
UNTRANSLATABLE YOU

Shireen R.K. Patell*

*Que se passe-t-il donc quand se tait un grand penseur qu'on a connu
vivant, qu'on a lu, et relu, entendu aussi, dont on attendait encore
une réponse, comme si elle devait nous aider non seulement à penser
autrement mais même à lire ce que nous avons cru déjà lire sous sa
signature, et qui tenait tout en réserve, et tellement plus que ce qu'on
croyait y avoir déjà reconnu?*

Jacques Derrida

Adieu

Derrida/America: the euphony of this pairing perhaps makes it seem almost destinal. Derrida/America. The alluring assonance is lost, however, in his language—Derrida/Amérique—displaced by another order of euphony or, perhaps, not. In translation, something is lost, and still, something remains, and remains, perhaps, untranslatable. What is lost and what remains? With Derrida, as we might well know, the question of translation is always at work and at play.

Untranslatability pulls Derrida. In conversation with Hélène Cixous, he explains: “*Ce qui me guide, c’est toujours l’intraductibilité.*” “What guides me is always untranslatability; that the phrase should always be indebted to the idiom.”¹ What propels thinking and provokes reading is this untranslatability—a resistance to transfer that articulates the strange materiality of language, its embodiment. This body is, perhaps, a materiality without matter, but one that underwrites the very possibility of world, me, you. Derrida is drawn by untranslatability, which seems to command that “the body of the word [*le corps du mot*] must be so inseparable from its sense that the translation can’t but lose it.”² This imperative brings to us the strange torque in a word, an internal tension that defines the word’s singularity as the simultaneous expression of a stubborn autonomy and a loss of identity borne of a

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¹ Aliette Armel, *Du mot à la vie: un dialogue entre Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous*, MAGAZINE LITTÉRAIRE, Apr. 2004, at 26 [hereinafter Armel, *Du mot à la vie*] (remarks collected by Aliette Armel) (my translations).

² *Id.*

supposed fusion to sense. The untranslatability that always guides him is articulated in a word-body that retains its singularity precisely as it merges absolutely into its semantic web. The body of this untranslatable word is never more singular than when the distinction between body and sense is, precisely, senseless—such is the embodiment of language.

Here, mourning Derrida, celebrating and reading him, how might we think the difference between this embodiment of language and the literal body on which it touches, if only figurally? Reading untranslatability as a certain imperative to keep the body intact, how can we not also think of the body that absolutely resists metaphorical transfer—the one whose disquieting intensity is held in its being as Rilke says: “Ein *Mal und nichtmehr*.” “Once and no more.”³ The loss of this body resistant, the pain such a loss registers, strikes at the unnameable difference between the literal and the figural. For while the figural may grow, the loss of what we think of as a literal body introduces us to the terminus of metaphor—the zero point of metaphor’s emergence.⁴ Losing the other one, I am confronted by the extravagance of metaphor that grows helplessly over the abyss of the expiration of an “*ein Mal*.”

While by now we can probably mostly concur that the line between the literal and figural dimensions of language is never absolute, the loss of the other indicates the possibility of an absolute difference that outflanks linguistic determination (or indeterminacy) and traces the sheer destruction that attends the possibility of life—that is, in life but not of life. The pain of the vanishing body borne by the ones who remain is perhaps the very experience of aneconomic difference that Derrida considers in *Différance*: “the relation to an impossible presence, . . . expenditure without reserve, . . . the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, . . . the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy.”⁵ *Différance*—differing deferral—is already traced as a difficult if not impossible relation to death, loss and irreversibility—that is, to what can bear no relation, but cannot be itself absolute.

Speaking from an “infinite sadness” Derrida pauses in the abyss of

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Ninth Elegy*, in *DUINO ELEGIES AND THE SONNETS OF ORPHEUS* 61 (A. Poulin, Jr. trans., 1977).

⁴ Perhaps this emergence of metaphor at the ungraspability of death has always been the anxiety of philosophy. The strange economies and aneconomies of metaphor in the text of philosophy, what Derrida shorthands as “*plus de métaphore*,” are exquisitely scrutinized in his *White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy*, in *MARGINS OF PHILOSOPHY* 207 (Alan Bass trans., 1982).

⁵ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Différance*, in *MARGINS OF PHILOSOPHY*, *supra* note 4, at 19 [hereinafter DERRIDA, *Différance*].

this aneconomy as he bids adieu to Emmanuel Levinas.⁶ He wonders how the infinite separation already inscribed in the relation to any other might be hollowed out yet again by a second infinite interruption—the death of the other. How, where, to whom does this interruption of interruption strike? Derrida asks:

If the relation to the other presupposes an infinite separation, an infinite interruption where the face appears, what happens, where and to whom does it happen, when another interruption comes at death to hollow out even more infinitely this first separation, a rending interruption at the heart of interruption itself?⁷

Is this “rending interruption” a violent pain—the pain that the departed other can no longer feel—which breaks the impossible heart of an infinite separation? This second absolute interruption—the death of the other—indicates the far side of the extravagance of metaphor, a zone resistant to metaphor that nonetheless provokes it and is thus lost again in a catachrestic eddy.

The lost body of the other, the body resistant to but still in language, triggers an experience of untranslatability. Textual translation engages this resistance in the putatively figural body of an idiomatic word. The task of the translator crucially involved with these precarious metaphors is at once an act of mourning and an ethical practice, because it is a task dictated by an absolute alterity that signals both loss and law without calculus. The embodiment of untranslatability (if not the untranslatability of body) touches on what Derrida reads as an essential “untouchability” inscribed in Walter Benjamin’s *The Task of the Translator*. Before touching on this untouchability, I would like to repeat Derrida’s penultimate question from his powerful “translation” of Benjamin’s text: “*Comment traduiriez-vous une signature?*” “How would you translate a signature?”⁸

Here, in mourning, in celebration, how do we? How can we?

Derrida, reading Benjamin, reminds us precisely not to confuse the signature with the one who signs. The structure of the text is *sur-vie*, survival, living on, as the very embodiment of a kind of non-organic life that “exceeds biological life and death.”⁹ Yes. But you also later said: “of course.” And here, stupidly, I would like to dwell on what haunts that “of course.”¹⁰ It may take just a moment to get to that course,

⁶ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Adieu*, in *THE WORK OF MOURNING* 197, 204 (Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas eds. & trans., 2001) [hereinafter DERRIDA, *Adieu*].

⁷ *Id.* at 206.

⁸ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Des Tours de Babel*, in *DIFFERENCE IN TRANSLATION* 248 (Joseph F. Graham ed. & trans., 1985) [hereinafter DERRIDA, *Des Tours de Babel*].

⁹ *Id.* at 179.

¹⁰ Here I inhabit the ethical articulation Avital Ronell writes of in *Stupidity*: “I am stupid before the other.” AVITAL RONELL, *STUPIDITY* 60 (2002). I should say that the inscription of

however. Derrida reads Benjamin's *Task of the Translator* as a "[s]trange debt, which does not bind anyone to anyone . . . [b]ut . . . represents the formal law in the immanence of the original text."¹¹ Yes. Here, the embodiment of the text as formal law severs its connection from the palpating bodies of its scriptor and reader. Derrida, of course, insists upon this—the relation of translation is graphematic and not interpersonal or even intersubjective. What is the law that marks this primarily impersonal debt? "To what or whom is [the translator] committed?" Derrida asks. "[I]t is not [the translator], not he himself as a finite and mortal being, who is committed. Then who? It is he, of course, but in the name of whom or what? The question of proper names is essential here."¹² You said "of course": "it is he, of course, but" Here, mourning, reading, I stand in this "of course," there where the *ein Mal* of the writer/translator is conceded and superceded. But here, mourning, reading, it is the one signaled by this "of course" that we wish to keep with us—and not only his writing/translating—even as we acknowledge the text, the signature, how they always already "outlive" the writer even during the writer's organic life.

The embodiment of text divests it of an author—thus somehow *disembodies* the text concomitantly—but marks the emergence of a signature. Derrida starkly describes Benjamin's thought of the debt that makes the translator an "agent of sur-vival. The sur-vival of works, not authors. Perhaps the sur-vival of authors' names and of signatures, but not of authors."¹³ Of course, the survival of the text does not animate or reanimate the writer—and certainly cannot make the other one, departed, breathe again. Translation/writing as prosopopoeia is but a fiction of animating a non-present other in language; it cannot breathe life into the body of the other. Is the body of the other exhausted in the *ein Mal* of its phenomenal appearance? Of course. But still somehow bound by the fantasy of full presence, have we understood the breath both too literally and not literally enough? Let us keep this question beating as we continue to track the untranslatability that attends Derrida.

Derrida: How did your French speak in America, to America? How did the transplantation of your name, your text, here, retrace your signature? You said, in the same conversation with Cixous, just after invoking the body of the word inseparable from its sense: "*Or, paradoxe apparent, les traducteurs se sont beaucoup plus intéressés à mes textes que les Français, en essayant de réinventer dans leur langue l'expérience que je viens de décrire.*" "Now, apparent paradox,

this speech act concludes Ronell's reading of the nefarious role of intelligence testing in the history of America's immigration policy.

¹¹ DERRIDA, *Des Tours de Babel*, *supra* note 8, at 182-83.

¹² *Id.* at 183.

¹³ *Id.* at 179.

translators are much more interested in my texts than are les Français, attempting to reinvent in their languages the experience I just described.”¹⁴ Seemingly sacrificing the French body, searching for a foreign body that could wear its network of senses, its semantic range, like a second skin, translators try to reinvent in their own language what Derrida (and Cixous) “cultivate[s] with la langue française: strange rapport, or familiar estrangement, familiarly strange, (*unheimlich*, *uncanny*).”¹⁵ Only an apparent paradox that Derrida’s texts, as he says, should be among the most translated and the most untranslatable—for translation and untranslatability trace an instance of what he calls “the radical heterogeneity and indissociability of the conditional and the unconditional in general.”¹⁶ What cannot be translated calls for the future translations that perpetually reach toward but can only trace an oblique if missed *touch*—or deal the to-be-translated only glancing blows. Absolute untranslatability is the silent articulation of the absent ideality of translation (a fantasy? a provocation of mourning?) that nonetheless inspires translation, figuration, writing. This absolute untranslatability is in and of language itself, for, as we might learn from Derrida, translation as the encounter with untranslatability doesn’t always take place between discrete languages, but is also an intralingual event—if not the event of language itself. Even one language alone bears untranslatability, as an absent horizon of what is not present to us. But is there ever only one language alone?

In the keynote address Derrida delivered to the 1993 Conference *Deconstruction is/in America, The Time is Out of Joint*—(He delivered this address in French and underlined this fact as he asked forgiveness for offering thanks in his language. If I don’t remember incorrectly, perhaps as the gross embodiment of the unpredictability of alterity, during this lecture a man burst into the room shouting something cryptic to Derrida, and flung a flurry of pamphlets that turned out to be Lyndon Larouche propaganda, before just as quickly fleeing the space.)—Derrida, speaking of translation, citing himself, reminded us of “the only definition that I have ever in my life dared to give of deconstruction: ‘more than one language [plus d’une langue]’ . . . both more than one language and no more of just one language.”¹⁷ Deconstruction as “*plus d’une langue*” is always translating and in translation—and Derrida specifically links the future anterior of deconstruction to America, in translation: “Deconstruction, as we know it, will have been first of all a translation or a transference between

¹⁴ Arnel, *Du mot à la vie*, *supra* note 1, at 26.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 26-27.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 28.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Time is Out of Joint*, in *DECONSTRUCTION IS/IN AMERICA: A NEW SENSE OF THE POLITICAL* 27-28 (Anslem Haverkamp ed., Peggy Kamuf trans., 1995).

French and American (which is to say also, as Freud has reminded us about transference, a love story, which never excludes hatred, as we know).¹⁸ Let us not forget that this translation and transference is always a *literary* affair. Coupling translation and transference, we are reminded that translation is not always or only a smooth process, but takes place in dislocation. Translation is perhaps not always and only the loving touch that Benjamin imagines: “[I]nstead of resembling the . . . original, [the translation] must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification.”¹⁹ Here, translation is a dream of oblique fullness arising from a loving vigilance seemingly untouched by violence.

For Benjamin, it is the geometry of tangency—a singular touch that goes on its way—which renders the relation of a text and its translations. The admixture of literal and figural in the image of the tangent precipitates a clot of meaning in the essence of translation. Literally touching, tangent, and figurally off-course, beside the point, on a tangent, the task of the translator is embodied in the fleeting touch of two texts. Derrida reads this ephemeral yet instituting touch as the tracing of the sacred pull that organizes Benjamin’s essay: “The sacred and the being-to-be-translated [*l’être-à-traduire*] do not lend themselves to thought one without the other. They produce each other at the edge of the same limit.”²⁰ Untouchable is the infinite remoteness of full presence—an experience of immediacy that would reconcile the loss traced by aneconomic *différance*. Benjamin’s sketch of the translator’s task takes place in the wake of an absent pure language that nonetheless can’t but pass and is constantly indicated by the multiplicity of languages; thus, writes Benjamin, “both the original and the translation [are] recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.”²¹ The task of the translator carries forward a lost language into the future, as the possibility of a future, a future translation. Although the “kingdom” of the pure language may never be touched, it excites the reach of the translator’s gesture and is thus hailed in its very withdrawal.

Reading Benjamin, “translating” him, Derrida’s writing is a strange sort of theoretical *style indirect libre* that inhabits the text that it rewrites—touches it and pursues other trajectories as *The Task of the Translator* suggests is indeed the very task. Thus Derrida inscribes and embodies Benjamin’s metaphor of the tangent as reading/writing *practice*, revealing how the task of the translator intimately tracks,

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Task of the Translator*, in ILLUMINATIONS 69, 78 (Hannah Arendt ed., Harry Zohn trans., Schocken Books 1968) (1955).

²⁰ DERRIDA, *Des Tours de Babel*, *supra* note 8, at 191.

²¹ BENJAMIN, *supra* note 19, at 78.

erases and retraces the impossible separation of the literal and figural.

For Derrida, the untouchability evoked by Benjamin's understanding of translation might not be a sign of the transcendent, but it perhaps suggests one possibility for an aneconomic experience—or, perhaps, the aporetic structure of experience *tout court*. As we shall see, the “experience” of aporia conditions, among other impossible experiences, mourning and justice. Reading, writing, translating Benjamin writing of the “true language,” untouchable, but provocative, Derrida concludes: “Let us say that the translation is the experience, that which is translated or experienced as well: experience is translation.”²² Yoking translation and an encounter with impossibility under the name *experience*, Derrida suggests that the trial of life is the task of the translator. Yet Derrida's thinking of the “word inseparable from its sense so that the translation can't help but lose it” does not accent the future in the mode of a prospective nostalgia for a yet-to-appear-wholeness. Although still traced in loss, Derrida's translating task accents what Ralph Waldo Emerson mourns as the “most unhandsome part of our conditions”:²³ “the evanescence and lubricity of all objects.”²⁴ The ungraspability of life in the midst of life that pains Emerson is the very play of *différance* that attends every would-be instant.

If I call now on Emerson, it is because here, mourning, celebrating, reading with Derrida, I am also writing under the weight of an inconsolability that has not only to do with the loss of Jacques Derrida and what he was still to be, to read, to write, but an inconsolability arising from the loss even of loss. Emerson's fitfulness in “Experience” articulates the essential discomfort of mourning. The departed other, too near, and too far, never truly leaving us, but never touching us, forces us to acknowledge the departed other, as Derrida writes, “to be gone forever, irremediably absent . . . [I]t would be unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living *in us* is living *in himself*.”²⁵ Derrida's fine ear and stylus help us read Emerson's grief over mourning and the possibility of life. Reading between Derrida and Emerson tracks an eccentric curve that is part of the translator's inscribing task. This writing curvature also reminds us that Derrida constantly traces his thought as a kind of impossible comparative literature—perhaps the only kind of comparative literature that there is.

Here, mourning, celebrating, reading Derrida, reading Derrida with Emerson, I am wary of the words that come, keenly aware that they can't ever touch the departure of the other—thus sometimes an

²² DERRIDA, *Des Tours de Babel*, *supra* note 8, at 203.

²³ RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Experience*, in *ESSAYS AND LECTURES* 473 (1983).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ JACQUES DERRIDA, *MEMOIRES FOR PAUL DE MAN* 21 (Cecile Lindsay et al. trans., 1986).

impatience with grief that cannot grieve enough—as if grief could have somehow let us touch the loss and thus bear it or relieve it. Emerson, in his manic depressive consideration of *Experience* laments the insufficiency of lament, our inability to stay in the loss, be in it, and experience it as a fullness. “Courting suffering” as a direct route to reality, the longing for loss renders it a fantasy of full experience of reality or presence. Emerson writes: “People give and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth.”²⁶ This reaching for suffering as a figure or substitute for an absent sense of durable truth touches only on “scene-painting and counterfeit.” Actually plunged into the grief of the loss of an irreplaceable other, however, the cut of loss also proves to be a superficial wound for Emerson: “In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me.”²⁷ The loss of the son becomes remote. Loss, untouchable, loses us, leaves us behind, bereft even of being bereft, and still we grieve:

[Calamity] does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.

This abandonment in loss, the infinite separation that cannot be filled by grief as the embodiment of an incontrovertible reality—the death of the other—is this not loss as it is? Always losing, unprofitable, unable to touch the other, unable to stretch the other’s touch toward me.

Emerson’s being-uncathed as the articulation of pain itself names the very “enigma of survival” that marks Freud’s elaboration of trauma.²⁸ Emerson, traumatized, abandoned, compelled to grieve grieving, describes the double-bind of a loss that haunts—never present enough, never remote enough. Emerson’s inconsolability may be the upheaval of what Derrida in his adieu to Levinas reads as an “*entrusted responsibility*”—“the survivor’s guilt . . . a guilt without fault and without debt.”²⁹ It is this entrusted responsibility that keeps the encounter with death from the violent calcification of negativity, although it may pass through that violence. The “entrusted responsibility” pitches the survivor into what cannot be known, thwarting the fantasy of annihilating annihilation, and instead tracing

²⁶ EMERSON, *supra* note 23, at 472.

²⁷ *Id.* at 473.

²⁸ CATHY CARUTH, UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE: TRAUMA, NARRATIVE, AND HISTORY 58 (1996).

²⁹ DERRIDA, *Adieu*, *supra* note 6, at 204.

the entrusted subject as living bearer of the unknown. Of course, this entrusted responsibility can make us squirm.

Emerson ultimately targets grief as a false teacher, for even the loss of his son cannot relieve him from what seems to be a more primary loss marked by the impossibility of essential contact: “Direct strokes she [Nature] never gave us power to make; all of our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual.”³⁰ Emerson laments this obliquity of relation, for what seems to be already an infinite abandonment is only aggravated by the inadequacy of relations. He figures this infinite non-coincidence between two both as a tangent and as a weak copy, a kind of inadequate translation:

There will be the same gulf between every me and thee, as between the original and the picture. . . . Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and, whilst they remain in contact, all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts, the more energy of appentency the parts not in union acquire.³¹

For Emerson, the tangency of two human beings does not necessarily augur a wholeness-to-come, as does the tangent relation of translation Benjamin describes. Instead, Emerson here understands the contingency of relation as another blow to permanence wrought by the inadequation of mind and world, thought and language. The tangential relation leaves the parts untouched hungry for their turn, their trope; the pressure for metaphor—for a fusional substitution that would make something appear and stay—inevitably breaks apart any would-be relation. Life here seems to only be in error, turning away without return, beyond our capacity to repair. Emerson writes: “We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors.”³² The lament Emerson expresses at this point allows for no relief. If we do not wear distorting lenses, but *are* them, there is no release from our mediate existence. Being is in translation and “there will be,” as Derrida says, “no unique name, even if it were the name of Being.”³³

Emerson’s inconsolability knots his grief in the abyss of Derrida’s question concerning the infinite interruption of death that strikes a prior infinite separation that is relation itself. Emerson grieves that he loses the sharp grief of his son’s loss, but earlier in the passage, speaking perhaps not literally, he exclaims: “The only thing that grief has taught

³⁰ EMERSON, *supra* note 23, at 473.

³¹ *Id.* at 488.

³² *Id.* at 487.

³³ DERRIDA, *Différance*, *supra* note 5, at 27.

me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers.”³⁴ Emerson metaphorizes the urgent desire for contact with reality as the willingness to sacrifice even a son; the actual loss of his son, however, reveals the radical unprofitability of the loss—even the loss of the most irreplaceable does not fill the longing for a durable reality, an experience of permanence. The metaphor for the most fervent need for reality—the sacrifice of the dear one—cannot produce the desired return. Loss does not reconstitute the loss of contact by plunging one into an experience of presence (even of loss); loss cannot fix the impermanence dictated by the law of finitude, even in the most elaborate negative determination. Perhaps this infinitization of loss *is* Emerson’s dreamt-of zone free of mediation, not as the fullness of a contact, however, but as the interruption of *différance*, the fissure of metaphor, the provocative resistance of untranslatability.

The perpetual turning and troping of this life, however, pulls Emerson out of the orbit of his depressive resignation, and orients him elsewhere, beyond calculus; somehow, the infinite separation of the human can become a resource *beyond intention*. Emerson ends his *Experience* in a stretch toward a time to come, but one that cannot be touched by “manipular attempts.”³⁵ Recognizing what seems to be the untranslatability of thought into life, Emerson lets fall away the dream of activating what is to come, and instead submits to the present untranslatability of thought into life. To be sure, he appears to do so in a romantic upturn, pointing to a future time of seeming adequation. Let us read carefully, however, the emerging upswing at the end of *Experience*, for what seems to be but a romantic nostalgia for the future may actually be what Derrida calls an “affirmation foreign to all dialectics, the other side of nostalgia”—an aneconomic affirmation of the fact that there will be no unique name.³⁶

Despite the present untranslatability of thought into life, and the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects,” Emerson holds ground in the face of those who would challenge him to create a world that accords with his thought. And he does so through a turn of the phrase, the positing power of a language that need not proceed by the calculus of present possibility: “Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”³⁷ Emerson’s upbeat is

³⁴ EMERSON, *supra* note 23, at 472-73.

³⁵ *Id.* at 492.

³⁶ DERRIDA, *Différance*, *supra* note 5, at 27.

³⁷ *Id.* at 492.

powered by a performative positing articulated in the rectitude of an address, a resuscitating apostrophe—"Up again, old heart!"—that flies in the face of ridicule and defeat, announcing a transformation to come. This future difference—the victory of all justice—is staked precisely on the obliquity of translation.³⁸ What comes into being does so askew, appears otherwise, is, precisely, as he says, *transformed*. The event of this translation is unpredictable; but rather than lament this ineluctable translation borne of a recalcitrant untranslatability or untouchability of essence, Emerson displaces, transfers the "true romance" into this transformation itself, letting fall away the fusional desire for immediacy and transparency. Thus Emerson translates the inconsolability of separation into an opening.³⁹

Derrida, too, understands the performative opening for justice as the aporetic experience of both an ineluctable obliqueness or translation, and an obligatory "*rectitude* of address."⁴⁰ This straightforwardness "we must not forget when we want justice, when we want to be just,"⁴¹ he writes. The obliquity of justice, however, indicates that even within this obligation for rectitude, a head on approach to justice is impossible, or unjust: "one cannot speak *directly* about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say 'this is just' and even less 'I am just,' without immediately betraying justice, if not law (*droit*)."⁴² For Derrida, this obliqueness is, among other things, a consequence of *différance*, and it cannot be overcome rationally. And yet, Derrida is uneasy about his attachment to obliqueness, for it seems to not be oblique enough; this figure of obliqueness is both too efficient rhetorically and too geometric, calculable: "I have always been ill at ease with this word of which I have, however, so often made use The oblique remains the choice of a strategy that is still crude This displacement still

³⁸ In his *Emerson and the Climates of History*, Eduardo Cadava suggests "that this transformation [of thought into action] can only happen with the transformation of the language within which and with which we encounter the world and everything in it. It can only occur, that is, through a task of thinking that is also the labor of reading and writing." EDUARDO CADAVA, *EMERSON AND THE CLIMATES OF HISTORY* 14 (1997).

³⁹ In her *After Loss. What Then?*, the afterward to the volume of essays *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler probes the abyssal economies of loss and the loss of loss precisely as the possibility of an other political agency:

And perhaps most difficult, the loss of loss itself: somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full "recovery" is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.

Judith Butler, *Afterward to LOSS: THE POLITICS OF MOURNING* 467 (David L. Eng & David Kazanjian eds., 2003).

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*, 11 *CARDOZO L. REV.* 919, 949 (Mary Quaintance trans., 1990) [hereinafter Derrida, *Force of Law*].

⁴¹ *Id.* at 949.

⁴² *Id.* at 935.

appears too direct, linear, in short, economic.”⁴³ The relation of the *oblique* to that to which it would refer is still too straightaway, and so Derrida decides to shake it off rhetorically: “Let us therefore forget the oblique.”⁴⁴ This performative forgetting of a word insufficient does not, however, mark an end to obliqueness, as if one could simply repress the signifier that always misses its mark, and thus terminate the mediation that it inevitably signs. Obliqueness is inscribed by the trace and cannot be finished off:

Can one ever finish with obliqueness? . . . As soon as there are words—and this can be said of the trace in general, and of the chance that it is—direct intuition no longer has any chance. One can reject, as we have done, the word ‘oblique’; one cannot deny the destinerrant indirection as soon as there is a trace. Or if you prefer, one can only deny it.⁴⁵

There is no straightening the obliqueness, but neither is there any possibility of rendering its obliqueness properly—for the oblique is the very skewering of adequation, of direct intuition. The irremediability of this obliqueness, however, can be pressured by a performative positing that refuses unreasonably: “Let us forget the oblique.” The straits of the oblique introduce another encounter with untranslatability as *aporia*—the impossibility of getting from here to there, of following the “destinerrant indirection” as a path, a method, or an escape route. There is no escaping what escapes us.

This submission to *aporia* is, for Derrida, the trial of experience itself, a kind of skip in experience that names the very possibility of justice:

As its name indicates, an experience is a traversal [I]n this sense it is impossible to have a full experience of *aporia* . . . of something that does not allow passage. An *aporia* is a non-road. From this point of view, justice would be the experience that we are not able to experience But . . . I think that there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of *aporia*. Justice is an experience of the impossible.⁴⁶

This impossibility of experience that names justice is, precisely, a *passion* for justice. The subject’s intention is nullified in this passion. Nearly paralyzed in the crossroads of undecidability, of justice beyond calculus, the exhausted subject is traced in its responsibility before the law, and for the law. The “experience” of *aporia* cannot be harnessed into a will or a strategy for it blows the subject away. Thus, for

⁴³ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Passions: “An Oblique Offering”*, in ON THE NAME 3, 13-14 (Thomas Dutoit ed., David Wood trans., Stanford University Press 1995) (1993) [hereinafter DERRIDA, *Passions*].

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 14.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 30.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *Force of Law*, *supra* note 40, at 947.

example, a government that tries to exploit the aporia at the heart of justice, or capitalize on the destinerrance of the signifier is decidedly not “postmodern” or “poststructural” or “Derridean,” but merely an agency of cynical violence. Indeed, the refusal to contend with the non-knowledge precipitated by the experience of the impossible—aporia—the foreclosure of alterity, is a threat to the possibility of a just rule of law and democracy itself.

Aporia as fissured instance of untranslatability touches on the secret that for Derrida links democracy and literature. The entanglement of translation and untranslatability marks perhaps the very secret of the secret that literature always bears but never reveals, and this secret is traced by Derrida as one contour of the secret—and perhaps the very allure—of democracy. In *Passions: An Oblique Offering*, Derrida perhaps conjures America under this name *democracy* for which it is exemplary, even in or as its failure. *Passions*, he tells us, was written in response to an invitation to write the introduction to the book *Derrida: A Critical Reader*. Reflecting on the economies of invitation, among other things, Derrida probes the possibility of the non-response—of what I wrongly abbreviate here as the possibility of a responsible non-response—more precisely he encounters the multiply aporetic structure of the non-response. “Verifying,” as he says, the limits of the response, Derrida, wonders what escapes the sacrificial regression of a “Critical Reader” a priori and endlessly exposed to critical reading. It is at this question of escaping a sacrificial economy that he invokes the secret, a secret at the heart of both literature and democracy. I cannot here do justice to the strangeness of this secret as Derrida unfolds it in *Passions*, but one might think of this secret as the impossible web of all those aneconomic instances that have long traced Derrida’s thought.

What links literature and democracy, and what secret?—“the right to say everything” and that which subtends this right, indeed makes it possible: the possibility of the non-response. Here I am going to quickly run through—too quickly—Derrida’s elaboration of the unshareable but shared secret, sketching the link in secrecy of literature and democracy. Literature as the right to say everything, he says

ties its destiny . . . to the space of democratic freedom. . . . No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. . . . But this authorization to say everything . . . (which goes together with democracy, as the apparent hyper-responsibility of a “subject”) acknowledges a right to absolute nonresponse, just where there can be no question of responding, of being able to or having to respond. . . . This contradiction [between a calculable political subject and the hyperbolic right to the nonresponse, the secret] also indicates the task (the task of thought, also theoretico-practical task) for any democracy to come. . . . There is in literature, in the

exemplary secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret.⁴⁷

Literature, its exemplary secret, is its absolute exposure, exercising the authorization to say everything, while still leaving the secret intact, untouched. Thus literature has something to teach us about the connection between the freedom of speech and a certain right to absolute privacy that secretly subtends that very freedom.

This secret of literature accompanies what Derrida, as he says, likes about literature. And here he confesses that he could do without literature per se (really? I'm not sure I believe him—one thinks of all of the dazzling readings of literature undertaken by Derrida):

Perhaps all I wanted to do was to confide or confirm my taste (probably unconditional) for literature, more precisely for literary writing . . . [N]ot that I want to reduce everything to it, especially not philosophy. Literature I could fundamentally do without, in fact, rather easily. If I had to retire to an island, it would be particularly history books, memoirs, that I would doubtless take with me, and that I would read in my own way, perhaps to make literature out of them, unless it would be the other way round . . .⁴⁸

Encountering reading as this “making literature or literature making,” one might hear the phrase “literary culture” inflected as a laboratory test: “Let’s take a literary culture.” Sampling literature, or scoring it, reading as inscription, disseminates literature. Reading literature—or, literary reading—reaches toward the untranslatable and makes literature. Carrying forward the untranslatable also bears the impossible charge of mourning. In *Béliers*, Derrida writes of “keeping an ear out, listening faithfully, to let come the other word, especially as it is as yet unintelligible, inaudible, untranslatable.”⁴⁹ This attention/reading/listening keeps the other, as he says, “*en haleine, c’est-à-dire en vie*” “in breath, keeps the other alive.”⁵⁰

Keeping the other “in breath, alive”: this is not simply a prosopopoeia. This compelled but unauthorized custodianship is reading as the retracing of the trace, of who or what is not simply here (or there). Trope flashes its illocutionary potential. Keeping the other “in breath, alive”: this is not only a prosopopoeia, but reading, reading at and as the limit of cognition; reading in the breach that severs language from referent. At the limit, reading, perhaps, as the “survivor of the ‘without-response’”; reading there, keeping the other *en vie*, when the other, perhaps departed, no long has the *freedom* of the non-

⁴⁷ DERRIDA, *Passions*, *supra* note 43, at 28-29.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 27-28.

⁴⁹ JACQUES DERRIDA, *BÉLIERS. LE DIALOGUE ININTERROMPU: ENTRE DEUX INFINIS, LE POÈME 38* (2003) (my translation).

⁵⁰ *Id.*

response.⁵¹ Reading: is this not also the task of the translator, the task of keeping the other's word, come what may—what future, what monster, what ghost, who, what—come what may? Reading is/as what Derrida calls in *Plato's Pharmacy* “a cutting trace.”⁵² Is there danger in this cutting? Perhaps. But no justice without danger and, he reminds us that despite these cuts, the text is “indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading.” Reading, inscribing, responsible to the word of the other, we trace, but the text regenerates behind the cutting trace, ensnaring, enveloping the reader/writer in the web of a web—as if we were never there, reading. But we were and are. Come what may. The regenerating web also keeps us there, reading, impossibly, endlessly.

Reading, inscribing, we recognize both the right to say everything of literature and its secret, but reading, even the cutting trace, leaves the secret intact, untouched, untouchable. We cannot touch the secret of the other, for it is “what does not answer,” even as it makes every response possible.⁵³ This secret pulses as the living impossibility of: “No responsiveness . . . Shall we call this death?”⁵⁴ asks Derrida. “I see no reason not to call that life, existence, trace,”⁵⁵ he answers. “And it is not the contrary,”⁵⁶ he says. No responsiveness traces the unconditionality of death as the very possibility of life, trace, writing, reading. Reading translates this non-response that traces nonetheless. Being in the shadow of this non-response, mourning lets reading be, suggests Derrida: “Readability bears this mourning: a phrase can be readable, it must be able to become readable, up to a certain point, without the reader, he or she, or any other place of reading, occupying the ultimate position of addressee. This mourning provides the first chance and the terrible condition of all reading.”⁵⁷ Marking this absence of responsiveness, this secret, (which is also the secret of an untranslatability that invites but is never touched by any translation)—marking this secret, reading/writing bears the unbearable: the other's ceaseless departure. And thus could you, perhaps, translate a signature—tracing it, reading, apostrophizing, translating the untranslatable without end.

⁵¹ In *Passions*, Derrida considers the freedom to not respond—but this is, of course, a finite freedom. The non-response is also traced in *Adieu*, when Derrida cites this non-responsiveness as the very trait of Levinas's understanding of death and the other. Derrida, *Adieu*, *supra* note 6, at 203.

⁵² JACQUES DERRIDA, *Plato's Pharmacy*, in *DISSEMINATION* 61, 63 (Barbara Johnson trans., University of Chi. Press 1981) (1972).

⁵³ Derrida *Passions*, *supra* note 43, at 31.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Lyotard and Us*, in *THE WORK OF MOURNING*, *supra* note 6, at 211, 220.

A work of mourning and the very task of a democracy to come, for still—

—But maybe you do hear us. First, let's listen to what you wrote concerning the formal discourse of mourning, the classical genre of funeral orations:

In its classical form, the funeral operation had a good side, especially when it permitted one to call out directly to the dead, sometimes very informally [*tutoyer*]. This is of course a supplementary fiction, for it is always the dead in me, always the others standing around the coffin whom I call out to. But because of its caricatured excess, the overstatement of this rhetoric at least pointed out that we ought not to remain among ourselves.⁵⁸

You (and Paul de Man) have often taught us about the necessary fiction of the apostrophe, the destinerrance, as you might say, of the address. Of course, it is always the other in us (and more) that is addressed in the apostrophe. But isn't it also always the departed one? Can the departed one hear us? How can we determine ultimately the range of hearing? Can the departed one hear us? Is the departed one responding? We cannot say. We cannot be certain. The articulation of this fact—more as disposition, perhaps, than knowledge—is the very stroke of grief. If I am inspired by the departed one, the other in me attends every tracing, animates my gestures, translates my actions, lives—is this just a metaphor?

Untranslatable you. Who is being addressed, when I say “you”? And who says? Is it you? Have you thought the call was for you? Can you be mistaken?⁵⁹ Are you but an auditory voyeur? “You” is/are all of these possibilities, you, untranslatable and calling for reading—“you” marks the interminability of address that Derrida indicates when he links mourning and readability. The tensional structure in the “you”—grammatical position, shifter, *and* singular, most near, possibly even most intimate—embodies the aporia of the double law of obliquity of reference and rectitude of address. Staying with this tension, this is perhaps the aporetic experience of mourning and justice, and the very task of a democracy to come, for still—perhaps even more now, should such a thing be possible—the time is out of joint.

And we miss you. But perhaps I should say it in your language, which better bears the radical passivity of being in absence: *Vous nous manquez*.

⁵⁸ JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Deaths of Roland Barthes*, in *THE WORK OF MOURNING*, *supra* note 6, at 31, 51-52.

⁵⁹ In *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell, reading Kafka's “Abraham,” explores the exposure of the ethical subject who mistakenly responds to a call, but who justly not respond. See RONELL, *supra* note 10, at 306-10.