THE TRANSLATOR
2023, VOL. 29, NO. 4, 480–493
https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2275808

Crossing the borders of social class: Social mobility as translational experience

Chantal Wright [1,2]

[1]University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; [2]Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur, Switzerland

ABSTRACT
This article suggests that we might conceive of the experience of upward social mobility as a form of translational experience and view the socially mobile individual as both *translatum* and translator. Acknowledging that the experience of social mobility varies enormously in its specificity, the article's temporal focus is on upward social mobility in Britain since the expansion of higher education in the early 1990s. It draws on the author's own experience of social mobility and on the memoirs *Hungry* by Grace Dent (2021), *Respectable* by Lynsey Hanley (2017), and *People Like Us* (2020) by Hashi Mohamed, and relates the socially mobile self to the phenomenon of textual translation. It also theorises the 'return' – post-translation communication with the 'source culture' or social class of origin – and the process of back-and-forth translation in which socially mobile individuals are constantly engaged.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 June 2022
Accepted 23 October 2023

KEYWORDS
social mobility; untranslatability; back translation; social class; working-class; Walter Benjamin

Dinner and tea – an anecdote

In the care home to which my parents have lately moved, I caused consternation in the kitchen one evening by going in search of our 'dinner'. This had been ordered the day before and was to be put out for the three of us on a tray, for collection.

- But we put your dinner out, I'm sure we did. There's no more dinner left now. Did you not get anything to eat? said the Mancunian cook, genuinely dismayed.

I realised, belatedly, that I had unwittingly fallen into the lap of that old chestnut: the British North-South lunch-dinner-tea-supper divide. Dinner and tea in the North-West. Lunch and dinner in the 'South'. Supper seemingly referring to different types and sizes of meal, depending on location: an ethereal 'informal' dinner for some, a more prosaic bedtime glass of milk for others. I grew up with dinner and tea, but I now reside with lunch and dinner. I adapted to circumstances. At that moment in the kitchen, when I stood facing the care home cook and realised that I had essentially just accused him of dereliction of duty, of not feeding us the meals that had been ordered and of letting us go hungry, I further realised that this was an instance of what one

CONTACT Chantal Wright Chantal.Wright@zhaw.ch Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur, Switzerland

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

might be tempted to call a translational moment. In failing to use the correct word, to translate my dinner into his tea, I had birthed a misunderstanding and possibly also given offence. This failure or inability to translate interested me: I *know* that dinner is tea, I spent the first twenty years of my life calling dinner tea. It would never have occurred to me, back then, to call it anything else. But the process of becoming socially mobile, of adapting to changed circumstances, necessitated a form of internal back translation, and I clearly found this challenging. In that translational moment I had to think really hard, to think about why the nice man in the kitchen was confused, and to realise that I needed to use the magic word 'tea' to undo the misunderstanding so that my parents and I didn't go hungry. This was a moment akin to many that I have experienced in my life as a professional language-learner and translator, but it happened *at home and in English*, and it made me reflect upon my experience of social mobility, on the connection between my biography and my practice as a literary translator, and on whether or not we might conceive of social mobility as a translational experience.[1]

North and South – translating social class

Around the corner from my parents' new home is Elizabeth Gaskell's house, a mighty Victorian dwelling with a blue plaque affixed to it, completely out of character now with the social housing and new builds that surround it. I drive past it whenever I visit my mum and dad. This physical reminder of the novelist moved me to pick up *North and South*, which I had never read, and then *Elizabeth Barton*.

The heroine of *North and South*, Margaret Hale, is an interpreter figure. She moves between the wealthy upper-class world of her aunt Mrs Shaw and her cousin Edith, who reside on Harley Street, and the world of the educated but not very well-off middle-class clergy to which she belongs by virtue of her father's ministerial status. She descends lower in class terms when her father, suffering a crisis of conscience, leaves the Church of England and moves to Milton, a fictional Northern town, where he earns his living as a tutor. There the family live in genteel impoverishment under the patronage of local mill-owner John Thornton, himself a working-class boy who started out as an employee in a lowly draper's shop. Milton is a place where capitalism is turning the old order upside down. The novel is about social mobility: the tantalising rewards of hard graft and the misfortunes of sudden financial collapse and social descent.

Margaret Hale acts as an interpreter on several levels: she explains the South and rural life to working-class Northerners who know nothing of it and who display a tendency to idealise fresh-aired country living, not realising that it involves manual labour outdoors in all weathers. She moves between classes, visiting the dying Bessy Higgins and her mill-worker father and adopting their figures of speech – she is chastised for using the phrase 'slack of work' by her mother (1995:233). Margaret is well aware of her in-between status as a member of the impoverished but educated middle class, aware of the ridiculousness of her comparatively fancy dress on Milton's dirty streets, where it draws the attention of the mill workers. The height of Margaret's translational prowess comes when, on a visit to the Thornton house to beg the lending of a water-bed for her sick mother, she is caught up in a workers' protest. Thornton has locked out his labourers and brought in 'Irish blackguards' (1995:177) on a cheaper wage. Margaret is the only one able to see all points

of view in the dispute. The crowd is focalised through her eyes and the free indirect discourse merges the third-person narrator's voice with Margaret's own unvoiced thoughts in a manner that translates the complexity of the situation for the reader:

> Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless, – cruel because they were thoughtless, some were men, gaunt as wolves, and made for prey. She knew how it was [. . .] with starving children at home – relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread. Margaret knew it all . . . (Gaskell 1995:176)

Margaret wishes that Thornton would say something to the crowd, appease them – 'let them hear his voice only' (1995:176). She also urges the workers not to use violence, but when they turn on the mill owner, her empathy comes into focus: she 'only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond' (1995:177). Narrowly missing a projectile clog aimed at Thornton, Margaret then suffers a head wound from a sharp pebble thrown by a member of the crowd. With the wound comes Thornton's instantaneous realisation of his love for Margaret, a moment of Sirkian melodrama, even though the couple spends the rest of the novel miserably at war, having to gradually find their way to one another before a reversal of their respective financial fortunes and the inevitable happy end.

Margaret's own class position is unstable and perhaps because of this she is able to muster empathy for all sides. But she is ultimately a person who moves between – she takes turns translating one class and their position for another class and another position, but she is never actually required to translate herself. In Bourdieusian terms, her habitus is not divided. But what happens when habitus is divided, when the person who interprets has translated their own person and continues to translate their own person, back and forth, depending on where they happen to find themselves, socially, geographically, at any given moment?

Social mobility as translational activity

When I started to think about social mobility as a form of translational activity, I fancied that it might be a translator's conceit, an easy application of the intellectual framework with which I am most familiar to my own circumstances and to the enduring topoi of social class and social mobility in British society. I have since come to believe that it is not merely a matter of perspective or terminology. The circumstances of my life are in fact translational. This might be one of the reasons why, following a degree in Modern Languages, translation became my career, my practice, and my intellectual preoccupation. By virtue of a Thatcher-era 'assisted place' at an independent school in Manchester and the access that this afforded to higher education, and through the tenacious efforts of a working-class mother who was aspirationally upwardly mobile, petit bourgeois in her outlook if not in her material reality, I exited the working class and entered the middle class.[2] Whenever I stop to think about it, I find it remarkable that my paternal grandmother left Northern Ireland at a tender age to go into service in London, that my great-grandfather placed his mark rather than his signature on that grandmother's birth certificate because he was not literate, that my parents both finished their secondary modern schooling in

Manchester at the age of 15 and went straight into working life, but that I have a PhD in the humanities, didn't start work 'properly' until I was over 30, and now have a career as a university lecturer. My parents wanted a better economic future for their children, and possibly also more social and cultural capital, and this improved economic future has indeed come to pass. But there was never any premonition on my parents' part, or on my part, that social mobility, if actually achieved, would change things, that there might be a price to pay, that the person launched onto this trajectory would become a translation, a version of their earlier self – 'eine Form', as Walter Benjamin would have it (1991:9). A form that is necessarily different from, distanced from, the source text.

In her introduction to *Respectable*, a memoir of her own social mobility, Lynsey Hanley writes:

> Changing class is like emigrating from one side of the world to the other, where you have to rescind your old passport, learn a new language and make gargantuan efforts if you are not to lose touch completely with the people and habits of your old life. (Hanley 2017:x)

Hanley is arguing that changing class – here she is specifically discussing a move 'upwards' – involves a geographical or socio-geographical shift, that it involves sacrifice, that it involves 'language-learning' or code-switching: all of this rings true and is reasonably well documented.[3] What is perhaps less widely explored is the not-losing-touch, the 'return', the 'gargantuan efforts' involved in maintaining contact with where you come from – your source culture; the difficult, painful, even traumatic process of back-translating the self, of periodically or constantly negotiating, translating between, two cultures and languages and therefore also two identities, potentially leading to what psychoanalyst Joanna Ryan, in reference to Sennett and Cobb's seminal *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Sennett and Cobb 2023), calls a 'dividedness within the person' (2017:90).[4] I would like to use a translational framework to think more about this 'return', about the distance that it implies, and the process of back-and-forth translation in which socially mobile individuals are constantly engaged.

The experience of social mobility, like translation between different kinds of language pairs, translation across temporal and cultural gulfs and across media, and indeed the very experience of class itself, varies enormously in its specificity.[5] My particular temporal focus here is on the experience of social mobility in Britain since the expansion of higher education in the early 1990s. The early 1990s were when I went away to university, the first child from my working-class family to do so,[6] and it is also when Lynsey Hanley and food critic Grace Dent, who also recently authored a memoir about social mobility, went to university too. I will be drawing on their books *Hungry* and *Respectable*. The basic biographical facts of the two women's lives parallel my own: both are from white working-class families, from the North-West and the Midlands respectively, both are roughly my age, both accessed social mobility via education. I will also draw on the memoir *People Like Us* (2020) by barrister and broadcaster Hashi Mohamed. Hashi Mohamed came to Britain from Somalia aged nine with his siblings, unaccompanied by his parents, and went to university in the early 2000s, approximately ten years after I did. His experience of social mobility in Britain is layered by his experience as an immigrant and as a Black man. Where I had access to private secondary education, Mohamed attended the 'wild places' that were the 'failing state schools of inner-city London during the 1990s' (2020:89). But the

intention is not to compare my biography to Mohamed's, or indeed to Dent's or Hanley's, rather I intend to look for evidence of the translational nature of social mobility across the three memoirs and in my own story, and to consider the socially mobile self in relation to the phenomenon of textual translation.[7]

Translatum and translator

If we proceed from the premise that the socially mobile individual is a translation, a *translatum*, then a number of possible lines of enquiry arise. We can contemplate who or what translates the socially mobile individual; which facets of the individual, or of their environment(s), are being translated; the manner in which the translation has been carried out; and the effects of the translation process.

I will posit here that the translation of the socially mobile individual is effected by the individual concerned, so that the *translatum* is, simultaneously, the translator. In other words, socially mobile individuals translate themselves. The *translatum* comes into being both consciously and unconsciously: the person evolves over time in response to their new environment and circumstances; there may be watershed moments; there may be conscious episodic decisions to adapt and change; the process is certainly an ongoing one rather than one that can be said to be complete at a particular moment. In the memoirs considered here, secondary and higher education are portrayed as key moments of transition. Hanley marks the beginning of the translation process as inevitable and unconscious, as almost not a matter of choice, part of a trajectory that you are placed on when you enter education, in her case a sixth-form college in Solihull, about an hour's bus journey away from the council estate in Chelmsley Wood where she lived. Her only option was to follow the trajectory she had been launched upon to avoid falling between two chairs:

> I didn't decide pragmatically to become middle class in order to access social esteem and higher wages. It happened that way because I happened to stay on at school. There is a sense in which you buy, or are sold, a one-way ticket. (Hanley 2017:121)

But education can be just the beginning. Much of Grace Dent's 'class education' took place in the London world of fashion magazines and journalism following her English degree at Stirling.[8] Hashi Mohamed writes that social mobility is 'a journey, and a process of transformation, a process of renewal that could take a lifetime' (2021:21).[9]

The process of upward social mobility is not, of course, entirely the same process as the translation of a literary text. The translational process of social mobility involves only one person rather than two simultaneously existing texts. The socially mobile person may have divided loyalties or a complex sense of identity, but there is nonetheless only one of them. At a certain point in the mobility process, the socially mobile person becomes the *translatum*, a 'form' of their earlier self – and ceases to exist as the source text, or rather, the self as source text exists only as a historical artefact, as past lived experience and as memory. The source language and culture do live on, however: as a concrete location, in the family of origin, in working-class culture, as a space that is remembered, visited, dealt with, possibly even, enjoyed, reconciled with or championed. And once the socially mobile person exists as a translation within their new environment, this triggers the need for back translation into the source environment if the desire for or the necessity

of communication with the location of origin exists. The translational moments experienced by the socially mobile, such as the one described in my opening anecdote, are bi-directional therefore: the ongoing nature of translation means that there are always elements of the self that are as yet untranslated into the target environment,[10] and there are elements that have been translated into that new environment but that need, on occasion, to be translated back.

Walter Benjamin's (1991) essay 'The Task of the Translator' offers up a complex metaphor of translation as an activity that takes place in a mountain forest, with source and target text reverberating and echoing through the trees and across the mountainside. Antoine Berman interprets Benjamin's metaphor as follows:

> A mountain is characterised by inherent topological irregularity, which is typical of all *natural* language. The original text is located at the heart (*innern*) of the mountain. Translation cannot penetrate this space. For translation, language is not a mountain forest. Rather, the language of translation is the open and even periphery of the translating language from where one can observe the mountain of the foreign language. One cannot observe a mountain from another mountain. If translation inhabited its language in the same way that the original text inhabited its language, such observation would be impossible. The original text is buried within its own language, whereas translation is exposed. This exposed linguistic space within which translation operates is necessarily the translating language's *edge*. (Berman 2018:174, italics reflect Berman's own, my translation)

If the socially mobile individual wishes to maintain contact with the source, to 'observe [the] mountain', then their position within the target language will necessarily be on the 'edge'. Either one domesticates fully, sits comfortably in the forest of the target and no longer enjoys a vantage point, or one squats on the 'open and even periphery' of the translating language, simultaneously looking forward and back. The translator, and the *translatum*, occupy a position *abseits*, on the outside.

In social mobility terms, this liminal location can be frightening. Hanley writes of her experience of secondary school: 'I had to avoid falling into the void between two worlds, the working-class world and the middle-class world. I had to choose between rooms' (2017:37). Whether we conceive of the socially mobile individual as occupying an in-between or hybrid space, or being a divided person located in a middle-class world, theirs can be a difficult set of circumstances. There are problems at both ends, at the point of origin and the point of arrival. There is the tiring feeling of 'constantly getting things wrong' in the new middle-class environment, of 'never quite knowing how you're coming across' (Mohamed 2020:131), but there is also the increasing fraughtness of the return to one's origins. This is largely experienced as a tension that the socially mobile individual contains, for better or for worse, within their own person. Additionally, like Gaskell's Margaret Hale, the socially mobile individual is often also called upon to interpret the middle-class world for the working-class world and – though this is less frequent in my experience – to translate the working-class world for the middle-class one. The translational load involved in all of this is significant.

The difficulties of fitting into one's adopted environment have to do with learning the rules, as Mohamed points out, but mainly with being made to feel welcome and accepted ... or not. One can certainly compare this 'reception' to the reception of the translated text in the Anglophone sphere. Translations are often accepted or rejected on ground of their supposed readability and the extent to which they conform to or dissent

from domestic literary expectations.[11] Signs of difference, of foreignness, are often seized upon by book reviewers as evidence of shoddy work on the part of the translator, as a sign of an inability to fully 'carry over' (cf. Allen 2014). This textual reception finds a counterpart in the abundance of painful and clichéd examples of snobbery, ignorance and downright meanness experienced by the socially mobile. Dent relates the words of one of the junior writers on the magazine *Marie Claire*, where Dent was on work experience, who commented on the mismatch between Dent's full name, Grace Georgina Dent, and her appearance:

> 'It's funny. [. . .] Your name is so long and grand', she says. And then you actually see you'.
>
> 'Yes', I laugh, leaving it hanging in the air. 'And then what happens?'
>
> 'Well, you begin talking and you're, well . . . ' She pauses to find the word.
>
> 'What?' I say, raising an eyebrow.
>
> 'You're you', she says.
>
> 'Hahahahaha, yes', I laugh. She means common; I let this slide over me.
>
> I'm pretty sure I only got through the doors at *Marie Claire* on unpaid work experience due to the use of my middle name, Georgina. Grace Georgina Dent. [. . .] This lengthened the short Northern fishwife grunt of Grace Dent and made it sound posher. I'd fooled them. And now I was in, like knotweed, taking root. (Dent 2021:163)

Not only can the new environment be unwelcoming, it can also feel unreal. I have a distinct memory of sitting in a large departmental meeting early on in my tenure at a particular university and of not understanding the rules of the game, the political subtext that was playing out underneath the grandstanding and showboating, the failure to realise that if Professor A said X, then this was the cue for Professor F to say Y, and so on around the room until a point was scored or an intangible historical argument lost or won. There was a particular day in a meeting when I felt as though the ground beneath my feet was rippling and buckling, when everything seemed surreal. This was probably a sign of anxiety, although I didn't understand it as such at the time. I thought of it more as a psychosomatic response to the theatre going on around me. But Mohamed, too, talks about experiencing a 'sense of vertigo, the dizzying sense of the ground shifting beneath your feet' (2020:148).

This sense of the middle-class environment being somehow unreal, surreal, comes about through a keen awareness of difference. Dent writes of returning to her London life after a period of time living back up North with her elderly parents: 'I'm off to review a totally ridiculous restaurant. It's not ridiculous in the eyes of the London food scene or the Michelin-star people, but it's certainly ridiculous if you've become accustomed to dining out in a garden centre' (2021:272). It can be difficult to take yourself seriously if you have a sense that you could just as well be living a different sort of life.

Conversely, you yourself can appear ridiculous, untranslatable perhaps, to your source culture. Before the pandemic, some time in 2018, I visited my parents in Salford and we stopped at a Costa Coffee. I ordered my cup of tea, my dad was paying for the drinks, and I went to use the toilet while the drinks were being made. When I returned to the table where my parents had taken a seat, my mother was on the phone to a friend:

'Yes, we're just having a coffee in Sainsbury's. '
'Yes, Chantal's here.
'She's having a cup of tea.'
A brief pause.
'With oatmilk.'

My fussy choice of non-dairy milk was report-worthy. On the one hand, of course, there's humour to this, and it is simply part of the cost of doing business across class lines. But simultaneously incidents like these make me feel awkward, like I've been tripped up, caught out, as though somebody has cottoned onto my foreign accent, spotted that I am a translation, as though I should have known better and simply ordered the regular, assuming that I can remember what the regular is.

Joanna Ryan writes that class is 'a prime example of the past operating in the present and thus could be of great psychoanalytic interest as to how it constructs and endures within the psyche' (2017:6). This 'past operating in the present' is also an excellent description of a translated text. For socially mobile individuals, the 'past' is a living present located somewhere else – this might be across the country (in a Costa Coffee in Salford), in a different country, or just down the road – a place where loved ones are going about their lives in the manner that you used to go about your life, once upon a time. Reflecting upon her own experiences of communicating across the class divide (from her middle-class location downwards), Ryan talks about her desire for 'unconstrained connection' (2017:11) and for upwardly mobile individuals it is this unconstrained connection with the source that can be so difficult to establish. I always feel constrained, not quite myself, not quite honest, not quite genuine, *awkward*, properly middle-class awkward, whenever I establish that connection with the past-as-living-present, whether that's over the phone or face-to-face. On some level this is because family don't have experience of the new world in which you operate. As Mohamed points out: 'It is worth remembering that becoming socially mobile in the UK often involves engaging with a society, a profession or a professional class that your parents may not necessarily approve of, or even understand' (2020:82). He talks about finding ways 'to answer endless questions about when I would finally be this lawyer' during his training (2020:146–7). Dent describes phoning home less and less as her glamorous London life and paid-for journalistic junkets abroad occupied her focus (2021:180). Her activities seemed inexplicable to, un-shareable with, her parents and brother. This is a phenomenon that afflicts me too: it began at university and has continued to the present day. I phone home, by which I mean my parents, with less frequency when the shape of my present-day middle-class life seems most at odds with the shape of my parents' perceived existence. This might be when I'm on holiday, when I'm away giving a lecture, when my head is busy with things that I feel I can't possibly explain, that would strike them as odd, or with things that I might have mentioned in the past but that didn't meet with a response because they were so out of the realms of my parents' experience. Being met with silence is awkward, and there have been lots of silences over the years. The socially mobile individual is an awkward artefact, as is the translated text. The translated text is a special kind of text (cf. Boase-Beier 2011:59–72): a text with two authors, a text that either attempts to conceal its foreign origins, or conversely that deliberately, provocatively, wears its translated-ness on its sleeve. It can challenge its reader, who may find it difficult to establish that 'unconstrained

connection'. It will be unable to please everybody and will come in for criticism from some quarter somewhere.

The clichéd argument that the English-speaking world translates only small numbers of texts from elsewhere because of its literary self-sufficiency (and implicit literary superiority) suggests that translations are a luxury or frivolity, an unnecessary extra or an exoticism. There are parallels with the life of the socially mobile individual, who is financially better off, who often does have more social and cultural capital, is less existentially threatened, is not faced with financial precarity, can indulge in – and sometimes get paid for – activities that are, frankly, frivolous or at least comparatively frivolous. All of this also makes an unconstrained connection difficult to establish. Explaining your new set of circumstances – translating the middle-class world for the working-class world – is often not worth the bother, but sometimes you do it because you don't want to efface yourself completely, because you'd actually prefer oatmilk in your tea, because effacing yourself comes at a psychic cost; and sometimes because it is a duty or a didactic moment, as it is when Mohamed describes going to a chicken shop with his cousin and his cousin's friends and talking about his new life as a barrister and the possibility that this life is open to other young male Somalis too (2020:158–160).

The phenomenon of 'class-related disgust' (Ryan 2017:96) pertains to the pathologisation of the working classes and the internalisation of this pathologisation by the upwardly socially mobile individual (cf. Jones 2011; Lawler 2005). But I would suggest that this pathologisation can work in both directions, one way as disgust and the other as mistrust. The socially mobile individual is confronted both with the disgust and condescension detailed in the examples given above, but also with the mistrust displayed by their source class towards their target class. I sense this mistrust when I talk to my father about the advice of a mortgage broker on how he should invest the proceeds of his house sale, in my parents' assumption that university research leave is a paid holiday, in my mother's utter lack of comprehension that I and my sisters-in-law (note, not my brothers) all pay for somebody to clean our houses. Her objection was made on privacy grounds: 'I wouldn't like anybody going through my things like that'.

Translation method and translation effects

We can map the disgust/mistrust phenomenon experienced by socially mobile individuals back onto textual translation. Translations have always been objects of mistrust. Translation has historically been viewed as a process of loss, of making the most of a bad situation, and the translation product has frequently been seen as inadequate, inauthentic, or as embellished, libertine. Translators themselves are often the worst critics of other translators (cf. Dryden 2012, Nabokov 1955). There are echoes of this mistrust in what Mohamed has to say about working-class attitudes towards the code-switching of the socially mobile: 'we know you didn't always speak that way – and you're not a real working-class person either, because what working-class person speaks like you? You're a fake, you've been trained, you're not *authentic*' (2020:229). You have pretensions, you drink oatmilk. You are not the source text. You are neither one thing nor the other.

At the opposite end of the individual's journey, in the target culture, palimpsestic traces of the source culture and language, evidence of foreignisation, can also be viewed negatively – this is not the case everywhere, but in many contexts. University humanities

departments, with their predominantly left-wing politics and hyper-sensitivity to identity issues, are not the worst culprits. Barristers' chambers, as Hashi Mohamed has experienced, are a different kettle of fish, especially when you are a Black, non-British 'interloper'. Domestication offers itself as the simplest way of mitigating disgust, but it is of course neither possible nor desirable to fully domesticate oneself. Domestication involves suppression and denial, making invisible; it is a (self-)colonising strategy (cf. Venuti 1995). It also makes the process of back translation, of retaining sight of the mountain forest, all the more difficult.

There are positive impulses from within Translation Studies – older and more recent – that allow us to think hopefully and creatively about the experience of social mobility. As far back as the 1970s, Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (1990) posited translation as a source of renewal and innovation for literary systems, a fruitful cross-pollination. More recently the translation product has been seen as a form of 'experimental writing' (Scott 2012). Clive Scott is an advocate of a translation practice that involves reading source and target texts alongside one another; in other words, of translating for people who understand what the translator and their translation is about, and of stressing the continuities and the dialogue between source and target rather than the gulf that exists between them.

In thinking the experience of social mobility, I find myself pondering one of Sarah Manguso's aphorisms – 'Once you've travelled far enough from where you began, it's impossible to reconcile the present with the past' (2017:86) – alongside a more hopeful statement by Hashi Mohamed – 'The sum of *all* your parts make up the whole; one does not invalidate the other, one is not superior to the next' (2020:147). It is clearly possible to identify both loss and gain in the experience of social mobility, to see the dislocation caused by social mobility as a form of trauma – Blackwell (1998, 2002) argues that the positive spin placed on social mobility means that its difficulties are unacknowledged, leaving 'no adequate space for mourning' (Ryan 2017:108) – but it is also possible to view the socially mobile individual as somebody who possesses a unique skill set. It is striking that many recent memoirs of social mobility are written by journalists and broadcasters. Having an already established public profile as a journalist means that it's easier to find a publisher, of course, but there may be more to the connection than this. Journalists, particularly in the UK with its extensive tabloid newspaper landscape, have played an important role in packaging and representing the various social classes for those who do not belong to them: the working class for the middle class; the middle class for the working class; the upper class for everybody else.[12] This ability to 'explain' others is accompanied by further abilities. Dent and Mohamed both display qualities of tenacity, confidence and resilience, and a skill set that comes from being able to operate across boundaries:

> "I could perform magic tricks like 'retrieve a Chanel jacket from one of London's fanciest, grumpiest dry cleaners without the actual ticket' – a feat of charm and bloody-mindedness that would earn me a round of applause when I came back carrying the item.
> 'They can't teach that at Roedean', [*the editor*] once said to me. (Dent 2021:170–171)

Echoing Dent's display of 'bloody-mindedness', Mohamed writes that it takes 'extraordinary levels of self-belief to arrive on the other side [*of the class divide*] still believing that you have something to contribute' (2020:129).

But I do not wish to downplay the trauma or the anger that is perhaps most palpable in Hanley's *Respectable* and Mohamed's *People Like Us*. In my own case, social mobility, intersecting with other factors that included gender and religion, led to a painful ten-year estrangement from parents, brothers and many members of the extended family that lasted from the end of my undergraduate years to the start of my professional life post-PhD. Those are ten years that can never be recovered, that have left a hole in relationships and fundamental lack of trust. There can be a violence in social mobility, a clash of worlds.

Until recently I came down on Manguso's side, feeling that the gap between there and here could not be overcome and that social mobility was indeed a 'one-way ticket' (Hanley 2017:121) that leads to a discomforting rupture within the self. But recent experiences have changed my mind. Dealing with the serious illness of a parent in a pandemic, understanding how overstretched NHS hospitals are, how staff have no time to talk and to explain because they are so overworked, and experiencing the full horror of an absolutely inadequate social care system, has ironically mended some fences and rebuilt some trust as I and my parents went through this experience together. Perhaps I had also previously observed an appropriate period of mourning for things lost, as Ryan suggests is important, but I do wonder whether the classless experience of these national institutions that are accessed by the vast majority of Britons acted as a kind of bridge, buttressed by the universal human experiences of illness and ageing.[13] For the first time in many years, my parents and I were truly in it together. But there was something else, too, perhaps the first appreciation I have felt – on my dad's part – that my educated middle-class skill set was valued and valuable. I had to sit down one day in the middle of my mum's health crisis and write an email summarising the situation so that we could apply for a room in the excellent care home where my parents now reside. It took me about 15 minutes to put the fairly lengthy email together. When I showed it to my dad, he wept and then expressed his wonder: 'It would have taken me hours to write that, Channi. I knew all that education would be good for something in the end'.

There's probably a reason why I was drawn to Gaskell's grand house, standing there out-of-place in the middle of Longsight. It represents the integration of past and present, the face-off between rupture and continuity, the 'macrotext' (O'Neill 2005:11) of source text and translation that is the life of the socially mobile individual. And biography has certainly played its part in leading me to my chosen profession. But the role of biography may have less to do with promoting the ability to integrate different worlds within one person – or one text – than with cultivating a heightened environmental sensitivity, with teaching a person to read: contexts, norms, expectations, habits … and therefore also texts. You have to be able to see things before you can translate them.

Notes

1. If I conceive of myself on this occasion as the ethnographer of my own circumstances, this moment of reflection can be seen as an example of what Masi de Casanova and Mose call 'linguistic reflexivity', namely, 'recognition of linguistic boundaries and language-based identities in fieldwork' (2017:2).
2. I use the terms working class and middle class here in full awareness that social classes are neither homogenous nor inert. From the outset I also wish to state that my own experience of

a working-class upbringing was both gender-inflected, and coloured to a significant degree by religious conservatism and anti-intellectualism. Savage argues that the contemporary UK class landscape has been 'fundamentally remade' and is 'more fuzzy and complex in its middle layers' (2015:4). This evolution can certainly be traced in my parents' lives where some intragenerational social mobility is observable. My parents, who grew up in white working-class families in Manchester in the post-war period, were the first generation in their respective families to purchase their own home. Having both grown up on council estates, they first rented privately and then took out a mortgage on the first of two houses that they would own. Both of my parents left secondary modern schools at the age of 15 and went straight into the workforce. In my mother's lifetime, her occupation – nursing – became a degree subject; her own status and the status of the profession shifted accordingly. Both of these factors were significant in my parents' upward economic and social mobility. See Savage (2015) for a breakdown of the 'middle layers' of the UK's contemporary social class structure.

3. On language and code-switching see, for example, Chapter 7 of Mohamed's memoir.
4. This dividedness can be seen in other contexts that involve the crossing of a substantial cultural and/or linguistic border. In 1981 German exophonic writers Franco Biondi and Rafik Schami authored a manifesto entitled 'Literatur der Betroffenheit: Bemerkungen zur Gastarbeiterliteratur' [the German word Betroffenheit is notoriously difficult to translate but can mean 'dismay', 'consternation', 'being affected by something' or 'being on the receiving end of something'; roughly translated therefore, the title reads 'Literature of *Betroffenheit*: Some Notes on Guest Worker Literature']. In this manifesto they discuss the negative effects of migration upon the mental health of guest workers in Germany and frame the then emergent guest worker literature – much of which was written in German and therefore involved a linguistic border crossing – both as a response to the vulnerable situation of the individual writer and as an act of political solidarity with fellow migrants.
5. Though Ryan states, in her discussion of Robert Elias' *The Civilising Process* (1994): 'this book reveals that while the precise criteria differentiating one class from another change historically and according to locality, class distinction per se does not' (2017:83).
6. One uncle had done a non-residential Open University degree in maths.
7. On this occasion I will not, however, be considering the socially mobile self in relation to the well-researched phenomenon of self-translation.
8. Cf. Dent's anecdote about being taught how to deal with the wine list in expensive restaurants (2021:182–6).
9. Savage notes that 'Britain's social mobility challenge is far from over once the graduation ceremonies are concluded' (2015:108).
10. I have observed in myself, for instance, an investment in outward appearance in certain areas that I know to be a feature of my English working-class upbringing. I would be embarrassed to serve a guest food on a chipped plate, and feel uncomfortable using a less than fresh tea towel, particularly if visitors are present, and am still genuinely baffled when such practices feature in certain kinds of middle-class environment. This is an anecdotal generalisation of course, but also an example of the kinds of thing about which Bourdieu (2010) had so much to say.
11. Gideon Toury's work on translational norms showed that translators tend to unconsciously 'adapt' to prevailing translational values, whatever those are in a given cultural space (1995). Lawrence Venuti's oeuvre (1995, 1998) famously explores the dominance of a domesticating approach to translation in Anglo-American publishing of the late 20th and early 21st century.
12. Hanley is also aware of the special status of journalism and references David Brooks' (2000) concept of the 'bourgeois bohemian', under the banner of which he includes both journalists and academics (Hanley 2017:181).
13. When Grace Dent writes that 'my childhood, in fact, almost *all* British childhoods in the 1970s and 80s – contains a lot of mince' (2021:6), she is putting her finger on another shared national experience, the almost universal mediocrity of post-war British cuisine before the food revolution of the 1990s. Hanley, too, talks about mince (2017:29).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Chantal Wright is Co-Director of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. She is also a literary translator working from French and German into English. Her research interests encompass the theory and practice of literary translation, stylistics, philosophies of translation, and migrant, exophonic and intercultural writing. She is the author-translator of Yoko Tawada's Portrait of a Tongue: An Experimental Translation (2013), the editor-translator of Antoine Berman's The Age of Translation (2018) and the author of Literary Translation (2016).

ORCID

Chantal Wright http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1011-3717

References

Allen, E. 2014. “Lost in the Book Review.” *Other Words* 44:26–33.
Benjamin, W. 1991. “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.” In *Walter Benjamin. Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by T. Rexroth, 9–21. *Band IV.I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Berman, A. 2018. *The Age of Translation*. Translated by C. Wright. Abingdon: Routledge.
Biondi, F., and R. Schami. 1981. “Literatur der Betroffenheit: Bemerkungen zur Gastarbeiterliteratur.” In *Zu Hause in der Fremde: Ein bundesdeutsches Ausländer-Lesebuch*, edited by C. Schaffernicht, 124–136. Fischerhude: Atelier im Bauernhaus.
Blackwell, D. 1998. “Class, Status and Conflict in Mind and Society.” *Group Analysis* 31 (1): 16–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316498311012.
Blackwell, D. 2002. “Out of Their Class.” *Group Analysis* 35 (3): 367–380. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316402035003609.
Boase-Beier, J. 2011. *A Critical Introduction to Translation Studies*. London: Continuum.
Bourdieu, P. 2010. *Distinction. Translated from French by R. Nice*. London: Routledge.
Brooks, D. 2000. *Bobos in Paradise*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Dent, G. 2021. *Hungry*. London: Mudlark.
Dryden, J. 2012. “From the Preface to Ovid’s *Epistles*.” In *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by L. Venuti, 38–42. Abingdon: Routledge.
Elias, R. 1994. *The Civilising Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Even-Zohar, I. 1990. “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem.” *Poetics Today* 11:45–51.
Gaskell, E. 1995. *North and South*. London: Penguin.
Hanley, L. 2017. *Respectable*. London: Penguin.
Jones, O. 2011. *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso.
Lawler, S. 2005. “Disgusted Subjects: The Making of Middle-Class Identities.” *The Sociological Review* 53 (3): 431–446. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00560.x.
Manguso, S. 2017. *300 Arguments*. London: Picador.
Masi de Casanova, E., and T. R. Mose. 2017. “Translation in Ethnography: Representing Latin American Studies in English.” *Translation & Interpreting Studies* 12 (1): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.12.1.01dec.
Mohamed, H. 2020. *People Like Us*. London: Profile.
Nabokov, V. 1955. “Problems of Translation: “Onegin” in English.” *Partisan Review* 22:496–512.
O’Neill, P. 2005. *Polyglot Joyce*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Ryan, J. 2017. *Class and Psychoanalysis: Landscapes of Inequality*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Savage, M. 2015. *Social Class in the 21st Century*. Pelican: London.
Scott, C. 2012. *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sennett, R., and J. Cobb. 2023. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. London: Verso.
Toury, G. 1995. *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Venuti, L. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility*. New York: Routledge.
Venuti, L. 1998. *The Scandals of Translation*. New York: Routledge.