

# The World, the Text, and the Author: Coetzee and Untranslatability

Elleke Boehmer, Lynda Ng, and Paul Sheehan

## **Abstract:**

This essay analyses Coetzee's success as a world literary author, from two distinct angles. The first stems from his non-European 'southern' position (and self-positioning) as a South African and then Australian writer with South American links, and his subscription to an 'imaginary of the South'. The second looks beyond the colonial indebtedness to Europe, focusing instead on some of the 'minor' European cultures to which the oeuvre refers, and then on the ways in which it evokes Asia. As will be seen, Coetzee's work from the very start acknowledges the pivotal role of Asia in the formation of Western identity.

## **Keywords:**

J.M. Coetzee

world literature

transnational writing

geo-politics

marginality

Western identity

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Since the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999, J. M. Coetzee has been widely invoked as a leading if not exemplary exponent of world literature. By world literature we mean a

literature whose inter-texts are located in several literary traditions, and one which therefore appears to solicit translation even as it itself transposes and translates from those other cultural and literary sources. This movement toward world literary status has occurred in parallel with a deepening critical discussion of Coetzee's at the same time unmistakably local and provincial contexts, though the two levels of discourse have not been mutually exclusive. As this implies, Coetzee has proved himself to be a reflexive practitioner of transnational forms of literary expression, even while his South African reputation has, if anything, been further consolidated, and new biographical studies have reinforced his South African coordinates.<sup>1</sup> As if to corroborate these two levels of discussion, the writer in his post-2002 work has explicitly set about addressing at once Australian and international concerns, including such pressing transnational issues as asylum, terrorism, and the post-Afghanistan moral bankruptcy of the West or North.

In this essay we examine some of the processes whereby the 'worlding' of Coetzee's writing has occurred, by posing two crucial questions: what is it that makes Coetzee a world literature author, a writer whose work deliberately speaks to more than one national context? And, what elements in his writing make it hospitable or even conducive to translation, open it to other languages, invite other, unfamiliar voices in? As this might suggest, our essay takes issue with the controversial claim made by Rebecca Walkowitz in 2009 that Coetzee is one of those Anglophone global writers who is "born translated"; which is to say, that his work refrains from invoking a national language tradition, and "projects comparative beginnings" (572).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, allegedly, his writing lends itself to (indeed, calls up) a world literature dimension. He is a practitioner of "comparison literature", an international field according to Walkowitz in which both writers and critics assume a detachment from national location, and national markers, including linguistic markers, and participate through their writing in a transnational (and translational) flow of signs and texts.

Against this view, we submit that throughout his career, even in his most globally emollient novels, especially *Disgrace*, Coetzee has shown declared interest both in national-language traditions, *and* in the activity of translation, at multiple levels – linguistically, metafictionally, epistemologically. He explores translatability, as described by Walkowitz, but also is drawn to the linguistically and culturally recalcitrant and untranslatable (see Boehmer 2005: 237-43; Apter 2013). This is clear from the ways in which his work is loaded with untranslatable (often Afrikaans) words and concepts – with referents and references that insist on their own singularity, and demand local knowledge and linguistic proficiency to be decoded. Expanding on the latter observation, we show in this essay that some of the prominent social worlds that Coetzee’s novels evoke are marked both by specific detail – the visible investment of local interest – and at the same time by transnational circulation and exchange. His novels build links between places and regions, and emphasize networks of collectivity and exchange, but also see those networks as grounded in specific, not always translatable locales. Here it is worth adding that our concept of untranslatability bears relation to Emily Apter’s linguistic and philosophical iterations of the non-translatable in her polemical study *Against World Literature*. However, we allow the term a wider semantic and metaphorical reach than does Apter, to take in intercultural crossings, or the lack thereof, whereas Apter’s focus on comparative literature and its post-2000 politics directs her attention in the main to the critical topoi of world literature debates. For us, but possibly also for Apter, untranslatables in Coetzee do not necessarily militate against his world literature status.

In what follows we contend that there are three main dimensions to Coetzee’s alleged success as a world literary author. The first stems from his non-European ‘southern’ position (and self-positioning) as a South African and then Australian writer. This dimension tracks the intercultural and transnational pathways that stretch between the two regions, and beyond,

to construe an ‘imaginary of the South’ to which Coetzee arguably subscribes, at least in conceptual and geo-physical terms. The second dimension relates to the continental (European) tradition to which his work subscribes, and which has, at least since *Disgrace*, been most often considered in the light of European modernism – Kafka and Conrad, Beckett and Dostoevsky. Yet in the new century, Coetzee’s continental focus has tended to shift elsewhere, to ‘minor’ European cultures, as we explain, both in terms of his chosen collaborators, and as allusions and inter-textual cues inscribed in the late fiction. The third dimension is, in some ways, the most shadowy or phantasmal: the manner in which Coetzee uses an Asian imaginary in order superficially to de-localise his work, subsequently allowing him to engage more deeply with specific national politics (be they American, South African or Australian). In each case, it is a matter for Coetzee of self-location in certain positions and voices, none of which involve the uncomplicated assertion of a global Anglophone perspective, as Rebecca Walkowitz might put it (2009: 576).

### **Coetzee’s Australia: Tracing the Global South**

In this section we submit that, whereas the first three decades of Coetzee’s writing career saw him develop at once South African and metropolitan allegiances in his work, his move to Australia just after the millennium brought a significant shift in his to date rather conventional transnational axes as a writer. Although Coetzee’s first attempt at writing a novel took place in Texas, his subject matter at the time was emphatically South African and provincial, though this may have been belied by the brief early foray into Asia material that the Vietnam episodes of *Dusklands* appeared to represent (Attwell 2015: 49-63). While as a first-time novelist he struggled to imagine place, still, the characters, point of view and narrative voice, and the moral dilemmas that interested him, were all characteristically not only South African, but specifically located in the Western Cape, and even more particularly

in the Karoo. He was avowedly and self-confessedly a South African author, down to writing his own family name into the genealogy of Cape colonial history in the *Relaas* of Jacobus Coetzee, in the second part of *Dusklands*; and inserting a flavoursome, intensely local black Afrikaans into the mouths of the servants in the South African edition of *In the Heart of the Country* (1978). As commentators have observed, South Africa was the only country in which his work “really attains its full significance” (Attwell 2015: 95).

As this might suggest, across the first two decades of Coetzee’s career, any transnational orientation in his work, when it was expressed, was invariably longitudinal, directed due north, towards the European continent. Europe and its literary traditions and figures represented the opposite, metropolitan pole to what he took as the cultural and literary parochialism of the region of the world he inhabited. Significantly, the notes on colonial history he compiled for the writing of *Dusklands* took a radial form, in which colonial enterprise was seen as extending out from the European colonizing countries like spokes on a wheel (Attwell 2015: 52). In comparable fashion, Coetzee’s 1972 report to his head of department on books banned in South Africa is divided into four categories: ‘American literature’ (Baldwin through Faulkner to Nathaniel West), ‘British literature’ (less extensive and more canonical, including Lawrence and Lessing), South African literature (familiar 1950s-70s names), and ‘World literature’ (Attwell 2015: 79-81). For the purposes of our discussion here, the last-named category, set in relation to the others, is the most revealing, as it contains exclusively (and the only) writers in translation (Calvino, Gorky, Fuentes – all male), and, moreover, writers overwhelmingly from Europe, bar a sprinkling of predictable Central and South American figures. Nonetheless, this geo-literary compass of Coetzee’s understanding of the ‘world’ in world literature was extremely revealing: the representatives of the southern hemisphere in this category were almost non-existent. Later on, in the twenty-first century, this emphasis was markedly to change.

The predominant northern orientation of Coetzee's views on literature and the literary life is often mordantly rendered in *Youth*, his 'portrait of the artist' memoir-novel, the second instalment in the *Scenes from Provincial Life* trilogy. The sense this conveys of artistic beauty and truth lying elsewhere, in the north, contrasts intriguingly with Coetzee's post-2002 Australian period. Here, though certain writerly ideals, especially verisimilitude, continue to challenge and frustrate him, the models he seeks to follow and the forums in which he hopes to present them, no longer lie exclusively in the European metropolis. Moreover, in the Australian writing, Coetzee works hard, diegetically, on his own terms, to ground his narratives, however self-referential they may be in the context of his new homeland. He embeds them in the urban map of Adelaide in *Slow Man* (2005) or the domestic details of Marijana's petit-bourgeois suburban interior (241-2); and in the experience of 'talkback radio' in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Certainly, in his most obviously Australian novel *Slow Man*, his effort at least in the first half is to take on a recognisable Australian perspective and even voice, one in keeping with the Australian identity he had adopted as his own, as we shall see. A new transnational orientation in his work therefore accompanied his physical migration, an orientation that did not bisect the equator as assiduously as before, but pursued new south-south homologues, inter-cultural links and cross-ocean interests. Being a world writer no longer equated with identifying with the names of European greats alone.

Yet the need to relocate as an imaginative writer threw up certain very specific challenges to one such as Coetzee, who has always been impatient with the demands of realism: that is, "[t]he kind of scene-setting and connective tissue the novel used to find necessary" (Attwell 2015: 73). Lacking, he wrote early on, 'a secure sense of space', he found the need to build a plausible world for his novels particularly challenging (Attwell 2015: 83). Any material context was something already 'decided on' rather than to be 'explored' (Attwell 2015: 63).

Indeed, that he has palpably struggled with and addressed these challenges in his Australian work, points to how important this particular imaginative relocation was to him, how crucial it was to make something different of his writing to suit his Australian context (though, at the same time, his new location, Australia, a made up country, as he writes in Elizabeth Costello, was also helpful to him in his efforts to slough off the lingering demands of realism).

Authenticity or verisimilitude, therefore, are not standards by which to judge Coetzee's representation of Australia. Australia in *Slow Man* or *Diary of a Bad Year* or even *Elizabeth Costello* is rarely geo-physically invoked; it is, as was South Africa, largely called up through intellectual schemas, especially of colonial paradigms of the land and the dystopic south. Yet, sketchy and schematic though it may be, at the same time Coetzee's Australia is arguably as present in his work as South Africa was (bar the Karoo) – in the sense, first, of it being located and understood as an antipodean and southern condition, and then placed in relation to the wider global sphere. At the same time, intriguingly, even as Coetzee seeks to designate and particularise Australia, he is helped in doing so by analogies between creative evocations of the south that the European imagination laid down – that is, by its being replicable; or by precisely the homologies between representations of South Africa and Australia that are found in the colonial record. As a decolonial space Australia is a serial, transnational formation, in Benedict Anderson's sense; but as a southern space it is also, at the same time, named and designated as such (Anderson 2006; see also Mignolo 2011).

Considering this famed uniqueness of Australia that in some sense defies representation, much as reality does, it is interesting that Coetzee in his Australian work has desisted from his usual practice of rewriting a pre-existing novel, that is, until the appearance of *The Childhood of Jesus*, with its apparently South American setting, and references to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Kafka's *Amerika*. In his South African phase Coetzee of course incrementally reworked Schreiner (*In the Heart of the Country*), Kleist (*Life & Times of*

*Michael K*), Defoe (*Foe*), and Dostoevsky (*The Master of Petersburg*). What he does do in respect of “making up Australia”, as Elizabeth Costello puts it, is engage in a different though still profoundly literary and self-reflexive project, on two levels (Coetzee 2003a: 10). First, he rewrites himself, or at least one of his character incarnations, Elizabeth Costello from the eponymous novel, in *Slow Man*. This occurs most obviously at that point when the Australian novelist enters the narrative self-reflexively to draw out its narrative and moral implications. Second, as Elleke Boehmer has commented at length elsewhere, he has used “allusions to certain postcolonial genres and forms [that] have produced ... a recognizably Australian world” (the symbolic predominance of the dead white male; the obsession with forgery and fakes), in order to render Australia, yet has done this with “a greater directness of reference, a kind of post-fictional reportage, than he has shown with respect to the imagining of South Africa” (Boehmer 2011: 204-05).

In short, in his post-2002 (or Australian) work, Coetzee is noticeably interested in that continent’s specificities and, hence, its untranslatability. If anything, his Australian oeuvre in part turns from the global dimension he may have invoked with the Manichean symbolism of *Disgrace* (1999), and maintains a certain tension between the pull of locale, and the seductions of a global audience; of speaking in a generic English to a readership worldwide. The same pull of a specific locale is evident in his interest in minority identifications from the European continental tradition.

### **Continental Coetzee: The ‘Minor’ Turn**

In 2004, Coetzee published a translation of some significant works – significant, that is, for Coetzee himself – by six Dutch poets. Introducing the volume, *Landscape with Rowers*, he puts their writing in a wider context:



Dutch is a minor language in the sense that it is spoken by only some fifteen million people, and its literature is a minor literature in the sense that it is not widely read. ... [T]he experience of being continually overshadowed and on occasion trampled on by bigger neighbours – France, Germany, England – certainly led in Holland to apprehensiveness about being passed over by history and becoming a backwater, and hence to a paralyzing deference to fashions from abroad. (2004a: vii)

Using this assertion as a measure or gauge, in this section we consider Coetzee's involvement with several minor cultures, and with related issues of 'translatability'.

It is important, as a preliminary note, to clarify what we mean by a minor culture. This is not a value judgment, nor an indication of the historical importance or significance of that culture. When Deleuze and Guattari describe Kafka's work as 'minor', they are referring to the politics of language: a Czech writer using the German language has the effect of forcing that language to its boundary, revealing the "whole other story" of conflict and mastery that would otherwise be occluded (Deleuze and Guattari 17). In similar fashion, what we are calling Coetzee's 'minor turn' could be seen as his attempt to resist the cultural hegemony of the major European powers, by working with (and writing about) traditions emerging from different, neighbouring cultural and geographical loci. In suspending the question of value, 'minor' could also be equated with playing a piece of music in a minor key – as one or a series of modulations of distinct elements providing an alternative (and potentially more interesting) sense of arrival and rest. Bearing this in mind, the question of 'translatability' in Coetzee has taken three principal forms, discussed below: adaptation, from one medium to another; juxtaposition or affiliation, conjoining literary work with visual art; and narrative exposition, exploring cultural readjustment both in and through a storytelling framework.

In the 2000s, the dominant form of adaptation of Coetzee's work has been text-into-film – but not by Coetzee himself. Prior to this, the author produced his own screenplays for *In the*

*Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and a treatment for *Life & Times of Michael K*. That none of these was filmed is unsurprising, given the volatile nature of the financing system and the experimental approach that Coetzee was taking to his own source material (see Wittenberg 7-8). What is more noteworthy is that the subsequent period of ‘successful’ – as in realised – adaptations coincided with Coetzee’s minor turn. Thus, low-key, small-scale productions have been made of *The Lives of Animals*, adapted by the BBC in 2002; and of *Youth* (re-titled *The Muse*), made for Dutch television in 2007. In addition, there is also the somewhat higher-profile film of *Disgrace*, an Australian-South African co-production released in 2008. Coetzee’s lack of direct involvement in these film adaptations contrasts with the collaborative opportunities he has pursued in other media, and the determination he has shown in choosing to work with artists from marginal or minority European cultures.

Text-into-opera adaptation has also been attempted – again, by hands other than Coetzee’s – with the playwright Christopher Hampton composing a libretto for Philip Glass’s operatic rendering of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2005). The example of Hampton and Glass may have inspired Coetzee to follow in their footsteps. Or perhaps the impetus came from his own back catalogue: in *Disgrace*, David Lurie struggles to compose a chamber opera about Byron, which slowly devolves into a folk opera about one of Byron’s aging lovers.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Coetzee agreed to write a libretto, based on the “most theatrical scene” (Lens 2012: 49) in his *Slow Man* novel, at the request of the Belgian composer Nicholas Lens, who wrote the musical score. The production premiered at the Malta Festival in Poznań, Poland, on 5 July 2012.

In an art form in which the sonic and dramatic qualities of *voice* are paramount, *Slow Man* the opera seeks to re-emphasise the stubborn corporeal actuality of *body*. The main stage props are Zimmer frames and wheelchairs, sometimes used by performers mimicking the

movements and gestures of aging, infirm and / or amputated bodies. But the most striking element of this production – at least in relation to its source-text – is the nod it gives to another ‘minor’ (this time non-European) culture. Two of the three main soloists are African-American: the bass-baritone Mark S. Doss, who sings the part of Paul Rayment, Coetzee’s (French) amputee-protagonist; and the soprano Claron McFadden, who sings the part of Marijana, the blind woman with whom Rayment has a sexual tryst. The casting here hints at a potential entente between these estranged and disabled characters.<sup>4</sup>

Two further points of significance are evident concerning the *place* of this production. In the first instance, a strand of Coetzee’s ancestry can be traced, three generations back, to Poland – a point duly noted when Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań awarded the writer an honorary doctorate, a few days after the opera’s premiere (Koch 2012: 9). And, second, like the Low Countries, Poland could be considered a ‘minor’ European culture. It was an acute awareness of this fact that prompted the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, living in exile, to describe his homeland as a “border country”, a minor nation between East and West where European identity dwindled into regional idiosyncrasy (1973: 53).

The same year as the *Slow Man* opera, Coetzee participated in another transmedial project with another Flemish artist. In September 2012 the multimedia sculptor Berlinde de Bruyckere invited Coetzee to join her as collaborator-curator on a project for the following year’s Venice Biennale. Coetzee came to mind, said de Bruyckere, because she had been immersing herself in his writing over a period of months, and had accumulated “[s]o many thoughts that need to be translated into sculptures” (29). She requested from him a “parallel text”, to accompany photographs of the installation that she was preparing. Coetzee agreed to contribute a story, “The Old Woman and the Cats”, featuring yet again the writer’s choleric alter ego, Elizabeth Costello; and also some reflective correspondence on the project as it took shape.

De Bruyckere eventually settled on the title and theme of *Kreupelhout* (“Cripplewood”) for the work, rendered as a tree whose bark was made out of wax. The trunk represents, she says, a “crippled body in need of support, but at the same time, translating death into fertility and life” (43). In fact, ‘translatability’ is at the heart of the Cripplewood project. De Bruyckere recalls walking in a field in Burgundy and coming across a broken tree, “ripped to pieces” by a storm – an image that, she felt, needed to be translated into art (30). She also considers where the work will be displayed, and reflects on the Black Death that ravaged Venice in 1630. The atmosphere that pervaded the city, one of fear, insecurity and danger, is also something that she sought to translate into her work, and to conjoin with the crippled tree (31). And referring to “The Old Woman and the Cats”, de Bruyckere notes how the story is oriented around the “unspeakable” conversation that Costello and her son John foresee but evade. That which cannot be spoken in this story, says de Bruyckere, is that which “can be translated into the language of the writer” (32).

The “crippled body” that is de Bruyckere’s central metaphor suggests continuity with *Slow Man* the opera, and its confrontation with physical disability; and also with *Slow Man* the novel. The latter is, however, complicated by its status as an onto-fiction, a tale in which questions of being and reality are never far from the narrative surface. These questions take shape through the continual clash between plainspoken author (Elizabeth Costello) and self-restrained character (Paul Rayment). For although Rayment is at the centre of *Slow Man* he is – as Elizabeth is at pains to point out – a minor character. She impresses on him the need for assertiveness, to take hold of his life and act decisively:

So that someone, somewhere *might* put you in a book. So that someone might *want* to put you in a book. Someone, anyone – not just me. So that you may be *worth* putting in a book. Alongside Alonso and Emma. *Become major, Paul*. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for? (229). [Last

emphasis added]

The ironies proliferate here almost to the point of absurdity: the (real) author's fictional alter ego tells her creation to act more like a fictional character so that his (non-fictional) life might be redeemed. Life and art are thus reversible, and complementary: to live a fulfilling life (according to Elizabeth) is to be worthy of fictionalization, the lesson that 'major' literary characters have to impart to us. Yet even without acceding to Elizabeth's demands, Rayment's 'minor' status provides Coetzee with a subject, and with exigent material for his novel. There is, then, a still higher struggle or agon: between Coetzee and Costello, concerning the politics of writing and how textual authority should assert itself.<sup>5</sup> (This major / minor dialectic is rendered even more starkly in *Summertime*, where 'John Coetzee's' biography becomes peripheral to the stories of five people who knew him in the early 1970s.)

Coetzee's 'minor turn' also underpins the novel's plot, a detail that has so far attracted very little critical attention. Rayment's post-operative life is overturned when he encounters the Jokićs, the migrant Croatian family struggling to find a place for itself in a new culture. Why Croatia? Coetzee's notes for the novel contain a section entitled 'The plot against PR' (2003b: 19-20). In a nutshell, the Jokić family conspires to extract money from Rayment, exploiting his obsession with the mother of the family, Marijana, who is also Rayment's nurse. The abandoned plot appears to derive from the changed landscape of post-Cold War Eastern Europe – across the region, it has been defined by political chaos, by ethnic grievance, and by the development of so-called 'hybrid capitalism'. This last turn of events has opened the floodgates for gangsters, racketeers and swindlers of every stripe, now free to engage in all kinds of unscrupulous and unlawful behaviour. The Jokićs, then, in their original incarnation, embodied the corruption of the New Croatia, relocated to the antipodean New World – another indication of Coetzee's striving for cross-cultural 'translatability' yet which has untranslatable consequences (Rayment struggles to identify with the Jokićs'

responses).<sup>6</sup>

‘Untranslatability’ has not just to do with linguistic adaptation and / or understanding, but also with the broader question of cultural belonging. The key instance in *Slow Man* is how the Jokićs see themselves in terms of Australian migrant history – an instance on which a large part of the plot turns. And so Drago Jokić, Marijana’s son, digitally alters one of Rayment’s prized Fauchery photographs, inserting his father into the scene. In doing so, he is creating an alternative representation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century migrant history: ‘translating’ the ‘untranslatable’ by adding a Croatian presence to that history. But rather than ‘fixing’ the problem, Drago’s act highlights it, drawing attention to the fact that insofar as the Jokićs have a cultural history to which they belong, it is 10,000 miles and half a world away.

In terms of the novel as a whole, Coetzee’s invocation of the Balkans is also quickened by his interest in the (former) Eastern bloc more broadly, which is based on a fortuitous parallel. He has made a pointed comparison between the collapse of Soviet-controlled Europe and the dismantling of Apartheid in his home country – events which took place more or less simultaneously. What they shared was a renewal of outwardness and openness; South Africa, East Germany, Russia and Kirghizstan, says Coetzee, all “rejoined what is called the world”, after half a century of building walls to separate them from that world (2006: 6). The minor cultures of Central and Eastern Europe thus have a special historical significance for Coetzee.

The early drafts of *Slow Man* also draw attention to the ‘major / minor’ distinction. Throughout Coetzee’s notes are numerous references to *Don Quixote*, suggesting that this was to have been the key intertext for the Paul Rayment-Elizabeth Costello relationship (Coetzee 2003b: 6, 17, 22). As we know, Cervantes’ novel reappears several years later, in *The Childhood of Jesus*, where the question it raises about the work’s cultural legacy becomes still more pertinent. Spain is hardly a ‘minor’ culture in the way that Poland, Croatia and the Low Countries are, but for much of the past two hundred years it has been

“overshadowed” by its northern neighbours, just as Coetzee says that Holland has been.<sup>7</sup> And even though he later changed his mind about inserting the national epic of Spanish literature – which is also one of the inarguable foundations of world literature – into an Australian context, Coetzee nonetheless questions the enforced segregation of disparate literary traditions.

Even as *Slow Man*, in its embryonic form, reveals ‘minor-culture’ traces expunged from the final, published version, *Summertime*, too, has a revealing detail in one of its early drafts. The character of Julia Frankl, an Austrian Jew and the first of the ‘interviewees’, was originally named ‘Renata Kiš’ – also Jewish, but the daughter of Hungarian refugees (2005a: 26). Underscoring the ‘minor’ status of the character’s national background, the ‘refugee’ condition of her parents anticipates Coetzee’s reflections on statehood and asylum in the ‘Strong Opinions’ sections of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007: 3-9, 111-13). His interest in this condition is clearly impelled by the Australian political situation of the early 2000s and the government’s ‘Pacific Solution’, through which asylum seekers were transported to detention centres on Pacific island nations. And it contrasts tellingly with the modernist glorification of ‘exile’, based on the belief that voluntary expatriation was necessary so that (as John puts it in *Youth*) ‘life can be lived at its fullest intensity’ (2002: 41).

But if the ‘minor’ cultural intimations described above do not represent a complete turn away from European modernism, they suggest a moderating or subduing of Coetzee’s commitment to that tradition. Such a move also engages with the untranslatable, in that literary modernism had become, by the end of the last century, *all too translatable*. What was once a recalcitrant and (on occasion) rebarbative body of work had acquired mainstream credibility and accessibility – not least through the efforts of authors (such as Coetzee) to find alternative pathways through modernism’s fabled difficulty and inscrutability (see Diepeveen 1-9). Additionally, if the ‘minor turn’ is a break, of sorts, it is also a continuation, for these

marginal cultures can be seen as congruent with Coetzee's 'outsider' identity. Instead of the Great Powers and their imposing traditions, he is drawn to the minor, the secondary, the peripheral, and, in many instances, the untranslatable. This last issue becomes much more pronounced and heuristic when we consider the allusions to Asian culture – veiled and interred, yet still visible – in Coetzee's earliest writings.

### **Coetzee in Asia: The Limits of Translation**

A key contributing factor to Coetzee's spare and accessible writing style is the masterful way he combines elements from different cultures. By his own admission, Coetzee's English is acultural:

My English does not happen to be embedded in any particular sociolinguistic landscape, which relieves the translator of one vexatious burden; on the other hand, I do tend to be allusive, and not always to signal the presence of allusion' (2005c: 143).

We should, however, be wary of equating his form of acultural English with any assumptions of cultural universality or inherent translatability. Coetzee's own experience of working with translators highlights the relative *untranslatability* of his works, a reminder of the limitations of language and of the impossibility of finding true equivalency across languages. The limitations of translation can have both positive and negative outcomes for a text. In a negative sense, *untranslatability* means that direct translation is impossible. But in a positive sense, *untranslatability* can also result in unforeseen resonances and creative forms of *mistranslation*.

To date, the role and influence of Asia on Coetzee's work has been little explored and rarely acknowledged. And yet, as Coetzee's archival material makes clear, the Asian region has made a significant contribution to the oeuvre, in terms of its imaginative potential and the example of the different forms of languages and cultures. As we turn to Asia in this final



section, it becomes clear that the translatability of Coetzee's prose owes much to his deliberate attempts to cut across the standard geographic configurations mapped out by colonialism. It is not surprising that Coetzee's work seems to transcend the sole national context of either South African or Australian literature, given that he has deliberately looked to the examples offered by other national histories and literatures for inspiration and guidance. This section will underline how the Asian region operates as a limit case in Coetzee's work and working methodology. His interest in linguistics and the limitations unique to every language cannot resist the alternate models for literature that can be found in Asia, historically regarded as an exotic, symbolic 'Other' by which Western culture positions and defines itself.

Coetzee's engagement with the concept of Asia is highly self-conscious. His interest is more in the symbolic importance of Asia to the West or of Asia as a Western construct, rather than stemming from any desire to understand or convey any sense of the 'real' Asia. Coetzee therefore explicitly focuses on the tendency towards exoticism or Orientalism in Western culture and literary forms, and utilises such discourses to great creative effect in his own work. In *History's Disquiet* (2000), Harry Harootunian notes that '[i]t has been one of the enduring ironies of the study of Asia that Asia itself, as an object, simply doesn't exist. [...] this enmapped place has never been more than a simulacrum of a substanceless something.' (25) Harootunian picks apart the East-West division so firmly entrenched in our academic and cultural discourses, and in our attempts to shoehorn the motley group of nations that constitute the Asian region into the geographic boundaries delineated by successive waves of colonialism. Coetzee's work demonstrates an awareness that Asia is a place constructed by the Western imagination, and invokes it to bring into relief questions about the West's construction of itself. Indeed, by further extrapolation it reveals the ways in which forms of the national imaginary impinge upon individuals' lives in concrete, visceral ways.

Coetzee's interest in Asia echoes that of modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats and Marianne Moore. The early material in the archive signals an awareness and interest in Asian culture or literature. There are notes on Ernest Fenollosa, the American art historian and Orientalist, references to the work of Yukio Mishima, and passages copied out from Haruko Ichikawa's *Japanese Lady in Europe* (1937), a travel diary documenting a Japanese woman's impressions of Europe in the early twentieth century. But the most significant examples of Coetzee's engagement with Asia surface in his earliest published works: the spectre of Vietnam that overshadows Eugene Dawn's work as a mythographer in *Dusklands*' "The Vietnam Project", and the role of a mythological China in helping Coetzee arrive at the fully realised and compelling, but nationally ambiguous, locale in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

The role of Vietnam itself has tended to be sidelined by critical discussions of *Dusklands* – overshadowed in the first instance by the critique the work seems to be making of Apartheid South Africa, and then by that of American foreign policy. Both forms of analysis draw extensively on Coetzee's biographical experiences as a South African, first, and then as an expatriate in America. But whilst the self-contained novella of "The Vietnam Project" explores the violence and propaganda driving America's war, the relationship between Africa and America is triangulated by a third and notably silent term: the Asia represented by Vietnam itself. Vietnam is figured here as a phantasmatic project, a site for America's pornographic, sadistic and murderous fantasies.

In the breakthrough pages at the end of Coetzee's first sketch for "The Vietnam Project", called at this time "Pornography Inquisition", the nascent voice of Eugene Dawn acknowledges that the very basis of his work turns on recognising that Vietnam is part of the symbolic order: 'That is why Vietnam the idea is more important than Vietnam the country, and why our conduct of the war is correct. It is correct that today (May 25, 1972) the war

should be at a stage at which the antagonists are, on the one side, men with their feet on the ground, and on the other side directed objects that fly through the air and explode' (1973: 1; stress in original). The mythology of the war cleaves the acts of violence away from the reality of the men who must endure the violence, leaving the acts themselves as raw material for mythographers such as Dawn. As drafts for "The Vietnam Project" proceeded, Coetzee progressively removed all references to Dawn's direct involvement in the war, arriving at the character of Dawn as we know him – a man who ends up traumatised by the war, despite only ever having experienced it through mediated forms. This is an example of the progressive writing out of untranslatables that marks Coetzee's creative processes behind all the novels, the expunction of personal details and national coordinates in order to better draw out themes such as abhorrent violence, the dehumanising aspects of oppression and the duty of care that can exist between strangers.

A similar process of engagement with, and subsequent concealment of, the Asian imaginary occurs in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). In earlier, abandoned drafts, Coetzee first contemplated setting the novel amongst refugees on an island, and then recognisably in Cape Town. The breakthrough came when he shifted the location to an outpost on the westernmost part of China – a move that effectively liberated him from the demands of realism.<sup>8</sup> It also provided a counterpoint to those evocations of political oppression that Coetzee had borrowed from Soviet Russia. *Barbarians* was, of course, written at the height of East-West geopolitical tensions, during which time Soviet Russia unquestionably held majority status in terms of political, economic and cultural influence. In *Doubling the Point* and *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee's relationship to Russia centres on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary imaginary of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev, signifying the historic importance of Russia in a world literary context. For *Barbarians*, Coetzee utilises bureaucratic terminology from Soviet Russia to sinister effect, but the references to non-Soviet culture (the

desert, the nomadic 'barbarians', the ancient script on the wooden poplar slips that the Magistrate collects), prevent the reader from drawing a direct analogy to Soviet Russia. In this manner, an imagined and overtly fictional China allowed Coetzee to ground his characters in a locality that was fully textured with cultural specificities, yet also elusive, indeterminate and remote in terms of national coordinates.

Referring to *Barbarians* in his essay "Roads to Translation" (2005c), Coetzee notes that his novel is intentionally set in an unspecified time and place, one that is neither recognisably Western nor Eastern. He highlights the importance of translation in the development of a specific idiom for the novel, an idiom that helps to consolidate its ambiguous geo-spatial coordinates:

All of [the novel's] dialogue can be conceived of as translated by an invisible hand from an unspecified foreign tongue into English. Its language is more or less bare of allusion to the past of the English language and indeed to the history of Western thought (2005c: 143).

The techniques that he used to maintain ambiguity in English, however, caused certain unintended difficulties during the process of having the novel translated into Chinese. The mention of the locale of the Summer Palace prompted the translator to ask if Coetzee was referring to the "Old Summer Palace in Beijing that was destroyed by British and French allied force in 1848" (144).<sup>9</sup> Coetzee is adamant that he did not 'consciously intend to refer to the palace in Beijing', nor to the historical event it immediately conjured up for the translator, in a Chinese context. However, he also acknowledges that there are deliberate references to China and Chinese culture in the novel:

At the same time, I did intend that enough of an association with imperial China should be evoked to balance and complicate, for instance, the association with imperial Russia

evoked elsewhere in the book by the phrase ‘Third Bureau’, the arm of the security forces for which Colonel Joll works (144-5).

For Coetzee, then, the Chinese material was a means of de-localising the text, of decoupling it from a specific South African (or Russian) context. The word that he uses here, ‘balance’, is an important concept for the transnational, invoking as it does a dynamic and relational aspect between one or more fixed points. An important means of de-nationalising a text is to make it culturally ambiguous, by combining elements from several nations to ‘correct’ for certain cultural biases. However, this can also be problematic, first, because it mimics the processes of globalization – the hybridization of cultures that is occurring worldwide; and second, because on a certain level bias cannot be removed as it is embedded in the very fabric of language. For instance, the state of apartheid coupled with South Africa’s strong censorship laws from the 1960s-1980s could not fail to have an impact on the development of its national literature, a situation that has been investigated quite thoroughly by Peter D. McDonald (303-320). More recently, Jarad Zimble has sought to explain the affective dimensions of Coetzee’s spare style, arguing that it is a product of Coetzee’s experience of living in a violent society (35-55). These denationalising processes are therefore subtended by a persistence of locale, of the specific and the untranslatable.

Unintended transcultural reverberations highlight the ways in which the transnational always comes up against the specificities and peculiarities of the national – be it via cultural / historical events, or linguistically. In this instance of translation, we can see how Coetzee exploited the imaginative possibilities offered by the geographically and culturally unmoored “Old Summer Palace” in order to counteract associations that would be made because of his own specific South African context, or the associations with Soviet Russia that would be linked to specific vocabulary used in his novel (“The Third Bureau”). Although working effectively in English, it creates problems in a Chinese context, where the “Old Summer

Palace” regained its specific geo-spatial connotations. The transnational therefore does not lead directly to a uniform world literary paradigm (building towards an *ur*-canon of world literature), but instead brings to the forefront the ways in which certain tropes undergo a process of constant reconfiguration in their crossing over borders and changed significance, as they move into different national contexts.

The successful circulation of Coetzee’s works along transnational circuits therefore owes much to his efforts to resist any reductive frameworks imposed by the State. He frustrates easy national categorisation by deliberately drawing from a range of different cultural markers. The acultural landscape and dialect of Coetzee’s writing could thus be seen as a deliberate attempt at deracination at one level, even though he maintains an interest in particularity at others. Coetzee affirms this in a 1992 interview with Richard Begam, averring that notions of ‘blackness’ and / or ‘whiteness’ do not figure in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. He says:

The Magistrate and the girl could as well be Russian and Kirghiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber. In *Foe*, Susan and Friday are ‘white and ‘black’. They are also ‘woman’ and ‘man’, ‘free’ and ‘slave’, ‘European’ and ‘African’. Which of these – what shall I call them? – identity pairs – is primary? Is blackness blackness? In itself the question seems meaningless to me (424).

Coetzee’s work occurs in response to the fixed categories of race and gender that are inextricably tied up in the discourse of Apartheid and his engagement with Asia becomes an important means of disassembling the stark ‘identity pairs’ constructed by the Apartheid State. The introduction of a ‘yellow’ alternative decouples the rigid opposition. It relativizes both sides of the racial divide and forces a confrontation with those more elemental aspects of human existence. The deliberate construction of a de-localised *world* through the incorporation of multiple cultural references does not completely negate the national frame,

nor does it attempt to; rather, it creates an elasticity in the work that enables it to be applied across various national frames.

The Asian imaginary in Coetzee's work brings us to the limits of translation – Asia representing the mythological, the providential, the imaginative potential offered by the untranslatable. Coetzee has no illusions about his limited ability to access or to represent an 'authentic' form of Asian culture. We should also note that this continental triumvirate – Africa, America and Asia – constitutes the major territories that surround Europe, the centre of the Western literary canon that Coetzee writes himself into. Coetzee's positioning as a world writer therefore takes several forms: in relation to Europe, through the act of his writing in English; in relation to Australia, as part of a southern imaginary to which South Africa first introduced him; with the political situations of South Africa and America, recognizing both as being the result of a cycle of violence that stems from European colonial violence; and finally with the way in which Asia, constructed as an object of Western colonial desire, maintains these symbolic resonances. The spareness of his prose, for which he is so famous, should not be viewed as any attempt at developing a homogeneous, global tongue. Instead, it should be seen for what it is – an act of resistance against forms of nationalism (including Australian) which have highlighted and elevated regional differences. Even with the language stripped back, Coetzee's novels remind us of the importance of that which cannot be translated.

*University of Oxford*

*Western Sydney University*

*Macquarie University*

## **NOTES**

1. To date most notably J. C. Kannemeyer's *J. M. Coetzee: A Life In Writing*; more recently David Attwell's *J.M Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*.

2. It is notable that the only Coetzee text Walkowitz discusses in any detail is *Diary of a Bad Year*.
3. Coetzee also produced a libretto (undated) based on *In the Heart of the Country*. Entitled “Lament from the Heart of the Country: For Soprano and Chamber Ensemble”, it consists of ten parts, alternately spoken (‘recitative’) and sung (‘aria’).
4. Coetzee and Lens are planning to produce two further operas together. The first will be an adaptation of an earlier novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, entitled *Costello: This Body That I Am*. The world premiere is scheduled for 2016.
5. For a perspicacious analysis of this Coetzee-Costello agon, see Wicomb 2009.
6. This plot, or a version of it, was shorn of its ethnic overtones and carried over to *Diary of a Bad Year*, in the form of the ‘plot against Señor C’ engineered by Alan, Anya’s Scottish lover.
7. The old slur that ‘Africa begins at the Pyrenees’, derived from exoticist, orientalist conceptions of Spain, has been displaced by the geopolitical realities of the country’s “political, economic, and cultural subordination to modern Europe” (Iarocci 20). Spain might therefore be seen as a ‘minor major’ culture, exerting regional influence but excluded from the Group of Eight (G8) highly industrialised nations.
8. Hermann Wittenberg and Kate Highman (2015) have traced the connections between *Barbarians* and the early-twentieth-century travelogues of Sven Hedin; David Attwell (2015) has discussed the importance of the Chinese setting in helping Coetzee break from realism (104-128).
9. In Coetzee’s essay it isn’t clear if he is speaking about correspondence with Zhenjia Cheng, who translated *Barbarians* into Chinese in 2002, or Min Wen, who produced an alternative Chinese translation in 2004.



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