

What Is a “Relevant” Translation?

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Lawrence Venuti

Then must the Jew be merciful.

(I leave untranslated this sentence from Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

Portia will also say, *When mercy seasons justice*, which I shall later propose to translate as *Quand le pardon relève la justice* . . .

How dare one speak of translation before you who, in your vigilant awareness of the immense stakes—and not only of the fate of literature—make this sublime and impossible task your desire, your anxiety, your travail, your knowledge, and your knowing skill?

How dare I proceed before you, knowing myself to be at once rude and inexperienced in this domain, as someone who, from the very first moment, from his very first attempts (which I could recount to you, as the English saying goes, off the record), shunned the translator’s *métier*, his beautiful and terrifying responsibility, his insolvent duty and debt, without ceasing to tell himself “never ever again”: “no, precisely, I would *never* dare, I should *never*, could *never*, would *never* manage to pull it off”?

If I dare approach this subject before you, it is because this very discouragement, this premature renunciation of which I speak and from which I set out, this declaration of insolvency before translation was always, in me, the other face of a jealous and admiring love, a passion for what summons, loves, provokes, and defies translation while running up an infinite debt in its service, an admiration for those men and women who, to my mind, are the only ones who know how to read and write—

translators. Which is another way of recognizing a summons to translation at the very threshold of all reading-writing. Hence the infinity of the loss, the insolvent debt. Much like what is owed to Shylock, insolvency itself. Speaking, teaching, writing (which I also consider my profession and which, after all, like many here among you, engages me body and soul almost constantly)—I know that these activities are meaningful in my eyes only in the proof of translation, through an experience that I will never distinguish from experimentation. As for the word (for the word will be my theme)—neither grammar nor lexicon hold an interest for me—I believe I can say that if I love the word, it is only in the body of its idiomatic singularity, that is, where a passion for translation comes to lick it as a flame or an amorous tongue might: approaching as closely as possible while refusing at the last moment to threaten or to reduce, to consume or to consummate, leaving the other body intact but not without causing the other to appear—on the very brink of this refusal or withdrawal—and after having aroused or excited a desire for the idiom, for the unique body of the other, in the flame's flicker or through a tongue's caress. I don't know how, or in how many languages, you can translate this word *lécher* when you wish to say that one language licks another, like a flame or a caress.

But I won't put off any longer saying "merci" to you, in a word, addressing this *mercy* to you in more than (and no longer) one language.

For no sooner will I have thanked you for the hospitality with which you honor me than I will need to ask your forgiveness and, in expressing my gratitude [*grâce*] to you, beg your pardon [*grâce*], ask you to be *merciful* to me. For your part, forgive me from the outset for availing myself of this word *merciful* as if it were a citation. I'm *mentioning* it as much as I'm *using* it, as a speech act theorist might say, a bit too confident in the now canonical distinction between *mention* and *use*.

In other words, I certainly won't delay in thanking you for the signal honor you have accorded me, but also, via this word of gratitude and *mercy*, in asking your forgiveness for all the limits, starting with my own inadequacies, which hinder me from measuring up to it. As for my inadequacies, I will no doubt make a vain effort to dissemble them with contrivances more or less naively perverse.

Before these thanks rendered, this pardon begged, I must first acknowledge a defect of language that could well be a breach in the laws of hospitality. In effect, is it not the first duty of the *guest* [*hôte*] that I am

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to speak a language that is intelligible and transparent, hence without equivocation? And therefore to speak a single language, namely that of the addressee, here of the *host* [*hôte*], a language especially designed for whoever must and can understand it, a language that is shared, like the very language of the other, that of the other to whom one addresses it, or at the very least a language that the listener or reader can make his or her own? A language that is, in a word, translatable?

Now, here is one of the admissions that I owe you on several scores. First, on the score of my title and on the score of speaking about my title, as I shall do in a moment, in an entirely untranslatable manner. Admitting more than one failure, I confess this double inadequacy that is all the more impossible to avoid because it bears a self-contradiction: if I need to address you in a single language, French (thereby recognizing that every so-called discourse *on* translation, every metalanguage or meta-theorem on the topic of translation is fated to inscribe itself within the limits and possibilities of a single idiom), I am nevertheless always already inclined to leap over this language, my own, and I shall do it again, thus leaving undecided the question of a simple choice between language and metalanguage, between one language and another. At the word *go* we are within the multiplicity of languages and the impurity of the limit.

Why would my title remain forever untranslatable? In the first place, because one can't decide the source language to which it is answerable [*relève*]; nor, therefore, in what sense it *travails*, *travels*, between *hôte* and *hôte*, *guest* and *host*.

It is impossible to decide the source language to which, for example, the word "relevante" answers [*relève*], a word that I leave within quotation marks for now. Nor the language to which it belongs at the moment when I use it, in the syntagms or the phrases where I move to reinscribe it. Does this word speak one and the same language, *in* one and the same language? At the same time, we don't even know if it is really one word, a single word with a single meaning, or if, homonym or homophone of itself, it constitutes more than one word in one.

What I shall propose to you under this title ("What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?"), undoubtedly short of any reflection worthy of this word about the word, about the unity of the word in general, will perhaps be a more modest and *laborious* approach, on the basis of a single word, the word "relevant." I underline *laborious* to announce several words in *tr* and to indicate that the motif of *labor* [*travail*], the *travail* of childbirth, but also the *transferential* and *transformational travail*, in all possible codes and not only that of psychoanalysis, will enter into competition with the apparently more neutral motif of *translation*, as *transaction* and as *transfer*. We shall then wind up revolving around a single example, a punning example, if there is such a thing, and if the word "relevant" may be one, unique, solitary, at once an adjectival and verbal form, a sort of present participle that becomes an epithet or predicate.

What of this vocable "relevant"? It possesses all the traits of the linguistic unity that one familiarly calls a word, a verbal body. We often forget, in this same familiarity, how the unity or identity, the independence of the word remains a mysterious thing, precarious, not quite natural, that is to say historical, institutional, and conventional. There is no such thing as a word in nature. Well, this word "relevant" carries in its body an ongoing process of translation, as I will try to show; as a translative body, it endures or exhibits translation as the memory or stigmata of suffering [*passion*] or, hovering above it, as an aura or halo. This translative body is in the process of being imported into the French language, in the act of crossing borders and being checked at several intra-European customs points that are not only Franco-English, as one might infer from the fact that this word of Latin origin is now rather English (*relevant/irrelevant*) in its current usage, in its use-value, in its circulation or its *currency*, even though it is also in the process of Frenchification. This acculturation, this Frenchification is not *strictu sensu* a translation. The word is not only *in translation*, as one would say in the works or in transit, *traveling, travelling, in labor*. In my proposed title, it serves, through a supplementary fold [*pli*], to qualify translation and to indicate what a translation might be *obliged* to be, namely *relevant*.

Those of you who are familiar with English perhaps already understand the word as a domestication, an implicit Frenchification [*francisation*] or—dare I say?—a more or less tacit and clandestine enfranchisement [*l'affranchissement*] of the English adjective *relevant*, which would have thus passed into our language with bag and baggage, with its predicates of denotation and connotation. The French feminine of this word ("une traduction *relevante*") sounds even more English and takes us back to the signature and the sexual difference at stake wherever translation or translators (in the masculine or feminine) are involved.

What is most often called "relevant"? Well, whatever feels right, whatever seems pertinent, apropos, welcome, appropriate, opportune, justified, well-suited or adjusted, coming right at the moment when you expect it—or corresponding as is necessary to the object to which the so-called relevant action relates: the relevant discourse, the relevant proposition, the relevant decision, the relevant translation. A relevant translation would therefore be, quite simply, a "good" translation, a translation that does what one expects of it, in short, a version that performs its mission, honors its debt and does its job or its duty while inscribing in the receiving language the most *relevant* equivalent for an original, the language that is *the most* right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on. *The most* possible, and this superlative puts us on the trail of an "economy" with which we shall have to reckon.

The verb *relever* brings me back to a modest but effective experiment in translation in which I have found myself engaged for more than thirty years, almost continuously, first between German and French, then more

recently between English and French. That this same French word (the very same word, assuming that it is the very same word, and that henceforth it is French through and through), that this same word could have thus operated, in a single language, between three languages, so as to "translate," or in any case to put to *work* different words belonging to apparently different contexts in at least two other source languages (German and English)—this fact seems an incalculable stroke of luck, an invention or necessity for which I wonder who can bear the responsibility, even if it was apparently mine at first and mine to sign. I harbor no illusion or pretension in this respect: if I took the initiative in these quasi-translations, I could do so only to hear, in order to record, various possibilities or laws—semantic and formal—already inscribed in this family of languages and, first and foremost, in "my" language. In any case, because the happy coincidence in question has since then become somewhat more familiar to me, because I feel less exposed—in my incompetence—to the risk of saying highly irrelevant things about translation in general before the expert scholars and accomplished professionals that you are, I have therefore preferred to suggest that we prowl around a small word and follow it like a "go-between" rather than engage anew, on the level of generality, in theoretical or more obviously philosophical or speculative reflections that I have elsewhere ventured on various universal problems of Translation, in the wake of Walter Benjamin, James Joyce, and several others.

And perhaps I should then confess under this very heading, thus pleading guilty without extenuating circumstances, that I chose my title precisely because of its untranslatability, premeditating my crime in this way, conspiring to insure the apparent untranslatability of my title through a single word, a word wherein I sign, in an idiom that is something like my signature, the theme of this lecture, which will therefore resemble a seal that, cowardice or arrogance, would abridge itself into my initials.

What remains is that—trust me—I don't transgress a code of decency or modesty through a provocative challenge, but through a trial, by submitting the experience of translation to the trial of the untranslatable.

As a matter of fact, I don't believe that anything can ever be untranslatable—or, moreover, translatable.

How can one dare say that nothing is translatable and, by the same token, that nothing is untranslatable? To what concept of translation must one appeal to prevent this axiom from seeming simply unintelligible and contradictory: "nothing is translatable; nothing is untranslatable"? To the condition of a certain *economy* that relates the translatable to the untranslatable, not as the same to the other, but as same to same or other to other. Here "economy" signifies two things, *property* and *quantity*: on the one hand, what concerns the law of *property* (*oikonomia*, the law—*nomos*—of the *oikos*, of what is proper, appropriate to itself, at home—and transla-

tion is always an attempt at appropriation that aims to transport home, in its language, in the most appropriate way possible, in the most relevant way possible, the most proper meaning of the original text, even if this is the proper meaning of a figure, metaphor, metonymy, catachresis, or undecidable impropriety) and, *on the other hand*, a law of *quantity*—when one speaks of economy, one always speaks of calculable quantity. *On compte et on rend compte*, one counts and accounts for. A relevant translation is a translation whose economy, in these two senses, is the best possible, the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible.

How does a *principle of economy* permit one to say two apparently contradictory things at the same time (1. “Nothing is translatable”; 2. “Everything is translatable”) while confirming the experience that I suppose is so common to us as to be beyond any possible dispute, namely, that any given translation, whether the best or the worst, actually stands between the two, between absolute relevance, the most appropriate, adequate, univocal transparency, and the most aberrant and opaque irrelevance? To understand what this economy of in-betweenness signifies, it is necessary to imagine two extreme hypotheses, the following two hyperboles: if to a translator who is fully competent in at least two languages and two cultures, two cultural memories with the sociohistorical knowledge embodied in them, you give all the time in the world, as well as the words needed to explicate, clarify, and teach the semantic content and forms of the text to be translated, there is no reason for him to encounter the untranslatable or a remainder in his work. If you give someone who is competent an entire book, filled with *translator's notes*, in order to explain everything that a phrase of two or three words can mean in its particular form (for example, the *he war* from *Finnegans Wake*, which has occupied me in another place,¹ or else *mercy seasons justice* from *The Merchant of Venice*, which we shall discuss below), there is really no reason, in principle, for him to fail to render—without any remainder—the intentions, meaning, denotations, connotations and semantic overdeterminations, the formal effects of what is called the original. Of course, this operation, which occurs daily in the university and in literary criticism, is not what is called a translation, a translation worthy of the name, translation in the strict sense, the translation of a *work*. To make legitimate use of the word *translation* (*traduction*, *Übersetzung*, *traducción*, *translaci6n*, and so forth), in the rigorous sense conferred on it over several centuries by a long and complex history in a given cultural situation (more precisely, more narrowly, in Abrahamic and post-Lutheran Europe), the translation must be *quantitatively* equivalent to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, explication, analysis, and the like. Here I am not speaking of quantity

1. See Jacques Derrida, *Ulysse Gramophone, deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris, 1987). [An English translation of Derrida's text is available in *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge, 1984)—TRANS.]

in general or of quantity in the prosodic sense (meter, rhythm, cæsura, rhyme—all the classic constraints and limits that are in principle and in fact insurmountable by translation). I also deliberately set aside all sorts of phenomena—quite interesting, as a matter of fact—due to which this form of quantitative equivalence is never rigorously approachable. It has been recognized that certain languages with a tendency toward excessively long constructions take them much farther in translation. No translation will ever reduce this quantitative or, in a Kantian sense, this aesthetic difference, since it concerns the spatial and temporal forms of sensibility. But this will not be my point. No, what matters to me more and today in particular, in this quantitative law, in this economy, is the unit of measurement that governs at once the classic concept of translation and the calculus that informs it. This quantitative unit of measurement is not in itself quantitative; it is rather qualitative in a certain sense. It is not a question of measuring a homogeneous space or the weight of a book, nor even of yielding to an arithmetic of signs and letters; it is not a question of counting the number of signs, signifiers or signifieds, but of counting the *number of words*, of lexical units called words. The unit of measurement is the unit of the word. The philosophy of translation, the ethics of translation—if translation does in fact have these things—*today* aspires to be a philosophy of the word, a linguistics or ethics of the word. At the beginning of translation is the word. Nothing is less innocent, pleonastic and natural, nothing is more historical than this proposition, even if it seems too obvious. This has not always been the case, as you well know. As it was formulated, among others, by Cicero, I believe, to watch impassively over subsequent developments, to watch over a turbulent and differentiated history of translation, of its practices and its norms, the first imperative of translation was most certainly not the command of "word-to-word." In *De optimo genere oratorum*, Cicero freed translation from its obligation to the *verbum*, its debt to word-for-word. The operation that consists of converting, turning (*convertere, vertere, transvertere*) doesn't have to take a text at its word or to take the word literally. It suffices to transmit the idea, the figure, the force. And the slogan of St. Jerome, who with Luther was one of the fathers of a certain translation ethics, an ethics that survives even if it is contested in our modernity, is *non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu* [to express not word by word, but sense by sense]. He was speaking just as much of translating the Greeks as of translating the Holy Scriptures, even if he had been tempted to make an exception for the "mysterious order of words" (*verborum ordo mysterium*) in the Bible.² In recent times, for scarcely a few centuries, a so-called literal translation that aims to attain the greatest possible

2. See Cicero, *Libre de optimo genere interpretandi* (*Epistula* 57). For this reference I am indebted to the admirable recent work (still unpublished) of Andrès Claro, *Les Vases brisés: Quatre variations sur la tâche du traducteur*.

relevance hasn't been a translation that renders letters or even only what is placidly termed the sense, but rather a translation that, while rendering the so-called proper meaning of a word, its literal meaning (which is to say a meaning that is determinable and not figural) establishes as the law or ideal—even if it remains inaccessible—a kind of translating that is not *word-to-word*, certainly, or *word-for-word*, but nonetheless 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 indivisible unity of an acoustic form that incorporates or signifies the indivisible unity of a meaning or concept. This is why, whenever several words occur in one or the same acoustic 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, the figure of its ruin (but perhaps a translation is devoted to ruin, to that form of memory or commemoration that is called a ruin; ruin is perhaps its vocation and a destiny that it accepts from the very outset). A homonym or homophone is never translatable word-to-word. It is necessary either to resign oneself to losing the effect, the economy, the strategy (and this loss can be enormous) or to add a gloss, of the translator's note sort, which always, even in the best of cases, the case of the greatest relevance, confesses the impotence or failure of the translation. While indicating that the meaning and formal effects of the text haven't escaped the translator and can therefore be brought to the reader's attention, the translator's note breaks with what I call the economic law of the word, which defines the essence of translation in the strict sense, the normal, normalized, pertinent, or relevant translation. Wherever the unity of the word is threatened or put into question, it is not only the operation of translation that finds itself compromised; it is also the concept, the definition, and the very axiomatics, the idea of translation that must be reconsidered.

In saying these things, I have gotten ahead of myself, formalized too quickly, proceeded to an unintelligible economy. What I have just said undoubtedly remains untranslatable. I shall slow down, then, and start over.

You might ask to what language the word *relevante* belongs. It is one of those English words that, in a confused and irregular way, is in the process of winning both use-value and exchange-value in French without ever having been, to my knowledge, officially sanctioned through the institutional channels of any academy. On this score, it represents one of those words whose use floats between several languages (there are more and more examples of them) and that merits an analysis that is at once linguistic and sociological, political and especially historical, wherever the phenomena of hegemony thus come to inscribe their signature on the body of a kind of idiom that is European or indeed universal in character (that it may in the first place be European, moreover, far from excludes the fact that it is spreading universally, and that it involves a vast question

of translation without translators, if I can put it this way, although I must set it aside, like so many previous questions, for want of time).

This word "relevant," this present participle that functions as a predicate, is here entrusted with an exorbitant task. Not the task of the translator, but the task of defining—nothing less—the essence of translation. This word, whose relation to French or English is not very certain or decidable and that—I hope to show shortly—also retains an obscure Germanic filiation, thus comes to occupy a position that is *doubly* eminent and exposed.

On the one hand, it extends and announces the accomplishment of an ambitious response to the question of the essence of translation. (What is a translation?) To know what a relevant translation can mean and be, it is necessary to know what the essence of translation, its mission, its ultimate goal, its vocation is.

On the other hand, a relevant translation is assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be better than a translation that is not relevant. A relevant translation is held, rightly or wrongly, to be the best translation possible. The teleological definition of translation, the definition of the essence that is realized in translation, is therefore implicated in the definition of a relevant translation. The question, What is a relevant translation? would return to the question, What is translation? or, What should a translation be? And the question, What should a translation be? implies, as if synonymously, What should the best possible translation be?

Put another way (and put another way, the expression "put another way," "in other terms," "in other words," "en d'autres mots" is the phrase that silently announces every translation, at least when it designates itself as a translation and tells you, in an autodeictic manner, look, I am a translation, you are reading a translation, not an interlinguistic translation, to make use of Roman Jakobson's distinction, but an intralinguistic one³—and I am not sure whether or not this autodeixis accompanies the word "relevante" in my title), put another way, if the question, What is a relevant translation? signifies nothing other than the question, What is a translation? or What should the best possible translation be? then one should jettison the word "relevant" and forget it, dropping it without delay.

And yet I have kept it. Why? Perhaps to try to convince you of two things: on the one hand, this word of Latin origin, even though I no longer know to what language it belongs, whether French or English, has

3. If one reflects on Jakobson's classification, only *interlinguistic* translation (the operation that transfers from one language to another and to which one most often refers as translation in the proper or strict sense) is governed by the economy I have described and, within it, by the unit of the word. Neither *intralinguistic* translation nor *intersemiotic* translation is governed by a principle of economy or above all by the unit of the word. [Derrida is referring to Roman Jakobson's famous essay, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," *On Translation*, ed. Reuben Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 232–39, rpt. in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, 2000), pp. 113–18—TRANS.]

become indispensable to me, in its uniqueness, in translating several words originating in several languages, starting with German (as if it in turn contained more than one word in a single one); on the other hand, this translative word has become in turn untranslatable for the same reason. And when I say that this has happened to me, as I try to relate it, I don't mean at all that it is empirically personal because what has happened to me, or what has passed through me coming from languages and returning to them, was also a project of institutional accreditation and canonization in the public sphere. My first concern, then, has never been to appropriate this translation for myself, but to legitimate it, to make it known as the most relevant translation possible and therefore, on the contrary, to expropriate it from myself, to dispossess myself of it, while putting it on the market—even if I could still dream of leaving my likeness on this common currency and, like Shylock, expect an IOU for it.

How can I try to justify, or in any case submit for your discussion, the reasons for which, several times over the space of thirty years, I have judged relevant my use of one and the same verb, *relever*, to translate first a German word, then an English one?

The English word—let us start at the end—can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*. The privilege that I assign here to Shakespeare's play does not only depend on the presence of this word to be translated. In addition, by virtue of connotation, everything in the play can be retranslated into the code of translation and as a problem of translation; and this can be done according to the three senses that Jakobson distinguishes: interlinguistic, intralinguistic, and intersemiotic—as, for example, between a pound of flesh and a sum of money. At every moment, translation is as necessary as it is impossible. It is the law; it even speaks the language of the law beyond the law, of the impossible law, represented by a woman who is disguised, transfigured, converted, travestied, read *translated*, into a man of the 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. At least for three or four reasons:

1. First there is an *oath*, an untenable promise, with the risk of perjury, a debt and an obligation that constitute the very impetus for the intrigue, for the *plot*, for the conspiracy [*complot*]. Now it would be easy to show (and I have tried to do so elsewhere) that all translation implies an insolvent indebtedness and an oath of fidelity to a given original—with all the paradoxes of such a law and such a promise, of a *bond* and a contract, of a promise that is, moreover, impossible and asymmetrical, transferential and countertransferential, like an oath doomed to treason or perjury.

2. Then there is the theme of economy, calculation, capital, and interest, the unpayable debt to Shylock: what I said above about the unit of the word clearly set up a certain economy as the law of translation.

3. In *The Merchant of Venice*, as in every translation, there is also, at

the very heart of the obligation and the debt, an incalculable equivalence, an impossible but incessantly alleged correspondence between the pound of flesh and money, a required but impractical translation between the unique literalness of a proper body and the arbitrariness of a general, monetary, or fiduciary sign.

4. This impossible translation, this conversion (and all translation is a conversion: *vertere, transvertere, convertere*, as Cicero said) between the original, literal flesh and the monetary sign is not unrelated to the Jew Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity, since the traditional figure of the Jew is often and conventionally situated on the side of the body and the letter (from bodily circumcision or Pharisaism, from ritual compliance to literal exteriority), whereas St. Paul the Christian is on the side of the spirit or sense, of interiority, of spiritual circumcision. This relation of the letter to the spirit, of the body of literalness to the ideal interiority of sense is also the site of the passage of translation, of this conversion that is called translation. As if the business of translation were first of all an Abrahamic matter between the Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim. And the *relève*, like the relevance I am prepared to discuss with you, will be precisely what happens to the flesh of the text, the body, the spoken body and the translated body—when the letter is mourned to save the sense.

Shylock recalls that he promised *under oath* to respect the original text of the contract, the IOU. What is owed to him refers, literally, to the pound of flesh. This oath binds him to heaven, he recalls, he can't break it without perjuring himself, that is to say, without betraying it by translating its terms into monetary signs. In the name of the letter of the contract, Shylock refuses the translation or transaction (translation is a transaction). Portia proceeds to offer him three times the sum of money he is owed in exchange for the pound of flesh. If you translate the pound of flesh into money, she essentially proposes to him, you will have three times the sum owed. Shylock then exclaims:

An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven,—
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?
No not for Venice.⁴

Portia pretends to take note of this refusal and to recognize that "this bond is forfeit." With the contract, the bond, the IOU falling due, the Jew

4. This abstract arithmetic, this apparently arbitrary economy of multiplication by three—three times more than the monetary signs—points us to the scene of Portia's three suitors at the end of the play and the entire problematic of the three caskets, from *The Merchant of Venice* to *King Lear*. Read through a Freud who has been mobilized and interrogated, this will also be a great scene of transfer, metaphor, and translation. [See William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown, vol. 23 of *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Una Ellis-Fermor (London, 1951), 4.1.224–26; hereafter abbreviated *MV*—TRANS.]

has the right to claim a pound of flesh that he must literally cut out very close to the merchant's heart:

Why this bond is forfeit,
 And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
 A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
 Nearest the merchant's heart.

[*MV*, 4.1.226–29]

Portia will press Shylock one last time to pardon while cancelling the debt, remitting it, forgiving it. "Be merciful," she asks, "Take thrice the money, bid me tear the bond," the promissory note, the contract. Shylock again refuses; he swears truly on his soul that he cannot perjure himself and retract his oath. Countersigning his act of faith, swearing on what he has already sworn, he refers to language, to a tongue of man incapable of being measured, in its relative economy, in the proposed translation or transaction, against the absolute oath that binds his soul, unconditionally, before God:

by my soul I swear,
 There is no power in the tongue of man
 To alter me,—I stay here on my bond.

[*MV*, 4.1.236–38]

Thus the oath is, *in* the human tongue, a promise that human language, however, cannot itself undo, control, obliterate, subject by loosening it. An oath is a bond *in* human language that the human tongue, as such, insofar as it is human, cannot loosen. *In* human language is a *bond* stronger than human language. More than man in man. In human language, the element of translation is an inflexible law that at once prohibits the translation of the transaction but commands respect for the original literalness or the given word. It is a law that presides over translation while commanding absolute respect, without any transaction, for the word given in its original letter. The oath, the sworn faith, the act of swearing is transcendence itself, the experience of passing beyond man, the origin of the divine or, if one prefers, the divine origin of the oath. This seems true of the law of translation in general. No sin is more serious than perjury, and Shylock repeats, while swearing, that he cannot perjure himself; he therefore confirms the first oath by a second oath in the time of a repetition. This is called fidelity, which is the very essence and vocation of an oath. When I swear, I swear in a language that no human language has the power to make me abjure, to disrupt, that is to say, to make me perjure myself. The oath passes *through* language, but it passes beyond human language. This would be the truth of translation.

In this fabulous tale of the oath, of the contractual *bond*, at issue is

an indebtedness in which the exchange-values are incommensurable and thus each is untranslatable into the other (money/pound of flesh). In 4.1 Portia, disguised as a lawyer, first addresses herself to Antonio to ask him to acknowledge, to confess his unpaid or unpayable debt: "Do you confess the bond?" Do you confess, do you recognize the contract, the promise, the bond? "Reconnais-tu le billet?" ["Do you recognize the note?"] is the flat rendering by François-Victor Hugo, whose translation I have followed, at times modifying it. Do you acknowledge the acknowledgement of the debt, the IOU? Do you confirm the signed pledge, the bond, that which you owe, that because of which you are in debt or in default, indeed at fault (hence the word "confess")? Antonio's response: "I do" (a performative). Yes, I confess, I acknowledge, I recognize, I confirm and sign or countersign. *I do*: a sentence as extraordinary as a "yes." The economy and brevity of the response: as simple and bare as possible, the utterance implies not only an "I," an "I" who *does* what it says while saying it, confirming that he himself is the very person who has already heard, understood, memorized in its entirety the meaning of the question posed and integrated in turn into the response that signs the identity between the *I* who has heard and the *I* who utters the "yes" or the "I do." But it is also, given this understanding and the memory of the question, the same person as the one posing the question: I say *yes*, *I do*, precisely in response to what you mean by asking me this or posing this question to me. We think and mean the same thing (intralinguistic translation), we are the same person in the mirror of this measure. This mirrored or transparent univocity, this ideal translation, is supposed to be at work in all performative utterances of the type "I pardon."

After Antonio's confession, the response falls like a verdict. "Then must the Jew be merciful." Six brief words name *the Jew* and *mercy* in the same breath. This short sentence simultaneously signs both the economy and the incomparable genius of Shakespeare. It deserves to rise above this text as an immense allegory; it perhaps recapitulates the entire history of forgiveness, the entire history between the Jew and the Christian, the entire history of economics (*merces*, market, merchandise, *merci*, mercenary, wage, reward, literal or sublime) as a history of translation: "Then must the Jew be merciful."

Then (hence, consequently, *igitur*) the Jew must be *merciful*. He must be *clément*, *indulgent*, say certain French translations. Obviously, this means *here*: therefore, *igitur*, *then*, since you acknowledge the debt or the fault, the Jew (*this Jew*, Shylock, in this precise context) must free you from it. But the elliptical force of the verdict tends to take on a colossal symbolic and metonymic value on the scale of every historical period: "the Jew" also represents every Jew, the Jew in general in his *différend* with his Christian counterpart, Christian power, the Christian State. The Jew must forgive.

(Permit me a parenthesis here: while rereading this extraordinary verdict whose ruse we shall analyze in a moment—namely, the phrase that says “then the Jew must forgive,” implying that “it is the Jew who must forgive,” “it is up to the Jew in general to forgive”—I can’t avoid recalling the Pope’s extraordinary sigh at the end of the second millennium. Several months ago, as he was about to board a plane for one of his transcontinental journeys, he was asked what he thought of the French episcopate’s declaration of repentance, and after sighing, after feeling a bit sorry for himself, after feeling a bit sorry for Christianity and Catholicism, he said: “I notice that it is always we who are asking for forgiveness.” Well! The implication: forgiveness from the Jews [even if some people legitimately think of certain American Indians, too, as well as various other victims of the Inquisition whom the Pope has since put on the list as an another duty of commemoration, as it is called—or of repentance]. It is always we, Christians or Catholics, who are asking for forgiveness, but why? Yes, why? Is it that forgiveness is a Christian thing and Christians should set an example because Christ’s Passion consisted of assuming sin on the cross? Or indeed because, under the circumstances, a certain Church, if not Christianity, will always have reproached itself a great deal, while asking for forgiveness, and first of all from the Jew, whom it has asked for forgiveness—and to be *merciful*? “Then must the Jew be merciful.”)

Portia thus addresses herself to Antonio, her accomplice, and while referring to the Jew as a third party, she hears what the Jew hears: faced with your recognition, your acknowledgement, your confession, the Jew must be *merciful*, compassionate, forbearing, capable of forgiving, of remitting your pain or your payment, of erasing the debt, and so on. But the Jew doesn’t understand Portia’s deductive reasoning, he entirely refuses to understand this logic. She would like him to grant forgiveness and absolve the debt simply because it is recognized. The Jew then grows indignant:

“In virtue of what obligation, what constraint, what law must I be *merciful*?” The word that is translated by “obligation” or “constraint” or “law” is an interesting one: it is *compulsion*, which signifies an irresistible impulse or constraining power. “In virtue of what compulsion should I show myself *merciful*?”

On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

[*MT*, 4.1.179]

In response to the Jew’s question, Portia launches into a grand panegyric of the power of forgiveness. This superb speech defines *mercy*, forgiveness, as the supreme power. Without constraint, without obligation, gratuitous, an act of grace, a power above power, a sovereignty above

sovereignty, a superlative might, mightier than might since it is a might without might, a respite within might, this transcendent might of *mercy* rises above might, above the economy of might and therefore above sanction as well as transaction. This is why mercy is the king's attribute, the right of grace, the absolute privilege of the monarch (or, in this case, of the doge). Yet it is also an infinite extravagance, another tread or trade in an infinite ascent, and just as this power is above power, a might mightier than might, so the monarch's attribute is at the same time above him and his sceptre. This might passes beyond humanity even as it passes through humanity, just as language does (as we mentioned earlier): it is only in God's keeping. Grace is divine, in earthly power it recalls what most resembles divine power, it is the superhuman within the human. The two discourses here echo or mirror one another, that of Shylock the Jew and Portia the Christian or the Christian in the guise of the law. Both place something (the oath, forgiveness) above human language *in* human language, beyond the human order *in* the human order, beyond human rights and duties *in* human law.

The strength of forgiveness, if you listen to Portia, is *more than* just, more just than justice or the law. It rises above the law or above what in justice is only law; it is, beyond human law, the very thing that invokes prayer. And what is, finally, a discourse on translation (possible/impossible) is also a discourse of *prayer on prayer*. Forgiveness is prayer; it belongs to the order of benediction and prayer on two sides: that of the person who requests it and that of the person who grants it. The essence of prayer has to do with forgiveness, not with power and law. Between the elevation of prayer or benediction—above human power, above even royal power insofar as it is human, above the law, above the penal code—and the elevation of forgiveness above human power, royal power and the law, there exists a sort of essential affinity. Prayer and forgiveness have the same provenance and the same essence, the same eminence that is more eminent than eminence, the eminence of the Most High.

Shylock is frightened by this exorbitant exhortation to forgive beyond the law, to renounce his right and his due. He is being asked to do more than he can and more than he even has the right to grant, given the *bond* (one is tempted to say the *Bund*) that obliges him beyond every human link. Shylock also senses that it is an attempt to steer his ship in circles, if I can speak this way about a story that involves a ship and a shipwreck. He who is presented as a diabolical figure ("the devil . . . in the likeness of a Jew" [*MV*, 3.1.20]) senses that he is in the process of being had, of being diabolically possessed in the name of the sublime transcendence of grace. There is a pretense of elevating him above everything, with this tale of divine and sublime forgiveness, but it is a ruse to empty his pockets while distracting him, to make him forget what he is owed and to punish him cruelly. So he protests, he grumbles, he com-

plains, he clamors for the law, his right, his penalty. In any case, he is not deceived. In the name of this sublime panegyric of forgiveness, an economic ruse, a calculation, a stratagem is being plotted, the upshot of which (you know it well: the challenge to cut flesh without shedding one drop of blood) will be that Shylock loses everything in this translation of transaction, the monetary signs of his money as well as the literal pound of flesh—and even his religion, since when the situation takes a bad turn at his expense he will have to convert to Christianity, to translate himself (*convertere*) into a Christian, into a Christian language, after having been in turn forced, through a scandalous reversal—he who was entreated to be *merciful*—to implore the doge for mercy on his knees (“Down therefore,” Portia will tell him, “and beg mercy from the duke”). The doge of Venice pretends to grant him this pardon so as to show how superior his generosity as a Christian and a monarch is to that of the Jew:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it:
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's,
The other half comes to the general state,
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine.

[*MI*, 4.1.364–69]

The sovereignty of the doge, in its crafty manifestation, mimics absolute forgiveness, the pardon that is granted even where it is not requested, yet it is the pardon of a life. As for the rest, Shylock is totally expropriated, half of his fortune going to a private subject, Antonio, half to the State. And then—another economic ruse—in order to receive a reduction of the penalty and avoid total confiscation, the doge adds a condition, which is that Shylock repent (“repentir” is Hugo’s translation for “humbleness”): if you give proof of humility while repenting, your penalty will be reduced and you will have only a fine to pay instead of total expropriation. As for the absolute pardon, the doge wields such sovereign power over it that he threatens to withdraw it:

He shall do this, or else I do recant
The pardon that I late pronounced here.

[*MI*, 4.1.387–88]

Portia had protested against the offer to reduce the total confiscation to a fine on the condition of repentance. She says, “Ay for the state, not for Antonio” (which means that the penalty of confiscation is reduced for what Shylock owes the State, but not for what he owes Antonio). Then Shylock rebels and refuses the pardon. He refuses to pardon, for sure, to be *merciful*, but he reciprocally refuses to be pardoned at this price. He

therefore refuses both to grant and to ask for forgiveness. He calls himself a foreigner, in short, to this entire phantasmic tale of forgiveness, to this entire unsavory plot of forgiveness, to all the Christian and theologico-political preaching that tries to pass off the moon as green cheese. He prefers to die than to be pardoned at this price because he understands or in any case senses that he would actually have to pay very dearly for the absolute and merciful pardon, and that an economy always hides behind this theatre of absolute forgiveness. Shylock then says, in a sort of counter-calculation: Well, keep your pardon, take my life, kill me, for in taking from me everything that I have and all that I am, you in effect kill me.

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that,—
 You take my house, when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house: you take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live.

[*MI*, 4.1.370–73]

You know how things turn out: the extraordinary economy of rings and oaths. Regardless of whether Shylock is implicated in it, he finally loses everything. Once the doge has threatened to withdraw his pardon, he must agree to sign a complete remission of the debt and to undergo a forced conversion to Christianity.

Gratiano tells him:

In christ'ning shalt thou have two godfathers,—
 Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more,
 To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font.

[*MI*, 4.1.394–96]

Exit Shylock.

Immediately after the scene I have just evoked, when Shylock has lost everything and left the stage (no more Jew on stage, no more Jew in the story), the profits are split, and the doge beseeches, implores, entreats (which is rendered into French as *conjure*) Portia to dine with him. She refuses, humbly begging his pardon: "I humbly do desire your grace of pardon" (the fact that great people are often called Your Grace or Your Gracious Majesty clearly underscores the power we are discussing here). She begs His Grace's pardon because she must travel out of town. The doge orders that *she*, or *he*, be remunerated ("gratify"), that she/he be paid or rewarded for her/his services:

Antonio, gratify this gentleman,
 For in my mind you are much bound to him.

[*MI*, 4.1.402–3]

This gratuity, this reward, is a wage. Portia knows it and she recognizes it, she knows and says that she has been paid for performing well in a scene of forgiveness and pardon as an able and cunning man of law; she admits, this woman in the guise of a man, that she has in some way been paid as a mercenary of gratitude [*le merci*], or mercy [*la merci*]:

He is well paid that is well satisfied,
 And I delivering you, am satisfied,
 And therein do account myself well paid,—
 My mind was never yet more mercenary.

[*MV*, 4.1.411–14]

No one could better express the “mercenary” dimension of “*merci*” in every sense of this word. And no one could ever express it better than Shakespeare, who has been charged with anti-Semitism for a work that stages with an unequalled power all the great motives of Christian anti-Judaism.

Finally, again in the same scene, Bassanio’s response to Portia passes once more through a logic of forgiveness:

Take some remembrance of us as a tribute,
 Not as a fee: grant me two things I pray you,—
 Not to deny me, and to pardon me.

[*MV*, 4.1.418–20]

Such is the context in which Portia displays the eloquence for which she is paid as a mercenary man of the law.

Now here is the main dish, the plat de résistance. I have left the spiciest [*relevé*] taste for the end. Just after saying, “Then must the Jew be merciful,” and after Shylock protests by asking, “On what compulsion must I?” Portia begins to speak again. I cite her speech in English, then translate or rather paraphrase it, step by step. It raises the stakes in admirable rhythms:

First movement:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest,
 It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes,

[*MV*, 4.1.180–83]

The quality of mercy is not forced, constrained: mercy is not commanded, it is free, gratuitous; grace is gratuitous. Mercy falls from heaven like a gentle shower. It can’t be scheduled, calculated; it arrives or doesn’t,

no one decides on it, nor does any human law; like rain, it happens or it doesn't, but it's a good rain, a gentle rain; forgiveness isn't ordered up, it isn't calculated, it is foreign to calculation, to economics, to the transaction and the law, but it is good, like a gift, because mercy gives by forgiving, and it fecundates; it is good, it is *beneficent*, *benevolent* like a *benefit* as opposed to a *malefaction*, a good deed as opposed to a misdeed. It falls, like rain, from above to below ("it droppeth . . . upon the place beneath"): the person who forgives is, like forgiveness itself, on high, very high, above the person who asks for or obtains forgiveness. There is a hierarchy, and this is why the metaphor of rain is not only that of a phenomenon that is not ordered up, but also that of a vertical descending movement: forgiveness is given from above to below. "It is twice blest; /It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes": thus there is already a sharing of the good, of the good deed, a sharing of the benediction, a performative event and a mirroring between two benefits of the benediction, a mutual exchange, a translation between giving and taking.

Second movement:

'Tis the mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice.

[*ML*, 4.1.184–93]

Forgiving mercy is the mightiest or the almighty *in* the almighty: "'Tis the mightiest in the mightiest," the omnipotence of omnipotence, the omnipotence in omnipotence or the almighty among all the almighty, absolute greatness, absolute eminence, absolute might in absolute might, the hyperbolic superlative of might. The omnipotence of omnipotence is at once the essence of power, the essence of might, the essence of the possible, but also what, like the essence and superlative of might, is at once the mightiest *of* might and more *than* might, *beyond* omnipotence. This limit of power, of might and of the possible obliges us to ask ourselves if the experience of forgiveness is an experience of "power," of the "power-to-forgive," the affirmation of power through forgiveness at the conjunction of all the orders of "I can," and not only of political power, or even the beyond of all power. What is always at issue here—another problem of translation—is the status of *more* as *the most* and as *more than*,

of the mightiest as *more mighty than*—and as *more than* mighty, and therefore as another order than might, power, or the possible: the impossible that is *more than impossible and therefore possible*.⁵

In the same way, if forgiveness, if “mercy” or “the quality of mercy” is “the mightiest in the mightiest,” this situates both the apex of omnipotence and something more and other than absolute power in “the mightiest in the mightiest.” We should be able to follow, accordingly, the wavering of this limit between power and absolute powerlessness, powerlessness or the absolute impossible as unlimited power—which is not unrelated to the im-possible possible of translation.

Mercy becomes the throned monarch, Portia says, but even better than his crown. It is higher than the crown on a head; it *suits* the monarch, it becomes him, but it *suits* higher than his head and the head [*la tête et le chef*], than the attribute or sign of power that is the royal crown. Like the sceptre, the crown manifests temporal power, whereas forgiveness is a supratemporal, spiritual power. Above the authority of the sceptre, it is enthroned in the heart of kings. This omnipotence is different from temporal might, and to be different from might that is temporal and therefore earthly and political, it must be interior, spiritual, ideal, situated in the king’s heart and not in his exterior attributes. The passage across the limit clearly follows the trajectory of an interiorization that passes from the visible to the invisible by becoming a thing of the heart: forgiveness as *pity* [*miséricorde*], if you wish, pity being the sensitivity of the heart to the misfortune of the guilty, which motivates forgiveness. This interior pity is divine in essence, but it also says something about the essence of translation. Portia obviously speaks as a Christian, she is already trying to convert or to pretend that she is preaching to a convert. In her effort to persuade Shylock to forgive, she is already attempting to convert him to Christianity; by feigning the supposition that he is already a Christian so that he will listen to what she has to say, she turns him toward

5. This structure is analogous to what Angelus Silesius, in *The Cherubic Pilgrim* (which I cite and analyze in *Sauf le nom* [Paris, 1993], p. 33), calls *Überunmöglichste* and describes as possible—this is God: *das Überunmöglichste ist möglich*—which can be translated, depending on how *über* is understood, as “the most impossible, the absolute impossible, the impossible par excellence is possible” or as “the more than impossible, the beyond of impossible is possible.” These renderings are very different yet amount to the same thing, because in the two cases (the one comparative, the other superlative) they wind up saying that the tip of the summit (the peak) belongs to another order than that of the summit; the highest is therefore contrary to or other than what it surpasses; it is higher than the height of the most high: the most impossible and the more than impossible belong to another order than the impossible in general and can therefore be possible. The meaning of “possible,” the significance of the concept of possibility, meanwhile, has undergone a mutation at the point and limit of the im-possible—if I can put it this way—and this mutation indicates what is at stake in our reflection on the impossible possibility of translation: there is no longer any possible contradiction between possible and impossible since they belong to two heterogeneous orders. [See Derrida’s commentary on Angelus Silesius in *On the Name*, trans. David Wood and John P. Leavey Jr., ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif., 1995)—TRANS.]

Christianity by means of her logic and her rhetoric; she predisposes him to Christianity, as Pascal said, she preconverts him, she converts him inwardly, something that he will soon be forced to do physically, under constraint. She tries to convert him to Christianity by persuading him of the supposedly Christian interpretation that consists of interiorizing, spiritualizing, idealizing what among Jews (it is often said, at least, that this is a very powerful stereotype) will remain physical, external, literal, devoted to a respect for the letter. As with the difference between the circumcision of the flesh and the Pauline circumcision of the heart—there will certainly be a need to look for a translation, in the broad sense, with regard to this problematic of circumcision (literal circumcision of the flesh versus ideal and interior circumcision of the heart, Jewish circumcision versus Christian circumcision, the whole debate surrounding Paul). What happens between the Jew Shylock and the legislation of the Christian State in this wager of a pound of flesh before the law, the oath, the sworn faith, the question of literalness, and so on? If forgiveness dwells within the king's heart and not in his throne, his sceptre, or his crown, that is, in the temporal, earthly, visible, and political attributes of his power, a leap has been made toward God. The power to pardon interiorized in mankind, in human power, in royal power as human power, is what Portia calls divine: it will be God-like. This *like*, this analogy or resemblance, supports a logic or analogic of theologico-political translation, of the translation of the theological into political.

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice.

The earthly power that most resembles God is that which "seasons justice," which "tempers" justice with forgiveness.

"Tempère" [tempers] is Hugo's translation for "seasons." It isn't an erroneous choice; it in fact means "to season" [*assaisonner*], to mix, to cause to change, to modify, to temper, to dress food or to affect a climate, a sense of taste or quality. Let's not forget that this speech began by trying to describe "the quality of mercy."

Yet I am tempted to replace Hugo's translation, "tempère," which is not bad, with another. It will not be a true translation, above all not a relevant translation. It will not respond to the name *translation*. It will not *render*, it will not pay its dues, it will not make a full restitution, it will not pay off all its debt, first and foremost its debt to an assumed concept, that is, to the self-identity of meaning alleged by the word *translation*. It will not be answerable to [*relever de*] what is currently called a translation, a *relevant* translation. But apart from the fact that the most relevant transla-

tion (that which presents itself as the transfer of an intact signified through the inconsequential vehicle of any signifier whatsoever) is the least relevant possible, the one I offer will allow me to attempt at least *three gestures* at once, to tie together, in the same economy, three necessities that will all be linked to the history of a translation that I took the somewhat rash initiative in proposing, over thirty years ago, and that is now publicly canonized in French—all the while naturally remaining untranslatable into any other language. I shall therefore translate “seasons” as “relève”: “when mercy seasons justice,” “quand le pardon relève la justice (ou le droit)” [*when mercy elevates and interiorizes, thereby preserving and negating, justice (or the law)*].

1. *First justification*: an immediate guarantee in the play of the idiom. *Relever* first conveys the sense of cooking suggested here, like *assaisonner*. It is a question of giving taste, a different taste that is blended with the first taste, now dulled, remaining the same while altering it, while changing it, while undoubtedly removing something of its native, original, idiomatic taste, but also while adding to it, and in the very process, *more* taste, while cultivating its natural taste, while giving it *still more of its own taste*, its own, natural flavor—this is what we call “relever” in French cooking. And this is precisely what Portia says: mercy seasons [*relève*] justice, the quality of mercy seasons the taste of justice. Mercy keeps the taste of justice while affecting it, refining it, cultivating it; mercy resembles justice, but it comes from somewhere else, it belongs to a different order, at the same time it modifies justice, it at once tempers and strengthens justice, changes it without changing it, converts it without converting it, yet while improving it, while exalting it. Here is the first reason to translate *seasons* with “relève,” which effectively preserves the gustatory code and the culinary reference of *to season*, “*assaisonner*”: *to season with spice*, to spice. *A seasoned dish* is, according to the translation in the *Robert* dictionary, “un plat relevé.”⁶ Justice preserves its own taste, its own meaning, but this very taste is better when it is *seasoned* or “relevé” by mercy. Without considering that *mercy* can redeem, deliver, ease, indemnify, indeed cure (this is the chain *heal, heilen, holy, heilig*) justice which, thus eased, lightened, delivered (*relieved*), redeems itself with a view to sacrosanct salvation.

2. *Second justification*: “relever” effectively expresses elevation. Mercy elevates justice, it pulls and inspires justice toward highness, toward a height higher than the crown, the sceptre, and power that is royal, hu-

6. The rich entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives some splendid uses for such diverse meanings as “to render more palatable by the addition of some savoury ingredient,” “to adapt,” “to accommodate to a particular taste,” “to moderate, to alleviate, to temper, to embalm; to ripen, to fortify.” A more rare and more archaic (sixteenth century) use: “to impregnate, to copulate,” as in “when a male hath once seasoned the female, he never after touches her.”

man, earthly, and so on. Sublimation, elevation, exaltation, ascension toward a celestial height, the highest or the most high, higher than height. Thanks to forgiveness, thanks to mercy, justice is even more just, it transcends itself, it is spiritualized by rising and thus lifting itself [*se relevant*] above itself. Mercy sublimates justice.

3. There is, finally, a *third justification* for the verb *relever*. I use this word *justification* to reconcile what would render this translation relevant to the conjoined motif of justice ("Mercy seasons justice") and justness or appropriateness [*justesse*], to what must be the appropriate word, the most appropriate possible, more appropriate than appropriate. This last justification would then give a philosophical meaning and coherence to the economy, accumulation, capitalization of good grounds. In 1967, to translate a crucial German word with a double meaning (*Aufheben*, *Aufhebung*), a word that signifies at once to suppress and to elevate, a word that Hegel says represents the speculative risk of the German language, and that the entire world had until then agreed was untranslatable—or, if you prefer, a word for which no one had agreed with anyone on a stable, satisfying translation into any language—for this word, I had proposed the noun *relève* and the verb *relever*. This allowed me to retain, joining them in a single word, the double motif of the elevation and the replacement that preserves what it denies or destroys, preserving what it causes to disappear, quite like—in a perfect example—what is called in the armed forces, in the navy, say, the relief [*relève*] of the guard. This usage is also possible in English, *to relieve*.⁷ Was my operation a translation?⁸ I am not sure that it deserves this term. The fact is that it has become irreplaceable and nearly canonized, even in the university, occasionally in other languages where the French word is used as if it were quoted from a translation, even where its origin is no longer known, or when its place of origin—I mean "me"—or its taste is disliked. Without plunging us very deeply into the issues, I must at least recall that the movement of *Aufhebung*, the process of establishing relevance, is always in Hegel a

7. I have just alluded to the navy. Well, then, Joseph Conrad, for example, writes in "The Secret Sharer": "I would get the second mate to relieve me at that hour"; then "I . . . returned on deck for my relief." [Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Sharer," (1910; New York, 1981), pp. 139, 149.]

8. Curiously, the first time that the word *relève* seemed to me indispensable for translating (without translating) the word *Aufhebung* was on the occasion of an analysis of the sign. (See *Le Puits et la pyramide: Introduction à la semiologie de Hegel*, a lecture delivered at the Collège de France in Jean Hyppolite's seminar during January 1968, reprinted in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972), p. 102 [See Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: An Introduction to Hegel's Semiology," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982)—TRANS.].) Most of the so-called undecidable words that have interested me ever since are also, by no means accidentally, untranslatable into a single word (*pharmakon*, *supplément*, *différance*, *hymen*, and so on). This list cannot, by definition, be given any closure.

dialectical movement of interiorization, interiorizing memory (*Erinnerung*) and sublimating spiritualization. It is also a translation. Such a *relève* is precisely at issue here, in Portia's mouth (mercy *relève*, it elevates, replaces and interiorizes the justice that it seasons). Above all, we find the same need for the *Aufhebung*, the *relève*, at the very heart of the Hegelian interpretation of mercy, particularly in *The Phenomenology of Mind*: the movement toward philosophy and absolute knowledge as the truth of the Christian religion passes through the experience of mercy.⁹ Mercy is a *relève*, it is in its essence an *Aufhebung*. It is translation as well. In the horizon of expiation, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation.

When Portia says that mercy, above the sceptre, seated on the interior throne in the king's heart, is an attribute of God himself, and that therefore, as an earthly power, mercy *resembles* a divine power at the moment when it elevates, preserves, and negates [*relève*] justice (that is, the law), what counts is the resemblance, the analogy, the figuration, the maximal analogy, a sort of human translation of divinity: in human power mercy is what most resembles, what most is and reveals itself *as*, a divine power ("then show likest God's"):

But mercy is above the sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

This doesn't mean, necessarily, that mercy comes only from one person, up there, who is called God, from a pitying Father who lets his mercy descend upon us. No, that can also mean that as soon as there is mercy, if in fact there is any, the so-called human experience reaches a zone of divinity: mercy is the genesis of the divine, of the holy or the sacred, but also the site of pure translation. (A risky interpretation. It could, let us note too quickly, efface the need for the singular person, for the pardoning or pardoned person, the "who" irreducible to the essential quality of a divinity, and so forth.)

This *analogy* is the very site of the theologico-political, the hyphen or translation between the theological and the political; it is also what underwrites political sovereignty, the Christian incarnation of the body of God (or Christ) in the king's body, the king's two bodies. This analogical—and Christian—articulation between two powers (divine and royal, heavenly and earthly), insofar as it passes here through the sovereignty

9. In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, at the end of *Die offenbare Religion*, just before *Das absolute Wissen*, therefore at the transition between absolute religion and absolute knowledge—as the truth of religion.

of mercy and the right of grace, is also the sublime greatness that authorizes or enables the authorization of every ruse and vile action that permit the lawyer Portia, mouthpiece of all Shylock's Christian adversaries from the merchant Antonio to the doge, to get the better of the Jew, to cause him to lose everything, his pound of flesh, his money, even his religion. In expressing all the evil that can be thought of the Christian ruse as a discourse of mercy, I am not about to praise Shylock when he raises a hue and cry for his pound of flesh and insists on the literalness of the *bond*. I analyze only the historical and allegorical cards that have been dealt in this situation and all the discursive, logical, theological, political, and economic resources of the concept of mercy, the legacy (our legacy) of this semantics of mercy—precisely inasmuch as it is indissociable from a certain European interpretation of translation.

After thus proposing three justifications for my translation of *seasons* and *Aufhebung* as *relève* (verb and noun), I have gathered too many reasons to dissemble the fact that my choice aimed for the best transaction possible, the most economic, since it allows me to use a single word to translate so many other words, even languages, with their denotations and connotations. I am not sure that this transaction, even if it is the most economic possible, merits the name of *translation*, in the strict and pure sense of this word. It rather seems one of those other things in *tr*, a transaction, transformation, travail, *travel*—and a treasure trove [*trouvaille*] (since this invention, if it also seemed to take up [*relever*] a challenge, as another saying goes, consisted only in discovering what was waiting, or in waking what was sleeping, in the language). The treasure trove amounts to a travail; it puts to work the languages, first of all, without adequation or transparency, here assuming the shape of a new writing or rewriting that is performative or poetic, not only in French, where a new use for the word emerges, but also in German and English. Perhaps this operation perhaps still participates in the travail of the negative in which Hegel saw a *relève* (*Aufhebung*). If I supposed, then, that the quasi-translation, the transaction of the word *relève* is indeed "relevant" (an English word in the process of Frenchification), that would perhaps qualify the effectiveness of this travail and its supposed right to be legitimated, accredited, quoted at an official market price. But its principal interest, if I can evaluate it in terms of usury and the market, lies in what it might say about the economy of every interlinguistic translation, this time in the strict and pure sense of the word. Undoubtedly, in taking up a challenge [*en relevant un défi*], a word is added to the French language, a word in a word. The use that I have just made of the word *relever*, "en relevant un défi," also becomes a challenge, a challenge, moreover, to every translation that would like to welcome into another language all the connotations that have accumulated in this word. These remain innumerable in themselves, perhaps unnameable: more than one word in a word, more than one language in a single language, beyond every possible compati-

bility of homonyms. What the translation with the word "relevant" also demonstrates, in an exemplary fashion, is that every translation should be relevant by vocation. It would thus guarantee the *survival* of the body of the original (*survival* in the double sense that Benjamin gives it in "The Task of the Translator," *fortleben* and *überleben*: prolonged life, continuous life, *living on*, but also life after death).¹⁰

Isn't this what a translation does? Doesn't it guarantee these *two* survivals by losing the flesh during a process of conversion [*change*]? By elevating the signifier to its meaning or value, all the while preserving the mournful and debt-laden memory of the singular body, the first body, the unique body that the translation thus elevates, preserves, and negates [*relève*]? Since it is a question of a travail—indeed, as we noted, a travail of the negative—this relevance is a travail of mourning, in the most enigmatic sense of this word, which merits a re-elaboration that I have attempted elsewhere but cannot undertake here. The measure of the *relève* or relevance, the price of a translation, is always what is called meaning, that is, value, preservation, truth as preservation (*Wahrheit, bewahren*) or the value of meaning, namely, what, in being freed from the body, is elevated above it, interiorizes it, spiritualizes it, preserves it in memory. A faithful and mournful memory. One doesn't even have to say that translation preserves the value of meaning or must raise [*relever*] the body to it: the very concept, the value of meaning, the meaning of meaning, the value of the preserved value originates in the mournful experience of translation, of its very possibility. By resisting this transcription, this transaction which is a translation, this *relève*, Shylock delivers himself into the grasp of the Christian strategy, bound hand and foot. (The cost of a wager between Judaism and Christianity, blow for blow: they translate themselves, although not into one another.)

I insist on the Christian dimension. Apart from all the traces that Christianity has left on the history of translation and the normative concept of translation, apart from the fact that the *relève*, Hegel's *Aufhebung* (one must never forget that he was a very Lutheran thinker, undoubtedly like Heidegger), is explicitly a speculative *relève* of the Passion and Good Friday into absolute knowledge, the travail of mourning also describes, through the Passion, through a memory haunted by the body lost yet

10. [See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), pp. 69–82, esp. pp. 71–73. For Derrida's commentary on Benjamin's concepts, see "Des Tours de Babel," (trans. Joseph Graham) in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Graham (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985). Zohn's translation contains significant errors that have been described by Steven Rendall in his "Notes on Zohn's translation of Benjamin's 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,'" *TTR: Traduction Terminologie Rédaction*, no. 10 (1997): 191–206. Rendall offers an alternative translation of the essay in the same issue (pp. 151–65). The German text appears in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. in 14 (Frankfurt am Main, 1974–89) 4:1:7–21—TRANS.]

preserved in its grave, the resurrection of the ghost or of the glorious body that rises, rises again [*se relève*]*—*and walks.

Without wishing to cause any grief to Hegel's ghost, I leave aside the third movement that I had announced in Portia's speech (which would have dealt with translation as prayer and benediction).¹¹

Merci for the time you have given me, pardon, *mercy*, forgive the time I have taken from you.

11. This would be a matter, without speaking further about the doge and the State, of examining and weighing justice on one side (and justice here must be understood as the law, the justice that is calculable and *enforced*, applied, applicable, and not the justice that I distinguish elsewhere from the law; here justice means the juridical, the judiciary, positive, indeed penal law). To examine and weigh justice on one side with salvation on the other, it seems necessary to choose between them and to renounce law so as to attain salvation. This would be like giving an essential dignity simultaneously to the word and the value of *prayer*; prayer would be that which allows one to go beyond the law toward salvation or the hope of salvation; it would belong to the order of forgiveness, like benediction, which was considered at the beginning (forgiveness is a *double benediction*: for the person who grants it and for the person who receives it, for whoever gives and for whoever takes). Now if prayer belongs to the order of forgiveness (whether requested or granted), it has no place at all in the law. Nor in philosophy (in onto-theology, says Heidegger). But before suggesting that a calculation is an economy again lurking in this logic, I read these lines from Portia's speech. Just after saying "when mercy seasons justice," she (or he) continues:

Therefore, Jew
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer, doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
 Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

[*MT*; 4.1.193–201]

Paraphrase: "Thus, Jew, although justice (the good law) may be your argument (*plea*: your allegation, what you plead, that in the name of which you plead, your cause but also your plea), consider this: that with the simple process of the law (the simple juridical procedure) none of us would attain salvation: we pray, in truth, for forgiveness (*mercy*) (*we do pray for mercy*), and this is the prayer, this prayer, this very prayer (*that same prayer*) that teaches us to do merciful acts (to forgive) to everyone. Everything I have just said is to mitigate the justice of your cause; if you persist, if you continue to pursue this cause, the strict tribunal of Venice will necessarily have to order the arrest of the merchant present here."