explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

An Island Apart: Dejima as a Site of Cultural Mediation in David Mitchell's Historical Novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.25.13.4

Bożena Kucała (Jagiellonian University)
ORCID: 0000-0002-9882-9305

Abstract. This article analyzes the importance of the setting in David Mitchell's historical novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010). For over two centuries Dejima − an artificial island constructed in Nagasaki Bay and the site of a Dutch trading post − functioned as the sole point of contact between the Western world and Japan, which at that time pursued an isolationist policy. The novel explores the island's double function: that of connecting the two cultures and yet keeping them apart. Due to its peculiar location − within and outside Japan − the island was not only a trading factory, but also acquired symbolic meanings. The article examines Dejima's role in the novel as a site of (limited) cultural exchange by focusing on its dual orientation towards both Japan and the outside world, its protean status in the story, and the crucial role of translation and translators. It is also highlighted that the intercultural encounters depicted in *The Thousand Autumns* foreground the role of the island in the modernization of Japan.

Key words: islands in literature, Dejima, David Mitchell, historical fiction, intercultural encounters

1. INTRODUCTION: THE FICTIONAL POTENTIAL OF HISTORY

David Mitchell's historical novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010)[1] owes its existence to the appeal of a very unusual place. As the writer explains in his essay "On Historical Fiction," appended to the novel, while travelling in Japan in 1994 he happened to get off at the wrong tram stop in Nagasaki and came upon the remains of a Dutch trading post. The place, as Mitchell recollects, "crackled with fictional potential."

[1] David Mitchell is a contemporary English writer, best known as the author of *Cloud Atlas* (2004) which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and shortlisted for the 2011 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. Two stories in Mitchell's debut novel *Ghostwritten* (1999) as well as his next novel *number9dream* (2001) are set in contemporary Japan. *The Thousand Autumns* stands out in Mitchell's oeuvre owing to a simpler and less experimental structure, being located in the past, and representing the writer's "first sustained use of third-person narrative" (Dillon 2011, 4). It is also "less overtly metafictional" than the majority of his works (cf. Harris-Birtill 2019, 8).

He describes the genesis of his novel as an attempt to "reconstruct" Dejima in fiction (2011b, 555). The English visitor's serendipitous creative impulse happened to coincide with the time when the Japanese started to reconstruct the site in recognition of the historical significance of Dejima as well as its current tourist potential. Since the 1990s a project has been underway to restore the Dutch settlement to its original state. The reconstructed bridge which connects Dejima to the mainland was opened in 2017 in a ceremony attended by members of both the Japanese and Dutch royal families ("Omotemon-bashi Bridge"). In the twentieth century the island had been integrated into the mainland but there are long-term plans to make the site an island again by constructing waterways around it ("Dejima Restoration Project").

In *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric, Politics* Marc Shell, drawing on the geographical definition of an island as a patch of land circumscribed by and opposed to water (2014, 1−2), argues that inherent to "islandness" is the confrontation between identity and difference, which "informs primordial issues of philosophy: how, conceptually, we connect and disconnect parts and wholes, for example, and how we connect and disconnect one thing and another" (3). Indeed, insularity was Dejima's key defining characteristic. Dejima was constructed by the Japanese in the early seventeenth century as a tiny island in Nagasaki Bay with the express purpose of isolating and supervising Westerners. The first residents, forcibly relocated from mainland Japan, were a group of Portuguese suspected of spreading Christianity and instigating political turmoil. However, the Portuguese were also expelled from Dejima by 1639, and this act was followed by two centuries of a policy of national isolation known as *sakoku*. The ban on foreigners entering Japan mirrored the prohibition on Japanese travelling overseas. A small number of Dutch residents, representatives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), were the only Europeans left in Japan; nevertheless, they were also ordered to move to Dejima and were subjected to numerous restrictions (Willis 2008, 242−43). Subsequently, the Dutch on Dejima found themselves in the position of mediators between Japan and the Western world. It was also through the Dutch language that a modicum of Western learning reached Japan.[2] The isolation of the island and its connection by a guarded bridge to the mainland served, from the Japanese point of view, two contradictory purposes at once: to maintain contacts with the outside world while keeping it at bay (also literally); hence, Dejima became a site of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion. Its singularity was conditioned by the dual status of Japan itself: the mainland in relation to Dejima, but an island with regard to the rest of the world.

The physical location of Dejima − a part of Japan and yet separated from it − corresponded to its cultural import, which was quite disproportionate to the island's tiny size. Examining a spectrum of meanings ascribable to imaginary islands in literature, Elizabeth McMahon argues that representations of islands tend to transcend their physical features, casting them in a figurative mode: "the island operates as a kind of metafigure, a key *topos* of the literary imagination" (2016, 8). Dejima, though a real place, was also, in a sense, a place of the imagination as a man-made island projecting Japan's self-perception. In the words of David Blake Willis, "Dejima functioned literally and figuratively as the metaphor of Japan's relations with the outside world" (2008, 241).

---

[2] Western learning was known as *rangaku* − literally "studies of the Dutch," since Dutch was the only mode of communication with the West (Willis 2008, 241−42).

As he further claims, by embodying the complex relations between the inside/interior and outside/exterior, Dejima was "the first, the most powerful, and the most enduring symbol of the Japanese mentality and approach toward Others" (2008, 244). The Japanese idea of the Other which took hold in this period – "those on the edge, outside the pale, forbidden, exotic, erotic, and dangerous" − may, ironically, be regarded as a counterpart to what Edward Said defined as Orientalism (Willis 2008, 244). According to Jeroen Vermeulen, Mitchell's novel "displays characteristics of Said's theory of Orientalism, but at the same time sketches its counterpart, Occidentalism" (2015, 168). Earlier in an interview, David Mitchell made the same point about the inversion of the common Orientalist relations on Dejima: "it was the whites who were corralled, fleeced, and exoticized" (Begley 2010). Until the mid-twentieth century, Westerners were viewed with conflicting feelings, ranging from "admiration, envy, curiosity, even servility" to "hatred, suspicion and contempt" (Maraini qtd. in Willis 2008, 244). As Carmen Pérez Ríu observes, "[t]he novel is set in a colonial location, but one in which the European characters lack the emblematic power and supremacy of the colonial metropolis" (2019, 192). According to contemporary Japanese scholar Kimiko Seki, the historic Dejima may be considered representative of how the Japanese communicate with foreign people and cultures even today (Willis 2008, 244). The complexity of perspectives which the island inspired obviously included also its function as the sole window on Japan for Europeans. For the two centuries of Dutch presence on Dejima, Western ideas about the inaccessible Asian country were nearly exclusively shaped by Dutch accounts.

Irrespective of the novel's historical setting, William Stephenson makes a case for its topicality by claiming that the theme of civilizations clashing "in a state of mutual ignorance" illustrates the narrative's engagement with "the contemporary globalized world" (2019, 101). While it is debatable whether, as Stephenson argues, *The Thousand Autumns* does not include a dominant point of view (indeed, the eponymous Jacob comes across as the principal character, for most of the narrative occupying the position of focalizer), it is true that the presence of other focal characters "decentres the narrative" (Stephenson 2019, 102−3). Interviewed while *The Thousand Autumns* was still a work in progress, Mitchell stated that his intention was "to write a bicultural novel, where Japanese perspectives are given an equal weight to Dutch/European perspectives" (Finbow 2007), and this island was uniquely placed to facilitate such duality. The plot of the novel is determined by the peculiar physical and symbolic location of "the microworld of Dejima" (O'Donnell 2015, 130).[3]

This article analyzes the significance of the setting in the novel. Following the standard narratological definition, the setting is understood as "the general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place" (Ryan 2009, 422). As Monika Fludernik observes, evocations of the space within which a narrative unfolds − especially when it is modelled on a real place − enhance the realism of the text (Fludernik 2009, 42). The article aims to demonstrate that *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* explores the import of the historic island as a place of fraught cultural mediation. Drawing on the fact that Dejima was literally a construct, Eva-Maria Schmitz describes it as "a laboratory of intercultural exchange" (2018, 21). Covering

[3] For a discussion of the significance of islands in Mitchell's fiction see Schmitz 2018.

approximately a year, from 1799 to 1800,[4] Mitchell's novel is set on Dejima not long before the island began to decline in importance as a transitional place between Japan and the Western world, or, as Patrick O'Donnell put it, "the geopolitical abstractions of 'East' and 'West'" (2015, 124). Certain developments in the plot herald changes which will obliterate the reason for the island's survival.[5] The novel captures Dejima at a turning point in both Dutch and Japanese history. It was at that time that Holland, weakened by the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and the Napoleonic wars, began to lose control over its Asian territories (van Waarden 2014, 34). On the other hand, Japan's period of self-imposed isolation was about to come to an end, and the country soon found itself "on the cusp of opening its borders and becoming a world power" (Eggers 2010). Hence, besides the obvious aspect of an encounter between Japanese and Western cultures, cultural mediation as depicted in Mitchell's novel includes also a confrontation between conservatism and the modernizing tendencies observable in Japan at that time.

2. A WINDOW ON TWO WORLDS

The topographical elements constituting the island of Dejima have deep cultural resonances. Its name reflects the Japanese perspective − as Willis explains, Dejima connotes "exit (of the foreigners presumably), a gateway to the outer world (for the Japanese), or simply a 'jutting-out'" (2008, 255). Positioned as the only breach in the strict policy of isolation, Dejima offered a tiny number of Japanese minimal contact with the outside world while forbidding them to enter it fully. The fan-like shape of the island may serve as a metaphor for the kind of movement it allowed − while the passage to the island was narrow, carefully guarded and accessible only under certain circumstances, the subsequent expansion the island seemed to promise was in fact constrained by its edges.

For several Japanese characters in Mitchell's novel, the external perspective Dejima offers is synonymous with progress and openness to otherness, while concomitantly making them aware of their actual incarceration in their own country. The interpreter Ogawa whom the protagonist Jacob de Zoet[6] befriends complains to him:

> But Mr de Zoet may pass through *Sea*-Gate and away, over ocean. But I – *all* Japanese … prisoners all life. Who plot to leave is executed. Who leave and return from abroad is executed. My precious wish is one year in Batavia, to speak Dutch… to eat Dutch, to drink Dutch, to sleep Dutch. One year, just one year… (Mitchell 2011a, 97)

As the young samurai recollects during the conversation with Jacob, on his first visit Dejima overwhelmed him with exoticism − the appearance of the foreigners, their

---

[4] The last two chapters leap forward to 1811 and 1817, respectively.

[5] Dejima lost its *raison d'être* in the 1850s, when Japanese ports were opened to foreign trade following a series of treaties with the US, Russia, the Netherlands, Great Britain and France (Mitchell 2011a, 554). Subsequently, Dejima was abandoned and gradually shrank to a small tidal inlet (Willis 2008, 255).

[6] One of the sources for the novel were the memoirs of Hendrik Doeff, who, like the protagonist of Mitchell's novel, arrived in Dejima as a young clerk in 1799 and remained there until 1817, in the meantime becoming Chief of the post (Larsonneur 2016, 25). Doeff's *Recollections of Japan* were published in Dutch in 1833, and translated into English in 2003.

language, even their clothes and the games they played caused a major cultural shock. His master had rightly warned him of the cultural divide he was going to encounter after crossing the Holland Bridge towards the island: "This is the longest bridge you ever cross because this bridge go [sic] between two worlds" (Mitchell 2011a, 97).[7]

Yet both in Mitchell's fictional realm and in the historical context those who metaphorically wanted to cross the bridge constituted minorities on both sides of the cultural divide. In his overview of the transfer of knowledge between Japan and the Western world in the late eighteenth century, Betto van Waarden notes that the Dutch East India Company employees, who acted as the main channel of information, were after all merchants, not scholars, and as a rule did not make much effort to learn about Japanese culture (van Waarden 2014, 25–27). On the other hand, the shogunate restricted the circulation of information from the outside world which might prove politically subversive (van Waarden 2014, 35). But there were notable exceptions, such as the Dutch scholar Isaac Titsingh in the employ of VOC who committed himself to studying the Japanese language and culture, and tried to disseminate knowledge about Japan in the West. Nevertheless, having spent a few years on Dejima, he observed that Dutch merchants and Japanese translators showed little interest in each other's cultures (van Waarden 2014, 38).

Mitchell's novel reflects this level of cultural exchange by featuring just two Dutchmen who apply themselves to Japanese studies: Jacob and Doctor Marinus. Thanks to the offshore presence of the tiny Dutch community, the Japanese benefit from certain achievements of Western science and thought, although inevitably the transfer of knowledge is very limited and filtered through the Dutch language. For instance, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is a coveted book among some Japanese dignitaries, and Ogawa is involved in the project of translating the book, at first not realizing that he is translating a translation from the English original. However, it is chiefly through medicine that Western thought slowly makes its way into Japan. The novel features several episodes involving medical practice. The highly respected Doctor Marinus holds regular medical seminars for a group of Japanese students. They are among the select few who are granted access to the transcultural territory of the island. European medical books, greatly valued among the more progressive Japanese doctors, convince them of the superiority of Western medicine, which, again, they broadly and often incorrectly regard as Dutch achievements. The ambiguities and tensions in the encounters between the two cultures lead Eva-Maria Windberger to contend that the portrayal of Dejima "as a place of intercultural understanding and learning … is sharply contrasted with frequently occurring cultural clashes, which appear to dominate the picture" (2023, 211).

The relations between the Japanese and the Dutch are based both on mutual benefits and mutual suspicion and mistrust, with each treating the other side as "untrustworthy and potentially dangerous barbarians" (Onega 2023, 18). The fact that Dejima is the "Empire's sole window to the world," invoked by the Chief Resident of the VOC in order to blackmail the Shogun into offering the Dutch better trade conditions (Mitchell 2011a,

---

[7] Gerd Bayer reads the book from a postcolonial perspective, claiming that "the novel's intensive investment in non-European localities and cultures can be read as a gesture that acknowledges the lasting attraction of the 'exotic' for European readers" (2014, 111). However, episodes such as the one cited above show that Mitchell attempts a balanced portrayal of both cultures which appear exotic to each other.

42), is not as effective an argument as Vortstenbosch assumed. Accordingly, the Shogun's reply to the Chief's letter is cautious and much less favourable than the Dutchman had expected. Even at the stage of the letter's composition Vortstenbosch's case is exposed as weak by his secretary Jacob de Zoet's factual correction that "the sole window" is in danger of being "boarded up" rather than "bricked over," since wood remains the dominant building material in Japan. The inward-looking Japan still pursues a policy of self-sufficiency, and the prospect of maintaining trade relations with the Western world is not a sufficient incentive for the Japanese authorities to ensure Dejima's survival.

In like manner, for the Europeans Dejima is the sole window on Japan; what for some Japanese becomes an exit, for some Dutch is an entry. Soon after his arrival, Jacob makes his first visit to Nagasaki. As Ogawa did before him, he crosses "the longest bridge" to another cultural realm, only in the opposite direction. The group of foreigners are carried in a palanquin so that they literally cannot set foot on Japanese soil. Through the grill of the palanquin, Jacob absorbs as much of the sights, sounds and smells of Japan as he can, while his European appearance makes him an object of popular curiosity. The window in Jacob's room on Dejima, constructed with the use of both glass and paper panes, exemplifies the material intermingling of the two cultures, but its description as "half-Japanese half-Dutch" (Mitchell 2011a, 63) also may be taken as a metaphor for the duality and intermingling of perspectives which his present locality offers.

On the structural level, the "bicultural" aspect of the novel is emphasized by setting parts of the action in mainland Japan and alternating European and Japanese calendars in the indications of time at the beginning of chapters. The coexistence of the two ways of measuring time "produces a sense of temporal relativity and loose correspondence that conveys the incommensurability of the two cultures" (Onega 2023, 15). As Windberger points out, the omniscient narration combined with the intermittent use of both Dutch and Japanese characters as focalizers serves the same purpose of doing justice to both cultures while exposing their separateness (2023, 210). Nevertheless, the perspective of Jacob, grounded in the in-between space of Dejima, appears to prevail in the novel.

3. DEJIMA'S PROTEAN IDENTITY

The depiction of Dejima in the novel begins with a factual account drawn from the point of view of the protagonist Jacob de Zoet, as he observes it from on board his ship while waiting for permission to disembark. His first impression of Dejima is congruous with its basic function as a Dutch trading factory: the approximately twenty-five buildings that the little island comprises are warehouses, residences of the Dutch officials, a small hospital and the house of the Guild of Interpreters. In the course of the story, however, Dejima undergoes metamorphosis in the eyes of Jacob and other characters, taking on a range of symbolic meanings.

Beginning with an attitude of mild curiosity, Jacob regards Dejima as his temporary home for the coming year. He has accepted a clerical post with the Dutch East India Company in order to acquire a fortune sufficient for him to marry his beloved Anna back in Holland. The Chief warns him of the dullness and monotony of life on "the Company's furthest-flung outpost" (Mitchell 2011a, 39). These predictions, however, soon turn out to be grossly inaccurate. When Jacob exposes fraud in the Company's trade books and his

uncompromising honesty leads to a bitter conflict with his superior, he learns, in a matter of minutes, that his career prospects are ruined and he will be trapped on this remote post for the whole five years of his contract. As a result, the protagonist's perception of Dejima is immediately transformed − it is now his prison rather than a temporary home, and a symbol of his failure: "*I shall be spending my twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth and thirtieth year – my last best years – trapped in a dying factory with whatever flotsam and jetsam happen to wash up*" (Mitchell 2011a, 196). This turn in Jacob's fortunes is immediately followed by the Japanese woman Orito's desperate attempt to escape to Dejima, to avoid incarceration in the sinister Mount Shiranui Shrine. Effectively, what has just become a prison for Jacob could be a place of freedom for Orito. Yet Jacob helplessly watches the Land-Gate on Holland Bridge close as the woman is being led away by her captors. Thus, both mainland Japan and Dejima function as places of incarceration for the respective characters.

Developments in the outside world also radically redefine the significance of this tiny patch of land and make it a politically contested territory. Dejima's ambiguous political status reflects its cultural duality − although a part of Japan, it enjoys some autonomy from the Japanese authorities while the Dutch regard the settlement as an extension of the VOC. Although officially just a trading company, the Dutch East India Company is believed to represent Holland, which is why the flag of the Republic of the United Provinces is flown from a flagpole in the centre of the island.

The intervention of a third party throws the question of the island's political identity into sharp relief. On 18th October 1800 an English ship, HMS *Phoebus*, enters Nagasaki Harbour[8] with the mission to "[p]lunder the Dutch and seduce the Japanese" (Mitchell 2011a, 415). Although the English dismissively describe Dejima as "a poke-hole" (Mitchell 2011a, 410), they nevertheless recognize its potentially crucial role as the British Empire's gateway to Japan. Planning to subdue the Dutch on Dejima and replace them as mediators between Japan and the rest of the world, the English captain is unable to predict the Japanese reaction: "would the Japanese consider Dutch soil to be taken or their own?" (Mitchell 2011a, 414). Even though, as a Dutch official explains, the island is "sovereign Japanese territory, leased to the Company" (Mitchell 2011a, 443), it is the Dutch who, unexpectedly, put up the most effective resistance. The English seamen bring the news that the Dutch East India Company has gone bankrupt and has ceased to exist, and that The Netherlands has been occupied by the French. Paradoxically, what the English captain describes as "[t]hat walled-in hamlet of warehouses" (Mitchell 2011a, 480), having thus lost its status as the easternmost outpost of the Company, rises in importance as the only place in the world where the Dutch flag is still flown. The Dutch residents on Dejima become self-appointed representatives of the Dutch nation rather than merely Dutch trade. They set up the Provisional Dejima Republic, with Jacob de Zoet as its president. From being a humble clerk, or "a shopkeeper," as the English captain has contemptuously dubbed him (Mitchell 2011a, 502), Jacob has advanced to the status of a heroic defender, ready to die for the flag of the non-existent Dutch state as he defiantly endures the English bombardment from the watchtower, in full view of the

[8] This part of the novel is loosely based on the so-called *Phaeton* incident of 1808. The English frigate sailed into Nagasaki harbour in order to plunder Dutch merchant ships. One of the historical sources on that event is Hendrik Doeff's *Recollections of Japan* (see Wilson 2010). Mitchell recreated the circumstances of the attempted invasion, however, he renamed the ship and predated the incident.

enemy. Nonetheless, Dejima remains Jacob's prison, even more so now that due to the Company's bankruptcy he cannot expect any transport back home, but at the time of the foreign attack it has also become, as he declares, "[his] station" (Mitchell 2011a, 500). Following his successful defence of the island, he begins to think of it again, albeit from quite a new perspective, as his home and would even willingly settle in mainland Japan if Japanese law allowed it. Yet, after an unexpectedly long, eighteen-year stay, he goes back to the newly created Kingdom of the United Netherlands (as his country is now called), where a hero's welcome awaits him. He has to leave behind his half-Japanese son, but by the time of his departure Jacob himself has become culturally hybrid. Jacob's inability to settle in mainland Japan due to his foreignness is mirrored in his son's precarious position: Yûan is "*too Japanese to leave, but not Japanese enough to belong*" (Mitchell 2011a, 544). It may be said that both father and son have been shaped by the cultural ambiguities of Dejima. The aged Jacob's death in the mid-nineteenth-century, reported briefly in the last chapter of the novel,[9] coincides with Dejima losing its political and economic status as the only exit from and entry into Japan. Although, in retrospect, it is clear that the novel portrays a historical watershed, Mitchell, as Michiko Kakutani puts it, does not "italicize" the moment, instead allowing "the consequences of this clash of civilizations to bubble up slowly through his characters' stories" (2010), and, it may be added, to be enacted on the remarkably small stage of Dejima.

4. DEJIMA AS A ZONE OF (MIS)TRANSLATION

In this novel, as Claire Larsonneur observes, "Mitchell chose to give translation a central role, involving all of the novel's lead characters" (2018, 2). The term "translation" is derived from the Latin *translatio* ("transporting"), related to the verb *transferre* ("carry over") (Munday 2012, 8) − both meanings particularly pertinent to the communication between the two isolated islands depicted in *The Thousand Autumns*. The numerous episodes involving translation between Japanese and Dutch are vital in the representation of Dejima as a place of (limited) cultural mediation. One the one hand, within Mitchell's narrative translation is "a channel for knowledge" (Ríu 2019, 196), or, to be more precise, for the one-sided transmission of aspects of Western science to Japan. But translating is not merely a matter of providing tools for communication between linguistically different communities; translation, as Patrick O'Donnell observes, "may … be considered the linguistic register of [the novel's] constant movement between shifting cultural frameworks" (2015, 146). Consequently, the translators portrayed in *The Thousand Autumns* defy the ideal of the translator's invisibility[10]: the poor language skills of even the best Japanese translators (which is rendered in the novel in the form of awkward, ungrammatical English) as well as the inevitable cultural differences they

---

[9] Back in the Netherlands, the aged Jacob in his dying vision sees Orito, and a door "slides open" (Mitchell 2011a, 546). The door is paper, therefore, as Stephenson observes, Japanese. This ending, according to Stephenson, suggests that "a trace of oriental otherness remains in Jacob's mind" (2019, 114).

[10] Lawrence Venuti explains that the invisible translator achieves the effect of transparency so that the translated text gives the impression of being the original (1995, 1). Norman Shapiro compares a good translation to a pane of glass which, ideally, should not call attention to itself (Venuti 1995, 1).

confront foreground the realm of translation as a zone of precarious negotiation between the two cultures.

The acts of translation described in *The Thousand Autumns* are time-consuming, arduous, ritualized and fraught with the potential for misunderstanding. The role of translation and the translators is determined by the Japanese side and therefore corresponds to the equivocal *raison d'être* of Dejima: translation is to build a bridge between the two cultures and yet to keep them apart. All the translators are Japanese while the Dutch are not allowed to study the Japanese language; this ensures that the Japanese occupy a privileged position in controlling the process of linguistic and cultural mediation. This control extends to the double role played by the majority of translators − they spy on the Westerners and on each other.

The regular language tutorials held at the Interpreters' Guild on Dejima illustrate the etymological meaning of translating as carrying meaning from one language to another, in this case from Dutch to Japanese, since the collective project of creating a dictionary is unidirectional. On the occasion when Jacob stands in for Doctor Marinus as an expert on Dutch, the words and concepts he is required to explain present varying degrees of difficulty, including cultural gaps which the seminarians and their Dutch instructor try to bridge:

> Each interpreter has a list of items that evade the Guild's collective understanding. These he reads out, one by one, and Jacob explains as clearly as he can, with examples, gestures and synonyms. The group discusses an appropriate Japanese substitute, sometimes testing it on Jacob, until everyone is satisfied. Straightforward words such as 'parched', 'plenitude' or 'saltpetre' do not detain them for long. More abstract items such as 'simile', 'figment' or 'parallax' prove more exacting. Terms without a ready Japanese equivalent, such as 'privacy', 'splenetic' or the verb 'to deserve' cost ten or fifteen minutes, as do phrases requiring specialist knowledge – 'Hanseatic', 'nerve-ending', or 'subjunctive'. (Mitchell 2011a, 128−29)

At one end of the spectrum are terms for which strictly linguistic translation suffices, at the other end are concepts which require what modern theoreticians call "cultural translation" (Bassnett 2011, 102). The novel intimates that the work progresses but provides no evidence by which to judge its actual results. It must be observed that under the circumstances the task is very challenging, given that everyone's linguistic competence in the foreign language is very limited, and everyone is quite ignorant about the cultural framework within which the other language operates.

Irrespective of the genuine efforts to mediate between languages and cultures, that same tutorial also reveals the translator's capacity to manipulate and shape the message in accordance with his own purposes. Belatedly, Jacob realizes that the words translator Kobayashi asked him to clarify in fact conveyed a hidden threat which at the time he failed to heed. The burglary carried out in Jacob's rooms while he was busy with the tutorial is clearly Kobayashi's revenge on the Dutch clerk for exposing his earlier deliberate mistranslation of the Shogun's letter to the Dutch. The blurring of the rendition and the distortion of meaning, encapsulated in the Italian adage *traduttore*/*traditore* ("translator/traitor") (Bassnett 2011, 97), is illustrated in the Dejiman context by the literal blending of the two roles. As Claire Larsonneur and Hélène Machinal observe,

"Much of the novel rests … upon what is lost in translation, or that has been omitted or twisted out of shape" (Larsonneur and Machinal 2013, par. 4).

Yet, when translation is motivated by a genuine desire to mediate between the two languages, it also becomes a space of mutually illuminating cultural encounters, even if there remains a degree of incomprehensibility. Jacob and Ogawa's joint work on translating documents leads to discussions of aspects of their respective cultures. Acknowledging Jacob's interest and dedication, the open-minded Japanese flouts the official prohibition by secretly helping the Dutch clerk in his study of the Japanese language.

Another series of interlinguistic and intercultural encounters is initiated by Jacob's acquaintance with Orito, the Japanese female doctor with whom he haplessly falls in love. Their strenuous communication typically revolves around translation and lexical clarification. The outward focus on language differences entails an unspoken meaning, as in the following exchange:

> 'Does "Aibagawa" have meaning?'
> '"*Aiba*" is "indigo",' her pride in her name is plain, 'and "*gawa*" is "river".'
> 'So you are an indigo river. You sound like a poem.' … 'My own name is,' he strains to sound casual, 'Jacob.'
> 'What is …' she swivels her head to show puzzlement '… Ya-ko-bu?'
> 'The name my parents gave me: Jacob. My full name is Jacob de Zoet.'
> She gives a cautious nod. 'Yakobu Dazûto.'
> *I wish*, he thinks, *spoken words could be captured and kept in a locket*.
> 'My pronounce,' Miss Aibagawa asks, 'is not very good?'
> 'No no no: you are perfect in every way. Your pronounce is perfect.' (Mitchell 2011a, 144)

Jacob's confusion about his own feelings and intentions is exacerbated by his ignorance of Japanese customs. His proposal of marriage, which in any case he knows to be impossible, is a doomed attempt to overcome the cultural divide between himself and Orito and is duly conveyed together with the gift of a Dutch dictionary. The dictionary, as Jacob well realizes, has great value for any Japanese scholar, but, as has been habitual in his conversations with Orito, the translation tool carries an extra meaning. Ironically, however, the message not only fails to reach the intended addressee but ultimately results in an outcome that is exactly the opposite of the sender's plans. Intercepted by Orito's hostile stepmother, the dictionary and the letter concealed between its pages hasten her decision to put a stop to the girl's medical studies and have her locked up in a remote monastery.

The role of both linguistic and cultural (mis)translation is brought to the fore in the culminating event in the novel, i.e. the English attempt to capture Dejima (inspired by an actual historical incident). The action switches rapidly between three locations − the Magistracy in Nagasaki, the Chief's Residence on Dejima and the English ship, three perspectives as well as three languages. Before the tension escalates into an open attack on Dejima and, accidentally, some shells fall on Nagasaki which effectively amounts to an English attack on Japan, the relations between the three sides remain precariously ambiguous. Negotiations are carried out and messages are translated back and forth between Dutch, English and Japanese. However, due to the opacity of the situation,

translation is always a double act − the literal conveyance of the message is followed by an explanation of the sender's intentions, which of course may be twisted by the intentions of the interpreter. The letter from the English captain, originally translated from English into Dutch by one of the ship's officers and subsequently translated into Japanese by the Magistrate's Japanese translators, outlines the English negotiating position:

> The letter claims that the Dutch Company is bankrupt, that Holland no longer exists and that a British governor-general now sits in Batavia. The letter ends with a warning that the French, Russian and Chinese are planning an invasion of our islands. King George refers to Japan as 'The Great Britain of the Pacific Ocean' and urges us to sign a treaty of amity and commerce. (Mitchell 2011a, 472)

Too prudent to take the message at its face value (indeed, the captain has mispresented the situation), the Magistrate asks Jacob to offer his interpretation. Jacob summarizes the letter as an English ploy to intimidate the Japanese; via his interpretations, he plays a major role in shaping the Japanese belligerent attitudes towards the English. By this time, Jacob has mastered some Japanese, and some Japanese officials have mastered some Dutch, yet both sides often resort to the mediation of translators, either to overcome actual language problems, or to use the mediating space to frame their utterances in accordance with their own aims.

Thus, the numerous episodes in the novel which involve translation highlight the role of Dejima as a site of complicated cultural interactions − understandings, misunderstandings, cooperation or double-dealing. A linguistic consequence of the early nineteenth-century English attack (not mentioned in the novel) was the instructions issued to Japanese official interpreters to extend their competence to English and Russian, besides Dutch (Larsonneur 2018, 4).

5. CODA: BETWEEN TWO ERAS

The analysis of Dejima's spatial and cultural in-betweenness in Mitchell's novel must be complemented by an emphasis on its significance as a point of temporal transition in Japan's history. The Japanese attitudes towards Dejima as an outpost of the Western world fall roughly into two categories: mistrust of the external world and a determination for the country to continue in its condition of isolation and a semi-feudal political system, or, conversely, openness to otherness and a desire to reform Japan. While conservatism and an overt adherence to tradition predominate, signs of the changes to come are evident. Orito, a member of the select group of Japanese medical students on Dejima, becomes not only the first female Japanese doctor, but also a pioneer of scientific, rational views.[11] As a practitioner of modern medicine, she has committed herself to fighting superstition:

---

[11] The German physician Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold was a physician on Dejima in the years 1823−29. His daughter by a Japanese concubine became the first female Japanese doctor − an inspiration for the character of Orito (Larsonneur 2016, 26−27).

> 'Nowdays, in Japan, when mother, or baby, or mother *and* baby die in childbirth, people say, "Ah … they die because gods decide so." Or, "They die because bad karma." Or, "They die because *o-mamori* – magic from temple – too cheap." Mr de Zoet understand, it is same as bridge. True reason of many, many death ignoration. I wish to build bridge *from* ignoration,' her tapering hands form the bridge, 'to knowledge. This,' she lifts, with reverence, Dr Smellie's text, 'is piece of bridge.' (Mitchell 2011a, 76−77)

A conflict between traditionalism and modernity also comes to the fore during a debate at the Shirandô Academy in Nagasaki, which one of its members describes as a "crucible of ideology" in Japan (Mitchell 2011a, 232). The scientist Yoshida Hayato − his courage in expressing such subversive views enhanced by his terminal illness − undermines the doctrine that Japan is "an impregnable fortress" (Mitchell 2011a, 229), criticizes the country's policy of isolation as harmful, and forcefully asserts the need for modernization. Some of the academics treat his urgency with scepticism: "'What I doubt is the likelihood of an armada of European warships sailing into Edo or Nagasaki. You argue for revolutionary changes to our state, but why? To counter a phantom? To address a hypothetical 'what if?'" (Mitchell 2011a, 232). The debate is indirectly settled several months later, when an English ship indeed enters Nagasaki Bay with hostile intentions. The invasion, although ultimately unsuccessful, exposes Japan's political and military backwardness and its vulnerability to possible future aggression.[12]

The developments on and around Dejima, however, function as harbingers of the changes to come rather than an impulse for immediate reforms. At the time of Jacob's departure for Europe, Japan is still continuing in its self-inflicted isolation, but the progress of history, of which the rapid temporal shifts outlined in the last chapter are a reminder, will soon enforce direct relations between Japan and the outside world, thus inevitably causing Dejima's significance to shrink. The existence of this unique island depended on its dual and ambiguous status as a symbolic barrier and a bridge between different cultures, and came to an end when its insularity lost its value.

References

Bassnett, Susan. 2011. "The Translator as Cross-cultural Mediator." In *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*, edited by Kirsten Malmkjær and Kevin Windle, 94−107. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bayer, Gerd. 2014. "Cannibalising the Other: David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* and the Incorporation of 'Exotic' Pasts." In *Exoticizing the Past in*

[12] The novel represents the British retreat as a moderate joint Dutch-Japanese success, which is not quite the way the historical *Phaeton* incident was judged. The Japanese inability to repulse the foreign invasion was, as modern historians recognize, due to both technological weakness as well as deep-rooted organizational deficiencies (Wilson 2010, 3−4). Taking a longer view, in his discussion of the fictional version of the event O'Donnell traces a trajectory from the early manifestations of "Western imperialist designs upon Japan" as exemplified by the attack to the evolution of Japanese imperialism until WWII, and the assertion of Western military superiority by the use of nuclear weapons in the very city of which Dejima was a part (2015, 125).

Contemporary Neo-historical Fiction, edited by Elodie Rousselot, 103–19. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Begley, Adam. 2010. "David Mitchell, The Art of Fiction No. 204. Interviewed by Adam Begley." *The Paris Review* 193. Accessed June 1, 2021. https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6034/the-art-of-fiction-no-204-david-mitchell

"Dejima Restoration Project." Accessed June 26, 2025. https://nagasakidejima.jp/english/restoration-work/

Dillon, Sarah. 2011. "Introducing David Mitchell's Universe. A Twenty-First Century House of Fiction." In *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, edited by Sarah Dillon, 3–23. Canterbury: Gylphi Limited.

Eggers, Dave. 2010. "Empire of Desire." *The New York Times*, July 1. Accessed April 24, 2017. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/04/books/review/Eggers-t.html.

Finbow, Steve. 2007. "Somewhere between History and the Imagination. British Novelist David Mitchell Talks about his New Book, Japan, and the Butterfly Effect of Fiction." *The Japan Times*, June 24. Accessed October 15, 2018. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2007/06/24/books/book-reviews/somewhere-between-history-and-the-imagination/

Fludernik, Monika. 2009. *An Introduction to Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Harris-Birtill, Rose. 2019. *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World: Buddhism, Belief and the Urgency of Compassion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Kakutani, Michiko. 2010. "Dutchman Sees Life in Japan Long Ago." *The New York Times*, June 28. Accessed November 21, 2017. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/29/books/29book.html.

Larsonneur, Claire. 2016. "Weaving Myth and History Together: Illustration as Fabrication in David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*." *Image [&] Narrative* 17(2):24–33.

Larsonneur, Claire. 2018. "Oblique Translations in David Mitchell's Works." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 6(3):1–16. doi:10.16995/c21.53.

Larsonneur, Claire, and Hélène Machinal. 2013. "Mediations: Science and Translation in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* by David Mitchell." *Études britanniques contemporaines* 45. doi:10.4000/ebc.957.

McMahon, Elizabeth. 2016. *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*. London: Anthem Press.

Mitchell, David. 2011a. *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*. 2010. London: Sceptre.

Mitchell, David. 2011b. "On Historical Fiction." In *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, David Mitchell, 555–60. London: Sceptre.

Munday, Jeremy. 2012. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

O'Donnell, Patrick. 2015. *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell*. New York and London: Bloomsbury.

"Omotemon-bashi Bridge." Accessed October 2, 2018. https://hollandkyushu.com/en/project/opening-ceremony-omotemon-bashi-bridge/.

Onega, Susana. 2023. "Trading Relations, the Evil of Violence and the Ungrievability of the Other in David Mitchell's *The One Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*." In *The Poetics and Ethics of (Un-)Grievability in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, edited

by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, 15–35. New York and Abington: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Ríu, Carmen Pérez. 2019. "Neo Historical Fiction: David Mitchell's Take on Adventure, Empire and the Exoticization of the Past." *Theory Now* 2(2):182–99. doi:10.30827/TNJ.v2i2.9554.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2009. "Space." In *Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert, 420–33. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.

Schmitz, Eva-Maria. 2018. "'No Man is an Island': Tracing Functions of Insular Landscapes in David Mitchell's Fiction." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 6(3):1–25. doi:10.16995/c21.62.

Shell, Marc. 2014. *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric, Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Stephenson, William. 2019. "History, Globalization and the Human Subject in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*." In *David Mitchell*, edited by Wendy Knepper and Courtney Hopf, 101–16. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

van Waarden, Betto. 2014. "Trials and Tribulations of Transfer: Isaac Titsingh and the Transfer of Knowledge from Japan to Europe in the Late Eighteenth Century." *The Great Circle* 36(2): 21–53.

Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Vermeulen, Jeroen. 2015. "Orientalism, Occidentalism and Self-Orientalization as Paradigms of Power in David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*." In *The West in Asia and Asia in the West: Essays on Transnational Interactions*, edited by Elisabetta Marino and Tanfer Emin Tunc, 158–68. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Willis, David Blake. 2008. "Dejima: Creolization and Enclaves of Difference in Transnational Japan." In *Transcultural Japan: At the Borderlands of Race, Gender, and Identity*, edited by David Blake Willis and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, 239–63. London: Routledge.

Wilson, Noell. 2010. "Tokugawa Defense Redux: Organizational Failure in the 'Phaeton' Incident of 1808." *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 36(1):1–32. doi:10.1353/jjs.0.0131.

Windberger, Eva-Maria. 2023. *The Poetics of Empowerment in David Mitchell's Novels*. Milton Park: Routledge.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/

AUTHOR'S BIO: Bożena Kucała is an associate professor at the Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where she teaches nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature. Her research interests include contemporary fiction, especially the historical novel and neo-Victorian fiction. Authored books: *Of What Is Passing: Present-Tense Narration in the Contemporary Historical Novel* (2023) and *Intertextual Dialogue with the Victorian Past in the Contemporary Novel* (2012); co-

edited books: *Writer and Time: James Joyce and After* (2010), *Confronting the Burden of History: Literary Representations of the Past* (2012), *Travelling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers* (2014).

E-MAIL: bozena.kucala@uj.edu.pl