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*On Absent  
Voices*

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English Extension 2  
Reflection Statement

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### Reflection Statement

*“Literature is also a process of translation: not the transmutation of the text into another language but the transformation and concretisation of the content of the writer’s imagination into a literary artefact.” – Edith Grossman*

My short story *On Absent Voices* is a meditation on the prevalence of translation in our lives. Because ‘no written or spoken text is “original” at all’<sup>1</sup>, fiction is essentially a translation of reality into text. Therefore the author is a translator of his or her experiences as they attempt to ‘transpose nonverbal realities into language’<sup>2</sup>, a role that the translator must then take on themselves in order to render an author’s ideas into another language. In this way, author and translator are indistinguishable. Writing and translating are acts of creation. I chose to focus particularly on literary translation, as it is the most intricate type, requiring creativity and tact to replicate the experience of reading the text in the source language for a target audience. As the writer, and thus translator of this short story, I intended to transform my insights into an understandable form for both an audience who is multilingual and shares my interest in translated postmodern literature, as well as those who enjoy the challenge of interpreting stories.

*Life of Pi*<sup>3</sup>, from the Preliminary Area of Study *Crossing Boundaries*, opened up to me the possibilities of crossing textual boundaries through metafiction. I was also inspired by the HSC Extension 1 elective *Textual Dynamics*, independently investigating the concept of polyvocality and heteroglossia, defined by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin as “language’s

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<sup>1</sup> Grossman, E 2010, “Quixotic”, *Guernica*, April, viewed 23 February 2013 from [http://www.guernicamag.com/features/the\\_fault\\_is\\_mine/](http://www.guernicamag.com/features/the_fault_is_mine/)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Martel, Y 2001, *Life of Pi*, Knopf Canada, Toronto.

*ability to contain within it many voices, one's own and other voices*"<sup>4</sup>. It was this idea of a double-voiced discourse that formed the basis of my short story as a narrative interweaving two voices. The Dessaix article *Pushing against the dark – writing about the hidden self*<sup>5</sup> was also a significant influence on developing early ideas about finding oneself in a text and drawing out the same response from an audience. I believe the readership of the *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* is an ideal example of my intended audience, particularly appropriate given that the December 2012 edition<sup>6</sup> prominently featured short stories translated in and out of languages.

I structured my story around seven "extracts" from my fictional text, *Absences*, which I believed would allow the layers to gradually unfold while also encouraging readers to examine their own relationship to language and thus become "*delighted, transformed and impassioned*"<sup>7</sup>. These extracts were influenced by Paul Poissel's *The Facts of Winter*<sup>8</sup> and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*<sup>9</sup>, particularly by Calvino's use of incipits within the larger framework of the story. The dream imagery furnished this framework in a way that I hoped would further engage the audience. Dreams also functioned as a language that typified the "absent voices" of the title: "*She dreams of them sometimes, the voices of all the books she passed up*"<sup>10</sup>, which was influenced in part by the fragmented dreams that made up *The Facts of Winter*.

In regards to developing the voices of myself as the "translator" and my fictional author Simon Sollers, I drew inspiration from Paul La Farge and the author he created, Paul Poissel,

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<sup>4</sup> Allen, G 2000, *Intertextuality*, Routledge, London.

<sup>5</sup> Dessaix, R 2012, "Pushing against the dark – writing about the hidden self", *Australian Book Review*, April, pp.32-40

<sup>6</sup> *Multiples* 2012, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* Vol.42, published by McSweeney's, San Francisco.

<sup>7</sup> Board of Studies, Extension 1 Syllabus document, Textual Dynamics rubric

<sup>8</sup> Poissel, P 2005, *The Facts of Winter*, McSweeney's Books, San Francisco.

<sup>9</sup> Calvino, I 1998, trans. William Weaver, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Vintage, London.

<sup>10</sup> 2459 6621, *On Absent Voices*

in *The Facts of Winter*. Through this I was able to give Sollers a firmer pseudo-historical grounding, which allowed me to create a “*focused presence*”<sup>11</sup> the audience could converse with. La Farge’s voice as the “translator” of his story also helped me to shape my own voice and its dynamic tone.

Developing Sollers’ working relationship with Christine was undertaken mostly in the latter stages of drafting as I wanted their dialogue to act as a “*conversation between texts*”<sup>12</sup> across time and space to enforce the notion of translation as a tool used to break down barriers. It also enhanced the other conversations, such as those between my work and other texts, fiction and reality, Chinese, French and English, and to an extent the one between the author and the audience.

My initial research into translation included reading the relevant chapters of *A History of Reading*<sup>13</sup> and Edith Grossman’s *Why Translation Matters*<sup>14</sup>. The latter was particularly vital for gaining a contemporary understanding of the place literary translation has in the publishing world, which helped make my story relevant for an audience interested in postmodern literature. Part of my research also pertained to translated fiction. The online journal *Asymptote*<sup>15</sup> allowed me access to works such as *Knotted Tongue*<sup>16</sup> and *The Pocketwatch*<sup>17</sup>, Urdu and Chinese short stories respectively translated into English. These proved useful in understanding the shifts in nuances between languages. I was also able to

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<sup>11</sup> Dessaix, *opcit.*

<sup>12</sup> Board of Studies, *opcit.*

<sup>13</sup> Manguel, A 1997, *A History of Reading*, HarperCollins Publishers, London.

<sup>14</sup> Grossman, E 2010, *Why Translation Matters*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

<sup>15</sup> *Asymptote*, <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/>, last updated April 2013

<sup>16</sup> Hussein, A 2012, “Knotted Tongue”, *Asymptote*, October, viewed 28 October 2012 from [http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Fiction&id=32&curr\\_index=&curPage=](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Fiction&id=32&curr_index=&curPage=)

<sup>17</sup> Huan, Chuanming 2012, “The Pocketwatch”, *Asymptote*, July, viewed 28 October 2012 from [http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Fiction&id=29&curr\\_index=&curPage=search](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Fiction&id=29&curr_index=&curPage=search)

find articles and interviews including *Searching for the Familiar*<sup>18</sup> and *An interview with Margaret Jull Costa*<sup>19</sup>, both of which greatly assisted in comprehending the intimacy of the author/translator relationship. I wrote some of their experiences into Christine's character, such as her fear of her own voice drowning out that of the author's.

To familiarise myself with the short story form I read short stories from collections such as Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness*<sup>20</sup>, from which I learnt how the accrual of detail may be an effective method of storytelling. Stories from *The Best Australian Short Stories 2009*<sup>21</sup> assisted me in comprehending the basic features of my chosen form, including plot, character and pacing while the irreverent voice of my authorial presence was influenced by Etgar Keret's *The Great Nimrod Flip-Out*<sup>22</sup> and Dave Eggers' *How We Are Hungry*<sup>23</sup>. Yann Martel's *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*<sup>24</sup> influenced the way I wove postmodern literary techniques such as mise-en-abyme with more traditional ones, including metaphor and imagery.

I decided on the use of metafiction from the outset as a way to comment on the nature of stories and the constantly shifting language used to construct them. Apart from being evident in my fictional text *Absences*, metafiction would be seen in the authorial intrusions in the body of the work and in the footnotes in order to convey the intrusions of reality into fiction and vice versa. My own playful use of footnotes was informed by John Fowles' witty footnoting in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*<sup>25</sup>, subverting their traditional purpose as

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<sup>18</sup> Larsen, R, Miedema, N 2013, "Searching for the Familiar", *Asymptote*, January, viewed 15 March 2013 from <[http://asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Special\\_Feature&id=102&curr\\_index=30&curPage=current](http://asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Special_Feature&id=102&curr_index=30&curPage=current)>

<sup>19</sup> Sanches J, Berkobien M 2013, "Interview with Margaret Jull Costa", *Asymptote*, viewed 24 April 2013 from <[http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Interview&id=18&curr\\_index=32&curPage=current](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Interview&id=18&curr_index=32&curPage=current)>

<sup>20</sup> Munro, A 2009, *Too Much Happiness*, Vintage, London.

<sup>21</sup> Falconer, D (ed) 2009, *The Best Australian Short Stories 2009*, Black Inc., Melbourne.

<sup>22</sup> Etgar K 2004, *The Great Nimrod Flip-Out*, Picador, Sydney.

<sup>23</sup> Eggers, D 2005, *How We Are Hungry*, Penguin Books, London.

<sup>24</sup> Martel, Y 2004, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, Canongate Books, London.

<sup>25</sup> Fowles, J 1969, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Vintage, London.

informative additions to make asides: “*Translation is imperfect to the last word and if we learn to live with it, so much the better*”<sup>26</sup>, which relieved my work of a stifling academic stereotype and brought into the story my personal attitude towards translation.

However, having so many ideas in so many places meant that during the writing process I rapidly became unstuck in a sea of translation theory. Thankfully, I was fortunate enough to interview Dr Mabel Lee<sup>27</sup>, who shared her personal experience in choosing to translate *Soul Mountain*<sup>28</sup>. This helped me to narrow my scope of research. I began to investigate literary translators such as Howard Goldblatt, William Weaver and David Bellos to learn more about their relationship to the works they had translated. By investigating translators themselves I allowed the audience greater capacity to empathise with my protagonist, Christine. An interview with prolific Italian-English translator William Weaver in the spring 2002 *Paris Review*<sup>29</sup> was highly influential. He spoke of the importance of a translation preserving the rhythm of the original and having its own rhythm in the target language, and as a result I consciously shaped my language so that there was a rhythm to my sentences and a lively alternation between Christine’s voice and that of the fictional translator.

I also made use of depersonalised narration and fragmented sentences, which allowed both empathy and destabilisation in the audience: “[Christine] *Thinks on how one story can be told in three different languages and be the same-not-same. Thinks of herself as comprised of a multitude of languages – does that make her a multitude of people then?*”<sup>30</sup> This, along with the hybrid French/English sentences such as, “*How many of them are histoires, and how many are stories?*”<sup>31</sup>, were cues taken from *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*<sup>32</sup>, and

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<sup>26</sup> 2459 6621, opcit.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, Mabel. Personal Interview. 16 April 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Gao, Xingjian 2000, *Soul Mountain*, trans. Mabel Lee, HarperCollins, New York.

<sup>29</sup> Spiegelman, W 2002, “William Weaver, The Art of Translation No.3”, *The Paris Review*, Spring

<sup>30</sup> 2459 6621, opcit.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

specifically from the story “French Lesson I – *Le Meutre*” – “*See the vaches ambling up the hill ...*”<sup>33</sup> As I wrote I tried to keep in mind the concept of one language helping to explicate another – we turn to the language of fiction to explain reality, just as we may rely on other translations of a French text to translate it into English.

I believe I have realised the vision I had for my short story in moving my audience to empathise with Christine, while also challenging them to reflect on their own experiences with language. The barrier between language and human beings is a semi-permeable one and I believe I have successfully translated my thoughts about this intimacy into a short story that holds these threads of language together. Personally, I feel as if I have matured not only as a languages student, but also as a “decent human being”, in the words of my mentor.

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, L 2009, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, Picador, New York.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*