A Poetics of the Cosmopolitan Language

The story that I will tell in this book is, in a sense, a tragedy. Modernity has not been gentle with the cosmopolitan language systems whose trajectories I follow, Latin and Arabic. Arabic survives today as lingua sacra, and it maintains a notional identity as a unified cosmopolitan language. Most Arabs believe that the language they speak is the same as the language they write and the same as the language that was written in the ninth century of the Common Era, although they recognize that it has changed substantially over time. Extensive training is required in order for a speaker of colloquial Arabic to be able to read any of the written registers: Modern Standard Arabic, the classical Arabic of the ninth century, or Qur’anic Arabic. Latin is (by any standard used to measure language vitality) dead as a doornail. The website Ethnologue, a resource that tracks the vitality of all languages, spoken and written, in use on the planet, has posted its epitaph. “No known L1 speakers,” it says of Latin—no one, that is, speaks Latin as a first language or mother tongue; “no ethnic community.” Literary historians typically describe the passing of Latin in another mode, since its demise made way for the triumph of vernacular literatures. Partisans of vernacularity have perceived the cosmopolitan languages as deadwood to be cut away so that local genius may flourish, the stifling weight of history and convention that must be shifted in order for innovation to emerge. My aim in this book is to construct a counterweight to such descriptions of the megalanguages of literary history: to describe and (for the most part) to eulogize languages that modern men and women of letters often view with suspicion, contempt, or disdain. This book is a ballad for a language that is dead.

Why celebrate linguistic instruments that (literary modernity teaches us) can only alienate the writer’s creations from the lives that inspired them? My aim is to honor writers who worked to take on languages that were not their birthright but rather became theirs, slowly and by grace of sustained effort. I describe language that gives provincial intellectuals equal footing with cosmopolitan elites, because neither provincials nor cosmopolitans
learn the language effortlessly as infants; rather, they earn it by the sweat of their brow. I sing the praises of the cosmopolitan language as a way to opt into empire. I watch the arcane maneuvers of Alexandrian languages whose structure was formalized millennia ago, whose vocabulary has a musty glamour: a foundation cut into living rock. I recognize the allure of writing in an acquired language: a whetstone that hones thought. I admire the cosmopolitan language for its capacity to demand an ethical commitment and an ethical stance from the language worker. By taking on the cosmopolitan language, as we will see, the writer or reader, copyist or printer takes on a way of being in the world, an ethics of engagement that is baked into that language and the texts that carry it through the world.

The framing of this book may appear atypical, even eccentric. Literary historians typically focus not on languages but rather on the texts created in language. Those who study language as such typically are not literary historians but linguists, trained to deploy research methods and strategies designed to study language. This book takes a different approach. I take languages themselves as objects of analysis, but I study them as literary historian. My aim is not to produce sustained philological analyses of specific texts, although I advance my argument using philological strategies. At times, too, I use other approaches: I describe languages as historical actors and as agents of historical change. Or I sketch a quick portrait of language in its natural habitat: the choreography of behaviors and investments that link author, tongue, and text. Because we typically know languages—we hear, interpret, love them, and sometimes hate them—as they are instantiated in texts and in the mouths of speakers, I use emblematic texts and exemplary speakers as stand-ins for the languages themselves. Yet in a sense speakers and texts are incidental to the story I tell, part of the background noise that language generates in its labors to articulate and sustain itself. As we zoom out from language workers to the global span of the language, as individual humans fade from view, the language itself emerges in greater relief.

The geochronological focus of this book is in part suggested by the languages I take as objects of study, Arabic and Latin. Both languages have a vast chronological range (both, in fact, like to think of themselves as immortal). This study will focus on a particularly eventful moment for both of them: what the Christian West refers to as the Middle Ages, when these two languages connected more writers and readers than ever before or since. The geographical valences of the languages are equally impressive (both, in fact, fancy that they are universal). This book studies the heartland of Arabic and Latin during the Middle Ages. My discussion ranges from Abbasid-caliphate Baghdad and Basra—where the Arabic language was refined and standardized as literary medium—to early modern Italy, where Latinity
made its last stand as the common tongue of literary life. Arabic and Latin were blithely unaware of each other for most of their history. Each interacted with other languages: each translated from Greek, for instance; Arabic had a special relationship with Persian and, later, with Ottoman Turkish; Latin was symbiotically connected to the Romance vernaculars that would supersede it. But the Arabs knew little and cared less about Latin letters. Latin did acquire scientific texts from Arabic, and I address this translation movement below. I also discuss those places where writers of Arabic and Latin and speakers of Arabic colloquials and the European vernaculars came into contact: the port cities of the Mediterranean. Thus, the geochronological coordinates of this book stretch from the Abbasid East (mainly between the eighth and tenth centuries CE, with a special emphasis on Baghdad and Basra) to the sixteenth-century Mediterranean (focusing on the Italian Peninsula).

Arabic and Latin are incommensurate languages in so many ways, and it is part of the aim of these opening chapters to spell out how they differ. Despite their differences, however, Arabic and Latin shared one quality: they had the ability to draw men of letters (and the occasional woman) to them. This book studies the attractions of the Alexandrian languages, which inspired writers to set aside the mother tongue as literary vehicle and to embrace them as the truest expression of the truest thought. Because of this conceptual focus, the argument doesn’t track chronologically: writers and books are chosen to illustrate attributes and behaviors of the language they used as medium and thus are not arranged in historical order. In this chapter, I outline the structure of the argument, with an abundance of internal references to aid the reader in navigating the nonlinear organization of the book. In the next chapter, Bashshār ibn Burd—an Arabic poet of the Abbasid age—and in chapter 3, Petrarch, who is remembered for his Italian poetry but wrote most of his works in Latin, appear to introduce the languages they served. I begin with a concession to chronology: thumbnail histories of the two languages.

The Latin language, emerging from the murky depths of history as the Romans consolidated their power at the heart of the Mediterranean (ca. third century BCE), developed its literary chops through translation from Greek. Carried out of Rome on the pathways of empire, it spread through the imperial capitals and made some headway in the countryside. But in parts of the empire—in the eastern and the southern Mediterranean, in particular—it struggled, because of competition from other languages (Greek, Syriac, and Armenian) in the east, and because of the sparseness of human settlements along the southwest quadrant of the Mediterranean shore. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, as the institutions of empire
failed, the language suffered considerable entropy. Scholars disagree on the precise timing and mechanics by which Latin lost the hearts and minds of the population. Most scholars believe that, although literacy rates were low, the general public understood the formal language orally in much of western Europe (what is now France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and parts of the UK and Ireland) through the seventh century. In 782, Charlemagne invited poet and grammarian Alcuin (ca. 740–804), who got his Latin in York, to join the palatine school. Alcuin would write a number of treatises on Latin and become a central figure in the language reforms of the Carolingian era. When a young scholar from a land where a Germanic language was spoken had to correct the Latin used by speakers of Romance languages derived from spoken Latin, scholars agree that the umbilical cord between written Latin and the spoken tongues had been severed.

From the ninth century onward, formal, written Latin and the vernaculars were distinct languages, even in Romance-speaking parts of Europe, and written Latin had to be learned through study. French, Occitan, and Italian were no longer spoken registers of the formal language but, rather, independent languages. *Grammatica*, the first topic studied at school, taught Latin as the foundation of the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—and as point of entry for all future study. Breakaway vernaculars challenged the hegemony of Latinity: first in the north (parts of the oldest treatise on Irish grammar may date to the seventh century), then in Mediterranean Europe (Occitan poetry first appeared in southern France around the turn of the millennium; see chapters 5 and 11 below for the rise of the vernaculars). Latinity endured longer in the Italian Peninsula than most other parts of the Latin West, for a variety of reasons: because the Italians felt ownership over it and over the city of Rome, its sentimental capital; and because the language was identified so closely with the Catholic Church, which was also felt (within Italy, at least) to be a peculiarly Italian possession. Petrarch’s championing of Latin and his reforms of the language, bringing it once again into line with classical practice, would do much to extend the life of the language in Italy (see chapter 3). During the fifteenth century, the century of humanism, when most other European regions had happily negotiated the transition to vernacular composition, Latin flourished in Italy. The end game of the venture of Latinity—the competition between Latin and the Italian vernacular(s) for literary dominance during the era of humanism—marks the end of the vitality of Latin in the Italian context, although Latin survives still in Italy as the idiolect of the Roman Church. Scholars trace the neo-Latin tradition from the Renaissance, with its reconsolidation of Latinity on the foundation of classical Latin, through the nineteenth century (at least). But most readers look elsewhere for early modern and modern European literary milestones.
The trajectory of Arabic was quite different. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE, it burst forth from the Arabian Peninsula, carried with the armies of Islamic expansion. At this early stage, the language had little real-life experience. The literary record consisted of a corpus of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur’an, both known and transmitted primarily orally (although the caliph ʿUthmān [d. 655] gathered scholars and witnesses to correct the text of the Qur’an and spread copies to all corners of the Islamic world). Under the Umayyads (661–750), following this period of rapid expansion, the domain of Muslim rule extended from the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco in the West to the shores of the Caspian Sea and central Asia in the East. Administering this vast empire put a great deal of pressure on the language; Arabic grew up quickly. Following the Abbasid revolution in 750, the explosive rate of territorial expansion slowed, and Arabization and Islamization slowly transformed the population. The emergent language and the new religion both drew converts to themselves; the Arabic language grew apace, fueled by a burgeoning literary life, intensive grammatical self-examination (the topic of chapter 6), and a vibrant translation movement (chapter 8), which taught the language new behaviors. The Arabic language faced peculiar challenges in certain times and places. In the eastern Mediterranean, for instance—where Latin stumbled, in part because of the daunting linguistic complexity of the region—it had to learn to share territory with a plethora of other languages. The Arabs’ genius for coalition building (exemplified in their extension of most of the rights of citizenship to non-Muslim monotheists—mainly to Christians and Jews) served them well, too, as a language policy. The eastern Mediterranean remained a place where multiple languages coexisted but the language of record—for science, literature, and imperial bureaucracy—was Arabic.

Inevitably, given the enormous burden placed on the Arabic language, Abbasid language policy was not monolithic. The territorial extension of the lands of Islam, the quantity of spoken and written languages that coexisted with Arabic, and the portfolio of literary, bureaucratic, and diplomatic duties imposed on it made the language at times magnanimous and at others churlish. With one hand, Abbasid men of letters welcomed the philosophy of non-Arabs into the language and accepted the contributions of non-Arabs to the establishment of its grammatical sciences and its literature. With the other, they snapped at those non-Arabs, who did so much to promote the vitality of Arabic as literary language and who wielded their Arabic as a tool of social and cultural mobility (see chapter 8). The duality of ethnic Arabs’ attitudes toward non-Arab litterateurs who used Arabic as literary register was mirrored in the attitudes of non-Arab Muslims. Some were silent about their lives outside the reach of the Arabic language (like Sibawayhi; see chapter 6). Others took the occasional snipe at Arabs,
even as they deployed Arabic as cosmopolitan language (like Bashşār; chapter 2). Finally, some opted out of Arabic and chose to bushwhack a literary path in New Persian, for instance, or (later) in Ottoman Turkish. The earliest recorded debates around ethnicity and language choice in the Arabophone world emerged around what is termed the shu‘ābiyya movement (discussed in chapters 2 and 6). Those debates never disappeared; at times they become more fraught and charged, at other times less. In the face of this background noise of competition over ownership of the language, however, the Arabic language never stopped being an object of desire for non-Arabs and non-Muslims. Muslim Arabs never had a proprietary hold over the language. It was an important literary language for Mediterranean Jews throughout the Middle Ages. Christian Arabs, too, used it (and still do) as a literary instrument; Lebanese Christians contributed to the modernization and codification of the language during the nineteenth century (see chapter 10). Despite the battles over legitimacy occasioned by the use of Arabic by writers from such diverse linguistic origins, from so many different lands, and for so many different purposes, Arabic retains a promise of openness and remains a powerful literary instrument to the present day.

Or one could tell the story differently, emphasizing the entanglements of the actors rather than separating them for the purpose of analysis:

When Arabic burst onto the scene, in the seventh century CE, Latin had already passed the first bloom of youth. It had flowered and faded in the eastern and southern Mediterranean. It thrived now only in the corridors of power and the monasteries of its former heartland; we are in the chasm between “Late Latin” and “Medieval Latin.” Arabic was (and is) buoyed by its status as lingua sacra (see chapters 2, 7, and 13). But Latin had a relationship with scripture that can only be described as complicated, reserving a fuller discussion of the question until later (chapter 7). In 711 CE, Muslim armies reached the Iberian Peninsula. There, Latinity had already faltered, thanks to the expansion of the Visigoths—no litterateurs, they. The Iberian Peninsula was thoroughly Arabized, although (as was true almost everywhere in the Arabophone world) the Arabic language coexisted with regional tongues—including pockets of Latinity and, over time, an emergent Romance vernacular culture. A further wrinkle of complexity: the Muslims who reached the Iberian Peninsula were not themselves necessarily Arabs. Many of the warriors were Berbers, who carried another mother tongue to the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

The armies of Islamic expansion, Arabs and Berbers, settled Iberia and, in the early ninth century, conquered Sicily. They established colonies in southern Italy and even (in 846) threatened Rome, but they never gained a lasting foothold on the Italian Peninsula. Yet around the turn of the millen-
nium the Italians developed extensive mercantile engagements with Arabs, and as a result the Arabic language and Arabic-language culture were not entirely unknown in Italy. The diverse entanglements between Arabic and Latin culture on the Iberian and Italian Peninsulas would flower in the Arabic-to-Latin translation movement of the late Middle Ages (see chapter 9). Over time, the casual contact of merchants, pilgrims, corsairs, captives, and other professional, occasional, or accidental travelers generated a contact language used to communicate between speakers of Arabic, the Romance vernaculars, Greek, and other Mediterranean tongues: a pidginized Romance used in the port cities and bagnios and on the ships that traversed the sea, known as the lingua franca (or “language of the Franks”; see chapter 12). The lingua franca flowered during the twilight centuries of the Mediterranean, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. It vanished with the end of cabotage, trade, and pilgrimage across the sea.

Or, finally, one could start the story with a question:

What bait did the cosmopolitan languages dangle to lure generations of writers away from the bosom of the mother tongue? From the perspective of modernity the cosmopolitan language system appears flawed, thanks to its perceived incapacity to speak to contemporaneity. Latin may boost thought above the travails of the quotidian, but where does that leave Petrarch’s Laura (see chapter 3)? Before the vernacular revolutions of European modernity, it seems, writers must accept the estranging filter of the learned language, in an equation that links intimacy to the ephemeral, degrading the language that bubbles spontaneously from the throat as unworthy of literature. The Arabic literary tradition remains permanently alienated from the popular voice that alone grants vivacity to the work of literature.

In this book, I aim to capture the vitality of the cosmopolitan language, to describe the qualities that allowed men like Francesco Petrarch and Bashshār ibn Burd to invest in it their ambitions, their dreams, and even the ambitions and dreams and desires of their most intimate moments. I do not promise a survey of the cosmopolitan language, nor even an exhaustive description of a single cosmopolitan language. Only a truly small-minded philologist would propose such an enormity: the cosmopolitan language is, by definition, as big as the world itself. Rather, I propose a comparative poetics of the cosmopolitan language, a conceptual account of the strategies that language uses to transcend the boundaries that language creates, and a defense of it that might satisfy those men and women who loved their literary lingua franca as the medium of their art. I rely upon vignettes. Group portraits with language capture the texture of the language and its choreography: the network of connections and associations that drew pen
to paper and linked writer to writer, text to text, city to city (weaving the hinterlands into its tapestry as well), century to century, and language to language. I am fundamentally interested in the cosmopolitan language systems of the premodern Mediterranean. But it is one of the presuppositions of this book that language, in the twenty-first century, is reaching toward a kind of globalization that to a medievalist looks familiar.

European modernity accustomed us to a series of notions that would appear puzzling at best and outrageous at worst to premodern men and women of letters (and, in truth, to many non-European writers during the centuries of modernity). In the closing decades of the twentieth century, anthropologists began to study national language ideology, as it was defined in modern Europe and is currently understood in many parts of the world. Susan Gal, a pioneer of anthropological study of national language ideology in modern Europe, defined it most succinctly and most effectively: It teaches that language is a nameable, countable property, she wrote (“one can ‘have’ several”). Monolingualism is normative and natural. Languages are interchangeable; anything that can be said in one language can be translated into any other. Each language has “charming idiosyncrasies that are typical of the group that speaks it.” Languages are internally homogeneous, obedient to rules that can be abstracted and laid out as normative. Boundaries between languages—geographical and conceptual—are clearly delineated by lack of mutual intelligibility.¹³

The contrast with national language ideology clarifies the nature of the cosmopolitan languages I analyze in this book. First, the national language, like the nation-state, claims territorial sovereignty. But the cosmopolitan language is transregional and recognizes the presence of multiple linguistic actors in all of the territory where it is used (see chapter 4). Second, according to modern language ideology, the mother tongue—the language we learn as infants from our mothers and from the linguistic surround, without formal grammatical instruction—is the natural and normative language of literature. But the cosmopolitan language system insists on the necessity of linguistic education in part as instrumental (because the language is not learned in daily life) and in part as ethical formation (the language teaches the student how to think). Third, modern language ideology proposes ontological continuity between the spoken and written forms of a language: the language we speak and the language we write are one. But for premoderns, as we will see (in chapter 5), writing a language changes its essential nature, fixing on the page what in its true form is ephemeral and defined by variation and discontinuity. Finally, the national language—because of its association with the mother tongue—represents itself as the language that is always there, always accessible and waiting to be activated, hardwired
into the brain. It’s the memory palace we return to, when we crave the comforts of home. The cosmopolitan language, on the other hand, because it must be studied and learned, must first be desired. Language workers use the cosmopolitan language not because they are born to it but because they crave the access it grants. It requires labor to construct, but it rewards that labor with its own pleasures. Like the nomad’s tent, it gives shelter to the language worker far from the precincts of his native tongue (see chapter 2 and part II).

So entrenched is our belief in the validity and legitimacy of the modern language system that it is difficult to articulate and appreciate the power of the Alexandrian language model: the capacity of a learned language of literature to tempt the writer away from her mother tongue. National language ideology asserts that only the mother tongue can express the urgency that compels the writer to set pen to paper (and that compels her public to buy her books). But the allure of the cosmopolitan language is embedded in the DNA of that descriptive adjective itself—cosmopolitan—in particular in a specific late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century regional usage of the word. In the years leading up to the turn of the millennium, cosmopolitan became a buzzword that described a particularly dense knot of intellectual affections and visceral emotions. In the popular press, it connoted nostalgia for the ethnic and linguistic density of certain cities of the eastern Mediterranean—Beirut, Alexandria, Izmir, Istanbul—viewed through a sepia-toned lens. Conversely, in scholarly usage, it signified an intentionally dissonant critique of that nostalgia. Scholars criticized cosmopolitan universalism as a cover for the global export of Western values. They saw cosmopolitanism as an old ideology in new clothes: an attack on particularism and local identities in the name of a “universal” humanism that was nothing more than the Enlightenment ideology of western Europe in disguise.

But in American usage in particular, the word retained or revived a glossy veneer, a flirtatious quality. It came to suggest the edgy pleasure associated with big cities, people in motion, and the anonymity of crowds. It connotes (in a word) naughtiness, and in particular the kind of naughtiness that urban centers and human mobility make possible. Cosmopolitan magazine has become a supermarket checkout lane banality in the twenty-first century. It’s easy to forget how risqué the magazine was during its heyday: it printed the first male nude centerfold (Burt Reynolds) in 1972, and it continued to publish the occasional centerfold thereafter (Arnold Schwarzenegger, for instance, appeared in 1977). The cosmopolitan cocktail is of obscure origin, but it seems to have been created in South Beach in 1985 by a bartender, Cheryl Cook, who understood that people feel sophisticated when hold-
ing a martini glass, even if they don’t like the taste of gin. It became the last word in turn-of-the-millennium urban sophistication as the favorite cocktail of the character Carrie Bradshaw on the HBO series *Sex in the City*. In the early 2010s, the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas—a sumptuous resort property that epitomized the most recent iteration of the new Vegas—promised its clientele “just the right amount of wrong.”

In an academic context as in the popular press, *cosmopolitan* connotes human mobility and the networked layering of languages that supports the global movement of people. To American ears, the word suggests the casual hedonism of a particularly urbane and mobile segment of the population. In this vernacular usage, one form of rhizomatic complexity has replaced another. The sense of mobility remains. But linguistic connectivity is replaced by social and sexual connectivity. Most useful for our purposes is the cocktail of connotations that informs both vernacular and scholarly uses of the word: circulation and connectivity are constants. The cosmopolitan language in particular is a linguistic tool that serves as an instrument of human mobility, rather than (like the literary languages of modern Europe, rooted in the soil of the nation) a deterrent to mobility. The cosmopolitan language is a code that must be learned, the price of entry into a far-flung cultural community, rather than our birthright. For this reason, it separates the speaker from his neighbors and even from his own household.

To be clear, the distinction that I am arguing between cosmopolitan language and national languages is not taxonomic. I do not claim that some languages by nature function as cosmopolitan and others as local languages of daily life, or that languages can be categorized as one or the other by virtue of clear genetic differences. Today, for instance, those who use global English or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in a formal setting may believe that they write or speak in the vernacular of everyday life. But linguists or attentive readers might insist that the distance between MSA and colloquial Arabic on the one hand, and between global English and a local register on the other, is wider than language ideology admits. I sidestep these niceties. The writer must be trained to write in the formal languages I celebrate in this book. A language system that privileges immediacy and accessibility as the loftiest of virtues may view its disconnection from geographic and historical coordinates as a fault. The Alexandrian languages, however, exalt other qualities: geographic and historical heft and scope; a capacious lexical reservoir that can express the subtlest of concepts; a sophisticated grammar that allows the writer to describe potentiality and actuality, speculative futures and deep history—or, if you prefer, the deep blue future and a speculative past.

It is the premise of this book that, while the opposition between “mother
“tongue” and “cosmopolitan language” might at times be artificial, the opposition between the cosmopolitan language system and the national language system is not. The latter presumes an intimate and exclusive relation between language and the nation-state that alone has the capacity to legislate political, legal and cultural identity. The former demands a conversion experience of sorts—the writer must come to it, taking it on as the price of entry to literary life—but, outside this elective affinity, allows a wide field of play. For this reason, the term Alexandrian languages may seem a better designation than cosmopolitan languages. Like the term gramatica (discussed below, chapter 3), Alexandrianism names languages that are formally difficult, with abstruse grammar that must be studied at school; complex, with a deep literary history; and—at least as regards use as spoken instrument—extinct. Or we could adopt a term coined by Philip of Harveng (see chapter 11), who wrote around the time of the emergence of vernacular cultures in Romance-speaking Europe, and use the moniker legittera, the letters or language (littera) bound by laws (leges).16 We may speak one or many languages at home or in the streets. The cosmopolitan language or the Alexandrian language or the legittera or the gramatica is the one that the author chooses for his most ambitious communications.

The cosmopolitan language, alas, lacks one quality promoted in the national languages’ portfolio as an essential charm: it is not a living language. It is a literary convention to describe certain languages as living: those that are still spoken in daily life, those that infants learn from their mothers (see chapter 13). In the twenty-first century, activists work to protect those languages that are living today but are threatened with extinction. The website Ethnologue, for instance, publishes updates on language vitality as part of its report on the health of languages worldwide. Wikitongues aims to record all languages spoken globally, in an effort to protect them from extinction. UNESCO maintains a list of the world’s endangered languages and declared the “Year of Indigenous Languages” in order to protect those languages—and all the cultural memories and aesthetic practices embedded in them—from annihilation. It is not my intention to scorn microlanguages. Seen from this perspective, the cosmopolitan language is not a victimless crime. It sweeps local languages away in its ruthless advance, leaving them no room to flourish.

This book, obviously, subscribes to a different view of language. I come not to bury the cosmopolitan language but to praise it. I also aim to curate the metaphors I use to describe the language. Language does not live or die. The humanity of the cosmopolitan language extends far beyond this mortal coil. It may be (as we will see) vibrant, possessing qualities that observers could describe as emergent.17 By virtue of this fact, it may appear to have
autonomy and agency, and at times in this book I refer to the cosmopolitan languages as actors. In its sensitivity and responsiveness as well as its wide geohistorical reach, the cosmopolitan language often appears to have a heartbeat: it is tempting to speak about such languages as if they had the rudiments of consciousness. Yet it might be more appropriate to describe them using the vocabulary of systemic connectivity and emergence, in order to capture their ability to possess agency without consciousness. This book is a ballad for a language that is dead—and yet lives, in the mouths of its practitioners, wherever literary life is pursued.

In the chapters that follow, I investigate the qualities that distinguished two Alexandrian languages from their local competitors: Arabic (particularly but not exclusively in the Abbasid East) and Latin (especially but not solely in late medieval and early modern Italy). Part II, “Space, Place, and the Cosmopolitan Language,” focuses on the psychogeography of the cosmopolitan language: its territorial range and the paths that it travels, linking the far-flung places in which it is known. It isn’t true, as they like to tell us, that the megalanguages are coextensive with the physical world. However, they do have remarkable geographical breadth. Perhaps more intriguing, they don’t possess exclusive territorial sovereignty wherever they are used. The chapters in part II study the territory of the cosmopolitan language: a terrain defined by human circumambulation and (more to the point) by the circulation of words, languages, and texts. A city is a world, a snow globe in which each swirling flake is a book. Yet, paradoxically, cities are less important to the life of the cosmopolitan language than historians sometimes assume they are. The cosmopolitan language creates its own geography (chapter 4). It can act as such wherever its practitioners carry it, whether to the metropole or the provinces. In the chapters of part II, I watch two language workers as they move (unwillingly) between cities: Dante, exiled from Florence (chapter 5), and Sibawayhi, cast out of Basra (chapter 6). Like many before me, I use the biographies of these two men as ethical model, studying the cosmopolitan languages that sustained them through the lens of their lives.

Exodus, in a sense, is the modus operandi of the Alexandrian languages: they are engineered to enable communication across distances, and they guarantee that their practitioners will be understood wherever they find themselves. I use the term language workers to refer to these ardent disciples of the language, all those engaged in the production and dissemination of texts: writers, translators, commentators, copyists, editors, publishers,
bookdealers, and the occasional saint who invents an alphabet in order to record scripture in a new tongue (chapter 7). But I reserve the term *nomad* for the writers themselves, those who live in the language and are able to move with it from place to place throughout the *logomenē* of the Alexandrian language. In part II, I describe the movement of the language that serves as a structure to house thought through physical space. My aim is to characterize the sensuous appeal of the languages for the nomads who worked to sustain them while being sheltered by them, the haptic and vibrant charm that draws language workers to them.

In part III, “Translation and Time,” I discuss the temporal breadth of the cosmopolitan languages. Again, it is my difficult duty to point out that the cosmopolitan languages occasionally give themselves too much credit. They see themselves as eternal and declare themselves to be unchanging and self-identical throughout their long history. But, in fact, they change over time; their character arc demands it. The translation movement, a period of particularly intense change, occurs at a moment when the cosmopolitan language needs to scale up: when circumstances offer it a larger stage than those on which it has performed in the past, and it needs to learn new behaviors or speak to a new public. This transformative moment often occurs near the beginning of the lives of the great languages, as it did in the Abbasid East when the Arabic language absorbed the sciences of the ancient Greeks and literary traditions from the Sanskrit and Pahlavi. But it may also mark a moment when a language self-adjusts, recognizing that it needs to absorb new information or practices in order to remain current. This happened in late medieval Europe, when voracious translation movements brought scientific texts (and the occasional imaginative narrative) out of Arabic and into Latin, then the vernaculars, in response to a swiftly changing intellectual climate. These translation movements have much to fascinate the historian of literature. They allow us to watch as texts move between languages, and to trace the transformations that occur in the process. They are what gamblers call a *tell*: they mark a moment when the cosmopolitan language unwittingly tips its hand. In its most confident moments, the cosmopolitan language proposes that it is coextensive with the known and knowable world. But in the translation movement, it reaches beyond what its own language workers have produced in order to import knowledge discovered and disseminated in adjacent languages.

In part III, I describe episodes in discrete translation movements that show us texts moving through time, passed hand to hand in translation, and that reveal languages striving to learn new behaviors. I look first at a snapshot of language beyond the geochronological focus of this book: the creation of a new alphabet in order to bring Christian scripture to the
Slavonic-speaking Moravians (chapter 7). Cosmopolitan languages often sustain their privileged position by identifying themselves (and behaving) as sacred languages. Both Arabic and Latin have a long, at moments conflicted history as languages with a special relationship to scripture, liturgy, and worship. I use Old Church Slavonic as a cheat shot both to historicize language—it marks the birth of a new written tongue—and to think about the lingua sacra, because its history is much more compressed and much less familiar than either of the two languages that are my focus. The next two chapters follow the winding trail of a somewhat quixotic philosophical treatise through the centuries: Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The treatise was translated from Greek via Syriac into Arabic toward the end of the Abbasid translation movement (chapter 8). Then, during the Arabic-to-Latin translation movement, it made its way into Latin (chapter 9). I use this history in order to think about how the Alexandrian languages responded to a uniquely challenging task: translating a work about language from language to language.

The translation movements allow me to examine the strategies that the cosmopolitan language uses to give itself temporal (as well as territorial) breadth. I argue that in place of *haecceity*—the quality of immediacy, urgency, and vivid realism privileged by the modern European languages and often celebrated in modern literature—megalanguages like Latin and Arabic forward another quality, which I call (repurposing an Arabic literary term) *hikaya*. This quality allows the writer to play in the fields of the language, unconcerned with the adjacency of reality. The aim of the language is not to create a vivid, lifelike portrait of the world: your life, memory by memory, flickering by like an old newsreel. I argue that the strength of the cosmopolitan language is not mimesis but performance: the creation of a world parallel to but separate from this one, an arena in which writers and readers meet and tango and spar, one that changes over time but much more slowly than the sublunar world. In the final chapter of part III, I discuss two nineteenth-century language workers who were both besotted by the Arabic language and its ability to sustain precisely this quality (chapter 10). This chapter traces the hikaya of the Alexandrian language—its emphasis on play, using the tool kit provided by the grammatical and lexical structure of the language itself—from the Arabian Peninsula during the era of revelation to nineteenth-century England. I argue that the behaviors I study in this book are possessed by any language willing to disassociate itself from mimesis as literary logic, to differentiate itself from the spoken tongue, and to embrace another portfolio of attitudes and behaviors. With its robust grammar and lexicon, its deep literary history, and above all its charisma, the Alexandrian language can draw the nomads who use it as artistic medium away even from the comfort and pleasures of the mother tongue.
In part IV, the final section of this book, I look at the aftermath of the cosmopolitan language regime in Europe and the West. At the end of the Middle Ages and the early centuries of modernity, the cosmopolitan language of Europe slowly went dark. How has it happened that literary historians represent the collapse of the European common tongue as a liberation and depict the ongoing vitality of the cosmopolitan language in the Arabic-Islamic world as a weakness? In an effort to circumambulate this question, if not to answer it, I describe the moment when the Alexandrian language of literary history fell silent in the Christian West (chapter 11). It retreated into texts as its public grew resentful of its position as a register of communication staved off from daily life, a code that demanded significant study to crack. At roughly the same time, a stunted, parodic shadow image of the Latinity of western Europe emerged in the Mediterranean: the lingua franca (chapter 12). The lingua franca mimicked the grasping range of the cosmopolitan language, but on a much smaller scale. As cosmopolitan language manqué, it is good to think with.

The final chapter of the book provides an outro for the cosmopolitan languages: exit music, to play them off the stage of world letters. Of course, in truth, cosmopolitan languages remain very much the currency of business and culture in the new millennium. They are what organizations like Ethnologue, Wikitongues, and the UNESCO Year of Endangered Languages seek to protect us from. I reflect on the diverse paths followed by Latin and Arabic in the last chapter, and on some of the fundamental questions raised by this book: How do we recognize the nomad’s choice of the language she uses to write? How do we honor the *cura litterae*—the care of and for the written tongue—that sustains the *fuṣḥā*, the purest or clearest language? The Alexandrian language is both an aesthetic strategy and an ethical stance. It furnishes a bulwark for trolls and language police. But it also gives poets and storytellers and philosophers and readers a citadel for thought and a fastness in which to shelter. It is the aim of this book to celebrate their labors and achievements and to suggest new ways to think about both their medium and what they accomplish with it.

My decision to focus on Abbasid Arabic and the late medieval Latin of Italy inevitably colors the argument I make and the texts I read. In part these comparanda are selected in order to tell a story that will be comprehensible to a wide audience. I write about both Arabic and Latin for nonspecialists. Writers like Bashshār, Sībawayhi, and al-Jāḥiṣ may not be household names, but the fabled Abbasid East rings familiar from children’s versions of *The Arabian Nights* and Hollywood movies spun from those tales during the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, and the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid and his vizier Ja’far are known quantities. By the same token, general readers may
know little about the vast sea of medieval Latin, but Dante and Petrarch have recognition value—even if nonspecialists know little about their lifelong hovering between vernacular and cosmopolitan languages. These two focal points—the Arabic of the Abbasid East; late medieval Italian Latin—also provide a useful contrast: on the one hand, a language in the bloom of youth; on the other, a language approaching its dotage. But (spoiler alert) the Alexandrian languages have impressive resources. Even when they are young, they seem to possess lexical and archival bounty (or to be able to compensate for their shortfalls through translation). Although elderly, they often retain the possibility to reinvent themselves.

My narrative focuses on Latin and Arabic, but I want to make it clear from the outset that I am not a specialist in either language. I have admired and loved both and have grown exasperated and bored with both. In order to be able to decipher texts written in them, I have spent long hours chanting paradigms and memorizing vocabulary lists. I have scratched notes in the margins of texts in order to avoid the humiliation of failure in reading classes. Both have been objects of fascination and frustration for me. But this book is not about languages that one possesses but rather about languages that one desires. The cosmopolitan language is a tongue that one covets and seeks to win: a mistress tongue (in a formulation that has been used by more than one enamored and unfulfilled author), rather than a mother tongue.

This book, however, could not be written by a specialist or expert. Latin and Arabic are each (like any cosmopolitan language) as big as the world itself. Only the dead know Brooklyn, Thomas Wolfe wrote; in the same way, true knowledge of a cosmopolitan language could be achieved only beyond life, only beyond the limitations of mortality. One can be in full command of one’s mother tongue, for usage dictates grammar in the case of the mother tongues. But prescriptive grammar must precede descriptive, in the case of the cosmopolitan languages,19 and the lexical pool of the cosmopolitan language far outreaches the knowledge and scope of any individual speaker or writer of the tongue. If each of these languages is greater than any one writer, the notion of writing a comparative study of the two of them together must seem a fool’s errand. Make no mistake: there are specialists and experts in Latin and in Arabic, and any one of them may possess a thorough command of the language. However, it is the aim of this book to pay tribute to languages that exceed any individual's knowledge of them, and to validate the imperfect yet sufficient knowledge of a linguistic and literary tradition—the justification for both these assertions being that the cosmopolitan language is greater than any single student (or ardent lover) of it. I write about languages as chimeric object of desire and pragmatic
tool of communication at once. For this reason, the comparative lens is necessary, and a scholar who has made one of these languages the primary object of her study may find it difficult to step back and study the language as comparandum.

I take liberties, too, with geography. Although this book is not set solely in the Mediterranean, Mediterranean history provides the conceptual scaffolding for the story I tell in this book. The shores of the sea, at whose edges great world civilizations perch, isolated from their hinterlands and connected by the ships that sail in cabotage from port to port, each port a meeting point for populations so similar in some ways, so much at odds in others: Mediterranean history gathers together these narrative elements and reworks them again and again. The annual cycles and the grand narratives of Mediterranean history provide what Hollywood scriptwriters and studio executives call the *beat sheet* of this book: an outline that coordinates the dramatic twists of a narrative, isolating the moments at which individual characters and their relations to each other become clear.

Chronology, finally, becomes entangled, baffled by the vast historical scale and the dynamic recurrence of event characteristic of the story I will tell. Without a clear narrative trajectory (as any scriptwriter or studio mogul can testify), no story is worth the telling. But how to tell the story of languages that themselves defy time? The cosmopolitan languages that are the subject of this book detach themselves from time and place. They lift human thought above the hurly-burly of everyday life. Do they, in so doing, put themselves beyond the reach of human affections? Can we truly catect (to use a word created and sustained, momentarily, by the contact between languages) a tongue that we must learn as adults in the same way that we do the mother tongue, in which we have invested so much: love and memories, the tastes and smells and sounds of infancy and youth?

The chapters that follow aim to describe the power and the allure of the cosmopolitan language model, and in so doing to demonstrate why a writer might turn to a cosmopolitan language *in preference to* her mother tongue. In order to sketch a portrait of the cosmopolitan language, I have chosen a series of vignettes, tableaux vivants of the learned language of literature in characteristic moments. My goal is not to connect the dots between anecdotes but, rather, to draw the circle tight around the language in each case, to draw close to the flickering light cast by the language in order to capture its warmth. I use comparatism as a wedge against the perils of universalism. This work focuses on two traditions that accounted for a significant portion of the literary life of the medieval Mediterranean: the Arabic and the Latin. The result may appear eccentric—where is Aramaic, ancient Greek (or Byzantine Greek, for that matter), Hebrew, Armenian,
Turkish, or Persian?—but only if one expects that totalizing approach to literary history now viewed in most quarters as suspect. In the same way, I use chronotopes as a scholarly convenience, situating my readings of literary texts in specific times and places in order to grant them a measure of philological precision. I do not intend to represent eighth-century Baghdad or sixteenth-century Venice as emblematic of the Arabophone world or the Latin West as a whole but, rather, to locate specific historical moments and geographical coordinates that allow me as reader to dig in my heels and study a cosmopolitan language in its interactions with the life of given geochronological coordinates.

In so doing, I aim to create a stereoscope portrait of the literary language before the nation and beyond the mother tongue. The cosmopolitan language—to sketch a quick definition, a point of reference for the discussions that follow—is a megalanguage that asserts its unity and singularity, while resting upon a foundation of linguistic multiplicity. It has a dynamic, combinatorial genius. It does not (as modern languages do) claim exclusive rights to the speaker’s identity but, rather, is always relational and intersectional. All those who use it, whether as literary or as spoken tongue, possess multiple languages; the cosmopolitan language represents itself as one among these: a literary register (albeit, in many cases, the language proclaims itself to be the best literary register). Paradoxically, it assumes a terrain of linguistic multiplicity both outside its own speech community and within that community. It understands that other communities possess a special relationship with a distinct language, and (in some cases) it recognizes the capacities of those languages in those parallel contexts. The cosmopolitan language promises great things to the writer: with it, her words have heft, vitality, permanence; beyond it, all is babble.