"For to seken straunge strondes": *Translating Chaucer hospitably in* Refugee Tales

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1. Introduction

In an article for *The Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*), David Herd describes the situation of asylum seekers held in indefinite detention in centres around the UK. Responding to Hannah Arendt's suggestion that a vital constituent of our humanity is our ability to tell our story, Herd suggests that the asylum process disenfranchises asylum seekers not only by restricting and regulating their freedom of movement but also by restricting and regulating their freedom of speech (Herd, 2016c). *Refugee Tales*, edited by Herd and Anna Pincus, is a response to both these restrictions: a series of anonymous stories which both explores the inhumanity of the asylum process and articulates the need to translate this hostility into a hospitable response to those seeking asylum in the UK.

This article explores the ways in which *Refugee Tales* seeks to provide a shape for this hospitable response through translation, understood as a geographic and cultural transposition as well as a linguistic and aesthetic one. Translation is integral to the text: all the tales involve an intralingual translation, from the spoken words of a detainee sitting in the Gatwick Detention Centre, for example, to the words on the page in front of us, written by established authors such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Marina Lewycka and Ali Smith. *Refugee Tales* describes this intralingual translation as a legal necessity, to preserve the anonymity of those seeking asylum for fear of official repercussions. At the same

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time, some of these intralingual translations between storyteller and writer also depend upon forms of interlingual translation: while *Refugee Tales* does not discuss this directly, the production of the text in English means that several of those telling their tales were either self-translating their narratives from their mother tongue into English or must have required an interpreter. Like all translations, the intralingual and interlingual translations upon which *Refugee Tales* depends have ethical consequences. As Lawrence Venuti suggests, every translation must negotiate the value-laden dynamic between target and source language, between domestic and foreign, between the reader and author (Venuti, 2002: 4-5). For asylum seekers, this dynamic is integral to the very process of claiming asylum: while the success or failure of an asylum claim depends on the perceived legitimacy of the life story of the claimant, the power of the domestic receiver – the judge, the Home Office official – vastly outweighs that of the foreign narrator – the asylum seeker. When a translator – an interpreter, a lawyer, a civil servant – is involved, the voice of the asylum seeker can, ironically, be silenced by the very attempt to make his or her story heard.

How then, in telling its own stories, can *Refugee Tales* avoid replicating or consolidating this uneven power dynamic, prioritising the domestic over the foreign, stifling the very voices it wishes to allow to speak? In this article, I suggest that it is *through* translation – through the decision to translate Chaucer's canonical 14th-century *The Canterbury Tales* into these multi-authored 21st Century *Refugee Tales* – that the text creates a space to address and problematize the relationship of the foreign and the domestic. Drawing on Paul Ricœur's concept of *linguistic hospitality*, "where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house" (Ricœur, 2006: 10), I explore the ways in which *Refugee Tales* deploys Chaucer's language within the text. By integrating the words of Chaucer into these tales, in their original Middle English, the writers render us – the readers – foreign within our own language, insisting that our cultural heritage can alienate and displace us as it often alienates and displaces those who seek refuge here. At the same time, these tales alter that heritage, bringing Chaucer into dialogue with contemporary events in a way which transforms and translates his words into new temporal, geographic and cultural contexts. Ultimately, I argue, the ethical questions raised by translation in this text mirror the ethical questions raised by the process of asylum seeking itself, a process which – like translation – involves forms of spatial, cultural and

linguistic transposition. Exploring the forms of linguistic hospitality contained within *Refugee Tales*, I suggest, offers us an opportunity to think hospitably about our own response to those who seek refuge on our "straunge strondes" (Chaucer, 1974: l.13), our strange shores.

2. Speech and action

In his article for *TLS*, Herd refers to Arendt's comment in *The Human Condition*: "A life without speech and without action... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men" (Herd, 2016c; Arendt, 1958: 157). In speaking and in acting, Arendt suggests, we find ways to negotiate our past, to understand our present, and to shape our future. *Refugee Tales* is concerned with exploring and interrogating this connection between human identity, action and speech as it relates to, is disturbed by or erased within the process of seeking asylum in the UK. As Herd describes in the "Afterword" to the text, *Refugee Tales* emerged as a response to the existence of indefinite detention, the system whereby, in the UK, an asylum seeker can be placed in a detention centre with no idea of when, or if, s/he will be released (Herd, 2016a: 136-138). The UK is the only EU country which does not have a limit on the number of days for which an asylum seeker can be kept in detention: instead, the government is not permitted to detain someone for longer than is "reasonable".[1] In practice, this approach means that asylum seekers can be released or deported after two or three days, but also that they can remain in a centre for an indefinite period of time.

This variation in approach is reflected in the official statistics: in the year ending June 2017, 64% of people released from detention centres had been held for less than 29 days, 28% for between 29 days and 4 months, and 7% for more than a year. At the end of June 2017, the longest period an individual had been detained without release stood at just over 4 years.[2] Amnesty International has noted that, in the same year, less than 50% of those detained were ultimately deported

[1] See *Lumba (WL) v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2011] UKSC 12 (23 March 2011)* para 22, in https://www.supremecourt.uk/decided-cases/docs/UKSC_2010_0062_Judgment.pdf.

[2] Home Office Immigration Statistics, April-June 2017, in https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2017/how-many-people-are-detained-or-returned.

out of the UK: the majority were returned to the community.[3] Yet even those released back into the community remain in limbo, prevented from working or choosing where to live, and dependent upon a government-issued Azure card which regulates what they can buy and where they can buy it (Herd, 2016a: 135). Those who are deported are either returned to their home country or, if they are non-EU citizens, to their first point of entry into the EU.[4]

The stories in *Refugee Tales* engage both with the infringements upon movement enacted by the process of indefinite detention and with the enforced movement of deportation. "The Migrant's Tale", for example, is the narrative of a Syrian man who crosses illegally into Europe, is returned to Syria, crosses again into the UK, and is then detained for over three months. "The Detainee's Tale" focuses upon a victim of human trafficking, who spends 5 years in enforced labour in the UK. When he finally seeks help from the Home Office, however, he is imprisoned for 6 months, before being moved to a detention centre for 18 months, released, and then re-detained for 6 months. In all the tales told, these restrictions upon the right to move freely are accompanied by restrictions upon the right to speak freely. In "The Deportee's Tale", for example, a fourteen-year-old asylum seeker is repeatedly returned to Greece, the first EU country which he entered after leaving Afghanistan. This spatial dislocation goes hand in hand with a verbal one, in which his voice is repeatedly and violently silenced by those charged with removing him from the UK:

> 'Shut the fuck up, motherfucker. Shut your fuckin' mouth now.' Officially.
> All he asked was why they had to send him to Greece. […]
> You haven't any right to say anything.
> Your need to speak is not your right.
> Your silence now is not your right.
> Your questions, fears, this panicked will to clear yourself
> Is not your right (Mohammad, 2016: 99-101).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes human identity as split

[3] See Amnesty International's report, "A Matter of Routine: the use of immigration detention in the UK", 2017, p. 17, in https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2017-12/A%20Matter%20Of%20Routine%20ADVANCE%20COPY.PDF?ya06n-1Z2uH6J0bP8HmO7R2Pn7nabDymO.

[4] Home Office Immigration Statistics, April – June 2016. There is no mention of this data in the most recent immigration statistics, in https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2016/returns.

between a "who" – an active agent making his or her world – and a "what" – a passive subject who has limited control over that world (Arendt, 1958: 186). In "The Deportee's Tale", this collision between enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, agency and the loss of that agency, is repeatedly enacted in relation to the physical and the verbal until the subjugation of the individual to the Kafkaesque machinations of the asylum process becomes a dehumanizing triumph of the "what" over the "who". Once this category shift has taken place, it becomes increasingly easy to deny basic human rights – speech, movement – to those seeking asylum, for they have already been placed in what Agamben terms a "state of exception" (Agamben, 1998: 122-123): positioned outside the discourses of individuality and citizenship which create and protect those rights.

Once an individual is positioned outside these discourses, speech, like movement, becomes regulated: the words of an asylum seeker only have weight when those in charge of the asylum process choose to give them legitimacy, as part of an asylum hearing or in response to questions from the Home Office or the UK Border Agency. As Derrida (2002: 15) suggests in *Of Hospitality*, the possibility of hospitality is in fact always regulated by those who hold the linguistic power: "the foreigner […] has to ask for hospitality in a language which is by definition not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State". To speak in the asylum process involves precisely this type of linguistic imposition, which demands either that an asylum seeker translate herself or himself or that s/he is translated into the domestic language. However, even if translation occurs, speech is not enough to lead to hospitality: in the asylum process, credibility depends upon producing documentation to support both the identity of the storyteller and the factual reality of the story told. Yet, as Herd explores in "The Appellant's Tale", the limitations imposed upon speech and movement by the asylum process can render this required verification impossible. "The Appellant's Tale" is the story of a 63-year-old man who came to the UK from Nigeria 28 years earlier to work as a translator. Woken in his home one day at 6 am, the Appellant finds himself accused of being an illegal immigrant: placed in indefinite detention, he is moved from centre to centre and threatened with constant deportation to a country he left almost three decades previously. To prove his right to remain in the UK, the UK Border Agency demands evidence that he has paid tax throughout his time in the country. But that documentation remains locked in the home from which the Appellant was forcibly removed;

and without the legal right to remain in the UK, he also has no right to return to his house to seek it.

The Appellant's chance of gaining access to a safe place in the present and of holding on to that place in the future is fundamentally bound up in his ability to narrate his past, but also, crucially, in his ability to narrate that past in a way that is credible, and to provide the evidence to support this credibility. Yet, as Herd suggests, this demand for evidence reveals the fundamental inconsistency and inhumanity of the asylum process. For while it is essential to provide written documentation to support an asylum claim, the hearings which make up the judgements of that claim are not, themselves, written down (Herd, 2016a: 140). For Herd, this failure of record silences asylum seekers through their very attempt to narrate their experiences: if these stories are not written down, he suggests, there is no evidence to explain the verdicts passed, and thus no way to either challenge these verdicts or create precedents through them. Herd describes this disenfranchisement as the "holding of people outside the skin of language"; returning some measure of agency to the process of asylum seeking, Herd suggests, involves finding ways to move inside this "skin" (Herd, 2016a: 140). This movement means having the words of asylum seekers "fully registered in settings that matter": in settings that operate from within as opposed to outside a political, cultural and social framework which seeks to marginalise them (Herd, 2016c). Alongside its attempt to draw attention to the injustices of indefinite detention, *Refugee Tales* is also an attempt to enact this linguistic inclusivity: the ways in which the tales in the text were produced and the ways in which they were disseminated speak to this desire to integrate the narratives of asylum seekers into a domestic discourse which currently operates to disenfranchise them. And, as Herd's metaphor of an exclusion from the "skin" of language suggests, this integration is conceived in both a physical and a linguistic sense. *Refugee Tales* as a project brought speech and action into collision by combining the oral narration of the stories in the text with a 9-day group walk across the North Downs.

Herd suggests that this collision of language and geography was fundamental to the overall aim of the text:

> It is in these spaces as much as any – Kent, Surrey, Sussex – and in the idiom of these spaces, that the language of national identity forms and perpetuates, functioning as it does to hold the migrant out of view. […] *Refugee Tales* was […] the crossing of a deeply national space by people whom the nation has

organised itself in order precisely that they be kept from view (Herd, 2016a: 138).

The experience of narrating and listening to stories about those who have been barred from entering or remaining within this domestic space, while walking across that space, brings geography and language into conjunction: *Refugee Tales* is a pilgrimage towards hospitality as a condition of both language and of space. As Herd writes "At its simplest, Refugee Tales aims to create a context in which stories that are officially excluded from the record can be told, listened to, and told again. It aims to be a counter, in other words, to what the Home Secretary, Theresa May, articulating her ambition for the Immigration Bill back in 2012, called "a really hostile environment" (Herd, 2016c).

3. Voicing the voiceless: problems of translation and anonymity

But how can hostility become hospitality? How can narrative inclusivity become political inclusivity? In Herd's discussion of these questions in the 'Afterword' to *Refugee Tales*, he suggests that one answer is provided by the relationship between this text and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The connection to Chaucer is emphasised by Herd's "Prologue", which frames the stories contained in *Refugee Tales* through a relationship between movement, narrative and hospitality that Herd suggests originated within *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's text begins with his pilgrims at rest in an Inn where their host suggests they pass the time on their pilgrimage to Canterbury by exchanging stories: the best of these will be rewarded with hospitality – a free meal upon their return to the Inn. Storytelling, then, in Chaucer's text, as in *Refugee Tales*, is the access point into an experience of hospitality: a movement towards a physical act of welcome which can only be realised through the telling of tales.

This connection between language and space is implicit within the decision to employ the Chaucerian framework for *Refugee Tales*. John Dryden's famous invocation of Chaucer as "the father of English Poetry" (Dryden, 1962: 280), articulates Chaucer's position at the heart of an English cultural, literary and linguistic heritage. Bringing the stories told in *Refugee Tales* into connection with this canonical text which, according to Dryden, explores and reveals "the various manners and humours […] of the whole English nation in his age" (Dryden, 1962: 284), is then a literal inscription of the words of those

marginalised within and by that heritage into a narrative which is fundamental to its construction.

The deployment of Chaucer as a framing device also draws attention to the role played by translation within these texts. As Herd discusses, each of these texts began as a conversation between the tale teller and an established writer; this conversation was then converted into a written text by that writer, who integrated the Chaucerian framework into it, thereby creating a cohesive body of work. The Chaucerian framework is emphasised by the way in which each tale is introduced with an anonymous title – "The Migrant's Tale", "The Lawyer's Tale", "The Refugee's Tale". But this anonymous title is also accompanied by a paratext: "as told to", followed by the name of the author who wrote the published version of the text. These paratexts acknowledge that the original source for each story and its named author are not one and the same. And yet these paratexts are deceptive in precisely the ways they seek to be transparent. For the written versions we read in the text are not the stories "as" they were told to the writers: rather, those stories are framed, adapted, and transformed through a translation from the voice of the storyteller into the voice of the writer.

There is thus a chain of translations at play within the production of *Refugee Tales*. In some of the stories told, the use of translation operates solely on an intralingual level – in "The Lorry Driver's Tale", for example, or "The Appellant's Tale", the original storyteller and the writer telling his tale are both fluent English speakers. In others, translation also occurs on an interlingual level: to communicate with the writers who are retelling their stories, some of the storytellers must have self-translated their narratives from their mother tongue into English or an outside interpreter must have been involved. *Refugee Tales* does not directly discuss this interlingual translation, although "The Interpreter's Tale" is concerned with the ways by means of which the use of interlingual interpretations in the asylum process, more generally, inevitably involves the possibility of misinterpretation and erasure.

Like all translations, the chain of translations involved in the production of the stories told in *Refugee Tales* involves both gain and loss. As Herd suggests, the circulation of stories is one way of gathering collective momentum to exert pressure upon a political status quo in need of change (Herd, 2016a: 143): the fact of sharing these stories, writing them down, and publishing them in English, offers a wider remit of distribution and replication than a single oral narrative in the original language of the storyteller might do. At the same time, the

publication of these tales under the name of the writer rather than that of the original storyteller enables the anonymity of the original speaker to be preserved, thereby mitigating some of the potential traumas, both affective and political, inherent in these personal narratives. As Herd discusses, producing these tales anonymously allowed those who were too traumatised by their experiences to narrate them personally to share them nonetheless. At the same time, anonymity made it possible for those who feared the political repercussions of giving voice to the realities of the asylum process to do so without fear of recrimination or re-detainment (Herd, 2016a: 141).

The anonymity granted to the original tale tellers through the translation of their stories into the words of someone else offers a measure of emotional distance and political safety. And yet, in following this anonymous approach, *Refugee Tales* becomes implicated in precisely the types of linguistic and political disenfranchisement that Herd suggests the text was written to combat. For anonymity offers not just freedom but also forms of erasure, a point raised in Herd's own translation of "The Appellant's Tale":

> I ask what anonymity means. You say the way it looks, you are a nobody. It means you have no story. If you are given anonymity the UKBA can say you have not stayed here for so long. And nobody could establish whether you have been here, where are your friends, where are your connections. You are anonymous. Nobody knows you (Herd, 2016b: 80).

The Appellant here suggests that anonymity is another method by which an individual can be positioned outside language, his or her story delegitimised by the lack of name attached to it. In this regard, the anonymity of *Refugee Tales* replicates rather than challenges one of the ways in which asylum seekers are marginalised by the asylum process itself.

The ways in which *Refugee Tales* responds to the anonymity of its tale tellers highlights another problematic aspect within the narrative approach of the text. On the one hand, the production of these texts in English implicates *Refugee Tales* in the linguistic power dynamics which Derrida discusses in *Of Hospitality*: in telling his or her tale in *Refugee Tales*, the "foreigner" – the asylum seeker, the refugee, the migrant – is forced to speak "in a language which is by definition not his [or her] own", in the language of the host and not the guest (Derrida, 2002: 15). On the other hand, the decision to alter the stories in the process of intralingual translation and, in particular, the decision to insert the Chaucerian framework into them, also indicates a potential power asymmetry in play between the source text – the narrative of

the tale teller herself or himself – and the target domestic audience for whom *Refugee Tales* was produced. Herd describes the process through which these texts were created as a "collaboration between an established writer and the person whose tale was being told" (Herd, 2016a: 133). Collaboration implies a relationship of equals, working together on the creation or production of something. Yet, this equality is destabilised by the linguistic hierarchies at play in the production of the text. So too, Herd's use of the word "established" troubles this equality, for to be established implies recognition and acceptance within a particular place, time, and community: precisely the belonging which is denied to those caught up in the process of seeking asylum.

As Ali Smith describes in "The Detainee's Tale" the balance of power between those telling these stories and those translating them into written texts is contained within this idea of belonging, always converted into the freedom of movement and speech denied to a detainee. Narrating the story of a visit to a detention centre, the narrator admits that "the whole time I'm there I will feel the paper edge of my VISITOR band round my wrist rough under my sleeve […] I will feel it keenly, the whole time, the reminder that I can leave. I will long to leave" (Smith, 2016: 59). As Smith narrates it, this desire to leave is an experience shared between detainee and visitor, but only one of the two individuals collaborating on the creation of a tale has established the right to act upon this desire. This asymmetry between storyteller and writer does not diminish the importance of telling the stories which appear in *Refugee Tales*. But it does affirm that the absence of agency and of belonging implicit within the asylum process, which Herd suggests the text sets out to address, remains in play within the text, revealed by the telling of these tales in English and their translation from the voice of a marginalised figure to the voice of an established one.

In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti suggests that every translation contains the potential for forms of disenfranchisement and erasure:

> [v]iolence […] resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts" (Venuti, 2008: 18).

The inevitable violence of translation, Venuti suggests, is exacerbated by translations which take a "domesticating" approach, those which

seek to inscribe a translated text firmly into the domestic culture but, in so doing, erase the cultural and linguistic difference of the original text (Venuti, 2002: 5). As I discussed earlier, the Chaucerian framework deployed within *Refugee Tales* creates a textual space in which the voices of asylum seekers who are marginalised by the domestic discourse can be inscribed into this discourse: an ethical paradigm of literary inclusivity created through a connection with one of English literature's most canonical voices. Yet, at the same time, by suggesting that it is only through this domestic discourse – by writing these tales in English, framing them with Chaucer's canonical text and publishing them under the names of established writers – that these voices can be heard, *Refugee Tales* enacts a partial domestication of those voices, in the sense Venuti gives to the term. The interlingual and intralingual translations deployed in *Refugee Tale* are thus problematic precisely because they replicate the hierarchies which the text seeks to disrupt: the reconstitution of the tale of an asylum seeker in the words of someone who is already valued, believed and represented within the target language; the use of a domestic cultural, political and linguistic framework which often silences the very voices which *Refugee Tales* seeks to allow to speak. While the content of *Refugee Tales* is concerned with making a space for these marginalised voices, the form of the text then operates on some level to foreclose the very spaces it seeks to open.

Herd suggests that the goal of *Refugee Tales* is, ultimately, "to question any aspect of mediation, including its own; […] to create the circumstance in which anonymity is not a shaping conceit" (Herd, 2016a: 142-143). But how can the text question the mediation which is its guiding principle? In what ways does the text confront, confirm, or disturb the problematic relationship between storytelling, agency and translation which it both highlights and creates? One answer emerges through the tale which focuses most closely upon this problematic relationship, "The Interpreter's Tale", as told to Carole Watts. In this text, the losses and gains involved in a translation from the original language of the asylum seeker into English are foregrounded, and the Chaucerian framework is deployed as part of an interrogation of the challenges, erasures and misunderstandings involved in any attempt to voice the story of another. Yet such inevitable misunderstandings can only emerge from the desire, and the attempt, to understand; and this understanding, the Interpreter suggests, in fact depends upon the existence of translation to have any hope of being realised. In "The Interpreter's Tale", this inevitability and desire illuminate the shape

and possibility of an ethical and hospitable response to the voices translated within *Refugee Tales* itself.

4. "The Interpreter's Tale": linguistic loss and collective responsibility

"The Interpreter's Tale" begins with a double quotation, the first of which is drawn from Chaucer's 'Prologue': "He may not spare, although he were his brother;/ He moot as wel seye o word as another" (Watts, 2016: 63; Chaucer, 1974: l.737-8). This quotation comes from a passage in Chaucer's 'Prologue' in which the narrator emphasises the importance of accurately reporting the stories he has heard from the other pilgrims. The second quotation comes from the Home Office *Code of Conduct for Registered Interpreters*, and states that "Your duty is to interpret *everything* that is said" (Watts, 2016: 63): the original quotation follows on from an exhortation to interpreters to maintain accuracy.[5] In dialogue with each other, these two quotations assign an importance to the absolute transmission of meaning between one language, one voice, and another: the language deployed in both implies that, if one is careful enough, it is possible to enact such a translation perfectly and completely, sparing nothing, interpreting everything.

In *On Translation*, Paul Ricœur refers to this desire for a perfect translation as a "dream": "the wish that translation would gain, gain without losing […] a demonstrable *identity* of meaning", he writes (Ricœur, 2006: 9, 22). The perfect translation arises from a belief in the possibility of an absolute correspondence between source and target text. Yet this *identity*, Ricœur insists, is precisely what can never be demonstrated, for we have no way to quantify what is lost or what is gained in a translation. Instead, every translation can offer only a presumed equivalence, always conditioned by its betrayal of an original text even as it seeks to be faithful to it (Ricœur, 2006: 20-21). In "The Interpreter's Tale", Watts focuses upon this inevitable betrayal by returning to the quotation from Chaucer with which she began the text and transposing Chaucer's use of the word "brother" from an assertion of the importance of accuracy in interpretation into an exploration of the impossibility of attaining it.

[5] See "Code of Conduct for the Home Office Registered Interpreters", in https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/454473/Code_of_conduct_17_08_15.pdf.

The text focuses upon two phrases: "My brother gave me money to leave/ My brother sent me money to leave" (Watts, 2016: 64). For the Interpreter, the ostensibly small difference between these two phrases masks the enormity of the gap she must negotiate between the original words of the asylum seeker and her interpretation of those words in English:

> Between giving and sending are continents.
> Geography intervenes
> […]
> In giving you might understand some closeness, as if he had come into the house that morning.
> […]
> In sending, a necessary distance.
> As if my brother, without rights or a bank account,
> perhaps in Israel, already a migrant, had found a way to
> help me leave" (Watts, 2016: 64-65).

The "continents" between "give" and "send" open onto a gap between credibility and inconsistency that can make the difference between freedom and imprisonment for an asylum seeker. "A choice of two words her story relies on, in me" (Watts, 2016: 65), the narrator states, and it is this linguistic responsibility which permeates the text. The narrator foregrounds this responsibility by turning to the word "brother", a word whose meaning, she suggests, can itself be subject to erasure or confusion in the process of interpretation:

> I say brother. That is, uncle.
> *So it was not her brother who helped her?*
> *Her story isn't stacking up.*
> I say brother, meaning the brother of my father.
> My uncle gave me the money to leave.
> My uncle sent me the money to leave.
> One word weighed along with another" (Watts, 2016: 65).

In this narrative of interpretation, the impossibility of the Home Office invocation to translate *everything* and Chaucer's articulation of the importance of not substituting one word for another collide with the reality of translation. Every translation involves a substitution which renders it imperfect, partial, non-identical with the original which was its source.

This imperfection can be masked in translation because, as Ricœur suggests, we have no objective way to measure the losses and gains of the translation process: even a comparison of an original and a translated

text depends on the subjective assessment of the person doing the comparison. In an interpretation such as the one described in "The Interpreter's Tale", even this subjective comparison is impossible: the tale told will be judged based only upon the words offered by the interpreter. This interpretation is always an imposition, "an act of violence" committed upon the language and words of the original speaker (Derrida, 2002: 15). For, as the narrator of "The Interpreter's Tale" reveals, every interpretation always involves a substitution: "I will tell you word for word" she claims, before acknowledging that this telling is always "My word for hers. / I say *I*. / I say I for her or his I." (Watts, 2016: 64). This acknowledgement reveals the reality of translation: that every attempt to re-voice the words of another involves an exchange which is always, also, a transformation: an "I" for an *'I'*, a "give" for a "send", a "brother" for an "uncle". A translator can attempt to bridge these gaps, to find an identity of meaning and overcome the semantic slippages of translation. But, as Ricœur suggests, to believe these slippages can be redeemed perfectly is an illusion which belies the reality of translation.

For Ricœur the reality is that translation is a task "in the sense of *the thing to be done* so that human life can continue" (Ricœur, 2006: 19). Ricœur suggests that the story of Babel reveals not the impossibility of communication and understanding with those who speak different languages from us, but rather the centrality of translation to that communication: the need to build comprehension from within, as opposed to despite, the reality of linguistic and cultural difference. Read in relation to Ricœur's paradigm of translation, the disjunction between "I" and "*I*", the continents between "give" and "send", the relational slippage between "brother" and "uncle", reveal not only the inevitable losses of translation but also the role translation plays in every attempt to connect beyond our own networks, to understand outside our existing discourses, and to disseminate this understanding beyond our linguistic and cultural borders**.**

For Herd, it is precisely this connection and this understanding which is the ethical project of *Refugee Tale*, and it is the translation of the stories in *Refugee Tales* from a conversation into a written text in English which allows this connection and understanding to develop. For in this translation, connectivity becomes collectivity, so that

> a story that belongs to one person now belongs, also, to other people; that other people acknowledge the experience that constitutes the story, but also that in making that acknowledgement they register responsibility. These are

tales, in other words, that call for and generate a collective; tales that need to be told and re-told so that the situation they emerge from might be collectively addressed (Herd, 2016a: 142).

As Herd suggests in "Afterword", the impetus behind *Refugee Tales* is a call to action and speech. But this call is not only a call for asylum seekers to be granted these two fundamental human rights: it is equally a call to us, both readers and listeners, to find our own measure of humanity through reading and listening. But for Herd, it is not enough for us to listen to or read these stories; we need also to become active participants in them. And this participation takes shape through a call to translate these stories into a collective vocabulary, and in the process to "make a language/ That opens politics/ Establishes belonging/ Where a person dwells" (Herd, 2016c: v). Herd's call for a linguistic transformation demands, paradoxically, that language work simultaneously to reach out and also to ground, to liberate the domestic discourse and also to draw those foreign to that discourse within it. It is precisely this double gesture of extension and contraction that Ricœur describes as "linguistic hospitality", "where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house" (Ricœur, 2006: 10).

In Ricœur's paradigm of translation, hospitality is achieved through a continual mediation between the domestic and the foreign. But what would such a "linguistic hospitality" look like? In *Refugee Tales*, Herd frames a similar call for forms of linguistic hospitality. "How badly we need English/ To be made sweet again/ Rendered hostile by act of law" he writes (Herd, 2016b: viii-ix). Drawing upon Ricœur's work, I now explore the ways in which, through his adaptations and translations of Chaucer's language, Herd gives form to this linguistic shift from hostility to hospitality.

5. "Prologue": linguistic hospitality between the domestic and the foreign

"Prologue", Herd claims, is not an introduction but a statement of intent and welcome, "a declaration" of "solidarity" (Herd, 2016c: v). In discussing the need to "make a language/ That opens politics" (*ibid.*), Herd suggests we go back to "where/ The language starts" (Herd, 2016c: v-iv), and follows this statement with the first language loan from Chaucer, "Now longen folk to goon/ on this pilgrimage" (Herd,

2016: vi; Chaucer, 1974, l. 12). In writing Chaucer into "Prologue" and positioning his words as the "start" of the language in which he is writing, Herd appears to affirm the necessity of employing a domestic discourse in order to create a language which can establish "belonging" (Herd, 2016c: v) for those marginalised within that discourse. But the phrase which Herd borrows from Chaucer is not an unaltered loan: the original phrase in *The Canterbury Tales* in fact reads "*Than* longen folk to goon on *pilgrimages*" [my italics] (Chaucer, 1974, l.12). In the slippage between "now" and "than" [then], Herd creates a temporal displacement, converting Chaucer's general description of the desire for movement into a specific reference to the movements of *now*, to *this pilgrimage*. This specificity is emphasised by a second adulterated language loan, in which Herd describes those "crossing/ For to seken straunge strondes/ In moments of emergency" (Herd, 2016c: vii). Chaucer's description of pilgrims seeking foreign shores here encounters the reality of the refugee crisis, in which this longing is not a desire, but a necessity, born of emergency. In this collision between Chaucer's Middle English and Herd's own words, the domestic and the foreign meet within the narrative Herd creates: Chaucer's poetry is brought into contact with Herd's contemporary poetic voice; in the process, Chaucer's language is itself transformed, deployed to create a vocabulary which describes and dramatizes the need for the domestic space to be opened to those from foreign shores in need of refuge within it.

This collision between the domestic and the foreign is extended through Herd's focus upon another Chaucerian language loan: the word "tendre" (Chaucer, 1974, l.7). Herd both translates and glosses the term: "Tender/ to hold/ From the French/ *Tendre*/ From the English/ For listening/ To a story as it is said/ To attend/ *Tendre*" (Herd, 2016c: ix). Via this glossing, Herd draws attention to the French roots of much of the language in Chaucer's poetry: as Michael Hanly notes, the English Chaucer both deployed and developed in *The Canterbury Tales* frequently depended upon borrowings and coinages drawn from French and Latin, the dominant literary languages when Chaucer began writing (Hanly, 2000: 160). But the particular words which Herd chooses to elucidate this connection between English and French convert this connection into an ethical encounter: through the etymological links between the English "tender" and "attend" and the French "tendre", Herd articulates a relationship between listening, kindness and hospitality formed at the intersection of the domestic and the foreign. The English terms connect listening with

sensitivity, compassion, tenderness. But it is in combination with the French that this connection develops into hospitality: for while *tendre* as an adjective means loving or soft, as a verb it means to reach out towards someone or something – *tendre les bras* – to hold out one's arms. In the movement between tender and *tendre*, Herd's original call for a language able to both reach out to another and to inscribe that other from within takes form in a word which invokes an extension, a welcoming, and a holding in place: a loving gesture 'towards' another articulated through this etymological connection between English and French, the domestic and the foreign. In fact, this etymological and hospitable connection extends beyond the words Herd chooses in "Prologue" to encompass the French word *entendre*, which means simultaneously "to hear", "to understand" and "to get along with", a verb which writes hospitality into the very intersection between listening and comprehension which is at stake in the project of storytelling created by *Refugee Tales.*

Yet, linguistic hospitality, in Ricœur's articulation of it, is not only an inscription of the foreign into the domestic or the domestic into the foreign: Ricœur's paradigm of translation also requires us to recognise what is already foreign within that which we believe to be our own. This recognition is implicit in Herd's engagement with Chaucer's language, which he includes in his text without referencing or quotation marks. Yet despite this, an English reader of "Prologue", encountering a word from Chaucer – tendre, thanne, straunge strondes – will inevitably stumble, thrown up against what is foreign and distant through historic estrangement within this domestic linguistic heritage. In *On Translation*, Ricœur suggests that this encounter is fundamental to the ethical possibilities of linguistic hospitality. "[W]ithout the test of the foreign", he asks, "would we be sensitive to the strangeness of our own language? […] without that test, would we not be in danger of shutting ourselves away in the sourness of a monologue, alone with our books? Credit, then, to linguistic hospitality" (Ricœur, 2006: 29). The hospitality Ricœur invokes here is one in which our ability to recognise what is foreign to us depends upon our ability to recognise what is foreign within us, the foreign remainder within the domestic. This recognition, he suggests, is also a recognition of our need to look beyond our own borders for inspiration, for connection, for discussion.

In the interaction between Chaucer and Herd, between *The Canterbury Tales* and *Refugee Tales*, Ricœur's linguistic hospitality is given form. On one level, writing the stories within *Refugee Tales* into a connection with Chaucer is a domestication, an inscription of the

voices of those telling these tales into a domestic heritage and into the very language – English – which is often implicated in their silencing. Yet, in so doing, "the father of English poetry" is also brought into contact with those voices, with *this* pilgrimage *now*, in an encounter which transforms Chaucer's own words through their interaction with these contemporary refugee tales and with the particular demands for hospitality which exist in the 21st-Century. At the same time, Chaucer's English words are revealed to be permeated with, and developed through, an interaction with a foreign language – French – in an encounter which suggests that the foreign and the domestic exist not only in opposition but also in productive and creative interaction. "Credit, then, to linguistic hospitality" (Ricœur, 2006: 29).

But the hospitality Ricœur praises here is not only linguistic; as Richard Kearney notes, Ricœur's paradigm of translation is twofold: "First, the *linguistic paradigm* which refers to how words relate to meanings within language or between languages. And, second, the *ontological paradigm* which refers to how translation occurs between one human self and another" (Kearney, 2007: 147). For Ricœur, linguistic hospitality offers us a model to explore the relationship between the domestic and the foreign, between self and other, in our interpersonal as well as interlinguistic relations. In *Refugee Tales*, Herd articulates a similar desire for a linguistic hospitality which could also be translated into a political hospitality towards those seeking asylum on our shores. The move from linguistic hospitality to an ethics of hospitality is one conditioned by the experience of translation. As Derrida suggests in "Hostipitality" "the question of translation is always the question of hospitality" (Derrida, 2000: 11). Hospitality, like translation, is about exchange and crossing, and both hospitality and translation require us to think about the threshold between self and other, the domestic and the foreign. As Derrida notes, it is always the host language which "defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome" (Derrida, 2000: 4) To think about the ways in which we might open up our linguistic borders is then also to think about the ways in which we might open up our national borders. For it is when we believe that the foreign and the domestic exist in absolute opposition that we close those borders, reify the spaces of our national identity, and render our heritage and language hostile to those seeking refuge within it. In recognising that the foreign and the domestic are always interrelated – that we can feel foreign upon our own shores and that those shores can themselves be founded upon what appears to be foreign to us, we can begin to articulate a space

within which to translate resentment and rejection into recognition and welcome.

6. Conclusions

The challenges which *Refugee Tales* negotiates and highlights in terms of translation issues are the challenges of the asylum process itself: the challenges of welcoming others onto our shores with hospitality rather than hostility. Responding to these challenges is a question of politics but it is also, Herd suggests, a question to be pursued through literature and through language, for it is in these spheres that the shape of a potential hospitality can be negotiated and formed. And yet this literary and linguistic hospitality has its limits, limits which are implicit in the relation between *The Canterbury Tales* and *Refugee Tales*. For Chaucer's pilgrims never reach Canterbury, nor do they return to claim the hospitality of the Innkeeper. So too, in *Refugee Tales*, the journeys narrated often do not end in rest and welcome, but with deportation and detainment. Just as the Canterbury of *The Canterbury Tales* is never attained, so too the refugee status which is the implicit goal of *Refugee Tales* remains out of reach for most of those whose tales are told in the text.

"Do you know what limbo means?", asks the narrator of "The Arriver's Tale". "It means the edge of hell" (Gurnah, 2016: 39). The reality of this limbo is articulated in an intersection between Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale" and "The Migrant's Tale". Both texts are concerned with journeys from Syria to the UK; both involve sea voyages and banishments; the protagonists – Custance in Chaucer's tale; Aziz in "The Migrant's Tale"– are cast out and cast adrift through their every attempt to find a space to call home. But it is not the similarities between these two tales which makes them a pertinent comparison through which to end this article, but the differences revealed in their endings, which Todorovic writes as parallel quotations: the first his contemporary translation of Chaucer's words; the second the story of Aziz.

> And so in virtue and in charity they all loved. They were never parted, except by death itself. And farewell now. My tale has come to an end,
> #
> Aziz's story hasn't come to an end. His family is in Daraa and his wife is losing patience. […] Aziz shrinks when he sits down, as if expecting a blow (Todorovic, 2016: 12).

The gap between the fictional closure of "The Man of Law's Tale" and the limbo and defeat experienced by Aziz is the gap between linguistic and literary hospitality and its reality as a social and political endeavour. The hospitality articulated in *Refugee Tales* is a hospitality of language and of storytelling. But, as "The Migrant's Tale" reveals, such a literary welcome can only go so far before it stumbles once again on the hostility of political shores.

The ongoing project, which is *Refugee Tales,* reveals the persistence of this hostility. Another collection of tales was published in 2017; another *Refugee Tales* walk is planned for 2018. But there is still no quantifiable upper limit to the period of detention permitted for asylum seekers in the UK. And yet this continued political hostility is precisely what makes *Refugee Tales* such an important project. As the narrator of "The Interpreter's Tale" comments: "Words are tarmac and concrete./ They can be prison houses or their unlocking" (Watts, 2016: 67). In relation to the asylum process, words have the power to condemn but also to redeem, to separate and to connect, to build a story and to undermine it. As Herd suggests, we have a collective responsibility to try to reshape language so that it is deployed to unlock rather than to imprison. This responsibility develops through an engagement with the words of another, through the attempt to listen to their story, to hear it, and to repeat it, translating their experiences into our words so that these can travel far and wide. This translation is, as always, a risk. "Might one word be said as well as another?", the Interpreter asks. The answer, she suggests is no: in every story told and retold, "[e]verything is at stake each time./ Everything" (Watts, 2016: 68). But in attempting this translation, in attempting to open up the "skin" of our own language, we simultaneously attempt to open up our domestic spaces, to greet in the spirit of linguistic hospitality those arriving on our shores.

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