

## Seeing through the *concept* of World Literature

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A finger is needed to point at the moon, but what a calamity it would be if one took the finger for the moon.

Ancient Zen saying

### Abstract

Less concerned with the concept of World Literature than with the promise and perils of conceptualization, this essay considers what experiencing some forms of writing as world literature might involve. Using J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) as an illustrative example, it addresses questions of circulation, translation, writing systems, book history, and literary geography in the context of recent academic debates about world literary studies. It concludes by revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's landmark 1907 essay "World Literature", arguing that it remains an indispensable guide to experiential reading and anti-conceptual thinking.

### Keywords

Interlingual – intercultural–Tagore–Coetzee–“place-time-pot”–*ananda*

Trigger warning: *the following contains little conceptual discussion as such. Taking inspiration in part from the Zen Buddhist tradition, it seeks to show what contemporary debates within world literary studies might gain by moving beyond or simply outside discussions of that kind. The reason? Some literary works circulate in many languages, scripts and media, across multiple histories and locations. Readers, even multilingual ones, are finite beings bound (but not trapped) by time, place and language. With some forms of literary writing, the primal simplicity and complexity of the reading experience trumps theoretical knowledge, particularly when it comes to concepts like “world”, “literature”, and “world literature”.*

## 1.

As a matter of principle, I begin with a particular case—not a case study but a specific experience of writing and reading, albeit a partly hypothetical one.

## 2.

Towards the end of *In the Heart of the Country*, J. M. Coetzee's second foray into literary writing, a young boy called Piet delivers a letter to Magda, the main protagonist and first-person narrator. Addressed to Magda's father, it comes in a "buff envelope with a cross drawn heavily over it in blue pencil", indicating that it is both official and that it has been sent registered mail (1978, 124). Opening it Magda finds "a printed letter in two languages requesting the payment of taxes" (124). Piet does not know who sent it but insists that she acknowledge receipt in "a little notebook" (124). Rather than sign her name, she writes: "*EK HET NIE GELD NIE*" (124). By this stage in the narrative, Magda is an aged, arthritic "crone" who uses "block letters because of the pain in my fingers" (124).

*In the Heart of the Country* does not attempt to conjure up a precise historical and geographical world—it is not an exercise in realist fiction—but it is clear that the action takes place sometime in the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century on a remote sheep farm in the Karoo, a semi-desert region in South Africa's hinterland. Extrapolating from some of the details in this scene, however, our hypothetical reader might be tempted to be a little more exact about the historical moment. If she takes the two official languages of the letter to be English and Afrikaans, then she may well infer that Magda's father is being chased by tax collectors working on behalf of the Union of South Africa sometime after 1925, the year in which Afrikaans effectively replaced Dutch as the second official language of the unitary state created in 1910. Magda certainly chooses to address the revenue authorities in Afrikaans as she does not write "Ik heb geen geld", the Dutch equivalent of "Ek het nie geld nie".

As these extrapolations suggest, our reader has some familiarity with South African history as well as some competence in English, Dutch and Afrikaans. Less obviously, she is reading a particular edition of *Country*: the paperback brought out by the leading Johannesburg-based anti-apartheid publisher Ravan Press in 1978. Now a rare book, it is the only "bilingual" (English-Afrikaans) version ever published. Today all the English-language editions are based on the "monolingual" version Coetzee prepared for his American and British publishers, Secker & Warburg (London) and Harper & Row (New York), who

published separate hardback editions in 1977. After acquiring the paperback rights, Penguin (UK) and Viking (US) re-issued the same self-translation in 1982. Despite various changes of ownership, the English-language digital rights have been apportioned in the same way. So, if you buy, say, the 2015 Vintage eBook from Amazon.co.uk on Kindle today, then you will find not only that Magda writes “I HAVE NO MONEY” (no italics) but that she speaks a rather neutral, unidiomatic English to Piet rather than Afrikaans, more or less the same English in which she composes the diary-like entries that make up the main body of the narrative (2015, 136). In the original, “bilingual” edition only the dialogue is in Afrikaans.

Magda receives other visitations from the world beyond the farm besides the tax letter. “I also hear voices,” she notes: “The voices speak to me out of machines that fly in the sky. They speak to me in Spanish” (1978, 125). Though she has no knowledge of the language, she finds everything they say “immediately comprehensible” (125). This puzzles her. Perhaps there is some “continuous miraculous intervention on my behalf in the form of translation”—as if she has acquired a Babel fish from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), a set of Pixel Buds from Google, or some other translation device from the future (126). She dismisses this possibility, however, preferring to think that the men in their flying machines speak “a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers” (125). She also prefers not to think of the voices as mere delusions on her part. Whatever the explanation, she is clear that, given the state of isolation in which she now finds herself—all the farm workers have abandoned her by this point—the voices keep her “from becoming a beast” (125). After comparing her fate to a Crusoe-like castaway who, with only his barking dog and squawking parrot for company, ends up “bounding on all fours, clubbing the indigenous goats with thighbones, eating their flesh raw”, she declares: “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” (125).

Being rather learned, our reader recognizes that what the voices say is really a pastiche of unattributed quotations from the writings of various European thinkers and poets, including Blake, Calvin, Cernuda, Hegel, Lacan, Nietzsche, Pascal, Rousseau, Spinoza and Weil. These are all rendered in English (and in italics) though Magda of course hears them as “crystal Spanish vocables” (126). “*It is a world of words that creates a world of things*”, one voice says, implicitly citing, as our reader picks up, Lacan’s formulation of the linguistic relativity thesis in *Écrits* (1966) (134). Magda rejects this particular claim with a brusque “Pah!” (134). Only too aware of language as a potential prison-house, she spends much of the narrative trying vainly to escape the entrapments of her “father-tongue”, Afrikaans, and the

racialized feudal order it encodes, by attempting to fashion a new language and, she hopes, a new egalitarian community on the farm (97).

Though Magda believes the voices help preserve her fragile human dignity, they also create a problem for her. If the “sky-creatures” promise the kind of human reciprocity she craves throughout, a reciprocity she pointedly fails to establish with the farm workers, she needs to find some way of opening up a genuine dialogue with them (133). She makes various attempts. To begin with she tries gesturing and calling out, first in English, then in rudimentary Spanish. Then, again recalling the “classic castaways”, she lights “a pyre” but this too fails—she wonders what might make them think it “a signal”, rather than “a mere phenomenon” (131). Next she turns to writing. Recognizing that her words will need to be read from the sky, she gathers a pile of stones “the size of small pumpkins”, again like Crusoe making use of “every odd and end”, paints them white and forms them “into letters twelve feet high” spelling out “messages to my saviours” in her garbled Esperanto-like Spanish (132). First, already worried that she might be seen as pitiable “ugly sister”, she writes: “CINDRLA ES MI”; then “VENE AL TERRA”, “QUEIRO UN AUTR”, and “SON ISOLADO” (132). However, after realising that mere “importunities” are unlikely to have the desired effect, she switches to poetry, composing a series of “POEMAS CREPUSCLRS, intending CREPUSCULARIAS but running short of stones” as she did with the word “CINDERELLA” (132). Finally, accepting that even poetry is unlikely to succeed and “descending to ideographs”, she uses the remaining stones to make “a sketch of a woman lying on her back, her figure fuller than mine, her legs parted, younger than myself too”. “How vulgar”, she thinks, “yet how necessary!” (133). Still there is no response.

Our reader recognises that Magda’s various attempts at communication, which run the gamut of human sign-making, can be construed as Wittgensteinian language-games on at least two levels. *In* the world of the fiction, the “POEMAS CREPUSCULARIAS”, for instance—the phrase would normally be rendered as “Poemas Crepusculares” (“Twilight Poems”) in Spanish—are for Magda less acts of poetic self-expression than desperate appeals like the “importunities” and the ideograph. For our reader, however, they constitute one of the many writing-games *of* the fiction itself—in this case the games of unattributed, even indeterminate allusion and pastiche. Perhaps, she wonders, the phrase is an oblique reference to Pablo Neruda’s first book *Crepusculario* (1923) which is itself “a curious pastiche of compositions” imitating “the refined aesthetic norms of Hispanic Modernism” (de Costa, 19). Or maybe it is an allusion to the generation of Italian poets, the so-called “Poeti

Crepuscolari” of the early 1900s, who rejected the lofty nationalism and oratorical style of their precursors, notably Gabriele D’Annunzio, and sought instead to write about everyday life as simply and directly as possible, striving for something like an Italian of “pure meanings”.

### 3.

For anyone “interested in developing the concept of World Literature”, seeing these various acts of reading/writing or hearing/speaking as language-games in Wittgenstein’s sense points to a third possibility as well (“Overview”, *JWL*). In this case, they serve as a cautionary tale. If you believe that literary works, especially works of world literature in translation, speak to you out of the sky in an English of “pure meanings”, then you risk being accused of wishfulness at best, delusions at worst. True, as Magda’s oblique reference to the dreams of “the philosophers” suggests, you might be in illustrious company but there may be little consolation in that given the doubts Coetzee himself expresses about such dreams in “Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language” (1982). In the essay he considers Newton’s engaging but ultimately unsuccessful struggle as a writer-translator “to bridge the gap between the nonreferential symbolism of mathematics and a language too protean to be tied down to single, pure meanings”, identifying the purist aspiration with “the no-nonsense ‘mathematical plainness’ that stood for the ideal of Bishop Sprat and the Royal Society of Newton’s day” (Coetzee, 1992, 193-94). Coetzee could just as easily have traced a longer genealogy from, say, Francis Bacon to the varieties of positivism, including the early Wittgenstein’s, that emerged in the early twentieth century. His principal point is clear, however: Newton’s failure to fashion a “metaphor-free language” that might achieve an “unambiguous one-to-one mapping of reality”, escaping the prison-house or at least the imperfections of, in his case, everyday Latin and English, raises the question of whether “anything significant or new” might ever be said in the “pure language” the philosophers of his day dreamed of making the foundation of knowledge (193).

*In the Heart of the Country* itself puts this aspiration under extreme pressure by insisting at every point on its own status not as a crystalline speaking *voice* but as a fallible artefact of *writing*—most obviously Magda’s unreliable narrative is set out as a numbered, sometimes contradictory series of 266 diary-like entries. The vignette of the tax letter underscores this by analogy: literary works, the scene suggests, are more like tax letters than aerial voices, since they come into our hands through the agency of various intermediaries—

many Hermes-Piets are involved—as all-too-human documents printed in particular languages and writing systems and enclosed in envelopes of one kind or another. The analogy of course belongs to the age of print and so now looks dated or at least of little obvious relevance in the world of the digital download. To bring things closer our own multimedia moment, we can turn once again to Coetzee writing in his own person. At one point in *Here and Now* (2013), a series of letters he exchanged with Paul Auster between 2008 and 2011, he considers the effects of the digital revolution via an anecdote about the moment he bought a copy of *War and Peace* for his “personal library” when he was sixteen (i.e. sometime in 1956). This was Aylmer Maude’s translation first published by Oxford University Press in 1922-23.

Aylmer Maude’s *War and Peace*, in its original maroon and cream wrapper, has accompanied me through half a century’s moves from continent to continent. I have a sentimental relation with it—not with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, that vast construct of words and ideas, but the object that emerged from the printing house of Richard Clay and Sons in 1952 and was shipped from the warehouse of Oxford University Press somewhere in London to the press’s distribution agent in Cape Town and thence to Jutta’s bookshop and to me. (180)

By distinguishing two versions of the novel—the translator’s and the author’s—and highlighting the difference between the work (“that vast construct of words and ideas”) and the material object (the “bulky little book printed on thin India paper”), the anecdote can be read as a short philosophical lesson in the ontologies of writing, perhaps even of world literature, in the age of print. Yet as the detailed itinerary of the book’s journey indicates, Coetzee’s own “sentimental” attachment is not so much to the book itself, qua material artefact, as to the interconnected world it reveals, a world of authors, translators, publishers, printers, warehouses, ships, agents, booksellers and readers, linking mid-nineteenth-century Russia to early-twentieth-century England, the London and the Cape Town of the 1950s and, ultimately, Coetzee’s teenage self to Tolstoy. Given the new technologies of dissemination in the digital age, Coetzee concludes, this “kind of relationship with an author—extremely tenuous and highly indirect, conducted perhaps through a dozen intermediaries—will be less and less possible in the future” (180).

Taken together with the vignette of the tax letter, these wistful observations reflect Coetzee’s nostalgia for the age of print. They also make him seem like an ally of the book

historians who have for the last three decades or more been insisting, as Roger Chartier put it in 1992, that readers “never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality” (50). A historian by profession, Chartier intended this primarily as a rebuke to the textualist delusions of 1980s literary critics and theorists. But Coetzee’s position is in fact more subtle than this connection suggests. For one thing, he is only too aware of the potential absurdity of nostalgia. “How does one escape the entirely risible fate of turning into Gramps,” he goes on to ask Auster, “the old codger who, when he embarks on one of his ‘Back in my time’ discourses, makes the children roll their eyes in silent despair?” (181). For another, he is far from convinced by the materialist fundamentalism to which many book historians subscribe, since, as he puts it, “books are not real, not in any important sense”: “The fact that what we call a book can be picked up in one’s hands, has a smell and a feel of its own, is an accident of its production with no relevance to what the book conveys” (180). More questionably, he adds: “The very letters on the page are signs, images of sounds, which are images of ideas” (180). What, we might ask, has happened to the Coetzee who had the author-figure Foe insist that “writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech” (1986, 142)? Returning to his copy of *War and Peace* and the web of relations it disclosed—that is, to the focal point of his own comments on the advent of the digital age—he draws a more cautious conclusion: “Whether such relationships have any value seems to me an open question, as is the question of whether it is better to own a physical copy of a book than to have the power to download an image of its text” (180-81). After all, if, as a reader, you are primarily concerned with what books convey, then the support technologies and mechanics of transmission will have at best a debateable significance.

#### 4.

Let’s return to our hypothetical reader with these questions in mind. She was, you will recall, reading the “bilingual” Ravan edition which came into her hands not only as a specific paperback book with a cover design (part of its unique envelope) by the Scottish-born South African artist Richard Smith but as a piece of intellectual property restricted “for sale in the Republic of South Africa only” (1978, iv). For some critics of the latest world literature project, we ignore the salience of this last detail at our peril. “World Literature seems to be one more way of not talking about the world,” Joseph R. Slaughter comments, “especially when it fails to recognize the material inequalities and imbalances that subtend creative production and the monopoly model of copyrighted culture that are the conditions of its own contemporary possibility” (2014, 34). As the telling phrase “one more way” implies,

Slaughter, who writes as a no-nonsense materialist, sees this as an expression of a deeper malaise within traditions of literary study that remain aloof from, if not indifferent to, the inequities of real economic and political power.

*Country*'s early publishing history bears out his concerns. As Peter Randall, Ravan's publisher at the time, later recalled about Coetzee's move to Secker and Harper, "it was painful to know that as a small publisher we could not compete with international houses to retain authors for whom we had taken the initial risks" (de Villiers, 9). Though Ravan's contract for Coetzee's first fiction *Dusklands* (1974) "contained the usual clause about being offered his next work", Randall decided that, given his limited resources and the structural realities of the publishing world at the time, "we could not stand in the way of possible international recognition and world sales" (9). Yet he did in the end produce his own uniquely "bilingual" edition after Coetzee himself negotiated a compromise with Secker. Partly out of personal loyalty to Randall and partly out of his commitment to Ravan's anti-apartheid activism, he did the same with *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986)—these were not strictly separate editions, however, as the text they reproduced was identical to Secker's (see Wittenberg).

For Slaughter, intellectual property is real in an important sense because it reflects the asymmetries of an international book trade in which small, local publishers (and producers of knowledge more generally) cannot compete with the major metropolitan brokers who dominate Pascale Casanova's "World Republic of Letters" and because it exposes the unworldly idealizations implicit in many traditions of academic literary criticism. Yet, returning to Coetzee's question of value as it pertains to the tenuous author-reader relations embodied in his copy of *War and Peace*, the seemingly legalistic matters of copyright could be said to have a further significance as well, one that brings us back to the analogy with the tax letter and its limits. Though literary works do not speak to us from the sky, they cannot be said to have addressees in the sense that most letters do either. Yet as intellectual property subject to copyright they do inhabit particular geographical territories, many of which cross national borders and all of which create specific communities of readers. While the "bilingual" Ravan edition of *Country* circulated within a national sphere, for example, the Secker and Harper "monolingual" versions were distributed transnationally not to a "world" audience but to the particular supranational sections of the global Anglosphere. Secker/Penguin and Harper/Viking divided among themselves. By the late 1970s, following the collapse of the Traditional Markets Agreement of 1947, UK and US publishers agreed on



a more flexible map of the world defined in terms of “open” (non-exclusive) and “closed” (exclusive) markets. In practice, this generally means the Americans operate exclusively within their own national borders and the Philippines, while the British sell their books across the UK, the Commonwealth, including countries in Asia and Africa, and Europe. This is true of the paperback versions of *Country* today, the rights to which are now owned by Penguin in the US and Vintage in the UK—the name changes reflect the rise of a new, conglomerate multinationalism in publishing. Again, following the typical pattern, the exclusive digital/eBook territories match the print spheres. Looked at in terms of the geographies of copyright, then, any viable concept of world literature has to come to terms not just with the structural transformation and imbalances of the global trade in books, whether physical or digital, but with a shifting patchwork of contractually- and linguistically-defined worlds of literary circulation which the digital age has complicated rather than transformed.

Circulating within a restricted national territory, the “bilingual” Ravan paperback created a particular relationship between our reader and Coetzee. To give her more of a biography, let’s say she was a young lecturer teaching English at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa in the early 1980s. Replicating the circuit linking Coetzee’s teenage self to Tolstoy, we could then trace a line back to her local bookshop, University Publishers and Booksellers, via the South African postal system to Ravan and its printers both of 60 Juta Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg and finally to Coetzee as bilingual author (not self-translator) in Cape Town where he was himself a lecturer in English. Yet, we might again ask with Coetzee, does *this* tenuous and indirect relationship have any value? As it happens the absence of one key intermediary in this case is far from negligible. Unlike the British hardback edition, the Ravan paperback did not pass through the apartheid censorship bureaucracy. To secure its own copyright, Secker shipped a limited consignment of its edition to South Africa in July 1977 which customs officers then embargoed, submitting one copy to the censors for inspection. For the same fate to have befallen the local edition, either an individual member of public or the police would have had to make the submission but this never happened.

This is not to say that it was wholly untouched by the system. Because the blurb Coetzee produced for the Secker edition referred explicitly to Magda’s father being “trapped with serfs in a web of reciprocal oppression” and to his “lurch across the colour-bar” in “a bid for private salvation in the arms of a black concubine”, Coetzee suggested Randall use a less provocative quotation from Maev Kennedy’s review of the British edition which appeared in

the *Irish Times* for 11 June 1977. This had the effect of bringing another globally displaced intermediary into the circuit, adding an additional world-feature to the Ravan edition's unique envelope (1977, inside flap). Though Kennedy mentioned the father taking "a black concubine", the section of the short review Randall chose centred on Magda's "searing loneliness", Coetzee's experimentalism, and the story's universality—"putting its finger on several common terrors of mankind" (1978, back cover). Tellingly, in the sentence Randall cut from the opening, Kennedy informed her Irish readership that *Country* stood out "as an alien", particularly when seen "against the intense Englishness" of the other more conventional novels she was reviewing, with its "utterly foreign environment and period producing a character deeply estranged from any Western norm"—a revealing but moot point, given Magda's own sense of the culture in which she is inescapably embedded (Kennedy, 8).

The concerns Coetzee and Randall had about the censors proved unfounded, however, as even the Secker edition with its more provocative blurb was passed, largely because the censors judged it a major literary achievement. As Anna M. Louw, a prominent Afrikaans writer put it in her censor's report, "this product of our own *bodem* [literally soil, but also existential or spiritual home] is one of the few works of stature in the world of South African English letters"—though equally moot, the contrast between her reading and Kennedy's could not be more marked (McDonald 2009, 314). The censors' decision nonetheless left our young lecturer in the strange position of reading the local edition which they never scrutinized, rather than the import which they approved.

The censors' surprisingly sympathetic and more or less exclusively literary assessment highlights a key dimension of the circuits of publication that Coetzee's own relational model underplays. Again revealing the limits of the analogy with the tax letter, these circuits never simply track the mechanics of transmission. They also reflect the operations of what James English, following Pascale Casanova (who in turn follows Pierre Bourdieu), dubs "the economy of prestige", the focus and product of which is literary value itself (see English). Like Slaughter's literal rights economy, this symbolic "economy" has imbalances of its own—think of Casanova's "Greenwich meridian of literature"—and, again like Slaughter's, it can be national, trans-, or supranational, or all three at once (Casanova, 87). Gesturing towards its potential expansiveness, Coetzee notes in a passing comment to Auster that he bought *War and Peace* as an intellectually ambitious sixteen year-old in 1950s Cape Town "because *Time* magazine said it was the greatest novel ever written" (180). In the

case of our reader, the value brokers included Randall in Johannesburg, Kennedy in Dublin, the judges of the South African CNA prize, and—to fill out the details of her predicament further still—her senior colleagues at Rhodes University who had prescribed *Country* as part of a course on African literature she was teaching. Tracing a lineage from *The Epic of Sundiata*, an oral narrative about the founding of the Empire of Mali in the thirteenth century, to Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful ones are not yet Born* (1969), the course, which drew extensively on the Heinemann African Writers series for its materials, was designed to encourage students to situate various South African writers, including Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Miriam Tlali and Coetzee, in a wider *continental* context. For our junior lecturer, however, this only raised more questions about the actual experience of reading the Ravan edition. On the one hand, given its “content”—at least its setting, its main languages, and its political preoccupations—not to mention the writing-games it plays with the Afrikaans tradition of the realist *plaasroman* (“farm-novel”), it seemed, to her mind, to achieve its primary effects only when seen in “a national frame” (“Overview”, *JWL*). On the other hand, given its many “cosmopolitan threads”, it was impossible to treat it simply as “a product of our *bodem*” as the censor put it or, indeed, to consider 1970s South Africa its “culture of origin” in any straightforward sense (“Overview”, *JWL*; Damrosch, 2003, 4). Thinking of the “POEMAS CREPUSCULARIAS”, for instance, which linked it to Chile and Italy in the early part of the last century, our reader was more inclined to understand it in internationalist and transhistorical terms, say as a work engaged with traditions of Hispanic and Italian modernism, though that hardly captured the full range of the many literary, philosophical and other “networks” it both inhabited and created (“Overview”, *JWL*).

## 5.

Our reader's experience of the Ravan edition may now be a thing of the past—the world has moved on and that edition has been out of print since the early 1990s—but the questions it asked of her and the culture she inhabited have, if anything, become more pertinent today, given *Country*'s extended afterlife in translation. Since the first French edition appeared in 1981, it has been published in twenty languages (Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, German, Serbian, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Japanese, Dutch, Slovenian, Greek, Spanish, Swedish, Russian, Albanian, Estonian and Mandarin) and six scripts (Latin, Hebrew, Cyrillic, Greek, Chinese and Japanese), making it, at least on one measure, an exemplary instance of world literature. It is still some way off *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee's most translated work, however, which has now appeared in forty languages and fourteen scripts. Of the twenty,

only Peter Bergsma's Dutch version (*In het hart van het land*, 1985) recasts the "bilingual" experience of the original, retaining the Afrikaans dialogue and, for instance, having Magda write "EK HET NIE GELD NIE" (Bergsma, 165). Again following the basic language divisions of the original, Bergsma also preserves Magda's broken Spanish while rewording the aerial voices she hears in Dutch. Yet the Dutch-Afrikaans "bilingualism" his readers experience is still inevitably different to the English-Afrikaans original. It also produces some anomalies of its own. In a few cases, for instance, Coetzee retained some Afrikaans words in his English self-translation, "baas" being the most telling example (see van der Vlies, 138-42). Originally of Dutch origin, the *OED* gives its primary meaning as "master, employer of labour"—it also notes that the word has been a naturalized part of the English language since the seventeenth century, albeit mainly in its South African variety (*OED*). Coetzee no doubt kept the Afrikaans form as a distinctive linguistic marker of the farm's equally distinctive feudal code. So, in the original English-Afrikaans version, Magda, commenting on the testy master-serf relations between her father and the farm workers, asks: "And was it their provocation to reply *Ja baas* to his provocation, casting their eyes down, hiding their smiles, biding their time till he overreached himself?" (1978, 130). Preserving the freighted key term, Coetzee translated the Afrikaans phrase as "*Yes baas*"; while Bergsma blended the Afrikaans into the Dutch, inescapably reducing, if not eliminating, the word's foreignizing effect as well as the culturally and politically specific resonance (1977, 142). Following Coetzee's lead, all the translations in languages based on the Latinate writing system preserve the Afrikaans term in its original orthography.

## 6.

For David Damrosch, who makes circulation a key to his own concept of world literature, "a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (2003, 4). As we have already seen, *Country* puts this formulation under pressure in part because its "original culture" is a matter of debate rather than a given, but also because it exceeds the confines of any "literary system". For one thing, it engages with many such systems, not just those in English and Afrikaans; for another, its targets are not only literary: it takes on philosophy, theology and much else besides. To avoid these restrictions, we could say the translations make *Country* an instance of world literature in Damrosch's sense because they give it life in a new *language* and, in some cases, a new *writing system*. And yet, as Coetzee's comments on Maude's *War and Peace* indicate and as the cautionary tale about Magda's vocalized

“pure meanings” underscores, even this formulation falls short because it fails to address the fact that Coetzee’s *Country* becomes present in these other systems as a new work, as, say, Bergsma’s *Land*, much as Coetzee’s own self-translation entered the global Anglosphere as a new “monolingual” English edition. Given Gisèle Sapiro’s work on the unequal and uneven flows of translation—a concern organizations like PEN International and UNESCO have addressed for many years—it is worth noting that this became the standard source or mediating text for translators—again Bergsma is the exception (see Sapiro and McDonald 2017). Sometimes this difference is explicitly signalled in the choice of title. While most translators opt, like Bergsma, for a rough equivalent of Coetzee’s original (though does the Dutch “land”, or the French “pays”, or the Hebrew *הארץ* / *Haaretz* really have the same resonance as the English “country”?), some recast it completely as, for example, *I det mørke landet* (Norwegian, *In the dark country*, possibly conjuring up ideas of Africa as “det mørke kontinent”), *Deserto* (Italian, *Desert/Wasteland/Wilderness*), *Askund* (Albanian, *Nowhere*), 内陆深处 (Mandarin, *Nèi lù shēn chù*, *Deep Inland*), *En medio de ninguna parte* (Spanish, *In the middle of nowhere*), and 石の女 (Japanese, *Ishi no onna*, *Stone Woman*), avoiding the specific idiomatic colouring of the original English altogether.

## 7.

For translators and students of translation, these differences are central and worth detailed scrutiny. But is there anything English readers of Coetzee might gain by keeping these other versions in view, thinking beyond the “monolingual” self-translation currently in circulation?

At one level, the opportunities a lateral comparison affords are philosophical and linguistic rather than literary. For instance, reading across the translations opens up ways of developing Coetzee’s critique of the philosophers’ ideal language of “pure meanings”, since as a quick comparison shows actual languages, even those that share the Latinate writing system, do not agree when it comes to the onomatopoeic rendering, let alone the graphic notation, of pure (non-human) vocalizations. Consider the sounds Magda’s imagined dog and parrot make: her “Woof!” and “Squawk!” (1978, 125) become variously «¡Guau!» and «“Ca-ca-ca» (Spanish, 171), “Woef!” and “Lorre”! (Dutch, 166), «Ouah!» and «Jaco!» (French, 169), «Voff!» and «Kræ!» (Norwegian, 146), »Vuh!» and »Vaak!» (Finnish, 159-60), “Au!” and “Currupaco” (Portuguese, 163), »Vuf!» and »Orkk!» (Danish, 158), »Wuff!» and »Quak!» (German, 186), “abbaia” and “squittisece” (Italian, 145), “Hau, hau!” and “Krra,

krra!” (Polish, 177). The Mandarin has “汪! 汪!” and “呱! 呱!” (“wang, wang” and “guāguā”, 187).

At another level, reading with an eye on these differences, casts new light on Coetzee’s own forays into a wider multilingualism via Spanish, since this plays out differently across the translations creating various effects. Translators using the Latinate writing system retain most of the capitalized Spanish words in their original (corrupted) orthography, as does the Hebrew, though when it comes to Magda’s self-identification as “CINDRLA” (1978, 132), the Danish translator opted for “ASKPOT”, a deformed version of “Askepot” (literally, “Ashpot”, 166), while the Spanish has “CENICNT”, a misspelling of “la Cenicienta” (181). Inevitably all Magda’s attempts at Spanish lose some of their foreignizing effect in the Spanish version which on one occasion also alters her misspelling, giving “SON AISOLADO” for “SON ISOLADO”—the grammatically and orthographically correct rendering of “I am isolated”, if that is what Magda intends, would be “soy aislado” or “estoy aislado” (181).

These shifts in language, orthography and even graphic presentation inevitably created a challenge for the Chinese translator. Her solution was to reproduce the originals, adding a Mandarin translation in parenthesis. She also included the following explanatory footnote accompanying the first occurrence in paragraph 251:

ES MI in Spanish could refer to something like “it is me”, but it is not a typical Spanish word. In the text that follows, there are more such examples in capitalized letters. We could understand some of them by guessing (if so, I shall put the Chinese equivalents just behind these coined words, rather than give them any footnote). However, some of these words are really confusing, and thus beyond us. They sometimes seem to be a mixture of Italian and Catalan, but this is not always the case. What is worse, it is more incomprehensible because Coetzee creates a deliberately fragmented narrative. The translator believes Coetzee himself coins these words and wants to show the reader a “universal” language, which, as he puts in paragraph 241, “belong[s] in fact not to a local Spanish but to a Spanish of pure meanings”. Thus the translator has guessed one of its meanings based on their common Latin root. The translator believes Coetzee wants to create a puzzle for his readers. (195)

The “equivalents” the translator guessed were, however, often rather different in kind. In the case of CINDRLA ES MI, for instance, she decided to mix translation with transliteration, rendering the letters as 我是辛德瑞拉, giving the back translation and the Pinyin version of the name “I am *xin de ri la*” (198). With POEMAS CREPUSCLRS, however, she chose a more direct, if surprising, translation: 黎明之歌 (*li ming zhi ge*, “dawn song”, 198).

Occasionally, however, the translator’s choice of a single word or phrase produces a fundamental difference in itself, again casting new light on Coetzee’s own preoccupations. Considering Magda’s views on writing in the “bilingual” and “monolingual” originals, for example, it is clear that she is not always “deeply estranged from any Western norm” as Kennedy put it. When she describes herself as “descending to ideographs” in her final effort to communicate with the “sky-creatures”, she voices a very entrenched Euro-American alphabetic prejudice (1978, 133). Since she produces a glamourized and sexualized self-portrait in stones, she evidently has something like Chinese characters or Egyptian hieroglyphs in mind, rather than, say, Hindu-Arabic numerals which are more purely ideographic—they also form a central non-phonetic part of all Latinate writing systems. “Descending” of course implies that supposedly ideographic writing systems are less advanced than purportedly phonetic ones. The idea that there is a categorical and evolutionary difference is itself part of the standard prejudicial story in which the ideal writing system is envisaged not just as phonetic but as “one in which each letter would stand for just one individual sound”, much as each word has one meaning in the dreams of the philosophers (Harris, 39). Most translators reflect Magda’s entrapment within this prejudice by finding an equivalent for “descending”. Bergsma, for instance, has “En vervolgens verlaagde ik me tot beeldschrift” (“And then I lowered myself to image-writing”, 177); while the Spanish translator gives “descendiendo ya a los ideogramas” (“descending then to ideographs”, 182). For readers of the Italian, German and Norwegian versions, however, this feature of Magda’s cultural prison-house is downplayed or excised altogether. While the Italian renders the verb simply as “passando” (“passing/moving”, 154), the German construes the clause as “Und dann ging ich zu Ideogrammen über” (“And then I switched to ideographs”, 198), while the Norwegian has the slightly less neutral “Jeg tydde til ideogrammer” (“I resorted to ideographs”, 155). More unexpectedly, given the history of Euro-American attitudes, the Mandarin is as neutral as the German: 我把字母转化为象形文字 (*wo ba zi mu zhuan wei xiang xing wen zi*, or “I transform these letters into ideographs”, 200).

## 8.

What relevance might all this have for scholars “interested in developing the concept of World Literature”? By “all this” I mean not just the details about *In the Heart of the Country* and its history, but the various actual, hypothetical and finally possible reading experiences it affords both in its original forms and in its translations.

To address this question I propose, by way of conclusion, to revisit and retranslate the 1907 essay in which Rabindranath Tagore developed his own concept, or rather anti-concept, of বিশ্ব সাহিত্য (which can be Romanized as *Vishva Sahitya* and translated as “World Literature”). In his anthology *World Literature in Theory* (2014), which includes Swapan Chakravorty’s 2001 translation of the essay, Damrosch describes it as a “path-breaking” statement that “speaks of the universal values that world literature can embody” (6). In a similar but more chary vein, Pheng Cheah cites it in the epilogue to *What is a world?* (2016) setting it up, like Damrosch, alongside Goethe’s pronouncements on *Weltliteratur*, as a parallel non-Euro-American formulation of what he calls “the older vision of world literature as the expression of universal humanity” (310). Though more attuned to the intricacies of Tagore’s writing and to questions of translation, Supriya Chaudhuri falls back on the same formulation in her otherwise astute essay “Singular Universals”, claiming that for Tagore literature “serves to express universal humanity” (2016, 81). There is much in Chakravorty’s translation that makes such claims understandable, not least his version of Tagore’s concluding sentence: “It is time we pledged that our goal is to view universal humanity in universal literature by freeing ourselves from rustic uncatholicity; that we shall recognise a totality in each particular author’s work, and that in this totality we shall perceive the interrelations among all human efforts at expression” (Tagore, 2001, 150). Yet to take this as a straightforward articulation of Tagore’s *concept* of world literature is not just to treat him as a mysteriously comprehensible voice from the sky, ignoring all the promise and perils of translation, but to miss at least two key elements of his thinking both of which reflect his partly Buddhist-inspired wariness of conceptualization as such.

The first concerns his idea of literature. “We do not properly understand literature (*sahitya*),” Tagore notes at one pivotal point in his wide-ranging discussion, “if we reduce it to place-time-pot (*desh-kāl-pātra*)”—*pātra* could also be “container” or “vessel” (Tagore, 1961, 771). Chakravorty gives the whole sentence as “literature is not viewed in its true light if we see it confined to a particular space and time”, making it plausible to see the compound



*desh-kāl-pātra* as something like “context” in English (147-48). Yet why limit translation to a search for linguistic correspondences or even rough equivalents? Is it not sometimes more productive, linguistically, intellectually and culturally, to extend the expressive capacities of the target via the source language, creating a new *English* compound in this case?

Considering the very long history of loans and calques, such transformative movements are after all part of the ordinary life of languages—recall the emergence of the Dutch word “baas” into seventeenth-century English.

As it happens, the creative potential of such movements was also central to Tagore’s understanding of translation. Indeed, by marking the particular, Bangla-inflected character of his thinking, the foreignizing neologism “place-time-pot” highlights an important feature of his interlingual practice as a writer, while also reflecting the intercultural ideals he championed as an educationalist. For Tagore, literary creativity is above all an act of resistance directed against all forms of containment and reification, including the conceptual kinds many varieties of literary criticism and academic scholarship favour either actively or by default. So if literature cannot be reduced to “place-time-pot”—say, the historicist’s curatorial object—neither can it be seen merely as a “constructed artefact”—say, the formalist’s well-wrought urn—because it constitutes “a world” (*ekti jagat*), the creative potential of which is, “like the material world”, always “ongoing” and “incomplete” (772).

Why is this? Because, as Tagore explains in the opening paragraphs of the essay, it is an expression of “*ananda*” (“joy” or “delight”). This has two important consequences. First, it sets literature apart from the sphere of calculating rationality, which Tagore associates with an arrogant will to power over others, and from the sphere of practical necessity or need, which he also links to power though this time over the environment—“water, air, and fire” become “our unpaid servants” (Tagore, 2001, 138). Second, and conversely, seeing literature as an expression of *ananda* connects it to a wide range of other seemingly gratuitous or superfluous everyday activities, ranging from the elaborate rituals of a wedding ceremony to the needless theatricality of warfare. These are also manifestations of “man’s excess (*prachurya*), his wealth (*aisharya*), that which overflows all his need” and, for that matter, all forms of rationalistic calculation whether political, economic or, indeed, literary-critical (769). As Chaudhuri puts it, literature for Tagore is “a movement of affect which binds human beings together” (2016, 84). It is partly because of this affective overflowing that it cannot be contained within a “place-time-pot”.

The second key element of his thinking concerns his idea of the world. Here the difficulties have less to do with translation as such than with the many unattributed allusions to the Bangla literary traditions that permeate the essay. When it comes to his understanding of the world, the principal figure is the medieval *bhakti* poet Chandidas and the main point of reference is the song Jeanne Openshaw translates as follows:

I have made the world my home  
And my home the world.  
I have made “others” my own people,  
And my own people “others”. (vi)

Tagore echoes the second two lines when explaining the “connection” (Chakravorty has “bond”) *ananda* creates: “It is when we know the other as our self and our self as other”, or, as Chakravorty has it, “it is nothing but knowing others as our own, and our selves as others” (763; 139). Again, Tagore contrasts this with the connections rationality, particularly political rationality, fashions—it is “like the bond between the hunter and his prey”—and with the alliances required to satisfy basic needs—he mentions “the English trader” who “once secured his aims by bowing to the Nawab” but “eventually ascended to the throne himself” (138).

Political and economic domination over others drive both these forms of connectedness. Whereas, when it comes to the ties created in a spirit of *ananda*, the self and the other are both undone in a process of reciprocal transformation that involves simultaneously reaching out and embracing the foreign, on the one hand, and turning inward, discovering the foreign within, on the other. Later in the essay, Tagore echoes Chandidas’s first two lines: “the heart is constantly at pains to find the world in our self and our self in the world”, which Chakravorty renders as “the heart’s longing to make the world its own and itself the world’s” (767; 144). Crucially, for Tagore, “the world” in this context is neither a geographical space nor a determinate set of universal values: it is an aspiration toward an ever greater understanding of and feeling for interconnectedness which, like the creative potential of literature, is always in the making, never complete. For this he took his cue as much from Chandidas as from the itinerant Bāul singers of Bengal whose vagabond, quasi-anarchic humanism shaped his own self-understanding as a poet and his ambitions as an educationalist (see McDonald, 2017). Hence the name he gave the university he founded in Santiniketan in 1921: Vishva Bharati which, as Dutta and Robinson explain, is “a compound

made from the Sanskrit word for universe [or world] and Bharati, a goddess in the *Rig Veda* associated with the Hindu goddess of learning, Saraswati” (literarily “world-learning”, 220).

With these two key elements of his thinking in mind, we can return to the sentence with which he concludes the essay, retranslating it as follows: “The time has come to try to free ourselves from narrow parochialism [or village-provincialism] and to aim to see the World-Man (*vishva-manab*) within world literature; to find in the works of particular writers a whole, and in that whole the interrelations among all forms of human expression” (773). Importantly, the “whole” may, on this formulation, be a consequence of the writer’s own creativity—the relations she actively produces in each work—or simply an effect of the medium she chooses to adopt—the relations already embedded in the novel form, say, or the English language. As importantly, for Tagore this understanding of world literature as an intercultural aspiration has nothing to do with reified values of any kind, whether “universal” or “cosmopolitan”, or, indeed, with simple oppositions or choices between “nationalism/provincialism” and “cosmopolitanism/universalism”. Nor is it viable on this model to see world literature merely as an effect of translation and circulation understood in historical, economic, geographical or cultural terms. Encountering the world in Tagore’s sense via literature in his sense is about the way we experience the ongoing creative potential of each individual work as an intercultural effort on the writer’s part in the first instance to remake the self and the other, the indigenous and the foreign, in an open-ended, superfluous, even gratuitously wasteful spirit of *ananda*. This why he offered his anti-concept *Vishva Sahitya* as an alternative to what he called in a doubly self-distancing gesture “Comparative Literature”—he used the English phrase—which left too much securely in place (771; 148).

## 9.

So what might it mean to experience *In the Heart of the Country* as world literature in this sense? To begin with it would require us to become attuned to the ways in which Coetzee foreignizes his own elective cultural heritage, including the genre of the Afrikaans *plaasroman*, what he would later call the “transplanted European novel”, and some dominant philosophies of language in the European tradition (Coetzee, 1988, 161). At the same time, we would need to recognize the connections he creates with other cultures and languages, and those in which he is already embedded simply because of the literary media, languages and writing systems in which he chooses to work. Extending this author-centred analysis, we could then track *Country*’s circulation and reception in its original “bilingual” form within

South Africa and the fate of the self-translated “monolingual” version across the various copyright territories of the English-reading world. We could also consider the varied impact it had on very differently located readers ranging from, say, the Afrikaans censor who remained committed to seeing it in exclusively national terms to our hypothetical reader who hesitatingly embraced its apparent cosmopolitanism and to Kennedy who championed its foreignness for her Irish readership in the late 1970s. Adding the translations would raise other questions, allowing us to gauge the success with which each translator, drawing on the resources of each new language and writing system, remakes the world Coetzee created, enabling readers of Wen Min’s 内 陆 深 处, for instance, to engage with the unique intercultural and interlingual connections her version opens up.

## 10.

Exactly which figure in this unfolding story we choose to emphasise—the author, the publisher, the translator, the reader—is only one, relatively contingent consideration, however. What matters is that we acknowledge with Tagore that, when it comes to experiencing *Country* in its various iterations as world literature, the *concept* as such is at best only a means, a way of pointing to the many worlds it both inhabits and creates, each of which reveals something more about the connections reifying and rationalistic modes of thought obscure, ignore or exclude. The reason? For Tagore, as Chaudhuri notes, “there is no world literature, only a relation of literature to the world” or, as I would put it, only the experience of relating to an ever-widening range of intersecting worlds via some forms of literary writing (2016, 86).

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