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# Translation and (im)mortality

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**ABSTRACT**

The idea that writing offers a way of living on after one's own death is as old as writing itself. Within the many explorations of this topos, translation is generally seen as something that serves the posterity of an author or their oeuvre rather than offering the translator a way of living on in their own right. In discussions of other connections between writing and death, such as those that see writing as a means of grieving, translating is rarely mentioned. Against this backdrop, this article explores the various significant links that can be made between (im)mortality and translation in its own right. These include the potential for translation to serve as distraction from death as well as confrontation with death, illustrating the latter phenomenon with an analysis of Anne Carson's translation-transformation *Nox*. The article also explores ways of conceptualising the kind of immortality that translators might achieve for themselves, evoking and ultimately rejecting the possibility that this is a kind of vicarious immortality or immortality by proxy. Instead, the article draws on Jacques Derrida's notion of the secret to suggest that translators can achieve immortality in the cosmic sense suggested by Jorge Luis Borges by creating translations that are in themselves events of thought.

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## Main text

Immortality's relevance to writing is a theme that stretches across the ages, from hieratic verse on ancient papyrus (Hui 2015, 26) to twenty-first-century efforts to create poetry that 'can persist on the planet until the sun itself explodes' (Bök 2011) by being encoded in DNA. As Michel Foucault (1977, 53) famously observes, 'writing so as not to die … is a task undoubtedly as old as the word'. Literary criticism has repeatedly explored this topos, from both historical and philosophical angles. Andrew Bennett (1999), for example, historicises and localises the topos by exploring the specific articulation of the desire for posterity in the Romantic period, suggesting that in that era the quest for immortality becomes part of the very function of writing, particularly the writing of poetry. Poets write, so Bennett suggests, not for present audiences, but for future ones; writing is a 'redemptive act' (Bennett 1999, 17) that is also constitutive for the identity of the poet.

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In many expressions of the topos, a key aspect of literary immortality is the living-on after death of the author's name. Thus, Ovid famously envisages that he will 'be borne,/The finer part of me, above the stars,/Immortal, **and my name shall never die**' (Ovid 1986, 379, my emphasis). In the Romantic paradigm, this living-on follows on from a neglect of the author's name during their own lifetime. Bennett (1999, 30) cites from Henry Mackenzie's 1786 essay on Burns to illustrate this point: 'our posterity may find names which they will dignify, though we neglected, and pay to their memory those honors which their contemporaries had denied them'. However, the idea that immortality equates at least in part to the living-on of the author's proper name is not one that all authors and critics accept. Jorge Luis Borges (1999, 15–16), for example, argues:

> I have devoted the last twenty years to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and I know many Anglo-Saxon poems by heart. The only thing I don't know is the names of the poets. What does it matter, as long as I, reciting the poems from the ninth century, am feeling something that someone felt back then? He is living in me in that moment, I am that dead man. Every one of us is, in some way, all the people who have died before us.

Borges's declaration in the final sentence of this citation is striking for its inclusivity: it is not only the authors of famous works who live on but everyone. Borges (1999) refers to this kind of living-on as immortality 'in the cosmic sense' (16): this is an immortality in which all participate, since 'every one of us collaborates, in one form or another, in this world' (16). Borges (1999, 16) appeals to language to illustrate his point: 'Language is a creation, it becomes a kind of immortality. I am using the Castilian language. How many dead Castilians are living in me?'. Whilst Borges associates cosmic immortality with a hopeful future,[1] our present era of climate breakdown, plastic pollution and mass extinction leads us to view that immortality through a much darker lens. As Michelle Bastian and Thom van Dooren (2017, 1) explain, 'it is not the dissipation and silencing of our creative and technical works that is feared, but the threat that they might circulate endlessly'.

One response to our fears – of our own death, of our planet's death – is to carry on as if these were not our ultimate realities. The idea that much of our productive busyness is anchored in the need to forget is one that has been explored by Zygmunt Bauman (1992, 34) amongst others:

> There would probably be no culture were humans unaware of their mortality; culture is an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device to forget what they are aware of. Culture would be useless if not for the devouring need of forgetting; there would be no transcending were there nothing to be transcended. In the light of mortality, all meanings of life look pallid, wan, insubstantial. This light must be extinguished, if only for a time and an occasion, for life meanings to appear solid and reliable.

Bauman's argument represents a shift away from the classic topos not only by virtue of its expansion to all culture, but also through the way that it figures cultural production as a means of forgetting death in the present moment, rather than as an effort to face the reality of one's own death and overcome its finality. Indeed, central to Bauman's (1992, 10) argument is the idea that 'the totality of social organization, the whole of human culture' as we know it today is premised on this need to forget: 'the impact of death is at its most

powerful', Bauman (1992, 10) argues, 'when death does not appear under its own name; . . . [when] we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter'.

An alternative response is to use writing or other creative activity to confront death. Elegies and laments have been traditional ways of 'perform[ing] the work of mourning' (Fredericksen 2021, 290) and find contemporary expression in genres such as grief memoirs and blues music. Artistic installations coming out of the artists and climate change movement, such as Regan Rosburg's (2018) *Omega*, explicitly aim to shock us out of our diversionary tactics and open up a space for grief.[2] In these instances, creative production is not a distraction but a confrontation: it is a means of building a memorial to a lost person or part of the natural world whilst also processing – however effectively or ineffectively – our own distress.[3]

Amongst the myriad reflections on writing and immortality, reflections on translation and immortality are glaringly absent. In the conventional topos, it is the poet who aspires to immortality through their poetry; the translator, if evoked at all, contributes to the immortality of the original poet or the work but does not achieve posterity for him or herself. In an essay on the desire for immortality among Greek and Latin authors, for example, Andrew Hui (2015, 19–20) argues that these authors saw their texts as having more durability than physical monuments 'because of their ability to transcend their materiality, take leave of their origins, be imitated, appropriated, and adapted multiple times and in various historical situations'. Such a view is broadly in line with the Walter Benjamin-inspired work in translation studies that sees translation as a way of contributing to the survival of the original: in this scenario, translation is typically envisaged as an afterlife that allows the original to flower anew.[4]

In this article, however, I would like to suggest that there are connections to be made between (im)mortality and translation in its own right. Each of the ideas evoked in the brief overview above might fruitfully be explored in connection with translation, but here I will limit myself to just four. First, I shall explore the potential for translation to serve as a counter-mnemotechnic device along the lines suggested by Bauman. Second, I shall explore translation as a process of mourning, one way of building a memorial whilst exploring our own grief. Third, I shall consider translation as (attempted) self-memorialisation, whereby a translator deliberately undertakes a particular translation with the goal of making their own name live on after their death. Finally, I shall consider the potential for translators to live on anonymously, in the cosmic sense suggested by Borges, via their translations. In each of these reflections, my perspective foregrounds the translator as human individual, exploring the possible connections between their translating activity and their own mortality. Whilst to some extent distinct from each other, all of these activities may be seen as part and parcel of being human, being mortal – being, in Bauman's (1992, 92) terms, '*aware-of-mortality* beings'.

## Translation as counter-mnemotechnic device

As we saw above, Bauman (1992, 33) posits culture as 'an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device' through which humans enact 'the devouring need of forgetting' about death. Rather than accept the inevitability of death, we push it out of sight, 'flush[ing] it down to the murky depths of the subconscious we immerse ourselves in

a 'world of busy pretence' (Bauman 1992, 133), 'transform[ing] being into action and existence into a purpose and a task' (Bauman 1992, 36). Will Storr (2019, 1) refers to this determined forgetting as 'beetling', connecting knowledge of our own mortality to knowledge of the mortality of the universe:

> We know how this ends. You're going to die and so will everyone you love. And then there will be heat death. All the change in the universe will cease, the stars will die, and there'll be nothing left of anything but infinite, dead, freezing void. Human life, in all its noise and hubris, will be rendered meaningless for eternity.
>
> But that's not how we live our lives. Humans might be in unique possession of the knowledge that our existence is essentially meaningless, but we carry on as if in ignorance of it. We beetle away happily, into our minutes, hours and days, with the fact of the void hovering over us. To look directly into it, and respond with an entirely rational descent into despair, is to be diagnosed with a mental-health condition, categorised as somehow faulty.

In both Bauman's and Storr's analysis, a key feature of this mode of being is that it is filled with purpose. Most of the time, that purposiveness has nothing consciously to do with mortality; the goals that we set ourselves – or which are set for us by others – are ones that we hope to achieve in our own lifetime, rather than looking beyond our own deaths. Mundane or aspirational, individual or shared, these goals 'give our lives order, momentum and logic' (Storr 2019, 180).

If we agree with Bauman and Storr, then translating, like every activity, would come under the rubric of fending off death by distraction. We might even argue that it lends itself particularly well to counter-mnemotechnics because it is often carried out with a particular purpose and temporal deadline in mind (for publication, for remuneration, for teaching; by this or that date). As such, translation as a task is very effective at demanding our focussed attention, and giving us a sense of achievement when completed. The relatively constrained nature of the translation task is also beneficial for death-distraction, the presence of the source text directing our thoughts onto whatever its subject matter might be – itself often a product of someone else's beetling – rather than allowing them to roam freely and perhaps accidentally into a sudden remembering.

## Translating to grieve

As both Bauman and Storr acknowledge, there are moments in our lives when the whole elaborate pretence collapses, typically in periods of depression or bereavement. During such periods, translating has the potential to play two roles. First, it may serve as deliberate, conscious distraction during a time of acute emotional crisis, a way of marking time until other activities become possible again. Second, translating may become a way of confronting death, either in the sense of working through a bereavement or in the sense of attempting to come to terms with our own mortality (or both; the two often being intertwined). As we will see below, distraction and confrontation often go hand in hand.

There is very little existing scholarship that addresses the connection between translating and grieving. Brief mention of the use of translation as a distraction from knowledge of mortality is made by Susan Bassnett (2011, 77): comparing the translating activity of the poet Ted Hughes and Queen Elizabeth 1, she suggests that in the

last years of his life, as illness took hold, [Hughes] translated more than ever, just as Queen Elizabeth I, with death approaching, translated Boethius and other Latin writers, day after day, scribbling her English version in a shaky hand testifying to her fears that time was running out for her.[5] There are also some accounts of authors translating during periods when they cannot produce their own work because they are too caught up in grief. One is provided by Catullus, in Poem 65 of his Carmina, in which he tells Ortalus that grief for his brother has prevented him composing the poem he had promised; instead, he has turned his hand to translation (Catullus 2002, 74–5, and see Fitzgerald 1995, 185–196). Another frequently cited example is that of American poet and translator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who reportedly translated Dante's *Divine Comedy* whilst mourning his wife:

> Writing of Longfellow's grief-stricken anguish during the months following Mrs. Longfellow's death, his brother observed: In one of his early letters Mr. Longfellow had said: 'With me all deep feelings are silent ones'. It was so of the deepest. No word of his bitter sorrow and anguish found expression in verse. But he felt the need of some continuous and tranquil occupation for his thoughts; and after some months he summoned the resolution to take up again the task of translating Dante, begun, it may be remembered, years before, and long laid aside. For a time he translated a canto each day. (Cox 1960, 97)

In this account, Longfellow translates because he is unable to write: translation gives him a 'continuous and tranquil occupation for his thoughts'. Other accounts emphasise the material that Longfellow chose to translate, suggesting that Longfellow 'identif[ied] with the tortured longing of Dante for Beatrice, [and] used his translation to work through his grief' (Roylance 2010, 143).[6]

Another example of translating as mourning is found in Douglas F. Hofstadter's (1997) *Le Ton beau de Marot* [The Sweet Tone of Marot], a 600-page reflection on translation, interspersed with 88 translations, by almost as many different individuals, of a single poem by Clément Marot. Hofstadter completed the book three years after the sudden death of his wife Carol at the age of 42. Although most of the translations of the Marot poem were done many years earlier, it is no coincidence that the theme of the poem is a get-well letter to 'ma mignonne' [my sweet girl]. In the concluding chapter, which describes Carol's diagnosis and death, Hofstadter explains that while 'reliving with deep nostalgia' the tenth anniversary of their wedding day, he decided to retranslate, 'in memory of Carol' (560), two Silvestre-Fauré songs that a friend had sung at their wedding. Whereas the original translations that he made ten years earlier were only good enough to 'do the job' (560) for the English guests, for these later retranslations he 'work[ed] each line back and forth with utmost care, making sure that justice at last was done to the verse' (560). As befits Hofstadter's playful approach to writing, there are several levels of wordplay that tie this act of retranslation together with the act of remembrance. The concluding chapter in which they are embedded is entitled 'Le tombeau de ma rose' [the tomb of my rose], a near-homonymic echo of the book's title, which itself already evokes the word 'tombeau' [tomb] through both homonymy and the book cover image (the cover shows a gravestone in the shape of a cross, engraved with Marot's poem). With this second homonymic echo, this time between 'Marot' and 'ma rose', Hofstadter uses the term of endearment to give Marot's place to Carol, thus setting up the final chapter – and even the whole book itself – as a memorial to her.

The idea that translating can be both distraction from and working through grief tallies with theories of the grieving process, notably the Dual Process Model (DPM) of Coping with Bereavement proposed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (2010). According to this model, a healthy approach to coping with bereavement will involve oscillating between confrontation and avoidance, rather than focussing solely on one or the other. Just like reading, translating can combine both of these processes in one, distracting from grief yet also opening up possibilities of recognition and its associated functions of catharsis and insight.[7] More than this, however, in some cases translating can offer an experience that is more akin to writing – as opposed to reading – as a form of confrontation of grief. The possibility for death to drive creative endeavour is one that is evoked by Bauman (1992, 36) when he speaks of the 'energizing, creative potential' of survival that is 'never exhausted'. Numerous other critics point to this same possibility: Jacques Derrida (2001, 88), for example, identifies death as the 'command' for all of his work:

> I think about nothing but death, I think about it all the time, ten seconds don't go by without the imminence of the thing being there. I never stop analysing the phenomenon of 'survival' as the structure of surviving, it's really the only thing that interests me . . . And at bottom it is what commands everything – what I do, what I am, what I write, what I say.

Whilst Derrida speaks here in personal terms, Foucault sketches out the relevance of death to literature as part of a broad historical overview of what it means to 'speak so as not to die' (Foucault 1977, 59), suggesting that death is 'the source against which we seek refuge and towards which we address ourselves' (60):

> Like Kafka's beast, language now listens from the bottom of its burrow to this inevitable and growing noise. To defend itself it must follow its movements, become its loyal enemy, and allow nothing to stand between them except the contradictory thinness of a transparent and unbreakable partition. We must ceaselessly speak, for as long and as loudly as this indefinite and deafening noise – longer and more loudly so that in mixing our voices with it we might succeed – if not in silencing and mastering it – in modulating its futility into the endless murmuring we call literature. (60)

Foucault is primarily envisaging original creative writing as the response to the 'deafening noise' of death', yet translation too can play a part in this modulation of futility into literature. Bassnett (2011, 76) evokes this possibility when she suggests that translation can be a 'means of writing the self at one stage removed, as it were, a means of writing creatively about pain or trauma assisted by the cloak of the words of a writer from another time and another place'. In this scenario, translation is creative writing that has its catalyst in the translator's grief, yet achieves a protection of sorts from that specific pain by ostensibly writing about the author's loss rather than the translator's own.

A sustained example of this type of modulation through translation can be found in *Nox*, a work by renowned translator of classical literature, Anne Carson (2010). Written after the death of her estranged brother, Carson describes *Nox* as a replica of 'an epitaph' for her brother 'in the form of a book', yet instead of a bound volume, the reader encounters a concertina of unfolding pages, containing short reflections and narratives, photographs, and other scraps of material, encased in a grey box (for a material reading of the book, see Littau 2022). Through these fragments, the reader learns that Carson's brother ran away in 1978 and communicated with his family so rarely that their mother eventually concluded that he had died: 'How do you know?

I said and she said When I pray for him nothing comes back' (Carson 2010).[8] On the first page of the book is a Latin elegy by Catullus: known as poem 101, it is Catullus's farewell to the 'mute ashes' of his brother, who died – like Carson's own brother – far away, 'multa per aequora' (Carson 2010) [across many seas]. An English translation by Carson appears about two-thirds of the way through the book, echoing the Latin original in the visual manner of its presentation: both are typed on yellowed paper in similar slightly smudged font. Yet the entire book is also, both literally and figuratively, an unfolding of a translation in progress: whilst the right-hand pages of the book are made of the scraps mentioned above, the left-hand pages are devoted to dictionary-style entries of the Latin words of poem 101. Each word of the poem is accorded a whole page (occasionally more), so that the entries run through the entire book. At first glance, the pages look like bona fide dictionary entries, listing the four principal parts of verbs or the masculine, feminine and neuter nominative singular forms of adjectives, for example. There then typically follows a list of possible translations into English, many with examples, once again – superficially at least – in dictionary style. Through these lists, Carson's translation of the Catullus poem explodes out of what Derrida (1999, 25) has called the 'économie' [economy] of translation: rather than one word of the Latin becoming one word (approximately) of the English, each Latin word generates tens if not hundreds of possibilities.

More importantly, though, the left-hand pages are not the neutral dictionary entries that they purport to be, as Peper Langhout (2018, 10) also observes: the examples of language-in-use are a combination of phrases made up by Carson, and unattributed Latin quotations from the Classical era, some of which are accurate, and some adapted. The translations of both Carson's own examples and the quotations are often very free, reading like loose idiosyncratic associations with the word, drawn out of Carson's own life experience. As such, they hint at further dimensions of the brother's story that is unfolding more explicitly on the facing pages. These extra layers of narrative are generated in particular by what Erik Fredericksen (2021, 301) terms the 'irruptions' of the Latin word *nox* or its English equivalent *night* into the entries. 'Nox' is not itself present in Catullus's poem at the level of the surface words that make up the elegy. However, through these irruptions, Carson shows that, for her, *nox* is present in almost every individual word that makes up the poem, even in an apparently straightforward preposition like 'ad' [to] or a conjunction like 'et' [and]. In the entries for 'ut' [in order to/how/when, etc.] and 'nunc' [now], for example, Carson conveys the shock of her brother's sudden death via the example phrases 'ut nox!' and 'nunc nox!', giving their associated glosses as 'in indignant questions, rejecting an idea as preposterous' and 'night now! (implying that the latest development is in some way unexpected)'. Through the entries, *nox* – the title of the book – comes to stand in the work both for the death of Carson's brother and for what Jill Marsden (2013, 191) terms his 'opacity'. Many of the entries use the night-related phrase to hint at the impact on Carson of this double-faceted *nox*. For example, 'miseras' [wretched] and 'accipe' [voc. take] emphasise Carson's sorrow through the phrases 'nocte fratris quam ipso fratre miserior – made sadder by the brother's night than by the brother himself' and 'oculis aut pectore noctem accipit – he lets in night at the eyes and the heart' respectively.[9] The entry for 'mutam' [mute], which includes two night-related items, points both to the wordlessness of immediate grief and to Carson's ongoing questioning of the reasons behind her brother's silence during his lifetime: 'silentia muta

noctis – deep speechlessness of night'; 'tempus magis mutum a litteris – there was a better reason for not writing'.

The presence of nox in the lexical entries can be read in two ways, perhaps simultaneously. On the one hand, nox's presence may be an indication of the distraction that is always there when Carson attempts to translate, evidence of 'the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of [human words] that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate' (Carson 2010). On the other hand, their presence is also indicative of the mind's never-ending effort to make sense of words and people. As Carson (2010) observes: 'we want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here's why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?' Using a word that is reminiscent of Derrida,[10] Carson (2010) calls this effort 'prowling': 'Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark'. Whilst most published translations wash away all evidence of 'all those little kidnaps' – all those webs of connections, those subconscious and semiconscious evocations, those potential but unrealised translation choices, the 'plenitude of any word's experience' (Croft 2019, 190) – Carson's translation preserves a small handful of them within the lexical entries. The choice of the lexical entry format hides the evidence in plain sight, signalling to the reader through their pseudo-scientific, dictionary-like presentation that they contain nothing of narrative interest. The ubiquity of the nox-related expressions within the lexical entries also makes the longer title that Carson chooses for the inner title page, 'Nox Frater Nox', thick with meaning. Like the famous final line of the poem which Carson is translating, 'ave atque vale', its surface expression is perfectly balanced and pared down, but just like Catullus's line it goes on unfolding. In Carson's words, 'it [translation] never ends. A brother never ends'.

Carson's appeal to the never-ending nature of translation and of the person that is 'a brother' recalls Derrida's many efforts to discuss the *secret*. This by definition undefinable figure is that which – whether in literary works or in people – always remains concealed, 'resistan[t] to the daylight of phenomenality' (Derrida 2001, 57). Like Carson, Derrida pinpoints the locus of the secret in the autobiographical, in the sense that 'the other is other … *tout autre est tout autre'* (Derrida 2001, 58). As individuals, we can never fully know another person; in all that we share there is always something unshareable. Although some humans are more open and inclined to share than others – and Carson's brother was at the extreme end of opacity – all are to some extent unknowable: 'a brother never ends', says Carson (2010); 'we never finish with this secret, we are never finished, there is no end', says Derrida (2001, 58). It is probably no coincidence that the prompt for Carson's exploration of the never-endingness of her own brother is his death, since death brings the resistance of the secret into radical focus. Derrida (2001, 58) acknowledges this closeness between the secret and death but insists that they are not identical:

> Clearly, the most tempting figure for this absolute/secret is death, that which has a relation to death, that which is carried off by death – that which is thus life itself. Now, it is true that the relation to death is a privileged dimension of this experience of the secret, *but I imagine that an immortal would have the same experience*. Even for an immortal this secret would be concealed, sealed. (italics in original)

The secret is thus not synonymous with death, but human experience of death represents a 'privileged dimension' of human experience of the secret. Translating, too, offers a privileged way of approaching the secret, provided it is pursued without any delusions of finality. Derrida (2001, 30) frames this argument from his own perspective as author, suggesting that it is precisely the 'zone of disacquaintance, of not-understanding' in his own work that opens it up to translation: 'A work that appears to defy translation is at the same time an appeal for translation: it produces translators, and new protocols of translation' (16). The appeal to translation arises out of the secret, out of what Derrida describes as the 'excess even with respect to what I myself can understand of what I say' (31). The secret is what makes a text 'overflow the present' (30), ensuring that it cannot be consumed immediately and 'leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation' (31).

## Translation and immortality

Derrida's (2001) evocation of literature that 'overflow[s] the present' (30) and that 'produces translators and new protocols of translation' (16) returns us to the theme of literary immortality and the question of whether a translator can ever be more than a handmaiden to the immortality of a poet or their oeuvre. The idea of a translator working with one eye on their own posterity is one that is alien to dominant ideologies of translation. According to the paradigm of invisibility famously elaborated by Lawrence Venuti (1995), translators have typically been self-effacing, placing themselves at the service of the original work. The success of their endeavour is often seen as being dependent on this: the more the translator places themselves at the service of the work, the more likely it is that the work will survive the hazardous ordeal of translation. This attitude is encapsulated by writer and translator Elliot Weinberger (1987, 17), in the context of a negative evaluation of a translation of a verse by Chinese poet Wang Wei: 'In its way a spiritual exercise, translation is dependent on the dissolution of the translator's ego: an absolute humility toward the text'.

Even within scholarship that moves away from the concept of a servant translator and emphasises translatorial creativity, the idea that a translator might be targeting some kind of immortality for themselves is not one that is ever evoked. Within a recent edited volume in the emerging academic subfield of translator studies, for example, I could find only one mention of posterity. This occurs as part of an introductory statement about the difficulties of carrying out historical research into translators: 'As a traditionally marginalized group, translators are often difficult to identify and material about them is scarce. Many are "forgotten" in history and **only live on** in their published translations' (Schlager 2021, 201, my emphasis). Evoked here only as a concession, the idea that translators 'only live on' in their published translations is presented as a minor, unremarkable thing. Yet if we pause for a moment by this little phrase, we might consider that to live on at all in a public way (that is, beyond the memories and private objects of family or close friends) is something that most human beings do not achieve; this kind of 'only liv[ing] on' is in fact a quite remarkable possibility that is open to translators. In the case that Schlager is introducing, the posterity achieved by the translator through her published translation has in fact been

substantial and long-lasting: as Schlager (2021, 199) observes, Harriet Martineau's 1853 translation of Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy* 'became very popular and has remained the English standard translation to this day'. Whilst Schlager speaks in terms of the popularity and longevity of Martineau's translation, we might rephrase this in terms of the consequences for Martineau herself: through this translation, Martineau's name continues to circulate long after her death.

One does not have to look far to find other examples of translator's names being perpetuated after their death: any brief foray into quora or reddit will reveal discussion threads declaring 'the Strachey translation is generally pretty good',[11] or 'Kaufmann is usually my go-to for Nietzsche'.[12] Recommendations of this type undoubtedly also occur undocumented in university classrooms on a regular basis. Such 'immortality by proxy' (Bauman 1992, 59) may involve a deliberate decision, on the part of a translator, to align their own name with the name of a very specific other person, i.e. an author whom they admire. In this sense, translation might function in the same way as a dedication in literature, which Gérard Genette (1997, 135) suggests is 'a matter of demonstration, ostentation, exhibition: it **proclaims a relationship**, whether intellectual or personal, actual or symbolic' (my emphasis). Translating for posterity is thus in a sense an extension of translating for reasons of affinity or admiration (cf. Wright 2016, 18–19), but with a more calculating, less altruistic emphasis. In other cases, the posterity might be unexpected and in this sense accidental, the translator perhaps not imagining that their chosen author will achieve significant fame.

Whilst examples of this kind of posterity are not difficult to identify, finding acknowledgement that translating might involve, at some level and in some cases, a pursuit of immortality, is much more difficult.[13] Whilst a number of recent publications do address the important question of motivations for literary translation, to my knowledge none evoke this possibility. Chantal Wright (2016), for example, who treats the topic of literary translation motivation in considerable depth, extrapolates from her own experience to identify a set of motivations for translating that encompasses humanistic reasons (a belief that 'access to foreign literature and thought has the potential to improve the lives of individual human beings and of humankind' (18), political or ideological reasons, financial reasons, reading pleasure, and metaphysical concerns (seeing translation as 'giving insight into language and thought' (19). An exception can be found in a study of translator and writer Jorge Luis Borges, albeit in the form of a third-party attribution of motive rather than an acknowledgement by a translator that a desire for posterity played into their decision-making. This comes in the form of Rosemary Arrojo's (2004, 48) suggestion that Borges's decision to translate Walt Whitman was in part attributable to Borges's desire to be 'forever associated with the American poet'.

In the absence of discussion by translators or within translation studies, we might therefore look to other disciplines to conceptualise what is at stake in this kind of immortality. Above, I provocatively referred to the translator's immortality as 'immortality by proxy' (Bauman 1992, 59), an idea developed by Bauman in the context of an analysis of the conjunction between future immortality and present hegemony. Bauman (1992) is reflecting on the nature of immortality as 'the great de-equalizer' (58): whilst rulers' biographies 'become history ... the lives of ordinary mortals ... enter history, if at all, as *statistics*' (61, italics in original). Nowadays, however, Bauman explains, people can purchase durable monuments from the aristocracy, 'their castles and their adornments. The

adornments now carry immortality by proxy: their acquisition bestows vicarious immortality on the new owners'. (59). Reasoning along the same lines, we might see translation as a means for 'ordinary mortals' (Bauman 1992, 61) (translators) to acquire 'vicarious immortality' (59) from authors, who are more likely to be able to 'enter history' (61) owing to the social structures of the present.

However, describing translation as 'vicarious immortality' or 'immortality by proxy' may not be fair. Bauman develops these terms to describe the purchase of objects; the purchaser does nothing to those objects beyond preserving them and thus ensuring their continued value. The objects themselves have value in advance of and independently of the one who acquires them. This is clearly rather different from the role played by a translator. If we return to the case of Harriet Martineau, for example, then it would be difficult to argue that she was merely hitching a lift, as it were, on Comte's journey to future prosperity. On the contrary, Schlager (2021, 201) describes her translation work as 'a significant contribution to Comte's long-lasting fame': Martineau translated freely and selectively, popularising Comte's ideas for a broader audience and doing this so effectively that Comte apparently recommended Martineau's version to his students and 'arranged for a back translation into French' (199).

A similar – though less extensively studied – scenario may have played out with Constance Farrington's translation of Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*): as I have argued elsewhere, Farrington's decision to simplify Fanon's Sartrean-imbued vocabulary enhanced the quotability of Fanon's ideas and may have facilitated the book's passage to best-seller status (see Batchelor 2015). Would Fanon have known such success in America and such global posterity without Farrington's intervention? Perhaps. Perhaps not. At the very least, we can see that it is not straightforwardly the case that Martineau's and Farrington's names are achieving immortality by some kind of parasitic attachment to the names of Comte or Fanon. On the contrary, we could posit that the parasitic relationship is the other way around: Comte and Fanon achieve immortality because of Martineau and Farrington. In a sense, this returns us to the traditional idea whereby translators achieve immortality for others. Yet what we have added into the discussion is the acknowledgement that in many cases there are benefits for the translator: the translator's name *is carried forward* together with the author's name. Translating thus opens up a route through which translators might achieve some kind of immortality for themselves: by ensuring that the author's 'name shall never die' (Ovid 1986, 379), they also give posterity to their own.

Yet if we are not to term this kind of translatorial immortality a 'vicarious' or 'proxy' immortality, then how might we conceptualise it? It is helpful at this point to return to Derrida's (2001, 16) postulation that a work that 'appears to defy translation is at the same time an appeal for translation; it produces translators and new protocols of translation'. Derrida (16) elaborates on this point using the example of his own work:

> If . . . I may take my own work as an example, there's no doubt that it is closely linked to the French language; indeed, it has often been accused of multiplying the plays on words, the neologisms, the linguistic oddities linked to an idiom – and so, for this reason, of being all the more untranslatable. But all this has not discouraged translation, and often has made it possible to produce translations that were themselves, in their own languages, events of thought or textual events.

Derrida's (16) description of translations that are 'themselves . . . events' offers a crucial link for further exploring the connections between translation and immortality. Simply put, an event of thought, in Derrida's philosophy, is a new and original thought as opposed to a purely constative one. More precisely, it is an individual, personal response to whatever the 'singular and distinctive happenings of today' (Derrida 2001, 79) might be. For a thought to be an event, it must not only discern newness but also articulate an individual response to it. For Derrida, the personal, singular, taking-responsibility aspect of the event is crucial and aligns the concept of event closely with that of signature:

> Faced with the singularity of the world event, I have to respond to it singularly, with my signature, in my own way, not as an aesthetic fetish, but to take a responsibility. It happens to me . . . and I have to respond, me, with my language, my age, my history, my *ductus*, my way of writing, of making the letters, even if it is illegible. Naturally one has to invent, not in the sense of fiction but in that of the performative: here is my response to a given situation; if it is a signature, then it too has to be an event, in its way, modestly, but it has to have the form of something that is not simply constative – it too, like all acts of responsibility, has to pledge itself, to give as a pledge. (Derrida 2001, 79)

Whilst Derrida is speaking in this passage about his own writing, we have seen in the previous quotation that he anticipates translating being one kind of event of thought. This implies that just as Derrida creates events through his writings, which are typically close readings of other's texts, so translators can create events by translating. It is the 'leaving to be desired' (Derrida 2001, 31) – in other words, the non-shareable, non-transparent secret – of Derrida's works that creates the openings for translators to create events of their own, or, in Derrida's terminology to 'sign' (31) their own names in Derrida's texts:

> If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation: the other will have to be able to sign in my text. (iDerrida 2001, 31, italics in original)

If translators are able to sign in Derrida's texts, creating events of thought, then the kind of immortality they might achieve by translating Derrida is not simply that of their name being forever associated with Derrida, to return to Arrojo's (2004, 48) words about Borges and Whitman cited above. Rather, they achieve something closer to immortality 'in the cosmic sense' (Borges 1999, 16) elaborated by Borges and discussed in the opening section. By creating something new – for this is what an event of thought is – translators change the world that others will inherit and to which they will respond in their turn.

Events, in Derrida's understanding, are by definition oriented towards the future: they leave open a space for the future to come. Derrida (2001, 83) sees this openness to the future as intrinsic to an ethics of hospitality, since it is only by leaving the future open – inviting the other to interpret, sign, and create events in their own turn – that we truly welcome and accept the other, allowing them to act as they wish to act, not as we dictate:

> *if there is* a categorical imperative, it consists in doing everything for the future to remain open. I am strongly tempted to say this, but then – in the name of what would the future be worth more than the past? More than repetition? Why would the event be preferable to the non-event? Here I might find something that resembles an ethical dimension, because the

> future is the opening in which the other happens [*arrive*], and it is the value of the other or of alterity that, ultimately, would be the justification. Ultimately, this is my way of interpreting the messianic. The other may come, or he may not. I don't want to programme him, but rather to leave a place for him to come if he comes. It is the ethic of hospitality. (Derrida 2001, 83)

Translating ethically, then, means creating newness that resists closing down or allowing only programmed responses, instead inviting others to bring about their own events of thought. The mortal translator must leave the text open for those who come afterwards, or from elsewhere; this is the only way not to die. Becoming immortal by translating is thus not about fixing our names in the library catalogues and internet pages of the future, but rather about collaborating on philosophical and literary legacies which others will read and interpret and write about and perhaps even translate in their turn, in their time – and on, and on.

## Notes

1. 'Every one of us wants this world to be better, and if the world truly became better – that eternal hope – if the country saved itself – and why can't the country save itself? – we would become immortal in that salvation, whether they know our names or not' (Borges 1999, 16); 'We will keep on being immortal; beyond our physical death our memory will remain, and beyond our memory will remain our actions, our circumstances, our attitudes, all that marvelous part of universal history' (Borges 1999, 16).
2. Rosburg (2018) describes the goal of her installation as being to dissolve the distance between personal actions and their consequences, envisaging grief as an element that is indispensable for behaviour change: 'Distraction gives way to awareness, melancholia is replaced by mourning, and suddenly there is room for grief. The more individuals can utilise artistic symbolism to experience their grief (and thus, their love for what has been lost), the more authentically they can connect with themselves, and then move towards meaningful, pragmatic changes of behaviour in the face of overwhelming collapse'.
3. On the question of effectiveness, see James's (2019) problematisation of what he terms the 'unpredictable nature of solace' (88).
4. Important counters to this interpretation of Benjamin's notion of überleben can be found in Disler 2011 and Berman et al 2018.
5. Although it is true that Elizabeth produced the majority of her translations in the late 1580s and the 1590s, I could not find any evidence that would connect Elizabeth's rate of translation or shaky handwriting with such fears. The editors of the two volume collection of Elizabeth I's translations suggest that the translations were a way for Elizabeth to be 'productively and pleasurably alone' during a time of great political upheaval and difficulty (see Mueller and Joshua 2009, 9).
6. Roylance is summarising commonly held views about Longfellow's translation activity, rather than proposing this argument directly. Nevertheless, she concurs with it, suggesting that 'in a Victorian culture where the practices of mourning were highly ritualized and self-aware, it [also] makes sense to interpret Longfellow's grief work after Fanny's death as not entirely individual' (Roylance 2010, 143).
7. On the functions of reading during times of loss, see Koopman 2014.
8. There are no page numbers in Carson's book and I have therefore not provided page number references in this section.
9. The latter expression is adapted from Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.530. Virgil's words refer to Dido not being able to sleep (neque umquam . . . oculis aut pectore noctem accipit 'her eyes and breast rejected the night'.)
10. See Batchelor 2021, 8–11.

11. https://www.reddit.com/r/psychoanalysis/comments/1c06ww/what_is_the_best_translation_of_freuds_works/
12. https://www.reddit.com/r/philosophy/comments/1az6z9/which_translation_of_nietzsche_is_best/
13. This by no means implies that immortality is always desired by translators: a translator may not be in sympathy with the author they are translating, or at least not sufficiently to want their own name yoked to theirs in any lasting way. Even if they are admirers or advocates of the texts they translate, they may well translate for reasons that bear only on the present or at least only on their own lifetime.

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