UNIVERSITE PARIS OUEST NANTERRE LA DÉFENSE

TROPISMES

N° 16

The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

Publié avec le Concours du Conseil Scientifique
de l'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

2010

CENTRE DE RECHERCHES ANGLOPHONES

What is a "Relevant" Theory? Translating Derrida's Shakespeare

1.

The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now.
(Shylock, The Merchant of Venice 3.1.80)

How are we to respond to this "now," to this doubled "now" in a play written four hundred years ago? Shylock – for it is Shakespeare's character, the one who has been used to exemplify "the Jew" in so many different contexts who speaks these lines – Shylock uses a form of the now that opens it up, divides it by (at least) doubling and splitting its temporal frame. What is he trying to say here? The first part of the sentence introduces a rupture: from this moment on things will be and already are different, and yet this is a difference that has already been prepared for, that was seemingly already part of the past because it had already been uttered. The curse that Shylock invokes is the Biblical curse on the Jewish people (it is in Matthew 27: 25 and Luke 13: 34-5) that stems from their role in the condemnation and death of Jesus. Like any example of how to do things with words, the performative force of this curse has only been deferred; it has always already shadowed Judeo-Christian relations and all of the varieties of

anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic feeling that have surfaced – and continue to surface – throughout the history of what we call Western culture. And yet Shylock goes on to say that he has never felt it until "now." A second now, this time not to be understood in the framework of a history that is almost coexistent with the history of Christianity itself, but instead as a dimension of a personal history (to the extent that we can meaningfully say that of a fictional character). In other words (and although I will only explicitly mention it in one or two places, this paper is never about anything other than the "other words" of translation), it is possible to live within a historical continuum that has always already been written – that has always been poised, then, on the dotted line that marks the loosening and tightening of the bond between performative and constative – without ever "feeling" it. What this suggests is that what Shylock identifies as the effect of the curse is not simply identical with anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism itself; there have been plenty of occurrences of the latter in the play up to this point, but they have not managed to acquire the exemplary status that Shylock wishes to recognize here. But he feels it "now," at the moment when it is no longer possible not to admit the loss of his daughter and his ducats. This is not an isolated moment. Just as Shylock's jewels are immediately converted into other currency as he calculates their worth, Jessica's first scene in the play has already involved her explanation that she will become a Christian when she elopes with Lorenzo. Conversion equals translation, but it also equals catastrophe.

2.

Now we are beginning or pretending to open the door <that impossible door, sublime or not>. We are on the threshold. (Derrida, "Hostipitality," 6)

Shylock's lines are only part of the play's obsessive return to "now," and this is a term which occurs in some form some 46 times. It is not therefore surprising that this should be linked repeatedly with ideas of currency or of relevance. Yet alongside this temporal reference, *The Merchant of Venice* is also obsessively fixated on the notion of the

"port": there is the literal port of Venice, as well as those to which Antonio's ships sail and from which they (eventually) return; "port" is also a state or style of living; it is a mark of dignity, privilege and power (in the references to the "portly sail" or "magnificoes of greatest port"); it is in the "portraits," including the mirror image of a blinking idiot as much as Portia's counterfeit in the casket scenes; it echoes through "merry sport," "Report," "proportion" and "importunity," that litter the play, but it is most of all present in the name of "Portia."

So what is a port? Most obviously (at least in dictionaries), it is a haven or harbour or refuge, or the town which houses or acts as one; a port is a gate or doorway; it is an aperture or that which covers it. It is the threshold, the point at which land and sea meet, where inside and outside coincide; it is an opening of one space on to another. "Port" is the space through which someone or something passes, enters or exits. It is where a cargo can be loaded or unloaded. But port is also always *portare*, to carry, and as such it is the figure of transport (including the act of transportation that translates "metaphor"), it is the act of passing, or of bearing a load.

3.

What is the status of the present in that form of critical response which goes under the name of presentism? Presentism has always haunted historicist criticism as its evil twin. Presentism is either a form of historicism that is superior to new historicism because it is more finely attuned to the political and cultural concerns of the present (as in the work of Terence Hawkes), or else it is inferior to historicism – new or especially old – because it is too bound up with the distorting effects of a concern with the political and cultural concerns of the present (thinking here, as does Hawkes, of the work of David Scott Kastan)[1]. Presentism – as the name suggests – attempts to tie itself to a "now" of reading, to a moment that is frozen as endlessly present, even if that condemns it to an unavoidable transience, to a perpetual hollowing of

[1] See Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

the "now." Presentism's now is always a now that arrives too late: as a form of criticism it testifies to a moment that has already escaped, or else it inevitably betrays the moment to which it wishes to be faithful, to which it confesses or professes its fidelity, by falling in behind it, by following in its footsteps. The problem with presentism, then, is that it can never make itself punctually present, even though this attention to the present is its professed critical virtue. What I am saying here does not amount to a charge of naivety against the presentists. This predicament is caught very well, in fact, in Terence Hawkes's discussion of the moves towards devolution that took place in 1999 in Britain and which, he suggests, mean that Shakespeare's plays must be read differently: "That texts can never be read after 1999 in quite the same way that they could be read before that date, that their 'meaning', now thoroughly suffused with different levels and intensities of irony, seems to change before our eyes, offers a fine example of how the present helps to mould the past. It's something that the zealous pursuit of *wie es eigentlich gewesen* not only cannot supply but must, to some extent, obscure."[2] Avoiding a Rankean, historicist urge towards an illusory purity of historical knowledge, Hawkes nonetheless cannot avoid conjuring a dialectical relation of past and present that renders the "now" which he invokes forever open to further transformation. As such, this present moment is already hollowed out by the future for which it already prepares itself. Now is not now, or, at least, not for long.[3]

4.

At the end of the first scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio says:

[2] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.

[3] Please see my discussion in "Shakespeare's Words of the Future: Promising *Richard III*," *Textual Practice* 19.1 (2005): 13-30.

Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea,
Neither have I money nor commodity
To raise a present sum. Therefore go forth –
Try what my credit can in Venice do;
That shall be racked, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.
Go presently inquire, and so will I,
Where money is, and I not question make
To have it of my trust or for my sake.

Antonio's speech offers us a vision of speculation, a speculative vision of the speculator who can only hope to make his money present (a prospect that seems increasingly elusive as I write this in the autumn of 2008). Reliant on futures, Antonio the speculator is forced to try his credit, but this is possible only by underwriting successive acts of departure: Antonio's ships are at sea; he tells his friend Bassanio to go forth, so that he can fund another journey out, to Belmont and to Portia, venturing and adventuring as another arrow is fired after one that is lost. The present is in need of investigation: "Go presently inquire ... Where money is." He is looking for capital (and thus for a new heading, to invoke Derrida's usage).[4] The answer is that money lies between "ports," between Venice and an undisclosed abroad, between Venice and Belmont, between a past moment of departure and a future moment of return.

5.

In an interview with Derek Attridge in which he confesses his desire to become an expert on Shakespeare, Jacques Derrida comments on the reading of *Romeo and Juliet* that appears in "Aphorism Countertime" as exemplary of a kind of iterability:

[4] Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992); *L'Autre cap* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991).

> *Here the example of Shakespeare is magnificent. Who demonstrates better that texts fully conditioned by their history, loaded with history, and on historical themes, offer themselves so well for reading in historical contexts very distant from their time and place of origin … This has to do with the structure of a text, with what I will call, to cut corners, its iterability, which both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization. All this is historical through and through. The iterability of the trace (unicity, identification, and alteration in repetition) is the condition of historicity – as too is the structure of anachrony and contretemps which I talk about in relation to Romeo and Juliet: from this point of view my brief essay is not only 'historical' in one or other of its dimensions, it is an essay on the very historicity of history, on the element in which 'subjects' of history, just as much as the historians, whether or not they are 'historicist', operate.*[5]

A few lines later, Derrida proposes: "There is no history without iterability." Read in this way, Shakespeare's texts themselves become ports. They are loaded with history and yet also offer a way in to history and historicity. The rooting of the text in a particular context at the same time opens that context up to recontextualization. That is, the historicist move to locate the text in context – to anchor it, we might say – enacts a simultaneous dislocation of that context. As I have already suggested, this is as true of the present contexts invoked by presentism as it is of those "in" the past that are the refuges of historicism.

6.

The necessity of departure is not an accidental feature of *The Merchant of Venice*, that is, it is not merely a plot device designed to defer the outcome of the narrative or to prolong the pleasure that its resolution brings. Rather, the insistence on and of departure in the play

[5] Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 33-75, 63-4.

marks its relation to a certain understanding of economy that operates according to a circular logic of venture and return, but which – like all travel narratives – also circles around notions of "home." Antonio's ships are due to come home in time for him to settle his bond; Portia's suitors desire to return home rather than risk all; the Duke wishes to take Balthasar home to help him celebrate his victory in court, and so on. But the crucial home in the play is Belmont. Belmont figures so strongly in *The Merchant of Venice* because it is the home that can and must be transferred; the entire subplot of the play revolves around the marriage that will pass Portia's home and possessions – as well as her body – from her father to her husband. We might say, then, that this is a plot in which the guest will become the host. This might look like a figure of absolute hospitality, perhaps, in which all rights of ownership and propriety are rendered up willingly to the guest, but there are good reasons for thinking not. The openness of Belmont is repeatedly contrasted with another home: Shylock is the one who wishes his daughter to "stop [his] house's ears" so that its threshold will not even be penetrated by Christian noise. Yet as Derrida suggests, in this mercantile play's insistence on the values of home, there could be nothing more conventional in its thinking through of economy:

> *What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law [loi] (nomos) and of home [maison] (oikos, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). Nomos does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (nemein), the law of sharing or partition [la loi du partage], the law as partition [la loi comme partage] (moira), the given or assigned part, participation. Another sort of tautology already implies the economic within the nomic as such. As soon as there is law there is partition: as soon as there is nomy, there is economy. Besides the value of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously at the center, if that can still be said of a circle. [...] This motif of circulation can lead one to think that the law of economy is the – circular – return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home. So one would have to follow the odyssean structure of the economic narrative. Oikonomia would always*

> *follow the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved ones or to himself; he goes away only in view of repatriating himself, in order to return to the home from which [à partir duquel] the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen [le parti pris], the lot divided, destiny commanded (moira).*[6]

Circularity thus establishes itself as the link between spaces that we might be tempted to think of as separate, that lend themselves to conceptualization in terms such as private/public, commercial/domestic, and so on. And yet there is no space or commodity within a space that is not open to the possibility of exchange. Isn't it this that makes the ring one of the key motifs of the play (as well as being the word on which it ends)?

7.

This all leads us towards a simple question: is it possible to read *The Merchant of Venice* in the present, and, if so, what might such a reading look like? The difficulty that the play presents is that it is perhaps all too obvious what is "relevant" about the play, that is, it is all too obvious – and isn't this always a good reason to be suspicious and to put us on guard? – what its context is "now." This "now," of course, is a reference to a moment that cannot easily be contained by the word now, it is a historical moment through and through and yet it is a moment that cannot safely be consigned to history. *The Merchant of Venice* is a play about ... well, what exactly? The terminology fails at this point because to use "anti-Semitism" is anachronistic – or so we are often told by historicists – because anti-Semitism is a notion that is intimately tied to racial theories that are the product, perhaps even the most marked characteristic, of the nineteenth century. Contemporary readings of Shakespeare's play thus occupy a position "now" that is itself defined by two instances of that which was to and has become its

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps : 1 : la fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), pp. 17-18. Translated by Peggy Kamuf as *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 6-7.

context, namely, the emergence of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. So again, now, we might return to a passage from Derrida that I have already cited, and say with him that: "Here the example of Shakespeare is magnificent. Who demonstrates better that texts fully conditioned by their history, loaded with history, and on historical themes, offer themselves so well for reading in historical contexts very distant from their time and place of origin?" The anti-Judaism of the play – by which I mean the anti-Judaic logic that it stages and by so doing reveals the rhetoric and the allegory that it theatricalizes – is both there to be excavated as a historicist object and operates simultaneously as that which breaks and breaks with any anchorage of the text in the early modern context. The play certainly travels, then, but it is heavily laden.

8.

The "port" marks the crossing of a border, or else it indicates the point at which the border is crossed. As such, it is both an exemplification of that which historicism would most wish to comprehend and simultaneously an exemplification of why such efforts at comprehension will always be frustrated. Derrida hints at this when he says:

> *I think that the problematic of the border and of framing – that is, of context – is seriously missing in new historicism; and I think that this is the question new historicists should address with the utmost urgency in some of the texts called deconstructionist. This would avoid the reconstitution of a new archivism or of a new documentalism.*[7]

[7] Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. and intro. David Carroll (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 63-94, 92-3. For Derrida's most sustained work on the "frame," see *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978). Translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod as *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For his work on the problems of the archive, see *Mal d'archive* (Paris: Galilée, 1995). Translated by Eric Prenowitz as *Archive*

While the historicists have all-too-evidently retreated ever further from the theoretical insights that made the newness of the "new" historicism possible (a withdrawal ironically made more, rather than less, apparent in the conceptually vacant invocation of a new materialism within Shakespeare studies), it is also reasonable to ask whether the presentists – in their movement beyond or after new historicism – given sufficient attention to this problematic.[8]

What the presentists are looking for is the *relevance* of a work of art. Terence Hawkes suggests of the presentist project that:

> *If an intrusive, shaping awareness of ourselves, alive and active in our own world, defines us, then it deserves our closest attention. Paying the present that degree of respect might more profitably be judged, not as a "mistake," egregious and insouciant, blandly imposing a tritely modern perspective on whatever texts confront it, but rather as the basis of a critical stance whose engagement with the text is of a particular character. A Shakespeare criticism that takes that on board will not yearn to speak with the dead. It will aim, in the end, to talk to the living.*[9]

I confess I quote this in part for the attraction of the metaphor of "taking on board." But more tellingly, the distance that Hawkes wants to put between his own project and that of the new historicists is apparent in the echo of Greenblatt in that parting shot, but it still opens up his discussion to the form of critique that I am attempting here. What Hawkes is arguing for is a theory of relevance that rests on the distinction between a living present and dead past. But what I have been implicitly asking is whether or not this is a tenable distinction in the case of a play such as *The Merchant of Venice*.

Fever: A Freudian Impression (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[8] For a fuller – if still introductory – exploration of this topic, please see the "After Greenblatt" section of my *Stephen Greenblatt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

[9] Hawkes, Shakespeare in the Present, 4.

9.

As Derrida's essay on this play suggests, Shakespeare's texts – like any literary texts – always contain hints that they may call into question the relevance of theory (and any theory of relevance). As he asks himself in "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?":

> *What is most often called "relevant"? Well, whatever feels right, whatever seems pertinent, apropos, welcome, appropriate, opportune, justified, well-suited or adjusted, coming right at the moment when you expect it – or corresponding as is necessary to the object to which the so-called relevant action relates: the relevant discourse, the relevant proposition, the relevant decision, the relevant translation.*[10]

Like the "relevant," presentism ties itself to the opportune, the apropos and the pertinent. But, rather than taking this to characterize a form of criticism, what this might more fruitfully be seen as is a model of citation. That is, the decision that a literary text is *relevant* to a present moment leads to the repetition of that text through the translation of it into other terms, and this is a translation that we might properly characterize as an act of reading. As such, what the presentist critic claims – and here lies both the weakness and the potential strength of presentism – is that a text is readable at a given moment. And yet, within the critical rhetoric of presentism itself, the claim seems always to be larger than that, to entail that somehow a text is more resonant "now," that it is more worthy of reading at this moment than it has been (and perhaps will be) at any other, or at least that the power of the reading made possible in and by the present context renders those other readings redundant or simply weak. In the invocation of this critical "more," however, we are thrown back upon an economic calculation from which, in truth, we have never departed. Like other critics, and like readers still naively wedded to the idea of some pleasure to be gained from reading, presentists turn to a particular text

[10] Derrida, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 174-200, 177.

because they think it will give them a good return on their investment of time and energy in the act of reading. Theirs is ultimately a performative model in which the energy of the present is returned and intensified in the "here and now" of present performance.[11] Hawkes speaks candidly of critical "investment" (4), as well as of the ability of and necessity for presentist critics to connect "fruitfully" (5) with current concerns, and so on.

10.

In this respect, Shakespeare's plays become an emblem or perhaps (in de Man's sense) an allegory of writing and reading *per se*. As Derrida repeatedly suggests in texts which span his career, iterability is not an accident that befalls writing but is the very condition of its possibility, in other words it is structurally necessary for writing to be writing. This notion of iterability – and the –ability suffix is itself a mark of the open structure to which Derrida gestures – is itself linked to the model of citation that I referred to a moment ago in attempting to characterize presentism as a mode of reading. Explaining the centrality of citability to the written mark's ability both to root itself in and break with a given context, Derrida proposes that:

> *Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage].*[12]

Any statement can be quoted, that is, put between quotation marks and used in any conceivable context by anyone. This is both

[11] Hawkes, Shakespeare in the Present, 5.

[12] Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 12.

exemplary, and what makes exemplarity possible. What he goes on to call the utterance's "graftability" (modelled on the grafting of plants or trees) is not necessarily a positive feature of writing, since it is as much a threat as a promise, just as the future uses to which texts can endlessly be put is as monstrous as it is reassuring. The threat and monstrosity must always remain structurally possible if the future is to be a genuine future (to come or *à-venir*) rather than simply an unfolding of that which is readable in the present. *The Merchant of Venice* contains its own recognition of this structure in the suggestion that: "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose." But the play also seems to offer a commentary on this idea through its insistence – which I have already noted – on rings. Rings operate as structures that have no absolute centre but function instead as apertures to be entered or withdrawn from, like the homes that can always be occupied by another possessor, but also like the human bodies that are inevitably described and drawn into these circles through the repeated sexualization of the ring as metaphor for bodily openness. The embodied ring – most obviously figured in the body of the woman but complicated by the self-conscious transvestism and homoeroticism of the play – is promising and threatening, its openness both seductive and monstrous. Portia as the port has been potentially open to any suitor, and the stage business with the subplot regarding the rings is a marker of the symbolic attempts to close her (body) to anyone other than Bassanio. This is equally readable in the play's figuration of the ships that cannot be located with any certainty, that can be given no known or final anchorage, and that are thus always an object of anxiety until they are safely reported as having returned "home."

11.

In this play, which turns upon notions of worth and equivalence, that circulates figures of conversion and translation, there is no absolute anchoring for value. Derrida suggests of Shakespeare's play that: "In *The Merchant of Venice*, as in every translation, there is also, at the very heart of the obligation and the debt, an incalculable

equivalence, an impossible but incessantly alleged correspondence between the pound of flesh and money, a required but impractical translation between the unique literalness of a proper body and the arbitrariness of a general, monetary, or fiduciary sign."[13] The lack of fixity in exchange, even within the law, means that it is always possible to find that there is no firm ground on which to base a judgement. When Derrida comes to describe the way in which Shylock fears that he will lose everything through being told that he must forgive Antonio his debt (as well as his insults), he falls back on a curiously apposite idiom that must puzzle English readers of his essay, since in the absence of a footnote it remains in effect untranslated. Of Portia's insistence that Shylock must renounce the claim to his bond and forgive Antonio, Derrida says: "Shylock also senses that it is an attempt to steer his ship in circles, if I can speak this way about a story that involves a ship and a shipwreck."[14] The French text says: "Shylock pressent aussi qu'on est en train de le mener en bateau, si je puis dire dans cette histoire de bateau et de naufrage."[15] Idiomatically, *mener quelqu'un en bateau* means to fool someone, for them to be taken in by a story ("l'abuser en inventant des histoires," says the Littré in its entry for "bateau"). This idiomatic French expression is certainly opportune here, so opportune in fact that Derrida worries about whether it should be used at all in this context, but he elects to use it anyway. To take someone in, then, to fool them, is to make them go in circles, to make them describe a ring, to enter into an economy, to return endlessly to the point of departure. What is significant is that this is achieved by narrative, by telling stories or histories (the French "histoires" contains both). As Derrida puts it, Shylock realises that, "In the name of this sublime panegyric of forgiveness, and economic ruse, a calculation, a stratagem is being plotted" in which he will lose everything.

[13] Derrida, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation?," 183-4; *Qu'est qu'une traduction «relevante»?* (Paris: L'Herne, 2005), 33.

[14] Derrida, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation," 188.

[15] Derrida, Qu'est qu'une traduction «relevante»?, 46.

12.

> *The contretemps looks favourably on the encounter, it responds without delay but without renunciation: no promised encounter without the possibility of a contretemps. As soon as there is more than one.*[16]

In his essays on Shakespeare, Derrida repeatedly stresses temporality. "Aphorism Countertime" and "The Time is Out of Joint", in particular, operate in the distention of any now, in the space opened up by a failure of the text to coincide punctually with its performative dimensions and capacities that is more than coincidental.[17] In Derrida's readings of them, Shakespeare's plays enact a structure for which the stakes encompass even death itself, but without falling into a gestural sense of pathos. *Romeo and Juliet* ends impossibly, with each one of the lovers seeing the other dead; *Hamlet* similarly offers a protagonist who is, in Nietzsche's terms, "the one who has seen death." Each of these plays, then, demands that we recognise a structure, let us call it a performativity or performability, that goes beyond the stabilizations of historicism, whether presentist or otherwise. Shakespeare's plays become *envois* in the sense given to that term in *The Post Card*, they are sent out, departing from and through a "port." As Derrida comments: "all language, all writing, every poetico-performative or theoretico-informative text dispatches, sends itself, allows itself to be sent," but this offers no secure sense of return. He continues: "the destinerrance of the sendings is precisely what both divides and repeats the first time and the last time alike."

"The first time and the last time alike." Here is a statement that marks what I would like to see worked through in terms of the historicism/presentism divide. For isn't this what they each hope to promise: historicism will grant us access to the "first" version of the

[16] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 1; *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

[17] Derrida, "Aphorism Countertime," trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature*, 416-33; «L'aphorisme à contretemps», in *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 519-33; "The Time is Out of Joint," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Deconstruction is/in America*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 14-38.

text, or at least to the conditions of possibility of that firstness; presentism mirrors this desire in its wish to be the latest, to offer the last word on a play's resonance and relevance "now." Yet, the logic of first and last undoes the succession of first and last, it hollows out the presence of both such that the first time is the last time, and vice versa. Historicism and presentism can only act as host for that which has already been identified as relevant, in all the senses that Derrida give to that term in the passage that I cited a moment ago.

Parenthetically, then, I would like to end with a sense of where this line of thinking – which might appear to be of interest only to Shakespeare scholars, and probably not to many of them in the current critical climate – might take us. In his essay on "Hostipitality," Derrida notes a passage in Kant's renowned and still problematic essay on Perpetual Peace. In a curious passage that is worthy of far greater attention than I can give it here, Kant suggests that it is explicitly the ship that raises hospitality as an issue. It is the ship – or else, says Kant, the camel, the "ship of the desert" – that brings into contact those peoples who share a right to the surface of the earth. It is thus the ship that produces both the desire and the need for a cosmopolitanism based on a principle of hospitality. And what this in its turn leads to is a need for ports. As Derrida puts it, what we have to think about here is the door:

> *To take up the figure of the door, for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. There is no hospitable house. There is no house without doors and windows. But as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality. There must be a threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no longer hospitality. This is the difference, the gap, between the hospitality of invitation and the hospitality of visitation. In visitation there is no door. Anyone can come at any time and can come in without needing a key for the door. There are no customs checks with a visitation. But there are customs and police checks with an invitation. Hospitality thus becomes the threshold or the door.*[18]

[18] Derrida, "Hostipitality," *Angelaki* 5.3 (2000): 3-18, 14.

Following Derrida's reading of Kant, the port is thus best conceived through the image of the city of refuge, but unlike Venice this is the city not of the ghetto but of the *cosmopolis*. Shakespeare's text, I would like to suggest, might just be a kind of necessary "port," standing in for that through which we can see the cosmopolitan ideal and its frustrations. In *The Merchant of Venice*, both Venice and Belmont each in their own way try and fail to be the cosmopolis, despite the encounters between cultures that apparently take place in them: Venice is, of course, also the initial setting for *Othello*, another failed narrative of welcome for the other; Belmont welcomes suitors from England, Scotland, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, and Morocco, but each is rejected in favour of the man from Venice who turns out to have been there before.

Here, I can only offer a telegraphic ending.[19] What Shakespeare's play evinces is a fear of the unknown, a desire to convert that unknown into a known quantity, that is, to bring it fully into a legible figure of economy. As such, it offers a model not only of political failure, but also of a failure of the ethical relation. Conversion equals incorporation, it is yet another symbol of the openness of the body, but it also embodies the threat of catastrophe, the threat that the absorption of the foreign body will not neutralize but set to work. In other words, we move from a structure of domination to one which is itself dominated by what Derrida describes as an "autoimmunitary" impulse.[20] Perhaps, then, if

[19] This "here" is shadowed by the occasion for which this piece was originally written, that is, a conference on "The Relevance of Theory" which took place in June 2008 at the Université de Paris X – Nanterre. At that time, I delivered three endings, one of which evoked a text by Jean-François Lyotard that was translated with the title "Nanterre, Here, Now." The brief comments that I gave were based on my article, "Impractical Criticism," in *English: The Condition of the Subject*, ed. Philip W. Martin (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 168-79. In place of that ending, and to spare the patience of readers, I would like to express my thanks to the conference organisers for their hospitality.

[20] This notion appears in Derrida's text "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 36-78, and is central to "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-136.

there is an urgent task for Shakespeare criticism at the present time – and, as will by now be apparent, this is not a gesture in the direction of presentism – it would seem to be to recognise the extent to which Shakespeare's texts have been mobilized within a structure of autoimmunity. For those of us who care about those texts which unite under the name of Shakespeare, our task, then, is to recognise in Shakespeare not only a promise, but a threat.

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