

J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*: Mistranslation, Linguistic Unhousedness, and the Extraterritorial Literary Community

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This article deals with J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, focusing on its depiction of linguistic multiplicity as allied with confusion and misunderstanding, given the impossibility of an unequivocal and straightforward road between languages and hence, the inevitability of mistranslation. In this work, we encounter characters that hover between languages without *properly* belonging to any of them, a linguistic unhousedness accompanied by territorial and cultural unsettlement. This is especially the case of John Coetzee, presented as an outsider as regards family and homeland, with an imperfect knowledge of Afrikaans and a relation to the English language depicted in primarily instrumental and professional terms. As a clear continuation of *Boyhood*, *Summertime* fancifully projects and subverts the illusion of belonging on the Afrikaans language, together with that of belonging on the Karoo land. Given the absence of other meaningful communities, such as the ethnic or the national, the only community projected by *Summertime* is the community of writers who, like J. M. Coetzee and borrowing George Steiner's expression, are 'extraterritorial' writers, never linguistically at home. In order to develop these ideas, attention will be paid to other works by Coetzee, such as *Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, and the collection of letters he has exchanged with Paul Auster, *Here and Now*.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; *Summertime*; mistranslation; linguistic unhousedness; extraterritorial literary community

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Summertime, de J. M. Coetzee: La mala traducción, el desarraigo lingüístico y la comunidad literaria extraterritorial

Este artículo examina *Summertime*, de J. M. Coetzee, centrándose en el modo en que presenta la multiplicidad lingüística como unida a la confusión y la equivocación, dada la imposibilidad de un camino inequívoco y recto entre las lenguas y, por tanto, la inevitabilidad de la mala traducción. En esta autobiografía ficcionalizada, encontramos personajes que

oscilan entre distintas lenguas sin pertenecer *propiamente* a ninguna de ellas, un desarraigo lingüístico acompañado de un desarraigo territorial y cultural. Este es especialmente el caso de John Coetzee, que se presenta como desarraigado en cuanto a la familia y la nación, con un conocimiento imperfecto del afrikáans, y una relación con la lengua inglesa descrita en términos eminentemente instrumentales y profesionales. Como clara continuación de *Boyhood*, *Summertime* proyecta y subvierte de manera imaginativa la ilusión de pertenecer a la lengua afrikáans, así como la de pertenecer a la tierra del Karoo. Dada la ausencia de otras comunidades significativas, tales como la étnica o la nacional, la única comunidad proyectada por esta obra es la comunidad de los escritores que, como J. M. Coetzee y utilizando la expresión de George Steiner, son ‘extraterritoriales’, al no sentirse en casa en ninguna lengua. Para desarrollar estas ideas, prestaré atención a otras obras de Coetzee, tales como *Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, y la colección de cartas que ha intercambiado con Paul Auster, *Here and Now*.

Palabras clave: J. M. Coetzee; *Summertime*; mala traducción; desarraigo lingüístico; comunidad literaria extraterritorial

But the Lord came down to see the city and the
tower that the people had started building.
And the Lord said, "If as one people all sharing a
common language they have begun to do this,
then nothing they plan to do will be beyond them.
Come, let's go down and confuse their language
so they won't be able to understand each other"
(Genesis 11.5-7)

1. INTRODUCTION

With *Summertime* (2009), J.M. Coetzee completes the sequence of fictional memoirs begun with *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and followed by *Youth* (2002).¹ In the former, Coetzee deals with his childhood in Worcester and Cape Town in the late 1940s and early 1950s; in the latter, with the years spent by the young John Coetzee in London in the early 1960s. *Summertime* focuses on the years 1972 to 1977, when J.M. Coetzee returned to South Africa, after completing his PhD in the United States. In his third *autre-biographical* work,² John Coetzee is presented as dead,³ with the bulk of the narrative made up of five interviews carried out by a young English biographer, Mr Vincent, to people that had some kind of relationship with John Coetzee during the years in question. These interviews are preceded and followed by extracts coming from Coetzee's fictional notebooks dating from that time. From this assemblage of texts what emerges is an image of a single John Coetzee living with his widowed father in suburban Cape Town, engaged in manual labour and part-time teaching, publishing his first novels, and trying to establish meaningful relationships with women.

There are facts that establish a clear gap between the fictional Coetzee as presented in *Summertime* and the historical Coetzee: J.M. Coetzee's mother did not die until 1985, he had married in 1963, and had become the father of two children by the early 1970s.⁴ In spite of the impossibility, hence, of a complete assimilation between J.M. Coetzee, the writer and historical figure, and John Coetzee, the character created in *Summertime*, I would like to argue that in the construction of this fictional persona we can detect

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² This adjective has become generalized among Coetzee's critics in order to describe the inextricability between truth and fiction, personal engagement and detachment that we find in all the works in which he deals with his own self. The term '*autrebiography*' was actually coined by Coetzee himself in the 'Retrospect' of *Doubling the Point* (1992a: 394), in which he indulges in a typically Coetzeean *autrebiographical* exercise. In a 2002 interview with David Attwell, he similarly asserts that "all autobiography is *autre-biography*" (2006: 216).

³ Thus, Grant Farred describes *Summertime* as an "autopbiography": "the critical act of taking apart —autopsying— the life of the author before that life is (physically) over" (2011: 832).

⁴ See Patrick Denman Flanery's review of this novel, 'J.M. Coetzee's *Autre-biography*' (2009), for a discussion of Coetzee's interest in keeping a gap between himself and the character he creates in this fictional memoir.

concerns and predicaments that are also common to Coetzee, the writer, and that traverse his literary production, especially his trilogy of fictionalized memoirs. Specifically, my focus is on this work's concern with the language(s) of the self, these languages being English and Afrikaans in Coetzee's case. My analysis supports J. C. Kannemeyer's claim in his biography of J. M. Coetzee that Coetzee "had, from a relatively early age, an awareness of the twofold nature of his origins and a measure of ambivalence towards English and Afrikaans" (2012: 59).⁵ In *Summertime*—and *Boyhood*—Afrikaans is fancifully associated with a linguistic belonging and a cultural rootedness simultaneously questioned and yearned for, whereas it is suggested that in spite of his proficient command of English, John Coetzee does not belong in this language, approaching it "as a foreigner would" (Coetzee 1993: 7).

2. MISTRANSLATION

In *Summertime*, linguistic multiplicity and linguistic translation are highlighted from the opening pages, namely, in the 'Author's Note', which reads as follows: "My thanks to Marília Bandeira for assistance with Brazilian Portuguese, and to the estate of Samuel Beckett for permission to quote (in fact to misquote) from *Waiting for Godot*". Brazilian Portuguese is the language in which one of the interviewees, Adriana, answers Vincent's questions, so that a translator must mediate between them. The scene in which full communication between two characters is thwarted, due to a linguistic barrier, leading to the intervention of a third character, is a repeated one in *Summertime*. Vincent tells another one of the interviewees, John's cousin Margot, that in his transcription of their interview into "an uninterrupted narrative" spoken in Margot's voice, he "asked a colleague from South Africa to check that [he] had the Afrikaans words right" (Coetzee 2009: 87). Or Sophie, erstwhile colleague of John at UCT, remembers how she took part in the interview that a journalist from *Libération* carried out with him: "I thought I would assist in case there were *language problems*, John's French was not good" (2009: 236, emphasis added).

The reference to language problems is found in another revealing passage, in which we encounter John and his cousin Margot remembering a disturbing episode of their childhood on the family farm in the Karoo, Voëlfontein: when John pulled the leg off a locust, so that his cousin had to kill it. John asserts that everyday he asks the poor thing's forgiveness—"Kaggen, I say, forgive me" (2009: 96)—, and gives the following answer to Margot's question about the meaning of *Kaggen*: "*Kaggen*. The name of mantis, the mantis god. But the locust will understand. In the afterworld there are no *language problems*. It's like Eden all over again" (2009: 96, emphasis added). The world

⁵ The reception of this biography in South Africa has been fairly controversial, mainly because of Imraan Coovadia's extremely hostile review—full of disparaging comments towards Coetzee the man and the writer—of what he calls "a badly written and sycophantic biography" (2012), and Ian Glenn's harsh response (2013) to Coovadia, arguing that his review is symptomatic of the struggles and tensions that characterize the South African literary field.

we encounter in *Summertime*, in contrast, is no Eden, but a world full of “language problems”. It is a postlapsarian world, the world after the destruction of the Tower of Babel, the mythical event taken to mean, according to Jacques Derrida, “the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation” (2002: 109).

This confusion and multiplicity of tongues is manifested in the very linguistic texture of *Summertime*, pervaded by myriad words and phrases coming from languages other than English: Latin in “*dies irae, dies illa*” (Coetzee 2009: 6), “*mirabile dictu*” (30) and “*Homo sapiens*” (58); Russian in “*gulag*” (15); Yiddish in “*Schlemiel*” (25); German in “*Strafkolonie*” (48), “*Ich bin der Erstgeborene*” (49), “*Bagatellenmeister*” (82) and “*Autobahnen*” (143); French in “*amour propre*” (43), “*bien-pensant*” (66), “*salle à manger*” (74), “*célibataire*” (160, 162), “*comme il faut*” (166), “*entre nous*” (172), “*Francophonie*” (222), “*agrégation*” (222) and “*dirigistes*” (240); Khoi in “*Kaggen*” (96) and “*Koup*” (103); Portuguese in “*Senhora*” (155), “*brevidades*” (159), “*caminhonete*” (166), “*mamãe*” (168), “*militares*” (171), “*sublimar*” (175), “*despachantes*” (177), “*balet folclórico*” (182) and “*Brasileira*” (200); Italian in “*prima*” (64) and “*La donna è mobile*” (248); or Spanish in “*fin*” (84). In all cases, the words are introduced in italics, as a way of pointing to their foreignness, even to their intrusive character, to a resistant, stubborn linguistic materiality that cannot be assimilated or dissolved into the prevailing English discourse.

This attention to the materiality of words in their original language coincides with what Coetzee asserts in ‘Homage’ about the confrontation with the original poem when reading foreign poetry: “There is something physical in confronting the poem in the original, something about the words themselves, in their own brute presence . . . that cannot be provided by translation of any kind” (1993: 5). Carrol Clarkson calls attention to this passage, as she analyzes the “appreciation of language as material substance” that we keep encountering throughout Coetzee’s writing: “The sense of a signifying act *saying* through the fact of its perceptible materiality, rather than through an abstract semantics” (2010: 67, italics in the original). As Coetzee suggests in ‘Homage’, this materiality of words is untranslatable, and hence the introduction, in *Summertime*, of words in their original language without the English equivalent.

Furthermore, as he argues in ‘Roads to Translation’, “the necessary imperfection of translation” is due to “the incapacity of any given target language to supply for each single word in the source language a corresponding single word that would cover, precisely and without overlap, the denotation of the original and its major connotations” (2006: 216). In *Summertime*, this becomes especially obvious on the numerous occasions in which we encounter the Afrikaans language, particularly in the section devoted to Margot, which is pervaded, not only by words, but by whole sentences in Afrikaans. The point is often to convey the multiple, complex, intimate shades of meaning of certain Afrikaans words; semantic and cultural nuances that render an exact, accurate translation into English problematic, as in Margot’s detailed description of the denotative and connotative meanings of the word *slapgat* (2009: 116).

But the most revealing passages are those in which John is presented as uneasily and unsteadily posed between English and Afrikaans. Margot describes John's Afrikaans as "halting", full of solecisms that her sister Carol will parody (2009: 93), and many of which are a consequence of his making literal translations from English expressions into Afrikaans: "*Ek het my vanmiddag dik gevreet*: I stuffed myself like a pig this afternoon" (2009: 93). The two languages are juxtaposed, only to underline their mismatch, the insurmountable difference between them. Like in the passage from 'Roads to Translation' quoted above, the emphasis falls on the impossibility of finding a single, unequivocal, straightforward road leading from one language to another, and on the uncertain middle ground which the self inhabits.

3. LINGUISTIC UNHOUSEDNESS: AFRIKAANS

Summertime, then, is strongly concerned with what Rita Barnard has called "the Afrikaans Coetzee . . . the earlier self who once moved with the Afrikaans language around him" (2009: 101). Barnard assumes that after his leaving South African soil — Coetzee left South Africa for Australia in 2002 —, Coetzee's "shadowy, hypothetical Afrikaans self will no doubt come to seem evermore like a discarded shell" (102). But contrary to that prediction, the Afrikaans self returns with full strength in *Summertime*, which constitutes, in this sense, a clear continuation of its predecessors, *Boyhood* and *Youth*. In the three memoirs, especially in the first and the third, John's ambivalent relation with the English and the Afrikaans language is presented as a central dimension of his identity.

In *Boyhood*, there are multiple references to the boy's relation to the Afrikaans language. This is so because as J. C. Kannemeyer explains, when his family moved from Cape Town to Worcester in 1949, John was exposed for the first time to a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community. Before this moment, the Afrikaans he had been in contact with had been the Afrikaans spoken on Voëlfontein: the Afrikaans of coloured boys and the Afrikaans spoken by his father's family side, an Afrikaans pervaded by English words (2012: 51). And this is the kind of Afrikaans that the child enjoys: "the happy, slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans" (Coetzee 1998: 81). It is a "funny, dancing language" that is "lighter, airier than the Afrikaans they study at school, which is weighed down with idioms that are supposed to come from the *volksmond*, the people's mouth, but seem to come only from the Great Trek, lumpish, nonsensical idioms about wagons and cattle and cattle-harness" (1998: 81).

There are, then, political and ideological reasons behind the child's rejection of Afrikaans, even if he is not fully aware of them: what is rejected is Afrikaans as the language of Afrikaner nationalism and of the apartheid system. Hence the multiple references to the feelings of repulse or alienation that a certain type of Afrikaans provokes in John. He characterizes the language of Afrikaans boys as "filthy" and full of "obscenity" (1998: 57) and "mocks his father's speech: '*Mammie moet 'n kombers oor Mammie se knieë trek anders word Mammie koud*' — Mommy must put a blanket over Mommy's knees, otherwise

Mommy will get cold. He is relieved he is not Afrikaans and is saved from having to talk like that, like a whipped slave" (Coetzee 1998: 49). Afrikaans is associated with a rigidity, hierarchy and sense of distance between the interlocutors that the boy strongly dislikes. His command of Afrikaans, furthermore, is a limited and restricted one: "The range of Afrikaans he commands is thin and bodiless; there is a whole dense world of slang and allusion commanded by real Afrikaans boys . . . to which he has no access" (1998: 124).⁶

Similarly, in *Summertime*, John's Afrikaans is characterized by artificiality and rigidity, cut off from the living, oral language of the people, as we see in Margot's mocking description of John's attempt to have a conversation with the farm labourer, Hendrik, in his "stiff and bookish" Afrikaans (Coetzee 2009: 124). As put by Sophie, "he knew Afrikaans well . . . though much in the same fashion as he knew French, that is, better on the page than spoken" (2009: 238). And John's imperfect command of the Afrikaans language is related to his not wholly belonging to Afrikaner culture, to the Afrikaner *volk*, a fact underlined by Margot: "Does he really think of himself as an Afrikaner? She doesn't know many real [egte] Afrikaners who would accept him as one of the tribe. Even his father might not pass scrutiny. To pass as an Afrikaner nowadays you need at the very least to vote National and attend church on Sundays" (2009: 95).

In *Boyhood*, the child is already aware of the fact that he cannot have an Afrikaner identity: "Because they speak English at home, because he always comes first in English at school, he thinks of himself as English. Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself speaks Afrikaans without any English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner" (124). In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee gives both linguistic and cultural reasons for his non-Afrikaner identity: "No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. . . . Why not? In the first place, because English is my first language, and has been since childhood. An Afrikaner (primary and simplest definition) is a person whose first language is Afrikaans . . . In the second place, because I am not embedded in the culture of the Afrikaner" (1992a: 342). The boy in Coetzee's first fictionalized memoir feels a profound disjuncture in his personal and familial identity, due to what he perceives as an abnormal adherence to two different languages in a context in which Afrikaner nationalism emphasized the unbridgeable separateness between linguistic and ethnic groups. In such a context, "their family 'is' nothing" (1998: 18): it cannot be made to fit into prevailing categories or labels. Coetzee has referred to these problematic early linguistic experiences — "as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism, a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English" — as central to his development of a feeling of linguistic and cultural "alienness" (1992a: 393).

⁶ In *Boyhood*, close attention is also paid to the materiality of words, as the boy feels simultaneously fascinated and repelled by an Afrikaans linguistic materiality that remains unknown to him. Thus, he wonders about the spelling of Afrikaans monosyllabic words, or about the relation between Afrikaans and English words (Coetzee 1998: 57).

Nonetheless, as opposed to the passages from *Boyhood* quoted above, where the child examines Afrikaans with a detached perspective and critical eye, there is a moment in which he certainly seems to experience a feeling of linguistic belonging. He and his cousin Agnes —whom we should probably take as Margot's alter ego— go for a walk in the Karoo veld: "They began to talk. . . . He lost his reserve. As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words" (1998: 94). This is a surprising moment in which the gap between words and thoughts is bridged, something that Coetzee, given his intellectual and philosophical background, would never accept from a theoretical, linguistic point of view, as we see in *White Writing: On the Culture in South Africa*, when he analyzes the literary production of early writers of European descent in South Africa. Coetzee detects in these writers a common anxiety about the English language as a medium that cannot fit the African natural world, that cannot be "authentically African" (1988: 7). However, he is suspicious of the notion of "an authentic language", the quest of which "is pursued within a framework in which language, consciousness, and landscape are interrelated" (1988: 7), and argues that "dissatisfaction with English would in truth hold for any other language, since the language being sought after is a natural or Adamic language, one in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names" (1988: 9).

In spite of this critical dismissal of the concept of an authentic or natural language, the passage from *Boyhood* quoted above actually constitutes an Adamic moment in which the split between signifier and signified disappears. According to Barnard, this is "a moment of unproblematic, culturally unfettered expression of a sort that Coetzee, the academic writer, would never associate with any given language" (2009: 96). This is certainly true, but still, or precisely because of that, we must approach the question of why Coetzee chooses to depict such a linguistic experience at all. The first thing to be taken into account is that the language John and his cousin Agnes are speaking is Afrikaans, and not English. Also it is important to notice that there is another moment in this memoir in which the child's plunge into Afrikaans is similarly depicted as both spontaneous and liberating: "When he speaks Afrikaans all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away. Afrikaans is like a ghostly envelope that accompanies him everywhere, that he is free to slip into, becoming at once another person, simpler, gayer, lighter in his tread" (Coetzee 1998: 125). Again, the child experiences in Afrikaans an ease and smoothness that he never attaches to his use of the English language. In *Youth*, John also describes a relaxing and soothing moment when he meets his cousin in London and "switches to the language of the family, to Afrikaans. Though it is years since he spoke Afrikaans, he can feel himself relax at once as though sliding into a warm bath" (2003: 127). It is in Afrikaans that we glimpse the possibility of full communion between self and language, and of unblemished communication between speakers of the language.

However, the fanciful character of this projection is revealed when we realize that, in *Boyhood*, the conversation between John and Agnes in the veld constitutes an ephemeral, almost dreamlike moment: he is with a girl he suspects being in love with, and they are

“in the middle of nowhere” (1998: 94). Just a few paragraphs before, his own command of Afrikaans had been questioned as we read that “the Afrikaans the shearers speak is so thick, so full of strange idioms, that he can barely understand it” (1998: 93). What is more, the apparently fluid and intimate linguistic exchange with Agnes is ironically reversed in *Summertime*, where Margot emerges as Agnes’s older self and hints at the defective nature of their communication, due to John’s imperfect command of Afrikaans: “His Afrikaans is halting . . . But they have spoken Afrikaans together since they were children; she is not about to humiliate him by offering to switch” (2009: 93).

It is also revealing that in *Boyhood*, all the moments in which the child feels liberated and fulfilled by the use of Afrikaans take place on the Karoo farm, in reference to which he asserts that “there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more” (1998: 79). In the final *autre*-biographical retrospect of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee points out that “the family farm” is “the place on earth he has defined, imagined, constructed, as his place of origin” (1992a: 393-94). Thus, the imaginative projection of belonging onto language—the Afrikaans language—tends to go together with the imaginative projection of belonging onto the land—the Karoo farm: “The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*” (1998: 95). But this belonging is an impossibility. In the case of the language, we have already seen why. In the case of the land, the child is aware of the fact that on the farm “he will never be more than a visitor” (1998: 96), since it is Coloured servants, like Freek, who truly belong on the Karoo, unlike his family: “The Karoo is Freek’s country, his home; the Coetzees, drinking tea and gossiping on the farmhouse stoep, are like swallows, seasonal, here today, gone tomorrow” (1998: 87). As Farred has argued, Coloureds and Hottentots in *Boyhood* are “ineradicable reminders of the spectral restrictions the South African Other imposes on white land ownership” (2011: 839), so that “the Karoo is a sacred place, a land made holy by life, by death, by the knowledge and a desire for an impossible belonging” (Farred 2011: 842).

Similarly, love of the Karoo farm is strongly present in *Summertime*. What Margot and John “share above all” is “a love of this farm, this *kontrei*, this Karoo . . . To him and to her it was granted to spend their childhood summers in a sacred place” (Coetzee 2009: 134). However, their presence cannot be one of full belonging: “the unspoken question” that has always lain between them is “*What are we doing here? . . . What are we doing in this barren part of the world? Why are we spending our lives in dreary toil if it was never meant that people should live here, if the whole project of humanizing the place was misconceived from the start?*” (2009: 140). To the traditional Afrikaner conception of toiling the land as a way of legitimizing presence in South Africa and white ownership of the land, Coetzee opposes a vision of a land that resists and repels any human inhabitation.

4. LINGUISTIC UNHOUSEDNESS: ENGLISH

As his literary production attests and as opposed to what he presents as an imperfect command of Afrikaans, J. M. Coetzee enjoys a complete, indeed, an outstanding command

of the English language. However, according to Coetzee's own words in 'Homage', linguistic proficiency does not necessarily imply cultural embeddedness: "Though I have spoken English since childhood, I was not brought up in a culture that anyone would recognize as English. English in South Africa is what one might call a deeply entrenched foreign language" (1993: 7).⁷ Thus, in *Boyhood*, we read that the child "commands [English] with ease" (1998: 129) and that he "always comes first in English at school" (124). However, he never associates with this language the cultural rootedness and feeling of belonging that he fancifully projects onto Afrikaans.

The boy's relation to English is depicted as instrumental and academic, as we can also see in *Summertime*, in which the relation between John and the English language makes its appearance early in the book, in one of the passages presented as coming from the late Coetzee's notebooks. John receives a call from an employment bureau where he has left his particulars: "a client seeks advice on language matters" (2009: 10). The client in question is a woman who is convinced that lawyers "have misread the wording" of her husband's will, as they have misunderstood a sentence containing the word "notwithstanding": "I am hiring you as an expert on English, not as a lawyer," she says. "The will is written in English, in English words. What do the words mean? What does *notwithstanding* mean?" (2009: 11). Again, full attention falls on the materiality of the English language, on words and their potential, complex, contradictory meanings, and on the possibility of mistranslation even within the same language, which corresponds to the vision of language and translation defended by George Steiner in *After Babel*: "[T]ranslation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication . . . To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate" (1992: xii).

Should he deliver a report, John would attach "a copy, attested by a Commissioner of Oaths, of the degree certificate that makes him an expert commentator on the meaning of English words" (Coetzee 2009: 11). His relation to the English language is one of expertise, legitimized by academic and professional qualification, and in this sense, it resembles that of a foreigner: "There is a sense in which I have always approached English as a foreigner would, with a foreigner's sense of the distance between himself and it. This has not implied any linguistic insecurity: since childhood I have felt confident that I write English better than most natives" (Coetzee 1993: 7). As we see in *Summertime*, John's approach to the English language is characterized by "a foreigner's sense of distance", not for lack of linguistic proficiency, but because of his instrumental and professional relation to it. He approaches the language from a technical and analytic stance, and never as the member of a linguistic and cultural community.

In this sense, John very much resembles Paul Rayment, in *Slow Man* (2005), and J. C., in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), both of whom undermine the connotations of intimacy and at-homeness we associate with the mother tongue. For Rayment, divided between his

⁷ This conception of English brings to mind the moment in *Disgrace* in which David Lurie reflects on English as "an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa" (Coetzee 2000: 117).

French and his Australian identity, territorial unsettlement —he has no “home”, but just “a domicile, a residence” (Coetzee 2005: 197)— is tied with a linguistic one: despite being “perfectly fluent” in English, he feels like “a kind of ventriloquist’s dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me” (2005: 198). Rayment undermines the idea of closeness associated with the mother tongue, as he says, “English came to me too late. It did not come with my mother’s milk” (2005: 197).⁸ Similarly, to J. C., “English does not feel . . . like a resting place, a home. It just happens to be a language over whose resources I have achieved some mastery” (Coetzee 2007: 197). Very revealingly, in one of the letters he writes to Paul Auster, Coetzee describes his relation to the English language in exactly the same terms. He tells his American friend that he feels completely identified with Derrida’s assertion, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, that, in spite of being monolingual in French, French was not his mother tongue. The same could be said of his relation to the English language, Coetzee claims, and in fact, of many other writers and intellectuals “who have a removed or interrogative relation to the language they speak and write” (2013: 65).

In this letter, Coetzee approaches the question of the relation between the self and language appealing to the idea of property. He remembers how when he was a child he “thought of the English language as the property of the English” (2013: 66), and points to how he sees this question today: “English may not after all be the property of the English of England, but it is certainly not my property” (2013: 67). Similarly, in *Summertime*, in the section focused on Adriana —a Brazilian dance teacher with whom John was apparently infatuated— the relation between John and the English language is also discussed in terms of property. John gives extra English lessons to Adriana’s daughter, Maria, but she has doubts about his capacity as an English teacher: “This Mr Coetzee sounds like an Afrikaner to me, I said to Maria Regina. Can’t your school afford a *proper* English teacher? I want you to learn *proper* English, from an English person” (2009: 157, emphasis added). When she accuses him of not being English, this is the answer she receives: “I agree I am not of English descent . . . Nevertheless I have spoken English from an early age and have passed university examinations in English, therefore I believe I can teach English. There is nothing special about English. It is just one language among many” (161). But this answer infuriates Adriana even more: “My daughter is not going to be like a parrot that mixes up languages . . . I want her to learn to speak English *properly*, and with a *proper* English accent” (161, italics added).

John and Adriana are obviously arguing from antithetical conceptions of language, and of the relation between self and language. Adriana repeatedly uses the term ‘proper’: she wants her daughter to learn “proper English”, not only in the sense of a correct or standard form of the language, but especially in the sense of ‘proper’ because of its being the property of a speaker and a speaking community; ‘proper’ because it belongs exclusively

⁸ As analyzed by Clarkson, what casts Rayment and Marijana, his Croatian nurse, as foreigners “is the English language, not Australia” (2010: 166).

and distinctly to a person and group. Adriana appeals to an organic identification between language and identity that John demystifies, as he argues that his just having used, spoken and studied the English language provides him with full authority over it. Although the principal of the school tries to explain to her that Mr Coetzee is “adequately qualified” as he “holds a university degree in English”, for Adriana, John “is not a proper teacher, he has no qualification”, because “he is not even English, he is a Boer” (2009: 187). The term ‘proper’ in relation to language and identity had already appeared in *Boyhood*. There are “the proper English boys, with English names and homes in the old, leafy part of Worcester” (1998: 129), but John is obviously not one of them, given his family’s linguistic and cultural hybridity.

This connection between linguistic competence and properness/property interestingly relates to Derrida’s approach to the story of the tower of Babel, which he interprets as a disruption of the proper name.⁹ Derrida argues that ‘Babel’ means babble, confusion, but also “the name of the father, more precisely and more commonly, the name of God as name of father” (2002: 105). Hence, “the proper name of God (given by God) is divided enough in the tongue” (108), and “at the very moment when pronouncing ‘Babel’ we sense the impossibility of deciding whether this name belongs, properly and simply, to one tongue” (111). God’s imposition of his proper name, then, paradoxically implies a disruption of property, and of the “universal tongue” and “unique genealogy” the Semites were trying to impose (111). Adapting Derrida’s reflections to the South African context of *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, John’s impropriety or lack of property derives from his confusing genealogy and *translated* identity, which disrupts the official Afrikaner ideology of essentialist, purist and mutually exclusive conceptions of identity and language, according to which “not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African” (Coetzee 1998: 18).

Then, if *properly* speaking, John is neither fully embedded in Afrikaans, nor in English, what is he, “in this ethnic-linguistic sense?” (Coetzee 1992a: 342). This is a question that Coetzee himself poses and that he answers in the following terms: “I am one of many people in this country who have become detached from their ethnic roots, whether those roots were in Dutch South Africa or Indonesia or Britain or Greece or wherever, and have joined a pool of no recognizable *ethos* whose language of exchange is English. . . . They are merely South Africans . . . whose native tongue, the tongue they have been born to, is English” (1992: 342). Here Coetzee dissociates his use of the English language from any rooted sense of ethnic and cultural identity, and in this aspect, he resembles other characters we encounter in *Summertime*, a literary text full of characters hovering between different territories and languages, and hence, between different selves. Julia, Mr Vincent’s first interviewee, is a Jewish South African — “Of course I was a South African too, and as white as white could be. . . . But I had a second self to fall back on: Julia Kiš, or even better

⁹ See Jonathan Roffe (2004: 107-09) for an analysis of Derrida’s insights into the relation between translation and the proper name.

Kiš Julia, of Szombathely" (2009: 53)—, whereas Adriana relates in detail her traumatic experience as a Brazilian immigrant in South Africa, with her "bad English" learned in school out of books (177).

But it is probably the account that Julia gives of her father that constitutes the most dramatic example of linguistic and territorial dislocation, of what Edward Said has called "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (2001: 173).¹⁰ For Said, exile entails a "crippling sorrow of estrangement" (173), an estrangement that pervades Julia's father's life as a Hungarian immigrant in South Africa: "He had forgotten who he was, forgotten the rudimentary English he picked up when he came to South Africa. To the nurses he spoke sometimes German, sometimes Magyar, of which they understood not a word. He was convinced he was in Madagascar, in a prison camp. . . . 'Ich bin der Erstgeborene,' he kept saying" (Coetzee 2009: 48-49).

If, as put by Said, exile "is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being" (2001: 177), it is language, or rather the confusing hovering between languages, as we see in the passage quoted above, that constitutes the most powerful expression of this discontinuity. There is, however, a fundamental difference between, say, Julia's father and Coetzee. If the former has been estranged from his native home, both in a territorial and linguistic sense, Coetzee seems to have never enjoyed an ethno-linguistic home in the first place. Borrowing George Steiner's words in *Extraterritorial*, he is "a writer linguistically 'unhoused' . . . not thoroughly at home in the language of his production, but displaced or hesitant at the frontier" (1975: 14).

5. THE EXTRATERRITORIAL LITERARY COMMUNITY

In its concern, then, with the relation between language and identity, and with the transference between languages, *Summertime* emphasizes *discontinuity* and *unhousedness*, *mistranslation* and *misreading*. Going back to the 'Author's Note', it refers to a "*misquote*" (emphasis added) from *Waiting for Godot*: again, an allusion to the unavoidable deviation and unfaithfulness that take place in any act of translation. I would like to argue that this apparently marginal reference to Beckett is actually pivotal for the interpretation of *Summertime*. It implicitly highlights the centrality, in this text, of translation as "law, duty and debt" (Derrida 2002: 111), not only because of its reference to a misquote, but also because of this misquote particularly coming from *Waiting for Godot* (1954), or *En attendant Godot* (1952), a literary text that we could regard as having a translated identity in itself: it is constituted by two different versions, one in French and one in English, both written by Beckett, whose proper name, in the transition from the English to the French language, stopped belonging, properly, to *one* tongue.

¹⁰ In his autobiography, *Out of Place*, Said describes his ambivalent relation to the Arabic and English language in terms that very much recall Coetzee's relation to English and Afrikaans: "I have never known which language I spoke first, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt" (2001: 4).

The great influence exerted by Beckett on Coetzee is well known.¹¹ Steven G. Kellman has argued that “what Coetzee found in Beckett . . . was an author for whom nature and the world are problematic because language cannot be taken for granted” (2000: 59). In this sense, it is interesting that, in ‘Homage’, after asserting both his confidence and sense of distance in relation to the English language, Coetzee refers to Beckett and Nabokov as “the two writers who came closest to shaking my confidence that I had nothing to learn about English lexicon and idiom” (1993: 7): Beckett, who kept “a certain skeptical distance” (7) from his mother tongue, English, which he abandoned in favour of French, and Nabokov, who was immersed in three languages, Russian, English and French, since childhood —“I was a perfectly normal trilingual child” (Nabokov 1990: 43)—, and who switched from Russian to English in his literary writing. The case of these two writers is different from Coetzee’s, who has written his whole literary production in only one language, English. But, as we have seen, he may also be regarded as an ‘extraterritorial’ writer, in Steiner’s terms, since he is also “a writer linguistically ‘unhoused’” (1992: 14).

This is the moment in *Summertime* in which we find the misquote coming from *Waiting for Godot*: “Given the existence of a personal God”, he says, “with a white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia loves us deeply quaquaquaqu with some exceptions” (2009: 112). The original passage in Beckett’s text is delivered by Lucky, after Pozzo commands him to think (Beckett 2000: 36-38). Coetzee considerably reduces Lucky’s speech, but in both cases, the mixture of “grammatical sense” and “transgrammatical nonsense” (Nealon 1998: 110) disrupts metaphysical, referential and teleological discourse (1998: 109). However, as it works in *Summertime*, what is more important is its subversion of the Adamic moment of transparent communication that we find in *Boyhood*, analyzed in the previous section, and that this passage rewrites. John and his cousin are, once again, in the Karoo, and when asked by her to tell a story, he responds with this confusing postbabelian babbling, so that “she has not the faintest idea what he is talking about” (Coetzee 2009: 112). Whereas in *Boyhood* thoughts turn into transparent words (Coetzee 1998: 94), what we have in *Summertime* is “forbidden transparency, impossible univocity” (Derrida 2002: 111).

Surprisingly enough, it may be argued that Nabokov, like Beckett, is a hidden presence in *Summertime*, specifically his *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), structured upon a biographical device extremely similar to that we find in *Summertime*.¹² If, in

¹¹ Coetzee wrote his 1969 doctoral dissertation on the Irish writer, with the title *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis*. In the following years, he published several articles on Beckett: ‘The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett’s *Murphy*’ (1970), ‘The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett’s *Watt*’ (1972), ‘Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style’ (1973) and ‘Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition’ (1973). Apart from his critical production on Beckett, the trace of the Irish writer is visible throughout the whole of Coetzee’s literary career.

¹² Nabokov is also a writer to whom Coetzee has paid explicit attention, namely in ‘Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art’ (1974). In this essay, Coetzee analyzes the different planes of reality in *Pale Fire* and their construction as surfaces of a mirror.

Summertime, Mr Vincent is gathering information to write the biography of the late famous writer, John Coetzee, in Nabokov's work, the narrator of the novel is trying to write the biography of his late half-brother, the famous novelist, Sebastian Knight.¹³ It is important to know that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was Nabokov's first work in English, and, in fact, the question of Sebastian's transition from Russian to the English language is an important strain in this frustrated biography. His half-brother argues that "Sebastian's Russian was better and more natural to him than his English" (Nabokov 2001: 71), and finds "pathetic" that "Sebastian's English, though fluent and idiomatic, was decidedly that of a foreigner": "he made queer mistakes . . . misplaced the accent . . . mispronounced names" (2001: 40), so that "there was something vaguely un-English about his poems" (2001: 41). The similarity between Sebastian's relation to English as that of a foreigner, and Coetzee's approach to the English language with a foreigner's sense of distance is clear enough.

In one of the undated fragments of *Summertime*, John Coetzee reflects on how, if he had not resisted the Afrikaner establishment, he would now have "a family and a home within a community within a homeland" (2009: 254). Instead, the only community that is probably left to him is the 'translinguistic' and 'extraterritorial' literary community: the community of those writers, who, like him, Beckett, and Nabokov, have approached the English language as foreigners and outsiders; writers who, borrowing Coetzee's own words on Beckett, have chosen or have found themselves in the "plight of existential homelessness" (2008: 20), and hence, "outside the security of a unified single viewpoint" (Beer 1994: 209).

6. CONCLUSION

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. C. wonders whether "all languages are, finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being" (Coetzee 2007: 197). As writer and intellectual, Coetzee endorses the view that the self can never be fully present through language, so that the result is a divided, 'foreign' identity. As he puts it in his letter to Auster, following Derrida, "language is always the language of the other. Wandering into language is always a trespass" (2013: 67). However, as I have tried to show, when he approaches this issue from an autobiographical and fictional perspective, he occasionally allows for a fleeting yearning—which he immediately subverts—for linguistic rootedness and belonging. *Summertime* is pervaded by a nostalgia it simultaneously questions and resists: nostalgia for a land and a language in which to feel at home; nostalgia for "that promised land where, at last, words are meant to mean what they mean" (Nabokov 2000: 64).

¹³ It is very revealing that Neil Cornwell's words on the biographical method followed in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* could be equally applied to *Summertime*: "*Sebastian Knight* itself emerges, overall, not so much a biography of its subject (whose 'real life' remains unknown and unknowable), but rather an account of the stumbling attempts to approach and compile this would-be biography—or even an oblique 'guide' to biographical methodology" (2005: 159).

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