

Comparison Literature

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A FAMOUS SOUTH AFRICAN AUTHOR COMPOSES a series of essays in English for publication, first, in German and, later, in French. The essays are to be called “Strong Opinions.” However, the author does not simply *write* the essays. Rather, he scrawls a few illegible notes onto a sheaf of papers, dictates into a tape recorder, and then hands both notes and tape to a Filipina-Australian typist, who transfers his words onto computer disks, though not before fixing them up, as she puts it, “where they lack a certain something.”¹ These essays come to us, along with the story of their production and circulation, in J. M. Coetzee’s most recent novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, whose “*Wereldprimeur*” appeared in Holland on August 2, 2007.² The book was soon published in Australia, Coetzee’s current home, and then in the United Kingdom, Canada, Spain, the United States, Germany, Japan, and France. Fourteen months after its release, Coetzee’s novel was available in at least nine national editions and six languages.³

Published in multiple languages almost simultaneously and beginning in Dutch rather than in English, *Diary of a Bad Year* does not belong to any one national, ethnic, or linguistic tradition. It is instead a comparative novel, or an example of what I call *comparison literature*. It fits this rubric because of its circulation, to be sure, but also because of its production: formally, the text experiments with comparative structures such as lists and catalogues; typographically, it invokes historical practices of translation that emphasize comparison between source and target; and thematically, it reflects on gestures of ethical, national, and generic comparison. These elements often work together, as when the novel’s comparative architecture—almost every page features a public essay interparagraphed with personal diaries—establishes a visual juxtaposition that matches classic modes of interlineal and facing-page translation. We are urged to compare verbally as well as visually: to consider how a word’s appearance in a philosophical essay at the top of the page relates to its appearance in one of the diaries printed below and how the meaning of an idea changes as it moves between the novel’s many discursive registers. These registers include academic and popular; public and private; the geopolitical and the neighborhood; oral, written, analog, and

digital; standard and vernacular. Comparison functions, too, as one of the novel's abiding ethical concerns: the text asks whether transnational enlargement in fact enhances—or ultimately thwarts—our capacity for social responsibility and political agency.

By using the term *comparison literature*, I mean to draw our attention to the traditional distinction between a field of national literature, in which scholars typically share a locus of production (a place, a community, a language), and the field of comparative literature, in which scholars typically share a structure of analysis (comparison in its various modes). Whereas British literature, to take one example, points to the study of texts that were made or published in the United Kingdom or by U.K. citizens, comparative literature points to no specific archive.⁴ Instead, it designates a repertoire of intellectual strategies that are addressed to multiple literary cultures or language traditions. However, since comparative literature often takes for granted that each literary culture is geographically and politically separate, the distinction between fields is not as sharp as it may at first seem. Both British literary studies and comparative literary studies trade in national categories and assume the ontological integrity of a given text. *Comparison literature* fits uneasily within methodologies, comparative and national, that assign unique locations or unique substance to literary artifacts. It asks us to imagine new geographies of literary production and requires methodologies that understand the history of a book to include its many editions and translations.

Novels such as Coetzee's are part of an emergent genre of transnational fiction whose preoccupation with comparison is stimulated in part by the historical conditions of the global literary marketplace and in part by several related developments such as the flourishing of migrant communities, and especially migrant writers, within metropolitan centers throughout the world. In addition, comparison literature responds to the ongoing problem of statelessness and post-Holocaust debates about the treatment of minorities. And it joins the renewed effort to imagine transnational and/or cosmopolitan paradigms that offer alternatives to national models of political community. Comparison literature is also part of a general turn to translation that has been crucial to many intellectual projects of the past two decades, including work in political philosophy, literary history, and postcolonial studies. Judith Butler has recently argued that a "non-nationalist or counter-nationalist mode of belonging," a mode of belonging that does not exclude minorities, will require a "certain distance or fissure," which Butler associates literally and figuratively with translation.⁵ Instead of "extending or augmenting the homogeneity of the nation," she asserts, genuine equality requires "a collectivity that comes to exercise its freedom in a language or set of

languages for which difference and translation are irreducible" (61–62). While Butler has placed translation at the center of a debate about political philosophies of the nation, Susan Bassnett has claimed that the field of comparative literature needs above all to "rethink its relationship to Translation Studies"; in fact, she argues, "as translation studies establishes itself firmly as a subject based in inter-cultural study and offering a methodology of some rigour . . . so comparative literature appears less like a discipline and more like a branch of something else."⁶

However, as Bassnett implies, it is not simply a matter of importing the old translation studies into new transnational contexts. Both Butler and Bassnett are invoking a mode of translation that emphasizes a) the historical uses of translation in and between cultures; b) the importance of translation and multilingualism within nation-states; and c) the ethical and intellectual imperative to keep translation "irreducible," which is to say, visible within collective speech acts (Butler's example is the national anthem) and translated texts. Naoki Sakai, Rey Chow, and Lawrence Venuti, to name perhaps the most well-known advocates for this mode of translation, have all argued that, in Venuti's words, the most responsible translation will actually refuse "the illusion of transparency... by deviating from the values, beliefs, and representations that currently hold sway in the target language."⁷ Moreover, as Chow argues, it will understand the source language and culture as "comparative" rather than as "monolingual, monocultural, or mononational" (85). In other words, the new translation studies insists on a definition of national languages that emphasizes internal variety and a complex mixing of local, regional, and global idioms. Comparison thus appears as predicate as well as practice. It is this development above all that is central to Coetzee's work, in which he considers how transnational comparison shapes the insides of novels, persons, and communities.

Treating comparison at the level of typography, language, genre, and theme, *Diary of a Bad Year* anticipates its own future as a work of world literature. It is therefore a novel that does not simply *appear* in translation but in important ways has been *written for translation*. To adapt Matthew Kirschenbaum's phrase for artworks that begin on the computer ("born-digital"), we might say that Coetzee's novel is *born-translated* in a diagetic and nondiagetic sense.⁸ Before I turn to the way these problems occupy the novel's diagnosis, it is worth noting that the novel's many and immediate translations are historically unprecedented, if we consider how quickly *Diary* saturated various national markets across several continents. By saturation of national markets, I refer to the publication of different editions in the same language (for example, Australian, U.K., U.S., and Canadian) and of different editions in different languages (for example, English, French, and Japanese); these editions have ap-

peared in several regions of the globe (for example, Australia/Japan, North America, Western Europe). Of course, long before the twenty-first century, there were literary works that traveled from their first language into multiple languages and national editions. But these travels were relatively slow and initially confined to regional distribution. To take several, well-known examples, the international bestseller *Don Quixote*, noted by Franco Moretti for its exceptionally fast absorption into many language systems, took fifty-one years, from 1605 to 1656, to find its way into six national languages; and it was only in 1769 that the novel was published outside of Western Europe.⁹ Isabel Hofmeyr tells us that *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678, has been translated into more than two hundred languages, including eighty African languages, but it began its migration beyond Europe and the North Atlantic in 1835.¹⁰ And according to Martin Puchner, the 1848 appearance of the *Communist Manifesto* in German was followed by Swedish, English, Russian, Serbian, and French editions in a speedy twenty-four years; the first edition printed in a non-European language was the Japanese translation, published in 1904.¹¹ Finally, a contemporary example that echoes the expansive geography and in some ways the speed of *Diary's* diffusion: between July and December of 2005, the phenomenally successful sixth installment of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, entered fifteen languages, including Vietnamese, Afrikaans, and Estonian, though as a result of piracy concerns, the first translation was delayed by two months.¹² In this case, linguistic and economic translatability may have actually hindered the process of translation.

Born-translated novels are designed to travel, so they tend to veer away from the modernist emphasis on linguistic experimentation. In the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett and, later, Anthony Burgess and Salman Rushdie, thematic innovation is sutured to the resources of vernacular idiom such that the work becomes, in the words of contemporary novelist and translator Tim Parks, "a thing made of language."¹³ In order to find a place in the global marketplace, Parks asserts, books written for translation will need to invent alternatives to the emphasis on idiolect. For better or for worse, he avers, "the writer whose quarrel with language is not manifested in rebellious and provocative events at the narrative level is almost certain to be passed over" (245). Born-translated novels have to be accessible, as Parks suggests, but they need not be obsequious. To accommodate translation, after all, is not only to encourage it. Accommodation may also involve appropriation, opportunism, and innovation. Comparison literature, then, as I imagine it, does emphasize narrative over idiom, but it uses that emphasis to explore the political history of languages in formal and thematic registers that can survive translation. In this way, comparison literature adapts the novel of transnational contact to an age of multilingual circulation.

Any list of novelists whose works are born-translated would have to include Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, W. G. Sebald, Tim Parks, Caryl Phillips, and Jamaica Kincaid. We could also point to individual works by David Peace, David Mitchell, the collaborative authors/artists Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, Peter Ho Davies, Kiran Desai, and Mohsin Hamid, the author of the bestseller *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. One can see among these writers the proliferation of what I call “the anthological novel”: think here of the geographic sampling and collating we see in Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, Phillips’s *The Distant Shore*, Ho Davies’s *The Welsh Girl*, and Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*.¹⁴ Comparison literature tends to be written in English, and most works hew to the novel form. Novels travel more easily than other genres, and Anglophone novels travel especially well because English has become the most-read, most-translated language in the world. Yet, the hegemony of the marketplace does not guarantee the hegemony of marketplace fiction. Unlike the average international bestseller, translated works of comparison literature confront readers with the history and politics of language, and they do this better than many so-called untranslatable novels that emphasize vernacular culture and idiomatic expression. This may seem counterintuitive, but it makes sense when we consider that a good translation is supposed to pass for a work produced from the start in the target language. To do this, translators will often homogenize regional differences within national languages by simplifying vernacular idioms or exchanging vernacular phrases for standard formulations. Some translators of complex idiomatic works, such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, resist simplification but accept instead that versions in new languages will venture far afield of the original works. Given these practices, novels that treat multilingualism through narrative events, characterization, and structure are more likely than novels that treat multilingualism through idiom to retain in translation an engagement with local histories of language.

Not only for the instrumental reasons detailed above, but also for reasons of political strategy, Coetzee has argued persistently against the assumption that all works in the original give us better or more representative access to local communities than all translations do. In his novels, Coetzee often represents non-English speech or writing, but he avoids stylistic marking such as grammatical inversion or broken diction that would remind readers of a specific original language. There are at least three consequences to this choice. Coetzee’s texts can be more easily translated, since there is no dialect to be reproduced in another language. He does not associate the consciousness of a kind of character, where kind is defined by ethnic community or third-world experience, with specific features of language. Finally, he creates a text in which even English readers are blocked from imagining a direct, simultaneous encounter

with a language that is their own. This last point is crucial: for Coetzee, it has always seemed inappropriate, both ethically and historically, to suggest that his writing is part of a unique national-language tradition or emerges from a coherent national community. In this way, one could say that all of Coetzee's fiction—not only those works that treat transnational comparison thematically—project comparative beginnings.

We can find this ambivalence about national traditions stated more or less explicitly throughout Coetzee's interviews, criticism, and fiction. "Perhaps—is this possible?—I have no mother tongue," muses the essayist in *Diary of a Bad Year* (195). The essayist implies that his sense of discomfort in any one language, his sense that in his voice "some other person (but who?) is being imitated, followed, even mimicked" (195), can be attributed to the history of colonialism. He imagines that middle-class Indians might experience something similar: "There must be many who have done their schooling in English, who routinely speak English in the workplace and at home (throwing in the odd local locution for colouring), who command other languages only imperfectly, yet who, as they listen to themselves speak or as they read what they have written, have the uneasy feeling that there is something false going on" (197). The falseness that Coetzee hears in his own voice and imagines in the voices of postcolonial readers and writers elsewhere does not represent a failure to use English successfully. To the contrary: it represents the difficulty of registering, as one speaks or writes flawlessly, the history of violence suppressed by fluency and monolingualism. As both a colonial and a postcolonial nation, to use Andrew van der Vlies' helpful formulation, South Africa has continued to struggle over whether national belonging should ever be associated with a single language.¹⁵

Coetzee's work has internalized many of the strategies of comparison that have transformed the literature disciplines, among them the investigation of transnational and multilingual histories of literary culture, the analysis of how the global dissemination of literature has been tied to institutions of the state and the apparatus of imperialism, and a new focus on technology and translation.¹⁶ *Diary of a Bad Year* exchanges one kind of comparison for another: instead of arranging representative examples from distinct locations, genres, or points of view, the novel places narrative episodes, characters, and historical events into multiple containers. Sometimes it can seem as if there are no containers at all, and this is the central problem that comparison literature poses both for literary history and for models of political community. In the remainder of this essay, I will turn, first, to the extant paradigm we have for literature that solicits comparison—world literature—and then I will take up briefly Coetzee's recent novel, which allows us to consider how comparison literature rejects and in some ways retains national paradigms.

Making World Literature

Recent discussions of world literature have assumed that books begin in one place and then move out to other places.¹⁷ But there are many novels, written by migrants and for an international audience, that exist from the beginning in several places. Of course, the notion that a book could begin in several places complicates traditional models of literary history and political community. Literary critics will need to ask how the multilingualism of the book changes the national singularity of the work. Philosophers of the nation will need to ask how the translation of literary texts, into more languages and faster than ever before, establishes networks of affiliation that are less exclusive and less bounded than the nation's "community of fate." Generally speaking, we can identify two paradigms that influence most contemporary accounts of the relationship between literary history and political community: the paradigm of "possessive collectivism," which has a long history in philosophy, anthropology, and legal theory, and the paradigm of "imagined communities," which Benedict Anderson introduced in 1983, and which has become so influential in history, literary studies, and many other fields that it operates almost tacitly in our ways of talking about the effect of books on political collectivities.¹⁸ Where have these theories brought us, and where might we now go in thinking about literature's engagement with conceptions of the collective?

"Possessive collectivism" extends the idea of possessive individualism to nations and ethnic groups.¹⁹ In Quebecois ideology, the anthropologist Richard Handler explains in a well-known study, the nation was understood as both a "collection of individuals and a collective individual," who/which possesses unique, permanent qualities such as a "soul, spirit, and personality," and who/which has the capacity to exercise sovereignty, free will, and choice.²⁰ Rosemary Coombe has used Handler's work on nationalist ideology to describe the effects and underlying assumptions of international copyright. In copyright law, Coombe argues, "Each nation or group is perceived as an author who originates a culture from resources that come from within and can thus lay claim to exclusive possession of the expressive works that embody its personality" (224–225). Literary works belong to the nation because they are the embodiment of its internal spirit or genius, and we know the nation has a spirit or genius because it has literary works to show for it. This is a feedback loop: nationhood owes its identity to authorship, but there is no authorship without nationhood, since expressivity belongs to unique individuals, who in turn belong to unique groups. Among minorities and colonized subjects, possessive collectivism has had the positive effect of validating intellectual labor and justifying political sovereignty. For our purposes,

possessive collectivism is notable because it helps to explain why emphasizing the original production of artworks tends to affirm national literary histories: original art and original nations grow up together. We could speculate, however, that a theory of artworks that understood acts of editing and translating as acts of making might affirm a different norm of literary history and a different conception of the community that literary history helps to justify.

Before I push this speculation further, consider Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities." Rather than rehearse Anderson's now-classic theory, I would like to mark an important difference between his account of literary nation making and the possessive collectivism model. It was Anderson's innovation to argue that the rise of print culture, and especially the rise of novels and newspapers, contributed to the possibility of imagining a nation as a shared, exclusive collectivity among strangers. Print culture contributed to this possibility in two structural ways: by creating the impression of simultaneous reading across space; and by creating the impression, within the novel, of simultaneity among people who never meet—an impression that Anderson memorably calls the experience of "meanwhile" (25). The second impression strengthens the first: if we can perceive the novel as a container for strangers who act together without knowing it, then we can imagine the nation as a container for us, the readers of that novel, who act together in just the same way—simultaneously, collectively, and invisibly. As Jonathan Culler has observed in an essay on Anderson's work, it is not the novel's content or theme but its form, its way of being a container for simultaneity among strangers, that creates "a political distinction between friend and foe."²¹ Anderson's model does not imply that the artwork is expressing a repertoire of national characteristics that could be owned; rather, it argues that the novel represents—and generates—a community based on the imagined concurrence of action. If there is a residue of possessive collectivism in Anderson's materialism, it is in his assumption that a text has an original language and that the text's language will coincide with the language of its readers. What happens, we need to ask, when these languages are not the same? Or when there is no original language to speak of?

We can address these questions by returning to Anderson's project. But instead of approaching *Imagined Communities* as an argument, as others have done so well,²² I want to treat it as an example, since it is as an example of world literature that Anderson's book coincides, historically and formally, with today's traveling novel. Like Coetzee's recent works, *Imagined Communities* stages an encounter between literary history and political theory. And like Coetzee's novels, the study itself functions as a work of world literature both because of its circulation and because of

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

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

There is no chapter in *Imagined Communities* that presents itself as an analysis of the novel today, but the afterword to the third edition is suggestive about translation's effects on literary history. Readers become part of the book's story about how print culture structures imagined communities, and thus the community of the book is shown to exceed the community of the text. In this way, *Imagined Communities* shares its

narrative structure with many other contemporary transnational works and also resembles edited and translated works from earlier eras. As Anderson argues, translation can contribute to the imagination of national communities. But as Anderson demonstrates, translation puts pressure on the conceptual boundaries between one community and another and may spur the perception of new communities altogether. To relinquish my initial distinction between Anderson's example and his argument, we might consider those nineteenth-century books such as anthologies, periodicals, and episodic novels in which the experience of a single container is disrupted by the perception of alternative collectivities.²³

In modernist literature, the apprehension of simultaneity in time and space is regularly breached by free indirect discourse, by the importation of multiple languages, and by multiple frames of narration. In the decades since World War II, with the expansive circulation of Anglophone writing, transnational novelists have developed structures of "meanwhile" that are not only "relative," as Wai Chee Dimock has put it, but recursive and rivalrous.²⁴ But perhaps the most significant continuity between Anderson's text and those of Coetzee and other comparative writers is their response to new theories and practices of translation. If Anglophone modernists made their novels nearly untranslatable because tied so closely to the idiosyncrasies of English, writers such as Coetzee and Ishiguro (and Anderson) purposefully accommodate translation by encouraging multiple editions of their novels and by designing comparative texts that emphasize networks of collectivity. These developments—a transformation in the time and space of literary production; the rise of migrant writers who address their work to communities of various scales; and a new engagement with translation within literary fiction—have been vital to the emergence of comparison literature.

Diary of a Bad Year

Coetzee's novels offer an opportunity to consider the relationship between the production and reception of world literature because, in addition to circulating widely, they have made practices of circulation a principal concern. Not only do they resist national location in the form of the book, by beginning in several places and languages at once, they engage with the problem of national location in the form of the text, by taking up comparison both structurally and thematically. We see this explicitly in three recent novels: 2007's *Diary of a Bad Year*; 2005's *Slow Man*, which brings together theories of migration and theories of art; and 2003's *Elizabeth Costello*, named for the fictional writer whose experiences on the international lecture circuit are described in many of the

chapters. *Slow Man* and *Diary* ask how new technologies of reproduction and prosthesis transform our sense of the enclosed national community. They are testing two of Anderson's central claims: first, that "the book . . . is a distinct, self-contained object, exactly reproduced on a large scale" (34); and second, that the book's self-containment imitates and even stimulates the imagination of a contained, simultaneous collectivity (30). In *Slow Man*, Coetzee considers how different strands of post-1945 migration (from "new" Europe as well as from postcolonial nations) have introduced new agents of Anglophone literary production, how new technologies such as personal computers and digital scanners have altered our understanding of artworks in the world, and how theories of prosthesis (a spare leg or a translated edition) might alter our conceptions of individuality and national belonging. In *Diary*, Coetzee treats these issues by placing a work of world literature—a series of short essays about global politics written in English and published in German—alongside a story about the production of that work and its author's relationship with his typist.

Some readers may have first encountered an excerpt of *Diary of a Bad Year* in a July 2007 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. There, one finds bracing short essays titled "on the origins of the state," "on anarchism," "on democracy," "on Machiavelli," and "on terrorism." Aphoristic in length and style, the essays are interrupted every few paragraphs by a single paragraph, printed in boldface, in which a narrator describes his encounter with a shapely woman in a short red dress, whom he has met in his building's laundry room. The narrator's crass reflections on the shortness of the dress, the shapeliness of the woman, and his own comparative decrepitude provide an odd but welcome contrast to the dour seriousness of the political compositions. As the excerpt ends, it becomes clear that the diary writer is the essay writer, and the shapely woman in the short red dress will be his typist.

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

us to organize our attention at every turn. While the excerpt implies that the diary exists as light background for the strong opinions, the novel gives greater emphasis to the diary's subject matter: the dictating, the typing, the conversation between author and typist. The novel suggests that those processes inform, the essays' models of sovereignty and political action.

It is important to Coetzee's project that the personal essay and the diary are two of the genres we associate most closely with individual voice. *Diary's* first English edition encourages this association by displaying a manuscript on its cover and typewriter font on its title page—even though neither manuscript nor typewriter appears in the narrative. Both of these technologies promise what Shakespeareans call “character”: the character of handwriting, the character of a typewriter's unique impression, the character of an author's expression. But the novel obstructs generic promises of self-revelation by introducing multiple diaries and by making the diaries part of the novel's action. Additionally, the fact that the author's essays have been dictated and then transferred to a computer makes it impossible to establish whether the essays we are reading are the author's words or the author's words altered by the typist's purposeful editing and the computer's automatic interventions. The novel confirms that the essays are collaborative in at least minor ways: for example, the fourth essay begins with a reference to “talkback radio” (17), and many pages later we find out from one of the diaries that the South African-Australian author incorporated this Adelaide idiom at the suggestion of his Filipina-Australian secretary (51). This recursive correction makes us wonder whose sentiments, language, and tone are represented in each section of the novel, and tells us that the apparently distinct voices of personal essay and diary are, in important ways, collective.

We should note that idiomatic distinctions such as “talkback radio” are treated diagetically, allowing the problem of idiom, if not the precise example to survive translation. And it can be no accident that talkback radio is itself a vernacular technology: a genre which imagines hosts and listeners alike talking and talking back in nonstandard locutions. But the subject of idiom is also addressed by the novel's comparative structure, which asks us to consider that there are several ways to speak, as it were, on any one page, and by the proliferation of diaries, whose addition and revision suggest the social nature of the essayist's individualism. The relationship between language and community is thus treated through reference to vernacular writing, to be sure, but it is also treated through formal patterns of translation and thematic engagement with topics such as interiority, migration, embeddedness, and solidarity.

Apart from representing a collaborative interiority, the proliferation of diaries in the novel has an important generic effect. It shifts the text's

emphasis from matters of political theory (global economy, genocide, ethical abstraction, and so on) to matters of social realism (private economy, jealousy, sentiment, and so on) and, at the same time, suggests that social realism, in so far as it emphasizes the embeddedness of social agents, exerts a strong, collective—we might even say, national—pull on the novel's antinational theories. We encounter those antinational theories in both explicit and implicit ways. Implicitly, *Diary* approaches the problem of national containment by invoking the problem of scale: how do we determine the boundaries of a person or a nation? The only pages in the novel that feature a single narrative—the only pages, that is, that display what appears as an individual voice—are those assigned to the essay "On the afterlife," which focuses on the question of the individual soul. Unsurprisingly, the essayist finds "the notion of an individual afterlife" unconvincing (154). Central to his critique is the changeability of the self and the self's transformation through encounters with other selves. Which version of the individual, the essayist asks, will the afterlife recognize? These observations about the limitations of individuality as a concept are immediately followed by the second part of the novel, in which the essayist tries to revise not only his opinions but also his relationship with the typist. We learn from these later pages that the earlier essays, including the one on the afterlife, were influenced by the author's conversations with the typist, which were in turn influenced by the typist's conversations with her boyfriend, which were in turn influenced by the boyfriend's surreptitious reading of the author's essays and of the author's computer-born diary. This is all to say that even the pages that seem to feature a single voice and focus on an univocal conception of the self are made to function in the context of other voices: they are not self-contained. If the essays do not support the uniqueness of the individual, either as a concept or as a narrative device, neither do they support the uniqueness of the nation. The writer treats with irony and distaste the assumption "that each person on earth must belong to one nation or another and operate within one or another national economy" (78). His complaint is in part directed at the so-called naturalness of the assumption; and in part it is directed at the national exclusivity and competition that follow.

Yet, for all its rejection of uniqueness in individuals and nations, the text finds room for uniqueness in collectivities such as those formed by the novel's paragraphs and those generated between author and typist by the circulation of those paragraphs. Additionally, Coetzee's affection for social realism—references to Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky appear throughout the novel—competes with his suspicion of caricature and national containers. The persistence of collectivity becomes increasingly notable in the latter part of the novel, where the essayist is

no longer committed to the version of enlargement he had espoused in his initial writings and where he embraces the sentiment and intimacy of realism even though he often disapproves of realism's approach to simultaneous community.

Diary begins with sweeping transnational and transhistorical comparisons: the essayist considers together the U.S. torture of prisoners, South Africa's violent preservation of apartheid, and Britain's imposition of colonial rule (39–45); elsewhere, he moves from the suppression of indigenous populations in Australia to histories of genocide in South Africa and the United States (107–109). But the novel ends with the sense that large-scale comparisons, while ethically necessary, are socially paralyzing. "Moral theory," the essayist opines, "has never quite known what to do with quantity, with numbers. Is killing two people worse than killing one person, for example? If so, how much worse?" (204). He then queries comparisons of quality: "Which is worse the death of a bird or the death of a human child?" (205). The problem implicit in these questions, a problem that concerns Coetzee in all of his recent world fictions, is not only how to order narratives of violence, but whether there is a single conceptual scale that can comprehend diverse units of analysis. Instead of comparison as a measure of quantity (which is more?) or quality (which is worse?), Coetzee suggests that comparison might function better—more effectively, more sympathetically—as a practice of irreducible translation. In this, he does not evade or even trump the national container. Not really. Aspiring to solidarity without exclusion, agency without possessiveness, works of comparison literature nevertheless make groups of various kinds. For writers such as Coetzee, the principle of comparison guarantees only that those groups will have to be generated over and over again. By creating a novel in which individual voices are modified by circulation, Coetzee suggests that transnational communities—like transnational novels—operate at several scales at once.

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

studies. Benedict Anderson helped us to see that the history of national literatures requires the history of the book. The history of comparison literature requires the history of many books: excerpts, anthologies, editions, and translations.

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NOTES

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1 J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), 29. Unless otherwise indicated, all future references to the text will refer to this edition.

2 Coetzee, *Dagboek van een slecht jaar* [*Diary of a Bad Year*], trans. Peter Bergsma (Amsterdam: Cossee, 2007). A sticker affixed to the front cover proclaims the Dutch edition “*Wereldprimeur de nieuwe roman van de Nobelprijswinnaar*” (a rough translation of which would be “world premier of the new novel by the Nobel Prize winner”).

3 In 2007, *Diary* was published in Australia on September 3; the United Kingdom on September 6; Canada on October 23; Spain on October 30; and the United States on December 27. In 2008, the book appeared in Germany on April 1; Japan on September 9; and France on October 1.

4 In his introduction to a special issue on Globalization and World Literature, Djelal Kadir writes, “Comparative literature is neither a subject, nor an object, nor is it a problem. It is a practice.” Djelal Kadir, “To World, To Globalize—Comparative Literature’s Crossroads,” in *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 4.

5 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (London: Seagull Books, 2007), 58–61.

6 Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 11.

7 Lawrence Venuti, “1990s and Beyond” in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 334. For Sakai’s and Chow’s versions of this approach, see Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On ‘Japan’ and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).

8 Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 114.

9 Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 171–73.

10 Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim’s Progress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 240–43.

11 Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 62–65.

12 For details of the *Potter* translation history, see Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature,” *Novel* 40, no. 3 (2007): 5.

13 Tim Parks, *Translating Style: A Literary Approach to Translation—A Translation Approach to Literature*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 147.

- 14 I discuss the anthological novel at greater length in "The Location of Literature: the Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer," *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 4 (2006): 527–45.
- 15 Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2007), 5. Two of the best recent studies of multilingualism, book history, and the South African context of Coetzee's work are van der Vlies and Rita Barnard, "Coetzee in/and Africaans," unpublished manuscript.
- 16 For examples of many of these new developments within the field of comparative literature, see Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006).
- 17 Moretti "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).
- 18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 2006).
- 19 Rosemary Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 225. Coombe's use of this phrase is derived from Richard Handler, "Who Owns the Past? History, Cultural Property, and the Logic of Possessive Individualism" in Brett Williams, ed., *The Politics of Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 63–74.
- 20 Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 39–41.
- 21 Jonathan Culler, "Anderson and the Novel," in *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Jonathan Culler (New York: Routledge, 2003), 50.
- 22 See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009); and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).
- 23 On the integration of regional articles within national magazines as a disruption of the homogeneous, empty time/space of national consciousness, see James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 172–73.
- 24 Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 174.