

Derrida on Translation and his (Mis)reception in America^{*}

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The influence of Jacques Derrida's work in America is vast and multifold. Since 1966 and his talk, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," given at a now quite famous symposium at Johns Hopkins University,¹ Derrida's thought has been affecting an ever growing number of disciplines in the United States, and the reception of his work in this country has been, especially since the mid eighties, the focus of numerous studies.²

The point of departure for my paper, though, was my observation that the impact of Derrida's work on the field of translation in the U.S. was not, far from it, as influential as on other disciplines, and this despite the fact that the question of translation is undeniably central to Derrida's thought. For example, in 1987 Derrida wrote in "Letter to a Japanese Friend": "The question of deconstruction is also

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¹ For the acts of the symposium, see Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972. Derrida's lecture was also published in 1967 in the French version of *Writing and Difference*.

² One can mention among other studies, and in reverse chronological order, those of Michael Thomas (*The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation*, 2006), Hent de Vries ("Deconstruction and America," 1999), Anselm Haverkamp (*Deconstruction is/in America*, 1995), Rebecca Comay ("Geopolitics of Translation," 1991), and James Creech, Peggy Kamuf and Jane Todd ("Deconstruction in America," 1985).

through and through *the* question of translation."³ And indeed, if you look at Derrida's publications over the years, the centrality of the question (and of related themes such as bilingualism, multilingualism, or diglossia) becomes more and more obvious, underlining the essential link between deconstruction and translation that Derrida stated in his "Letter to a Japanese Friend." One could mention among other titles, and in chronological order, "Des Tours de Babel," a long essay on Walter Benjamin's famous text, "The Task of the Translator" (1985)⁴; "Ulysses Gramophone. Hear Say Yes in Joyce" (1987)⁵; less well known, perhaps, is a chapter of *Right to Philosophy*, whose title in French is "Théologie de la traduction" (1990); or also, *Monolingualism of the Other; or the Prosthesis of Origin* (1996).

This discrepancy between the ever more obvious centrality of the issue of translation in Derrida's work and its lack of impact on translation studies in the U.S. was the first paradox that raised questions for me. Part of the reason for this patent paradox may be, as Lawrence Venuti explains in an article published in 2003 in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* entitled "Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance," the surprisingly low number of existing academic programs in translation in the U.S., especially compared to European countries. I quote Venuti:

For the fact is that translation has yet to gain a firm foothold in the American academy. Whereas European countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, Spain and Italy have

³ Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjam in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Derrida and Différance*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 1. Emphasis in the original

⁴ It is interesting to note that this text was first published in the U.S. in translation, with the French version as an appendix. See Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," trans. Joseph F. Graham. *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 165-207.

⁵ Originally published in *James Joyce, The Augmented Ninth*, although a shorter version is included in Peggy Kamuf, ed., *Between the Blinds. A Derrida Reader*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 569-600.

recently witnessed a substantial growth of translator training faculties as well as graduate degrees in translation research, the United States has lagged far behind, so that the translation program, even the odd course or dissertation in translation studies remains a rare exception.⁶

This lack of programs in translation may, in turn, be explained by the very nature of the field known as “translation studies” in the U.S., and here I will quote Venuti again who describes it as follows: a “loose amalgam of approaches that is nonetheless dominated by an empirical orientation, a synthesis of such branches of linguistics as text linguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics.”⁷ Indeed, from Eugene Nida to Douglas Robinson, and including Ernst-August Gutt, what seems to have mainly shaped translation studies in the U.S. is an overall functionalist approach to the issue, most often based on reception theory, leaving hardly any room to a more literalist approach to the question, of which Derrida, in the wake of Walter Benjamin, is one of the most famous proponents. Douglas Robinson, for his part, goes as far as calling the “neoliteral tradition” “a celebration of unabashed cultural elitism, scorning the ‘masses’ and their demand for instant understanding,”⁸ when he does not, even more bluntly, label this literal tradition as “protofascist.”⁹

In this paper, I will examine two of Derrida’s texts in an attempt to show that the American “disciplinary resistance” to Derrida’s literalist approach to translation, often based on accusations of excessive formalism, a-politicism or a-historicism, may be in part, as well, due to an oversimplification or misreading of Derrida’s writing on translation. In the process, I will also show how some of the early translations of Derrida’s work, while paradoxically facilitating the adoption of Derrida’s thought in the U.S., may have participated, if only tangentially so, in reinforcing the functionalist nature of translation studies to which Lawrence Venuti made reference.

⁶ Lawrence Venuti, “Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16 (2), 2003, p. 242.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁸ Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

The texts I have chosen to examine, which are not among those I mentioned earlier, may not be, for different reasons, the first ones that come to mind when one thinks of Derrida’s writing on translation. The first of these, “Living On,” though quite well known, is usually not primarily read for its importance to translation despite the central aspect of that issue in it. As for the second one, entitled “Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction ‘relevante’?,” or “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?,” it is probably less well known, since it was a lecture given in 1998 to a French audience at *Les Assises de la Traduction Littéraire en Arles* (even though it was translated by Lawrence Venuti and published in 2001 in *Critical Inquiry*). These two texts are of particular interest to us, since they are both devoted, if not entirely, at least for an essential part, to the question of translation, and also because they both address an American audience, even if they do so in a different way.

Living on

“Living On” was published in 1979, in a collection entitled *Deconstruction and Criticism*, along with essays by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and James Hillis Miller. It was one of Derrida’s early texts published in the U.S. (after, among a few others, the aforementioned lecture he gave at Johns Hopkins and the translation of *De la grammatologie* by Gayatri Spivak, published in 1976). It was a landmark later seen as the official birth of deconstruction in America, the beginning of the adoption process of Derrida’s thought in the U.S. via the so-called “Yale school,” which is now characterized as the first period of the reception of Derrida.¹⁰

“Living On,” which was supposed to address Shelley’s famous poem “The Triumph of Life,” is, through and through, haunted by the question of translation. First, because it was *originally* published in English – seven years would pass before it appeared in French in a book called *Parages*. *Originally* written in French, but first published in English, “Living On,” written to be immediately translated, is, so to speak, an “original text in translation.” The result of which is, under

¹⁰ See Michael Thomas, *The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation*, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

the pen of Derrida, to *literally* inscribe the text with the question of translation, in the form of more or less rhetorical recurring interrogations addressed to the future translator(s) of his text about the way some of his phrases will be translated – interrogations that are written reflections, *translations* so to speak, of what Derrida calls in the text itself his “calculations about the English.”¹¹

For example: “The event – which ‘*sur-vient*’ [‘takes place’, ‘occurs’; lit. ‘comes on’],– how will they translate this word?”¹²; or: “how will they render the *il faut* or perhaps the *faut-il* that is the imprint of prescription in ‘Living On?’”¹³; or again, towards the very end of the text: “Living on – in/after whose name, in/after the name of what? How will they translate that?”¹⁴ “Living On” is so filled with these interrogations that the question of translation could well appear, after all, to be the main topic of the text. Derrida himself seemed to believe so, since at one point he thought of calling his text “Living On – in Translation,” or even, simply, “Translations,” as he writes so in the text itself: “Hesitations about the title – I had first thought of ‘Living On – in Translation’ and ‘Translations.’”¹⁵

But the question of translation is not only to be found on a thematic level, for “Living On” is a twofold text. Its actual title, which I have so far only quoted in part, is “Living On. Border Lines.” The dual title reflects the dual nature of the text, which is composed of a main text, and underneath it, another text, which presents itself as a long footnote. The layout on the page, the typographic difference that underlines the dual nature of “Living On” reflects, in turn, the essential *stylistic* difference of the two texts. Indeed, the highly polysemic upper text, characterized by “semantic accumulation and overloading,”¹⁶ to the point of dissemination, largely differs from the lower text, which is written in an overall telegraphic style.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Living On. Borderlines,” trans. James Hulbert. *Deconstruction and Criticism*, New York, NY: Continuum, 1979, p. 167.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 167-168.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

This essential difference of style between the two texts is, once again, but this time *en acte*, wholly related to the question of translation, since in the upper text Derrida, following a “logic of the undecidable,”¹⁷ aims at rendering it untranslatable, whereas the lower text, ruled by a principle of maximum economy, would be aiming at the highest possible translatability. “Such will be the proposed contract,” writes Derrida.¹⁸ Hence, “Living On. Border Lines” presents “the enigma, or in other words the *récit* of translation [...] *practically*, and in a sense *performatively*.”¹⁹ The text, in its very form, would be an actual re-enactment of what Derrida elsewhere called the “tragedy”²⁰ of translation, with, at each end of the stage, the two edges, the two *borders*, *border lines*, between which translation has always been performed, has, over time, always been conceptualized, that is, torn between some pure untranslatability, based on an impossible *trans-lation* of the letter of the text, and some exhaustive translatability, based on a complete rendering of the meaning of the text.

Except that, for two essential reasons, “Living On” is not a mere re-enactment of this traditional conception of translation. First, because Derrida *knew* that his text *would* be translated. He did know that the upper part of it, despite its “contractual” untranslatability, would only exist, at least initially, *in translation*, and he wrote about it in the text: “I know, I am already in some sort of untranslatability. But I’ll wager that that will not stop the procession of one language into another, the massive movement of this procession, this *cortège*, over the border of another language, into the language of the other.”²¹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89-90.

²⁰ Derrida refers to this *récit* as the “tragedy” of translation, forced that it is to surrender the carnal envelope of the original language: “The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation.” (“Freud and the Scene of Writing,” trans. Alan Bass. *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 210)

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “Living On. Borderlines,” *loc. cit.*, p. 77.

Second, because, as Derrida himself finally admits it about the lower part of his text, written supposedly in a “steno-telegraphic” style, “Of course, I have not kept my promise. This telegraphic band produces an untranslatable supplement, whether I wish it or not.”²² For, of course, trying to express an absolutely unequivocal and unproblematic meaning is impossible.

In other words, what Derrida states with “Living On. Border Lines” is that both the contract of pure untranslatability *and* the contract of exhaustive translatability are *equally* impractical. Derrida, on the one hand, denounces an idealistic conception of language based on the false assumption that signification could ever be univocal, a conception of language in which translation would aim at rendering the pure meaning of a text, detached from its letter, as if that meaning could ever be *one*. This was also a way for Derrida to question the early adoption of his own thought in the U.S., warning readers against translations that, based on this kind of idealistic conception of language, would, at the very least, oversimplify his texts in an attempt to domesticate and appropriate Derrida’s thought.

Which is exactly what, for instance, the English translation of *La Voix et le phénomène (Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs)*, published in 1973) seems to be doing, if we are to listen to Newton Garver who, in his preface, explains straightaway that “since Derrida belongs to a philosophical tradition which is foreign, both geographically and intellectually, to most English-speaking philosophers, he is difficult to read.” Having stated this, Newton Garver then suggests that “it is wiser not to try a direct translation from Derrida’s Heideggerian language [...], but rather to look for a wider framework.”²³ The idea is thus to provide the American reader with a translation of Derrida in a sort of neutral, universal language that would render the meaning and coherence –

coherence on which Garver, incidentally, casts doubt²⁴ – of a thought that would be found underneath the “unrestrained literary extravagance”²⁵ of Derrida’s style.

Another illustration of a similar attempt to domesticate Derrida’s thought can be found in F. C. T. Moore’s translation of “La Mythologie blanche”, published in 1974. Indeed, as Moore explains in his preliminary Note of the Translator: the “task of the translator is to discern the *thought* of a text in one language (and the *reality* it claims to put before us), and to express the same *thought* in another language.”²⁶ A few lines further down, we find this sentence justifying his own choices, in logical accordance with such a conception of “the task of the translator”: “*Intelligible* English renderings have generally been preferred to direct transfers into English of M. Derrida’s *suggestive exploitation of nuances of French vocabulary*.”²⁷ Faced with such a translation, which aims at communicating the “thought”, and only the “thought”, of Derrida’s text by suppressing all elements that supposedly do not participate in it (this so-called “literary extravagance” and “suggestive exploitation of nuances of French vocabulary”), one is bound to wonder with Derrida, who expresses the question in “Living On. Border Lines”: “How can one sign in translation, in another language”²⁸ – when, indeed, all that remains is the anonymity of an ideally neutral and universal language?

²² *Ibid.*, p. 175

²³ Newton Garver in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 1973, p. ix.

²⁴ “The work is full of metaphors, of plays upon words that often do not survive the translation, of florid language that sometimes leaves one mystified as to Derrida’s intent, and of verbal contradictions or absurdities.” (*Ibid.*, p. xxvi.)

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

²⁶ F. C. T. Moore’s Note of the Translator in Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History*, 6 (1), 1974, p. 5. My emphasis.

²⁷ *Ibid.* My emphasis. For a thorough and critical analysis of this translation, see Philip E. Lewis, “The Measure of Translation Effects,” *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Living On. Borderlines,” *loc. cit.*, p. 175.

At the same time, though, that he warns readers against the naturalizing effects of this idealistic conception of language as essentially translatable, Derrida also, against a purely poetical conception of language that would result in pure untranslatability, denounces an excessive veneration of the letter of the text: "The unity of the word should not be fetishized."²⁹ If a text were to be highly polysemic, like the upper text of "Living On. Border Lines" (and like most of Derrida's texts, for that matter, if not all of them), and seem, by semantic accumulation, untranslatable, Derrida, far from sacralizing the letter of the text, suggests to (his) translators that they could "for example, with more words [...] triumph"³⁰ over the difficulty.

This was a way for Derrida, as it were, to ruin in advance the accusations of "excessive formalism" or "textualism" with which the so-called "Yale School" and some of its followers would soon be attacked, especially in America.³¹ But more importantly and fundamentally, what Derrida says with "Living On. Border Lines" is that in both cases, if a text were to be either completely translatable or absolutely untranslatable it would die: "Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even in what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. Thus triumphant translation is neither the life or the death of the text, only or already its living *on*, its life after life, its life after death."³²

By showing thus the two opposite borders of translation, by having them respond to each other from the two sides of the line that separates them, Derrida does not simply reenact the traditional conception of translation, but puts it at war, so to speak. In other words, Derrida re-produces the Babelian situation of conflict in

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Rebecca Comay, "Geopolitics of Translation: Deconstruction in America," *Stanford French Review*, 15 (1-2), 1991.

³² Jacques Derrida, "Living On. Borderlines," *loc. cit.*, p. 102-103.

which every translation takes part³³, which amounts, also, to no longer thinking about translation from one of its borders, but, precisely, to conceiving of it as this "in-between-borders" and finally, in the wake of Walter Benjamin, conceiving of it in the sense of an infinite history, a history of different conflicting translations, an infinite form of "living on":

While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. [So that] of all literary forms [translation] is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.³⁴

What appears clearly then, in the end, is that Derrida's reflection on the limits of a traditional conception of translation is profoundly historical.

What Is a "Relevant" Translation?

With "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," it looks as if, over almost twenty years, Derrida continued his debate with the U.S. on the question of translation. Indeed, the adjective "relevant" that appears in Derrida's title, commonly meaning "pertinent," "adequate" or "appropriate," is first to be found under the pen of Eugene Nida in *Toward a Science of Translating*. The linguist associates the word with the definition of his concept of "dynamic equivalence":

A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at *complete naturalness of expression*, and tries to relate the receptor to

³³ For a later reflection on the Babelian conflict in which translation takes part, see Derrida's commentary on the "he war" in *Finnegans Wake*: "Ulysses Gramophone. Hear Say Yes in Joyce," *loc. cit.*

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn. *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, London, UK: Routledge, 2000, p. 18.

modes of behavior *relevant* within the context of his own culture.³⁵

The word is to be found again, more recently, under the pen of Ernst-August Gutt, who devoted an entire book to the concept entitled *Translation and Relevance* (published in 1991). Gutt uses the word “relevance” in a passage where he gives a definition of what “faithfulness” should mean when translating. The phrasing he uses in that passage is strikingly similar to Nida’s:

The translation should resemble the original [...] in those respects that can be expected to make it adequately *relevant* to the receptor language audience. [These conditions that determine a translation’s faithfulness to the original] determine also that the translation should be *clear and natural in expression* in the sense that it should not be unnecessarily difficult to understand.³⁶

In sum, a “relevant” translation would be a translation aiming at the greatest possible naturalness and clarity of expression or, in a word, at transparency. This quest for a transparent translation, which aims to transport the most proper meaning of the original text to its language, in the most appropriate way possible, that is, without showing itself as a translation, is, as an inevitable consequence, ruled by an economic principle. The law of relevance is, first and foremost, a quantitative law, as Derrida explains in his lecture:

[A translation that] aims to attain the greatest possible relevance [...] [is] a translation that, while rendering the so-called proper meaning of a word [...] establishes as the law or ideal – even if it remains inaccessible – a kind of translating that [...] stays as close as possible to the equivalence of ‘one word *by* one word’ and thereby respects verbal quantity as a quantity of words, each of which is an irreducible body, *the*

³⁵ Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1964, p. 159. My emphasis.

³⁶ Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991, p. 102. My emphasis.

*indivisible unity of an acoustic form that incorporates or signifies the indivisible unity of a meaning or concept.*³⁷

So that, as soon as there is polysemy, this ideal of transparency, on which the relevant translation is based, is instantly destroyed. I quote Derrida again (in Lawrence Venuti’s translation):

This is why, whenever several words occur in one or the same acoustic form or graphic form, whenever a *homophonic* or *homonymic effect* occurs, translation in the strict, traditional, and dominant sense of the term encounters an insurmountable limit – and the beginning of its end.³⁸

But even more than polysemy, it is the essential plurilingualism of “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” that denies instantly the ideal of transparency and exhaustive translatability, that instantly endangers this conception of an “appropriate,” “proper” translation, which, aiming at clarity and naturalness of expression, is based not only on a univocal proper meaning, but also on the indivisible unity of language – for, speaking a clear and intelligible language, a transparent language, is it not (quoting Derrida’s lecture again), first, “[speaking] *a single language*, namely *that of the addressee...*,” a language that is shared, *like the very language of the other*, that of the other to whom one addresses it”?³⁹

Now, this plurilingualism that characterizes “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” is to be found first in the very title of Derrida’s lecture. Indeed, it is impossible to decide the source language of the word “relevante” in the French title: it is a word that seems to be the present participle form of the French verb “relever” – but as an adjective that specifies a noun, it is, as Derrida remarks (not without a little sarcasm), “one of those English words that [has not been, yet,] officially sanctioned through the institutional channels of any academy.”⁴⁰ It is both a French and English word, an adjective borrowed from the English, which, as such, as adjective, is not (yet)

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” trans. Lawrence Venuti. *Critical Inquiry*, 27, 2001, p. 180-181. My emphasis.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176. My emphasis.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

used in French, but which, nevertheless, is marked by the meanings of the French verb “relever,” as well as those of the French noun “relève.”

But that is not all, because this verb “relever,” and this noun, “relève,” although they are to be found in what appears to be a French context, are also marked – especially, of course, under the pen of Derrida – by some German meanings, those of a “crucial German word with a double meaning (*Aufheben, Aufhebung*), a word that signifies at once to suppress and to elevate.”⁴¹ For, Derrida himself used this word – “relève” – to translate Hegel’s concept in French, a concept considered for a long time as “untranslatable.” And since the first time the French philosopher suggested this translation in a lecture given in 1968 at the Collège de France,⁴² Derrida’s translation of Hegel’s concept had such an impact on philosophy that the word “relève” is now used even in other languages than French.

Notably, Alan Bass decided to keep the word in French throughout his translation of *Margins of Philosophy*, justifying his choice within a long Translators’ Note, of which I quote here a few sentences:

Derrida’s translation is *la relève*. The word comes from the verb *relever*, which means to lift up, as does *Aufheben*. But *relever* also means to relay, to relieve, as when one soldier on duty relieves another. Thus the conserving-and-negating lift has become *la relève*, a “lift” in which is inscribed an effect of substitution and difference, the effect of substitution and difference inscribed in the double meaning of *Aufhebung*.⁴³

In sum, this word, “relevante”, in the title of Derrida’s lecture, with its endless connotations, its undetermined origins – between French, English, German – this word challenges, at the very outset, any translation into *one* “clear and natural” language. Contrary to the “naturalness of expression” aimed at in the ideal conception of a

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁴² The lecture is entitled “Le Puits et la pyramide (introduction à la sémiologie de Hegel)” and was republished in 1972 in the French version of *Margins of Philosophy*.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 20, n. 23.

transparent translation, Derrida uses neologisms and borrows words from other languages, twisting French language to open it to the foreign.

Thus immediately placing his lecture “within the multiplicity of languages and the impurity of the limit,”⁴⁴ Derrida reminds us that if “we only ever speak one language, [it is, nevertheless,] never [...] only one language.”⁴⁵ Or, as he put it in a slightly different way almost two decades earlier in “Living On”: “One never writes either in one’s own language or in a foreign language.”⁴⁶ In other words, Derrida here challenges, both in its unicity and in its “naturalness,” the very notion of a “natural language,” reminding us of the long and complex cultural history of any given language and of the critical importance of context.

Once again, contrary to the accusations of excessive “textualism” and its corollary, a-historicism, Derrida emphasizes here, in his pursuit of the word “relève” around which his whole lecture revolves, not only the multiplicity of the word’s meanings, but also the infinity of its connotations, the infinity of its history, its “insaturable context.”⁴⁷

All the while following the word “relève” in his lecture Derrida also offers us an enlightening reading of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* through the prism of translation, of this play in which, writes Derrida, “At every moment, translation is as necessary as it is impossible,” as, for instance, between a pound of flesh and a sum of money. This play in which translation, Derrida continues, “is the law [...] of the impossible law [...]. As if the subject of this play were, in short, the task of the translator, his impossible task, his duty, his debt, as inflexible as it is unpayable.”⁴⁸

Derrida’s reading of *The Merchant of Venice* focuses in particular on Portia’s long monologue about “mercy” (act IV, scene 1), in which she is seemingly trying to obtain Shylock’s clemency, to talk Shylock (the

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” *loc. cit.*, p. 176.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensa, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Living On. Borderlines,” *loc. cit.*, p. 101.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” *loc. cit.*, p. 183.

Jew⁴⁹) into being merciful towards Antonio by sparing him the pound of flesh before, in the end, offering Shylock, for his due, in lieu of his due, the impossible task of cutting out the pound of flesh without shedding a drop of blood. By the end of his analysis Derrida proposes his own translation of Portia's line, "When mercy seasons justice," choosing, as a rendition of the verb "seasons," to use the "French" verb "relever": "Quand le pardon relève la justice." (François-Victor Hugo, one of the early translators of Shakespeare, translated "season" by "tempérer": "Quand la clémence tempère la justice.")

At first glance, the word "relève" looks like the epitome of the "good" translation, of the "appropriate" translation, the perfect example of a "relevant" translation. Indeed, by using the verb "relever" Derrida respects the foremost law of relevance, which is the quantitative law of "one word *by* one word", while succeeding in retaining, within one single word, one single form, both the sense of rising above while elevating (mercy rises above and elevates justice) and the culinary connotation of seasoning ("relever" in the sense of "assaisonner"). Finally, the word "relève" can be said to achieve the "complete naturalness of expression" aimed at in the relevant conception of translation by, "naturally," or so it seems, fitting in the host language to which it belongs. And yet, by the end of the reflection that composes Derrida's lecture on the quite problematic unicity and linguistic origins of the word "relevante," the proposed translation appears, if nothing else, as an obvious anachronism.

It is a way for Derrida to show how an "appropriate" translation, a translation that aims at being "clear and natural in expression," in other words a "naturalizing" translation, can be indeed deceiving. Exactly like Portia's monologue, which seemingly composes a sublime praise of mercy, in fact hides a *merciless* ruse resulting in – is it necessary to recall it? – the forced conversion of Shylock, Derrida discloses here, through his proposed translation of Portia's words, that the most "relevant" translation (which is also a *conversion* – from one language to another), the most "appropriate" – and consequently "appropriating" – translation is not devoid of

⁴⁹ "Then must the Jew be merciful" are the words of Portia's verdict, after Antonio has delivered his confession.

violence which, for all its dissimulating itself, is nevertheless quite brutal: violence against the other's language in a process of domestication, violence against the foreign language, reduced, without any apparent remainder, to one's own language.

For, in this context, how can one not hear the initial suppression, negation, destruction, annihilation that the *relève*, Hegel's *Aufhebung*, entails? Especially as Derrida's *relève* here echoes the word "seasons" that was later to refer to one of the worst if not the worst form of domestication and suppression of one's original culture and language, namely the "seasoning" of the slaves in pre-civil war America.

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Highlighting the fundamental ethical stakes in translation in such a way, Derrida seems to be carrying on a debate with the U.S. Indeed, over a distance of twenty years, these two texts, "Living On. Borderlines" and "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," which in different ways appear as warnings against the effects of a naturalizing translation and which in a more or less direct fashion address an American audience, these two texts, underlining the essential historical and ethical constitutive dimension of translation, defeat the reproach of pure formalism and apoliticism, which is perhaps one of the main misunderstandings in the reception of Derrida in America.

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