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When the Translator Ends Up in the Water: A Case Study of Three Fictional Finales

This article addresses three fictional stories that cast translators in a similar finale, that of relief in the water. The water as these translators' final destination is examined in relation to Yōko Tawada's short story "Saint George and the Translator" (2007 [1993]), Yōko Ogawa's novel *Hotel Iris* (2010 [1996]), and João Reis's novella *The Translator's Bride* (2019 [2015]). The question to be discussed from a comparative perspective and close reading approach is why these fictionalized translators end up throwing themselves into the water and what is entailed in this choice of liquidity. Contrary to translators who got into history, the translators around which these storylines revolve are nameless (anonymous) translators going through dysfunctional romantic relationships and struggling with the uncertainties and lack of recognition that pervade the translation profession. The different nuances in meaning of the water motif (symbolizing either purification or redemption, inspiration or destruction) is interrogated on two levels: the fictional translators' self-perception and will to self-assertion; and their professed ethics and the violence that is to a certain extent inherent to them. The narrative figurations of these issues, which inform translator agency, show that these translators are or feel excluded in/from society, which entails their exclusion in/from history. Attention is given particularly to translators' inability to cope with the responsibility of translation, and how – paradoxical as it might be – they assert their individual agency by denying their own translational agency. Ultimately, the analysis substantiates Rosemary Arrojo's claim of "the impossibility of being in[/]visible" (*Fictional Representations*, 32).

Keywords: fictional translators; agency; in/visibility; water motif; liquidity

Introduction

In John Crowley's *The Translator*, when the Russian poet Innokenti Isayevich Falin disappears in the early 1960s, uncertainty arises as to the role of his American translator, Kit Malone (herself a poet), in the dissemination of Falin's poetry. The roles of author and translator, creation and re-production slowly reverse to the point of it being claimed that "it was he [Falin] who was truly the translator."¹ This suddenly turned translator, whose body was never found, purportedly died in a car accident that threw his convertible off a bridge:

There were plans for a full search of the river, but the authorities said that the rapid flow resulting from the downstream gates being opened could have carried a body very far. Police recovered items from the river that they said might have been discarded by a man trying to swim ashore: an overcoat, an empty briefcase, shoes. [...] There was the picture of the convertible being drawn up out of the river [...].²

The river operates here as the alibi of a death that enables a body to vanish without trace and frees Falin from any persecution for double agency at a time marked by the tension of the Cuban missile crisis.

Both the translator's (supposed) tragic ending and this blurred author-translator figuration are among the common finales and power relations depicted in fictional representations of translators. These fictions have become more noticeable in literature since the 1990s,³ a logical outcome of the sociocultural transformations brought along by increasing globalization processes and human mobility. In like manner, research in this subfield of translation – or translator⁴ – studies

¹ Crowley, *The Translator*, 279.

² Crowley, *The Translator*, 267-268.

³ The first works then produced include: Jon Thiem. "The Translator as Hero in Postmodern Fiction", *Translation & Literature*, 4, no. 2, 1995, 207-218; Else Vieira. "(In)visibilidades na tradução: troca de olhares teóricos e ficcionais", *Com Textos*, 6, 1995, 50-68.

⁴ See Andrew Chesterman. "The Name and Nature of Translator Studies", *Hermes – Journal of Language and Communication Studies*, 42, 2009, 13-22.

has been more profuse since the turn of the twenty-first century,⁵ producing a wealth of critical reflection on a compelling corpus of fictional representations. The growing visibility of translators as fiction characters has enriched the metaphors of translation and has contributed to our rethinking not only the limits of fiction and translation but also translators' roles and (self-)perceptions in general, as well as translation ethics, theory, and even history.

While this literature has mostly served the interests of translation theory,⁶ the images on which it elaborates cannot be examined outside the frame of translation history. Significantly, fictions of translators constitute public discourses on and perceptions of these agents, and can therefore be legitimately studied as sources for examining their agency across time and space. Furthermore, translators' statements and perceptions, competence and performance are inevitably embedded in socio-historical structures, be they real or fictional.

There is, however, one natural structure or element that is "indifferent to human manipulation"⁷ and which now and then binds together the fate of fictional translators, which is that of water. The symbolism of the water is scrutinized here in connection to the translator figure of three fictional stories in an attempt to clarify their agency,⁸ and it will be equated with one of the most significant *topoi* of the history of translation: translators' invisibility.⁹ The different nuances in meaning of the water motif will be interrogated at two levels: the fictional translators' self-perceptions and will to self-assertion; and their professed ethics as a system of "values and moral principles that should guide our notions of right and wrong

⁵ Delabastita, "Fictional Representations", 189.

⁶ See, for instance, Arrojo, *Fictional Translators*; see also Kaindl, "The Remaking of the Translator's Reality", 162.

⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 111.

⁸ I follow Kinnunen and Koskinen's definition of agency, "as the 'willingness and ability to act'. [...] First, *willingness* describes a particular internal state and disposition. This state is linked to consciousness, reflectivity and intentionality, and it is not without some moral or ethical undertones. This first aspect is largely individualistic and psychological by nature. Second, *ability* relates the concept of agency to constraints and issues of power(lessness), highlighting the intrinsic relation between agency and power" ("Introduction", 6).

⁹ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*.

and, thus, discipline our conduct.”¹⁰ The water as translators’ final destination will be examined in relation to Yōko Tawada’s short story “Saint George and the Translator” (2007 [1993]), Yōko Ogawa’s novel *Hotel Iris* (2010 [1996]), and João Reis’s novella *The Translator’s Bride* (2019 [2015]), which has never been the subject of academic study. The question to be discussed from a comparative perspective and close reading approach is why those fictionalized translators end up throwing themselves into the water and what is implied in this gesture. By casting translators in a similar finale, the stories selected for analysis ultimately substantiate Rosemary Arrojo’s claim of “the impossibility of being invisible,”¹¹ which challenges the aforementioned *topoi* of the history of translation.

In order to examine the functioning of the water as these translators’ grand finale, each fiction will be addressed in terms of the conflicts leading to the water resolution, which will be linked to translators’ pathos and ethics. With this in mind, the article is organized as follows: the first part briefly examines the water as a (leit)motif in literature and in translation studies; the second part of the article provides a comparative introduction to the stories so as to present their plots; the third part focuses on each selected story from the viewpoint of the workings and implications of the water motif. The article concludes about translators’ inability to cope with in/visibility and their exclusion from history.

Water as symbol

In Banana Yoshimoto’s *N.P.*, the narrator confesses to have “tried translating some [stories] of *N.P.* [...] It felt like walking out into the ocean with your clothes on, the waves pounding into your body, and swimming out toward the horizon, with nothing holding you back.”¹² The ocean metaphor to explain what the character experiences when translating is tantamount to a physically enduring struggle with unpredictable effects, yet a struggle in which the translator is free to opt for any course of (creative) action. Water as a natural and liquid component of the human

¹⁰ Van Wyke, “Translation and Ethics”, 548.

¹¹ Arrojo, *Fictional Translators*, 32.

¹² Yoshimoto, *N.P.*, 24.

body is a major constituent of all living matter, without which life would be impossible. In the arts, literature in particular, water has been associated with (re)birth and, by extension, with fertility, regeneration and transformation or purification, redemption and return to a primeval state.¹³ These have, at least, been identified as the main metaphors of water,¹⁴ which also reverberate in the stories under scrutiny.

The water also has its place in the discourse of translation studies. In 2012, Michael Cronin apparently reframed translation not as a clichéd bridge but instead as “a river that runs from bank to bank, evading rocks, travelling far and wide and connecting people on a deep under-surface level.”¹⁵ This observation tallies with his view of translators as fluid beings who “are perpetually unquiet in that they must be perpetually on the move.”¹⁶ It was Zygmunt Bauman who first described modernity as “liquid”, liquidity or fluidity highlighting the unstable feature of modern life that is more than ever under constant change.¹⁷ Kaindl perceives in Bauman’s concept “the dissolution of social and territorial networks that previously provided people with a rather fixed frame of reference for their life decisions”.¹⁸ Translators, for their part, seem to have always lived in liquidity. Their relationship to space and time evolves according to technological progress and is inextricable from their identity; their frames of reference shift with each new text or culture for translation. To cite Kaindl, translators have been living in liquidity, at the very least because they are not bound to fixed cultural or spatial barriers, due to the precarity of their profession, the provisional nature of translations, the need to meet with tight deadlines, often with low pay and low public recognition.

A defining feature of translators’ identity, liquidity as symbolized by the water that some fictional translators elect as their destination

¹³ See, for example, Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 79; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 374.

¹⁴ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 374.

¹⁵ Elnamouy, “The Flowing River of Translation”.

¹⁶ Cronin, *Translation and Globalization*, 105.

¹⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

¹⁸ Kaindl, “Going Fictional!”, 2.

constitutes the article's object of analysis. Water is fluid, and fluidity is linked to instability and the inability to rest on stable ground or a fixed – and visible – place.

The stories

It is perhaps too obvious to state that “it is the author of fictional works who controls the destiny of translator-characters.”¹⁹ On this matter, it is worth noting that Yōko Tawada is an award-winning writer who emerged in the literary field in the 1990s; she writes both in Japanese and German and has also translated professionally, mostly as an interpreter. By contrast, Yōko Ogawa, who has been publishing since 1988, is not known to have practised translation, but certainly is a reader of translations. João Reis is professionally a translator from Nordic languages (particularly Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic) into Portuguese and began his literary career as an author in 2015, precisely with his novella *The Translator's Bride* that he self-translated into English in 2019. In his case, it is the translator-turned-author who controls the destiny of his peers in fiction.

Contrary to flesh-and-blood translators who got into history – such as St. Jerome, La Malinche, or British orientalist Sir Richard Burton, to name but a few – the translators around whom the selected storylines revolve are nameless figures going through dysfunctional romantic relationships and struggling with the uncertainties and lack of recognition that pervade their profession. Deprived of a name, these displaced translators are symbolically denied existence, lacking an individual identity. The water grand finale confirms this denial; yet on a more figurative level it could be equated with the baptismal waters that would endow the baptized individual with an identity.

In addition to being anonymous, the main characters of the selected stories fit into the stereotype of the solitary translator, who lives and labours in solitude. Tawada's fiction features a female translator who narrates her self-isolation in the Canary Islands as a flight from too much sociability that could prevent her from completing her two-page translation; as she openly acknowledges, “[b]oth translation and

¹⁹ Wakabayashi, “Representations of Translators”, 96.

thinking are things you must do on your own so I believe in the end I'm essentially always alone."²⁰ Ogawa's translator, also Japanese, lives on an island off a Japanese coastal town. This piece of land represents a workplace without worldly distractions that could jeopardize the translator's productivity or concentration²¹ and is simultaneously a site of protection or refuge, where the translator can give free rein to his sexually deviant practices and enter into a Lolita-like relationship without any onlookers. His self-isolation mirrors his lack of human affection and social skills and renders him "a regular lunatic"²² – or outsider – in the eyes of the mainlanders. Reis's wretched translator loathes all things around him and has just been abandoned by his so-called bride Helena. The plot takes place in the period following the First World War and in an unnamed but coastal city. This translator ultimately blames his unstable, precarious, and poorly paid job for Helena's abandonment, the task of translation representing the incompatibility between the translator's dreams of self-sustenance or free will and real-life dysphoria. Whereas this translator is led to entertain the hope of making a living from literary translation, which is ultimately denied to him, the other translators long to make their way into the literary field – by completing for the first time a translation from beginning to end (Tawada) or having their first translated novel published (Ogawa).

The narrator of "Saint George and the Translator" struggles with her constant procrastination, indeed postponement, of the translation task that arouses allergic reactions of itchiness, her skin irritation reading as a somatization of the difficulties associated with translating, which causes her anxiety. In *Hotel Iris*, the translator does not perceive himself as "a real translator", meaning "the sort a publisher would commission to do a novel."²³ While the translator is prejudiced against non-literary translation, which is the one he lives off, the higher status of literary translation represents the opportunity to remove him from that second-rate existence.

²⁰ Tawada, "Saint George and the Translator", 136.

²¹ Wakabayashi, "Representations of Translators", 158.

²² Ogawa, *Hotel Iris*, 33.

²³ Ogawa, *Hotel Iris*, 24.

Topographically, the island as the translator's natural ambience is in keeping with the trope of the solitary translator. All these fictional translators live in liminal spaces surrounded by or next to the seawater, which conflates inspiration with menace.

Story 1: Yōko Tawada's "Saint George and the Translator"

In time I would reach an expanse of sand. If I didn't stop I'd reach the sea which would be another dead end. Hemmed in on each side by seawall and lodging houses I'd be unable to flee in any direction except forward straight into the sea. I probably wouldn't choose this though seeing how I could only swim a distance of twenty-five meters. If not into the water then where else could I escape? I wouldn't know until the ocean loomed before my eyes. How much further was it? Far away or really quite near? With these and many other questions on my mind I ran on down the slope. (175)²⁴

The many questions this translator has in her mind tally with her view of translation: "Translation is a process of making choices. That's why I didn't want to complete this one. Nor did I want to give up in the middle so I continued to slog on as usual" (141). On the one hand, slogging on seems to characterize her translational performance. On the other, the translator runs down the slope towards the seawater to escape the male warrior figure of St. George, who prevents her from posting off her translation and, therefore, from accomplishing her task: "Up to now I still hadn't ever finished translating a story. Some obstacle along the way always hindered me and I'd end up asking my friend Ei to translate the rest. [...] For once I'd like to translate a story by myself" (139-140). The text the translator feels pressured to translate on her own consists of a rewriting of the legend of St. George and the dragon, in which, as the translator moves forward in her task, she becomes more and more entangled. Rather than a physical obstacle, St. George serves as a psychological deterrent or enactment of the translator's dread of completing a translation, which echoes translation's never finished

²⁴ Henceforth page numbers referring to the story under discussion will be provided directly in the body of the text.

nature – as Philip E. Lewis put it, “the form of failure – incompleteness, distortion, infidelity – that is the inescapable lot of the translator.”²⁵

The haste of the translator at the end of the story is symptomatic of her bodily reaction to, and rejection of translation throughout the narrative: “The author’s breathing became labored and her every gasp sounded like the beginning of a question I’d have trouble answering and *made my heart jump*. Before long I too *was panting* and could only hear my own short breaths” (132; emphasis added). Associated with this physiological side-effect – i.e., the translator’s breathing difficulty in reading the source text – is the material configuration of the narrative vis-à-vis that of the translated text that is graphically displayed in italics: the narrator’s testimony lacks commas, which adds to readers’ own difficulty in breathing/pausing, whereas her translation abounds in commas.²⁶ The lack of commas can be equated with the lack of artifice, that is, the avoidance of distractions that the translator seeks in the island. As for the copious use of commas in the translation, not only does it render the translation fragmentary – a word-for-word and phrase-for-phrase translation – but it is also a compensation strategy for pausing and thus breathing, which the water can put at risk. The narrator’s translation is ultimately as “desiccated” as the island (118) and dry as the “narrow belt” of “[h]ardened lava flow[ing] by the [translator’s] house” (116), a belt where she pictures herself walking side by side with the female author of the text she is translating.²⁷ The author remarks that “[i]f there was water here there would be no path [...] Water would render it not a path but a river” (131-132): the translator seems to be in need of the author to guide her and endow her with some sort of inspiration or creativity. Running towards the fertile

²⁵ “The Measure of Translation Effects”, 225.

²⁶ Chantal Wright has rightly noted that Tawada’s characters tend towards “superficial and flawed ‘translations’” (“Yoko Tawada’s Exophonic Texts”, 13).

²⁷ The translator’s reading experience of the source text is, however, dry itself: “[T]hese groups of letters were like grains of sun-baked sand that won’t stick to your skin so you couldn’t start reading them as if you were slipping your arms through the sleeves of a coat. Reading this ‘story’ was like walking around wearing sand” (113).

sea would provide her with the water her translation lacks to be able to flow as the sea does.

From the outset her translation is condemned to failure as all her previous translations were: “University professors occasionally criticize my work [...] like to point out my mistakes and dismiss my style as ‘translationese’²⁸ while complaining my Japanese is wrong or my use of Chinese characters strange” (121). The criticism scorning her work renders her necessarily visible. Aside from lacking the skills to carry out a fluent translation, the translator will likely not get paid for her task: “Even if I did finish I probably wouldn’t get paid and furthermore the magazine specializing in literature in translation where I was planning to publish the piece had been in the red so long my friends were afraid it would fold before anyone received royalties for the next issue” (119). These words echo Bauman’s liquid modernity; according to the philosopher, “[o]nce the employment of labour has become short-term and precarious, having been stripped of firm (let alone guaranteed) prospects and therefore more episodic, [...] there is little chance for mutual loyalty and commitment to sprout and take root.”²⁹ Translators’ unstable life and lack of symbolic and economic recognition may explain why George, the name of both the dragon’s slayer and the translator’s boyfriend, abhors her profession and her flawed translations as much as she, after all, despises him (125).

Being surrounded by water and trapped in an island, the translator has nowhere to run except to the seawater. This choice may not, however, be completely arbitrary. The translator believes that St. George dislikes water, apparently like herself: “Saint George would definitely be afraid of getting his feet wet. [...] [T]hose boots he wore must’ve sparkled from the massive amounts of oil he rubbed into them to keep water out” (129). The translator declares that “I hate to swim” (110) and “I fear both water and sand. I’m afraid of George and I’m afraid of work”

²⁸ Yōko Tawada herself would like her literature to be read as translationese, for it makes manifest the presence of the foreign language. Tawada states this in her participation in the roundtable *Lightning in a Bottle: A Case Study of Publishing Literary Translation* on August 4, 2020 (<https://howlround.com/happenings/lightning-bottle-case-study-publishing-literary-translation>).

²⁹ *Liquid Modernity*, 148.

(152), her final running into the water resulting *prima facie* from an act of despair that could ultimately repair her translation's dryness. By contrast, she loves cacti, "because they have no leaves and don't need water and besides they're not very useful" (127). Perhaps the translator perceives herself as a useless cactus who at the end needs to be supplied with water, the source of inspiration and creativity that she lacks. As Cirlot put it:

Immersion in water signifies a return to the preformal state, with a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force. [...] [W]ater stands as a mediator between life and death, with a two-way positive and negative flow of creation and destruction.³⁰

It should come as no surprise to find that as the translator draws closer to translating the last words of the text, her urge for water increases. Once the task is completed, she "ran into the kitchen and drank glass after glass of tap water" (160), as if water compensates for the physical effort translation demands. Nevertheless, the translator also sustains that "[i]f the writing feels like pebbles falling down then you know it's a translation" (147). This fragmentary view of translation³¹ rejects the water element, which indeed her translation lacks. Either serving as glue or washing the pebbles away, the water simultaneously represents creation and destruction, inspiration/creativity and disruption.

Although the title of the short story's English translation pre-empts the fact that the translator is in the position of the dragon, and hence the prey and victim of St. George, this role only becomes clear as the plot unfolds. In this respect, we cannot fail to note the translator's need to blacken the letter "O" in the source text, which stands for the word "victims", so as to be able to proceed with her translation:

³⁰ *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 365.

³¹ See Kaindl's discussion of this story in the light of Walter Benjamin's translation theory: "Of Dragons and Translators: Foreignness as a Principle of Life. Yoko Tawada's 'St. George and the Translator'." Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl (eds.), *Transfiction*, 87-102.

The word for “victims” began with an “O.” I noticed there were “Os” scattered across the first page. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the page was full of holes eaten away by the letter “O.” There was a wall behind formed by the white page so I couldn’t see inside and the harder I looked the more it seemed I’d never break through. I colored the insides of all the “O’s” black with my fountain pen and felt a slight sense of relief. (113)

The translator inflicts a wound on the O letter, visually rendering it close to the shape commonly attributed to an island. Since the O letter also stands for sacrifice – “I drew two lines through the word ‘victim’ and wrote ‘sacrifice’ instead” (114) – the island, and translation as well, becomes both the place of sacrifice and of the victim, as the finale reinforces. To translate implies inflicting a wound on the source language, that is, violating the so-called original, therefore translating entails its destruction or death.³²

When the translator rushes to the post office to mail the translation, she puts on red felt shoes since hers “were soaking wet [...]. But how had I gotten my feet wet? I didn’t have any memory of a river that wasn’t dried up. On this island I haven’t even seen a riverbed with water in it” (161-162). The lack of a logical explanation for finding her shoes wet, when in the beginning of the narrative they bear dry pebbles (144), like the ones she considers to define the nature of translation, insinuates that either inspiration has finally lurked behind her or that it has left her. Her forced choice of shoes further serves as an omen that the translator will get her feet wet. The several obstacles she counters on her way to the post office are all personified by the St. George figure from which she desperately escapes, to the point of climbing out a window to land “in a sort of garbage dump [...]. Among soggy pieces of cardboard

³² See João Ferreira Duarte’s “Translation as Murder.” Sebastiana Fadda and Maria João Almeida (eds.), *Rastos luminosos em palcos do tempo*, 269-276. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos de Teatro, 2018. Margaret Mitsutani, the American translator of Tawada’s story, clarifies in her afterword that creation and destruction go hand in hand in the text: “The Chinese character for ‘creation’ can also mean ‘wound.’ When Duden’s *wunde* is translated into Japanese, it takes on an extra layer of meaning – to wound is also to create. And if writing itself began as an act of scratching figures, ‘creating wounds’, then translation is the process of inscribing those wounds into a foreign language” (“Translator’s Afterword”, 183).

at the cusp of complete disintegration rolls of brown wrapping paper were still dry and crisp” (173). When this happens, she inadvertently loses the translation manuscript, thereby becoming definitely trapped in St. George’s story: “The envelope was gone. What I was holding in my hand was not the envelope but a piece of wet carpet. I must have dropped the envelope in the trash heap and picked up this useless rag instead” (174). Metonymically as useless as this piece of rag, her translation would, however, have gained in being as “wet” as this rag.³³ The magazine’s editor even advised her against using a fountain pen when handwriting her translation, a piece of advice that she ignored: ““You mustn’t under any circumstances use a refillable ink pen,” the editor had said over the phone. ‘Why not? I’ll send the manuscript airmail you know so it won’t fall in the water’” (161). The water around the island – menacing the translator and her translation – poses the threat of the dematerialization of translation. In the end, it is the dematerialization of the translator through the water that is suggested.

In pragmatic terms, the water constitutes itself as the ultimate shelter or place of rescue for the translator. St. George, embodying the translator’s own doubts about her translational performance, forces her to choose the realm of water, which can symbolize redemption or, on the contrary, punishment for its absence in the translation. Either way, it can be construed as the translator’s wish for invisibility and her inability to cope, on the one hand, with the responsibility translation entails (hence her reluctance to complete translations) and, on the other, with the visibility granted by her performance/ethics. In representing the impossible in/visibility of the failed translator, the water that her translation lacks denies her the possibility of self-assertion and agency.

³³ The floor at the post office was “soaked. Dirty scraps of paper floated in the scattered puddles of muddy water” (173). At some point, the translator fears that her skin may be floating on the water as well, as if her metamorphosis had come through. Although the expected metamorphosis would be into a dragon, can the muddy water symbolize the failed metamorphosis into a fulfilled translator?

Story 2: Yōko Ogawa's *Hotel Iris*

The translator tripped over an ashtray. The man from the coffee stand caught him, pinning his arms in back, but he managed to shake free and ran toward the bow of the boat. The scene played out in silence.

Just as they were about to catch him, he leapt into the sea. Without a word of farewell or even a smile in my direction, he threw his leg over the rail, curled in a ball, and fell. There was a splash [...]. (161)

Contrary to Tawada's and Reis's stories, this first-person narrative is not told from the perspective of the translator figure, but instead from that of Mari, a Japanese teenager who undergoes an initiatory rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, from innocence and naivety to perversion and deviation at the skilful hands of the "past middle age" translator (4). Mari is the only named character together with the heroine of the Russian novel that the translator is "[b]y coincidence" translating (20), a novel whose title or author's name is never disclosed. The heroine is called Marie and "falls in love with her riding master, and their love is the most sublime and intense in all the world" (23). Like Marie's master in the fiction inside the fiction so will the translator become Mari's instructor into embracing "a new kind of pain" (53), that of sadomasochism. It is as if only what is original, uncorrupted like Marie – before falling in love with her riding master – and Mari – until she meets the translator – could bear a name. These two diegetic levels intermingle with one another throughout the novel.

Mari gets involved not only with a nameless translator with whose distinctive voice of command she becomes obsessed, but also with his nameless and, by contrast, voiceless nephew, who cannot speak because he does not have a tongue. The nephew appears and disappears unexpectedly in parallel with his own uncle, who vanishes by committing suicide in the sea. His instinctive jumping in search of an escape reads as a confession of guilt. No mention is made to any potential effort at keeping himself afloat, and his gesture exposes his inability to deal with the responsibility over the damage inflicted on Mari's body just as he dreads the moments when he completes his translations. Echoing the fear of Tawada's female translator, this translator confesses that:

“When I finish a job, I take the boat to town to mail it off – it might be a pamphlet advertising pills made from sturgeon fat... [...] I buy a stamp and drop it in the box. The envelope makes just the slightest sound as it falls, and at that moment a terrible fear comes over me. [...] It’s not a matter of being sad or lonely. [...] No one will mourn me, or even so much as notice that I’m gone. No one will look for me, except perhaps the sturgeon pill company wanting to pay my translation fee – and they would give up soon, over such a paltry sum as translators are paid.” (65)

The completion of a translation amounts to going back to anonymity and invisibility, a state of non-existence. Except for his clients, no one would notice his absence. This way, he needs translating to feel needed and to endow himself with a non-fluid existence. His wish to author a literary translation is sensed as the ultimate form of consecration, i.e., of gaining a public name.

The translator’s anagnorisis of his faults happens when the couple is on the boat traversing the sea from the translator’s home island, and Mari’s mother, escorted by policemen, cries out her name from the shore. The loud voices and gazes of onlookers that fall upon the couple bring about the translator’s sudden visibility, which entails assuming responsibility for his liaison with Mari. The translator is as trapped as Tawada’s translator was and as the mouse caught in a small trap placed in the pantry where Mari was punished with a riding crop – “He [the translator] whipped my flesh in the crowded pantry [...]. The whip played these notes on my body, contracting the organs or bones concealed beneath the skin” (152). The mouse eventually drowns “in a bucket of water. It floated on the surface, curled in a ball” (153), just like the translator “threw his leg over the rail, curled in a ball, and fell” (161) into the sea.

The couple’s relationship embodies the same Eros/Thanatos tension that characterizes the love affair of the Russian heroine and blurs the line between translation and fiction. Mari undergoes the same physical violence the Marie character in translation suffered at the hands of her husband, who finding out she was pregnant by the riding master “strips her naked, plunges her into the frigid lake, and then forces her to take a medicine to induce miscarriage” (101). This intertwining of violence, sex and translation summarizes the tone of the novel.

As the translator models Mari closer to, or in equivalence with the Russian original, a novel that he declares he is translating for his “own amusement” (25) – to borrow Arrojo’s words, “in the pursuit of some form of textual mastery”³⁴ or self-fulfilment – he symbolically condemns the original to destruction by recreating his own version or original through violence. First, the sexual violence against Mari is committed with her consent and cooperation, similarly to an original that offers itself to be translated and to a certain extent violated by the target language. From victim to perpetrator, Mari gains agency by taking pleasure from pain. Second, the abusive relationship Mari entertains with the translator obscures her role as either original or translation. Could the translator be writing his translation on Mari’s body, hence turned into a copy or double of the Russian Marie? Incidentally, Mari has doubts about the translator’s progress on paper: “I had no idea whether he’d made any progress on the translation. It seemed as though more pages of the book had been turned, but the page in the notebook always looked the same” (93). Could the translator be shaping Mari as his original instead?

After the translator’s death, no traces are found of his craft or of the Russian novel, which confirms that he was not, in effect, “a real translator” (24). These absences subvert the relationship between author/translator and original/translation by refashioning the translator as author and Mari as the original: “I did ask the police to look for the translation of the novel about Marie, but they were never able to locate it. All they found were endless rolls of film filled with pictures of me” (164). The only material evidence left is Mari’s physical scars that were sculpted³⁵ on her with the translator’s hands:

The doctors examined every inch of me, checking each little bruise and scrape and recording it on my chart. They discovered that my head was covered with countless tiny cuts that must have been from the blades of the scissors. [...] I simply told them that I had no memory of anything that had happened. They assumed this was the result of the shock. (162-163)

³⁴ *Fictional Translators*, 4.

³⁵ This word choice is not arbitrary, in that as a small child Mari was victim of a sculptor who nearly raped her (16).

The trade of which this translator left traces was his trade as a sadomasochist. Mari as translation or original is either way in an inferior and submissive position to the male translator/creator's whims and commands. She willingly submits to his masochistic desires to the point of claiming that "I wanted to be Marie" and longing to be dragged by her hair and drowned by the translator (124), just as the Russian heroine was abused by her husband. Despite the beauty the translator finds in this novelistic torture (101), Marie is not shown to have experienced pleasure in her own abuse. Contrary to the Russian novel, it is the translator who drowns at the end. His fall seems less attributable to shame than to an inability to cope with the visibility of his actions or ethics.

Whether the translator is creating through Mari his own original or his translation, his craft, of which Mari is the sole witness, implies the destruction, corruption, and violation of female originality/purity. This translator's agency echoes that of Tawada's protagonist, insofar as translating is conceived in terms of inflicting wounds on the original. The water resolution can potentially wash away and redeem this abusive agency, yet condemns the translator to the invisibility and eternal anonymity of which he was afraid. As the translator's fright at becoming visible suggests, he was not prepared to deal with visibility either. The translator's precipitous choice echoes another event the translator had witnessed ten years before of a boy who had fallen off the excursion boat (88-89). Unlike the child's body that was never found, his innocence and purity having dissolved in the water without trace, the translator's body was retrieved three days later. Unlike the child whose name his mother called, the translator's name cannot be called, because he does not have one.

In sum, *Hotel Iris* embodies a metafictional paradox: translation corrupts the original just as the original lends itself to be fouled, and just as Mari offers herself to be shaped by the translator, who would tailor her to a certain idea of female originality with Mari finding pleasure in that violation. In like manner, any original would find pleasure in being translated and, thereby, elevated. In the end, fiction reproduces – translates – fiction. Translation is often described as bridge-building between cultural shores, and the translator is the mediator who

endeavours to get a message safely from one shore to another;³⁶ this translator's intentional drowning metaphorically and metonymically implies the failure of translation.

Story 3: João Reis's *The Translator's Bride*

I walk away, leaving behind the garlic lady, she's standing at the streetcar stop wearing my hat, only it's not my hat anymore, I'm going on a trip, Helena is somewhere on the blue patch on the map, I look back one last time and start running [...], the seamen are watching me, I don't stop running, I run even faster, reach the end of the pier, jump into the water, the blue dark green gray water, I hear a woman's scream and men shouting words into the wind [...]. (117)

This passage from the closing paragraph of Reis's novella depicts the translator rushing towards what seems to be a precipice, suggesting a suicide attempt in the water by which the translator ends his existential crisis. From the outset the reader is confronted not only with the character's frenzy as conveyed by a fast and asyndetic narrative pace, but also with the presence of the water – the seawater that took his bride Helena away and the rainwater that accompanies the character's movements since she left him and mirrors his state of mind: “My return trip is gloomy, rain falls relentlessly” (9). The character wonders why:

[W]e strive to be someone, to live, work, own a house, eat, be a writer, a translator, and for what purpose?, we all die sooner or later, the world doesn't stop spinning, we only postpone the inevitable, why are we compelled to fight for our survival?, if she was here with me it would be worth it, however, she's not, it's a calamity. (63)

In view of the translator's lament, exacerbated by the grief of Helena's departure, his jumping into the water anticipates the inevitability of

³⁶ On the bridge and other metaphors of translation see: James St. André. “Metaphors of Translation and Representations of the Translational Act as Solitary versus Collaborative”, *Translation Studies*, 10, no. 3, 2017, 282-295. Anecdotically, in German *Übersetzen* “means both translating and crossing waters” (Renate Resch. “Translating the Past, Negotiating the Self.” Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl [eds.], *Transfiction*, 269).

death and his giving up on surviving. Considering Dirk Delabastita's categorization proposal of translators' fictional representations, the main character of *The Translator's Bride* would accordingly symbolize "ordinary people simply going about their everyday business, trying to preserve their moral integrity."³⁷ In this vein, the translator, who inhabits an "obscure and musty little room" (17-18) in a boarding house, embodies a strained relation between his worldview or ambition and his lack of faith in society.

The denouement is pre-empted by the translator's declaration that "those who live here for a long time end up rotting, we're alive on the outside though dead inside, absolutely putrid, it would be better if we all united and threw ourselves into the river, we would be washed out to sea, we'd lose ourselves in its depths, rid the world of such aberrations, we destroy everything, are parasites" (73). The shift from the indefinite "those who" to the inclusive pronoun "we" of whom the translator is part reinforces the low esteem in which the translator holds himself. Throughout the novel, the translator repeatedly states that "I'm a mere/only/just a translator" (37, 52, 108), the adverb implying that he is powerless; he has no authority or decision-making: "I'm a translator, I am what I do and am nobody, a name on a piece of paper" (93). The translator lacks confidence in himself as a man and as a translator who barely earns a living, while the water straightforwardly represents an exit from an insecure existence.

In the light of the liquid modernity metaphor, the water resolution may stand for two types of inability: the inability to cope with emotional change and the inability to cope with stifling socioeconomic structures and narrow mindsets. On this matter, the translator announces at some point that he despises neutrality, "people cannot be neutral, a friend of mine cannot caress my hand and kiss my enemy, laugh when they mock me, this is my true belief, maybe I'm wrong, neutral people are the most dangerous" (50). First, translators are often expected to act as neutral conduits, a metaphor that recalls the water element, a conduit itself of life or death. Second, this translator is not neutral: "I'm an idiot, [...] why do I have convictions that lead me to failure?, I wish I

³⁷ "Fictional Representations", 192.

could be social with everyone, be a neutral person” (61). The rejection of neutrality unveils a deeper conflict, one between a professional code of ethics (neutrality) and life or art (non-neutrality). On the one hand, the translator describes himself as “a serious man, I do not soil my mouth with frivolities” (55); on the other, he divides the world into “two kinds of people, the intellectualized and the illiterate, there’s no middle ground, I suffocate here” (58). In spite of editors fulfilling an important task in the service of literacy and literary education, the translator despises this class of pretentious intellectuals. He perceives them as men without words commenting “on books based on their author and not the content itself” (59), forcing changes to translations of books they have never read (105), and cherishing a view of literature that he considers shallow, clichéd, and superficial. Yet, the translator confesses having rendered frivolities himself – apropos his translation of the first volume of the literary series *Battle*, he declares that “the book is teeming with banalities and disgraceful situations, it does nothing to enrich literature, but a man has to earn a living” (38). His aesthetical judgment of art conflicts with his practical need to survive and with his heightened consciousness of the lack of an intellectual ambience where he could give free rein to his translational creativity.

Aside from symbolizing the character’s social displacement and remedy for an emotional break up and aesthetic disillusionment, the water finale also subscribes to his rebellion against neutrality whereby the conflict between art and ethics is resolved. The finale can rather be construed as the affirmation of the translator’s agency and non-neutrality in the denial of further agency; the translator confides his life as a social parasite to the cleansing water that took his Helena away from him, and which alone can take him back to her. Kaindl argues that translators’ embodiment of “existential conflicts and contradictions” may be:

[R]ooted in the ambivalent characteristics ascribed to them and their work in the course of history: They are invisible and ubiquitous, subordinate and powerful, faithful and dubious, oppressed and uncontrollable, and they can enable or prevent communication – in other words, they are changeable, oscillating beings that are hard to grasp because they are constantly in motion [...].³⁸

³⁸ “Going Fictional!”, 9.

The finale confirms, to use the scholar's words,³⁹ the loss of a connection with a fixed geographical location and the embrace of fluidity that characterizes translators.

Depicting two days of the translator's life, the story roughly ends at the point where it starts. It opens with the translator's return trip from the pier where he bade farewell to his purported bride and during which he lost his hat, and along with it his apparent honour and respectability. It ends with a one-way ticket towards the river connection to the blue ocean at the same pier where his emotional mourning began and where he regains his lost hat, which he, however, hands over back to the woman who had held on to it. When the translator jumps into the water, he becomes visible to "someone [who] throws a lifebuoy" and to "a crowd [that] gathers on the pier" (117). This circularity shows that he is as trapped as Tawada's and Ogawa's translators; unlike these translators, he is not trapped in a text he is translating but in a life that offers no affective, cultural, or economic comfort.

Like Helen of Troy, his Helena embodies an ideal of beauty, love, and perfection. Nothing is said about the translator's life before Helena's departure and no one, except for the translator, seems to acknowledge her existence. Without her, the translator is doomed to failure. Hence equated as perfection or utopia, indeed a source of inspiration, Helena can be perceived as a kind of original – or originality – that has abandoned the translator or liquified "somewhere on the blue patch on the map". And what is a translator without his original? Likewise, what is an original without a translator? Just as in *Hotel Iris*, here the original – the translator's bride – springs into existence through the translator. By denying his own life, the translator exerts his agency in refusing to live in a world without an original.

Translation, as Delabastita reminds us, is "a master metaphor epitomizing our present human condition in a globalized and centreless context, evoking the human search for a sense of self and belonging in a puzzling world full of change and difference."⁴⁰ João Reis's character embodies translation as the expression of his frustrated human

³⁹ "Going Fictional!", 3.

⁴⁰ "Fictional Representations", 192.

condition which he seems to either resist or on the contrary give in to by dissolving into the unstable waters that underline his search for, or defeat in, finding a sense of self.

Concluding: why do these translators end up in the water?

In the early 1990s, in surveying translators' representations in Quebecois literature, Jean Delisle⁴¹ remarked that suicide and madness are seldom a matter of discussion; recently, Arrojo has addressed the *topos* of the translator's suicide letter in her *Fictional Translators*. The topic here explored of seawater as a translator's destination draws attention to some writers' fascination with the fallen translator and his/her inability to cope with the responsibility of translation and/or the in/visibility it entails. Resuming Arrojo's words, the burden of the impossibility of being in/visible leads translators to find the solution of relief in the water.

The three fictions depict a dysphoric view of translators who, paradoxical as it might be, exercise their individual agency by rejecting their own translational agency. Their opting for water results from a sense of disorientation, the water becoming a site of escape and repose. In "Saint George and the Translator", escaping is an attempt at becoming invisible in the predator's eyes; the translator's will to self-assertion as a competent translator leads her to self-effacement. In *Hotel Iris*, the translator becomes visible to the onlookers as their eyes are fixed on the boat where he is with Mari/translation-turned-original or original-turned-translation and cannot deal with the responsibility that visibility entails. In *The Translator's Bride*, the non-explicit drowning appeases the translator's restlessness and puts an end to his hectic life and sorrow as both a failed man and a failed translator.

Ultimately the water grants these translators the possibility of going back to invisibility, and it highlights at least two inherently human features of translators: their solitude and their mortality. As flesh-and-blood figures, these anonymous translators are or feel excluded in/from society, which entails their exclusion in/from history. As Chevalier and Gheerbrant put it, "[l]'eau efface l'histoire, car elle rétablit l'être dans

⁴¹ "Suicide et folie", 14-15.

un état nouveau.”⁴² Whether that new state is death or rebirth, the water resolution prevents marginal and nameless fictional translators from being part of history.

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⁴² *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 377.

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