

Putting Foreignness to the Test: Rabindranath Tagore's Babu English

THE MOST INTERESTING POINTS of contention in the comparative literature/world literature debates have concerned the status of original languages. For those who see a sharp distinction between comparative literature and world literature, most notably Gayatri Spivak, reading in the original language conveys more than simply the deep knowledge of a specialist (though this should not be undervalued). It signals an ethical responsibility—often phrased as a resistance to the sweeping and homogenizing effects of globalization—whereby a commitment to original languages is also a commitment to other kinds of rootedness: for example, the literary work's place within a particular cultural-historical milieu and the uniqueness of aesthetic and linguistic modes that would be lost even in the most worthy of translations (*Death* 8–10; 106). Yet this view of original languages, cultural particularism, and translation has come under pressure not only from proponents of world literature (Damrosch, *What*; Walkowitz, “Unimaginable”), but also due to the institutional successes of comparatists like Spivak and Edward Said. Their position at the vanguard of postcolonial studies helped open the academy to the very non-European literatures—Bengali and Arabic, just to name two—that initiated the critique of comparison as Eurocentric (see, for example, Chow and Melas) and now turn literary studies toward a “double-consciousness” mode of comparison (Radhakrishnan 256; Friedman 756). Such models of comparison deeply inform the design of world literature courses, which have used the moniker “world” to reflect upon multidirectional patterns of influence and rethink the relationship between text and context (Agathacleous and Gosselink 454; Cooppan 24–25).

Still, if the suspicion of world literature and its authorization of translation is that it will assist the more nefarious effects of globalization—furthering the

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1 dominance of the English language at the expense of cultural and linguistic
 2 diversity—then it is important to see the appeal to original languages as not just
 3 an appeal for rigor or cultural particularity. It is also a symptom of a long-held
 4 attitude toward particularity that aligns it with an otherness or alterity in danger
 5 of being subsumed. Such attitudes, a legacy of influential multicultural and post-
 6 structuralist approaches to ethics, have made us suspicious of representations,
 7 including translations, across lines of power.¹ To counteract the imbalance in mov-
 8 ing from small, often non-Western languages to more dominant ones, translators
 9 have advocated that translation mark an otherwise and an elsewhere—an origi-
 10 nal language and culture whose mediation can only ever be incomplete. Here,
 11 reverence for the singularity of the original work goes hand in hand with accentu-
 12 ating cultural difference. Such a translational ethos, David Damrosch remarks, is
 13 now very much the norm among scholars: “Translation theorists from [George]
 14 Steiner in the mid-seventies to Lawrence Venuti today have called for ‘foreigniz-
 15 ing’ translations, versions that resist assimilation and point up the work’s differ-
 16 ence, its translated quality . . . Their popularity today clearly accords with the rise
 17 of multiculturalism and our new attention to ethnic difference; just as the melting
 18 pot has lost favor as a model for immigrant experience, so too assimilative transla-
 19 tion is increasingly disfavored. ‘Foreignizing’ efforts are the translational corre-
 20 late of the contemporary championing of ethnic identity” (168).

21 It will probably be a relief to some and disturbing to others to see the friction of
 22 ethnic identity enabling the flow of world literature. Rather than render a verdict
 23 on this dynamic, I would like to point out that foreignizing translations not only
 24 champion ethnic identity, but also crystalize it when fidelity to the original text is
 25 also coded as fidelity to an originating culture’s difference. While such approaches
 26 have had the admirable intention of disrupting metropolitan consumption of
 27 “peripheral” literatures, they also run the risk of reinforcing those peripheries
 28 by turning linguistic translation into an engine of cultural untranslatability—
 29 the transformation of an elsewhere into the unreachable. This preference for
 30 alterity should be questioned not only for the ways it may unintentionally aid the
 31 commodification of difference in translation, as Marilyn Booth and Emily Apter
 32 have argued, but also for the distances it might facilitate in adjacent fields of
 33 literary study.²

34 Just as foreignization has become the preferred strategy among translators who
 35 link original languages to the irreducibility of cultural difference, so defamiliar-
 36 ization has become the aesthetic strategy most often praised by critics of postcolo-
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38 ¹ Shameem Black has written eloquently on the ethics of representation with respect to contem-
 39 porary fiction, although not translation.

40 ² In Booth’s words, foreignizing translations “runs the risk of ironically contributing to current
 41 dominant notions among Americans by privileging difference in ways that serves an already rooted
 42 discourse of difference.” Here, Booth differentiates between respect for difference and the inadver-
 43 tent promulgation of untranslatability as an “unbridgeable otherness” (51). Similarly, Apter sug-
 44 gests that untranslatability beleaguers countries marginalized within the global culture industry.
 45 Speaking specifically of Algeria but in an argument applicable beyond it, Apter suggests that a
 46 country’s untranslatability can function in two ways: first, as a marketing device in which “occulta-
 47 tion” or blankness becomes a national characteristic that marks its particularity on the world stage;
 48 second, as a trade imbalance within a global literary marketplace in which far fewer translations
 from non-European languages into European languages are commissioned, resulting in the
 absence of certain countries from the world republic of letters (94–108).

nial and ethnic literatures. Here, the translator's responsibility to disrupt metropolitan perceptions is recapitulated by the literary critic's approach to ethical reading, which values estrangement from over intimacy with a text and thus hews toward objects of study that seem to resist their own consumption, even as they draw multiple cultures and languages together (see Vadde 23–26). In the English literary tradition, my own field of research, this has led to numerous studies of vernacular or “rotten” English. The best (North; Ahmad; Ch'ien; Hart) have significantly complicated the notion that global English erases cultural difference by illuminating the internal variety within the English language made possible by minoritarian appropriations. Their attention to Ken Saro-Wiwa's, Junot Diaz's, Louise Bennett's, and Melvin Tolson's (among others') non-compliance with standard English has turned English study into a transnational Anglophone pursuit. Still, in making defamiliarization the most familiar paradigm of intellectual engagement and aesthetic success, the vernacular Englishes movement has perpetuated the exclusion of works that are not spectacularly hybrid or culturally syncretic from the American postcolonial canon. The classic example of this principle of selection has been Salman Rushdie's secure place in American English departments and R.K. Narayan's continual neglect, even though he is widely taught in English departments within India. Such exclusions are an ironic outcome of the original languages caveat, which is just as strong within the discipline of English as it is within comparative literature. In refusing to venture beyond works originally written in English, scholars have promoted a vernacular aesthetic as the best index of cultural contact, translatability, and untranslatability. Such promotion comes at the expense of “plainer” idioms and, of course, actual translations. The result is that diversity ossifies into a style rather than an avenue into Anglophone literary history's contact with, and even formation through, other languages' literary traditions. We should of course read Diaz for his inventive Spanglish idiom, but can we fully understand *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* without situating it in more than one literary system? It belongs to the tradition of ethnic American literature, but it is also equally indebted to Latin American dictator novels written in Spanish, not to mention Japanese manga and Indian mythology. The multilingualism and sheer referentiality of the novel pluralize and entangle its cultures of origin and so solicit a literary history that can do the same. Such a history will have to make recourse to translations if it is to cover a substantial range of Diaz's references.

To move beyond an “original languages” paradigm, then, we must supplement literary texts that theorize translation for us with processes of reading and canonization that refuse to situate such texts within provincially organized literary histories. In turn, if our literary histories make use of translations in the name of more comprehensive coverage, then we need to develop approaches for reading translations rigorously. As Haun Saussy warns, the language of a translation should be treated as “something more than a delivery system for content . . . [it must] be understood as having a weight and resistance of its own” (14). Saussy suggests here that translations are legitimate objects of close reading, deserving an attention to form usually reserved for texts read in their original languages. This possibility provides an indirect response to Jonathan Arac, who, when commenting on Franco Moretti's “Conjectures on World Literature,” doubted whether a

1 “language-based” criticism could survive the move from national to world litera-
 2 ture: “Language-based criticism of modern literatures rose and flourished with
 3 the modern nation-state. Moretti’s essay tacitly acknowledges this history but does
 4 not address the further question posed by the globality of world literature and the
 5 diminishing place of the nation-state in our times: what can the future hold for
 6 a mode of critical performance that is losing its home base?” (45). Since Arac’s
 7 essay, Wai Chee Dimock has proved that close reading does not need the nation to
 8 survive (Dimock 73–106), and Damrosch has shown that close readings of *transla-*
 9 *tions* are a powerful way to understand the life of literary works as both ongoing
 10 and productive of new communities of readers. This is not to suggest that all those
 11 communities will be happy ones, but their receptions of a particular work are
 12 as vital to establishing its cultural contexts as its culture of origin. The singular-
 13 ity of a work’s culture is thus altered by the “multiple singularities” (Damrosch,
 14 “Comparative” 474) of a work in circulation—a factor that the more protectionist
 15 approaches to original languages and cultural difference fail to address.

16 In my own work on Rabindranath Tagore, I have found that circulation is a key
 17 part of understanding his career both as a bilingual writer in Bengali and English
 18 and as a translator of several of his own works into English, including the poetry
 19 collection *Gitanjali*, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1913, and the novel *The Home*
 20 *and the World*, on which he collaborated with his nephew Surendranath.³ Although
 21 Tagore’s writings in English (the original works include essays and lectures while
 22 the translations are of his poems, stories, and plays) fill three thick volumes, they
 23 have escaped attention from both Anglophone scholarship (which generally dis-
 24 counts translations) and Bengali scholarship (which focuses on the originals).⁴ In
 25 approaching Tagore as a bilingual writer, I began with his translations and soon
 26 discovered that this demanded research, if not fluency, into the language and
 27 structure of his original works—in other words comparative work across languages
 28 and literary-critical traditions that is not often done (or at least not written about as
 29 far as I know) when the focus is vernacular Englishes as original languages. This
 30 research makes Anglophone literary study more comparative in several ways: first,
 31 it produces a more thorough and complex history of English’s intersection with
 32 other languages, in this case Bengali; second, it helps trace the development of a
 33 writer’s style through multiple language traditions, a trajectory that is relevant not
 34 only to Tagore but also to Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, and other canonical
 35 figures; and third, it calls attention to the explanatory limits of critical protocols
 36 based on the elevation of foreignization and defamiliarization.

37 In studying the fate of Tagore’s translations into English, written well before the
 38 interventions of multiculturalism and poststructuralism influenced literary pro-
 39 duction and analysis, I have found that they are hard to defend by today’s stan-
 40 dards. Contemporary critics openly bemoan the quality of their English and criti-
 41 cize the domesticating strategies by which Tagore changed elements of form,
 42 structure, and plot so as to remove from his English versions some of the specifi-
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44 ³ In his early days as a student, Tagore also translated *Macbeth* into Bengali, although he claims to
 45 be quite relieved that the translation was subsequently lost (*Reminiscences* 110).

46 ⁴ Tagore’s bilingualism as an artist is just beginning to be acknowledged thanks to Sisir Kumar Das,
 47 who edited the three-volume edition of his English writings, and Sukanta Chaudhuri, who has led
 48 efforts to reconsider the value of Tagore’s English writings and produce new translations of his work.

ties of Bengali life. Tagore's English prose, roundly described as old-fashioned and even archaic, has even led to important retranslation projects; however, Tagore's authorial imprint on *Gitanjali* and *The Home and the World* makes retranlations of these particular works less likely to be read. Thus, although at least two retranlations of *The Home and the World* circulate within India, Rabindranath and Surendranath's collaborative translation is the standard one distributed internationally by Penguin Classics.⁵ Most critics agree that in blurring the line between author and translator Tagore hurt his reputation in the West, but if the Tagore recovery project is to continue beyond India, our narrative of his English writings has to change. We cannot refer to the inaccessible genius of the Bengali originals, nor can we interpellate Tagore's English into metropolitan models of vernacular English. Rather, we need to reconsider what makes his translated works—their forms, content, and reception—worthy of discussion.

First, *Gitanjali*. In creating this collection, Tagore translated poems from a highly complex and versified Bengali into simpler English prose-poems, which are consequently very different works. Nabaneeta Sen and Mahasweta Sengupta (56–64) have both criticized these translations, but in attributing Tagore's success in the West to faddishness and exoticism they miss an opportunity to discuss the complexity of their reception.⁶ They are certainly right in pointing out that *Gitanjali*'s most well-known advocates in the Anglophone West, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, situated Tagore within a larger Orientalist fantasy; however, that fantasy and their interest in him (however short-lived) also brought Bengali poetics into the conversation of “international aesthetics” (575) in ways that were comparative but not hierarchal. In moving between the translations and the originals, Pound characterizes the Bengali originals as “somewhere between the forms of Provençal *canzoni* and the roundels and ‘odes’ of the Pleiade” (571) and suggests that the irregular form and meter of the English translations still retain a mastery of rhythm and cadence. Moreover, translating the *Gitanjali* inspired Tagore to experiment with looser Bengali metrical forms that he called *gadyakabita* or “prose-poetry.” He debuted this new genre in the 1922 volume *Lipika*, a work that introduced a generation of Bengalis to free verse (Das 216). Thus, it seems that Tagore's English *Gitanjali* would be more fruitfully read forwards than backwards—for the conversations around poetry and translation it inspired among modernists and for the innovations it made possible in Bengali poetics rather than those it failed to transmit. Reading *Lipika* in the original requires reading *Gitanjali* in translation, and to undertake this comparison is to be better equipped to explain the effects of Tagore's bilingualism on the evolution of his style. More broadly, it lays the groundwork for generative partnerships between reading in translation and reading in the original language by complicating the distinctions between derivative (translation) and inventive (original) modes.

The circulation of the English *Gitanjali* is a further reminder that literary careers cannot be historicized in neat stages: Tagore rising from regional to national and finally international fame. Before winning the Nobel Prize, Tagore

⁵ *The Home and the World* was retranslated by Nivedita Sen for Srishti publishers in 2004 and by Sreejata Guha for Penguin India in 2005.

⁶ Amit Chaudhuri considers Tagore's English translation important not for its quality but for the insight it provides into his “cultural confusion, personal drives, inspirations, and limitations” (131).

1 was the leading figure in Bengali letters, but he was not particularly well known
 2 beyond them. The international prize led to his nationalization as an “Indian”
 3 writer—one whose reputation within India also depended on the distribution of
 4 his work in translation. The role of translation in the making of Tagore’s national
 5 status further signals the dual locations of his English-language works, sliding
 6 an extra variable into the foreignization/domestication debate that often takes
 7 English hegemony to be a product of West/non-West divisions at the expense of
 8 addressing intra-national hegemonies. Tagore’s translations draw attention to the
 9 *simultaneous* scales at which literature functions—the regional, the national, and
 10 the global—and the way that these relative locations disrupt any consistent con-
 11 struction of a foreign or domestic audience, a national or a world writer.⁷ *The Home*
 12 *and the World* compellingly, if indirectly, addresses the very shifts of location that
 13 an ethics of cultural difference must downplay when it examines the relationship
 14 between circulation and identity formation in the context of Indian nationalism.
 15 The novel’s reception history, truncated here, also tells us a surprising amount
 16 about modes of critique we expect to be polar opposites: the Orientalism of the
 17 early twentieth century and the postcolonialism of the late twentieth century and
 18 the contemporary moment.

19 *The Home and the World* began in Bengali as *Ghare Baire*. Its first English version
 20 was serialized for the Calcutta-based periodical *The Modern Review*, where its title
 21 was *At Home and Outside* (1918). The work took book form again under the title
 22 *The Home and the World* (1919) for distribution in Europe and North America.⁸
 23 The novel combines domestic and ideological conflict and centers on a love tri-
 24 angle: Bimala, a young woman, is caught between her gently coercive husband
 25 Nikhil and the corrupt but enticing Sandip, the leader of the local Swadeshi move-
 26 ment. The shifting nature of their affections shapes the novel’s philosophical cri-
 27 tique of nationalism and the divisions of geography and identity for which it calls.
 28 When the novel first appeared in Europe, it represented a radical departure from
 29 the Tagore of *Gitanjali*. Unlike the poetry collection praised by Yeats and Pound,
 30 *The Home and the World* bore few signs of what could be called an Oriental imagi-
 31 nation and every sign of its colonial location. Georg Lukács’ famously bad review
 32 called it a “bourgeois yarn” (8), and E.M. Forster’s review finds Tagore’s shift in
 33 register present in the writing itself:

34 When a writer of Tagore’s genius produces such a sentence as ‘Passion is beautiful and pure—pure
 35 as the lily that comes out of the slimy soil; it rises superior to its defilement and needs no Pears’ soap
 36 to wash it clean’—he raises some interesting questions. The sentence is not attractive—in fact it is
 37 a Babu sentence—and what does Tagore, generally so attractive, intend by it. Is he being dramatic,
 38 and providing a Babu of his creation with appropriate English, or is he being satirical, or was there
 39 some rococo charm that had vanished in the translation, or is it an experiment that has not quite
 40 come off? Probably an experiment, for throughout the book one is puzzled by bad tastes that verge
 upon bad taste. (330)

41 In the course of switching genres (poetry to the novel) and themes (religious
 42 devotion to earthly love and nationalist politics), Tagore the lyrical guru found
 43

44 ⁷ See Walkowitz, “Cosmopolitan” for a discussion of this locational slipperiness in relation to the
 45 application of cosmopolitan ethics.

46 ⁸ *At Home and Outside* references the inside and outside of the *zenana*, the private space of women
 47 within the home. Comparing the titles of the Indian English and world English editions immediately
 48 provokes an analysis of spatial divisions: the multiple insides of the home embedded in the Anglophone
 Indian title versus the more extreme polarities of the title intended for international distribution.

himself rebuffed as a prosaic babu. His sentences became vessels of a derogatory colonial stereotype of the Bengali man as an obsequious assimilator of European values who never got them quite right.

Forster's review of *The Home and the World* is interesting because it shows how Tagore metamorphoses from being timelessly Oriental to anachronistically babu precisely at the moment in which he addresses history in its unfolding (the Swadeshi movement). What is more interesting, though, is the degree to which Tagore's translated English remains stigmatized today. Not quite vernacular and not quite standard, its foreignness remains "babu" to the degree that it stymies the conversion of shame into a deliberate rottenness or weirdness. Its idiomatic patterns may even suggest the difference produced by a failed attempt at assimilation. Yet idiom is not the only measure of a novel's form, and one could argue, *contra* Forster and contemporary Bengali scholar Tapobrata Ghosh, that, structurally, the changes to *Ghare Baire* align it with the European modernist novel more effectively than if Tagore had retained the Bengali novel's autobiographical form. Ghosh's very fine essay on the formal differences between *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World* suggests that the latter's structure (chapters that blend several characters' perspectives) places the emphasis on plot at the expense of character and interjects the presence of an outside author more powerfully than in *Ghare Baire*, which unfolds through Nikhil's, Bimala's, and Sandip's own written records of their lives. Ghosh, in short, associates chapter divisions with authorial intrusion. However, the structure of *The Home and the World* in fact aligns it with modernist psychological novels in which we are immersed in the interiorities of multiple characters. The protagonists still narrate their own stories, but in an impressionistic mode that, akin to the narratives of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, unfolds their doubts, digressions, and misperceptions as they are writing. Chapters in *The Home and the World* vivify characters' mutual entanglements and contradictory responses with more immediacy than a diary or autobiographical structure—both of which, if retained in translation, would resemble an eighteenth-century epistolary novel.

Tagore's innovation through translation, then, emerges in the nested narrative structure of the novel, which formalizes the problem of circulation between varying insides and outsides (the *zenana*, the drawing room, India, the global market all circulate through these polarities) via the collation of its characters' interiorities and their competing accounts of the action of the plot. The movement of the protagonist's minds becomes inseparable from the making of interlocking spaces that are regulated by habits of consumption and interior design. These themes are the loci of the novel's analyses of foreignization and domestication, valuations of taste, and the production of cultural stereotypes. In other words, *The Home and the World* helps us address the very issues that its translated idiom supposedly flattens out.

Two brief examples will illustrate my point. A scene between Sandip and his disciple Amulya focuses on obstacles to the Swadeshi campaign's goal of boycotting foreign-made goods. Amulya discusses how campaigners burned a Muslim trader's fancy and colorful "German-made shawls," but then wonders, "should we be so rigorous in our boycott of foreign flannels and merinos" given that "there is no such thing as cheap and gaudy Indian woolen stuff" (113). For Amulya, German shawls are reflective of consumer tastes in general; in contrast, Sandip

1 responds by dissociating Hindus and Muslims through distinctions in taste. A
 2 love of country, which Hindus have, conflicts with a love for “gaily coloured” shawls
 3 (113). Buying foreign, which was in fact cheaper and thus appealing to many, thus
 4 ossifies into a stereotype of Muslim decadence while domestically made woolens
 5 become synonymous with a righteous Hinduism.

6 Sandip’s version of nationalism depends on turning Swadeshi items into senti-
 7 mental objects of national sacrifice and foreign-made goods into emblems of van-
 8 ity and self-interest. When Sandip suggests that revolution is “not the time to think
 9 of looks” (113), the novel indicates that “looks” are exactly where false conflations
 10 of ethnicity and patriotism occur.

11 Looks or aesthetics play an equally significant role when we move from San-
 12 dip’s discussion of consumption to the drawing room of Bimala and Nikhil, where
 13 foreign and domestic goods exist side by side. Bimala prefers ornate English-style
 14 goods and rues her husband’s taste for the minimal: “My husband still sharpens
 15 his Indian-made pencils with his Indian-made knife, does his writing with reed
 16 pens, drinks his water out of a ball-metal vessel, and works at night in the light of
 17 an old-fashioned castor-oil lamp . . . we had always felt ashamed of the inelegant,
 18 unfashionable furniture of his reception-rooms” (95). Bimala goes on to say that
 19 when European guests came to their home she would often replace Nikhil’s brass
 20 pots with European-made crystal vases, leading Nikhil to respond: “that brass pot
 21 is as unconscious of itself as those blossoms are; but this thing [the vase] protests
 22 its purpose so loudly, it is only fit for artificial flowers” (95). Despite Nikhil’s claims
 23 to guilelessness and moderation, the exchange suggests that his tastes are equally
 24 affected and constitute a perverse form of ostentatious asceticism. Nikhil objects
 25 to a crystal vase on the grounds of its flamboyance, yet his preference for a brass
 26 pot “unconscious of itself” shows that he is all too aware of the connection between
 27 taste and political affiliation. Affective investment in objects thus determines what
 28 is domestic and foreign to the household, not the material fact of where the object
 29 was made—England, India, Germany, or anywhere else. In detailing how a gaudy
 30 cloth becomes Muslim, a brass pot becomes Hindu, and a crystal vase becomes
 31 English, Tagore connects feeling to aesthetic preference and aesthetic preference
 32 to the construction of national character and ethnic stereotype. This process estab-
 33 lishes how domestication and foreignization work: although several kinds of for-
 34 eign objects exist within every domestic setting, some become more visible than
 35 others. As characters establish what is glaringly out of place within the home and
 36 what unassumingly belongs, they reproduce and consolidate the ethnic stereotypes
 37 of the Muslim, Hindu, and English.

38 At a metatextual level, I want to suggest that the novel’s differentiation of domes-
 39 tic objects from foreign ones, in-groups from out-groups, provides insight into the
 40 conditions of its continued inhospitable reception, whether as “Babu English” or
 41 “translationese.” Critics like Forster rejected the translation because it did not
 42 offer the right kind of foreignness or the right kind of domestication. As a result,
 43 the only way to establish where it belonged was to stereotype it as something that
 44 did not belong anywhere—not in twentieth-century England, not in a timeless
 45 Orientalized India, and not in a newly nationalist India. In turn, contemporary
 46 scholars steeped in the values of foreignization and alterity overlook the innova-
 47 tions that a domesticated translation might produce.

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Precisely because Tagore's English is neither spectacularly different nor invisibly assimilated, and thus foreign in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons, it becomes essential to discuss *The Home and the World* as a translation and not just as a novel. As a novel, its elaboration of taste and stereotype unravels fixed ideas of the foreign and domestic to be sure, but, as a translation, its reception shows us how an impulse to fix norms of domestication and foreignization carries over from Orientalist to postcolonial and minority perspectives on difference. *The Home and the World* offers a variation of Indian English that European reviewers could not praise for its mysticism and that contemporary critics cannot praise for its defamiliarizing or vernacularizing tactics. An uncanny translation in which the foreign is the reviled familiar, it asks us to see past the utopian potential that we assign to foreignness in its more spectacular and disruptive manifestations. We might say that this translation puts what Saussy calls (by way of Antoine Berman) "the test of foreignness" (14) to the test. The results show that it is our critical paradigms of originality and defamiliarization, not Tagore's writing style, that need retooling.

Tagore's examination of stereotype, and his subjection to it, suggests that origins can be an effect of difference rather than its source. In his work, differences in taste help to establish the cultural and ethnic identities that his characters retrospectively attribute to long-held patterns of behavior and conflict among the English, Hindus, and Muslims. In making these putative ethnic origins derivative, however, Tagore undoes the prior-ness of primordiality. This lesson in collectivity is a lesson for literary criticism and history as well. The originality of original languages, like the primordiality of identities, is an invention that prizes continuity over change, the isolation that lends distinction over the conjunctures that blur it and provoke new distinctions. Tagore's *The Home and the World* may not have what we would today call an overtly vernacular or culturally translational aesthetics at the level of idiom, but, as a translated novel, its production and circulation contest our theories of literary value and linguistic tradition. Tagore's status as author renders the novel timeless in the sense of a classic; his status as co-translator renders it untimely in the sense of an anachronism. We might use the odd and disjunctive temporality of the translated novel to better describe the multiple geographies and traditions (Bengali, Indian English, world English) that its history bundles. To read Tagore's translations in this way would ideally be an avenue into learning Bengali (as it has been for me), but more modestly it is a way of ensuring that Anglophone literary history better records its sources beyond the English language.

Close reading translations, and thinking about the values that guide our appreciation or distaste for a translation, alerts us to the diversities we ignore in the name of the diversities we honor. Tagore's bilingualism and dual status as author-translator makes this negotiation particularly palpable. His "Babu English" helps historicize the shift from Orientalist, East-West distinctions to our own contemporary preferences for syncretic and vernacular aesthetics. Using Tagore to engage in such self-reflexivity about method goes beyond the study of English and into the heart of comparative literature, where the debates about world literature and the uses of translation began. To incorporate the study of translations into the critical apparatus of literary study is to remake the traditions and methods in which we consider ourselves expert. Perhaps it will remake our metaphors as well. The story

1 of the Tower of Babel is a recurring parable for comparatists, who have lately used
 2 it to focus on the resistance linguistic diversity poses to the production of mono-
 3 lingual national and global cultures. If an “original languages” paradigm takes the
 4 unfinished Tower of Babel as its guiding image of necessary failure, then a “trans-
 5 lated languages” paradigm shifts our gaze downwards to the multilingual city of
 6 Babel, whose infrastructure still needs to be built.

7
 8 *Duke University*
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