geographies, Latin allowed merchants and scholars to communicate without having to manage local

idioms.<sup>34</sup> Eleventh-century Iranian philosophers wrote not in Persian but in Arabic, while Chinese, Japanese, and Korean intellectuals used Chinese for nearly one thousand years.<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of the past, it is in some ways a misnomer to call this practice translation or even preemptive translation since it is a relatively recent assumption that one's writing language and one's speaking language would naturally be the same. Put another way, writing in Latin while speaking French is only a species of translation, or second-language use, if writing in French is the norm.

For most of literary history, written languages such as Greek, Latin, and Arabic have diverged from spoken languages, which were used for other purposes. People who could write—very few people—would have had a first language for writing and a first language for speaking. Periodically, it has seemed important for writers to align these two uses of language. Dante was unusual in his time because he chose to write an epic in Italian rather than Latin. Preemptive translation, or the division of writing and speaking languages, was the expectation until the late eighteenth century, which inaugurates the era of national languages and literary traditions. We are still part of that era. The expectation that the language of writing will match the language of speech remains dominant. We can tell that this is so because writing in a second language has its own special name, “translingual writing.”<sup>36</sup> This distinction between first- and second-language writing is continuous with the Romantic distinction between native and foreign languages. Early-nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher famously referred to writing in a second language as a species of translation because he believed that writing in the original could take place only in one's own tongue.<sup>37</sup>

We can find many examples of preemptive translation in the twenty-first century. In 2004, contemporary novelist Elif Shafak, who lives in both Istanbul and London, shifted from writing novels in her first language, Turkish, to writing them in her second language, English. Shafak follows a path—and a rationale—traveled by mid-twentieth-century writer Vladimir Nabokov, who composed his early novels in Russian but began producing novels in English, starting with *Lolita*, so he could publish in New York.<sup>38</sup> Novelist and poet Jaime Manrique, who was born in Colombia but has lived in the United States since 1980, publishes his novels in English and his poetry in Spanish. He calls English his “public language.”<sup>39</sup> English is the language in which he feels comfortable writing for and about public “conversation,” whereas Spanish is his language of “intimacy.” Spanish is hardly a minor tongue, but dominance is relative. Consider the case of Albanian writer and journalist Gazmend Kapllani, who composes his books in Greek, a language he learned only as an adult. Kapllani's works have subsequently appeared in Danish, English, French, and Polish. Long based in Athens but now living in Boston, Kapllani has said that he may start writing in English.<sup>40</sup> Manrique's and Kapllani's choices reflect a mix of political exigency, aesthetic preference, and economic opportunity. Publishing in two languages concurrently, Manrique's practice is reminiscent of the strategies developed by the early-twentieth-century Indian writer Premchand (the pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai Srivastava), who

sought to evade British colonial censors by producing each of his works in two original languages, Hindi and Urdu.<sup>41</sup>

Sometimes, preemptive translation takes place at the moment of publication rather than at the moment of composition. Milan Kundera, who wrote many of his best-known novels in Czech, published them first in French and has in recent years claimed that he is in fact a “French writer.”<sup>42</sup> The translations have come to shape the compositions: Kundera has used the French editions to update the Czech originals.<sup>43</sup> Elena Botchorichvili, a Georgian writer who lives in Montreal, also publishes her novels in French even though she writes them in Russian. Six of Botchorichvili’s books appeared in French and several other languages before they appeared in their original language.<sup>44</sup> Bernardo Atxaga writes his novels in Basque and self-translates them into Spanish; most of the subsequent translations are based on the Spanish editions.

Anglophone writers who are located outside of the largest centers of publishing, New York and London, have had to translate too. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o famously chose to publish his novels first in Gikuyu, but he has also published them, self-translated, in English. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which features a smattering of Igbo terms, required a glossary when it was published in the London-based Heinemann series in 1962, while several paragraphs of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*, first published in South Africa in 1977, were translated from Afrikaans into English for the U.K. edition.<sup>45</sup> Non-anglophone languages that are well known or at least familiar to anglophone readers in regional contexts—consider the use of many Spanish, Yiddish, and French words in U.S. writing, for example—often require translation or explication when they appear in anglophone books published outside those regions. And it is not only words from other languages but also words from regional or colonial versions of languages that travel uneasily within dominant languages. The title of Ferdinand Oyono’s francophone African novel *Une vie de boy*, first published in 1956, makes use of an English word (boy) that operates differently in French than it does in English.<sup>46</sup> In English editions of the book, the so-called English word has had to be translated.<sup>47</sup>

While some novelists expand their audiences by publishing their books in second languages or by standardizing their vocabulary, others have found ways to accommodate translation within global languages such as Spanish and French and also within regional languages such as Turkish and Japanese. Like Coetzee, Miéville, and Mosley, many build translation into the form of their works, emphasizing translation’s history and ongoing relevance while insisting that a novel can belong to more than one language. They are not preempting translation so much as courting it. Sometimes they do a bit of both. For example, Nancy Huston, a Calgary-born writer who has lived in Paris for the past forty years, writes novels and essays in French and then writes them in English. She publishes her works in both languages, and others have translated her work into many additional languages. Like Kundera, Huston uses her own translations to revise the originals, and, like Samuel Beckett,



who produced many of his own works in English and French, she regards both versions as original texts. In 1993 she won an award for fiction in French for a novel she wrote first in English. Huston thus preempts translation because she operates both as author and as translator. But she also treats translation as a species of production, as when she argues that her award-winning book should be understood as an original creation.<sup>48</sup> In addition, some of Huston's works take translation as a principal concern. The English version of the nonfiction book *Losing North* (2002), for example, includes an essay about the difficulty of translating idioms such as the one that constitutes the book's title.<sup>49</sup>

The Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, whose work has been widely translated and who is also an accomplished translator of U.S. fiction, has taken a somewhat different tack: using his second language to create a new kind of first language. To be clear: Murakami submits his manuscripts to his publisher in Japanese, and his novels first appear in that language. But from the start of his career he has deployed translation as a method of composition, in a variety of ways. First, the most literal way: he has claimed that he found his style in Japanese by writing pages first in English and then translating them into Japanese.<sup>50</sup> By starting in English, he sought to avoid the conventional diction and syntax of Japanese literature. In this sense, Murakami's project is similar to Huston's and indeed to Beckett's, except that Murakami uses his adopted language, English, not to depart from his first language, Japanese, but to create a less natural version of it. Murakami's later novels have involved self-translation of another kind: incorporating cuts made for the U.S. editions in subsequent Japanese editions.<sup>51</sup> The later works thus involve a kind of triple translation: from English into Japanese into English, and then back into Japanese.

The second way that Murakami deploys translation in the service of composition is in his liberal use of generic devices, historical references, and even words culled from anglophone popular culture. Invoking English, he reflects on the translated sources of contemporary Japan and generates works that can appeal to multiple audiences, who recognize both theme and terminology.<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that Murakami's novels appeal to each audience in the same way. Indeed, his blockbuster, *1Q84*, published in Japan in 2009, has been marketed as romantic fiction in one place and as a futuristic thriller in another.<sup>53</sup> And, paradoxically, the references to anglophone culture, while they may help the books travel into additional languages, do not always help the books travel into English, where those words no longer serve the same function.<sup>54</sup> Murakami also incorporates translation—this is the third way—by emphasizing the difference among Japanese writing systems, the character-based kanji and the syllabic hiragana and katakana, to create the impression of multilingualism on the page. Most notably, he uses katakana, the script in which foreign or “loan” words typically appear, to signal a much broader range of nonnormative or eccentric speech.<sup>55</sup> This practice has proved challenging to his translators, since they have had to find analogues in single-script writing systems such as English, Danish, Norwegian, Polish, and many other European languages.

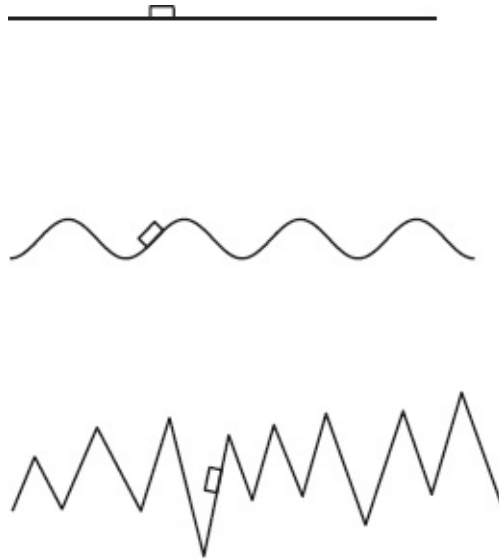
Murakami's longstanding effort to incorporate histories of literary circulation into the production of his Japanese novels can be understood as an effort to insist on the comparative origins of contemporary Japan. For his Japanese readers, he is trying to make his language less accessible, and thus to interfere with the distinction between native and nonnative readers. This is not a gesture of exile, or an embrace of the global in lieu of the local, so much as an affirmation of translation's place within Japanese history. Murakami's inventive use of multiple writing systems, counterfactual worlds, and popular genres creates an internal climate of traveling narratives that operates in tension with the external movement of his novels from one language to another.<sup>56</sup> Murakami's texts may be "suited to translation," as he has said, but they are also saturated by translation.<sup>57</sup>

Two additional examples are instructive: one, the Nobel Prize-winner Orhan Pamuk, who writes in Turkish; the other, the (late) celebrated novelist Roberto Bolaño, who wrote in Spanish.<sup>58</sup> Pamuk's novels have moved from Turkish into sixty other languages, including—just to name the Ks—Kannada, Korean, and two varieties of Kurdish. His works began to receive international recognition in 1991 after the French translation of *The Silent House* received the Prix de la découverte européenne. Readers of Pamuk's novels in Turkish have argued that his later works solicit translation by emphasizing international lineage, postmodern devices, and "Istanbul cosmopolitanism," whereas the earlier works engaged more substantially with the Turkish literary tradition and social realism.<sup>59</sup> Yet, through various narrative strategies, Pamuk's later works also reflect on global circulation: they accommodate translation and also identify translation as a source of local production. Published in Turkey in 2002 and in the United States in 2004, *Snow* features characters who, like many readers, lack information about regional histories; it considers Turkey's debts both to European and to Ottoman influences; and it presents social and cultural differences through dialogue rather than through idiolect. Strangers are useful because they allow Pamuk to make the description of regional history part of the novel's story: something a character learns rather than a feature of omniscient narration. Registering multiple sources is useful because Pamuk can show that Turkish literature is, at least in part, embedded in other literatures and cultural traditions. Dialogue is useful, as Gloria Fisk notes, because characters point at differences in ways that can be understood by readers unfamiliar with regional contexts or variations in diction.<sup>60</sup> Pamuk presents his readers with details about Turkey's past, and he raises questions about the historical reliability of those details and their interpretation by various characters. Readers are thus asked to engage directly with the phenomenon of world literature: its tendency to make guidebooks or cultural primers out of literary works from representative spaces. The process of overgeneralization has a special resonance for Pamuk's writing, which returns often to the complex geopolitical history of Turkey and especially of Istanbul, a city literally divided between Europe and Asia. The translated quality of Pamuk's writing can thus be understood both as an effort to reach audiences beyond Turkey and as an effort

to insist on multiple audiences within Turkey.<sup>61</sup>

I want to pause somewhat more deliberately over Roberto Bolaño's fiction, which has been enormously successful in multiple languages. It would be difficult to say that the extensive circulation of Bolaño's work animated his strategies of production since he wrote his major novels in a very compressed period, between 1993 and his death in 2003.<sup>62</sup> Like many of the English-language writers I have discussed so far, his address to multiple audiences seems to reflect a mixture of literary, political, personal, and commercial impulses. Among these are his attunement to the multilingualism of his first language, Spanish; his effort to consider geopolitical relationships of various scales, such as those between Mexico and other Latin American countries, Europe, and the United States; and his engagement with transnational literary movements whose poets, critics, and writers appear as fictional characters in many of his works. Bolaño was born in Chile, lived for many years in Mexico City, and produced his novels in Spain. Readers of his Spanish-language editions have noted that his diction is not reducible to Chilean, Mexican, or Iberian Spanish. His novels seem translated, in part because they combine several regional idioms and seem to have no one native tongue.

However, Bolaño also manages to communicate multilingualism spatially, visually, and narratively.<sup>63</sup> *The Savage Detectives*, the novel that brought Bolaño to worldwide attention when it captured two prestigious Spanish prizes in 1998, moves across several continents while placing its action in locations that function at the very smallest scale: the park bench, the lawn, the perambulated street, the hotel room, the mental health clinic, and the bar, to take only a few examples.<sup>64</sup> There may be many nations in the text, but the text doesn't treat the nation as the most important or most coherent unit of belonging. Several of the novel's places, for all their smallness, are also vague. They don't really fit the logic of civic nomenclature. Where is a park bench? Where is a lawn? What language do their denizens speak? Bolaño turns the global novel on its head by replacing the principle of expansion (a larger whole) with the principle of extraction (unclassifiable parts). This is one of the ways that his work, for all its attention to Mexico City, appears to resist the idea of a unique regional audience.



**FIGURE 0.3** Renderings of figures from Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, translated by Natasha Wimmer  
(New York: Picador, 2007), 398.

In addition, *Savage Detectives* involves for several hundred pages what appear to be interview transcripts, whose first audience, the person asking the questions, is not represented. Readers of this long section are second readers, always overhearing rather than hearing.<sup>65</sup> This creates the impression of a narrative that is taking place in at least two locations: the location of the interview and the location of the transcription. And then there are the translations built into the novel's conversations. The interviewer is searching for information about two poet-heroes, but the poet-heroes are searching for information about an older poet, Cesárea Tinajero, whom they honor as their inspiration. When they find one of her poems, it consists of an apparently multilingual title, "Sión," and a series of graphic lines, which Bolaño reproduces on the page (figure 0.3).

*The Savage Detectives* offers some possible meanings for the poem's heading, in Spanish, German, French, Hebrew, and English, but the possibilities are open-ended, like "Zion" itself, proverbially a place that has not yet come. The lines, according to the young poets, tell several possible stories.<sup>66</sup> They are translatable because they consist of visual images; they also seem to dramatize translation insofar as they represent a ship or a mathematical vector on its way somewhere else. The lines of the poem, as literal lines on the page, deflate poetry's usual emphasis on words while at the same time drawing attention to metaphor (graphic and poetic lines//líneas, for example). In the title's invocation of various languages and spaces of the future, the poem appears to be born translated: not so much a work for all readers as a work for other readers.





**FIGURE 0.4** Renderings of figures from Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, translated by Natasha Wimmer  
(New York: Picador, 2007), 648.

Finally, in the very last section of the novel, Bolaño returns to several themes of translation, one in which he pits popular knowledge of Mexico City’s slang against recondite knowledge of poetic terminology; and another in which characters amuse themselves by translating pictures into stories, much as they did with the earlier poem. In both cases we are asked to consider that translation operates within languages and literary histories as well as between them. The final words of the novel are an image that can be understood in several ways (figure 0.4). It is a box made of dashed lines; a window with a broken or unfinished frame; and a container whose outside permeates its inside. Translatable, this image is also a symbol of translation. It resembles the book we are holding.

Bolaño’s emphasis on “the border”—the book’s border, the border between plot and form, and the border between the United States and Mexico—reminds us that born-translated novels are not produced from nowhere for everywhere. In fact, they are often very local in their approaches to translation and the politics of translation. The text may engage with the regional history of languages even as the book circulates into many editions.<sup>67</sup> There is an enormous and growing critical literature on each of the four novelists I’ve discussed in this section, and I won’t do justice to that here. Instead, my brief and telescopic account of non-anglophone writing is meant to demonstrate the various strategies of born-translated fiction in other languages; to explore some of the reasons for those strategies; and, finally, to suggest by contrast how born-translated fiction in English both follows and diverges from its neighbors.

## ENGLISH NOW

Anglophone novels are more likely than novels in other languages to appear in translation: more works are translated out of English than out of any other language.<sup>68</sup> However, many English-language works encounter multiple audiences—and are produced in multiple national editions—before they even leave English. This

will be true of other global languages, such as Portuguese and especially Spanish, which are also often published in more than one place and involve multiple national versions. But the English language is dispersed like no other: it is a first, second, or third language used in the largest number of countries. As Pascale Casanova has persuasively argued, this is what it means to be the world's dominant language. It is not a matter of counting first-language or "native" speakers. Rather, it is a matter of counting both first-language speakers and all of the "plurilingual speakers who 'choose' it."<sup>69</sup> To write in English for global audiences, therefore, is to write for a heterogeneous group of readers: those who are proficient in several languages, those who may be less-than-proficient in English, and those who may be proficient in one version of English but not proficient in another. This diversity creates an enormous range of English-language geographies, writers, and audiences. It also means that readers of English-language texts are likely to have very different experiences: the work will be foreign, strange, or difficult to some; it will be familiar to others. Anglophone novelists are thus managing comparative beginnings from the start and must find ways to register internal multilingualism (within English) even as their works travel out into additional national languages (beyond English).<sup>70</sup> In addition, English is not only a source of translations, the language from which translations often begin, it is also the most frequent medium of translations, the language through which texts in other languages move into yet additional languages. In this sense, English-language writing is, like writing in other languages, an object of globalization; but it is also, unlike writing in other languages, crucial to globalization's machinery, both because of its role in digital media and commerce and because of its role as a mediator, within publishing, between other literary cultures.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, while anglophone writers in New York and London may have thought about or even criticized the conditions of literary globalization, only recently have they begun to think of themselves as subject to those conditions. Today English-language writers in the United States and Britain are faced with the unprecedented corn-modification and "global networking" of intellectual spaces such as universities, and the consolidation of publishing into a smaller number of international units. Not even English-language writers, it turns out, can imagine audiences only in one language. This has led to a new emphasis, within the anglophone novel, on the histories and institutions of literary circulation, from the uneven distribution of literacy (Jamaica Kincaid), to the production of anthologies (Caryl Phillips), to international art competitions in the present (Amy Waldman) and Pacific trade routes of the early eighteenth century (David Mitchell). As I've suggested, English-language writers who operate furthest from the centers of publishing have had to address multiple audiences for some time. This is true as well for many migrant writers, who may compose in several languages and whose political and literary affiliations often diverge. Indeed, affiliation complicates composition since writers addressing many places are less likely to believe that language confers belonging, or that belonging limits language. They are more likely to assume that the language of writing and the language of speaking do not necessarily overlap. The increasing use of English by

writers for whom English is not a first or only language has exerted new pressure on longstanding assumptions about “native” competency, the Romantic belief that those who are born into a language, as it were, are the rightful or natural users of that language.

Born-translated novels in English often focus on geographies in which English is not the principal tongue. These works purposefully break with the unique assignment of languages, geographies, and states in which one place is imagined to correspond to one language and one people, who are the users of that language. Born-translated works articulate this break by extending, sometimes radically, the practice of self-translation, a term that translation specialists have often limited to authors who produce both an original work and the translation of that original work. Self-translation has opened up in two directions. First, it now includes works that pretend to be translated.<sup>72</sup> Coetzee’s *Childhood* is “self-translated” from the perspective of narration because it seems to be taking place in Spanish; and it is also self-translated from the perspective of book history because it was published first in Dutch. The English edition appears to be a tributary to the Spanish and the Dutch. Second, self-translation now includes works that contain translation within them by incorporating multiple editions or multiple versions. These works are not translated in the sense of combining or moving between separate national literatures. Instead, they ask readers to consider that literatures, as we have known them, are already combined.<sup>73</sup>

In the novels I discuss in this project, self-translation involves pretending to write fiction in another tongue (Coetzee and Miéville); presenting English-language works as translations of some other language, some other version of language, or some other medium (Kincaid and Mohsin Hamid); reflecting on English literature’s debts to other languages and literary traditions (Mitchell and Waldman); and inviting translators to regard themselves as authors and collaborators (Kazuo Ishiguro; Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries; and Adam Thirlwell). Many English-language writers draw attention to the unevenness of the global marketplace—and sometimes try to remediate that unevenness—by welcoming translation, by devising strategies of multilingualism that can survive global circulation, and by emphasizing translation’s crucial role in the development of the English-language novel.<sup>74</sup> Reflecting on circulation at a global scale, born-translated novels introduce new ontologies of the work. They imply new understandings of literature’s place and emphasize new objects of analysis such as the chapter, the page, the edition, the illustration, the script, and the medium.

Novels have always reflected on their own languages, and it shouldn’t be surprising that the surge in translation would lead novels to reflect on future and past languages too. However, an acknowledgment of translation’s central role—as spur, problem, and opportunity—has to change what the anglophone novel is. Literature in dominant languages tends to “forget” that it has benefitted from literary works in other languages.<sup>75</sup> Born-translated fiction, therefore, engages in a project of unforgetting. Fiction is not alone in that project. *Asymptote*, a digital journal launched in 2011, has followed this path by seeking out translations from smaller languages into dominant

languages—English, but not only English—and by publishing both original and translation so that first and subsequent languages are readily available to the reader.<sup>76</sup> The emphasis is not on the foreignization of the word, in which a single-language edition tries to retain the impression or the quality of a prior language.<sup>77</sup> Instead it is on the foreignization of the form, in which the history of translation is preserved through the presence of two or more texts. For scholars, unforgetting translation means that, instead of organizing literary histories according to the citizenship of authors, as the Library of Congress does, we might organize literary histories according to the languages and versions of language in which a work is read, whether as original, translation, edition, adaptation, or collaboration. A work would thus appear several times, in each of the histories in which it has a presence, and some of those histories would extend well beyond literary fiction and the medium of print. To be sure, fields will seem to get bigger, but we will have to imagine our frames, after Bolaño, as windows made of dashed rather than solid lines.

Allowing books to count as part of several traditions and media has the salutary effect of tipping the balance of literary history from writers to readers, from a language's natives to its users, and from single to multiple chronologies. The tip toward circulation also tips back: thinking about overlapping literary histories allows us to consider how reception alters the work, and what it is that readers read. Literature produced in dominant languages becomes part of literary histories in other languages. Literature produced in smaller languages continues to have a place in those histories, but its uptake by other literatures also has to be registered. Some works will not travel into new languages, and the history of translation will have to include both works that reach multiple audiences and works that do not. Like *Asymptote's* effort to make English-language readers aware of a much greater number of works from many nondominant languages, literary histories that include adaptation, rewriting, and translation make room for unheralded traditions while also creating the conditions for more expansive heralding.

To approach the future of classification from the history of multilingual circulation is to recognize that anglophone writing operates in many languages, even when it appears to be operating only in English. The novel theorist M. M. Bakhtin made this point long ago, when he argued that the “unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single, closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several ‘languages’ that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other.”<sup>78</sup> Writing of the modern European novel (pre-1900), Bakhtin means that what we take to be the distinctive national voice of any one tradition in Europe in fact involves the explicit and implicit negotiation of several different regional languages as well as versions of language (poetic, ordinary, official). In the early twenty-first century, when contact among languages is not only generic and regional but also multiregional, continental, and planetary, multilingualism within a single language operates at an even greater scale. For Bakhtin, internal multilingualism does not undercut the possibility of national languages because national language–users who live in a relatively contained geographic area can be expected to achieve some fluency with



the significant contact languages. However, when so-called national languages operate at great distances, as they do in English, and when they operate alongside other strong literary traditions, as they do in India, the Caribbean, and the United States, the expectation of common fluency both across versions of the national language and with neighboring languages has to change. In addition, viewed from the perspective of migration, the concept of literary belonging may have outlived its usefulness. European novels of the nineteenth century belonged to their national languages, or often thought they did. But at earlier moments, Bakhtin argues, literary consciousness has been constitutively “bilingual,” inspired by a relationship between languages even if those languages did not appear, simultaneously or literally, on the page. The Latin word in Ancient Rome, Bakhtin asserts, “viewed itself in the light of the Greek word,” which produced an “exteriorizing” style.<sup>79</sup> Today’s born-translated novel, rather than expand belonging, strives to keep belonging in play. It does this by implying that the book we are holding begins in several languages.

## IMAGINED COMMUNITIES IN TRANSLATION

The notion that a book could begin in several languages complicates traditional models of literary history and political community. Literary critics have to ask how the multilingualism of the book changes the national singularity of the work. Philosophers of the nation have to ask how the translation of literary texts into more languages and faster than ever before establishes networks of affiliation that are less exclusive and less bounded than the nation’s “community of fate.” Generally speaking, we can identify two paradigms that shape the way we talk about the effect of books on political communities: the paradigm of “possessive collectivism,” which has a long history in philosophy, anthropology, and legal theory, and the paradigm of “imagined communities,” which Benedict Anderson introduced in 1983 and which has become so influential in history, literary studies, and many other fields that it operates almost tacitly.<sup>80</sup> Where have these theories brought us, and where might we now go in thinking about literature’s engagement with conceptions of the collective?

“Possessive collectivism” extends the idea of possessive individualism to nations and ethnic groups.<sup>81</sup> In Quebecois ideology, anthropologist Richard Handler explains in a well-known study, the nation was understood as both a “collection of individuals and a collective individual,” possessing unique, permanent qualities such as a “soul, spirit, and personality” and having the capacity to exercise sovereignty, free will, and choice.<sup>82</sup> Rosemary Coombe has used Handler’s work on nationalist ideology to describe the effects and underlying assumptions of international copyright. In copyright law, Coombe argues, “Each nation or group is perceived as an author who originates a culture from resources that come from within and can thus lay claim to exclusive possession of the expressive works that embody its personality.”<sup>83</sup> Literary works belong to the nation because they are the embodiment of its internal spirit or

genius, and we know the nation has a spirit or genius because it has literary works to show for it. This is a feedback loop: nationhood owes its identity to authorship, but there is no authorship without nationhood since expressivity belongs to unique individuals who in turn belong to unique groups. Among minorities and colonized subjects, possessive collectivism has had the positive effect of validating intellectual labor and justifying political sovereignty. For our purposes, possessive collectivism is notable because it helps to explain why emphasizing the original production of artworks tends to affirm national literary histories: original art and original nations grow up together. We could speculate, however, that a theory of artworks that understands acts of editing and translating as acts of making might affirm a different norm of literary history and a different conception of the community that literary history helps to justify.

Before I push this speculation further, consider Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities." Rather than rehearse Anderson's now-classic theory, I would like to mark an important difference between his account of literary nation making and the possessive collectivism model. It was Anderson's innovation to argue that the rise of print culture, especially the rise of novels and newspapers, contributed to the possibility of imagining a nation as a shared, exclusive collectivity among strangers. Print culture contributed to this possibility in two structural ways: by creating the impression of simultaneous reading across space, and by creating the impression, within the novel, of simultaneity among people who never meet—an impression that Anderson memorably calls the experience of "meanwhile."<sup>84</sup> The second impression strengthens the first: if we can perceive the novel as a container for strangers who act together without knowing it, then we can imagine the nation as a container for us, the readers of that novel, who act together in just the same way—simultaneously, collectively, and invisibly. As Jonathan Culler has observed in an essay on Anderson's work, it is not the novel's content or theme but its form, its way of being a container for simultaneity among strangers, that creates "a political distinction between friend and foe."<sup>85</sup> Anderson's model does not imply that the artwork is expressing a repertoire of national characteristics that could be owned; rather, it argues that the novel represents—and generates—a community based on the imagined concurrence of action. If there is a residue of possessive collectivism in Anderson's materialism, it is in his assumption that a text has an original language and that the text's language will coincide with the language of its readers. What happens, we need to ask, when these languages are not the same? Or when there is no original language to speak of?

We can address these questions by returning to Anderson's project. But instead of approaching *Imagined Communities* as an argument, as others have done so well, I want to treat it as an example since it is as an example of world literature that Anderson's book coincides, historically and formally, with today's born-translated novel.<sup>86</sup> Like many contemporary novels, *Imagined Communities* stages an encounter between literary history and political theory. And like those novels, the study functions as a work of world literature both because of its circulation and

because of its production. As a text, *Imagined Communities* takes as its subject the effects of print culture on the development of nation-states throughout the world. Individual chapters are devoted to case studies of small countries such as Hungary, Thailand, Switzerland, and the Philippines. As a book, *Imagined Communities* has circulated among many of these small countries, and among many large ones too. It was first published in English in 1983 and has been translated over the past thirty-some years into at least twenty-seven languages, including Japanese, German, Portuguese, Serbo-Croat, and Catalan. Yet the phenomenal success of Anderson's project has led not only to translation and retranslation but also to new production. In 1991 and 2006, respectively, Anderson issued second and third English editions, each of which includes new material that responds to criticism of the work and analyzes the transnational communities that the book's circulation has helped to create.

The third edition adds to the book's subject matter—how print culture contributes to the imagination of community—an account of how the translation and reception of the book we are reading has contributed to the imagination of communities to which the book now belongs. In this account we learn that the transnational and multilingual circulation of *Imagined Communities* has led Anderson to consider that the global appeal of his argument may have been spurred by its own transnational beginnings—that is, by origins understood not simply as London or the Anglo-American academy but as a transnational conglomerate, the United Kingdom, in which devolution and multiculturalism offer conflicting models of political history and collective fate. Anderson acknowledges in the 2006 edition that the original rhetoric of the book was borrowed in part from debates about postcolonial migration and the decline of empire that had become especially urgent in the United Kingdom of the late seventies and early eighties. From the perspective of later editions, we see that Anderson's text is rather more transnational than we had at first perceived. Yet what I am calling transnational, the narrative's attunement to histories of devolution and multiculturalism, also remains local in an important sense. Regional, semi-metropolitan, Anderson's work shows us that global disarticulation—belonging to nowhere—is not the only alternative to national simultaneity. Moreover, it suggests that the repression of translation may be tied, as it is in Anderson's text, to the repression of transnational impulses within national projects.

There is no chapter in *Imagined Communities* that presents itself as an analysis of the novel today, but the afterword to the third edition is suggestive about translation's effects on literary history. Readers become part of the book's story about how print culture structures imagined communities, and thus the community of the book is shown to exceed the community of the text. In this way *Imagined Communities* shares its narrative structure with many other contemporary transnational works and resembles edited and translated works from earlier eras.<sup>87</sup> As Anderson argues, translation can contribute to the imagination of national communities. But as Anderson demonstrates, translation puts pressure on the conceptual boundaries between one community and another and may spur the perception of new communities altogether.

This insight can be useful for our understanding of world literature. In books

published since 2000, scholars of world literature have focused on what happens to literary works when they travel into new literary systems. The emphasis on travel has sought to replace two older definitions: the one that designated literary masterpieces, those books everyone in the world should read; and the one that designated literary underdogs, those books produced outside of Western Europe and the United States. Whereas world literature once referred to a group of “works,” it now refers to a “network,” a “system,” a “republic,” or a “problem.”<sup>88</sup> The movement from a specific bookshelf of classic or marginalized literary works to the relationship among many different bookshelves has drawn attention to the ways bookshelves come to be organized, and to the ways and reasons that works move—or do not move—among them. Yet the focus on travel, while tracing uptake and renovation and therefore also new emergence, has also tended to emphasize the distinction between literature’s beginnings and its afterlives.<sup>89</sup> Translation appears as part of literature’s second act.

This understanding of translation is one of Emily Apter’s principal concerns in *Against World Literature* and in her earlier study, *The Translation Zone*. She calls for greater engagement with translation in the calculation of literary histories at a global scale.<sup>90</sup> Title notwithstanding, in the later book Apter is not really against world literature, or even World Literature.<sup>91</sup> She is interested in “when and where translation happens,” expanding the corpus of literary works geographically and linguistically, and rethinking foundational concepts from the perspective of literary histories beyond Europe.<sup>92</sup> But she is against the organization of literature from the perspective of national languages and literary histories. And she is against the expansion of ownership, preferring instead “deowned literature,” whose paradigmatic example is the translated book.<sup>93</sup> Of course, as Apter acknowledges, literary ownership is not a creature of world literature studies. The rise of national languages in the early nineteenth century made it seem natural and necessary for literature to begin—even to be “born”—in one language. When theories of literary circulation take nineteenth-century European fiction as their examples, as they often do, it makes sense that the national model would rule the day.<sup>94</sup> But what happens when we turn to new examples?<sup>95</sup> Instead of asking about the contemporary novel from the perspective of world literature, we might ask about world literature from the perspective of the contemporary novel.

In this book, I suggest that what literature is now has to alter what world literature is now. Once literary works begin in several languages and several places, they no longer conform to the logic of national representation. Many born-translated novels signal this departure by blocking original languages, invoking multiple scales of geography, and decoupling birthplace from collectivity. New objects change the shape as well as the content of world literature. When world literature seems to be a container for various national literatures, it privileges source: distinct geographies, countable languages, individual genius, designated readers, and the principle of possessive collectivism. When world literature seems instead to be a series of emerging works, not a product but a process, it privileges target: the analysis of



convergences and divergences across literary histories.<sup>96</sup> The analysis of target languages and literatures involves, paradoxically, an analysis of the past. Literary scholarship has to approach operations that once seemed secondary or external (not only reading but also translating) as sources of production.<sup>97</sup> Taking production and circulation together, it is impossible to isolate the novel today from the other genres in which its authors regularly participate. Many novelists are also reviewers, translators, anthologists, poets, editors, publishers, graphic designers, journalists, visual artists, intellectual impresarios, and essayists.<sup>98</sup> This has always been so—the novel is the genre of many genres—but today novels and novel-like fictions have found new ways to dramatize the relationship among these activities, in which writing, reading, adapting, and translating all take part.<sup>99</sup>

In contemporary fiction, we see many originals that are also translations. Readers are asked to experience the text as a delayed or detoured object: a book that began somewhere else. Instead of identification, these texts offer readers partial fluency, approximation, and virtual understanding, from the syntactical translations of Miéville's *The City, the City* and the diegetic translations of Coetzee's *Childhood* to the intermedial, collaborative, and serial translations of Mosley's *Alien Script*, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' digital narratives, and Adam Thirlwell's "Multiples."<sup>100</sup> If world literature is to involve asking "where a particular text starts, how it moves, and who ends up reading it," as Caroline Levine has recently suggested, we will need to know more about how *starting* has changed, when *movement* takes place, and what kinds of practices and chronologies *reading* has involved.<sup>101</sup> Because a work may be produced several times, through adaptation, rewriting, and translation, we can no longer assume that its language will always precede its composition and that its audience will always follow it. By challenging dominant models of literary sequencing, in which circulation always trails production, literary histories that incorporate translation recalculate the meanings of author and translator, original and derivation, native and foreign, just to name a few of the foundational distinctions that have shaped world literature as we've known it.<sup>102</sup> Born-translated works, because they value the history and future of translation, its conduits as well as its blockages, bring circulation into view. Rather than dodging translation, they try to keep being translated.

## NON-TRANSLATION STUDIES

This commitment—to keep being translated—doesn't fit our usual ways of thinking about the portability of literary works. It is conventional to distinguish between works that impede translation ("untranslatable") and those that invite it ("translatable"). But what would it mean for a work both to impede and to invite at the same time? The work that is difficult to translate is celebrated for its engagement with a specific national language and for its refusal to enter, or enter easily, into the pipeline of

multinational publishing. The portable work, for its part, is vilified for having surrendered to that pipeline, exchanging aesthetic innovation for commercial success, eschewing the idiosyncrasy of the local for the interchangeability of the global.<sup>103</sup> “In the global literary market there will be no place for any Barbara Pym and Natalia Ginzburgs,” Tim Parks has warned. “Shakespeare would have eased off the puns. A new Jane Austen can forget the Nobel.”<sup>104</sup> Global circulation, we are told, breeds literary decline and political lassitude. Literature is thus never worse than when it is “eminently translatable.”<sup>105</sup> And it is never better than when it can’t be translated at all.<sup>106</sup>

But translation, like world literature, needs to be approached comparatively: the concept has a history and a present, and it operates differently across languages and literary cultures. For example, the celebration of the untranslatable is in some ways a recent phenomenon in the United States. Spurred by the explosion in world literature studies and by new conditions of global literary production, its advocates are trying to halt the absorption of many literatures into a super-sized English-language curriculum. For many scholars, the obstruction of circulation is a necessary strategy of minority self-expression. By using nonstandard versions of a national language, a work opposes political and cultural homogenization, both the kind imposed by other speakers of that language and the kind imposed by translators and publishers. Brian Lennon, one of the more radical advocates for this position, has called for “a renewed emphasis ... on idiolectic incommensurability” and what he calls “non-translation studies.”<sup>107</sup> Lennon values books that refuse to participate in standards of linguistic, typographical, or semiotic accessibility. The most original books, he argues, will be unpublishable or barely publishable or perhaps only publishable by independent publishing houses. He suggests, in addition, that a “strong” version of non-translation scholarship would eschew its own monolingualism by producing “pluralizing” works: scholarship in languages other than English as well as individual works of scholarship that incorporate into English “significant quantities of a language or languages other than English.”<sup>108</sup>

In truth, this turn away from translation is something of a return. The notion that important literary texts have a distinctive language and that they are intended for a specific group of competent readers has been the reigning intellectual paradigm for at least the past century. The exemplary works of non-translation studies tend to feature idiosyncratic diction, portmanteau words, or phrases that gather several national languages into a single sentence. Doris Sommer calls these works “particularist,” by which she means that they are directed to a relatively small group of readers who can operate in two or even three languages.<sup>109</sup> Particularist writers, Sommer emphasizes, know their readers, or think they do.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, she argues, they know whom they are excluding: monolingual readers who lack access to multilingual puns that operate at the level of the word or the phrase. Particularist works are not meant to circulate globally. Rather, they are meant to be regional and to comment on the specific relationship among languages in that region. They are born untranslatable in

the sense that they do not travel well and in fact often resist it.<sup>111</sup>

At this point it seems important to acknowledge that the concept of the untranslatable, its meanings as well as its political consequences, is not one. I mean by this that it functions differently across various languages and that those differences have been largely invisible. These differences are important for our understanding of what the born-translated novel is trying to do. In English, as it has been used recently by Emily Apter, untranslatable texts or concepts involve “semantic units that are irreducible.”<sup>112</sup> They cannot circulate in another language, and in fact, as Apter puts it, they declare a “ban on passing from one language to another.”<sup>113</sup> Untranslatable words, Apter argues, are often bilingual and denote “shared zones of non-national belonging.”<sup>114</sup> They resist travel because their meaning is tied to the arrangement of phonemes or to the historical relationship among specific languages. This definition of the untranslatable fits well with the project of non-translation studies in the United States and with the idiolect-driven novels on which it has focused.

In French, as it has been used recently by Barbara Cassin, whose *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (2004) Apter helped to translate and adapt for anglophone audiences, “untranslatable” means “what one doesn’t stop (not) translating.”<sup>115</sup> The double negative is significant. It allows the statement to imply both “what one keeps translating” and “what one never finishes translating, or never manages to translate.” These two ideas together produce something like, “what one doesn’t stop translating even though one cannot finish translating.” Cassin’s is not a principle of repeated accomplishment (translating over and over) so much as a principle of ongoing failure (not translating, still). She writes in her introduction to the *Vocabulaire*: “To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.”<sup>116</sup> Cassin’s untranslatable means something like, “un-translated-able”: that is, unable to be finished being translated.<sup>117</sup>

If we follow the logic of Cassin’s thinking, translatable terms would be words or concepts for which translation can come to an end, and in which translation has not yet appeared to begin.<sup>118</sup> These words may have circulated, as all words have, but they do not register the trace of that circulation. Untranslatable words, on the other hand, are those for which translation is interminable. They express not the refusal of translation but the persistence of it. These words are translated from the start; they find ways to dramatize that history; and they carry that history into the future, requiring readers to engage in translation rather than to imagine that the work, as if from a later vantage, has been translated. Instead of a distinction between translation invited or banned, incorporated or alienated, Cassin points us toward a distinction between translation terminable or interminable, socialized or dramatized, managed or ongoing. Cassin’s “untranslatables” seem to be not simply born translated but virtually translated. They halt before the actual; they are solicitous of additional translation.

Literary works may be untranslatable, then, because they are difficult to translate

(Apter's sense) or because they are difficult not to translate (Cassin's sense). The first version of untranslatable, as I have suggested, has a long history within postcolonial and minority writing of the past century. It also has close ties with literary modernism. In some ways the association between non-translation and modernism is odd since so many modernist writers served as translators and created new works out of the translation and collage of other works. But the project of collage and the turn to the lyric in fiction emphasized the development of a particular language in relation to other languages and other versions of language. Promoting a sense of intimacy through sound and voice, many of the signal works of modernist fiction have to be heard as well as read. Scholars have called these works untranslatable not because they haven't been translated but because they seem committed to the history and structure of their original language. Beckett's famous aphorism about *Finnegans Wake*, that the "writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*," helped to produce what is now the standard account of Joycean fiction.<sup>119</sup> And of course James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* makes this point on its own behalf when it presents a story about the revitalization of a paralyzed idiom. Stephen forges the uncreated conscience of his race by teaching the English how to speak their language, and by outdoing the English in a language that has never been theirs. By the time we get to *Ulysses*, we are offered the opportunity to learn a new vernacular, and indeed that acquisition is crucial to the plot.

Thinking about Joyce, we can locate two ways of engaging with translation within anglophone writing.<sup>120</sup> One, which involves the *description* of languages, corresponds to Apter's emphasis on phonemes and irreducible parts. And the other, which involves the *narration* of languages, corresponds to Cassin's emphasis on interminable process.<sup>121</sup> In Joyce, these versions of translation lead in two directions. The first generates a new, oppositional fluency, whereas the second seeks to neutralize fluency as a principle of aggregation. These two goals get their start in modernism, and in this sense they have the same history. But they do not share the same future, having spawned two largely divergent paths in contemporary fiction. The path of description can be traced from *Ulysses* to G. V. Desani's *All about H. Hatterr* (1948) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), and Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012). We could easily choose other points in the trajectory—Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) come immediately to mind—but the ones I've selected trace a striking ninety-year route from 1922 to 2012.

In *Clockwork Orange*, a made-up amalgam of Russian and English is meant to convey the unconscious totalitarianism of the supposedly liberal English state. The relationship between the two languages, condensed in the narrator's argot ("there were three devotchkas sitting at the counter all together, but there were four of us malchicks ..."), tells a story about Cold War Britain, and it does so in ways that are difficult to replicate in other languages.<sup>122</sup> In many other twentieth-century works, multilingualism has served to record the political history of language imposition and



language use; generate a new language; and give shape to an audience whose distinctiveness is affirmed by the work. Díaz's stories are exemplary since they demonstrate some important continuities and divergences from the Joycean model. Take this passage about the narrator's brother's girlfriend, Pura:

Pura was her name. Pura Adames.

Pura Mierda was what Mami called her.

OK, for the record, I didn't think Pura was so bad; she was a hell of a lot better than most of the ho's my brother had brought around. Guapísima as hell: tall and indiecita, with huge feet and an incredibly soulful face, but unlike your average hood hottie Pura seemed not to know what do with her fineness, was sincerely lost in all the pulchritude. A total campesina, from the way she held herself down to the way she talked, which was so demotic I couldn't understand half of what she said—she used words like *deguabinao* and *estribao* on the regular. She'd talk your ear off if you let her, and was way too honest: within a week she'd told us her whole life story. How her father had died when she was young; how for an undisclosed sum her mother had married her off at thirteen to a stingy fifty-year-old (which was how she got her first son, Nestor); how after a couple of years of that terribleness she got the chance to jump from Las Matas de Farfán to Newark, brought over by a tía who wanted her to take care of her retarded son and bedridden husband; how she had run away from her, too, because she hadn't come to Nueva Yol to be a slave to anyone, not anymore; how she had spent the next four years more or less being blown along on the winds of necessity, passing through Newark, Elizabeth, Paterson, Union City, Perth Amboy (where some crazy cubano knocked her up with her second son, Adrian), everybody taking advantage of her good nature. ...<sup>123</sup>

Three characteristics stand out: First, the bilingual puns, which are accessible only to some readers. Second, the way that bilingualism, or code-switching, is associated not only with a single character but with the narrator, and thus with the work as a whole. And third, the use of italics for some but not all of the Spanish words.

Díaz's story performs a kind of reverse assimilation. Instead of translating Dominican speech into a standardized version of the English language, Díaz asks readers comfortable with standardized English to acquire Dominican.<sup>124</sup> But he does more than this. He makes a new standard. He presents Spanish words as part of New Jersey's native language. In this gesture, his writing stands out from the multilingualism of most U.S. fiction. Joshua Miller has used the term "accented" to describe works that register, through nonstandard English spelling, the voices of their immigrant characters.<sup>125</sup> Accented novels such as Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and Monique Truong's *Book of Salt* (2003) incorporate the sounds of migrant speech and occasionally words from languages other than English. When non-English words appear, however, they appear in dialogue. The words seem to belong to some of the characters, but they do not belong to the novel. Roth and Truong use what appears to be unaccented English—often called Standard English—as the principal language of their texts. In Díaz's work, by contrast, Spanish and English are internal to the work. The originality of Spanish, its presence as part of the novel's primary idiom, is emphasized by selective italicization (the slang words, *deguabinao* and *estribao*, in the passage above). Neither italicized nor footnoted, words such as "tía" and "indiecita" are local. They are not foreign. Indeed, when the story was published in the *New Yorker*, Díaz rejected house style (requiring italicization) and helped to bring about a new policy at the magazine in which foreign words are no longer distinguished typographically from so-called English ones.<sup>126</sup> Díaz's use of Spanish and English

together is very difficult to render in new languages, and indeed the text would prove difficult, too, for readers of the original who are not acquainted with Spanish—or who can't recognize Spanish at all.

Díaz creates a distinction between those who can read the language—those who are in on the multilingual joke about Pura, for example, which in Dominican pronunciation sounds like *puta*, meaning whore—and those who are not. But more to the point: his vocabulary is ephemeral. (Those familiar with modernist literature might think of Joyce's short story "The Boarding House.") Díaz records words of the moment, "on the regular"; as well as words on their way out, "the winds of necessity"; "taking advantage of her good nature." Called "The Pura Principle," the story captures a single moment, in a regional environment, among a small group of friends, whom the narrator calls his "boys." In all of these ways, Díaz's work fits the first path of non-translation.

However, the actual translation of Díaz's work offers an interesting coda and points toward the second path. If Díaz writes by describing languages, he translates by narrating them, and indeed one might argue that there is some narration built into his description. Díaz helped to produce the Spanish version of his award-winning novel, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.<sup>127</sup> Instead of replicating the English version's puns at the scale of each individual word, he replicates what the puns do at the scale of the work. The novel in translation retains the relationship between English and Spanish but does not always preserve the specificity of Dominican-American phrases. Díaz explains in an interview that he began by translating the entire book into Spanish and then replaced some of those words with Spanish-functioning English terms, preserving "that sort of multilingual madness," as he puts it, but not the original lexicon.<sup>128</sup> In this translation practice, Díaz is suggesting that the relationship between English and Spanish can be reproduced structurally if not locally. The relationship, that is, is formal and thematic as well as semantic.

In the Spanish version of *This Is How You Lose Her*, Díaz's strategy is most readily apparent in the translation of the phrase "not anymore," as in, "she hadn't come to Nueva Yol to a be a slave to anyone, not anymore." *Así es como la pierdes* inserts the English-sounding phrase, "ya no" ("you know" / "no longer"): "porque ella no había venido a Nueva Yol a ser esclava de nadie, ya no."<sup>129</sup> The Spanish edition gains a bilingual phrase in one place while losing it in many others. For example, the phrase "Nuevo Yol" appears more familiar in the Spanish edition than it does in the English. In the French version, translated as *Guide du loser amoureux*, the title displays Díaz's structural technique, since the American word "loser" has some currency, as American, in colloquial French.<sup>130</sup> That phrase also retains part of original's pun ("lose her" / "loser"). However, the French stories add back italicization. Spanish terms such as "guapísima," "indiecita," and "tía," which are distinguished from "deguabinao" and "estribao" in the English version, appear imported (italicized) in the French edition.<sup>131</sup> The translation has difficulty retaining the reader's encounter with words that operate in two languages (English and Spanish, or English and French) instead of one. Compare the following with the passage from the U.S. edition:

Pura, elle s'appelait. Pura Adames.

Pura Mierda, comme l'appelait Mami.

Bon, je précise que je ne la trouvais pas si mal; elle valait cent fois mieux que la plupart des traînées que mon frère avait ramenées. *Guapísima* en diable: grande et *indiecita*, des pieds immenses et un visage incroyablement expressif, mais contrairement aux autres beautés du quartier, Pura semblait ne pas savoir quoi faire de ses atouts, sincèrement perdue devant tant de charmes. Une *campesina* pur jus, de sa façon de se tenir à sa façon de parler, si péquenaude que je ne pigeais pas la moitié de ce qu'elle disait—elle utilisait régulièrement des mots comme *deguabino* et *estribao*. Elle bavassait à n'en plus finir si on la laissait faire, et elle était beaucoup trop spontanée: en moins d'une semaine elle nous avait raconté l'histoire de sa vie. Que son père était mort quand elle était petite; que sa mère l'avait donnée en mariage quand elle avait treize ans, en échange d'une somme inconnue, à un radin de cinquante piges (avec qui elle avait eu son premier fils, Nestor); qu'après quelques années de cette atrocité elle avait eu l'occasion de quitter Las Matas de Farfán pour Newark, invitée par une *tía* qui voulait qu'elle s'occupe de son fils attardé et de son mari grabataire; qu'elle s'était aussi enfuie de chez elle, parce qu'elle n'était pas venue à Nueba Yol pour être l'esclave de quiconque, plus jamais. ... <sup>132</sup>

The story depends on the idea that some of the Spanish words also function in English: they are native to New Jersey. This is important to the English edition because the story is not, in fact, about foreignness. Just as children expand their vocabularies by reading more widely and adding new terms to their lexicon, readers of Díaz's fiction are meant to *learn* words rather than to *translate* them. This is one reason why Díaz's work might be best understood as regional rather than global. It is written in one language.

## NARRATING LANGUAGES

Where does a text's multilingualism reside? When Coetzee's Simón mentions in the English text that "the alphabet" has twenty-seven letters, as it does in Spanish, the novel is narrating rather than describing languages. Or, when China Miéville dramatically interrupts a statement that signals one nation with a clause that signals another, he is registering the presence of foreign languages without representing them directly. Yasemin Yildiz has proposed that Kafka's multilingualism has more to do with his "writing *on* Yiddish" than with the so-called Yiddish features of his German language.<sup>133</sup> And Theodor Adorno, in an essay that has been foundational to theories of accented writing, acknowledges that it may be foreign ideas or unusual syntax, rather than foreign diction itself, that create the impression of nonnative expression.<sup>134</sup> In subsequent chapters I present other examples, including David Mitchell's references to a writing system of "characters" in a novel produced in Roman script; Jamaica Kincaid's and Mohsin Hamid's second-person narration; and the collation of editions in Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' digital narrative "Bust Down the Doors!" The example I pursue here comes from Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*, published in 2011. Lerner's novel has been enormously successful and has appeared in several languages, including German, Spanish, French, Dutch, and Italian. Raised in Kansas and now based in Brooklyn, Lerner won international awards as a poet before publishing his first work of fiction, whose title is taken from a

poem by John Ashbery. His background in poetry is notable since Lerner's fiction strives to keep language at a distance.

Like Díaz, Lerner is concerned with the relationship between Spanish and English, and for that reason alone his novel offers a useful comparison. But there are other reasons too. *Leaving the Atocha Station* tells the story of a young American, Adam Gordon, who spends a year in Madrid on a fellowship.<sup>135</sup> He's supposed to be writing an epic poem about the Spanish Civil War, and it is part of the novel's irony that Adam thinks the world needs a U.S. poem about Iberian militarism while the United States is busy invading Iraq. At least initially, Adam appears to have minimal command of Spanish, and much of the plot involves his efforts, first, to fake proficiency and, later, to fake ignorance. The novel filters every conversation through the medium of the character's competence. The impression of multilingualism is achieved not through idiolect, as in Burgess and Díaz, but through the dilation of possible translations. Multilingualism in the novel is not a matter of *voice*, the literary quality that critics from Roland Barthes to Franco Moretti have deemed most sensitive to place.<sup>136</sup> It is instead a matter of *form*.<sup>137</sup> To pick up on the distinction between description and narration I've been using, Lerner's novel tells us about translation—how it works, how it doesn't work, and many of the meanings it might, theoretically, produce—but it doesn't represent either an original phrase or an accomplished translation at all.

Approached by a sympathetic young woman after he has been punched in the face for inadvertently saying something inappropriate, the narrator reports:

She began to say something either about the moon, the effect of the moon on the water, or was using the full moon to excuse Miguel or the evening's general drama, though the moon wasn't full. Her hair was long, maybe longer than the guard's. Then she might have described swimming in the lake as a child, or said that lakes reminded her of being a child, or asked me if I'd enjoyed swimming as a child, or said that what she'd said about the moon was childish.<sup>138</sup>

The novel doesn't choose among the narrator's linguistic suppositions. It asks us to encounter the effort rather than the achievement of translation. The conjunction "or" and subjunctive syntax ("she might have described") appear frequently throughout the text. Whereas Díaz writes in a language we might call "native New Jersey," Lerner makes English into a foreign language. Both Díaz and Lerner are interested in two kinds of multilingualism: *internal multilingualism*, the varieties of expression within English or within Spanish, and *external multilingualism*, the movement between English and Spanish. They find different ways to put these two kinds of multilingualism into conversation. Díaz does this by introducing Spanish words that are foreign to New Jersey while also pointing at Spanish words that are local. Lerner does this by asking us to think about English versions of Spanish while he asks us to consider English versions of English, mediated in the novel by instant messaging, poetry, literary criticism, and free indirect discourse. Díaz's emphasis on description—all those Spanish and English words on the page—means that his novels are largely untranslatable, in Apter's sense. Lerner's are untranslatable in Cassin's sense: they approach translation from the perspective of reception.



Lerner is interested in the phenomenon of art's consumption, and indeed his novel begins with the narrator watching someone behold a painting in the Prado. The painting is reproduced in the novel so that readers too behold what Adam sees someone else behold. In this sense, readers are asked to think of themselves as the objects of the novel's attention, or at least as objects of Adam's attention. The novel stages various scenes of reception, which Lerner has described as a strategy of "recontextualization."<sup>139</sup> What the narrator and the reader encounter is someone else's encounter. This is one of the ways that Lerner promotes secondary, or mediated, experience. In his prose, Lerner is interested in the operations of language but not in what he calls the "surface effects of language," which he reserves for poetry.<sup>140</sup> Instead, he is focused on larger scales, deploying a collage of genres and circulating materials from one genre into another. There is no direct presentation of voice in the novel, apart from a short exchange involving instant messaging. Lerner's novel offers "a blueprint" for translation rather than the product of translation.<sup>141</sup> Hewing to the blueprint, Lerner keeps his novel from (not) being translated.

Both Lerner and Díaz are trying to produce works that provincialize English.<sup>142</sup> They force readers to grapple with partial fluency, register the arrogance of U.S. monolingualism, and invent strategies for incorporating the several languages, geographies, and audiences in which they get their start. Díaz's novel allows readers to learn the diegetic language, whereas Lerner's does not. Lerner's novel is less sanguine about creating new originals and about soliciting the reader's intimacy with the text. To be schematic for a moment, we might say that Lerner's novel welcomes translations into new languages by translating the original, whereas Díaz's stories themselves alter English but resist absorption by new languages. Díaz's texts are asserting their place in the world. Lerner is trying to retract that place. To put it in Casanova's terms, Lerner's novel tries to *unforget* its dominance. *Leaving the Atocha Station* reflects on the politics of language by dramatizing reception and by extolling the virtual. Partial fluency becomes in the novel a resource for self-expression and a basis for civic participation. Because Adam is not a knowing operator, he has to depend on what might be thought about him rather than on what he believes himself to be.

One could say that Lerner's novel accommodates translation because it avoids the "surface effects" of language. That accommodation is born out in the novel's Spanish edition, which has no trouble retaining the subjunctive quality of Adam's English-translated Spanish: "She began to say something either about the moon, the effect of the moon on the water, or was using the full moon to excuse Miguel" becomes simply "Empezó a contarme algo de la luna, del efecto de la luna sobre el agua, o utilizaba la luna llena para excusar a Miguel."<sup>143</sup> However, by recording the distance between "the actual words" in Spanish and "the claims made on their behalf," as Adam puts it in the U.S. edition, the novel keeps (not) being translated.<sup>144</sup> Lerner's text asks readers to confront the history and future of translation, and it invites translators into the literary history of the work within the work. At the end of the novel, Adam

proposes to his translator that they “swap parts” for a public reading of his poems.<sup>145</sup> This means, he explains, that “Teresa would read the originals and I would read the translations and the translations would become the originals as we read.”<sup>146</sup> The transformation is an effect of reading: the “translations” become the “originals” because they are presented first. There are now two originals, the ones made by the narrator and the ones made, as it were, by the audience. Originality, Adam implies, is produced by listening rather than (only) by writing or speaking. The status of the original, Lerner suggests, depends not on the artist but on the beholder.

In some ways the narration of languages retreats from the local since vernacular speech is often diminished. But narration also involves new ways of representing the local. We see this in the emphasis on the history and practice of translation, the distribution of literacy, the geopolitical institutions of literature, and the experience of partial fluency. The local now involves thinking about the origin of audiences and the mechanisms through which audiences add meaning to books. If we approach untranslatability as the dramatization of translation, then the most untranslatable texts become those that find ways to keep translation from stopping. They are those that invite translation rather than prohibit it. The engagement with idiolect is a distinctive trait of experimental fiction in the twentieth century.<sup>147</sup> But experimental fiction in the twenty-first century often withdraws from that engagement. Written for multiple audiences, contemporary novels have developed strategies of multilingualism designed for the foreign, nonfluent, and semifluent readers who will encounter them.

## NEW VOCABULARIES

Approaching world literature from the perspective of translation means confronting the idea that languages are not really countable: they do not separate easily into discrete units, “like an apple and an orange,” as one scholar has put it, and they are not equivalent units, as we notice when we compare the literatures of global languages such as English and Spanish with those of somewhat more localized languages such as Japanese and German or with those of even more localized languages such as Turkish and Swedish.<sup>148</sup> Literature scholars have generally relied on the distinctness of languages. That is how we organize our literary histories and how we construct world literature anthologies and syllabi. A focus on translation and contact among languages, however, implies new scales of literary history and new principles of literary belonging. By emphasizing the afterlives of individual works, the uptake of aesthetic strategies across regions, and generic developments, for example, Wai Chee Dimock, Martin Puchner, and Jahan Ramazani have established literary traditions based on formal and political affinity rather than simultaneity of language or historical period.<sup>149</sup> In this book, I gather anglophone works that address themselves to multiple audiences, invite reading as a source of making, and appear to be—and to be derived from—translated editions. These works point backward to the multilingual

histories of the novel, including the history of writing in nonnative languages, and forward to its many possible futures.

The distinguished translator Edith Grossman has suggested recently that we need a new vocabulary for talking about the relationship between original works and works in translation.<sup>150</sup> This seems right to me. For literary historians, thinking about the several editions in which a work appears would involve devoting much more substantial attention to the reading of translations. Instead of asking about fidelity, whether the subsequent editions match the original, one might ask about innovation and about the various institutional and aesthetic frameworks that shape the work's ongoing production. Examining all of the translations that appear in a single year, for example, would allow scholars to consider as part of a literary culture all of those works that began as part of other literary cultures. Or one could track the translation of a single work as it moves out into new spaces.<sup>151</sup> These are important strategies for recovering the histories of translation and reception, and for thinking about how, where, and when translations have mattered. While I will have occasion to discuss the translations of some works, especially in [chapters 1, 2, and 5](#), this book is devoted to a different question: how contemporary novels have incorporated translation into production, and what this development does—what it needs to do—to our analytic categories and procedures. It's not that we need a new vocabulary for reading works in translation. We need a new vocabulary for reading works. Instead of choosing between a literary history of originals and a literary history of translations, I approach these projects together. We have to do this because translation seeds production and is a crucial part of the literary ecosystem. We have to do this because many novels today address themselves to comparative audiences. There is no literary history without translation. Never has been. But today's novels have expanded the register of self-translation and multilingualism in unprecedented ways.

The chapters of *Born Translated* are organized conceptually, asking what happens to the signal categories of author, reader, original, translation, nation, world, native, and foreign when works appear to begin in many places and many languages. The chapters are also organized chronologically. [Chapters 1 and 2](#) focus on Coetzee and Ishiguro, whose longstanding engagement with translation can be traced to works published in the 1970s and 1980s. Later chapters focus on writers such as Mitchell, Phillips, Waldman, Hamid, Kincaid, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, and Thirlwell, whose works featuring global circulation and multiple audiences emerge dramatically in the 1990s and after. Yet concepts drive this story. [Chapter 1](#) shows that born-translated fiction, because it emphasizes ongoing production and multilingual reception, interferes with the novel's traditional role as an instrument of monolingual collectivity. It also interferes with traditional practices of close reading, which privilege fluency when they emphasize the text's smallest possible units: words. However, instead of proposing that born-translated works negate close reading or make it obsolete, I suggest that they direct close reading toward multiple editions of the work, larger units of the text, and units of the text that are also units of the book. [Chapter 1](#) shows how the project of close reading and the usual objects of its

attention (“details”) are altered by the production of works intended for multiple audiences.

**Chapter 2** turns from the question of how we read to the question of what we are reading. What is the object we hold in our hands? Book historians have asked: Is it the work, or is it simply one version of the work? Extending that question, this chapter asks: How many books constitute the work? Does the work consist of an edition in one language? Or does it consist of all editions, including those that may be produced in the future? The conceit of translation allows contemporary writers to approach their novels as series or lists of comparative versions. To invoke a distinction made by philosophers of art, novels that incorporate translation function more like performances than like site-specific sculptures. Acknowledging collaboration with translators, contemporary writers distance themselves from Romantic models of individuality and uniqueness. Born-translated works do not give up on uniqueness. Not exactly. Instead of assigning uniqueness to an object’s internal characteristics, they assign uniqueness to the object’s social properties: the way it relates to different objects in the same language, the same object in different languages, or objects of the same color or size or location. Beginning, in this sense, takes place over and over again.

**Chapters 3 and 4** address the relationship between the character of books and the character of readers. In the first case, I look at novels in which readers seem to constitute texts; in the second case, I look at novels in which texts seem to constitute readers. **Chapter 3** introduces the idea of the “world-shaped novel,” a work of fiction that attributes its aesthetic and spatial origins to planetary circulation rather than to national, regional, or urban geographies associated with one language. All collectives depend on strategies of sampling, collating, and counting. World-shaped novels ask how those strategies are altered by migration and other histories of circulation. Whereas **chapter 3** asks how audiences contribute to the meanings of aesthetic objects, **chapter 4** asks how aesthetic objects make—or classify—audiences. In the latter chapter, I ask what it means, today, to be a “native reader,” when many books appear in translation from the start and when many readers operate in languages that are different from those that they speak. I consider, first, the concept of native reading, and, second, how and why contemporary novels might choose to reject that concept. The chapter examines novels that dramatize the practical conditions of being—or not being—an audience. Deploying the second-person voice (“you”), these novels suggest that the most competent readers in the original will need to approach the works as translations. At the end of the chapter, I consider the generalization of this practice: reading all originals as if they are or will be translations.

The final chapter considers the irreducible collectivity of the born-translated novel as a paradigm for literary history and political belonging. I take as my examples several born-digital works because, self-published and irregularly updated, they appear in multiple languages and multiple versions of language at the same time. Operating as series (many editions, each in a different language) and as objects (one edition, consisting of different languages), these works reflect on the relationship



between language and citizenship, testing common definitions of monolingual and multilingual, national and international, domestic and foreign. At the end of the chapter I turn to examples of born-translated literature in print that have integrated digital practices. These post-digital works draw attention to the embodiment of the book and to the institutional, technological, and geopolitical histories of circulation.

My epilogue introduces Adam Thirlwell's collaborative project "Multiples," published in 2013. Like many of the born-digital works discussed in the previous chapter, Thirlwell's edition can be understood both as an anthology of individual objects in different languages and as an anthology of individual translations of the same object. Eighteen languages appear on its pages. While Thirlwell seems to present two kinds of serial individuality, individual works and individual translations, in fact his project is profoundly social in a variety of ways, hearkening back to the multilanguage periodicals of the modernist era and indebted to the coterie publishing of today.<sup>152</sup> Thirlwell celebrates his translators' creativity but also dramatizes profound disagreements about translation's political meanings and normative procedures. The translations included in the book run from paraphrase, collaboration, and adaptation to homage, imitation, scrupulous transposition, and replacement. As a template for literary history, "Multiples" testifies to contemporary fiction's robust uncountability in an age of world literature. Yet, through paratextual essays and visual images that emphasize translation practices, it also makes world literature accountable. The born-translated novel strives to embrace this paradox: accountability without countability; a literature of global circulation from the perspective of ongoing production.

# 1

## CLOSE READING AT A DISTANCE

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*Yet where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled?  
Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden, reading at a  
distance about his people and their latest pranks?*

—J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime*

### MAKING WORLD LITERATURE

Literary works that begin in translation require a new understanding both of what we read and of how much. Pointing at past and future versions, works may appear as unfinished collectives: not as one monolingual edition but as many editions in languages as varied as Korean, Dutch, French, English, Greek, and Urdu.<sup>1</sup> Readers will be able analyze only some parts closely because few will possess the necessary combination of languages and because the quantity of languages one would need to know continues to grow as subsequent translations appear. In this sense, born-translated writing repels attention and impedes the reader's mastery or knowledge of the work. But it also redirects attention. There is certainly no consensus about what close reading involves, whether the microscopic analysis of a text's very smallest units (words) or the macroscopic analysis of its thematic clusters, structural elements, and narrative devices. Yet born-translated writing modifies both kinds of closeness by expanding the notion of what an individual text is. Our interpretive energies shift rather than dissipate. The objects of closeness now include a narrative's visual as well as verbal qualities, paratextual materials such as typography and illustration, and aspects of the work that exceed the single monolingual version. What I call "close reading at a distance" differs from traditional "close reading" in two principal ways:<sup>2</sup> it demotes the analysis of idiolect, the privileged object of close reading's attention, in favor of larger narrative units and even units that seem to exceed the narrative; and it adds circulation to the study of production by asking what constitutes the languages, boundaries, and media of the work.<sup>3</sup>

## 06. On guidance systems

There were times during the Cold War when the Russians fell so far behind the Americans in weapons technology that, if it had come to all-out nuclear warfare, they would have been annihilated without achieving much in the way of retaliation. During such periods, the *mutual* in Mutual Assured Destruction was in effect a fiction.

These interruptions in equilibrium came about because the Americans from time to time made leaps ahead in telemetry, navigation, and guidance systems. The Russians might possess powerful rockets and numerous warheads, but their capacity to deliver them accurately to their targets was always much inferior to that of the Americans.

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As a typist pure and simple, Anya from upstairs is a bit of a disappointment. She meets her daily quota, no problem about that, but the rapport I had hoped for, the feel for the sort of thing I write, is hardly there. There are times when I stare in dismay at the text she turns in. According to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates "papers and papery." Brezhnev's generals sit "somewhere in the urinals."

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As I pass him, carrying the laundry basket, I make sure I waggle my behind, my delicious behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me. Alan says there are as many different bums in the world as there are faces. Mirror, mirror on the wall, I say to Alan, whose is the fairest of them all? Yours, my princess, my queen, yours without a doubt.

**FIGURE 1.1** Text from J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), 25.

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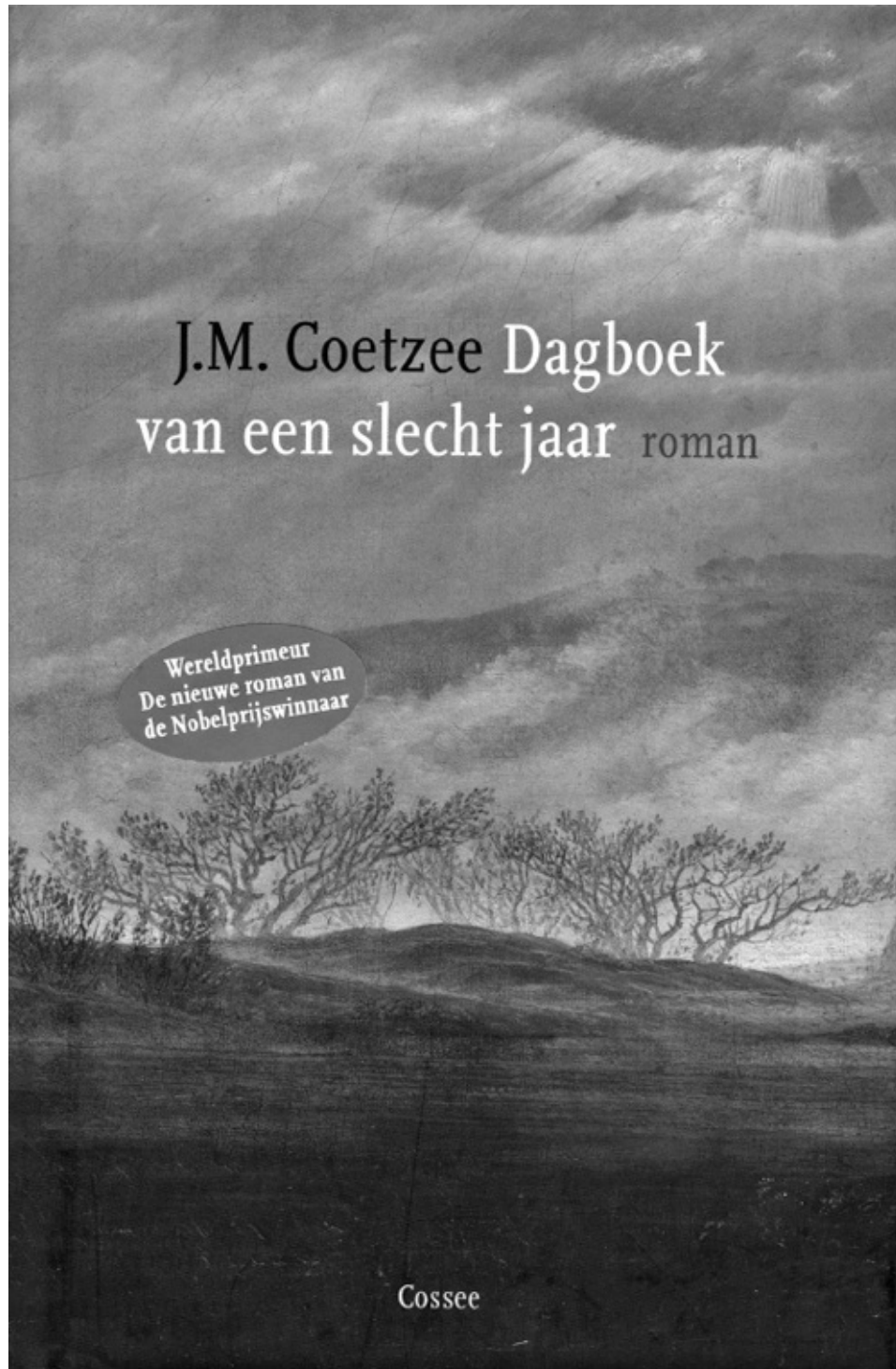
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We combine these two gestures when we approach literature that seems to be both an object and a collection of objects. As soon as a work appears as a group, we have to toggle between literary history and literary work. J. M. Coetzee's 2007 novel *Diary of a Bad Year* solicits this procedure by imitating the visual format of interlineal and facing-page translation (figure 1.1).<sup>4</sup> Whereas translation in 2013's *Childhood of Jesus* is principally a matter of story and literary precedent, in *Diary* Coetzee has

built translation into the physical layout of almost every page. Pointing at the embodiment of the text in this dramatic way, Coetzee asks us to consider how circulation shapes production. More than this, he suggests that understanding circulation as an agent of production alters our most basic principles of literary and political collectivity: exclusive beginnings, the completeness of novels and nations, and a developmental narrative that sequences—and separates—composition, publication, and reception.

*Diary of a Bad Year* is born translated because it was published in multiple languages almost simultaneously and premiered in Dutch rather than in English (figure 1.2).<sup>5</sup> It does not belong to any one national, ethnic, or linguistic tradition. It is also born translated because it displays, both fictionally and formally, its own multilingual start. Formally, the novel experiments with comparative inventories such as lists and catalogues; typographically, it invokes visual practices of comparison associated with the print culture of translation; and thematically, it reflects on gestures of ethical, national, and generic comparison. Because of the novel's architecture, we have to follow individual strands of narrative while comparing across those strands. We are led to compare visually as well as verbally: to consider how a word's appearance in a philosophical essay at the top of the page relates to its appearance in one of the two diaries printed below, and how the meaning of an idea changes as it moves among the novel's many discursive registers. Those registers include academic and popular; public and private; the geopolitical and the neighborhood; oral, written, analog, and digital; standard and vernacular. Comparison functions, too, as one of the novel's abiding ethical concerns. The text asks whether transnational enlargement in fact enhances or ultimately thwarts our capacity for social responsibility and political agency.





**FIGURE 1.2** Front cover of the Dutch translation of *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. M. Coetzee, *Dagboek van een slecht jaar*, translated by Peter Bergsma (Amsterdam: Cossee, 2007).

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The global expansion and increased speed of translation have led many novelists to ask whether it remains useful or even accurate to associate their works with original languages. What does it mean to refer to *the text* when the work exists from the start in several editions? How does the multilingualism of the book change the way we understand the literary and political culture to which the work belongs? These are

political as well as aesthetic questions. For his part, Coetzee has been reluctant to distinguish between original and translated editions. In a 1977 analysis of Gerrit Achterberg's poem "Ballade van de gasfitter," Coetzee refuses to say whether his interpretation relies on the Dutch version of the poem or on his translation of the Dutch version into English. He claims that the distinction is irrelevant because "all reading is translation, just as all translation is criticism."<sup>6</sup> We could understand this quip to mean that the process of analyzing the poem in Dutch is analogous to the process of translating the Dutch poem into English. And we could associate Coetzee with the belief that all translation, from any language into any other language, is historically, intellectually, and politically equivalent. But in fact in his novels and criticism, Coetzee has explored the history and politics of translation practices. He has associated translation, variously, with projects of colonialism, nationalism, and transnational solidarity. In his 1988 study of nineteenth-century South African literature in English, *White Writing*, Coetzee examines in scrupulous detail how writers produced "convincing imitations in English" of speech patterns from other languages such as Afrikaans. He argues that the representation of language "transfer" from Afrikaans into English had the effect of assigning a simplified consciousness to Afrikaans-speaking characters.<sup>7</sup>

Coetzee often represents non-English speech or writing, but he generally avoids stylistic marking such as grammatical inversion or broken diction that would remind readers of a specific foreign language.<sup>8</sup> There are at least three consequences to this choice. Coetzee's texts can be more easily translated, since there is little dialect or accent to be reproduced in another language. He does not associate the consciousness of a kind of character, where "kind" refers to ethnic community or national origin, with specific features of language. And he creates a text in which even English readers are blocked from imagining a direct, simultaneous encounter with a language that is their own. This last point is crucial: for Coetzee, it has always seemed inappropriate, both ethically and historically, to suggest that his writing is part of a distinct national-language tradition that emerges from a coherent national community. For this reason, one could say that all of Coetzee's fiction, not only those works that approach translation thematically or graphically, aspires to comparative beginnings. Because Coetzee associates linguistic and cultural homogeneity with apartheid nationalism, his fiction is in some ways most South African—most attentive, that is, to the history and politics of apartheid—when it appears most translated.

We can find Coetzee's ambivalence about national traditions stated more or less explicitly throughout his interviews, criticism, and fiction. "Perhaps—is this possible?—I have no mother tongue," *Diary's* essayist considers (195). The protagonist implies that his sense of discomfort in any one language, his sense that in his voice "some other person (but who?) is being imitated, followed, even mimicked" (195), can be attributed to the history of colonialism. He imagines that middle-class Indians might experience something similar:

There must be many who have done their schooling in English, who routinely speak English in the workplace

and at home (throwing in the odd local locution for colouring), who command other languages only imperfectly, yet who, as they listen to themselves speak or as they read what they have written, have the uneasy feeling that there is something false going on. (197)

The falseness that Coetzee hears in his own voice and imagines in the voices of postcolonial readers and writers elsewhere does not represent a failure to use English successfully. To the contrary: it represents the difficulty of registering, as one speaks or writes flawlessly, the history of other languages. As both a colonial and a postcolonial nation, to use Andrew van der Vlies helpful formulation, South Africa has continued to struggle over whether national belonging should ever be associated with a single tongue.<sup>9</sup> Coetzee engages with this struggle by creating works that appear in multiple-language editions while also emphasizing the dynamics of translation within those editions. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider how Coetzee's recent novels reflect on the relationship between literary history and political belonging, and how they refine and in some ways resist paradigms of possessive collectivism and simultaneous community. Finally, I suggest why new approaches to collectivity require new approaches to reading.

## **READERS, NOT WRITERS: ELIZABETH COSTELLO AND SLOW MAN**

Fluent from childhood in Afrikaans and English, Coetzee often writes about communities in which people speak different languages and sometimes speak more than one language. Now a resident of Australia, where he has become yet another kind of migrant-settler and where the characters of his recent novels make their homes, Coetzee emphasizes the differences within language, such as the English of Cape Town and the English of Adelaide. However, he almost always handles these moments diegetically: he tells us about words in addition to describing or citing them on the page. Coetzee also writes book reviews, which he collects in volumes whose tally now rivals the number of his fictional works. It is remarkable how many of the reviews published since 2002 focus on the histories, difficulties, and opportunities of translation. In those essays, published in 2007 as a volume called *Inner Workings*—a suggestive title for a book focused largely on translation—Coetzee considers the difficulty of translating texts that are written either in a regional version of a national language or in multiple languages.<sup>10</sup>

Not only the translation of other people's books but also the translation of his own books has filtered into Coetzee's production. In a 2005 essay he tells a story about helping his French translator choose among the several equivalents for the English word "darkness."<sup>11</sup> To find the word that would best convey the meaning of his original text, Coetzee reports, he sent the translator to French versions of D. H. Lawrence. Since he meant his use of "darkness" to evoke the tone of Lawrence's fiction, he explains, the French translation of his novel should above all sound like the French translation of Lawrence's novels. Translation, in this case, becomes both a

localizing and a globalizing procedure: localizing because Coetzee's Lawrentian tone is preserved; globalizing because Coetzee's Lawrentian tone is preserved—but only by conforming to a tradition of francophone translations. Past translations have established the conditions for the future of Coetzee's originals.

We see this explicitly in *Diary of a Bad Year*; in 2005's *Slow Man*, whose principal characters treat English as a second language; and in 2003's *Elizabeth Costello*, named for the fictional writer whose experiences on the international lecture circuit are described in many of the chapters. We see it also in 2009's *Summertime*, a fictional memoir that consists of five transcribed and edited interviews, of which at least two and possibly three have been translated into English. Critics are sometimes reluctant to describe Coetzee's works as novels since he has made resisting the historical and cultural meanings of the novel a persistent feature of his literary career.<sup>12</sup> Yet, paradoxically, Coetzee's resistance to the novel may be the best reason to retain it as both context and classification for his work. Coetzee does not relinquish novelistic concepts such as agency, collectivity, individuality, development, and action. Instead, he approaches them as if they no longer function or as if they need new functions. The generic oddness of Coetzee's works, their existence as novels that no longer underwrite novel-concepts, may help to explain why so many of Coetzee's texts—those that look like memoirs, those that look like essays, and those that look like novels—are marketed as “fictions,” as if Coetzee or his publishers are trying to thwart classification altogether.<sup>13</sup> In this chapter, I refer to all of Coetzee's narrative fictions as “novels,” emphasizing Coetzee's focus on the novel's elasticity as a genre, its history as a medium of national collectivity, and its function, in translation, as a source of collectivities both smaller and larger than the nation.

*Slow Man* and *Diary* ask how new technologies of reproduction and prosthesis transform our sense of the enclosed national community. They are testing two of Benedict Anderson's central claims: first, that “the book ... is a distinct, self-contained object, exactly reproduced on a large scale”; and second, that the book's self-containment imitates and even stimulates the imagination of a contained, simultaneous collectivity.<sup>14</sup> Coetzee asks how a translated edition or a spare leg might alter our conceptions of the individual. As readers will know, the appearance in Coetzee's fiction of nonfiction genres, self-referential characters, and even novelists is not an innovation of the late style. His third-person autobiographies, which began with *Boyhood* in 1997, offer striking, inventive contributions to the tradition of fictional memoir. And there is Coetzee's very first novel, *Dusklands* from 1974, one of whose short narratives contains what is presented as an English translation of a Dutch document attributed to an eighteenth-century explorer named Jacobus Coetzee. So, translation, metafiction, and biography have been there together in Coetzee's work for more than forty years.<sup>15</sup> But in the recent work there has been a decided turn to technologies of writing, to the making of world literature, and to the relationship between production and circulation.

*Elizabeth Costello* is a classic example of world literature in both the older and the newer senses of the term: it is at once a literary masterpiece, a book produced by a



Nobel laureate; and it is a literary underdog, a book produced by a native of South Africa who now lives in Australia. It is also a book produced within many literary networks: it began in at least four countries—Australia, South Africa, Great Britain, and the United States—and has now appeared in at least nineteen languages and twenty-one editions. As a text, *Elizabeth Costello* builds on several traditions of world fiction while also describing the institutions of making, evaluating, and promoting that constitute world literature today. There are references throughout to world masterpieces such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's "Report to an Academy" and "Before the Law," and the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Harriet Beecher Stowe. There are references to real African novels such as *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and to made-up Australian ones such as *The House on Eccles Street*, a rewriting of *Ulysses* that constitutes Elizabeth Costello's best-known work. Coetzee's protagonist is described as a "major world writer" (2).

And there is the transnational literary marketplace, what we might call the guts of world literature, represented in brutal anecdotes about the exigencies of book publishing, classifying, reviewing, interviewing, prize-receiving, and lecture-giving. These anecdotes are matched to a range of venues, including the lecture hall, the banquet room, the seminar table, the academic conference, the cruise ship, and the radio station. The venues correspond to a range of geographic locations, including college towns in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, a hotel in Amsterdam, a university in Johannesburg, and the shores of Antarctica. Because many of the chapters of Coetzee's book were first presented as public talks, the text's anecdotes constitute both the real and the fictional occasions of Coetzee's book. Without its audiences, Coetzee seems to say, *Elizabeth Costello* would never have been made.

*Elizabeth Costello* is everywhere interested in the difference between the inside of literary works—their verbal content—and what appears to us as the outside: the bodies of writers, editions, reviewers, critics, and audiences. At many points Coetzee will suggest that a book's outside is continuous with its inside, or that a book's inside exists only because its outside was there to contain it. In this vein, Elizabeth Costello, the character, will assert that a literary tradition succeeds because it has a "readership, not a writership" (53) and elsewhere that we should value literature and animals as well as people not by what they seem to be in themselves but by our "engagement" with them (95–96). Committed to the embeddedness of books among communities of readers, Elizabeth tells a large audience, "The book we are reading isn't the book he thought he was writing" (82). Later, she tells a class, "Writers teach us more than they are aware of" (97). These may sound like pronouncements about the metaphorical nature of all language—the way it is always meaning something else—but they are also arguments for the history and geography of books. Writers teach us more than they are aware of because they cannot possibly account for all of the communities, editions, languages, and literary histories into which a book will travel. A novel's inside, Coetzee suggests, is inseparable from its embodiment in the world. In this sense, a book might be said to have several insides or to produce its own inside multiple times.

Of course, when one thinks of *Elizabeth Costello*'s treatment of interiority, it is not the inside of books that first comes to mind. The two most infamous chapters, which Coetzee presented as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, feature lectures and post-lecture dinners in which Elizabeth Costello, the honored guest at a sumptuous meal, denounces what she calls the "holocaust" of animal slaughter (80). Ventriloquizing Plutarch on the subject of eating meat, Elizabeth tells her hosts that she is "astonished that you can put in your mouth the corpse of a dead animal, astonished that you do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds" (83). Elsewhere, she will say that she is not going to remind her audience—and then she does remind them—about "what is being done to animals at this moment in production facilities, ... in abattoirs, in trawlers, in laboratories, all over the world" (63). She will argue while visiting an undergraduate seminar that the relationship between the systematic slaughter of Jews and the systematic slaughter of animals is not simply rhetorical: "the Nazis learned how to process bodies," she asserts, by imitating the production methods of the Chicago stockyards (97). Coetzee asks us to think about the world systems that produce both dinner and novel, and he will suggest that such expansion—from the novel to the book, and from the dinner to the stockyards—both intensifies one's attention and in some ways limits it. Coetzee points readers to the mechanisms (abattoirs and trawlers) that transform animals into meat, to the quotidian and visceral details of the transformed object, to the total process by which "corpse" is mystified as "dinner," and to the complex geographies of production that link one kind of slaughter to another. To take ethical action, the novel suggests, we need to know that our lunch comes from the slaughterhouse, but ethical action is stalled—the character of Elizabeth Costello is physically overcome—when every intimacy is tainted by the process of enlargement, and by the inevitable connection of animal slaughter to endless other unseen slaughters such as Nazi genocide. In the novel's final chapter, a letter-writer who goes by "Elizabeth C." finds she can no longer think because she is consumed by metaphors: everything feeds into to everything else.<sup>16</sup>

Even before its final chapter, *Elizabeth Costello* offers several images of self-consuming consumption: the Moebius strip—one character is named Susan Moebius—in which every end also serves as a beginning (15); the traveler's jetlagged watch that is three and also fifteen hours out (27); the sexual encounter remembered as one person's knee fitted into another's armpit (24). And there is also the writer's voice, about which Elizabeth Costello muses, "Only by an ingenious economy ... does the organ of ingestion sometimes get to be used for song" (54). Each of these images points away from possessive collectivism: the notion, as one character proposes, that African novels emanate from African bodies, or that literary texts are expressive of a permanent, shared past. Instead, Coetzee suggests, novels are collaborative insofar as writers are always addressing their books to future readers as well as to prior writers. But Coetzee is also trying to say something different about bodies and texts: instead of treating them as containers for a unique and coherent interiority (a kind of person or literary work), he presents them as containers of fragile and often repulsive

matter (a kind of animal). At the end of the novel's first chapter, titled "Realism," Elizabeth's son is horrified to consider that what is inside his mother is not her consciousness but her "gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac" (34). He balks at having to think about the body's mechanisms. "That is not where I come from," he tells himself. The son wants to "come from" a person or a nation of sovereign agency, whereas Elizabeth associates individuality with nonhuman systems and social relations ("you in me, I in you" [32]). *Elizabeth Costello* reminds its readers persistently that texts, like people, have physical substance. The folding of speech into digestion, voice into stomach, production into consumption, can lead to futility, as in Elizabeth C.'s letter. But digestion can also create opportunities for new inspiration, allowing individuals to "act out of character" and to enter the lives of other characters (149, 155).

In order to act out of character, it is helpful to have a character, or a sense of one, in the first place. Not being sure of one's "situation" can lead simply to vertigo: what appears in the novel as a misfit between rhetoric and context (224). There can be no writing, the novel suggests, without at least some provisional situation. Yet the novel continually asks what a situation is, and how many situations count, for writers whose works start in several places and in conversation with writers from other traditions. By focusing on consumption, Coetzee's novel resists the logic of unique origin that governs most accounts of world literary history. In *Elizabeth Costello*, various kinds of consumption intersect, consumption feeds production, and knowing where things come from has to be established multiple times. Coetzee asks readers to consider that national literary histories, like animal slaughter and the Holocaust, are made possible by a theory of collectivity that privileges the simultaneity of consciousness over the solidarity of social contact. In the possessive-collectivism and imagined-community paradigms, the uniqueness and coherence of a text's inside leads to a nation-based model of literary history.<sup>17</sup> Coetzee suggests an alternative model by emphasizing the multiple contexts—and multiple scales—of aesthetic production. Building circulation into his novels, Coetzee registers the unsettling effects of the global marketplace, but he registers, too, the several beginnings that circulation makes possible. For readers of *Elizabeth Costello*, collectivity is always out of joint. Like a jetlagged watch or a Moebius strip, the novel places readers both after and before the narrative action. A grammatical stutter on the novel's second page takes us from the rhetoric of fiction ("Elizabeth Costello travelled ...") to the rhetoric of fiction-making ("... or travels [present tense henceforth]") (2). By suggesting that readers have prompted the text's alteration, Coetzee makes them agents as well as objects of the novel's community.

*Elizabeth Costello* reflects on translation by emphasizing the global itinerary of novels and novelists and by dramatizing the transnational origins of world literature. *Slow Man*, which also asks "where we come from" (52), approaches translation not through the migration of books but through the migration of people. The novel's main characters, the injured Paul Rayment and his nurse, Marijana Jokic, live in Australia but began somewhere else. Paul came from France when he was a small child;

Marijana arrived much more recently from Croatia. Marijana speaks an accented English: her unusual choice of words indicates that she is translating ideas from Croatian. Paul, whose thoughts are often part of the novel's discourse, is constantly selecting English words or invoking words from other languages. His English seems fluent, but he claims that the language feels unnatural to him. Is it because he is a character in one of Elizabeth Costello's novels, as she tells him when she appears on the scene? Or is it, as he tells her, because he is using a language that belong to someone, or someplace, else?

As for language, English has never been mine in the way it is yours. Nothing to do with fluency. I am perfectly fluent, as you can hear. But English came to me too late. It did not come with my mother's milk. In fact it did not come at all. Privately I have always felt myself to be a kind of ventriloquist's dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me. It does not come from my core, *mon coeur*. (197–98).

Paul's comments are in some ways untranslatable, since they involve both the consonance and the dissymmetry between the English "core" (interior) and the French "*coeur*" (interior, but also heart). Yet Paul's explicit translation of English into French should draw our attention to his implicit translations of French into English and of one kind of English into another. The appearance of a French phrase serves as a reminder that English, at least for the speaker, is a foreign language too. We are reading an anglophone novel, Coetzee suggests, but its characters are speaking and thinking in translation.

Describing languages, as I argue in the introduction, some contemporary novels use slang, local references, foreign words, and accent to exclude uninitiated readers and to welcome those who know, or who can master, the text's idiom. Mastery is possible: some have it, and some don't. Coetzee's novel leans in another direction. It uses words in French, Spanish, Croatian, and other tongues—there are at least seven besides English—to create a general sense of partial fluency. There is no original text to know, and no single vernacular community that could know all of it. Paul is always translating, both in the sense of testing the resources of different national languages and in the sense of trying to speak to a target audience without any source to call his own.

Like a good translator, Paul is obsessed with accents, double meanings, and clichés. His attention to idiolect may seem counterproductive for a novel interested in global circulation since it is difficult to move clichés from one language to another. But this is exactly the point. The novel doesn't just repeat clichés ("*Like a cat* he tells himself" [1]; "*full of beans!* he thinks" [6]; and so on); it flags them emphatically. Paul's overzealous selection of words—the way he "picks up the primly disapproving word of the day, weighs it, tests it," or the way he dubs one character "Mrs. Putts or Putz" and another "Wayne something-or-other, Bright or Blight" (180, 16, 20)—isolates him by emphasizing fluency at the expense of sociability.<sup>18</sup> And in truth, for all his weighing and testing, Paul's words are worn rather than expressive. The more the novel asks us to notice that Paul speaks "like a book," as Elizabeth Costello puts it,



the more we sense that Paul is trying to control language rather than deploy it (230–31). Paradoxically, the logic of fluency underwrites the logic of exclusion. “You speak English like a foreigner,” Elizabeth tells Paul (231). Paul embraces his foreignness, insisting, “if there were no foreigners there would be no natives.” But Elizabeth means something else. She isn’t telling him to speak better. She is telling him to “speak from the heart,” and thus she counters his clichés with one of her own (231). If we return for a moment to *Elizabeth Costello*, we find that speaking from the heart corresponds to an ethics of hospitality: we are supposed to live with nonhuman animals, or other people, not because we know what they are thinking but despite the fact that we don’t. Community cannot be premised on common language or on unique expressivity, Coetzee suggests; instead, it has to be attempted on the basis of partial understanding and even misunderstanding.

Because Paul values fluency, he is relentlessly fixing or lamenting someone else’s diction. At one point Marijana asks him in her English-translated Croatian if he is a “book saver,” and he responds almost immediately that he is a “book collector” (47). But as he suspects and as the novel implies, Paul is in fact more interested in conservation than collection. He is committed to natural languages, even though what passes for natural language often involves unrecognized translation and the appropriation of other languages. For example, Paul lights on “unstrung” as the perfect term to describe his fragile emotional state. The term appears several times in the novel, and Paul says he has taken it from Homer’s *Iliad* (27). However, he has in fact taken it from an English translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. The perfect English word is a Greek word. Paul is unstrung not because he has lost his resolve but because his accommodations have become visible. He has managed thus far by passing as an Australian, which means he did what was necessary to fit with everyone else: “That, as far as I am concerned, is all there is to it, to the national-identity business: where one passes and where one does not, where on the contrary one stands out. Like a sore thumb, as the English say; or like a stain, as the French say, a stain on the spotless domestic linen” (197). Paul’s invocation of national idiom, “as the English say” and “as the French say,” reminds us that fitting requires fluency, and here Coetzee seems to share Paul’s disdain for political collectivities defined by the appearance—and the sounds—of similarity. It is precisely by reminding us that “the English” have a way of speaking that the novel registers its own multilingualism. Coetzee uses these moments to emphasize circulation as a source of production: Paul is not English, and he is addressing himself to readers who might not be English either.

*Slow Man* associates passing—a kind of invisible translation—with unmindfulness. The problem, the novel suggests, is not one’s success or failure to pass but forgetting the demand for invisibility to which one has tacitly acceded. While passing can sometimes function as a tactic of appropriation or subversion, here it seems to register capitulation: the idea that everyone should look or sound the same. Sounding the same requires a natural language. Looking the same requires a natural body. Paul registers his desire for naturalness most intensively when he states his reasons for

refusing a prosthesis. After losing part of his leg in a bicycle accident, he says he wants to “feel natural” rather than “look natural” (59). He means by this that he doesn’t want to think about his body at all. “Did he feel natural before the occurrence on Magill Road? He has no idea. But perhaps that is what it means to feel natural: to have no idea” (59). Coetzee associates Paul’s desire to be disembodied, to be a self without a body, with his desire for continuity with the past. He wants to be remembered “As I used to be”; he wants his bookshelves to be dusted but everything to remain “in the same order” (50). He collects nineteenth-century photographs depicting Australia’s first waves of English and Irish migration because he wants to preserve “the last survivors,” by which he means not only “the men and women and children” whose images are captured but also “the photographs themselves, the photographic prints” (65). In some ways, Coetzee seems to support Paul’s “fidelity” to these photographs (65), which display not only the history of Australia’s several migrations but also the history of the technology that recorded them. In other ways, however, Paul’s instinct for *preservation* seems to obstruct Marijana’s and the novel’s projects of *restoration*.

In the novel, “restoration” refers to the process of animating objects, people, or artworks that have ceased to function. Marijana, a day nurse and former refurbisher of paintings, has made two careers out of reviving damaged goods. Her son, Drago, updates Paul’s photographs of Australian history by scanning them and adding in his own Croatian ancestors; later he turns Paul’s broken bicycle into a recumbent suitable to Paul’s damaged leg. Paul is absolutely set against restoration, ostensibly because he wants the real thing or nothing at all, but really because he doesn’t want to think about utility. “A recumbent. He has never ridden one before, but he dislikes recumbents instinctively, as he dislike prostheses, as he dislikes all fakes” (255). Paul is repulsed by the idea that a bicycle or a self or a work of art could be transformed by use, or by the material that serves as its container. But in order to be mindful, as Elizabeth Costello demands of him, Paul has to acknowledge embodiment. Like people, it turns out, words have function rather than character: they can be restored, and they can develop new functions. This is true for communities too. Speaking of the nation, Paul seems to understand that Australian history cannot be as “fixed, immutable” as he wants his photographs to be (64). He wonders to Marijana, “Don’t immigrants have a history of their own? Do you cease to have a history when you move from one point on the globe to another?” (49). The nation’s history, the novel suggests, is always in need of restoration. Because immigrants keep arriving, there can be no concurrence of action and language, and there can be no finished or completed nation. To a simultaneous past, Coetzee prefers a translated present in which histories of circulation remain ongoing and formative.

## WRITING IN TRANSLATION: *DIARY AND SUMMERTIME*

*Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* approach translation thematically by focusing on technologies and experiences of global circulation, including the global circulation of people. In its treatment of English as a foreign language, *Slow Man* recalls modernist works such as *Ulysses* and *Lolita*. Yet, emphasizing the role of audiences in the ongoing production of the work and reflecting on the limits of individuality as a model for expressivity, it fits well with Coetzee's other recent novels. *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime* approach these concerns formally, asking readers to analyze the physical properties of the text and to consider what constitutes the work before them. Both novels resist the principle of fluency, or what is often valorized as "reading in the original," by suggesting that only part of the work, or an unfinished work, is held in the reader's hands. They obstruct access to a unique language and reject the association between simultaneity and collectivity by insisting on comparison: in *Diary*, we encounter paragraphs in different genres; in *Summertime*, we encounter interviews in translation.

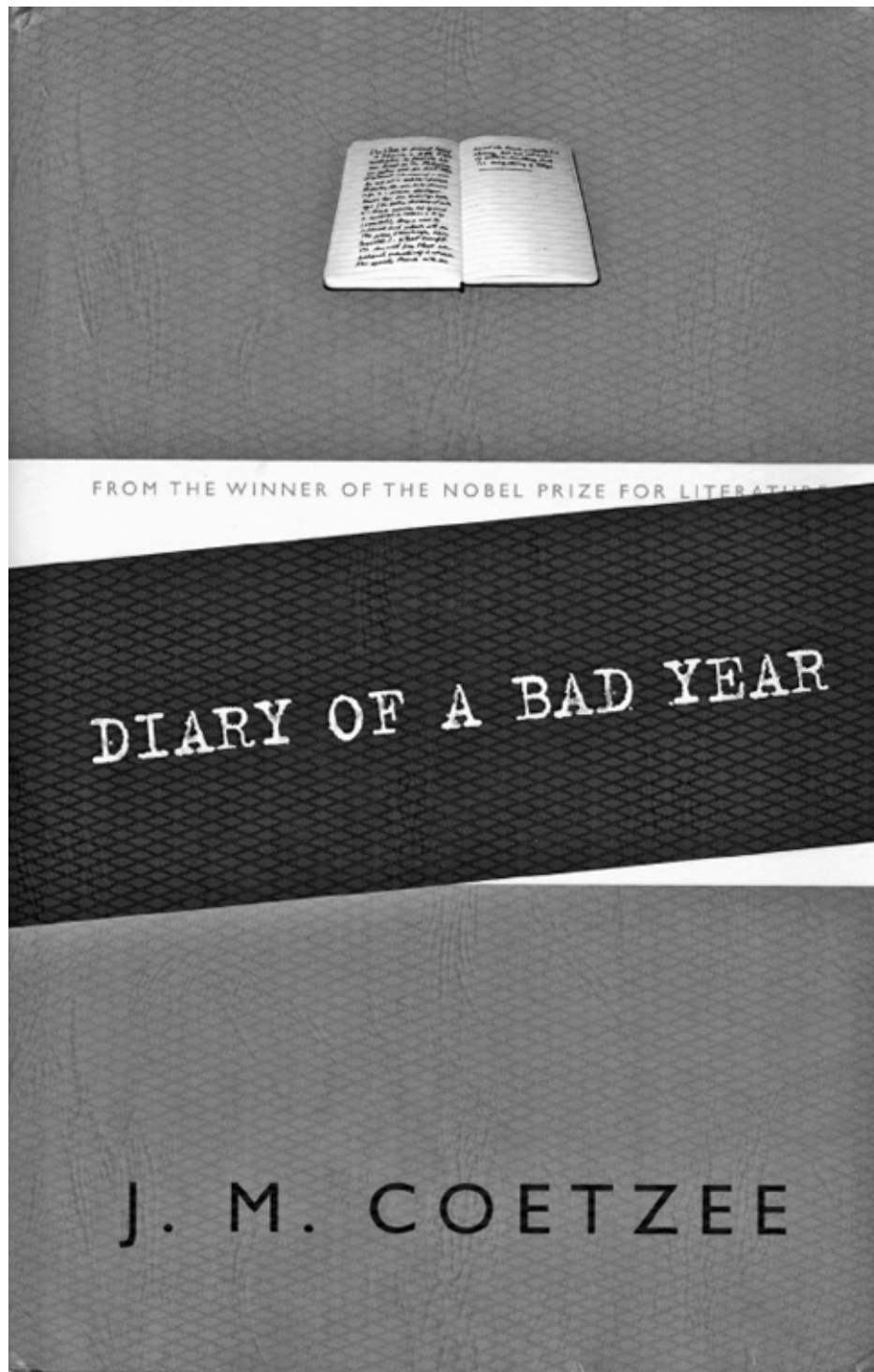
*Diary* presents its essays—this is the fiction—as the work of a famous South African writer who has been asked to compose a series of "strong opinions" for publication, first in German and later in French. The writer is called "J. C." and sometimes "Señor C.," so again we are in the presence of autobiographical fiction. The publication history of the novel increases the autobiographical effect. An excerpt was first published in a July 2007 issue of the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB), where Coetzee more often appears as a reviewer or commentator than as a novelist.<sup>19</sup> In the NYRB, one finds bracing short essays titled "on the origins of the state," "on anarchism," "on democracy," "on Machiavelli," and "on terrorism." Aphoristic in length and style, the essays are interrupted every few paragraphs by a single paragraph, printed in boldface, in which a narrator describes his encounter with a shapely woman in a short red dress, whom he has met in his building's laundry room. The narrator's crass reflections on the shortness of the dress, the shapeliness of the woman, and his own comparative decrepitude provide an odd but welcome contrast to the dour seriousness of the political compositions. As the excerpt ends, it becomes clear that the diary writer is the essay writer, and the shapely woman in the short red dress will be his typist.

The July teaser gives the impression that the longer book will consist of two voices: one impersonal, political, and a little stilted; the other intimate, solipsistic, and a little coarse. But in the novel, there is a third voice—the typist's account of her interactions with the writer—and on almost every page at least two and usually three of these voices appear. Each is separated from the others by a thin horizontal line (figure 1.1). At the top, we find the essays; in the middle we find the author's account of his interactions with the typist; and at the bottom there is the typist's account of those same encounters. What seems in the NYRB excerpt to be a series of political and philosophical essays interrupted by the occasional paragraph of personal diary comes in the novel as a much more balanced structure, or even a rivalry, in which the essays and the two diaries vie for our attention and indeed require us to organize our attention at every turn. A Victorian novel might have organized these internal texts into

serial form—essays followed by diary followed by second diary—but Coetzee’s novel presents them synchronically, at least on the page. Because most pages are separated into three sections, our attention is drawn to the paragraphs, which function as parts of different narratives organized by genre and as parts of the same narrative organized by the book. Individual words may be of interest to us, but it is the paragraph and the grouping of paragraphs that appear as the fundamental units of attention and that remind us of a language circulating alongside other languages.

While the *NYRB* excerpt implies that the diary exists as light background for the strong opinions, the novel gives greater emphasis to the diary’s subject matter: the dictating, the typing, and the conversation between author and typist. The novel suggests that those processes inform, both structurally and thematically, the essays’ models of sovereignty and political action. For example, Señor C. does not write the essays—at least not in any traditional sense. Rather, he scrawls a few illegible notes onto a sheaf of papers, dictates into a tape recorder, and then hands both notes and tape to his typist, who transfers his words onto computer disks, though not before fixing them up, as she puts it, “where they lack a certain something” (29). The essays are thus born electronic, both in the analog (audiotape recording) and the digital sense (microchip). I’ll have more to say about the relationship between translation and technology later on, but for now let’s simply note that Coetzee’s novel asks us to think from the start about its status as a reproduced artifact, about the ways that narratives are shaped by contemporary and near-contemporary writing technologies, and about what happens to accounts of the enclosed nation-state—the subject of many of the novelist’s essays—when they are played back, invisibly altered, and mechanically blended with other genres.





**FIGURE 1.3** Front cover of *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. M. Coetzee (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2007).

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It is important to Coetzee's project that the personal essay and the diary are two of the genres we associate most closely with individual voice. *Diary's* first English edition encourages this association by displaying a bound notebook and words in typewriter font on its cover, even though neither self-contained notebook nor typewriter appears in the narrative (figure 1.3). Both of these technologies promise what Shakespeareans call "character": the character of handwriting, the character of a

typewriter's unique impression, and the character of an author's unique expression. But the novel obstructs generic promises of self-revelation by introducing multiple diaries and by making the diaries part of the novel's action. Additionally, the fact that the author's essays have been dictated and then transferred to a computer makes it impossible to establish whether the essays we are reading are the author's words or the author's words altered by the typist's purposeful editing and the computer's automatic corrections. The novel confirms that the essays are collaborative in at least minor ways: for example, the fourth essay begins with a reference to "talkback radio" (17), and many pages later we find out from one of the diaries that the South African Australian author incorporated this Adelaide idiom at the suggestion of his Filipina-Australian secretary (51). This recursive correction makes us wonder whose feelings, language, and tone are represented in each section of the novel, and tells us that the apparently distinct voices of personal essay and diary are in important ways collective.

We should note that idiomatic distinctions such as "talkback radio" are treated diegetically, allowing the problem of idiom, if not the precise example, to survive translation. And it can be no accident that talkback radio is itself an example of vernacular culture: it is a species of popular media in which hosts and listeners talk and talk back in colloquial, often colorful language. The theme of idiom is addressed by the novel's comparative structure, which asks us to consider that there are several ways to speak, as it were, on any one page, and by the proliferation of diaries, whose addition and revision suggest the social nature of the essayist's individualism. The relationship between language and community is thus treated through words, to be sure, but it is also treated through the physical layout of the book and through a thematic engagement with topics such as interiority, migration, embeddedness, and solidarity.

Apart from representing a collaborative interiority, the proliferation of diaries in the novel has an important generic effect. It shifts the text's emphasis from matters of political theory such as global economy, genocide, and ethical abstraction to matters of social realism such as private economy, jealousy, and sentiment. At the same time, it suggests that social realism, insofar as it emphasizes the embeddedness of social agents, exerts a strong, collective—we might even say, national—pull on the novel's anti-national theories. We encounter those anti-national theories in both explicit and implicit ways. Implicitly, *Diary* approaches the problem of national containment by invoking the problem of scale: How do we determine the boundaries of a person or a nation? The only pages in the novel that feature a single narrative—the only pages, that is, that display what appears as an individual voice—are those assigned to the essay "On the Afterlife," which focuses on the question of the individual soul. Unsurprisingly, the essayist finds "the notion of an individual after-life" unconvincing (154). Central to his critique is the changeability of the self and the self's transformation through its encounters with other selves. Which version of the individual, the essayist asks, will the afterlife recognize? These observations about the limitations of individuality as a concept are immediately followed by the second

part of the novel, in which the essayist tries to revise not only his opinions but also his relationship with the typist. We learn from these later pages that the earlier essays, including the one on the afterlife, were influenced by the author's conversations with the typist, which were in turn influenced by the typist's conversations with her boyfriend, which were in turn influenced by the boyfriend's surreptitious reading of the author's essays and of the author's computer-born diary. This is all to say that even the pages that seem to feature a single voice and focus on an univocal conception of the self are made to function polyvocally: they are not self-contained. If the essays do not support the uniqueness of the individual, either as a concept or as a narrative device, neither do they support the uniqueness of the nation. The writer treats with irony and distaste the assumption "that each person on earth must belong to one nation or another and operate within one or another national economy" (78). His complaint is in part directed at the so-called naturalness of the assumption, and in part it is directed at the exclusivity and competition that follow.

Yet, for all its rejection of uniqueness in individuals and nations, the text finds room for uniqueness in collectivities such as those formed by the novel's paragraphs and those generated between author and typist by the circulation of those paragraphs. Additionally, Coetzee's affection for social realism—references to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky appear throughout the novel—competes with his suspicion of caricature and national containers. The persistence of collectivity becomes increasingly notable in the latter part of the novel, where the essayist is no longer committed to the version of enlargement he had espoused in his initial writings and where he embraces the sentiment and intimacy of realism even though he often disapproves of realism's approach to enclosed community.

*Diary* begins with sweeping transnational and transhistorical comparisons: the essayist considers together the U.S. torture of prisoners, South Africa's violent preservation of apartheid, and Britain's imposition of colonial rule (39–45); elsewhere, he moves from the suppression of indigenous populations in Australia to histories of genocide in South Africa and the United States (107–9). But the novel ends with the sense that large-scale comparisons, while ethically necessary, are socially paralyzing. "Moral theory," the essayist opines, "has never quite known what to do with quantity, with numbers. Is killing two people worse than killing one person, for example? If so, how much worse?" (204). He then queries comparisons of quality: "Which is worse, the death of a bird or the death of a human child?" (205). The problem implicit in these questions, a problem that concerns Coetzee in all of his recent world fictions, is not only how to order narratives of violence but whether there is a single conceptual scale that can comprehend each and every example. Instead of comparison as a measure of quantity (which is more?) or quality (which is worse?), Coetzee suggests that comparison might function better—more effectively, more sympathetically—as a practice of irreducible translation in which the heterogeneity among terms leads to overlapping collectives rather than to no collective at all. In this he does not evade or even trump the national container. Not really. Aspiring to solidarity without exclusion, agency without possessiveness, Coetzee's born-translated works make groups of

various kinds. For Coetzee, the principle of comparison guarantees only that those groups will have to be generated over and over again. By creating a novel in which individual voices are modified by circulation, Coetzee suggests that transnational communities—like transnational novels—operate at several scales at once.

*Summertime*, which follows *Diary* by two years, also solicits comparisons. Formally, Coetzee presents a divided book: a collation of fragments, transcriptions, translations, and redactions. Instead of the paragraph, *Summertime* isolates the chapter, each of which appears either as an interview in which characters reflect on past encounters with the deceased John Coetzee, or as a collection of notebook entries in which John, writing in the third-person voice, reflects on his encounters with his father, with neighbors, with the news, and with popular culture of the 1970s. If *Diary* is a novel that takes the shape of a memoir, *Summertime* is a memoir that takes the shape of novel. The book is based very loosely on Coetzee's early adulthood, and in this sense it resembles and fits with the fictional memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*. But several major life events have been substantially altered or even made up, including the principal conceit: the fact of Coetzee's death and the existence of an English biographer who has traveled the world conducting interviews with the dead author's acquaintances, friends, and former colleagues. Apart from its outright fictions, *Summertime* dramatizes the minor fictions of recounting, editing, projecting, framing, and embellishing that have been crucial to a long tradition of novelistic biographies. We might think here of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with its reports inside reports, or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, with its eager and bumbling interpreter. Like those works and like many of Coetzee's earlier novels and novelistic memoirs, *Summertime* presents genres of individual voice—diary, interview, letter, autobiography—only to suggest that what seems unique, self-contained, and personal is in fact collaborative, social, and shaped by other voices. What differentiates *Summertime* from other novelistic biographies, however, is its effort to align the collaborative interiority of the self with the collaborative interiority of the state.

Even the interview, that genre of direct discourse and unmediated quotation, comes to us altered by transcription, translation, abbreviation, addition, and in one case paraphrase and dramatization. To be sure, all interviews are shaped by questions asked and not-asked, but Coetzee emphasizes that condition by including the voice of the English biographer, known to us only as Mr. Vincent, and the interviewees' queries about the nature and scope of the conversation. The transcripts include unanswered questions and questions the interviewees decline to answer. Because *Summertime*'s interviews are organized by name—the table of contents reads “Julia,” “Margot,” “Adriana,” “Martin,” “Sophie”<sup>20</sup>—we are encouraged to think of each chapter as a monologue: a memoir narrated by a single character (Julia), in the service of a memoir about a single character (John). But in various ways Coetzee implies that every monologue is in fact a dialogue, even when there is only one voice on the page. We are reminded, often indirectly, that the interviews have been transcribed and edited and that most have been translated in part or in whole from a language unknown to the biographer. Sometimes the words attributed to individual characters



have been adjusted or abridged. Each chapter presents, therefore, not only a response to the biographer's questions but also an implicit interpretation of that response. The notebook fragments, too, are dialogues since each fragment is followed by a brief, italicized paragraph in which John reflects on the episode and considers how it might be used effectively in a future memoir. Throughout the book individual voices have been and are always about to be modified by others voices.

Given all of the editing, commenting, and other incursions, very little in the text can pass for direct discourse: sometimes we are reading what seems like a transcription of a character's voice, but later we find that words have been excluded, added, or altered for effect. We are in the presence of born-translated fiction. There is no first edition because the final object—the biography of Coetzee—has not yet been produced, and there is also no original archive because even the interviews have been edited, translated, and “fixed up” (87). Patrick Denman Flanery has called *Summertime* “a fictional biography in the process of becoming,” and this seems right.<sup>21</sup> Flanery's comment conveys effectively Coetzee's effort to display—and halt at midstream—the process of reducing social relations to a unique and coherent person. We encounter a collection of different voices, including the biographer's voice, but there is no omniscient narrator or framing mechanism to unify them.

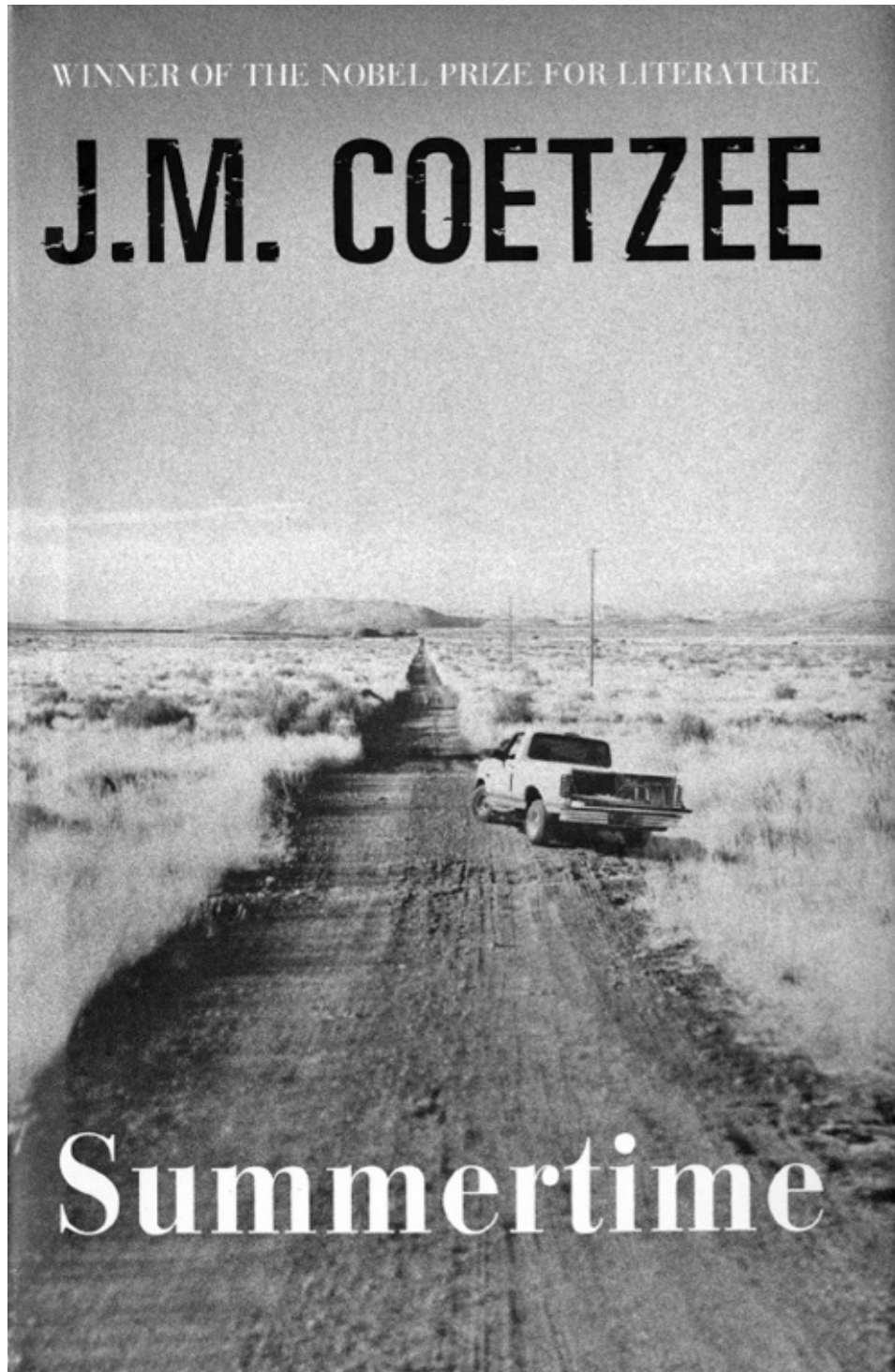
In addition, most of the chapters begin in a foreign language. At the end of the interview with Adriana, we find out that the entire exchange has taken place in Portuguese, in São Paulo, Brazil, and in the company of a translator, Senhora Gross, who never speaks and is never described (199). She will “transcribe our conversation and tidy up the translation,” Mr. Vincent explains. Apart from these direct statements, there are some earlier hints that the chapter's English words may not have originated with the speaker. Adriana refers at one point to the interviewer's “colleague ... [who] must be exhausted”; “Yes, I know how it is, being a translator” (173). She refers elsewhere to her “bad English” and to her sense that “how we speak in Portuguese” will be different than “how you speak in English” (164–65). Adriana's interview is the only one that seems to have been translated in its entirety, but Sophie's and Margot's remind us too that, at least for them, English is a foreign tongue. A former colleague in French literature who now lives in Paris, Sophie interrupts herself to ask, “can you say that in English?” (231). Margot, John's cousin, often speaks in Afrikaans phrases that are then immediately translated into English. Afrikaans words she and her sister “throw around rather easily” (115), the biographer tells us, but English words have to be dredged up, selected, and used: “He was—the English word occurs to her—a *go-getter* in a land with few go-getters, a man with plenty of—another English word—*spunk*, more spunk probably than all his children put together” (106, emphasis in original). Italicizing English as well as Portuguese, French, and Afrikaans, Coetzee presents readers with an anglophone book that begins in several languages. There is no single idiom and no single community of speakers to which the text belongs. In Coetzee's novel, undoing the repression of the transnational within the national is a linguistic as well as a political project. It is a linguistic project because we are meant to see that it is only the invisibility of translation within literary histories and the literary

marketplace that makes global fictions appear to be English. It is a political project because Coetzee shows that South African governance is accomplished through agents who operate both inside and outside the state's geography. The history of the state involves many cycles of migration, colonization, and violence.

By emphasizing translation as a source, a structure, and an outcome of his fiction, Coetzee demotes English as the language of South Africa and as the language of access to South Africa while at the same time acknowledging that English is the language of economic and literary circulation. At one point John insists to Adriana, "There is nothing special about English. It is just one language among many" (161). Coetzee seems to support this claim, insofar as his text decouples concurrence from collectivity: you don't have to be English to teach it; and the history of South Africa can't be all in one language. But Coetzee also modifies this claim and in some ways rejects it: what's special about English is its function as a language of colonialism, a language of upward mobility for migrants such as Adriana and her children, and a language of world literature such as the book we are reading. The dominance of English is a diegetic as well as a grammatical feature of the text. All of the interviews have been translated into English, and the biographer himself is English. These facts serve to demonstrate that the language remains historically if not characteristically "special." However, Coetzee is not suggesting that the biographer's parochialism can be attributed simply to his monolingualism. It is not fluency but modesty that the biographer lacks: he is quick to assume that "changing the form should have no effect on the content" (91).<sup>22</sup> The point for Coetzee is not to protect and reify the form. The point is to recognize that translation is both unavoidable and generative: it creates something new.

Chronologically as well as linguistically, *Summertime* has no single beginning. The order of the narrative does not correspond to the order of the plot. Put another way, the itinerary presented in the table of contents and offered to the reader differs from the biographer's actual journey.<sup>23</sup> The fifth chapter, the interview with Martin, draws our attention to this discrepancy by including an exchange in which Mr. Vincent announces his future plans to interview the four other subjects, three of whom we have already met (216–17). After Martin, the biographer says he plans to visit Margot, Adriana, Julia, and Sophie. But in fact, according to the dates given at the end of each transcription, he visits Sophie before he visits Julia, and then returns to South Africa to visit Margot once again. And of course, for us, he has already visited Julia, Margot, and Adriana. By presenting a book made up of several interviews rather than one narrative, Coetzee allows the parts to operate both independently and collectively: independently because the inconsistencies are allowed to stand; and collectively because we can assemble competing versions or editions of the text. Narrative and plot diverge in other ways as well. The order of the episodes recounted in the interviews does not correspond neatly to the order of John's life, and the notebook fragments, which focus on and at first seem to have been written in the early 1970s, later seem to have been written in 1999 or 2000, the years in which John is said to have added his commentary.<sup>24</sup>

And then there are the seasons. The book's title promises "summertime," and in some ways it delivers. Julia met John in the "summer of 1972" (20); Margot's account begins with a summer gathering at the family farm; and all of the pieces focus on what the biographer seems to regard as the "summer" of John's life, the period in which he ripens as a novelist.<sup>25</sup> But most of the interviews and both of the notebook entries take place in another season, usually winter, and one would hardly call "summery" either John's disposition or that of any of the characters. Summertime is one of those designations that seems natural—surely, there is nothing more natural than a season?—but turns out to be contextual, located, and historical. The French edition of the work, *L'été de la vie*, seems to know this especially well: the title evokes Proustian associations between self and nature, while the cover—like Proust's novel—suggests that both self and nature are subject to art (compare figures 1.4 and 1.5). In this light, we need to understand the work's title, both in English and in French, as part of the biographer's discourse: what he would call it, rather than a denotative classification. It's hard to imagine Coetzee embracing the kind of developmental narrative that we associate with the progression of seasons and the season-like progression of a life. But more than this, "summertime" suggests something about geography, about the planet, and the relationship among one part of the planet and another. If a South African novel can't be all in one language, Coetzee seems to say, it can't be all in one season either. Comparison is thus required by the ordering and reordering of the chapters, and it is also required within the chapters. For example, the interview with Margot takes place in June 2008, but Mr. Vincent is reading aloud from a narrative version of a previous interview he conducted with her some seven months earlier. It is not only that there is a discrepancy between the text's many seasons and the one declared confidently by the title. It is more fundamental. For a born-translated work, there can be no simultaneity across space. It is never the same season everywhere.



**FIGURE 1.4** Front cover of *Summertime*, J. M. Coetzee (London: Harvill Secker, 2009).

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The geography of *Summertime* is complex and difficult to describe, and here we encounter what I take to be the chief purpose of the work's born-translated structure. Coetzee asks readers to think differently about place, about the collectivities attached to place, and about the limits and opportunities of "reading at a distance" (4). Measured by characters and principal subject matter, the memoir's ambit is small: including John, we hear about nine or ten people, at the most, and we learn about



only a very narrow slice of those lives. The interviews focus on encounters that took place in rural South Africa and Cape Town. Yet, if we consider the biographer's itinerary, the circle grows somewhat larger. Each interview ends not only with a date but also with a location, and thus we are invited to reconstruct the biographer's path. The reader travels from Canada to South Africa, Brazil, Britain, and then finally to France, but Mr. Vincent has traveled from Britain to South Africa, then to Brazil, France, Canada, and back to South Africa. In this literal way, *Summertime* builds circulation into production: there is no original place of composition or collation.



**FIGURE 1.5** Front cover of *L'été de la vie*, French translation of *Summertime*, J. M. Coetzee, translated by Catherine Lauga du Plessis (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

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*Summertime* is about South Africa, if we understand this to mean that it is about the local, regional, transnational, and global actors that have generated the nation's history. We should note, however, that it is not nations but towns, suburbs, and cities that the biographer identifies at the end of each interview: "Kingston, Ontario,"

“Paris,” “Somerset West, South Africa,” and so on. By emphasizing small units of geography and civic space, Coetzee seems to be hewing to his subject’s preferences. We’re told that John finds national and even transnational collectivities much less meaningful and much less appealing than collectivities that operate within nations or at scales smaller than the state. He was “sympathetic” to the novelist and political organizer Alex La Guma, Sophie explains, “because La Guma was from Cape Town, not because he was a communist” (228). Part of the appeal of the city or town seems to be its intimacy. But another part is its relative detachment from the historical trajectories and linguistic uniformity that Coetzee associates with the imagined community of the nation. As it unfolds in the memoir, Coetzee’s life in Cape Town consists of friends and acquaintances who live in South Africa but who are also Brazilian, French, Afrikaans, English, and Jewish/Hungarian. Coetzee presents Cape Town as a city not only of educated cosmopolitans like himself and perhaps Sophie but also of migrants, exiles, prisoners, workers, and settlers. *Summertime*’s subtitle, at least in the U.K. edition, promises “scenes from a provincial life.” Placing his cosmopolitan roster beneath the flag of provincialism, Coetzee suggests that South Africa’s history is both more global and more local than apartheid nationalism could possibly comprehend. Narrowing and varying classifications, Coetzee draws our attention to the micro-histories of neighborhoods and to intimate relations that are not reducible to geopolitical arrangements. At the same time we are asked to notice that geopolitical arrangements inform the work and its sense of place from the very start.

To take the most dramatic and immediate example: the text begins in South Africa by beginning in the neighboring country of Botswana. Here, in August 1972, several Afrikaans-speaking men, probably members of the South African Defense Force, have killed a family of South African refugees. The men, John’s notebook reports, arrived in a “white American model” car (3). Even before we know the language of the killers, the white Americanness of the car implicates the South African government, which has drawn support, rhetorically and economically, from the United States. We’re asked to understand that the violence of apartheid takes place—that is, begins, finds financial and political backing, and shows itself most explicitly—both inside and outside South Africa. At some point, John imagines, the leaders of South Africa will “pack their bags, shred any incriminating evidence, and fly off to Zurich or Monaco or San Diego,” where they have bought houses and established businesses with obscure names (5–6). With Switzerland in the future and Botswana in the past, *Summertime* sets its South African scene well beyond the geography of a single state.

This is why, for John, there is no possibility of hiding “in the snows of Sweden,” and no comfort in “reading at a distance about his people and their latest pranks” (4). Distance brings neither affective nor ethical detachment. South Africa’s leaders remain “his people,” whether he lives with them or believes in their project. Living in Sweden would not change this. Of course, Sweden functions symbolically as well as spatially. It calls to mind a contrasting hemisphere, topography, and climate. But it also evokes an ideal of neutrality: think here of that country’s official status during the

Second World War as well as its continuing function as host of the Nobel committee, whose conferral of global prestige can create the conditions for local amnesty. Coetzee rejects both the ideal and the promise: he may be writing for translation, but he is not writing from nowhere. He can't because he associates global invisibility ("Zurich or Monaco or San Diego") with the very forces he wishes he could disavow.

The initial pages of *Summertime* tell us that National Party leaders justify the rule of apartheid by narrowing their view geographically and historically, and by evaluating action only in terms of self-interest. By way of contrast, we are presented with John's approach to current events. He thinks comparatively, as we have seen, and he refuses to embrace self-interest—that central tenet of liberal individualism—as a motor either for action or for collectivity. Like Stephen Dedalus at the start of *Ulysses*, John has returned to his provincial city feeling "soiled" by personal and collective guilt (4).<sup>26</sup> We don't yet know of his personal guilt but of his collective guilt—as one who has benefitted, even indirectly, from the apartheid system—we are immediately aware. *Summertime's* opening, then, offers two models of "reading at a distance." The first model, which John discards, associates geographical remoteness with ethical and emotional detachment. "Reading at a distance" allows one to imagine that someone else—not you!—is soiled.<sup>27</sup> The second model, which corresponds to the structure of John's analysis, suggests that there is no neutrality and that those spaces that seem to us distinct or contrasting—winter to our summer—may be integral to actions at home. Instead of developing some Sweden-like sense of impartiality, John has to be attentive to the many ways that inside and outside are established. It is therefore important to read at a distance but not in the way that John at first imagines.

*Summertime* begins and ends by suggesting that collectivity cannot depend on affinity. In fact, Coetzee proposes, it has to depend on and is most substantially tested by the lack of affinity. John is South African not because he shares the government's values but despite the fact that he doesn't. Similarly, the book's final notebook entry suggests that John can have a relationship with his ailing father only if he is willing to sacrifice his own pleasures: "He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye. One or the other: there is no third way*" (265–66, emphasis in original). We see here Coetzee's strenuous conception of ethical duty, in which it is not ideas or outcomes that justify care but the obligation to respond to someone else's suffering. *Diary* ends on a similar note, with the essayist confessing that fictional characters move him by the "accents of anguish" rather than the "substance of ... argument" (175–76). And this fits with his sentiments in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, in which collectivity is based on contact instead of consciousness. By building translation into its form, *Summertime* calls on readers to participate in a world in which no one is altogether fluent. This is not an argument for exile, for feeling distant while others feel close. Rather, it is an argument for participation without affinity and for a kind of mindfulness about the distances that



exist within any collectivity.

## WORLDS ON THE PAGE

Coetzee's comparative approach, in which we are asked to see how the logic of transnational circulation places characters, episodes, and even paragraphs within multiple containers, suggests new directions for literary critical methodology. Historians of the novel will need to analyze how a work participates not only in one literary system, the literary system of the language in which it was composed, but also in the other literary systems in which it has a presence. Because a text may begin in several places and because it may continue to travel to numerous regions and languages, its location and culture will be dynamic and unpredictable. It is no longer simply a matter of determining, once and for all, the literary culture to which a work belongs. Born-translated literature such as Coetzee's implies the intersection of several major methodologies: close reading, book history, and translation studies. Benedict Anderson has helped to show us that the history of the novel requires the history of the book. The history of the born-translated novel requires the history of many books.

Thinking about the history of many books can lead in several directions. We might investigate the publishing conglomerates, regional markets, and advertising strategies that manage and differentiate the circulation of works throughout the world. But the history of many books also leads to a practice I have called close reading at a distance because it challenges the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties of the work, draws our attention to the role of global audiences in the production of literary fiction, and asks us to consider how literature written for the world establishes new paradigms of uniqueness. The originality of the born-translated work, no longer expressive of a single language or national territory, now refers to the work's appearance as editions and translations that function within several literary geographies. Put another way, the history of many books will need to account for a text's multiple beginnings, and for the ways that it participates in and cuts across various collectivities. In "The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel," Peter McDonald has argued that the history of many books should not be seen as one approach among many but rather as "an essential precondition" for understanding the aesthetic strategies of works such as *Diary of a Bad Year* (493). Yet this approach, McDonald acknowledges, "obliges us to begin much farther back from Coetzee's project in *Diary* than many 'close readers' would find comfortable." (492). McDonald is advocating a kind of close reading that involves some alternative to close reading, or at least some alternative to the close reading performed and approved by most "close readers."

As examples of beginning "farther back," McDonald points to the contrast between Coetzee's ambivalence about generic categories within *Diary* and the various

affirmations of genre one finds on the front and inside covers of the different editions; to the analysis of the books' several formats and typographies; and to the conceit of a novel about a novelist who shares the same initials as the work's author (494–95). McDonald's approach involves acknowledging that what is putatively outside the text—its covers, its typography and pagination, its author's name—informs the inside. Historians of the book have been calling for this acknowledgment for some time. However, thinking about books instead of “the book” leads us to notice in addition that many outsides lead to many insides, and that not all of these insides will be legible to any one critic. For his part, McDonald seems uncertain about whether the turn to the geopolitics of readers and publishers—the study of “who reads and who publishes” (492)—negates, alters, or simply supplements traditional reading practices. First, echoing generations of book historians, he says, “particular readers find themselves face to face not with the ‘words on the page’ but with a richly coded artifact that bears witness to multiple intersecting histories” (490). But later he insists, “The point, however, is not to privilege the book above the words on the page” (492). Like many contemporary critics, McDonald finds himself repeating a familiar opposition between the book and the word, between the broad analysis of literature's economic, political, and physical histories and the deep analysis of a single work's rhetorical properties.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of asking whether books occlude words, what if we were to ask whether books lead us to privilege, analyze, or value something in the text other than words? We might have to pay greater attention to typography, layout, and illustration as well as to many things that are not strictly speaking “on the page” or on the page we have before us. Close reading may involve attention to “details,” as Jonathan Culler and Jane Gallop have argued, but what are details?<sup>29</sup> How large are they? How do we know when we have attended to them intensively, substantially, or, as we say, deeply? How would our reading practices change, what more or what less would we learn, if we focused our attention on larger units such as the chapter or the edition or on elements of the physical book such as lines moving across the page? Finally, what if we defined close reading, as John Guillory has proposed, less by its objects than by its practice, where it is not the deep attention to words but the deep attention itself that matters most?

As I suggested in the preceding pages, born-translated works often proceed from the fiction, sometimes the fact, that readers are encountering an original translation: a work that has begun in several languages or a work that has been composed in one language and then published in a foreign tongue. These works can't expect us to read and to master the words on the page since, on some level, attending to all of the words and all of the pages would involve reading many more editions than we could hold in our hands or would involve reading an edition that doesn't really exist. Instead they ask us to focus on the text's resistance to mastery—or what I call fluency—by pointing at versions and editions beyond our reach. Foreignness in these works operates diegetically, narratively, and physically much more than it does semantically. To be sure, many novels emphasize narrative structure and theme rather than idiolect and metaphor, and close readers of those works may find themselves analyzing the

former rather than the latter qualities. But it is nevertheless unexpected and unprecedented to find literary fiction veering away from idiolect in order to veer toward multilingualism. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, fluency is impeded not by portmanteau words or invented diction but by a misfit between story and physical structure. Only by thinking carefully about “the book”—the way the words are organized on the page, and on different pages—can we analyze “the words” at all. In *Summertime*, the location of the text is irreducible to any one beginning or geography; and in fact we are asked to think about the geopolitical, topographic, historical, linguistic, and meteorological relations that govern the meaning of place. Because the text starts in circulation—it literally begins by reflecting on South African violence in Botswana and the way that violence in Botswana tells us something about the true boundaries of South Africa—we have to conceive of its community as something we discover rather than as a linguistic, territorial, or political entity concurrent with either author or reader.

As an intellectual strategy, close reading at a distance overlaps with two major developments in transnational literary studies: first the turn toward books in the study of texts, and, second, the effort to challenge, historicize, transform, and in some cases reject dominant practices of close reading.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, these are separate developments, since some of the critics who call for new reading strategies are not especially interested in book history or in the history of translation implied by global circulation, and some of those interested in book history are not principally interested in reading at all. But in the field of world literature, a new attentiveness to books has changed the approach to texts. Perhaps the most influential critic in this regard is Franco Moretti, whose model of “distant reading” involves tracking the way groups of literary works travel from their national origin into new spaces and languages. Distant reading calls for new objects of attention, and it imagines collaborations among scholars rather than one person’s knowledge of every relevant language. However, distant reading presupposes someone else’s traditional close reading of individual works. The synthetic calculations at the heart of distant reading are based on other readers’ analyses of voice and idiom, on the comparison of national literary histories, and on the assumption that all literary texts begin in a unique language.

If Moretti’s project separates the analysis of literary circulation from the analysis of literary production, Daniel Hack’s related approach suggests that transnational book history can coexist with close reading if we hew to linguistic rather than national frameworks.<sup>31</sup> He shows, for example, how a nineteenth-century British work such as *Bleak House* developed new cultural meanings—new emphases, new ironies, and new political uses—when it was serialized in U.S. antislavery periodicals. A text that promoted British localism through the exclusion of Africans became, in the hands of some African American readers, a text that could be used to promote U.S. localism and the abolitionist cause (731). Through commentary, dramatization, and rewriting, Hack argues, the “African-Americanization” of *Bleak House* created “new *Bleak Houses*” (729). Hack calls his methodology “close reading at a distance,” but his procedure involves something more like distant reading up close since he is interested

above all in the dynamics of reception: how an original text with “intrinsic features” travels from one political context to another, and how it is deployed in each of those contexts (730). Hack’s method diverges from Moretti’s since Hack does not begin from the presumption of a self-contained work moving through time and space. Instead he analyzes several anglophone versions: serialized parts of the novel, rewritings that appear as completely different novels, and discussions of the novel in essays and letters. Yet Hack shares Moretti’s emphasis on beginnings and dispersals. Comparing “afterlife” with original, new U.S. versions with the version that Dickens published in Britain, Hack follows Moretti’s general model in which texts start in one place and then move out to others (730). What Moretti and Hack share most of all, of course, is a focus on nineteenth-century fiction. A novel such as *Bleak House* was designed to support the logic of national literary history. That is, Dickens may have read Frederick Douglass, and Douglass may have read Dickens, as Hack details, but the novel provides an argument for—and seems to solicit—serial nationalism. Hack calls this feature “the portability of the novel’s localism.”<sup>32</sup> Because they affirm national literary histories in order to compare them, distant reading and even distant reading up close might be best understood as methodologies both suited and indebted to specific literary works and kinds of literary works—namely, those that affirm localism and a sharp distinction among literary geographies.

For our purposes, the key innovation in Hack’s work is the principle that readers may have to think of any text as one version among many and of literary analysis as a dynamic process shaped by place, contexts of publication, and political climate—as well as method. It is here that the turn to books in transnational literary studies most overlaps with new theories of reading. These theories have called for alternatives to “critical distance” and “mastery,” both of which conceive of the reader as a disinterested authority who stands outside of the text, comprehends it, and speaks its language. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have argued that the dominance of “symptomatic reading” has led critics to miss what happens on the “surfaces” of texts or to look always and only for what texts do not seem to be saying.<sup>33</sup> They propose instead “surface reading,” while Timothy Bewes in a related essay suggests “reading with the grain.”<sup>34</sup> Best, Marcus, and Bewes are developing alternatives to “suspicious” reading.<sup>35</sup> Yet even those critics who seek to preserve the general tenor of suspicion have tried to uncouple the identification of puzzles in the text from the notion that one could possibly solve them. Jonathan Culler emphasizes above all attention to the “stubbornness” of texts.<sup>36</sup> Among the list of “conflicts” to which the reader should be attentive, Culler points not only to words but also to syntax, grammar, rhetoric, figure, and example.<sup>37</sup>

Jane Gallop, one of the most distinguished practitioners of close reading, argues that being “aware of the words chosen” is the best line of defense against generalization, projection, and other ways of mis- or not-reading.<sup>38</sup> Her principle of regarding each word as if it were “unfamiliar” or in some way inaccessible suggests that the reader should imagine herself not as a master interpreter but as a translator



even when she is reading in a native tongue. Because Gallop seeks to keep herself and her students from comprehending too quickly and from identifying the “sort of book” they have before them, she associates the function of closeness with the disruption of groups and classifications.<sup>39</sup> Best, Marcus, Bewes, Culler, and Gallop, for all their differences, agree that readers need to pay attention to the details of the literary work and to resist the impulse to master it.

How might born-translated novels change this calculus? First of all, they ask us to think about the history and practice of translation in which the dominance of some languages and the relative absence of others contributes to the generalizations we make as readers. Instead of suggesting that all texts are equally foreign or unfamiliar, Coetzee suggests that English has a special status as a language of imperialism, as a mediator of other languages, and as the language of composition for most translated works. Second, born-translated fictions are designed to obstruct the traditional alignment among language, territory, and nation, and they often do so by thwarting our expectations about the physical boundaries of the work. They test our confidence about groups and classifications not only through estranging or puzzling words within the text but also through details that operate narratively, thematically, structurally, and paratextually. Because they shift the locus of stubbornness and puzzlement from the smallest units of the text to units of various scales, they ask us to analyze closely and deeply a greater range of details than most programmatic versions of close reading have required. And because they feature narratives that seem to have begun in many different languages, they ask us to think about the political dynamics of foreignness and especially about the foreignness that is internal to any multilingual collectivity.

Naomi Schor’s important study of “reading in detail,” first published more than twenty years ago, points out that the analysis of details has not always been central to literary criticism and that what counts as a detail is not self-evident but often hotly debated, not only across periods but also within them.<sup>40</sup> Schor shows that the turn to details such as words, which she traces from Realist fiction and painting onward, was an important correction to the longstanding emphasis on idealization and abstraction. Schor suggests that the denigration of what seemed to be intellectually and textually “ornamental,” not only words but also themes such as domesticity and women’s lives, was rooted in the exclusion of a whole range of social, sexual, and philosophical dispositions.<sup>41</sup> To speak for details, then, was also to speak for the idiosyncratic, the everyday, the feminine, and the inessential. When critics today speak of a literary text’s “small details,” they almost certainly mean individual words, perhaps especially words that seem ordinary rather than determinative: articles and conjunctions, or even punctuation marks. But Schor suggests that the emphasis on everyday words is just one aspect of the detail’s rise. In the late twentieth century, the detail often meant, as it did for Jacques Derrida, paratext rather than text: “notes, epigraphs, postscriptums and all manner of *parerga*.”<sup>42</sup> And the details of nineteenth-century fiction are often diegetic, Schor explains. They are undernoticed not because they are graphically or syntactically small—like a word—but because they are rhetorically and socially small:

ordinary, common, and appearing with too much frequency.<sup>43</sup>

If we continue to assume that the most significant details of any text are its individual words, we may simply reproduce the logic of the ornamental, excluding from our attention any aspect of the text that is not reducible to “words,” now coded as important. Instead, born-translated novels ask us to conceive of details more broadly and more variously as those parts of the text, of potentially any scale or size, that seem prosaic, beneath notice, or simply mechanical. If we follow this lead, we attune our reading strategies to the strategies of our literary texts, and we acknowledge that reading strategies can, in effect, produce texts, insofar as, say, reading for the plot will tend to single out for praise or for notice those works in which plot is emphasized. Understanding details broadly also has the benefit of acknowledging the intellectual history of details in which expectations about thematic and semantic meaningfulness have changed and continue to change. Because it emphasizes details that have seemed too large, too functional, or too irrelevant to justify sustained analysis, close reading at a distance participates in the long recovery of the ornamental, but it does so by deemphasizing the kinds of details we have associated with the closest practices of close reading. The ornamental is not inherent to the text. It is an historical feature of reading. If we want to preserve the idea that close reading means analyzing details meticulously so as to avoid generalization and misapprehension, we need to direct our meticulousness to all aspects of the literary work, and we will need to understand details to include all of those elements that have gone without saying, or without seeing.

We should pay attention to small details, Gallop has proposed, not to understand the text better but to find in the text new aspects of its incomprehensibility. To read closely, for Gallop, is to acknowledge and cultivate our incomplete understanding. In *Summertime*, Coetzee yokes the ethics of incomprehensibility to the politics of translation. We have to regard the chapters “as if” they are foreign—full of anecdotes that are partial, inaccessible, and in need of careful interpretation—but we also have to regard them as actually foreign: part of the regional, global, and micronational histories of South Africa. By dividing the work into unfinished interviews and diary fragments, Coetzee keeps readers from assembling any kind of coherent “big picture,” to use Gallop’s phrase: a biography of John Coetzee or a history of South Africa in the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> We have to be close readers because we need to notice that the text doesn’t fit one period, one nation, or one language. But it also doesn’t fit one object, and in this sense we need to read at a distance. We have to think about the many insides and outsides produced by the narrative structure, the seasons, and the traveling biographer. The closest of readers, Coetzee suggests, are the South African leaders who restrict their attention solely to events in South Africa. Instead, Coetzee proposes, the novel takes place among a network of peripheries that are irreducible both to nation and to globe. We have to consider how that network changes what we know of South Africa and how it changes the way we think about South African, Australian, and world fiction in English. We need to add the history of translation to the history of reading and thus to think about how novels that begin in several places

are changing the ways that communities are imagined. But we will also need to think about how born-translated works understand the relationship between individuals and groups. In the next chapter, we turn to works that gauge various models of uniqueness, including the list, the series, and the clone.

## 2

### THE SERIES, THE LIST, AND THE CLONE

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*To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.*

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

#### UNIMAGINABLE LARGENESS

**T**HINKING ABOUT world literature, we often assume that translation leads to cultural as well as political homogenization.<sup>1</sup> Translation leads to cultural homogenization, the argument goes, because readers will learn fewer languages, and texts written for translation will tend to avoid vernacular references and linguistic complexity.<sup>2</sup> It leads to political homogenization because the world market requires stories that everyone can share, which means fewer distinctions among political antagonists and social agents.<sup>3</sup> The concern is this: translation is bad for what it does to books (presents them apart from their original language and context); but it is worse for what it does to authors (encourages them to ignore that language and context). In truth, the effects of translation will depend on what is being translated, who translates, and what happens when translated books are read. Moreover, the meaning of these effects will depend on how we evaluate sameness and difference. Do we assume, for example, that homogenization is always a negative outcome? To answer this question, we have to consider not only the global production and circulation of texts but also our ways of thinking about cultural and political uniqueness.

As we saw in the last chapter, the idea of novels as bounded containers has been important to the idea of communities as bounded containers. Yet many contemporary novels present themselves not as autonomous objects but as copies, grafts, versions, or clones. They are thus not only containers; they are also contained. They are distinctive in some ways, but they are conjoined in others. This chapter argues that the conceit of linguistic and geographic unoriginality creates new paradigms for collectivity in the novel. Comparative beginnings change the kind of community that authors and readers are able to imagine. I take up these concerns by turning to the work of Kazuo Ishiguro, whose novels have been translated from English into more than forty languages and who has written throughout his career about problems of authenticity, comparison, and adequation.<sup>4</sup> More than any other writer of anglophone

literary fiction, Ishiguro has reflected on and largely affirmed translatability. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing through the present decade, Ishiguro has approached his writing from the perspective of multilingual reading, in early interviews worrying that addressing many groups diminishes literary fiction and in later interviews embracing the challenge of having audiences in Denver, Oslo, and Kuala Lumpur.<sup>5</sup> In an interview from 2001, Ishiguro explains, “I have to really ask myself, ‘Does the line have substance? It’s not just a clever line, is it? Does its value survive translation?’”<sup>6</sup>

Ishiguro’s fiction can be understood as born translated in a number of different ways. First, he writes in English while thinking about readers in other languages.<sup>7</sup> Second, as a migrant to England from Japan at the age of five, he is in fact writing in a second language, though he speaks and writes English fluently, and speaks only rudimentary Japanese. From the perspective of early nineteenth-century theorists of translation, Ishiguro’s language of composition is foreign since it is not the (official) language of his native country. Third, Ishiguro has spoken of his effort to create works in English that appear to be translated from another language, and this dynamic is legible at different registers throughout his oeuvre.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes this is presented literally: in two of his novels and several of his short stories, the characters appear to be speaking Japanese.<sup>9</sup> But sometimes this is a matter of tone: the first-person narrators in many of his other works often speak in a vague or convoluted diction that can seem like translatese. Finally, in a sense that is most distinctive of contemporary fiction, Ishiguro’s novels are born translated because they emphasize the influence of global circulation on histories of art’s production, because they decouple the meaning of artworks from the expression of intrinsic cultures, and because they test the value of aesthetic originality as a baseline for political agency. From *The Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Unconsoled* (1995) to *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the short story collection *Nocturnes* (2009), the transnational circulation of art and artists has been a persistent theme. Questions about the relationship between agency and geographic scale have been crucial in all of the novels to date, perhaps most famously in *The Remains of the Day* (1989), for which Ishiguro won the Booker Prize.

This chapter brings together an analysis of that celebrated, widely discussed book with an analysis of Ishiguro’s most well-known book about originality, *Never Let Me Go*.<sup>10</sup> Translation is crucial to both novels since it allows Ishiguro to consider how the logic of individuality has shaped both the politics of imperialism and the politics of art, and indeed also to think about how claims for art’s uniqueness have served, rather than blocked, imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Ishiguro suggests in these novels that the commitment to intrinsic characteristics, whether of nations, persons, or artworks, recapitulates global inequality. It does so, first, by extending democracy only to the edges of the nation, and, second, by limiting the value of aesthetic production to the expression of its interiority. Ishiguro explores instead other values and other models of collectivity.

In *The Remains of the Day*, scalar thinking is invoked most explicitly through the conceit of “unimaginable largeness,” which refers to the notion that any small action,



including the polishing of household silver, needs to assume the same ethical and political significance as the more expansive system of actions in which it participates.<sup>12</sup> For Ishiguro's narrator, who invokes the phrase as a dramatic intensifier, *largeness* refers both to geographic extension (beyond the local) and to social consequence (beyond the individual). Most readers of the novel find it difficult to hear in this phrase anything other than Ishiguro's ironic commentary about the failings of his ambitious butler. But I argue that *The Remains of the Day* uses this concept to emphasize the transformation of international, collective events by local, individual decisions. "Unimaginable largeness" has a multilocal application since it suggests not only looking outward, how my actions affect many other unseen people, but also looking inward, how the actions of many unseen people affect my actions. In Ishiguro's novel, it is difficult to tell whether understanding actions globally leads to greater knowledge or even to greater fairness. But by encouraging readers to notice both proximate and distant contexts, Ishiguro registers the multiple containers of literary culture and mediates between interpretive strategies that abjure political and geographic distinctions and those that try to preserve them.

In the study of world literature, thinking about unimaginable largeness has its uses. It allows us to consider how the way we understand the uniqueness of books relates to the way we understand the uniqueness of communities, and how our models of literary culture shape what we need to know about the nature and scale of social lives. In turn, we need to allow new ways of thinking about the nature and scale of social lives to change fundamentally our models of literary culture. Since the disciplinary protocols of English literary studies are rooted "in a particular national ethos and ethnos," as Simon Gikandi has suggested, scholars are likely to analyze even born-translated anglophone texts according to national principles and objectives. Gikandi asks: "What are we going to do with these older categories—nation, culture, and English—which function as the absent structure that shapes and yet haunts global culture and the idea of literature itself?"<sup>13</sup> I do not suggest that Ishiguro's writing eludes this kind of "absent structure"; on the contrary, it invokes absent structures over and over again. Yet, by imagining a largeness constituted by books rather than by texts, by copies rather than by originals, Ishiguro forces categories such as "nation, culture, and English" to operate comparatively. He challenges us to see that a new conception of "global culture," if it is to be something other than an enlargement of national culture, will require a new idea of literature.

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE BOOK

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels function as world literature in two principal ways.<sup>14</sup> As objects, they are written, printed, translated, circulated, and read in several places. As narratives, they distribute anecdotes into multiple systems and then consider the ethical consequences of that process. Thinking about how and where his books will

be read, Ishiguro explains, has led him to emphasize “shape, structure, and vision,” or what he calls “architecture,” rather than “sentences” and “phrases.”<sup>15</sup> Ishiguro knows that the books he is producing will circulate beyond a single nation and in near-immediate translation into many languages. Like Coetzee, Ishiguro has acknowledged the long history of collaboration in which his novels take part and from which he has benefited, and he seems to accept and to appreciate that his novels will exist in several languages and become part of several literary traditions.<sup>16</sup> In an essay about translation, Coetzee tells of helping his Chinese translator with a reference to “the Summer Palace,” which appears in his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.<sup>17</sup> The translator had asked whether the phrase alludes to “the Old Summer Palace in Beijing” (144). Coetzee suggests that this question may be understood in two ways: as a question about intention (did he produce that allusion on purpose?) or as a question about effect (do the words generate that allusion?). Ultimately, he reflects, “As for whether the words in question do refer to the palace in Beijing, as an author I am powerless to say. The words are written; I cannot control the associations they awaken” (145).

One may assume that Coetzee is simply invoking the “death of the author,” acknowledging, pace Barthes, that the meanings of his words will proliferate willy-nilly in the minds of readers.<sup>18</sup> But Coetzee is proposing something more specific and, indeed, more limited: the readers he is thinking about are translators and those who read translated works, and the future “associations” he imagines for those works are not entirely arbitrary. Translators, he explains, have the power to “nudge” readers (his word) toward one allusion or another, and phrases will have more resonance in some cultures than in others. This attitude about translation, with its patent equanimity about variation and collaboration, is quite different from worries about a single “world literature” or about source languages infiltrating or overwhelming target languages. Instead, Coetzee imagines—and invites—a network of traditions.<sup>19</sup>

The collaboration between writers and translators that Coetzee imagines in his essay appears as an extension of literary production, in which collaboration is there from the start. World literature may require a special kind of collaboration so that scholars can see how a text circulates in many languages and so that writers can produce books in many languages, but all scholarship relies on social process since we approach literary texts through established traditions and classifications. This is true for literature as well, which depends on collaboration that is both visible (editing, publishing, printing, distributing) and less visible (building on previous representations, uses of language).<sup>20</sup> This is not to subtract from the strenuous, often global collaborations that translation may require but rather to note that translation makes literature’s status as a collaborative, often global enterprise more difficult to miss.

Ishiguro has made a similar point about translation’s networks: in an interview with Polish journalists at the end of 2005, he acknowledges the influence on his work not only of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy but also of the translator of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy. He claims, “I often think I’ve been

greatly influenced by the translator, David Magarshack, who was the favourite translator of Russian writers in the 1970s. And often when people ask me who my big influences are, I feel I should say David Magarshack, because I think the rhythm of my own prose is very much like those Russian translations that I read.”<sup>21</sup>

Ishiguro values not just any Dostoyevsky, but Magarshack’s Dostoyevsky, and he seems to appreciate the idea that his own novels are imitating translations. We generally assume that some works of art such as plays, films, or novels have multiple iterations (to own a book is to own a “copy”), while others such as paintings or site-specific sculptures are unique objects. But, as Ishiguro’s comments suggest, a book can be a unique object, too, both because translations create several versions of a text and because reception distinguishes the social itinerary of one version from another. In the last volume of Marcel Proust’s novel, the narrator tells us that he values above all “the first edition of a work,” by which he means not one of many copies from the publisher’s first imprint but the single version of the book in which he read the text for the first time.<sup>22</sup> In making this distinction, Marcel (the narrator) emphasizes what he calls the history of his own life rather than “the past in general.” The book Marcel read in his youth is a unique object, of which there are not even copies in the same language. And yet his experience is in some ways universal since every other reader of that work will also have his or her own first edition. Today each person can have his or her own first edition of a work, but it may not be an edition first printed by the publisher or an edition whose language corresponds to the one in which the work was originally composed. Indeed, it may be more correct to say that a work of world literature exists in many original languages, especially if we don’t want to say that it exists originally in none.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between “tokens” and “types” that Peter McDonald uses in his discussion of literary editions can be useful here.<sup>24</sup> In McDonald’s account, tokens refer to instances of a work (my own copy of a book) while types refer to the intellectual content of the work (Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*). Building on Noël Carroll’s theory of artworks in mass culture, McDonald compares book editions to two other kinds of “multiple instance or type artworks”: film and theater.<sup>25</sup> Carroll groups books with films because their circulation relies on a “template” (the print), but McDonald groups books with plays because their circulation depends on much more than a template (on the decisions of directors and actors, in the case of plays; on the decisions of editors, cover designers, and typesetters, in the case of books). McDonald regards book editions as “separate art-works” because they are produced by “a creative process, involving interpretive decisions that effect and constrain meaning.”<sup>26</sup> Editions in translation, while they surely depend on a printer’s template and on the creative acts of designers and typesetters, further complicate the type-token dynamic: translations are tokens of a single type (the work), however mediated by the printer’s template, as well as tokens of different types (the work in different languages). If we allow that the creative process includes the “social, political, critical, and institutional histories” of a book’s publication, as McDonald claims, as well as the

personal histories of readers like Marcel, as Proust, Barthes, and Ishiguro claim, then the distinction between “multiple instance or type artworks” and “singular artworks” begins to disappear.<sup>27</sup> Legally, of course, translations are one more instance of the author’s type; practically they can operate as originals and as copies at the same time.<sup>28</sup>

Ishiguro has made the literary conditions of uniqueness and comparison a principal concern in his work, but let’s return for a moment to the case of J. K. Rowling. Her “Harry Potter” novels, which appear in more than sixty-five languages, have prompted a range of consumer practices and have been translated not only into hardy, living languages such as French and Chinese but also into so-called dead languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek. In this respect they contribute to linguistic diversity even if this was not their author’s chief intention. Of course, the value and consequence of linguistic diversity should not be taken for granted. Variation is not in itself democratic or liberal if the demand for authenticity and distinctiveness restricts freedom rather facilitates it. Homogenization, the process of creating sameness or similarity, fits the project of uniqueness as well as the project of comparison.

Ishiguro well understands this forked potential. Whereas his interviews show him thinking about the production and circulation of world literature, his novels display a more indirect approach: they present global comparison as story and discourse, as something that characters do to assess the value and consequence of their actions, and as something that readers do—or need to do—to reflect on those assessments and to consider the ways that value and consequence can be determined. I have written elsewhere about the trope of the echo in Ishiguro’s work: the way that later scenes or phrases will sound like, or almost repeat, earlier scenes or phrases, and the way that these repetitions will in retrospect seem to have preceded or motivated what appeared to be the originals.<sup>29</sup> Ishiguro uses comparative devices like the echo to introduce complex patterns of world circulation. His comparisons create new groups of themes, persons, and objects, but they also prompt us to examine the shape and scale of that variety.

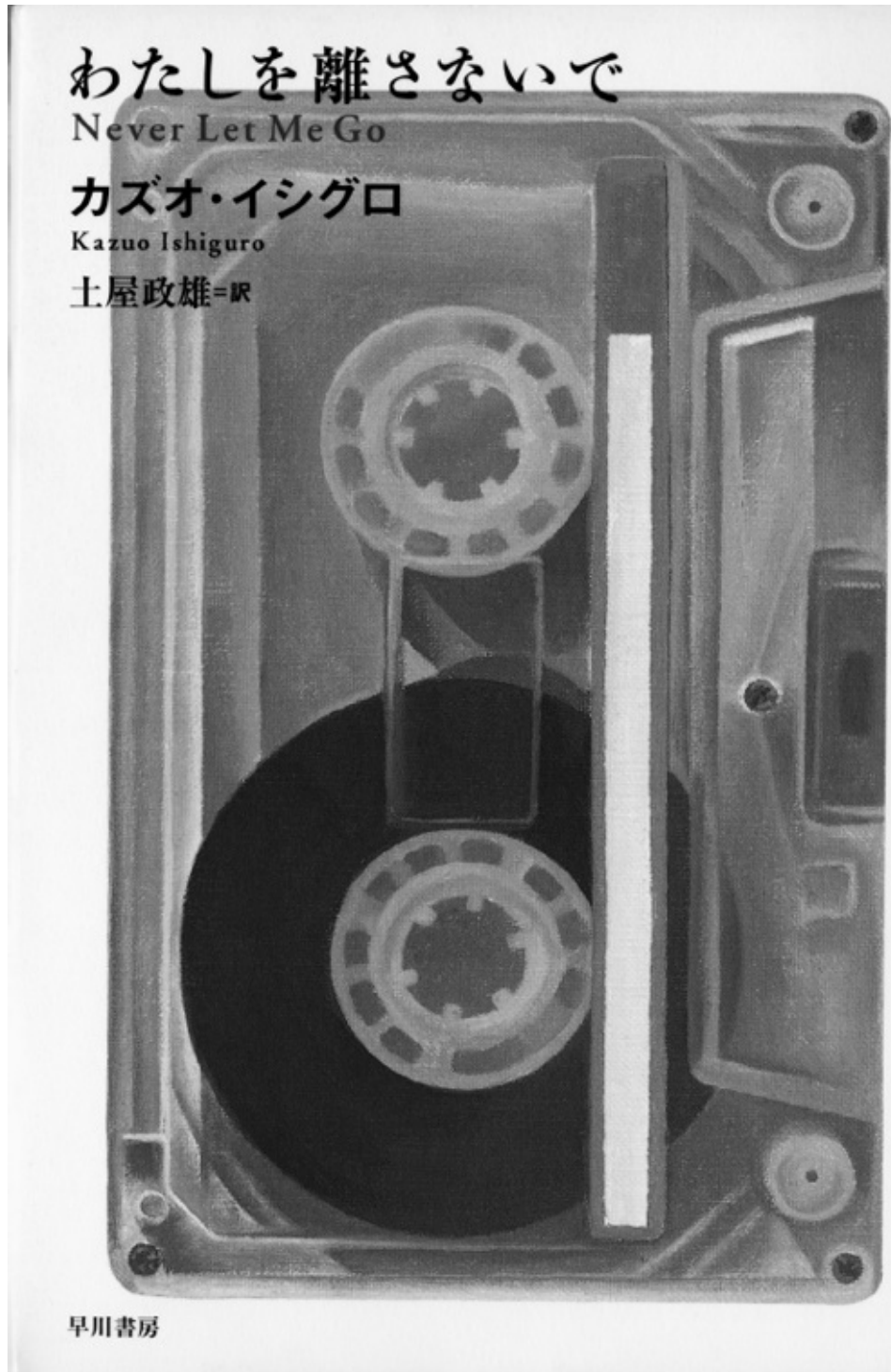
For this reason above all, I associate Ishiguro’s work with the project of born-translated writing. The novels register the tension between the writing of world literature and the reading protocols we bring to those texts. In literary studies, we generally distinguish between the disciplines of national literature, which typically refer to what books are, who wrote them, or where they were produced, and the discipline of comparative literature, which typically refers to what we do with books. Ishiguro’s novels incorporate comparison. They can’t—and do not try to—predict their future as translated works. That would be impossible, as Stefan Helgesson has persuasively shown.<sup>30</sup> But the novels acknowledge the multiple contexts of their making and remaking. They ask to be read across several national and political scenes. They trump an ignoble “translatability” not by resisting translation but by demanding it.<sup>31</sup>

## THE COPY, THE CLONE

*Never Let Me Go*, published in 2005 in Spanish, Danish, Polish, English, German, and several other languages, is a book about the value of unoriginal expression. Set in some kind of alternative England at the end of the twentieth century, the novel offers us a collection of bad copies and eccentric interpretations: there is a cassette tape that plays a monotonous pop song called “Never Let Me Go” whose lyrics the narrator adapts to her own story;<sup>32</sup> there is a mediocre television program whose sitcom relationships the adolescent characters take as role models for adult behavior (120); there is the magazine insert whose glossy image and cheerful rhetoric (“Are you the dynamic, go-ahead type?”) the narrator’s friend appropriates for her ideal future (144); there are the drawings of metallic animals, which are said to look “laboured, almost like they’d been copied” (241); and there is of course the narrator and her friends, all of whom are human clones brought up to be organ donors for—what shall we call them?—non-cloned, original humans.

The narrator, Kathy H., recounts her experiences as a child and adolescent in a special school she attended before she understood the role she would play in society, and she tells of her experience as “a carer,” one who takes care of other clones (her former schoolmates, including Tommy and Ruth) after their vital organs have been harvested and before they die, usually in their late twenties or early thirties. Three non-clone adults feature in the story: Miss Emily, the school’s headmistress; Madame, a visitor to the school who carries away the best examples of the children’s art; and Miss Lucy, who tells the clones, called “students,” that they should know more than they do about the future that is planned for them, though she does not ultimately provide that information. The novel is disturbing because of its premise, to be sure, but it is all the more disturbing because our knowledge of Kathy’s role, her existence as a future organ donor and as an accomplice to the organ donation system (as a carer, she tells us, she’s good at keeping other clones “calm”), is obscured by the aleatory style and vague diction of her narration (3). That narration, which encompasses the entire novel, seems to be one of the unoriginal expressions that Ishiguro wants us to value. In Kathy’s speech there is a kind of doubling between the novel’s story and the novel’s discourse. And insofar as one critic, no less than Frank Kermode, has faulted the novel’s discourse for its “familiar, chatty style,” Kathy H.’s unoriginality seems to be Ishiguro’s too.<sup>33</sup>





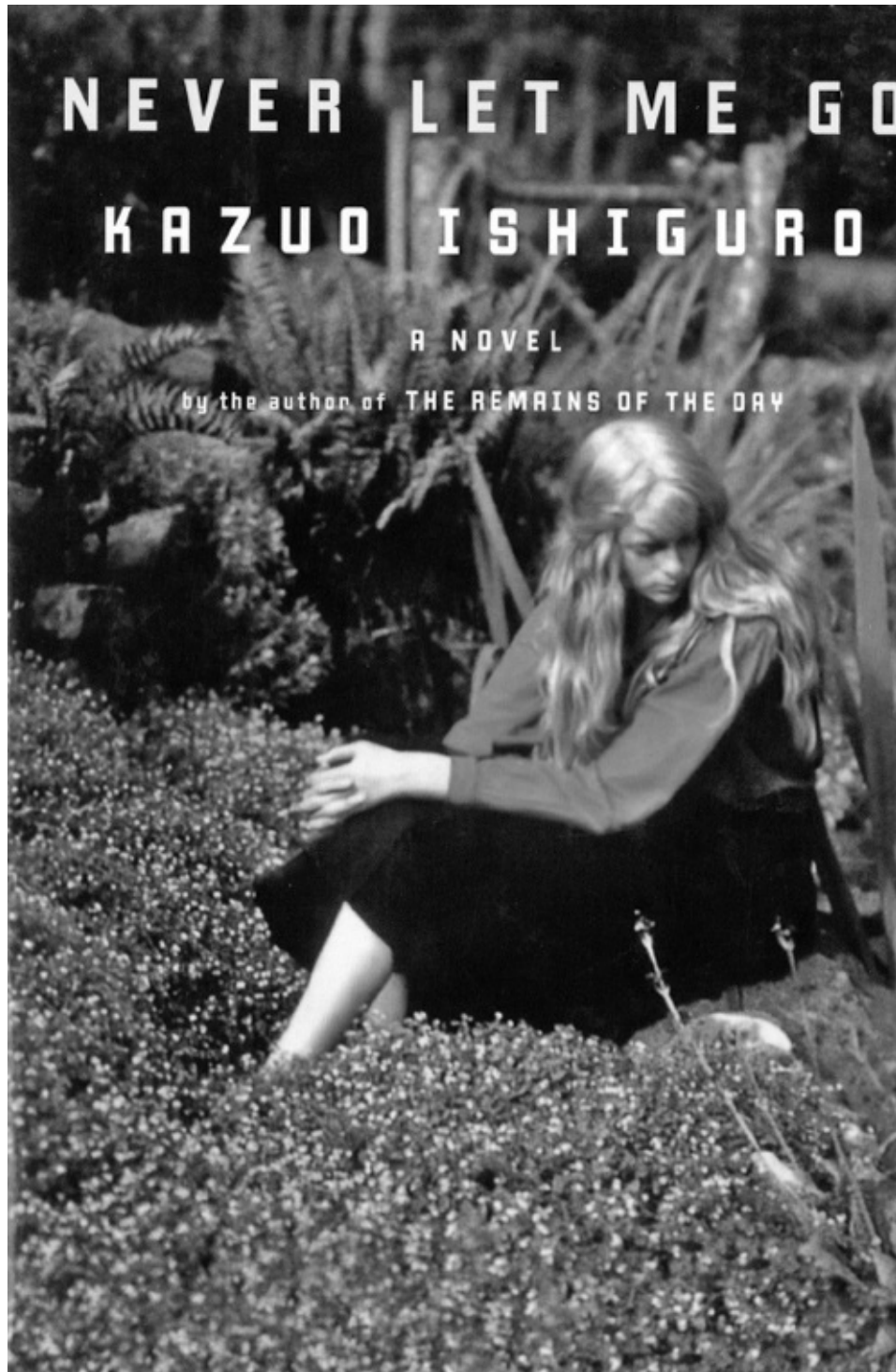
**FIGURE 2.1** Front cover of the Japanese translation of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *Watashi o hanasanaide*, translated by Tsuchiya Masao (Tokyo: Hayakawa Publishing, 2006).

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It is arguable that Ishiguro wrote *Never Let Me Go* as a critique of anthropocentrism, the idea that it is ethical or acceptable to sacrifice nonhuman animals to the needs and desires of human life. At many points in the text we are asked to notice that an unquestioned hierarchy in which humans are distinguished from animals makes the donation system possible. Tommy's drawings are telling about how that distinction is

preserved. They suggest that strategies of abstraction allow us to see some bodies as mechanisms and others as individuals. Looking closely at Tommy's pictures, Kathy is unable to see "animals" at all: "The first impression was like one you'd see if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird" (187). The donation system functions because the humans see the clones as non-individuated organisms, like radios or spiders (35), and because the humans fail to see themselves, too, as radios or spiders. The failure to see is a failure to compare: the humans think that individuality is the highest value, and they convince themselves that they are "not like" the clones—"not like" because as a group they possess a quality that they believe the clones do not have (individuality), and "not like" because they believe they are incomparable (only a clone is "like" someone else) (263). From the beginning of the novel, likeness is both the apex and the nadir of value: while it is "natural," Kathy H. claims, to establish and prefer "your own kind" (like some and not like others), it is also "natural" and desirable, she argues, not to be the same as other people (exactly alike) (4, 122–24). For Kathy, to be human is to be a type rather than a token.



**FIGURE 2.2** Front cover of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro (New York: Knopf, 2005).

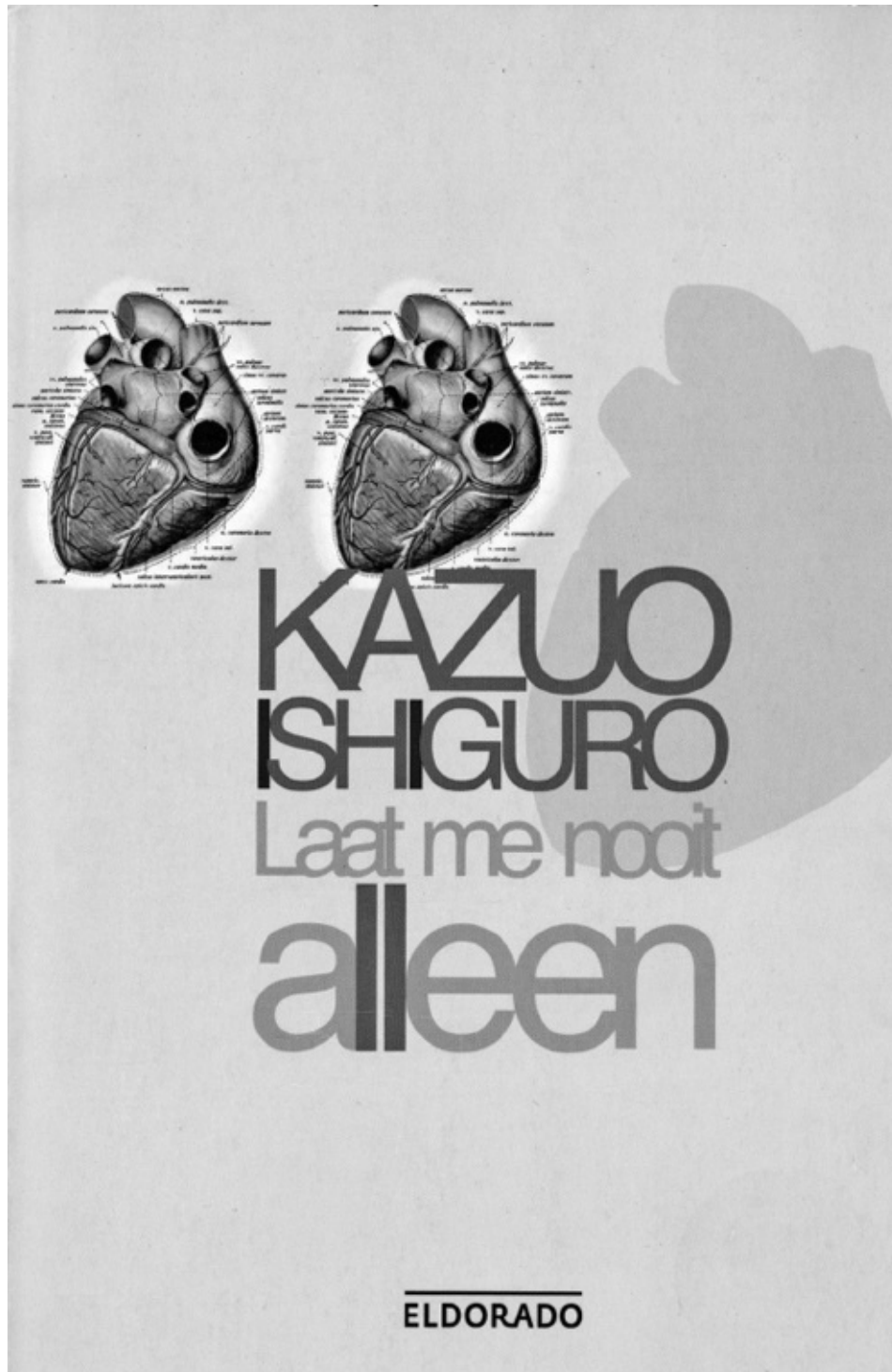
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The donor program continues because the humans believe that the clones lack interiority, which is measured, according to all of the characters, by the capacity for genuine love, authentic expressivity, and artistic originality. The disdain for things that are “copied”—the novel is studded with this word—is ubiquitous: if the children admire a friend’s poem, they are not happy to “copy it down” but want instead to possess the manuscript (14); Kathy criticizes Ruth for “the way you copy everything they [the older

clones] do” (124); the clones think of themselves as having been “copied at some point from a normal person” (139); and so on. In contrast, Kathy and Tommy think that if they are “really, properly in love,” they will have earned the right to have their donations deferred by a couple of years (153); Kathy thinks that the clones, to be more like “normal” humans, should aim for social mannerisms that are spontaneous rather than imitated (120); and Miss Emily believes that, by producing works of art, the clones will show that they are “as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (261).

Clones and non-clones declare the importance of spontaneity, sincerity, and creative talent. Yet, in the novel, most of the clones do seem to lack intellectual complexity, exceptional artistic abilities, and ideas of love that depart from sitcom banality. In addition, the case for the clones’ originality is made most strenuously by Miss Emily, whose methods—she tries to rally sympathy for her clone-students by organizing public art exhibitions—seem comic and on some level unconvincing. When Kathy and Tommy visit Miss Emily late in the novel, she explains: “We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*” (260, original emphasis). Miss Emily’s efforts, like her argument, only go so far: while they do improve conditions for the clone children, by creating schools like the one Kathy and Tommy attended, they do not alter or really aim to alter the donation system.



**FIGURE 2.3** Front cover of the Dutch translation of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *Laat me nooit alleen*, translated by Bartho Kriek (Amsterdam: Eldorado, 2006).

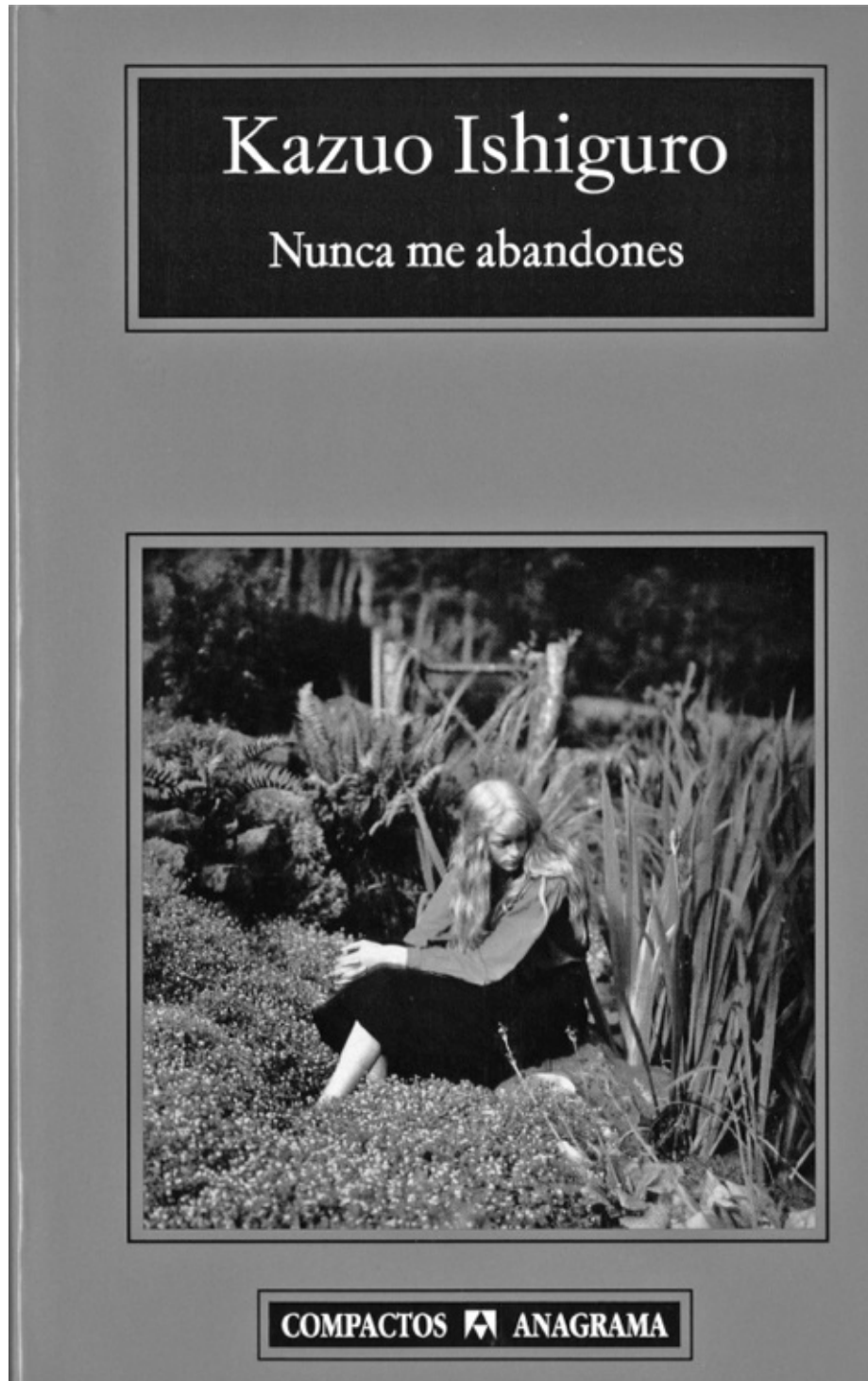
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But the novel's critique does not focus on the limits or hypocrisy of Miss Emily's improvements. Rather, it focuses on the logic of originality and Romantic genius that undergirds the beliefs of Miss Emily, of those who control the donor system she tentatively opposes, and of the clones themselves. Kathy H. seems naïve in her insistence that people "in normal life" don't derive their mannerisms from popular



culture (124). Seeing clones as humans is not the point. Instead we are urged to see humans as clones. That is, we are urged to see that even humans produced through biological reproduction are in some ways copies, and that human culture, full of cassette tapes and television programs and rumors and paperbacks of *Daniel Deronda*, is also unoriginal. It is by seeing the likeness between human originality and the novel's unoriginal objects—Kathy H., the cassette, the song, the television program, the narration—that we recognize the large networks of approximation and comparison in which individuality functions.

One of the novel's final episodes involves a discussion about the eponymous song, "Never Let Me Go." Kathy and Madame recall an episode in Kathy's childhood, in which Madame had seen Kathy holding a pillow to her breast and swaying to the music of a tape recording. At the time Madame had imagined that the lyrics ("Never let me go. Oh, baby, baby. Never let me go ...") express the fear of losing an "old kind world" to the advance of new technologies (272). For her part, Kathy had imagined that she was singing to a baby whom she held in her arms (70, 271). Neither "version," as Kathy calls her interpretation, seems to correspond to the song's "cocktail-bar" genre, but Kathy doesn't mind (271, 70). She explains, "Even at the time, I realized that this couldn't be right, that this interpretation didn't fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn't an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance" (70). Madame makes much the same point in her conversation with Kathy: while she knew her interpretation "wasn't really you, what you were doing," it was what she "saw" nevertheless (272). For Ishiguro, the point is not simply that art can mean anything—that it is what you say or see—but rather that the content of art will be transformed by expansive circulation and by the local interpretations that readers impose. Like Kathy H., Ishiguro seems to prefer phenomenology to ontology. He suggests that works of art, like people, should be valued for the social life they help to establish.



**FIGURE 2.4** Front cover of the Spanish translation of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *Nunca me abandones*, translated by Jesús Zulaika Goicoechea (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2005).

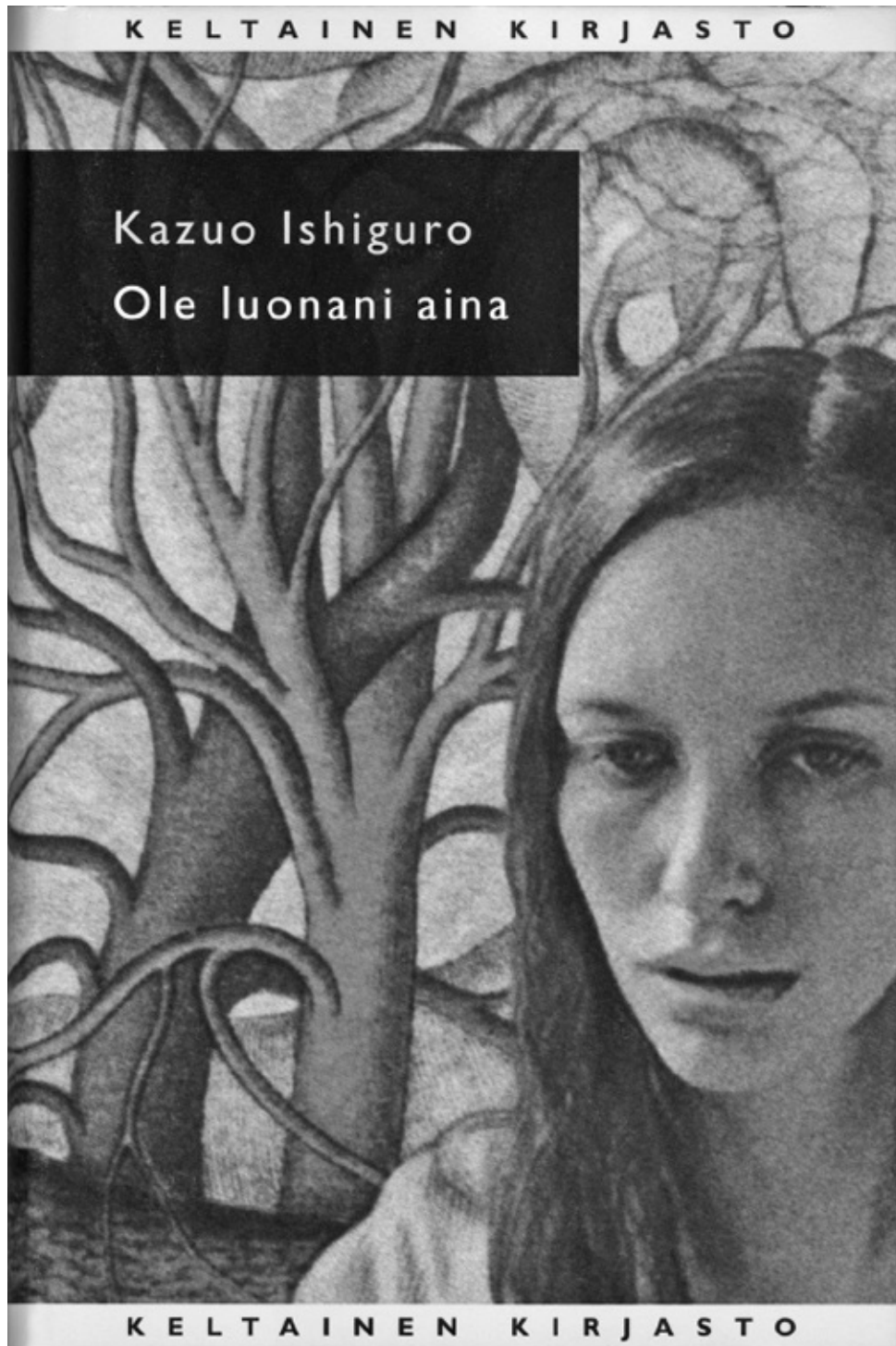
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For this reason, we need to understand the title of the novel not simply as the name of a song or as the expression of a sentiment that characters interpret but as a reference to a material object: the cassette-tape recording, which is also one of the novel's preeminent "copies." Early in her story, Kathy distinguishes between two different tapes of the song: "the actual cassette, the one I had back then at

Hailsham,” and the “copy of that tape ... the one Tommy and I found in Norfolk years afterwards” (64). Later she acknowledges that there might be two tapes or even “thousands of these [copies] knocking about” (172). In truth, Kathy does not know whether the Hailsham and Norfolk tapes are different objects or the same object: whether they are different because the found tape is not “the first edition” that she possessed at Hailsham, or whether they are the same because both tapes are “tokens” of a single album or perhaps even the same token (the Norfolk tape may be the Hailsham tape). It depends, to be sure, whether it is the cassette or the album that Kathy most values. It would seem that she, too, is uncertain. She recalls that, after the Norfolk trip, “I really appreciated having the tape—and that song—back again. Even then, it was mainly a nostalgia thing, and today, if I happen to get the tape out and look at it, it brings back memories of that afternoon in Norfolk every bit as much as it does our Hailsham days” (173). The tape can bring back memories of Norfolk because it is a singular object, and it can bring back memories of Hailsham because it is a clone of the edition she possessed as a child. She has the tape “back again” and also has a new tape. As a token, a cassette is one of many copies, perhaps one of thousands. And it is a copy of a copy: the cassette was “originally an LP” (67), and the LP was originally a “recording” of the performer Judy Bridgewater’s voice, and the voice is an interpretation of the song “Never Let Me Go.”

Instead of thinking about the novel’s comparison between humans and clones, we could think about its comparison between humans and cassette tapes. The novel introduces two different ways of thinking about uniqueness: one that is attributed to people and sometimes to works of art such as poems and drawings, and one that is attributed to objects such as cassette tapes and desk lamps. The first model assumes that uniqueness depends on sincerity and consistency. According to Kathy H., the clones believe that “when you saw the person you were copied from, you’d get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you’d see something of what your life held in store” (140, original emphasis). In this model, individuals have an ontological existence that defines what they are and what they will be; copies simply inherit that existence. The second model attributes uniqueness not to a prior existence but to social embeddedness and unpredictable futurity. Consider the “four desk-lamps, each of a different colour, but all the same design” that Kathy keeps in her bedsit, and how she enjoys herself in new towns by “looking for a shop with another lamp like that in its window—not to buy, but just to compare with my ones at home” (208). Kathy doesn’t value the desk lamps for what each one normally does (shed light). Instead she values them because they constitute a group, because they allow her to contemplate similarities and differences, and because they provide an occasion for new comparisons. Kathy’s desk lamps are part of group, but that group is incomplete, and each desk lamp has the potential to join other groups—those defined by, say, color rather than design. Consider, also, Kathy’s cassette tape from Norfolk, which has become one of her “most precious possessions” not because she listens to it but because it reminds her of at least two occasions: the afternoon she spent with Tommy, when they found the tape in a second-hand store, and her

childhood at Hailsham, where she was absorbed in a song-inspired fantasy (64). She values the Norfolk tape in much the same way as she values another cassette tape, the one of dance tunes given to her by Ruth to replace the lost tape of “Never Let Me Go.” Because “the music has nothing to do with anything,” Ruth’s gift is more important to Kathy as “an object” than as a token (a recording); it is one of Kathy’s “most precious possessions,” a term she repeats twice in the same chapter to refer to two separate tapes (76). In the novel the preciousness of both tapes is an effect of the social relationships they have helped to establish.



**FIGURE 2.5** Front cover of the Finnish edition of *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *Ole luonani aina*, translated by Helene Bützow (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Tammi, 2005).

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If there were any doubt that the novel privileges the second model of uniqueness, we might consider the Japanese edition, which features a book-sized image of a cassette on its cover (figure 2.1). That cover stands out from the covers of all of the other early editions of the novel, most of which display an image of humans or what appear to be parts of humans (figures 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5).<sup>34</sup> The Japanese cover, in its apparent singularity, raises several questions, including this one: why might one wish to privilege, as an icon for the novel, the image of a cassette tape over the image of a person? To begin, we might return to Miss Emily's logic, her idea that the work of art conveys the soul of its creator and moreover affirms that its creator has a soul or, as Kathy would put it, some quality "deep down" (140). In Ishiguro's novel, the work of art has no "deep down": its meanings are collaborative and comparative, and thus affirm, instead of a soul, various networks of production and consumption. Ishiguro suggests that a song or a novel or a person can be a singular object as well as a multiple-type object. In so doing, he proposes that uniqueness depends not on an absolute quality or a predetermined future but on the potential for comparison and likeness: all art is a cassette tape, for better or for worse. Only by appreciating the unoriginality of art, Ishiguro suggests, can we change the idea of literature itself.

## THE SERIES, THE LIST

I want now to bring *Never Let Me Go's* emphasis on replication and circulation to bear on Ishiguro's most familiar text, *The Remains of the Day*, which asks readers to consider not only networks but also scale. *The Remains of the Day* is usually discussed as an allegory about one of several world-political themes: the shrinking of Britain into England, the commodification of English heritage for American tourists, and the hypocrisy of English liberalism in the face of colonial exploitation abroad and anti-Semitism at home. Initially I bracket these themes and focus instead on the ways that the novel arranges them. *The Remains of the Day* approaches the project of uniqueness by establishing the relationship between individual anecdotes or actions and what the voluble narrator, Stevens, calls "unimaginable largeness." This phrase and the ideal of uniqueness it represents will occupy me for the remainder of the chapter. At the end, I return to the question of whether translation leads to homogenization, and I try to suggest what cultural and political homogenization might look like in the context of Ishiguro's work.

By presenting individual anecdotes as versions or explanations of more dramatic, collective events, such as colonialism and the Holocaust, *The Remains of the Day* invokes the principle of enlarged thinking—and in many ways supports it. Stevens



promotes a Benjaminian analysis of history: his stories show how unnoticed, almost invisible labors facilitate well-known achievements, and they display the past actions and processes that have led to present-day situations.<sup>35</sup> The ideal of enlarged thinking also matches Benjamin's sense of translation: his belief that a work of art will have an "afterlife" in another language, which its author can neither predict nor realize; and his conceit that translation preserves the original by helping it to mature.<sup>36</sup>

Stevens introduces enlarged thinking as the enrichment, rather than the abstraction, of ordinary actions. Preparing for the arrival of German, British, American, and French statesmen in March 1923, Stevens says he was "only too aware of the possibility that if any guest were to find his stay at Darlington Hall less than comfortable, this might have repercussions of unimaginable largeness" (76–77). This idea, that ordinary actions could have extraordinary consequences, is articulated in the text on at least two prior occasions: once when the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, reminds Stevens that household errors "may be trivial in themselves" but still possess "larger significance" (59); and once when Stevens's employer, Lord Darlington, asks Stevens to remove his ailing father (Stevens senior) from public duties because an accidental fall during the dinner service "might jeopardize the success of our forthcoming conference" (63). Stevens at first attributes the concern about "larger significance" to Miss Kenton, but he later acknowledges that it may have been Lord Darlington's phrase (60). However it begins, this way of thinking structures all of the anecdotes that Stevens presents, in which we are asked to see individuated actions in the context of pervasive consequences. The model here is the scale rather than the network: serving a well-orchestrated dinner contributes directly and uniquely to negotiating peace.

Some of the time Ishiguro's novel takes enlarged thinking seriously and seems to admire its critical impulse. We learn that the meeting organized by Lord Darlington aims to convince the British and especially the French to relax the terms of the Versailles treaty. For readers, who know that this fictional visit will soon be followed by the Second World War, Stevens's worry about failed hospitality and unhappy guests intimates two chief "repercussions": Darlington's efforts to bring economic stability to Germany could be compromised, and the subsequent effect, which Stevens is not imagining here but which some would say should have been imagined by him and others, that a failure to modify the Versailles treaty could lead to German unrest and later to militarism and finally to the Holocaust, an unimagined largeness signaled in the novel by an anti-Semitic incident that imposes its ethical and emotional weight on many other incidents in the text. Given this history, the novel does in fact ask us to see both analogy and contiguity between the act of polishing silver and the act of negotiating peace treaties. In a general way, welcoming guests is important because it triggers subsequent social interactions; in a more specific way, welcoming guests to talks about international peace takes on the ethical significance of alleviating poverty, preventing war, and extending sympathy across national borders. The stakes of alleviation, prevention, and sympathy are large, and Stevens transfers this quality onto the functioning of his employer's household.

The novel is especially persuasive in its support of enlarged thinking when it offers examples that reflect poorly on Stevens and when Stevens seems least aware of that outcome. Good household service may lead to peace treaties, but it may also lead to military aggression or political appeasement. While Stevens's early conversation with Lord Darlington about the "larger significance" of the dinner service precedes the 1923 meeting, a later conversation about polishing silver refers to a meeting between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop (eventually, Hitler's ambassador to Britain) in the middle of the 1930s (135–36). Lord Darlington tells Stevens, "By the way, Stevens, Lord Halifax was jolly impressed with the silver the other night. Put him into a quite a different frame of mind" (135). From this, Stevens concludes, "the state of the silver had made a small, but significant contribution towards the easing of relations between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that evening" (136). Enlarged thinking is vital, Ishiguro seems to suggest, because it allows us to see that Stevens's actions were in part responsible for the friendship between Hitler's agent and the British foreign minister. Stevens knew at the time that this was a significant occasion, but only in retrospect can he (and we) know what that significance would be.

Moreover, when Stevens claims that some actions, including his dismissal of two Jewish maids in the early 1930s, are simply "trivial"—that they have no "larger significance"—readers know to think otherwise. Recalling the circumstances that caused him to fire the maids, Stevens refers to a "brief, entirely insignificant few weeks" when Lord Darlington was influenced by British fascists and acknowledges "one very minor episode ... which has been blown up out of all proportion" (145, 137). Of course, blowing things up out of all proportion is just what enlarged thinking requires, and it is Stevens who has taught readers how to do so. Stevens fires the Jewish maids because he thinks he is acting in the service of Lord Darlington's larger European project. He fails to see or even really to evaluate the quality of that project, and he fails to see that his action has its own significance, especially for the maids and for his relationship with Miss Kenton. Finally, he fails to see that this episode sheds light on the significance of several previous anecdotes about model butlers who ignore or placate offensive masters. With the story about the Jewish maids, Ishiguro seems to imply—I am overstating only slightly—that self-abnegation and incuriosity lay the groundwork for genocide.

And yet it is important to notice that Stevens's call for enlarged thinking is not to be taken seriously or to be admired all of the time, and thus the ironic reading of Stevens's phrase is in some ways correct. Ishiguro is making fun of his character's overblown rhetoric and absurd formality while he is nevertheless constructing a novel that seems to follow the logic of Stevens's grammatical claim. Put another way, the novel takes "unimaginable largeness" seriously by valuing in Stevens's anecdotes both the sublime and the ridiculous. It is ultimately the ridiculous, Ishiguro suggests, that allows for new networks of responsibility to emerge. In the novel, the ridiculous is represented by the practice of "bantering," an activity and style of activity that generates inconsistency, playfulness, and surprise. Importantly, bantering appears not as the opposite of Benjaminian historicism but rather as its supplement: by

recognizing paradox, absurdity, and metaphor in the structure of Ishiguro's novel, readers can see the several large networks in which each of Stevens's anecdotes takes part. For example, in Stevens's mind, firing the Jewish maids is exactly like polishing the silver: both acts are meant to facilitate Lord Darlington's political maneuverings; Stevens sees them as equivalent parts of that largeness. For us, however, these acts are also parts of other kinds of largeness: a climate of anti-Semitism, or a national strategy of political appeasement. Just as a single text can operate in several literary cultures, polishing silver can be part of several political histories. It is not a matter of choosing between scale and network but of recognizing the networks of varying scales in which a single action may participate.

Bantering introduces several networks of meaning, but it also focuses attention on the process of communication. At the end of the novel, Stevens considers that "in bantering lies the key to human warmth," though this is not because of what people say but because of how they say it (245). Stevens notes earlier that bantering requires a kind of speech that is not "safely inoffensive" (15–16). In fact, the success of one's banter is measured by its ability to cause surprise; for this reason, there has to be something inconsistent and unpredictable in bantering's style. Like Kathy H. in her interpretation of "Never Let Me Go," those who banter refuse to be constrained by the consciousness of larger meanings or by the sense that there is only one larger meaning.

From beginning to end, *The Remains of the Day* is structured by a parade of anecdotes. Sometimes this parade seems to constitute a series, and sometimes it seems to be a list. It is a series insofar as the novel follows the chronology of the narrator's four-day travelogue and the story he tells about the meaning of his anecdotes. It is a list, however, insofar it contains the potential for many different series, chronologically as well as thematically arranged; insofar as it gestures to future comparisons that have not yet been imagined; and insofar as it allows each anecdote to have its own momentary life. Understood formally, the plot of Ishiguro's novel emerges in the difference between the professional largeness that Stevens sees and the many qualities of largeness—personal relationships, anti-Semitism, colonialism, political appeasement, the death of a family member—that we see but that he does not even apprehend.

Stevens applies to his anecdotes a theory of comparison that is somewhat different from the one that the novel asks us to adopt. The first theory, articulated by Stevens and reaffirmed at the end of the novel by the nativist liberal Mr. Harry Smith, proposes that every person must imagine his or her actions as part of a larger, unified whole. This theory allows Stevens to assert that his willingness to tolerate slights and ignore his personal feelings contributed to the forging of international alliances. It allows Harry Smith to assert, conversely, that his willingness to speak plainly contributes to a more democratic, egalitarian England. Both of these assertions are valued in the novel, but they are also criticized for their rigidity and for their singularity of scale. Stevens fails to notice that his professional restraint contributes not only to international alliances but also to anti-Semitism, political appeasement, and emotional

isolation. Harry Smith fails to notice that his speech is premised on the silence of Britain's colonial subjects, whose independence he wishes to suppress while advocating his own. The largeness that Harry Smith can recognize ends at the borders of Britain. He claims repeatedly to have "done his part" (fought in the war, made his opinions known, urged others to participate in democracy), but it is in his commitment to a whole that extends only as far as the nation that his conception of largeness matches the single-minded scale that Stevens promotes (189). The novel thus articulates a theory of comparison that emphasizes the largeness to which each incident contributes but also refuses the wholeness in which each incident might be contained.

Harry Smith's comments at the end of the text recall an anecdote that Stevens tells at the beginning about a butler serving in colonial India. According to Stevens, the butler displays professional dignity by protecting his employer's guests from the knowledge that a tiger has entered the dining room. The butler is able to alert his employer, kill the tiger, and report his success with such discretion that the guests never learn of the tiger's removal, or even of its presence. Stevens is especially pleased by the butler's unflappable manner and by his command of euphemism, which allow him to report blandly in the earshot of his employer's guests that "dinner will be served at the usual time" and without "discernible trace of the recent occurrence" (36). Surely, we can see—it's almost a cliché—that there is something strongly allegorical about Stevens's story: the British ruling classes used servants and other subalterns to separate their lives from the proverbial tiger in the dining room that had to be killed, but softly, so that afternoon tea could continue uninterrupted in the parlor. Stevens offers this anecdote as an example of what we might call professional formalism: an ideal of grace under pressure, which means maintaining one's role under any condition, no matter how alarming or dangerous. And while the repercussions of this ideal will become increasingly visible over the course of the novel, we learn right away about the butler's small role in the largeness that was colonialism. It is a key aspect of the novel's theory of largeness that Stevens will only ever recognize one context for his anecdotes, whereas the novel will always intimate several. The problem with Stevens's ethos of enlarged thinking, Ishiguro suggests, is not that he translates every action and every story but that he fails to translate enough.

In the novel Stevens calls this kind of persistent translation "forever reappraising," and it is an activity he resists because it seems to him impossible to follow a path and evaluate its direction at the same time. It seems "misguided," he explains, for "a butler with serious aspirations ... to be forever reappraising his employer—scrutinizing the latter's motives, analyzing the implications of his views," testing whether "one's skills were being employed to a desirable end" (200). But this is what the novel's structure requires from its readers: a movement between inside and outside, or between text and book, if you will. On the one hand, we read with Stevens, enlarging his anecdotes into more expansive systems; on the other hand, the more we read as Stevens reads, the more we encounter systems whose

meanings are obscured by the strategy of symptomatic interpretation. Largeness, which usually promises depth or latent content, appears in this novel as a perennial surface. Sharon Marcus has suggested that all symptomatic reading, because it emphasizes what is absent or invisible, tends to devalue or often simply miss what is present.<sup>37</sup> This is certainly the problem that Stevens often faces, or indeed does not face, as when he identifies his father's housekeeping mistakes as signs of a peace treaty that might be ruined rather than as signs of ailing health. Stevens thinks of his life as a series, whereas we have to see it as a list. A series privileges one context over another and situates each action in terms of an outcome or referent. The list, like a group of clones, implies equivalent objects, even if the arrangement and circulation of those objects generates distinctions and new objects. Ishiguro forces us to compare several outcomes (the Holocaust, Americanization, imperialism) by treating each anecdote as part of a list that can be arranged in several ways and whose meanings will change according to future arrangements.

The novel's structure invites readers to think about the relationship between text and book, as I've suggested, because it proposes that enlarged reading—reading globally—changes not simply the meaning but what I have been calling, after Benjamin, the life of a novel. Texts, as they exist in the world, are many different books; they are, like Stevens's anecdotes and Kathy H.'s cassette tape, part of several series—originals not simply in their own culture but in several cultures. If thinking about largeness can promote acts of comparison, as it does for the reader of Ishiguro's novels, it can also prompt (less retrospectively) acts of production, as it does for Ishiguro and other novelists working today. Anthony Appiah makes a related point when he remarks in his book on cosmopolitanism that the expansion of U.S. products into world markets can have a variety of dynamic effects, including the effect of reverse assimilation, such that U.S. products have to accommodate the desires and preferences of a variety of world consumers.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Ishiguro, he is accommodating consumers, but he is also challenging our sense of what it is that consumers consume: What is the work that we are reading? What is the difference between the work and its many books? What is the appropriate scale for our reading? And what is the relationship between the enlargement of ethics and the enlargement of geography?

Thinking about enlargement does not mean always thinking on a planetary scale, but it does mean acknowledging the many scales that recent globalization has helped to produce. Scholars of U.S. multilingualism such as Werner Sollors, Marc Shell, and Joshua Miller have made this point about American literature, while the Slavist Harsha Ram has argued that Russian translations of Georgian literature contributed to regional articulations of Soviet internationalism.<sup>39</sup> These projects suggest that it is not a single "distant reading," to use Franco Moretti's phrase, but a comparison of close readings, in many languages and across many geographies, that studies of world literature may require.<sup>40</sup>

From his novels about Japan to his novel about cloning, Ishiguro has implied that it is inadequate and unethical to treat uniqueness as the defining quality of art, culture,



and human life. In *Never Let Me Go*, valuing uniqueness leads to killing clones and preserving people. *The Remains of the Day* suggests a modification of that argument: rather than seeing uniqueness as a property of singular masterpieces or anecdotes or even cultures, we are asked to see it as the property of a work's appearance, as translation, edition, anthology, or excerpt. Ishiguro proposes that comparison, while it elides uniqueness in the service of a larger paradigm, also generates uniqueness, but uniqueness of a different kind: the uniqueness of a translation, the uniqueness of a cassette tape, and the uniqueness of an allegory about political appeasement.

I offer here, really, two accounts of comparison: an account of world literature in which translation and global circulation create many books out of single texts, transforming old traditions and inaugurating new ones; and an account of Ishiguro's novels in which a principle of unoriginality expands the horizon of social relationships, figuring new networks of local and global largeness. Ultimately, Ishiguro's calculation comes to this: uniqueness can persist in the world but only in comparative forms: in the shape of the echo, the copy, the clone, the list, the series, and the translation.

This chapter has explored how books in translation constitute new kinds of groups. The next two chapters consider the relationship between the location of books and the location of audiences.