Almost four hundred years ago an English cleric and scholar wondered at how he would cope. His days were invaded with the news from elsewhere:

I hear news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged in France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, &c. daily musters and preparations, and such like, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain, monomachies, shipwrecks, piracies and sea-fights, peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms […] New books every day, pamphlets, currantoes, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy and religion, &c. (Burton, 1927, p. 14)

Robert Burton, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), who in his lifetime had amassed one of the world’s largest private libraries of 1,700 volumes was not unhappy. He was simply astonished. His only difficulty was how was he going to keep up with all that was being written and reported. Of course, his wonder has its intermediaries. To know what towns have been taken or cities besieged in “France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland” means that someone has to translate the news for the speakers of a minority language on the periphery of Europe. The “New Books every day” and the “whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts” contain a great many translations and indeed so prevalent was the practice of translation in the Elizabethan and Tudor period that one scholar, Robert Cawdrey, author of the first dictionary of the English, *A Table Alphabeticall* (1604) was convinced that the English would soon forget what language it was that they spoke, “Some men seek so far outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language, so that if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell or understand what they say” (cited in Simpson, 2007, p. 41).

As Burton’s world expands and his library grows apace, translation is everywhere in the emergence of proto-global information networks. It is this presence of translation in the
expansion and opening up of civilisations that leads to the development of what we might
call messianic theories of translation. The extraordinary thousand-year history of Indian-
Chinese cultural exchange through the translation of Buddhist scriptures starting with
the Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period (148-265), continuing through
the Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (265-589) and culminating
with the Sui dynasty, the Tang dynasty and the Northern Song dynasty (589-1100) points
to the profoundly transformative effects of translation on a people’s culture and beliefs
(Zhong, 2003). The immense contribution of Arab-speaking peoples in a bewildering
variety of areas from architecture to cartography to pharmacy to poetry and veterinary
science through inwards and outwards translation is well recorded (Lyons 2010). The
creative engagement of the Ummayad and Abbasid Caliphates, the pioneering role of
figures like Al-Mansur, Al-Ma’mun, Huynayn Ibn-Ishaq point to the crucial catalytic effect
of translation in the evolution of cultures and languages. As a result of the demonstrable
contribution of translation to the opening up and enrichment of cultures, there is a clearly
understandable tendency to invest translation with messianic or redemptive qualities. That
is to say, in a world riven with dissension, border disputes, persistent racism and ethnic
violence, translation would appear to offer the possibility of mutual understanding, a
vision of harmony, a tantalizing glimpse of a world where conflict would be but a distant
memory. This millenarian promise is echoed in the names of organisations, books and
online journals devoted to literary translation in particular: Literature Across Frontiers,
Words without Borders, Literature without Borders and so on. The first principle of the
PEN Charter adapted at its congress in Brussels in 1927 at the initiative of John Galsworthy
was, “Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in
spite of political or international upheavals” (Rotondo, 2011). A commonplace image of
translators is as bridge-builders, as prophetic figures in the coming of a global, cultural
parousia. The prodigious expansion in information diffusion with the arrival of the
interactive web seems to provide the necessary material infrastructure for the realization of
the messianic promise of translation. Facebook as of September 2011 had 870 million users
worldwide with an average of 130 friends per user, Twitter had 256 million users, YouTube
was adding on average 48 hours of video footage every minute and Linkedin had 100
million users and rising (Cano, 2011, pp. 22-23). However, the question that might be asked
is whether the messianic conceptualization of translation is the most appropriate or even
the most desirable in a global age?

The dismantling of tariffs barriers, the deregulation of financial markets, the collapse
of the Soviet bloc, the spread of the internet and the rise of satellite television are often
depicted as contributory factors to the emergence of a “flat earth” where borders are more
honoured in the breach than in the observance and where limits of any kind are seen as the
doleful remains of backward-looking protectionism (Friedman, 2006). The political reality
of the planet, however, is at variance with the frontierless enthusiasm of the flat-earthers.
Since 1991, particularly in Europe and Eurasia, 27,000 kilometers of new borders have
been created and 10,000 more kilometers of walls, divisions, partitions between territories
are planned over the next decade (Debray, 2010, p.19). There are now almost four times as many nation states represented at the Union Nations as there were at the first meetings of the General Assembly held in London in January 1946. A striking feature of cities across the globe is the rise of gated communities, CCTV and private security companies and there seems to be no limit to the appetite for social and economic demarcation (Sennett, 1993; Förster, Jesuit & Smeeding, 2003). Do these realities simply indicate that we have to try harder in preaching the frontierless doctrine of messianic translation or do they, on the contrary, force us to think again about how we might think about translation and borders in a globalised world?

In order to think about the notion of limits, it is worth briefly considering a philosophical and anthropological perspective on the question before considering in greater detail the implications for translation. The French anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan argued that the principle of socialization has always consisted of, “mettre de l’ordre, à partir d’un point, dans le monde environnant [imposing order, from a particular standpoint, on the surrounding world]” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965, p.150). A significant shift in human development occurred over 30,000 years ago with the strict delimitation between waste and living space. A way of organizing one’s environment and defining who lived where was to separate detritus from human habitation. Keeping your house in order was keeping your house together. The distinctions that many of the major world religions make between what is pure and what is impure or the huge investment humans make in even the most difficult and trying circumstances to maintain a modicum of cleanliness and order in their homes point to a fundamental link between spatial cohesion, sense of self and delimitation (Kaufmann, 2011, pp.19-46). For the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach the Roman deity Terminus stood at the entrance to the world. He argued that a fundamental condition of human existence was self-limitation. No being can exist unless it exists as determined in some way. He goes on to argue, “L’espèce dans sa plénitude s’incarnant dans une individualité unique serait un miracle absolu, une suppression arbitraire de toutes les lois et de tous les principes de la réalité. Ce serait en fait la fin du monde” (Feurbach, 1839). The absence of limits in Feuerbach’s vision is cataclysmic. Where there are no limits, there is no distinct being. A world without borders, in effect, is no longer a world. It is an undifferentiated void, without ground or figure, a black hole from which nothing emerges. Thus, limits, boundaries, borders are seen from these different anthropological and philosophical standpoints in two different centuries as constitutive of self, community and reality. If this is the case, then where do we situate translation within thinking about limits?

When Marcel Proust embarked on his translation of John Ruskin’s *The Bible of Amiens* (1897) he undertook to visit as many of the sites associated with Ruskin’s writings as he was physically able (Tadié, 1996, pp.431-445). In a sense, he gave physical reality to the movement that underlines all translation, the passage from one language, one culture to another. Proust’s pilgrimages to the cathedrals of Northern France or to the hallowed Stones of Venice captured the nomadic impulse that brings the translator to the foreign lands of the text and language to be translated. As I have argued elsewhere, it is possible to
see all travel writing as a form of translation and all translation as a form of travel writing (Cronin, 2000). What travel involves, of course, in an exercise in self-definition. It is when the traveler goes elsewhere that they become aware not only of where they are and where they are going to but also crucially where they are coming from. It is a commonplace of that permanent form of travel which is exile that a sense of identity is never more cruelly felt than when you are away from your place of birth or origin. In this context, there is the story that is told of James Joyce who is visited by an old friend Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in Paris. On a visit to Paris, the great revolutionary, feminist and social activist, went to see James Joyce who had been at University College Dublin with her brother, Eugene Sheehy, between 1898 and 1902. Joyce subjected Sheehy Skeffington to a relentless and seemingly endless interrogation on the minutiae of Dublin life until in her brother’s account of the conversation:

‘Half-dazed with his cascade of enquiries, she at length said to him:

“Mr. Joyce, you pretend to be a cosmopolitan, but how is it that all your thoughts are about Dublin, and almost everything that you have written deals with it and its inhabitants?”

“Mrs. Skeffington!” he replied, with a rather whimsical smile, “there was an English queen who said that when she died the word ‘Calais’ would be written on her heart. ‘Dublin’ will be found on mine.”’ (O’Connor, 2004, p. 38)

For students embarking on a course of translation, the initial draw can be the voyage outwards, the lure of the foreign, the delights of difference. However, what makes translation different from foreign language learning is that it is the journey home that proves to be the most revealing. The student of translation soon realizes and this is as true of translating Joyce as it is of translating manuals for agricultural machinery, that the genuinely strange and unexplored territory is their mother tongue. In other words, there is a sense in which translation becomes a dual experience of limits in language and culture. There is the external experience of limits which is the recognition of irreducible differences in the structure and lexicon of two languages. It is these irreducible differences that greatly exercised the minds of translation scholars who were strongly influenced by the linguistics paradigm such as Roman Jakobson, Vinay and Darbelnet and J. C. Catford. A standard example is the use of the formal and informal second person (tu/vous, tu/usted, du/Sie) in many European languages and the difficulty of rendering the nuances of this usage into modern English which has only form of the second person singular, you. The difficulty of translation resides in having to contend with these limits and finding satisfactory or creating ways of dealing with them. The internal experience of limits is the acknowledgement by translators of the limitations to their knowledge of their native language. As they translate a text from a foreign language they frequently have to ask themselves the question that David Bellos includes in one of his chapter headings in his recent work on translation, “Is Your Language Really Yours?” (Bellos, 2011, p. 57). The
The internal experience of limits is subjective whereas the external experience is objective but the internal experience is none the less real for this. Marcel Proust would spend several years testing and reworking his personal knowledge of French before he felt properly able to offer a satisfactory rendition of Ruskin’s work in the Frenchman’s native language. He presents the recognition of limits and the desire to transcend them as the inescapable path to self-knowledge, “Cette servitude volontaire est le commencement de la liberté. Il n’y a pas de meilleure manière d’arriver à prendre conscience de ce qu’on sent soi-même que d’essayer de recréer en soi ce qu’a senti un maître. Dans cet effort profond, c’est notre pensée elle-même que nous mettons, avec la sienne, au jour [This voluntary servitude is the beginning of freedom. There is no better way of becoming aware of what one feels oneself than to try and recreate within oneself what a master felt. In this major task, it is our own thought, as well as his, that we are bringing to light]” (cited in Tadié, 1996, p. 439). The dual axis of external and internal delimitation in the translation experience of the individual translator is matched at a collective level by the role of translators and translation in the construction of national vernaculars.

One of the main influences on the language that Proust had to translate was the English of the King James Bible. The so-called Authorized Version of the Bible published in 1611 and translated by a team of translators led by Myles Coverdale would have a profound impact on writing in English for many centuries after its initial appearance (McGrath, 2002). An important precedent for Coverdale and his fellow translators was, of course, Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible into German which often earned for him the sobriquet, Father of the German Language. In his famous Open Letter on Translating (1530) he defends his insertion of the word *allein* where the word *solum* did not exist in the Latin or Greek text of Romans 3.

In all these phrases, this is a German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add *allein* in order that *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete. To be sure, I can also say, “The farmer brings grain and *kein* money,” but the words “*kein* money” do not sound as full and clear as if I were to say, “the farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money.” Here the word *allein* helps the word *kein* so much that it becomes a completely clear German expression. We do not have to ask the literal Latin how we are to speak German, as these donkeys do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them. (Luther, 1909, p. 640)

What Luther is confronting here is the external limits to the German language, the differences that he identifies between Latin and German grammatical usage. It is these differences which guide his choice of language in translating the New Testament passage. It is the juxtaposition of the Greek, Latin and German languages which make the specificity
of the German language emerge. His Open Letter is an attempt to marshal the external, objective evidence of language delimitation to justify the detail of the German text he has produced and in doing so to lay the foundations of the modern German vernacular language. At another level, however, what Luther is expressing in his Open Letter is the translator’s internal experience of the limits to his knowledge of his native language. Self-knowledge is no knowledge. It is not by remaining sequestered in his or her study that the translator will answer to the demands of the task. The translator must move, go out into the world, “ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace.” The Translation Zone is not a Comfort Zone. When Luther speaks of the translation of the Old Testament where he collaborated with Philip Melanchthon and Matthew Aurogallus of the University of Wittenberg he notes that, on occasion, it took them anything up to four days to translate three lines:

Now that it has been translated into German and completed, all can read and criticize it. The reader can now run his eyes over three or four pages without stumbling once, never knowing what rocks and clods had once lain where he now travels as over a smoothly-planed board. We had to sweat and toil there before we got those boulders and clods out of the way, so that one could go along so nicely. The plowing goes well in a field that has been cleared. But nobody wants the task of digging out the rocks and stumps. There is no such thing as earning the world’s thanks. (Luther, 1909, p. 642)

The “sweat and toil” of the translators is the translators working into their mother tongue. Digging out “the rocks and stumps” is the arduous exploration of a terrain that is suddenly rendered unfamiliar by the demands of the text to be translated. The fields of language that have to be “cleared” are the fields that are part of their landscape from infancy. The internal and external experience of limits are however porous. Translators shape as much as they are shaped by the limits of language and culture. Luther will give form to a new kind of German. He will influence in a profound and enduring way the German that will be spoken and later written by the mother in the home, the children in the street and the common man in the marketplace (Sanders, 2010). In other words, in exploring the subjective limits to his knowledge of German, he will set new limits to the configuration of the “smoothly-planed board”. It is precisely these new limits that will make his German recognizably different.

But what have these experience of limits have to say to us in an age which is dominated not by the images of flux and ceaseless movement? As the British sociologist Scott Lash observes:

Contemporary culture. today’s capitalism – our global information society – is ever expanding, is ever more extensive. There are Starbucks and McDonald’s – indeed many Starbucks and many McDonalds – in not just London, Paris and Berlin, but in
seemingly every district of Shanghai and Beijing, Delhi and Bombay, Johannesburg and Lagos, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Sao Paulo and Mexico City, and also increasingly in Chongqing and Wuhan, in Bangalore and Madras, in Nairobi and Cairo, Buenos Aires and Bogotá. (Lash, 2010, p.1)

Capitalism, society, culture and politics are thus increasingly extensive. Another dominant image used to capture the present moment is that of flux (Urry, 2000). In notions of extensivity and flux, limits are, of course, notable by their absence or if they do appear, it is increasingly, as a way of benchmarking a past that is irrevocably past. Translation as a global language industry would appear to partake of this culture of extensivity and fluidity. As Iulia Mihlache notes in a discussion of the interaction between translators, technologies and electronic networks of practice, in a technologized space, “translators are prompted to develop a kind of managerial cognition that enables them to target clients, strategic groups and companies worldwide” (Mihalache, 2008, p.56). Translation, in this representation, is what makes globalization a reality. It partakes of the culture of fluid extensivity. It allows the channels of global exchange to keep on flowing so that, if nothing else, the Starbuck’s customers, wherever they are, know what to order and the staff know what to give them. Scott Lash goes on to make a distinction, however, which suggests that limits may not always be off limits in discussing translation and globalization. He argues that, “Extensive culture is a culture of the same: a culture of equivalence; while intensive culture is a culture of difference, of inequivalence” (Lash, 2010, p.3 [his emphasis]).

Both extensive and intensive cultures are to be found in late modernity. Extensive culture is best captured by the Big Mac whose value rests on its interchangeability. It is precisely because it is the same product wherever one goes that one can be assured of its dependability. Intensive culture is expressed in popular terms by the cult of the brand. It is precisely because the watch or the pair of runners or the particular consumer product is not supposed to be like any other watch, or pair of runners or product that the brand acquires it reputation or aura. But, of course, the idea of intensive culture goes much deeper than the strategic cynicism of branded products and relates to a desire for human singularity. The resistance to a culture of the same, a culture of equivalence lies in the fear that if everything in a market society becomes interchangeable, then even human beings and their bodies, become goods like any other goods, to be traded like any other commercial product. What Régis Debray calls the tension between the technocosm - the physical and virtual infrastructure of global circulation - and the ethnocosm - the space of individual and collective self-definition and belonging - is another way of formulating the tension between extensive and intensive cultures in a global and digital age (Debray, 2010, p.57).

The tension between a culture of extensivity and a culture of intensivity is articulated in translation by the two competing representations of the act of translating. Both cultures find forms of expression that determine how translators and translation come to be seen in processes of globalization. Translation and extensive culture are noticeably paired in
the world of translation applications for smartphones. A readily available application for the iPhone is an App called “Word Lens”. The description of the App claims that you can “Instantly translate printed words from one language to another with your built-in video camera in real time […] Use Word Lens on vacation, business travel, and just for fun” (Quest Visual, 2012). Word Lens becomes World Lens. There’s more to the picture than meets the eye. Sightseeing becomes a form of simultaneous translation and seeing is not so much believing as decoding. The designers do add some nervous caveats to the utopian promise of the product:

- best used on clearly printed text (e.g. signs, menus)
- does NOT recognize handwriting or stylized fonts
- it’s not perfect but you can get the general meaning! (Quest Visual, 2012)

However, implicit in Word Lens is that language can be subsumed to an extensive culture, a culture of the same, where language is a matter of instantaneous equivalence flashed up on the screen of the iPhone. Unfortunately, for the designers, their idiomatic nervousness in justified. In the product description, they give an example of usage where one is shown a sign in French, “Danger! par fortes marées” and this is translated into English as “Danger! By strong tides.” One does indeed get the general meaning but there is an almost comic, poetic archaism in the literal rendering of the sign, “By strong tides I walked, lonely as an April cloud…” The lack of idiomaticity in the translation is a casualty of a culture of approximation but what is significant for the purposes of the analysis here is that Word Lens in common with many other translation Apps offers the users a vision (literally in the case of Word Lens) of a borderless world of instantaneous language access. The range of languages may be severely limited for many of the Apps but the implicit logic is one of potentially endless extensivity. The embedding of translation in intensive culture emerges when one looks more closely at particular translation flows in late modernity. In a report on literary translation from Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish into English in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 1990-2010, the authors noted the marked resistance to translation in the Anglophone world. Although the British and Irish publishing industry was one of the most productive in Europe with an average annual output of 120,000-130,000 titles per annum, only 1.5-2% of the titles or around 2,500 titles were translations and of these, only a fraction were literary translations. In contrast, in countries like the Czech Republic, Finland, Estonia and Slovenia over the period between 1990-2005 around 20%-30% of all published new titles were translations while the figures for Germany and France ranged between 10-15% over the same period (Büchler, Guthrie, Donahaye & Tekgül, 2011, p.7). The situation with respect to the wider Euro-Mediterranean region, although somewhat improved in the second decade of the study, was scarcely more reassuring. In the first years of the 1990s the average number of all published titles from Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish
was between 2 and 8 per year. In the 2000s, the average rose to between 10 and 16, with 26 translations from Arabic, 7 from Turkish and 8 from Hebrew published in 2009 (p.8). The authors of the report further note that translation choices from the three languages are strongly overdetermined:

There are not still not enough translations published from the three languages, and that, with some exceptions, interest in books coming from the Arabic, Turkish and Hebrew speaking world is determined by socio-political factors rather than by the desire to explore the literary culture of the Middle East and North Africa for its own merits, with the result that books from this region are often approached primarily as a source of socio-political commentary or documentary, rather than as literary works per se. (p. 8)

What emerges from the analysis of literary translation in the period is the extent to which a culture of difference, a culture of “inequivalence” to use Lash’s term is very much to the fore in the Anglophone world’s relationship with the non-Anglophone world. There is a sense in which the dominant presence of English in the global technocosm and the accompanying discourse of universal connectivity contrasts sharply with the resistance of the Anglophone ethnocosm (despite its multiple internal differentiations) to engagement with literature in translation. Indeed, even when translations do appear, as the authors point out, it can often be more to with immediate socio-political interests so that translation is more to do with an instrumentalised narcissism that with an disinterested involvement with the wider world. As one translator, Marilyn Booth, notes with respect to translation from Arabic, there is the “longstanding focus on asking for sociology instead of literature” (p.69). Insufficient funding, lack of training opportunities, media indifference, poor pay, absence of academic recognition for translated work are among the limits to the growth of translation from Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish into English that are identified by the translation practitioners in the report. In other words, what tends to define this practice of translation is the obdurate reality of limits in the putative flat earth of globalizing fantasy. Luther reminded his readers that facing up to the presence of “inequivalence” was hard work. The Arabic translator Jonathan Wright, for his part, notes that, “there’s a big difference between reading a newspaper, negotiating a business deal and reading pre-Islamic poetry. Arabic is such a vast body of material, with clear distinctions chronologically and in registers, that students and teachers have to set priorities” (p.73). In this view, the culture of translation cannot be anything other than intensive because the translator is constantly attempting to cope with the seemingly intractable differences of languages and cultures. Overcoming the differences does not so much annul differences as confirm their existence.

If we consider the difference between translation and extensive culture and translation and intensive culture, one striking dissimilarity relates to time. Grappling with the intricacies of pre-Islamic poetry and clicking with the iPhone belong to different orders
of time. The consequence is, that if in a globalized real-time economy time is money, more time is more money and more is always less in the shareholder’s desire to maximize return on investment. The near instantaneity of online connectivity reinforces a sense of a 24/7 culture of instant delivery. The Arabic translator Catherine Cobham captures the consequences of this dilemma when she notes:

Bad pay keeps standards down, making people rush, cram, work when tired; it also means that work gets farmed out to translators who are not really ready to take it on yet. I think literary translators should be paid more. A lot of the faults as they are in translations as they are now may stem from people doing them too quickly because they aren’t paid much and can’t afford to spend the necessary amount of time on them. (p. 74)

A foundational text in the birth of the modern ecology movement was the publication in 1972 of a report commissioned by the Club of Rome tellingly entitled *The Limits to Growth*. The authors of the report examined the implications of the mismatch between a growing world population and the finite resources of planet Earth (Meadows, Meadows, Randers & Behrens, 1972). Part of the contention of the ecology movement was that it was vital to protect the diversity of flora and fauna on the planet (bio-diversity) and the different natural environments and landscapes in which living beings and inanimate objects resided (geo-diversity). Are there Limits to Translation Growth? Is there a sense in which we need to institute a notion of what Paul Virilio has called “chrono-diversity” (Virilio, 2010, p. 27) alongside the by now familiar notions of bio-diversity and geo-diversity? By this is meant the need to protect different rhythms, difference experiences of time, in order to protect and maintain human flourishing. In a 24/7 culture dominated by the near instantaneity of text messaging and e-mails, the sense of being overwhelmed, of being engulfed in the kinetic inferno is easily reached. Acknowledging chrono-diversity in translation practice is recognizing that there are very real limits to achievement and accomplishment within specific time-frames and that different kinds of translation require radically different levels of investment in time. A world without limits of time is a world where time for anything is sorely limited. The real limits to growth, as the authors of the famous 1972 report readily admitted, are the absence of limits. Nothing grows in a landscape of endless depletion.

If the rhetoric around translation has gravitated to the messianic hopefulness of a borderless world, it has hardly been surprising. Dictatorships are famously suspicious of translators. The culturalisation of limits can be used to justify the worst forms of virulent xenophobia and the border can be much more a site of exclusion than a place of passage. This understandable wariness, however, leads to a frequent inability to recognize what actually happens when we engage in translation and what are the real dilemmas faced by translators in a global and digital age. It is also to fatally misconstrue the promise of limits. The impulse to move, to travel anywhere is driven by the desire to go beyond familiar horizons, to breach the limits of a familiar world. Without limits, the sense of curiosity,
excitement, achievement would be meaningless. This is the famous, destructive boredom of the delinquent. Having, for whatever reason, no internalised sense of limits, the delinquent out of despair desperately seeks to provoke surrounding society into imposing limits through harmful or reckless behaviour. In the geopolitical context, as Régis Debray observes, people who believe they know everything and claim to be at home wherever they are on the planet are generally much to be feared (Debray, 2010, p. 81). This is the implicit message of Ovid’s famous declaration in his *Fastes*, “Other peoples were given a specific territory: the world and the city of Rome are the same thing” (II, pp. 683-684). Part of the necessary humility of translators is to know the limits to one’s understanding of a culture or a language or a people. A lifetime is rarely enough to take in the fractal immensity of even one language pair. Although translators have been much criticized in recent years for a culture of excessive humility, for concealing themselves throughout history in an apologetic rhetoric of submissiveness, is this stance not to be much preferred to the imperial hubris of the subject who imagines no bounds to his or her knowledge and power? From this perspective, it may be more helpful to re-situate translation within a world of limits, borders, divisions and sees its emancipative power not in the messianic abolition of limits but in a rhythmic engagement with the forces of globalization in our age. In other words, translation is a profoundly ambiguous operation. It juxtaposes phases of openness - taking in ideas, texts, expressions from elsewhere – with phases of closure – the definitional labour of deciding what can and cannot be said in a text or language. Examples of this labour are omnipresent in online discussion forums where translators and non-translators alike will discuss at length the appropriate rendition of a particular word or expression in a language. In a WordReference.com Language Forum, the request for a French translation of “cream cheese” generated twenty-five separate posts (WordReference, 2005, pp. 1-2). One post claimed that “crème de fromage” existed in French and also “crème de gruyère” but another Senior Member “Claude 123” responded “No, no, no, Cream Cheese is a North American reality; it has nothing to do with Fromage fondu. In Quebec the “Comité intergouvernemental de terminologie de l’industrie laitière” has adopted Fromage à la crème as an equivalent.” This post prompted a response from another Senior Member, “Rodger”, “Sorry Claude123, it’s a french [sic] reality! Called Saint Moret.” A debate ensues about the appropriateness of “fromage frais” as a translation with further references to the Office de la langue française, a contribution from a Senior Member “williamtmiller” who works for a French cheese company where “cream cheese” is translated as “Fromage Frais Fondu” or “Fromage Frais à Tartiner” and a discussion as to whether Saint Moret really tastes like Cream Cheese. What is apparent in the range and intensity of the discussion is that the participants are both testing and defining the limits of what can be said in French to capture a culinary reality that originated in the United States in 1872 as an attempt to recreate the French cheese Neufchâtel. The attempted cultural translation of a French food product leads over a hundred years later to a polemical effort to retranslate the product, this time linguistically, back into French.

In negotiating the rhythms of closure and openness in languages and cultures,
translators both filter and infiltrate the target language and culture. In this respect, it might be opportune to move away from an image that has often been used to capture the task of the translator, the image of the bridge. Translation as a bridge between cultures, translators as bridge-builders, these metaphors are commonplaces of irenic pronouncements on the global importance of translation. However, it may be more useful to look under the bridge and see what it is that is swirling down below. James Joyce opened his hymn to the polyphonic possibilities of modern urban life with this downward gaze:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs, Sir Tristram, violer d’amores, fr’over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Asia Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: (Joyce, 1939, p. 1)

The river that runs through *Finnegans Wake* carries with it the multitude of languages and cultures that have passed through the city and into the mind and writings of the artist. Without the river of course there are no banks and no bridges. It is the river that defines the banks, brings the bridges into being. Rivers both define and ignore boundaries. They gather materials from both banks and bring materials to both banks. If the great civilizations of translation have grown up around rivers, the Nile, the Tigris, the Euphrates, is this not a reminder that translation is better understood not suspended in the air but as caught up in the living currents of language and cultures that continue to flow through the landscapes of our dwelling places? The riverrun of translation is what both divides and unites us and if in Heraclitus’s words, no man ever steps in the same river twice, it is because both the river and the man are themselves in endless recirculation, in a never-ending state of perpetual retranslation.

Notes
1. Inn diesen reden allen / obs gleich die Lateinische oder Griechische sprache nicht thut / so thuts doch die Deudsche / und ist ihr art / das sie das wort (Allein) hinzu setzt / auff das / das wort (nicht odder kein) desto volliger und deutlicher sey / Den wiewol ich auch sage / Der Bawer bringt korn und kein gelt / So laut doch das wort (kein gelt) nicht so vollig und deutlich / als wenn ich sage / Der Bawer bringt allein korn und kein gelt / und hilft hie das wort (Allein) dem wort (kein) so viel / das es eine vollle Deudsche klare rede wird / denn man mus nicht die buchstaben inn der Lateinischen sprachen fragen / wie man sol Deudsch reden / wie diese Esel thun / Sondern man mus die mutter ihn hause / die kinder auff der gassen / den gemeinen man auff dem markt drümb fragen / und den selbigen auff das maul sehen / wie sie reden / und darnach dolmetschen / so verstehen sie es denn / und mercken / das man Deudsch mit ihn redet. (Translation by Michael Marlowe).
2. Lieber / nu es verdeudscht und bereit ist / kans ein jeder lesen und meistern / Leufft einer itzt mit den Augen durch drey odder vier bletter / und stösst nicht ein mal an / wird aber nicht
gewar / welche wacken und klötze da gelegen sind / da er itzt uber hin gehet / wie uber ein
gehoffelt bret / da wir haben müst schwitzen und uns engsten / ehe denn wir solche wacken und
klötze aus dem wege reumeten / auf das man kündte so fein daher gehen. Es ist gut pflügen /
wenner der acker gereinigt ist. Aber den wald und die stöcke ausroten / und den acker zurichten /
da wil niemand an. Es ist bey der welt kein danck zu verdienen (Translation by Michael Marlowe)

3. Gentibus est aliis tellus data limite certo: Romanae spatium est Urbis et orbis idem’

References


