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Introduction: Unbelonging

THE TITLE of this book has run like a mantra in my head during the past several years. It echoes D. W. Winnicott's famously perplexing formulation in his 1963 essay "Communicating and Not Communicating." Winnicott explains the second part of his title ("Not Communicating") by contrasting simple not-communicating with an active or reactive not-communicating, like a child's game of hide-and-seek: "the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found."¹ He reframes this need, in paradoxical terms, as the child's need to establish a private self: "It is a sophisticated game of hide and seek in which *it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found.*" Winnicott's essay designates the individual's hidden core as an unfound "isolate" that must be protected at all costs from traumatic intrusion: "*each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact, unfound.*"²

My title uses "belonging" and "not belonging" in much the same double-edged way. I want to acknowledge, on one hand, the powerful human need to "belong" or assimilate, to identify with a group or find common ground, to recover or establish a home. On the other hand, I want to explore a more complicated relation to not belonging: the painful experience of outsider or exile status, with its lifelong uncompensated losses; but also, coexisting with it, a deep-seated resistance to belonging at all—a conscious or unconscious choice, whether self-protective, contestatory, or recognizing that some part of the self remains fundamentally unassimilable. For the individual (translator, poet, memoirist, photographer, filmmaker), *not* belonging may be as important as Winnicott's not communicating. For the critic, identification necessarily coexists with distance—overdetermining the choice of texts and subjects, while speaking to the same contradictory impulse: simultaneously wanting and not wanting to belong; in Winnicott's terms, wanting and not wanting to be found. Or perhaps we find ourselves in what we choose to write about.

This is far from being a collection of autobiographical essays. My approach is mainly literary, with excursions into photography, documentary, and film. But it inevitably draws on my own experiences and preferences—both lasting fascinations and more recent interests that respond to personal circumstances or global concerns. No choice is innocent or unmotivated by the past or the present, especially when it comes to what one chooses to write about. A recent trip to Poland—now emptied of all but the most attenuated traces of a thousand years of Jewish culture—brought home to me the extent to which, like many children born at the end of World War II, I grew up under the shadow of something incomprehensible, yet powerfully transmitted: a parent’s prewar emigration from a country and a society whose subsequent destruction in the war erased entire families, and along with them, their memories and the records of their lives. The blank in my memory occupies a space that coincides with places and memories that were literally unrecoverable for my father, and until recently, for me too. The postwar “Iron Curtain” (how dated that phrase now sounds) cut off what I somehow imagined, as a child, to be a land of darkness and danger that could neither be revisited nor communicated with.

Doubtless, the silent trauma of immigrant or refugee experience fuels the second generation’s conscious or unconscious need to assimilate and succeed. The wish to recover and remember what had been lost by a previous generation may arrive later in life. And so it was for me. A digitized copy of a family photograph album dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s recently came into my possession. The original had accompanied my grandmother, aunt, uncle-in-law, and cousin from Poland via Bucharest to Tel Aviv, and later to São Paulo in Brazil, in 1940. The album contained a time capsule of pre-World War II bourgeois life: family holidays at spas or by the sea; celebrations in restaurants and open-air picnics; trips to Italy and factory openings; precious babies and valued friends. In the midst of these scenes, with a shock of recognition, I came upon a photograph of my father: a serious young man in his late twenties, maybe ten years before I was born, seeming already to be eyeing his uncertain future in the Poland of the early 1930s. In other photographs from this period, his lively and glamorous older sister occupies center stage, sometimes affectionately intertwined with my father’s quieter, patriotic, younger half-sister Nina (her photographs never previously seen by me), who perished in unknown circumstances during the Holocaust, having chosen to remain behind with her fiancé rather than exiting for Tel Aviv when there was still time, along with her mother, sister, and brothers-in-law.

My truly “impossible” foreign father, with his excellent written English, heavily accented spoken English, interrupted career, and restless intellectual ambitions, was in some unstated way unassimilable by my English mother’s large anglophone family, with its unbroken history and sense of entitled belonging. For me, he inevitably became a psychic placeholder for the past that shadowed his (mostly unsuccessful) attempts to reestablish himself in Oxford when he arrived there with his young family after the end of the war, along with many others seeking to rebuild their interrupted lives, studies, and careers after military service or war-work. When I moved to America in my mid-thirties—as I often reflected, at much the same age that my father had left Poland—I recognized others who had internalized similar family experiences: immigration and lost relatives in the previous generation, or two; the sense of a cut-off past and incomplete belonging; and the subtle or not-so-subtle forms of intellectual dissent and internal division that surprisingly often coexist with academic life, finding an outlet in the limited forms of academic activism that universities provide. After my father’s death, I was astonished to find on his shelves—representing his postwar psychoanalytic ambitions—books by Melanie Klein that I thought I had discovered for myself. Writing a book on psychoanalysis, I found in London’s psychoanalytic community a comparable community of “unbelongers,” some of them affiliated with the diasporic origins of psychoanalysis itself in the prewar period.

So it can be no accident that many of the poets, translators, writers, photographers, and filmmakers whose work appears in these essays are migrants or emigrants—whether second-generation, like the novelist Jhumpa Lahiri, whose 2015 *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*) triangulates America, Italy, and the India of her parents’ generation; or emigrants by choice or necessity like W. G. Sebald, who opted to live and teach in England while continuing to write in German; or the internally displaced Swiss-German “isolate” Robert Walser, who left Berlin to live out his life as an inmate in a Swiss asylum; or Walter Benjamin, self-exiled from Nazi Berlin when he could no longer make a living there, taking with him his books and the memories of his Berlin childhood; or the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka, who left Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion of 1968, and—having previously documented the lives of East Slovakian Roma communities—continued to focus on the marginalized people and landscapes of “free” Europe. My final chapter, on versions of *Antigone*, finds in her both a figure of freedom, ejection from the polis, and the ambiguous pull of familial memory; but also the tensions that Edward Said evokes apropos of timeliness and lateness—“intransigence, difficulty, and

unresolved contradiction”—“a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*. . .”³ “Rewilding *Antigone*” tries to recover this stubborn, unresolved oppositionality, along with the irrational ties of familial or erotic love that bind *Antigone* to the past.

Sebald, Benjamin, and Koudelka each quit their country of origin, motivated by their need for personal or political survival; yet each retained an oblique relation to it—neither entirely leaving, nor entirely returning even when they could, finding in displacement itself an enduring motive for their work. The Italian poet Eugenio Montale and the American poet Elizabeth Bishop can both be read as exilic poets—by temperament if not by circumstances—who returned obsessively in memory to their respective childhood coasts, remaining anchored to the past yet viewing it from a distance. Colm Tóibín, writing about Bishop, acknowledges the imaginative hold of a coastal landscape transformed by time into a landscape of memory, eventually becoming a landscape of mourning. Distance and travel together unsettle the idea of home: “*Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*” (Bishop, “Questions of Travel”).⁴ Is “home” the place to which we once belonged, but to which we can never go back? Is the elusive sense of belonging always located in the past? Was leaving home not so much a matter of choice or necessity as an opportunity—in other words, not only a question of leaving somewhere, but also of what might be found elsewhere? After all, everyone at some level wants to escape their home, even if they dream of going back.

Ideas about home and linguistic identity are necessarily ambivalent and divided. In its inscription of foreignness, translation can appear as an almost existential dilemma. To live and speak in a second language, however fluently, is always to be at a slight but significant remove from expressing oneself in one’s native language. In Hannah Arendt’s words, “I write in English, but I have never lost a feeling of distance from it.”⁵ For Lahiri, by contrast, writing in Italian expressed her contradictory need for an imperfect relation to language, finding new immediacy in imperfection itself. Then again, the dictionary definition of “translation” includes not just linguistic translation from one language to another, but also translation from one place to another—translocation. The concept of translation embraces notions of metamorphosis and change, along with transformation, and even (for Walter Benjamin) the idea that a literary work only truly finds itself in translation. Crucially, it may also include transmission across time. Seamus Heaney, exploring the death of his father in his posthumously published 2016 translation *Aeneid Book VI*, or Tacita Dean, in her 2018 film *Antigone*—in some sense a father-daughter inquiry—were each

inspired respectively by Virgil and by Sophocles; in 2004, Heaney too became a translator of *Antigone*, exploring the shadowy embrace of the past, of family, and of paternity. With hindsight, the *Aeneid*, one of the key texts of Western culture, can also be read as a migration narrative founded on an original trauma and on the dangers of the Mediterranean crossing that are definitive of today's Mediterranean migrant crisis, the subject of Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 documentary about the island of Lampedusa, *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*). Rosi's traumatized survivors, coming ashore like ghosts of their former selves, arrive on an island whose subsistence economy had caused generations of previous emigrants to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Today, contact between islanders and migrants remains minimal, if not potentially conflictual, as the sheer number of incoming migrants overwhelms traditional island hospitality.

Lahiri's 2018 novel *Dove mi trovo*, a story of solitude and disconnection with journeying as its *telos*, initiated a new fiction-writing career in Italian focused on a pervasive sense of not fully belonging—in language as well as place.⁶ With altogether humbler aims and a less life-changing literary outcome, I struggled with the challenge of learning to speak and write Italian in later life, initially motivated by writing in situ about Cy Twombly, the artist whose move to Rome in the 1960s defined his relation to the art of both present and past—making him in his own way a temporal migrant (he firmly rejected the term expatriate). Although endlessly frustrated by my own lack of oral proficiency, I became intrigued by the unexpected recovery of childhood's vivid absorption in writing, even at an elementary level; later, attempting to write literary criticism in another language, I found myself forced to hone my thoughts to the limits of my ability to express them. Unexpected spin-offs from my attempt to learn Italian included greater access to Italian poetry as well as prose. Having previously read Montale in translation, I was just about able to read his poetry in Italian, experiencing with greater immediacy the changeable weather and rocky terrain of the Ligurian coast—another form of borderline, like Bishop's edgy walking-the-shoreline poetry. A fortuitous month-long residence on the Ligurian coast fired my imagination in almost physical ways. The sound of the waves pounding the cliffs beneath my study window became a distant refrain to thinking about both Montale and the hazards of Mediterranean migration.

Long before, studying Greek at school, my first exposure to Greek tragedy was to Sophocles's *Antigone*—overdetermined terrain for a future feminist. *Antigone* is revisited here in Heaney's 2004 translation, *The Burial at Thebes*, as well as in Kamila Shamsie's 2017 novel *Home Fire* (set in contemporary diasporic London), and in Dean's analogue film *Antigone*, whose dialogue with

Anne Carson's pared down "antick" version, *Antigonick*, enters the film in the form of its ongoing argument. Sophocles's *Antigone*, often read as a paradigmatic text about women's oppression by the laws of kinship, reemerges in Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* as "the occasion for a new field of the human . . . when the less than human speaks as human."⁷ Language itself becomes a symbolic snare for Carson's *Antigone*; and—as Heaney's translation makes clear—language is also a powerful political tool. A play about exclusion from the civic order holds warnings for the precarity of rights and belonging in the post-9/11 era, a danger Arendt had understood in the wake of the emergence of statelessness after World War II.⁸ Arendt's pessimism about human rights based on humanist or theological concepts of both the "human" and of "rights" implies a different understanding of belonging. As a political category, the right to have rights is predicated on a form of community that can never be fully addressed even by recognition of the nation-state—desirable as it may be—but only by a polity whose voluntarism can appear utopian or simply wishful (as it certainly risks doing in Arendt's writing). Belonging (or not) is never simply a matter of choice or sociality, but rather exists at the unstable intersection of the legal and the bio-political, the area that Giorgio Agamben refers to as the "no-man's land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life."⁹ Agamben's no-man's land corresponds to the wilderness occupied by Sophocles's *Antigone*.

One way to understand both cultural and psychic identity as aspects of belonging is to see them as paradoxically rooted in foreignness; as inexpressible, or as only partly accessible to consciousness. An identity founded or re-founded in language is potentially capable of translation, and hence of change. Lahiri complicates identity politics by substituting for it a "poetics" of identity predicated on writing in another language. In one of Lahiri's touchstones, Daphne's tree-form transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, constriction and escape are entwined with each other. David Malouf's 1996 novel, *An Imaginary Life*, reimagines the metropolitan Ovid leaving language behind altogether, as he crosses into the dream-time of the natural world. In the judicial realm, today's border-crossers are more likely to experience the violence of compulsory translation. In order to claim asylum, migrants must construct a coherent account of themselves in the language of the host country, often denying cultural differences and papering over the contradictions in their stories. By way of contrast, Sebald's affiliation with internal emigrants and exiles such as Walser and Benjamin allowed him to hold tenaciously onto Germany's literary past, or else swerve toward Swiss-German writers, while disowning the

conscious amnesia of postwar Germany—as if endorsing Arendt’s “What Remains? The Language Remains.”¹⁰ His side-long allusions to other writers not only revive the marginalized literary culture of the past but also create a displaced form of life-writing, like Benjamin’s or Proust’s, that is entwined with lost things. Benjamin’s cultural criticism resurrects some of the same overlooked and marginal writers who were beloved by Sebald. He too chose to displace remembrance of things past, not only onto writers but onto found objects—quarrying urban culture for its second-hand detritus and mapping autobiography onto the urban geography of Berlin, the city of his childhood: a city of memory and ghosts.

Dean comments on her personal predilection for obsolescence (her privileging of analogue over digital media) in ways that echo Benjamin’s fascination with superannuated technologies and with the “aura” of distance that surrounds them. Her salvaging of analogue film in *Antigone* suggests the potential for rethinking translation in terms of “analogue”—as Dean defines it, a representation of the original in another media. Benjamin argues in “The Task of the Translator” that a work’s “translatability” lies in its potential to engender new meanings in other linguistic and cultural contexts. This constitutes both its afterlife and its belatedness: “to some degree, all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines.”¹¹ If translation is a form, its content is its relation to other languages and even other media; and ultimately, for Benjamin at least, its relation to what cannot be communicated at all—its untranslatability and resistance to literal translation (rather than “poetic” or metaphorical translation). All that the translator can do, writes Benjamin, is “lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning . . . liberat[ing] the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.”¹² Recreation (including re-mediation) frees up an imprisoned original, allowing its untranslatability to survive in another form. Carson’s 2012 *Antigonick* achieves this heady freedom via the afterwardness of her version of Sophocles’s *Antigone*—not only politicizing Antigone’s exclusion from the law in terms of Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception,” but also incorporating some of the unstated questions raised by the original and by its successive interpretations. Carson’s version is a “wild” reading—not in the amateur sense signified by Freud’s “wild psychoanalysis,” but in its passionate relation to Antigone’s “going against” (Said’s telling phrase), that is, her oppositionality and unbelonging.

Translation can be regarded as a form of linguistic migration and rediscovery, or as a conditional recharging of the original via the politics of marginalization itself.¹³ On the move in all these essays is the figure of the migrant or

border-crosser, at once traveler, nomad, exile, vagabond, and barbarian (in its original sense of linguistic other).¹⁴ Migration raises questions about hospitality to strangers and outcasts, including the tensions explored by Derrida between Kant's Law of Hospitality and the judicial right to asylum. In Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, the homeless Being is an absolute Other, an outcast who indirectly acquires language and education from his unknowing host-family. The destructiveness aroused by his rejection makes him a limit case for unconditional hospitality, enacting fears surrounding the migrant who rages at the unjust state of unbelonging and its dehumanizing deprivations. Rosi's *Fuocoammare* brings together a local boy who ranges about the island, shooting birds with his slingshot, and the island's troubled humanitarian doctor. Its inspired pairing reveals the collision between settled island life and the uncontrollable migrant crisis washing up on its shores. The images and soundtrack of *Fuocoammare* ask us to see and hear the disjunction, as if hearing a distress call at sea. The human voice—call and response—captures the vulnerable relationships drowned out by the omnipresent technologies of communication on which both islanders and migrants depend for their survival. Can hospitality ever be sufficiently elastic?

Koudelka's 1977 *Gypsies* brought its viewers face to face with the forced immobilization of a formerly nomadic community. His later 1988 book of photographs, *Exiles*, documents his own adoption of an itinerant lifestyle; his camera exposes the poverty and anomie he found at the margins of a supposedly prosperous West. Koudelka's crisscrossing European travels link his photographic project to Sebald's discursive walkabouts, with their deliberate reminiscences of Walser's and Rousseau's Swiss wanderings, and to the subversive urban strolls of Benjamin's 1923–26 *One-Way Street*—inspired by his love both for outmoded things and for a Bolshevik woman artist of revolutionary change, but also by his awareness that the price paid for modernity is its destruction of the past. In Koudelka's later panoramic photography, borders and checkpoints—at once limiting human movement and dividing people from one another—become the focus of emptied-out, dehumanized landscapes, along with Europe's fortified borders and its industrial-scale destruction of the environment. Making borders visible as a site of aesthetic and political inquiry, Koudelka exposes what he calls "the principle of the wall," a principle transferable to other walls and other places, including the notorious wall intended to deter migrants from crossing the US-Mexican border. Militarized border-crossings criminalize not only migration and migrants, but also human movement. They function to "disappear" entire populations (refugees, families, children) as well as admitting, apprehending, or excluding them.

Translation moves between the pages of this book much like ideas about migration and memory: now visible, now invisible, yet always present in some shape or form. Outstanding translations exist of writers ranging from Montale and Sebald to Benjamin and Sophocles, and I have used them. Philosophic texts in the contemporary canon have themselves become internationalized, even naturalized, drawing attention to the role of translation in the formation of philosophy. Indeed, theories of translation have themselves achieved the status of philosophy, given philosophy's ancient origins and the migration of philosophical texts across languages that characterizes today's theoretical and critical repertoires.¹⁵ Although I have necessarily been informed by it, I have touched only lightly on the immense volume of contemporary writing on the theory and practice of translation. This is not the place to tackle the issue of untranslatability, or the fact that translation itself can be refigured as a citational patchwork of the foreign—as non-translation, or language turned inside out, engaged in constant exchange with other systems.¹⁶ The compendious *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (itself a work of translation) concludes its introductory entry on the verb “to translate” with a telling allusion to displacement: the reader may be left in peace by “the exchange of supposedly equivalent linguistic values in the passage from one language to another”; or, alternatively, “the displacement of the reader in relation to his [*sic*] native language by virtue of the translation (*übersetzen*) [is] such that they become foreign to each another, which is perhaps the best method for presenting it.”¹⁷ The translated reader here becomes a figure (a representation) for the most disturbing effect of the foreign: becoming foreign to oneself, both in and out of language.

It would be difficult adequately to acknowledge the formidable expertise, scope, and urgency of contemporary migration and citizenship studies. Although I have tried to do so, if only glancingly and in passing, my approach is primarily literary-critical—not only selective, but predominantly Eurocentric in focus, and often having more to do with the respective subjectivity and aesthetics of the practitioners I have singled out than with the traumas of migrant experience or negotiating actual frontiers today.¹⁸ I have benefited and borrowed from redefinitions and debates in cultural fields where the terms “migration” and “borders” have themselves become key terms urgently in need of updating, along with salutary critique of migration studies' Euro-Atlantic focus. This book is not intended as a polemic, nor does it attempt to engage with the intractable issues surrounding modern migration and displacement.¹⁹ But my hope is that these essays—like translation—will not so much leave their readers in place as displace them, if not from one language to another, or

from continent to continent, at least to a position from which they glimpse the alternative to economic globalization that Viet Thanh Nguyen, in his 2018 collection *The Displaced*, refers to as the utopian vision of cosmopolitanism—namely, the dissolution of borders altogether: “Making borders permeable we bring ourselves closer to others, and others closer to us”—at once an exhilarating and a frightening prospect, and arguably beyond reach of the current world of finite resources, regressive ethno-nationalisms, and unresolved military and economic conflicts.²⁰ Nguyen freely admits that many writers, and not only refugee writers, are used to feeling displaced, and (as I have suggested) their work may even depend on displacement of different kinds. But I have also tried to avoid the consoling fiction that we are all refugees now. We are not. Most of those reading the following pages will never have experienced the incalculable dangers, dislocation, and losses involved in refugee status; or participated in the attempt to breach barriers erected against migrants; or experienced the daily struggle to survive in the often inhuman conditions of temporary detention, on islands, in camps, or in prison-like centers as they await processing, asylum-hearings, or deportation to countries where their lives are at risk or have long been deprived of meaning, and where they may not even speak the language.

It is one thing to choose a life lived in translation or voluntary migration—which may amount to the same thing—but quite another to be a forced migrant. The most that one can do (quoting Nguyen again) is make visible the plight of refugees who are “ignored and forgotten by those who are not refugees until they turn into a menace.”²¹ Today’s tired walkers with their backpacks, bundles, and children, trudging across European or Latin American borders in their quest for asylum, are not vagabonds by choice, any more than migrants crossing the Mediterranean or the English Channel in their unseaworthy craft aspire to found a new empire on the shores of Italy, like Virgil’s Aeneas, or to become parasitic on Western welfare systems. Rather, they are simply trying to survive—let alone thrive—along with their children. However defined, migrants are the product of economic, political, military, and (sure to become exponentially worse in the future) climatic crises that combine to undermine utopian visions of a borderless global community, at peace with itself and richly renewed by intercultural and linguistic difference. The long-term devastation inflicted by a global pandemic on migrant populations without adequate (or any) healthcare, accompanied by restrictions on movement, the hardening of national borders, and the weaponization of migrants themselves, has hardly begun to be assessed. But that is a subject for another book and another, postpandemic time.

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