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Re-reading Jacques Derrida's 'Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?' (What is a 'relevant' translation?)

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ABSTRACT

Within translation studies, Derrida's (1999a/2012) lecture 'Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?' (What is a 'relevant' translation?) has been read as being a lecture that is about translation. However, the recently published *Le Parjure et le Pardon* [Perjury and Pardon] shows that Derrida recycled a large portion of the material from his two-year seminar on forgiveness. In this paper, I explore the possibility that Derrida's lecture is not really about translation in any theoretical or general sense at all. Instead, I suggest that the primary interest of the lecture for today's translation studies scholars lies in Derrida's act of prowling around the French word 'relever'. This word – which Derrida terms a 'translative body' – is crucial to Derrida's exploration of the system of exchange and redemption within which mercy itself is inscribed. A close reading of the section of the lecture in which this translative body is put to work underscores the ability of translation to serve as catalyst for philosophical enquiry.

KEYWORDS

Derrida; translation; relevance; philosophy; untranslatability; forgiveness

Derrida's lecture, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?' [What is a 'relevant' translation] was given in French as a keynote speech at the annual conference of ATLAS, a French literary translators association, on 13 November 1998, and was published in French in the conference proceedings the following year. It appears to have made its way into Anglophone translation studies via Lawrence Venuti's English translation, first published in the cultural studies journal *Critical Inquiry* in 2001 and subsequently incorporated into the second and third editions of *The Translation Studies Reader* (Venuti 2004, 2012). Its presence in the *Translation Studies Reader* has arguably resulted in its canonisation as a key text in Anglophone translation studies; many a Masters student in the UK, if not further afield, finds themselves required to read it, sometimes to their own bemusement. For Derrida's lecture is a strange, centaur-like beast. Whilst the original forum in which the lecture was delivered and its presence in the *Translation Studies Reader* have together created a paratext that suggests that Derrida's lecture is, essentially, *about* translation,¹ a large portion of the lecture seems to be about something else: a Shakespeare play; Judaism and Christianity; mercy, forgiveness and perjury. In this paper, I shall explore the possibility that Derrida's lecture is not in fact primarily about translation but about that 'something else', problematising existing readings in translation studies by setting the

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lecture in the context of Derrida's other work of the same period. At the same time, I shall argue that Derrida's lecture nevertheless holds interest for contemporary translation studies, albeit not for the reasons that are usually supposed.

Existing readings in translation studies

The assumption that Derrida's lecture is about translation is strengthened by existing secondary literature in translation studies. Venuti ([2003] 2013, 59), for example, argues that the lecture 'addresses one of the most practical themes in the history of translation theory, notably the antithesis between "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense" translation which occupied such writers as Cicero and Jerome'. Venuti perceives the commentary on *The Merchant of Venice* as 'an incisive interpretation of the role of translation' (ibid.) in Shakespeare's play, and concludes in his 2001 article that 'this lecture can be considered Derrida's most direct intervention to date into that fledgling discipline that in Europe and elsewhere is known as "translation studies"' (Venuti 2001, 170). Hans Vermeer's (2005) short essay on the lecture also reads the lecture as being about translation, focussing on the meta-theoretical statements on translation that are to be found within it. These include Derrida's (2012, 369) declaration that 'any given translation, whether the best or the worst, ... stands between ... absolute relevance, the most appropriate, adequate, univocal transparency, and the most aberrant and opaque irrelevance',² a declaration which Vermeer (2005, 116) sees as encapsulating Derrida's 'Zwischenposition' [inbetween position] towards translation. Derrida's theoretical statements about translation relevance are also cited by Emmanuelle Ertel (2011) in her reflections on Derrida's influence on translation studies in the United States: she concludes that Derrida's lecture 'highlight[s] the fundamental ethics in translation' (ibid. 16) and can be read as a piece through which 'Derrida seems to be carrying on a debate with the U.S.' (ibid.) begun some twenty years earlier. Kathleen Davis (2001, 98–99) reads Derrida's lecture through a similar lens, noting the lecture's focus on justice and mercy, but ultimately subordinating those concerns to the lecture's theorisation of translation: '[The lecture] addresses relevance as it is often understood in translation studies, points out a fundamental contradiction in the concept, and ultimately suggests a revised sense of relevance that respects the "incalculable idea of justice"'.

What is most striking about Davis's, Venuti's and Ertel's critiques is the way that they inscribe Derrida's lecture within a very specific lineage of translation studies theorists. Thus, in addition to the connections to Cicero and Jerome, noted above, Venuti (2001) links Derrida's discussion of relevance to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Eugene Nida, and Ernst-August Gutt, as well as to Antoine Berman and Philip Lewis, and in Venuti[2003] 2013 to Henri Meschonnic. For example, to support his view that Derrida's lecture represents an intervention in the discipline of translation studies, Venuti writes:

The idea of a 'relevant' translation is not new in translation theory ... In 1813, for instance, Friedrich Schleiermacher took up this idea when he questioned the translator who 'leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him' ... In the twentieth century.. relevance came to dominate translation theory and practice. Eugene Nida, a theorist who has exercised an international influence on translator training since the 1960s, championed the concept of 'dynamic equivalence' in which the translator 'aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant

within the context of his own culture'. More recently, the branch of linguistics known as pragmatics has spawned an approach wherein the relevant translation communicates an interpretation of the foreign text through 'adequate contextual effects' that take into account the receptor's 'cognitive environment' and therefore require minimal 'processing effort'. (Venuti 2001, 170-171)

In his 2003 essay, Venuti ([2003] 2013, 71) reprises the lineage that is traced from Nida to Gutt and strengthens it further, rephrasing Derrida's ideas in Guttian terms:

The effect of transparency in translation is illusionistic: accessibility or easy readability, what Gutt calls 'optimal relevance,' leads the reader to believe that the signified has been transferred without any substantial difference.³

In this later essay, Venuti ([2003] 2013, 71) also now connects Derrida's use of the word 'relevance' unequivocally to the theoretical *concept* as developed through Nida and Gutt, stating: 'within translation studies, translating Derrida's lecture can be an effective intervention because he addresses relevance, a concept that came to dominate translation theory and practice during the twentieth century'.

Parallels between Derrida's discussion and Gutt's theoretical notion of relevance are also drawn by Davis, albeit in a slightly less definitive manner: Davis (2001, 99) argues that Derrida's formulation of relevance 'coincides with the claims of contemporary relevance theory as it has been applied to translation', and like Venuti reformulates Derrida's discussion of the laws of property and quantity in terms commensurate with Gutt's theoretical work:

If a relevant translation presumes, as Derrida puts it, the 'most relevant' equivalent, the 'most right' language (or, in Gutt's terms, 'optimal relevance'), then this translation would necessarily deploy the terms of a certain economy, which would guide decisions as to what is *most* relevant. The economy of translation, however, must always be double and contradictory because it 'signifies two things, *property and quantity*' ... We can see the concern for both property and quantity in the expectation that 'optimal relevance' "will yield *adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost*" Gutt, 322000. (Davis 2001, 99-100).

Ertel's essay offers a very similar framing, citing from both Nida and Gutt to underscore the connections between Derrida's ideas and those expounded within translation studies. Whilst none of these scholars ignore the plurilingualism of the word 'relevant' in Derrida's title – a point to which I shall return below – they thus privilege the possibility that 'relevant' belongs to English, and, more specifically, to a particular specialist field within English.

Although Derrida himself does not mention Relevance Theory or Gutt or Nida, we might argue that these existing readings are nevertheless responsible responses to Derrida's lecture. For although Derrida states in the lecture that he will not talk about 'La Traduction' (Translation, with a capital 'T', i.e. on a general or speculative level), he devotes the first seven pages to doing precisely this, using the apparently self-contradictory statement that 'nothing is translatable and, by the same token, ... nothing is untranslatable' (Derrida 2012, 369) as a springboard for an elaboration of the 'economy' of translation that is governed by laws of property and quantity. This theoretical discussion is subsequently further extended by the elaborate analogy which Derrida sets up between *The Merchant of Venice* and translation itself, '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' (ibid., 372).

A reading of Derrida's lecture as being about translation on a general level is thus perfectly feasible. Arguably, however, it is not particularly interesting, for the reflections that Derrida presents are on what Matthew Reynolds (2019, 36) terms 'Translation Rigidly Conceived', or in other words on "'translation" (*traduction, Übersetzung, traduccion, translaciôn*, and so forth), in the rigorous sense conferred on it over several centuries by a long and complex history in a given cultural situation' (Derrida 2012, 369). This conventional view of translation – which is also summarised elsewhere in Derrida's *œuvre*⁴ – is one that insists on singularity, on replacing a word in one language with a word in another one, or at least on some measure of quantitative equivalence; the implied alternative, non-conventional approach, by contrast, would use the movement between languages to open up multiple readings of the original text. This contrast is sketched out by Derrida in 'La main de Heidegger', a conference paper given in 1985 and in which Derrida discusses Heidegger's use of the German word *Geschlecht*:

Although I find myself obliged to move away from the published translation on occasion, this is never with a view to evaluating or still less improving it. Instead, we should multiply suggestions, harry the German word and analyse it with many waves of touches, caresses or blows. A translation, in the conventional sense of what is published as a translation, cannot do this. But we have a duty to do this each time the calculation of word-for-word, of one word for another, that is, the conventional ideal of translation, finds itself challenged. (Derrida 1987-2003, 59, my translation).

This duty, this multiplication of touches, caresses, or blows, is in my view of far greater interest to today's translation studies scholars than Derrida's discussions of the traditional paradigm of translation, and it is something which can be observed close-up in the 1998 lecture, as we will see below.

The context of the 1998 lecture

Existing readings of Derrida's lecture within translation studies give minimal weight to the chronological context of the lecture, tending to read it either in isolation from Derrida's other work or in conjunction with other pieces in which Derrida reflects explicitly on translation. At most, these readings make passing mention of the key theoretical issues with which Derrida was preoccupied at the time. Venuti ([2003] 2013, 60) observes, for example, that the commentary on *Merchant of Venice* that is found within the lecture 'derives from a seminar on forgiveness and perjury which [Derrida] taught earlier in 1998'. In an Anglo-American context, this acknowledgement risks understating the extent to which Derrida was at the time immersed in this topic: the 'seminar' to which Venuti refers was a seminar in the French sense of the word, running over two years (1997–1999) and taking the form of fully developed lectures. It has since been published in two volumes entitled *Le Parjure et le Pardon*, running to a total of over 800 pages (see Derrida 2019, 2020). As we will see in a moment, rather than being 'derive[d]' from this seminar, the bulk of the 1998 lecture was in fact copied verbatim from it, a fact that is strongly relevant to my proposed re-reading.

Remaining for now with the broader chronological context of Derrida's publications, these show that Derrida's preoccupation with the topic of forgiveness was extensive and deep. The two-year 'le parjure et le pardon' seminar was itself part of a longer series

entitled ‘Questions de responsabilité’, which ran from 1991 to 2001 and included seminars on bearing witness, hostility/hospitality, and the death penalty.⁵ The 1998 lecture itself came between two conferences on religion and postmodernism at Villanova University (McCance 2009, 93). The first of these took place in September 1997, the second in October 1999, with a third event following in September 2001. The opening paper given by Derrida at the October 1999 conference is of particular interest: this paper was, like the 1998 lecture, a verbatim copy of material produced for the ‘le parjure et le pardon’ seminar, being reproduced from the session prior to the one that became the 1998 lecture. The paper was published in English under the title ‘To Forgive: The Unforgiveable and the Imprescriptible’ (Derrida [2001] 2015), and unsurprisingly intersects very closely with the 1998 lecture. For example, the paper questions whether forgiveness is ‘a thing of man’ (ibid., 173) or ‘reserved for God’ (ibid.), and examines the conditionality of forgiveness, which inscribes it within a set of conditions that are ‘psychological, political, juridical above all’ (ibid.). From 1999–2004, Derrida published several other essays on the theme of forgiveness, all of which were also drawn from the ‘le parjure et le pardon’ seminar:⁶ ‘Le siècle et le pardon’ (Derrida 1999b), ‘Le Parjure, peut-être’ (Derrida 2002), and ‘Versöhnung, Ubuntu, pardon: Quel Genre?’ (Derrida 2004). These complement earlier publications such as *Spectres de Marx*, in which Derrida (1993, 15) states that he will talk about spectres, heritage and generations ‘au nom de la *justice*’ [in the name of justice; italics in original]. These publications offer concrete manifestations of Derrida’s (Derrida, [2001] 2015, 158) view that ‘the analysis of “forgiveness,” of “pardon,” is interminable’ – and it is my contention that the 1998 lecture is most fruitfully read when seen as part of this unending analysis, rather than being about translation *per se*.

Returning to the ‘seminar on forgiveness and perjury’ mentioned in passing by Venuti ([2003] 2013, 60), a close examination of *Le Parjure et le Pardon* reveals what might be termed a rather startling instance of academic recycling: approximately two-thirds of the 1998 lecture – that is, the entire commentary on *The Merchant of Venice* – is copied verbatim from the typescript of the second session. Derrida makes a number of minor tweaks to the material, adjusting references to real-life events so that the material is not out of date, removing references to other sessions within the seminar, or to activities that the students should complete outside the session. Crucially, Derrida also inserts a number of brief statements connecting the reading of Shakespeare to the topic of translation, connections which are not present in the original seminar material in any way. The following extract from the commentary gives a sense of the nature – and superficiality – of these insertions:⁷

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*.

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. [...] The passage across the limit clearly follows the trajectory of an interiorisation 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. (Derrida 2012, 380–381; 1998 lecture insertions in bold)

While the passage with Derrida's threefold justification for his proposed translation of 'mercy seasons justice' contains slightly longer additions, the vast majority of insertions throughout the piece follow the pattern shown in the citation above, being limited, in other words, to a short phrase or sentence. A comparison of the 1998 lecture and *Le Parjure et le Pardon* thus shows that the commentary on *The Merchant of Venice* was not composed with a view to illuminating translation; rather, the commentary was conceived as a means of opening up a discussion of the 'system of gratitude, exchange, redemption, expiation' (Derrida 2019, 78, my translation) in which forgiveness is inscribed. The analogies between forgiveness and translation that are set up in the 1998 lecture, whether at the level of 'essence' (Derrida 2012, 381; 383) or history (ibid., 375), appear as fleeting, unexplored additions to this otherwise very carefully elaborated commentary.⁸ In many ways, they make Derrida's commentary and exploration of forgiveness more difficult to follow, appearing as so many swerves in an otherwise – by Derridean standards – reasonably straightforward argument. A particularly salient example of this type of hindrance occurs in the following section, in which Derrida is elaborating on the connections between mercy and the divine. In *Le Parjure et le Pardon*, the passage in question reads as follows:

Dès qu'il y a pardon, s'il y en a, on accède dans l'expérience dite humaine à une zone de divinité: grâce est la genèse du divin, du saint et du sacré, etc. (A discuter: nécessité de la personne, pardonnante ou pardonnée, irréductible à la qualité essentielle d'une divinité, etc.) (Derrida 2019, 98)

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 and of the sacred, etc. (For discussion: the need for the person, pardoning or pardoned, irreducible to the essential quality of a divinity, etc.). (my translation, based on Venuti's translation in Derrida 2012, 384).

Here, the information in the brackets is clearly intended as an elaboration on the reading of mercy that has gone before.⁹ However, in the 1998 lecture, Derrida inserts the words 'but also the site of pure translation' immediately before the brackets, thereby introducing a completely different possibility:

Dès qu'il y a pardon, s'il y en a, on accède dans l'expérience dite humaine à une zone de divinité: grâce est la genèse du divin, du saint et du sacré, etc., **mais aussi le lieu de la traduction pure**. (Interprétation risquée. Elle pourrait, disons-le trop vite, effacer la nécessité de la personne singulière, de la personne pardonnante ou pardonnée, du 'qui' irréductible à la qualité essentielle d'une divinité, etc.) (Derrida 1999a, 45, my emphasis)

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). (Derrida 2012, 384, my emphasis)

In this version, the logic of the syntactical sequence suggests that the ‘risky interpretation’ to which the bracketed information refers is the idea that mercy might be a site of pure translation, an idea which presumably invites the reader to connect with Derrida’s (1985) commentary on Walter Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator’. Furthermore, this addition means that when Derrida (1999a, 45/2012, 384) opens the following paragraph with the deictic phrase ‘cette *analogie*’ [this *analogy*] (italics in original), the reader of the 1998 lecture should logically assume that Derrida is referencing the analogy between mercy and translation. In contrast, in *Le Parjure et le Pardon*, ‘this analogy’ refers back to Portia’s comparison of the human power to forgive with God-like power.

In my introduction to this paper, I referred to Derrida’s lecture as a centaur-like beast; what the comparison with *Le Pardon et le Parjure* reveals is that the lecture is indeed composed genetically of two distinct elements: on the one hand, the opening and closing sections, in which Derrida discusses translation on a theoretical level, and, on the other, the large central section which consists of a commentary on the topic of forgiveness. The two elements are sandwiched together, as it were, by a provocative but in my view relatively under-developed analogy. I foreground this instance of academic recycling not to diminish the value of the lecture as a whole, nor indeed to question the importance of work subsequently done notably by Davis (2001, 98–105) and Foran (2016, 161–166), amongst others, to develop the theoretical implications of the analogy that Derrida appears perhaps casually to have thrown together. Rather, I foreground Derrida’s borrowing from *Le Parjure et le Pardon* to strengthen my contention that, at the time of the lecture given to the ATLAS translators, Derrida’s focus was not on translation as a theoretical or philosophical problem; it was on forgiveness. There is therefore a strong case for conceiving of the lecture as one among many publications that deal with mercy, justice, perjury and forgiveness, rather than taking it to be about translation *per se*. Rather than paying attention to the title of the lecture, in other words, we might pay attention to its epigraphs:

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 . . .* (Derrida 2012, 365)

In such a reading, the declarations about translation within these epigraphs (I leave untranslated; I shall later translate) are not the focal point – although they are far from irrelevant, as I shall argue below. Readings of the lecture which focus on Derrida’s analysis of mercy are by no means without precedent, but those precedents are found outside translation studies (see, in particular, Cixous 2012; Crépon 2006; Foran 2016; Kamuf 2012, 2014).

An alternative reading

What then, does Derrida’s lecture bring to translation studies, if the lecture is not primarily about translation? In my view, a richer way of connecting ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction “relevante”?’ to contemporary translation studies lies in taking seriously Derrida’s (2012,

366) claim that the lecture is not about translation, but about ‘the word . . . in the body of its idiomatic singularity’. This declaration is found in the opening paragraphs of the lecture and forms part of Derrida’s effort to connect with his keynote audience:

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) . . . 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 (Derrida 2012, 366)

Derrida’s reference to the word as a ‘body’ [corps] carries on a long history of conceiving of texts as living organisms. In such a conceptualisation, each reading of a text – each decision in each reading – is a ‘trace coupante’ (Derrida 1972, 71) [cutting trace] in the text. Like an organism, Derrida says, the text ‘régén[ère] indéfiniment son propre tissu’ (ibid.) [regenerates its own tissue indefinitely] after each such incision, retaining its secrecy, its ability to surprise. In this citation from the 1998 lecture, translation emerges as one such form of readerly decision-making, licking like a flame or a loving tongue at the body of the text. There is a strong echo here of the passage from *La main de Heidegger* cited above, in which Derrida speaks of harrying or harassing the German word ‘Geschlecht’ and subjecting it to successive waves of touch, caress or – like flames which threaten to destroy – blows. Later in the 1998 lecture, Derrida (2012, 368) refers to this intense analysis of a single word as an act of ‘prowling’ [rôder],¹⁰ a word which once again conveys a sense of unrelenting focus and potential danger that is however not carried through to consummation or destruction.

It is not just any word which calls out for this experimental prowling; rather, it is those which Hélène Cixous (2012) terms ‘symptom words, cleft words that beetle over their base, clefts through which world commotions are produced’. These words are typically homophonic, containing multiplicity within their apparent singularity: as a result, they play an important role in deconstruction, serving to ‘ouvrir, déclôturer, déstabiliser des structures de forclusion pour laisser le passage à l’autre’ (Derrida 1987-1998a, 60) [open, unenclose, destabilise structures of debarment to let the other pass]. Derrida often denotes such words *untranslatable*, in the sense that the homophonic multiplicity that is contained within the body of a single word in one language is not the same in another.¹¹ At the same time, it is clear that for some people – including Derrida – this homophonic multiplicity can itself be inter- or multi-lingual: in the case of the French word *merci*, for example, Derrida explains that he hears the English word *mercy* within it,¹² and the word *pardon* is prowled around in a similarly interlingual manner in the first session of *Le Pardon et le Parjure* (Derrida 2019, 27–9; or Derrida, [2001] 2015, 144). These homophonic words, then, are those that make possible what Cixous (2012) terms the ‘poetic practice of the philosophical’: they are ‘powerful, piercing words, capable of shaking a wall of repression’, whether they operate within one language or across several at once.¹³

In the 1998 lecture, Derrida (2012, 367) identifies *relevant* as one of these inter- or multi-lingual words, and the word around which he will ‘prowl’ (ibid., 368), describing it not simply as a ‘corps’ [body] but as a ‘corps de traduction’ [translative body]:

this word, 'relevant' carries in its body an on-going process of translation ...; 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.

While it is possible to contend that any word which carries homophonic potential across more than one language might be viewed as a 'corps de traduction', Derrida here appears to be denoting something rather more specific. Firstly, 'relevant' is a word which is a 'traduction en cours' [translation in progress]. The broader context of this remark shows that Derrida (2012, 367) is referring here to the 'Frenchification' of the English word 'relevant', or in other words to a process of linguistic borrowing similar to that through which a word such as 'weekend' has become a French word. Secondly, and more importantly for the purposes of our reading, 'relevant' is a word which is marked by an act of translation that has taken place in the past. As a translative body, 'relevant' carries with it the memory, stigmata or halo of past translations – these are the caresses and blows, or the licking flames, to which we made reference above.

The language that Derrida uses to describe the marks inflicted by translation is strikingly similar to the language that he uses to describe the gesture of writing in *Monolingualism of the Other*:

This gesture [*écriture*/writing] ... can always allow itself to be interpreted as an impulse of love or aggression toward the body of any given language that is thus exposed. Actually, it does both things; it surrenders itself, devotes itself, and links itself together with the given language ... in order to give it what the language does not have and what the gesture itself does not have. But this *salvation* – for it is a salvation addressed to the mortality of the other and a desire for infinite salvation – is also a scratch and a grafting. It caresses with claws, sometimes borrowed claws. (Derrida 1998, 66)

Translation, in this sense, is a form of *écriture*, a form of intervention that is both loving and aggressive towards the language in which it intervenes. In both this passage and the one from the 1998 lecture cited above, the religious element of the description is arresting: *écriture* is a form of, or desire for salvation; translative bodies are those which carry a stigmata 'd'une passion' [of a passion], or 'une auréole de gloire' [halo of glory].¹⁴

In the case of *relevant*, Derrida (2012, 383) explains that the stigmata of previous translation that this word bears is that of his own translation of the German word *Aufhebung* some thirty years previously. This Hegelian term famously carries a double meaning, signifying both elevation and suppression; for this reason, in Derrida's (2012, 383) words, 'the entire world had until then agreed [it] was untranslatable'. Derrida describes his translation of *aufheben* as *relever* as 'an incalculable stroke of luck' (ibid., 368), explaining that it allowed him to 'retain, joining them in a single word, the double motif of the elevation and the replacement that preserves what it denies or destroys' (ibid., 383). Whilst Derrida pinpoints a particular moment in which *relève* thus took on its halo, he also indicates that this is a translation in which he has been engaged 'for more than thirty years, almost continuously' (ibid., 368). This is borne out if we consider the frequency with which Derrida has recourse to the term *relève* and its variations throughout his oeuvre and in connection with a wide range of ideas, including humanism (Derrida 1982a, 117); metaphor (Derrida 1982b, 258), and, famously, *la différance* (Derrida 1981, 40–1). Given the immensity of the network in which the word *relever* is inscribed, it is surprising that existing readings of the 1998 lecture within translation studies pay

relatively little attention to it, limiting themselves to discussion of the specific translation instance highlighted by Derrida, and preferring overall to foreground the theoretical networks around the English word 'relevant', as argued above.¹⁵

Yet reading the 1998 lecture in full cognisance of this extensive network and thus with a view of *relevant* as a translative body (rather than as denoting the theoretical concept known in English as 'relevance') allows us to join the apparently disjointed elements in Derrida's lecture in a different way than hitherto attempted. Rather than seeking to build on Derrida's lightly sketched analogy between the economy of translation and the economy of mercy, we can instead be attentive to how translation – through the translative body of the word *relevant* – 'puts [languages] to work' (Derrida 2012, 384), bringing about a 'writing or rewriting that is performative or poetic' (ibid.). Within translation studies, a reading along these lines is anticipated in Venuti ([2003] 2013, 70) suggestion that translation is used by Derrida to 'perform . . . interrogative interpretation', and is also sketched out in brief terms in Deborah Goldgaber's (2019) entry on 'Derrida' in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Philosophy*, but remains underexplored.

A reading along these lines draws our focus to the commentary section of the lecture, rather than to the section containing general statements about translation. Specifically, it requires us to focus on the paragraphs in which Derrida justifies his translation of 'seasons' in the phrase 'mercy seasons justice' as 'relève', and to read these in the context of the analysis of mercy that Derrida has undertaken up to this point. This contextualised reading allows us to pinpoint in specific terms how the understanding of mercy is deepened or opened up through the translative body.

In a manner that is typical of his close readings of other texts, Derrida presents three successive readings of Shakespeare's play, layering them up on each other rather than following a linear structure.¹⁶ The first reading (Derrida 1999a, 31–38, 2012, 373–379) contrasts the divine grandeur of forgiveness with the cynical human calculations that hide behind it, foregrounding Shylock's perspective. Anchored in Derrida's own Jewishness and in which his irritation at Portia's logic is strongly evident,¹⁷ this reading centres on Portia's declaration, 'Then must the Jew be merciful'. As noted above, these words form part of the epigraph to the lecture, and are accompanied by the declaration, 'I leave untranslated this sentence from Portia' (Derrida 2012, 365). In fact, as Herzog (2014) observes, Derrida does in fact translate these words into French in the course of his discussion (see Derrida 1999a, 34). The discrepancy between the declaration of refusal and the later action gives us to understand that 'traduire' [translate] can have a stronger sense than that simply of rendering words in one language using words from another: traduire, in this stronger sense, would be about taking responsibility for the words in the new language; in Peggy Kamuf's (2014, 202) terms, translation marks a decision to '[sign] in the register of the philosopher's proper name'. Derrida signs his translation of 'mercy seasons justice'; he refuses to sign a translation of 'then must the Jew be merciful'.

The second reading of forgiveness in Shakespeare's play is announced with a play on words: 'Voici maintenant le plat de résistance. J'en ai laissé le gout plus relevé pour la fin' (Derrida 1999a, 39) ['Now here is the main dish, the plat de résistance. I have left the spiciest [*relevé*] taste for the end' (Derrida 2012, 379)]. With its play on *relevé*, the past participle counterpart to the participle/adjective *relevant*, Derrida appears to return, albeit in a playful, indirect way, to the theme announced in the title. In fact, Derrida makes no further mention of the word *relevé* in this section, and instead offers an expanded

paraphrase of fourteen lines from Portia's monologue.¹⁸ Now, the perspective is Portia's: forgiveness is 'foreign to calculation, to economics, to the transaction and the law' (Derrida 2012, 279–80), and benefits both the one giving it and the one receiving it; it is something which both suits and sits above the monarch; it is, in Peggy Kamuf's (2012) words, 'a super superlative, what is mightiest in the mightiest might and therefore also mightier than the greatest might'. Crucial, in this reading, is the interiorisation of mercy: mercy is above the monarch's sceptre yet also within the monarch's heart; those who exert mercy move from the visible to the invisible realm, from *pardon* to *miséricorde*, defined as 'the sensitivity of the heart to the misfortune of the guilty' (Derrida 2012, 381).

While in Shakespeare's play Portia's monologue extends over 22 lines, Derrida concludes his citation mid-way through the fourteenth line, with the words 'when mercy seasons justice'.¹⁹ This is the point at which the translative body *relève* opens up new avenues for Derrida's commentary on the play. It is significant that Derrida (2012, 382) introduces his suggested translation with the declaration 'I shall therefore translate', thus taking responsibility for the translation and the 'three gestures' (ibid.) that it allows him to attempt. Considering these three gestures allows us to explore the value that the translative body brings to the reading.

The first gesture, which is premised on the culinary connotations of the term *relever* (to season, in the sense of seasoning a dish), allows Derrida to argue that mercy intensifies justice, just as salt intensifies the flavour of dishes to which it is added. Derrida (ibid.) attributes this insight to Portia, 'this is precisely what Portia says', but the emphasis in Portia's monologue, notably in the lines which Derrida omits from his citation, is on the harshness of justice if not tempered by mercy: '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' (Shakespeare 1988, 445). Portia's elaboration of how mercy 'seasons' justice thus rests above all on the meaning of 'season' as 'to moderate, alleviate, temper' (OED online 2021), rather than on the sense of intensification. This is a meaning which is now obsolete but which would have been relevant in Shakespeare's day,²⁰ and is also clearly the one that François-Victor Hugo had in mind when he translated Portia's words as 'quand le pardon tempère la justice' (Derrida 1999a, 42). Derrida's reading of mercy as an intensification of justice thus emerges not from a contextualised or historical reading, but from his action of prowling around the word *relève*: the prowling places a pause on the word and awakens meanings other than the one that would most likely be assumed in a swifter reading.

Derrida's second gesture appeals to another semantic value of *relever* that is at best only partially apparent in Portia's own reasoning, namely that of lifting up. In Portia's monologue, earthly power, as invested in the monarch and as symbolised by the monarch's sceptre, takes on divine qualities when justice is moderated by mercy. In Derrida's (2012, 382) reading, in contrast, it is justice itself that is sublimated when combined with mercy: 'mercy elevates justice ... Sublimation, elevation, exaltation, ascension toward a celestial height'. It is important to note that the English word 'seasons' does not carry the sense of elevation in any of its uses, whether in Shakespeare's era or our own: for this particular meaning to be released, the French word 'relever' is thus required. This dependency on translation is even more apparent in the third gesture, in which Derrida (2012, 383) calls attention to the specific traces left by his former act of translating *relève* as *Aufhebung*, suggesting that they allow us to connect Portia's portrayal of mercy with

Hegel's, and specifically with the idea that mercy 'preserv[es] what it denies or destroys' (ibid.). Derrida argues that 'such a *relève* is precisely at issue here, in Portia's mouth' (ibid.), but once again this would not be readily derivable from the English word used by Portia or from the monologue in which it occurs. Instead, it is the halo around the translative body that allows Derrida to make this connection; in *Le Pardon et le Parjure*, it serves as a means of anticipating the much fuller discussion of Hegel's conceptualisation of forgiveness and reconciliation that follows (see the first, second and sixth sessions in Derrida 2020). All of these gestures, then, rely on the 'épreuve' (Derrida 1999a, 21) [trial/test/proof] of translation – whether historical or in the moment – to accumulate meanings and thereby deepen understandings of connections between mercy and justice.

Conclusion

If Derrida's 1998 lecture is thus primarily about mercy and justice rather than translation, it is clear that translation nevertheless plays an important role within it. Through his reflections on the three gestures, Derrida demonstrates the power of translation to prompt philosophical reflection, or as Claudia Ruitenberg (2009) puts it, to use translation 'as a philosophical operation', 'displacing language [to] arrest thinking about a text in a way that assumes that language is understood'. Although the 1998 lecture is one of very few lectures or essays in which Derrida appears explicitly to be putting the spotlight on translation, it is in fact one of many pieces which draw on translation as a catalyst for philosophical enquiry in this way. Asking how something has been or might be translated is a common refrain for Derrida,²¹ and it is never a question that seeks to close down options or reach 'the right' answer, as it were. On the contrary, asking about translation is a way of exposing the heterogeneity that is already present, generating discovery and transformation.

Within translation studies, this vision of translation leads us to connect Derrida's 1998 lecture not with Nida and Gutt, but with the work of scholars who have explored the potential for translation to produce philosophical reflection and literary critique. These might include Chantal Wright's translation of Antoine Berman's commentary on Walter Benjamin's notoriously difficult essay 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', a translation which, in Wright's (2018, 53) words, can be described as 'thinking Benjamin's text trilingually', or Silvia Kadiu's (2019) translations of translation theories as a means of engaging critically with them. In these works, as in Derrida's lecture, it is the performance of translation which deconstructs, opening up difficulties and aporia, and, in exceptional cases – as with *relève* – leaving lasting halos that may in turn become part of a shared inheritance.

Notes

1. I am using the term *paratext* here in the sense in which it is defined in Batchelor (2018, 142): 'A paratext is a consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received'.
2. Vermeer (2005, 116) cites from the French version of Derrida's (1999a) lecture. However, here and throughout the article, I have tried to maximise the clarity of my argument for non-French speakers, and cite from Derrida in English translation whenever the translation is sufficient for the point being made. Where the French words are important, I include both French and English.

3. Here and throughout Venuti's reading of the lecture, the connections to Venuti's own critique of domesticating strategies are strongly evident, both in terms of the argument pursued and the vocabulary employed.
4. See, for example, Derrida (1998, 56–7) (on untranslatable-translatable); Derrida (1987–1998b, 210–212) (on the debt of the translator); 221 (on the economy of translation).
5. See <http://derridaseminars.org/seminars.html> See also Michaud (2018).
6. See Derrida (2020, 11;21).
7. I cite from Venuti's English translation here so that non-French speakers can follow my argument. Venuti's version follows the French version closely and reflects the nature of the insertions accurately.
8. This argument can be further supported with reference to the 'le parjure et le pardon' seminar sessions that were held *after* the 1998 lecture: in these, Derrida refers back to the commentary on *Merchant of Venice* delivered at the seminar the previous year on two occasions, but does not connect the commentary to a theoretical consideration of translation in any way; instead, he reminds his listeners of the interweaving of the theological and the political in the play (see Derrida 2020, 72;131).
9. In the live seminar itself, as a footnote in *Le Parjure et le Pardon* indicates, Derrida used the prompt 'à discuter' to elaborate on the ideas within the bracket in relation to the Jewish and Christian theologies of forgiveness (see Derrida 2019, 98n1).
10. 'I have therefore preferred to suggest that we prowl [rôder] around a small word' (Derrida 2012, 368).
11. See, for example, Derrida's (2002, 33–4) reflections on the French word *parjure*.
12. See Derrida (2012, 366). A longer version of this play with *merci-mercy-merciful* can be found in the opening of the second session of *Le Pardon et le parjure*, showing that it is not only the commentary that Derrida drew from his own seminar material (see Derrida 2019, 77–78).
13. Although Derrida frequently refers to the entities known as 'French' and 'English' in these discussions, we should bear in mind that this is an approximating convenience: elsewhere he famously questions the assumption that one can 'déterminer rigoureusement l'unité et l'identité d'une langue, la forme décidable de ses limites' (Derrida 1987–1998b, 209) [strictly determine the unity and identity of a language, the decidable form of its limits]. Similar arguments are formulated in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* (Derrida 1996, 123–4) and *The Ear of the Other* (Derrida 1985, 100).
14. The religious imagery opens up multiple further intertextual connections with Derrida's work, not least with his exploration of Jewish-Christian relations in the *Merchant of Venice* in the 1998 lecture as well as with his commentary on Walter Benjamin's 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' in 'Des Tours de Babel' (Derrida 1987–1998b, 203–235).
15. Ertel (2011) comes closest to evoking the extent of the Derridean network around *relève*, describing the word as having 'endless connotations ... undetermined origins', and also suggesting that it is the word 'around which [Derrida's] whole lecture revolves'. However, at the same time, in a possible echo of a point made by Venuti [2003] 2013, 75), Ertel (*ibid.*, 15) suggests that *relève* 'appears, if nothing else, as an obvious anachronism', ultimately serving as an example of a translation that would appear relevant (in the English sense) but which is 'not devoid of violence' (*ibid.*, 15–16).
16. The declaration that he is decelerating and starting again approximately a third of the way into the lecture (Derrida 1999a, 28) is also characteristic of Derrida's non-linear approach. Michaud (2018, 147) describes 'the problem of starting and restarting' as concerning 'the entirety of Jacques Derrida's seminar on 'Perjury and Forgiveness'', but the act of beginning over in the middle of a lecture or essay is a frequent feature of Derrida's work. See, for example, the essays in *La Dissémination*, 'Hors Livre' (Derrida 1972, 9) and 'La Pharmacie de Platon' (Derrida 1972, 74). As McCance (2009, 45) observes: 'There is no privileged entry point'.
17. Cixous (2012) refers to this section as an 'immense, painful parenthesis'.

18. This is in fact not surprising when the 1998 lecture is read alongside *Le Parjure et le Pardon*: in the latter, Derrida (2019, 90) introduces this section without explicit mention of the word 'relevé' ('le plat de résistance, que j'ai laissé pour la fin'). 'Relevé' is thus an addition and is the only way in which this passage is altered for the 1998 lecture.
19. In contrast, the final segment of Portia's speech is included in the commentary provided in the original seminar in *Le Pardon et le Parjure* (see Derrida 2019, 99–101). Much of this material is relegated to a footnote in the 1998 lecture.
20. The two examples of this usage in the OED online 2021 are both from Shakespeare.
21. A notable example occurs in *Spectres de Marx*, in which Derrida (1993, 42–8) discusses four existing French translations of the line 'the time is out of joint' from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and also reflects on the imagined translation of Marx's phrase 'zu einer heiligen Hetzjagd gegen dies Gespenst' into French (Derrida 1993, 72–85).

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