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Editorial

Aaron Aquilina

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antae

antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

Editorial

Aaron Aquilina

Lancaster University

Whether my life had been before that sleep
The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell
Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,
I know not.—
Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*¹

Living on is not the opposite of living,
just as it is not identical with living—
Jacques Derrida, *Living On*²

When you survive, you are supposed to tell people about it. As the idiom goes, one lives to tell the tale. It seems, then, that we are not only storytellers compelled by life and its complex vitalities, but ones also intrigued by death. Death emerges not only as the culmination of a story—after Shakespeare’s tragic fifth act, there is no sixth—but the beginning of a new one.

As such, we might be compelled to talk of things that start from the end. Epitaphs, photographs and suicide notes may not only be remnants of a closed chapter, but a means of survival, troubling the all too clear dichotomy between life and death that we have become accustomed to. So too monuments, literature, drama, music, film, paintings, inventions. All of us die but, somehow, we live on.

How do we survive death?

Sometimes, by preparing for it. If we look at our species in general, we know there is an end to come. As Jean-François Lyotard reminds us, the sun ‘will explode in 4.5 billion years’.³ And so we plan to survive by looking elsewhere, at exoplanets and terraforming. But, perhaps, the end is sooner than we think. What of global warming, and the disastrous effects scientists can already observe? How does one talk about the human-environment relationship, when the survival of our death is at the figurative centre of every ecosystem? We are also, of course, not the only species around. Narratives of extinction have shaped how we live: just as we desperately want giant pandas to breed, so too, biopolitically, we regulate our population, managing our lives and placing survival above all else. Even dying, as Sherwin B. Nuland

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘The Triumph of Life’, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman (New York, NY, and London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002), pp. 481-500, lines 332-5.

² Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On’, trans. by James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, et. al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 135.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Can Thought Go on Without a Body?’, trans. by Bruce Boone and Lee Hildrith, in *Materialities of Communication*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. by William Whobry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 286–300, p. 286.

describes, is 'hidden, cleansed of its organic blight, and finally packaged for modern burial'.⁴ Hush, we must not speak of those who did not survive.

Looking more microscopically, how will I survive? My human body has that oft-bemoaned limitation: mortality. Cryogenics, robotics, virtual reality: is that one way of surviving? What does transhumanism promise us on this front, and what is critical posthumanism's rejoinder? What is the body marked by finitude, and how is it different from that which has survived? And what of the undead in all their forms, in mythologies and folk tales, in popular imaginations or, as Sartre warns, in each of us: 'turn and turn about; in these shadows from whence a new dawn will break, it is you who are the zombies'.⁵

Perhaps we can learn from the past, from those who have already survived. To speak of the body is to speak also of corpus, as in the body of work of an author, a poet or dramatist. They live on after their deaths, and literature itself, too, seems to be in this ambiguous state of survival. Has electronic literature survived the supposed death of the printed word, its spirit intact but lacking a body? What about the reception of literature itself, or of the work of art more generally? When we sing the praises of Shakespeare, Dante, Hieronymus Bosch or Chopin, the "death of the author" might be transformed into the author's eternal survival. And what mechanisms are at play here, ensuring the survival of some and non-survival of others?

But, surely, to survive means not to die? Shelley's 'Ozymandias' reminds us that, even if there remain "'two vast [...] legs of stone'", they are surrounded by "'decay [...] boundless and bare'"; to speak of survival, therefore, is also to speak of the ultimate impossibility of survival.⁶ Death awaits all of us.

However, sometimes we survive only if we die, surviving on into the after(-)life. There are the endless and at times even conflicting depictions of heaven, hell, and purgatory in painting, music, architecture and literature. Milton's words resonate: '[t]he mind is its own place, and in it self | can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n'.⁷ What, then, does the mind make of survival? One also encounters reincarnation (we have all heard of how Pythagoras met his old friend as a dog) and the liberation from that interminable cycle as Nirvana. There is the elaborate afterlife of the Ancient Egyptians, or the idea from Germanic folklore that souls leave bodies in the form of bees, and thus the beehive is the abode of spirits. On the other hand, one sees the broad spectrum of secular nihilism stretch out across time and cultures. Do not be daft, we are told, there is nothing beyond life; "where death is, I am not", to paraphrase Epicurus.⁸ Beyond life there is only decomposition to look forward to. Or perhaps, just maybe, we survive.

⁴ Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. xv.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 7-31, p. 13.

⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy, 5th ed. (New York, NY, and London: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005), p. 870.

⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_1/text.shtml>. [Accessed 28 April 2018]. Book I, lines 254-5.

⁸ See Epicurus, 'Letter to Monoceus', in Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy III: Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, ed. and trans. by John R. Catan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 173.

The present issue is a publication of selected proceedings from a conference entitled ‘Survival’, which was hosted by Lancaster University on the 3rd of July 2017, and which brought together twenty-one participants from twelve different universities. Sincere gratitude must here be shown to Lancaster University, specifically the Department of English and Creative Writing, as well as the co-organisers of this event, Valentino Paccosi and Bethany Dahlstrom.

In reading this issue, we might find ourselves continually agreeing and disagreeing with Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco anthem ‘I will survive’. The second article of the issue, Liam Randles’s “‘Post-Los Angeles’: The Conceptual City in Steve Erickson’s *Amnesiascope*” (*University of Liverpool*), certainly entertains the idea through a discussion of Erickson’s relation to Los Angeles in both life and fiction. After all, does not Jacques Derrida’s *sur-vivre*, in ‘Living On’, also imply some spatial elements to (im)mortality with the prepositions of place “on” and “over”? Randles’s essay thus deals with the idea of self in relation to space, where the evolution and transposition of space becomes integral to one’s sense of self-survival. As such, the post-apocalyptic cityscape—such as a transformed Los Angeles—not only highlights physical survival but furthermore acutely defines one’s ability for self-recollection in familiarity turned alien. ‘The symbiosis apparent between [conceptual] setting and [conceptual] self’, therefore, serves also to accentuate the great difficulties and complexities involved in the survival of one’s innermost constructs, whether in terms of memory or identity.

Following this, Angus Young’s essay deals with the idea of ‘Absurd Perseverance in Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*’ (*University of Leeds*). Taking his cue from Albert Camus, Young sees in McCullers’s novel both a realisation and problematisation of Camus’s logic in *Myth of Sisyphus*, where the former is here read as rendering ‘an absurd hope, in which the despair of isolation is inevitable and yet, due to this very certainty, survival and the striving for a utopia of complete communication becomes a heroic revolt’. Young thus looks at the complexities of suicide as presented in the novel—through five different narrative voices—and reads how it is not the extermination of the self, but rather its perseverance, that is the guiding thread in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, despite this ultimately being more of an irresolution than the closure of life’s narrative.

The fourth article—Declan Lloyd’s ‘Symbolic Survival: Beyond the Destruction of Language in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*’ (*Lancaster University*)—looks at Sartre and Süskind’s seemingly disparate novels and sees in both an exploration of a certain beyond of language, for, ‘when language fails, there is a paradoxical *opening* in terms of the potentiality for meaning within these texts’. Through Lacanian thought, Lloyd explores language’s mediation between the Imaginary and the Real, reading the sensory experience as that which brings to the fore a particular destabilisation of language—both narrativistically and metatextually—and, with this, the structure of the Symbolic death.

This issue’s last essay is Chutian Xiao’s ‘Survival beyond Life and Death: The Buddhist Transcendence of Dichotomy in *The Waste Land*’ (*Durham University*), and reads T.S. Eliot’s poem in line with Buddhist thought, a move supported by Eliot’s own studies, poetic allusions, and subsequent notes to the poem. Xiao explores the “soteriological” nuances of emptiness, the spiritual investigation of worldly suffering, the notion of detachment, and the tensions

between individual sensibility and universal existence. He sees in the Buddhist idea of negativity a breaking of the dichotomy between life and death, where subjective hollowness or emptiness 'is arguably the only thing that survives the crushing wheel of life and death', and where it is not the structure of life and death that changes but rather one's attitude towards it.

In all the above, one can observe how to speak of survival, inevitably, is also to speak of the sense of an ending, whether in literary terms as do Frank Kermode or Julian Barnes or, more plainly, in the key of apprehension. Opening up this issue, in fact, is Ivan Callus's creative-critical piece 'The time of *criticalthinkings*' (*University of Malta*), an act of thinking about apprehension and thinking apprehensively about thinking itself. Callus, who delivered the keynote address at the "Survival" conference in July, here quietly proffers a range of subtle nuances stemming from thoughts of survival—among others: the survival of the university, the survival of community, and the survival of thought itself. Here and now, this Editorial ends with Derrida's last thoughts, as read by his son Pierre at his funeral, who instructs us to 'always prefer life and never stop affirming survival'.⁹

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⁹ As quoted in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge and Maiden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), p. 541.