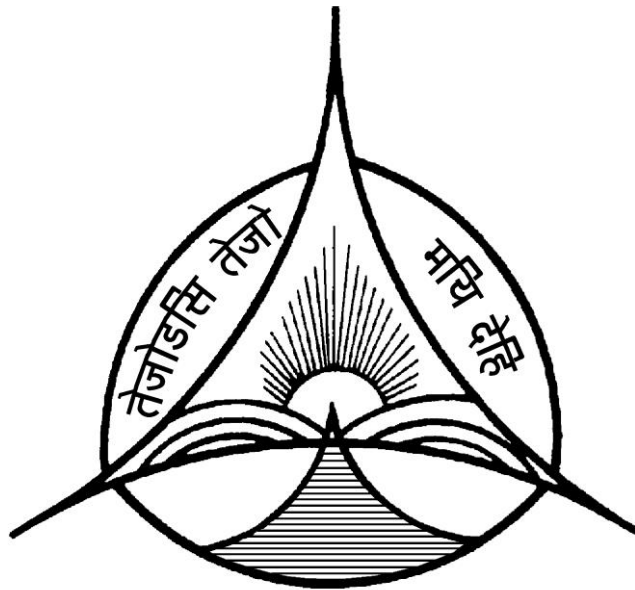


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BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE: TRANSLATION, SELF-WORLDDING AND POSTCOLONIALISM

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“I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character,” declares Rabindranath Tagore in ‘An Eastern University’. “On the contrary, I believe that the shock of such extraneous forces is necessary for the vitality of our intellectual nature” (Tagore 2015:164). The ‘shock’ that Tagore refers to is that of encountering alterity, through dynamic contact with life beyond one’s comfort zone. Such encounters, he suggests, may prove unsettling because they disturb the status quo, but from this very destabilisation of existing structures, productive change may follow. Taking my cue from Tagore’s inspirational insight, I propose to examine what it can mean for postcolonial theory and practice in today’s world.

While it is a critical commonplace that postcolonial theory directs its emancipatory rhetoric against colonial discourse, there is a need to reframe certain key questions in the light of changing power relations in the contemporary world. Beyond the conventional binaries of coloniser/colonised, First and Third Worlds, or the global North and South, there lies a spectrum of other issues that postcolonial theory needs to address, if it is to survive as a relevant mode of transformative thought and practice. In *Readings*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of the challenge that currently faces postcolonial theory. What is required, she argues, is a major effort of self-worlding, for to be ‘independent’ is also to be responsible for the future. “[W]e have to make a world, rather than just complain about colonialism” (Spivak 2014: 74). For Spivak, one route to such a reconfiguration of the field of postcolonial studies lies via literature, comprehended as “an instrument of imaginative activism” (ibid.: 80). Failure of communication, according to her, represents one of the major obstacles in the path of ‘worlding’ ourselves. In

Death of a Discipline, she speaks of “the lack of communication within and among the immense heterogeneity of the subaltern cultures of the world” (Spivak 2003:16). Connecting Tagore’s idea of the ‘shock’ of encountering one’s cultural Other/s with Spivak’s articulation of the problem of communication, I explore the place of translation in the imagining of altered worlds. Words, their power, and their migrancy via translation, form the subject of this essay. Here we ask the question: given the crisis in postcolonial theory today, what new possibilities can translation as intervention signal for our world-in-the-making?

The question is about literature, but it transcends the literary. Translation signals the possibility of a literary/linguistic self-worlding that also goes beyond the domain of words. But for this potential to be realised, the way we think about translation needs to change. We need to recognise that the persistent biases in the production, circulation and reception of works in translation parallel the asymmetries of power that characterise international and intercultural relations today. Only when we grasp the connection between language and power can we begin to ask the unsettling question: how can interventionist translation help us to make our world?

Translation, Power and Cultural Conflict

The link between translation and postcoloniality has already been explored in a range of ways. Tejaswini Niranjana, for instance, argues that whether a migrant or not, to be a postcolonial is to be in a state of translation (Niranjana 1992). Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi draw attention to the continued dominance of English, implying a parallel between translation and colonial discourse: “translation as traffic between languages still goes on in the once-and-still colonized world, reflecting more acutely than ever before the asymmetrical power relationship between the various local ‘vernaculars’ (i.e. the languages of the slaves, etymologically speaking) and the one master-language of our post-colonial world, English” (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 13). Paul F. Bandia builds on the idea of translation as a figurative way of thinking about postcolonialism: “The concept of translation as a metaphor for postcolonial writing broadens the horizon of the

study of translation theory and practice to include other fields of inquiry such as history, sociology, ethnography, and anthropological semiotics” (Bandia 2003: 140). Homi Bhabha notes an inescapable link between the ‘transnational’ and the ‘translational’ (Bhabha 2004: 5).

What emerges from these theorisations is a sense of translation as a struggle, a negotiation of power relations beyond the written page. The abstract ideal of translation as linguistic transfer of a prepackaged ‘meaning’ evaporates in the face of the oppositional/conflictual elements we encounter when working across cultural borderlines. In place of harmony and homogeneity, we find ourselves up against disjunctions, ruptures and contradictions. Emily Apter speaks of “the translation zone as a military zone, governed by the laws of hostility and hospitality, by semantic transfers and treaties” (Apter 2003:9). Using the language of love and war, she signals the emancipatory potential of the translation process. “Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history” (Apter 2003: 6). Translation connects, but also disrupts, because it jolts us out of our complacency. It becomes “a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements. ... Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change” (ibid.). Apter’s words serve as a signal reminder that change cannot be thought without also imagining the fracturing of existing structures. Change of this kind can be violent, disturbing and painful, yet it can be simultaneously productive and transformative. Such is the form of translation that postcolonial theory needs to imagine at this historical juncture.

The task of the translator today is not only to cross borders but also to destabilise hierarchies that continue to divide our worlds. These hierarchies function at international, national and local levels. Across cultures, the East/West divide in colonial times has been replaced with global North/South in recent years. Within a single multilingual culture such as India, there are internal hierarchies between ‘strong’ or ‘dominant’ languages and other, ‘minoritised’ languages. Histories of such conflict may be traced in the evolution of Hindi/Urdu. Bengali/Assamese/Oriya. Debates about writing and orality also reveal significant ruptures

between mainstream and marginalised discourses. Forms of social stratification are reflected in common understandings of ‘high’ and ‘low’ or colloquial versions of languages. Dialects with localised variations generate entire spectrums of linguistic difference. In official discourse, we find distinctions between authoritative and delegitimised vocabularies.

Given the history of colonial rule and its aftermath, questions of translation in South Asia would also need to negotiate shared histories and subsequent regional variations within the same language, as with Bengali in India and Bangladesh; Tamil in India and Sri Lanka; Urdu in India and Pakistan. The identity politics underlying these divergent streams would haunt the practice of translation in such contexts. Postcolonial translation is shadowed by history.

On a wider scale, translations and their reception are affected by prevailing asymmetries of power in international relations. It is now a well-known fact that the opening up of global markets has not created global equality. In publishing, as in other fields, hierarchical power structures predominate and seek to perpetuate themselves. The dominant languages in which translations circulate are Anglo-European. In India, for instance, translations into English are visible, while translations between other Indian languages remain locked in underdeveloped traditions.

The postcolonial translator faces a double challenge today: how to resist the homogenising tendency underlying the ostensible pluralism of globalisation, and how, simultaneously, to deal with forms of exclusion, prejudice and hatred based on nationalist, communitarian or religious identity politics. Especially in India and the neighbouring areas, these hardened oppositional attitudes, produced by our interwoven histories, offer no easy, harmonious grounds for resolution. Between the poles of imposed monologism and intractable difference, the translator needs to find a workable trajectory. This is particularly true of South Asia, where the translator must work across the international divisions between global North and South, and also negotiate the tensions that prevail between different nation states within our region.

The practice of translation thus operates in the realms of cultural conflict. The space of translation after all, is at the gaps and interstices between languages, and between cultures. It is precisely at the borderlines where understanding fails that translation comes into its own. For all translation involves a negotiation of the incommensurable. To recognise this instead of glossing it over is to resist the homogenising impulse. Every language has cultural terms for which the target language offers no equivalent. Faced with the untranslatable, what solutions can one imagine? Theorists suggest a range of alternative strategies. Lawrence Venuti for instance, makes a distinction between domestication and foreignization. Domestication, he says, is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bring the author back home” (Venuti 1995:20). Foreignization is “an ethnoveiant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (ibid.). The ideas of Alain Badiou offer another provocative suggestion. In *Petit Manuel d’Inesthétique* (1998), he presents translation as the writing of disaster, a place where meaning is emptied out. Cultural difference notwithstanding, he argues, ‘great poems’ overcome the hurdles of incommensurability to attain universality. The translator, too, should attempt to reach across cultural divides, in spite of the foreknowledge that perfect equivalence will not be achieved. In this paradox, he finds the source of a singular comparatism where the politics of location can be transcended. In Badiou’s scheme of things, it is the Idea that matters, and texts far removed from each other in place and time can be compared (cited in Apter 2003: 85).

These theories are inspirational, but they offer strategies that do not really address the South Asian translator’s double bind: how to simultaneously resist the homogenising pressures of a globalised world, while also trying to permeate the borders that threaten to fragment our region into separate, insular, often hostile national entities. A more nuanced approach is required to find a way out of this polarisation of predicaments. Such an approach would begin by asking: working at the interstices between cultures, can translation impel us to imagine a spectrum where once we assumed a binary? Instead of the black-and-white choices between sameness and difference, would it be possible to think of overlaps and divergences between cultures? Satya P. Mohanty argues that the translator should educate herself in cultural and political ‘sympathy’

(1998: 127). This plea for translation as tolerance is developed by Mohanty into an argument about the need to think about what is shared, as well as what is different, between the cultures and languages in question. “How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover one commonality, ... the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources?” (ibid.: 130). Mohanty’s stance implies a rejection of what he calls the extreme relativist position, based on the conviction that there can be no commonality between cultures, resulting in a pluralism that produces ‘debilitatingly insular spaces’ (ibid.: 129). To seek out shared grounds between disparate cultures involves a striving towards empathy. Speaking of cultural translation, Talal Asad asserts: “The anthropologist’s translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of *learning to live another form of life*” (Asad 1986: 149). This is what moving out of one’s comfort zone can imply. To reach out to the Other is to wrench one’s awareness away from one’s accustomed cultural moorings, to travel beyond the boundaries of the Self.

Where this effort at complete empathy fails, where platitudes like ‘peace’ and ‘harmony prove impossible, there remains, still, the promise of dialogue. Translation as dialogue—invoking the Bakhtinian ‘double voiced discourse’—can open up the possibility of mutual recognition and greater understanding. The Bakhtinian idea of dialogue does not erase differences, for it is premised on the acknowledgement of the co-presence of disparate voices. At the point where the voices come into contact, even if only to articulate their disjunctions, lies the space where translation can be born.

Negotiating Alterity: Towards an Ethics of Translation

Such forms of heteroglossia necessitate the recognition that translation works at the intersection of language and ideology. Speaking of Dalit narratives in translation, H. S. Shivaprakash says: “in an uneven plural society like India, the activity of translation cannot be an activity free from ideology. To iron out a source text by capturing only the universal significations of a target language like English, amount to tyrannical suppression of the right to self-expression of the

sections of our people whose texts are being translated” (2002: 126). Shivaprakash here rejects the universalising impulse and the domesticating strategies of Indian translators who sacrifice culture-specific details in the interests of producing ‘smooth’, readable translations in English. Instead, he argues that the translation should unsettle the reader’s complacency or passivity by letting the intractable cultural terms stand out as markers of particularity. Postcolonial translation, then, can challenge the comfort zone of not only the translator, but the reader as well.

This calls for a strong sense of responsibility. Lawrence Venuti articulates “a call to action for translators, a call to an ethical action that is neither arbitrary nor anarchically subversive, but rather determined to take responsibility for bringing a foreign text into a different situation by acknowledging that its very foreignness demands cultural innovation” (2013: 192). He adds: “For most readers, translated texts constitute world literature, even if we are still in the process of learning how to read translations as translations, as texts in their own right” (ibid.: 208). As the agent who opens the doorway to literatures beyond the reader’s first language, the translator has a daunting duty. Here we enter the domain of ethics, beyond the linguistic/literary. This is the dimension Spivak has in mind when she speaks of planetarity as an alternative to globalisation. While globalisation enforces the same system of exchange in all places, planetarity is premised on allowing alterity. “If we imagine ourselves planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us” (Spivak 2003: 73). She insists: “It is ... the right of the textual // to be so responsible, responsive, answerable. The ‘planet’ is, here, perhaps as always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous— an experience of the impossible” (ibid.: 101–2).

In addressing alterity, the possibility of translators from different backgrounds working together on joint projects can offer an alternative way of dealing with gaps in understanding and communication. The potential of collaborative translation has not been sufficiently explored in our part of the world. Such approaches are not new. Collaborative methods in translation were deployed in early and medieval times in different parts of the world. Today, there are ongoing

projects in this field, and some have indicated remarkable levels of success. Boris Dralyuk speaks of “texts composed by a native speaker of the source language, and then reworked by a native speaker of the target language in constant consultation with his or her partner” (2014). As Lin and Goldblatt argue, such collaborative translations work well because “They can expand the pool of available practitioners by allowing people unschooled or inadequately prepared in the original language to participate in the process; and they foster, even require, a continual dialogue about what a work means, what it does, and how it performs in the new language” (2014: 18). These ideas, if taken seriously in India, could offer a dialogic space for the negotiation of difference. Instead of compartmentalising the separate language/literature traditions of different parts of India, it would be more productive for translators to cooperate across linguistic and cultural divides.

This of course demands a will to think beyond narrow identity politics. To move beyond one’s comfort zone by struggling to come to grips with the alien and the unfamiliar can be a difficult but enabling enterprise. For the translator this implies comfort zones that are both cultural and linguistic. It also means destabilising the notions of ‘ownership’ of texts that mark not only the author’s claims over the original text, but also the translator’s ownership of the work in translation.

The process of translation then is also a process of learning, or re-learning. For the responsible translator, self-education is a requirement. A double-edged knowledge is called for, demanding a familiarity not only with source text and target language, but the histories, lexicographies and cultural nuances of the worlds to which source and target belong. Such education goes beyond knowledge of the word; it involves a will to delve into layers of history, culture and memory, to enter the realm of the unfamiliar. The ‘discomfort’ of stepping into linguistic/intellectual territory not one’s own is precisely the destabilising moment where new forms of translation can begin. In this process, the collaborative approach can be enabling.

Along with translators though, the world of publishing also needs to move out of the comfort zone of established market practices. Instead of the global pattern of privileging English and

certain other European languages, the circulation of translation needs to take into account local, regional and ‘vernacular’ readerships. For this to happen, translation can pave the way by generating readerships receptive to texts from cultures that are proximate, yet beyond our reach because of the biases of the publishing industry and the particularities of our recent regional history.

Translation, in other words, has transformative potential. The transformation we speak of here can work at multiple levels. First, the translation transforms the original, because with the greatest intention of fidelity, an exact replication of the source text is never possible, nor would it be desirable. Second, translation can transform the target language and culture by introducing elements from an alien or ‘foreign’ source. The cultural cross-fertilisation that takes place in this process is therefore a two-way osmosis. Third, translation can transform the reader/recipient by bringing her/him into a contact zone where one can textually step into the world of the other. But beyond this, through the possibility of creating expanding readerships, translation can also impact upon the marketplace. Venuti articulates a utopian vision of translation: “The communities fostered by translating are initially potential, signaled in the text, in the discursive strategy deployed by the translator, but not yet possessing a social existence” (2000: 498). Benedict Anderson thinks of this as an imagined community, in which “the members will never know most of their fellow-members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991: 6).

Some paradigm shifts are already taking place in this direction. The Man Booker Prize has now taken translation on board, a signal of a ‘global’ recognition of the translator’s role. There are now several awards for translation in India as well, and some major publishing houses have taken to promoting translation. Yet these forms of recognition remain caught in the conventional practice of focusing only on ‘mainstream’ languages and canonical texts. Both at global and national levels, the usual hierarchies remain in place. It is these hierarchies that the ethics of translation can set itself to challenge.

Translation and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English

The history of translation is a history of texts that travel. Such a trajectory posits, not stasis, but a world in flux; for words, like people, are migrants, and translation is often their mode of transportation. As Venuti says: “The production, circulation, and reception of translations does not simply involve crossing national boundaries, but also requires inserting texts into global networks that are inflected by national literary traditions, to be sure, but that reveal the national as constructed by international affiliations” (2013: 207). Sherry Simon speaks of “the cohabitation within a single text of multiple languages and heterogeneous codes” (1992: 174). About such texts, she says: “Translation, it turns out, not only negotiates between languages, but comes to inhabit the space of language itself” (ibid.). To realise the full import of these statements, we need to extend the conventional idea of translation, to include also the quality of ‘translatedness’ in apparently monolingual texts. The instance of the Indian novel in English is salutary in this respect.

From this perspective, it becomes imperative to situate Indian writing in English in relation to the regional languages in India. According to Amit Chaudhuri, translations from the vernaculars should be read alongside Indian writing in English, because the two canons share a common wisdom of modernity (2001: xxi). Indian English is contact literature, as Braj Kachru calls it, growing from a close proximity to Indian languages in an Indian context. Instead of a polarisation of English and the bhashas, we need to think in terms of a relational system of languages in “mutual recognition with each other” (Kachru 1983: 44; Bakhtin 1981: 295).

G.J.V. Prasad, commenting on the linguistic hybridity of the Indian novel in English, says of such writers: “They are situated in the interface of cultures” (1999: 55). In their works we encounter writing as cultural translation, resituating English as an Indian language, and challenging national and global linguistic hegemonies through their privileging of provisional and contingent local contexts (B. Ghosh 2004: 8). The implications of their experiments with language extend beyond the domain of linguistics, to project a secular and multicultural vision of India (Srivastava 2008). Simultaneously, at the international level, they represent a “situated cosmopolitanism”, a “strategic belonging to a global community” (B. Ghosh 2004: 20–21).

While many theorists, such as Martha Nussbaum, perceive cosmopolitanism as a rejection of the nation, there are others, such as Tim Brennan, who historicise different forms of cosmopolitanism and recognise that some forms are open to the idea of the nation, especially in anticolonial contexts (Jani 2012: 44). Bishnupriya Ghosh uses the term ‘cosmopolitical’ to describe these contemporary Indian writers, highlighting their concern for the subaltern, and their recognition that migrancy, though a privilege for the elite, was historically a painful experience for many (2004: 10, 19).

Heteroglossia here functions as a textual representation of cultural difference as well as connectedness. Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin, is the dialogic interrelation of different registers and dialects within the orbit of a national language; as such, it is in constant tension with the tendency towards linguistic centralisation (Bakhtin 1981: 272–73; Srivastava 2008: 140). Examples of code-mixing and code-switching between English and the bhashas ‘are signals of this (Srivastava 2008: 146). Hybridisation, a sub-category of code-mixing, involves the use of at least one item each from English and an Indian bhasha—as in the word ‘jailkhana’. Such words, Khushwant Singh says, are the products of promiscuous couplings between English and Indian languages (Roberts 1996: 271). In words like ‘abohawa’ from Neel’s *Chrestomathy* in the Ibis trilogy, Amitav Ghosh points out how Persian and Bengali combine to create a new English word for ‘climate’. This transformation of English through its interface with other languages involves a degree of linguistic violence—a violation of the rules of standard English.

This is the violence Rushdie gestures at, when he describes the impact of Desani’s novel *All About Hatterr* : “it showed me that it was possible to break up the language and put it back together in a different way. . . I found I had to . . . destroy the natural rhythms of the English language” (1984: 19–20). Yet, as Rushdie’s own work demonstrates, such textual violence paradoxically has tremendous creative potential.

At stake here is the question of a cultural, and not merely a linguistic transfer. According to Maria Tymoczko, “[t]he task of the interlingual translator has much in common with the task of the postcolonial writer; where one has a text, however, the other has the metatext of culture

itself” (1999: 20). Rushdie refers to British Indian writers as ‘translated men’ who are ‘borne across the world’ to act as mediators between cultures (1990: 17). Braj Kachru coins the term ‘transfer of context’ (Kachru 1983: 131). He speaks of the “multicanons”, the many Englishes that emerged from the experiments of postcolonial writers from India, Africa and other once-colonized lands (Kachru 1998: 76). In this respect, the Indian novel in English needs to be seen as part of a larger literary map.

Some things are lost in translation, no doubt. As Amitav Ghosh says: “you can’t expect to understand everything. . . . It’s a very complex and bewildering world. Language, if it promises to provide you transparency, is providing you with a false promise” (Larsen 2011). Rushdie, too, insists on the positive potential of linguistic transactions: “it is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (1990: 17).

The debates about multilingualism and cultural translation need to be understood in a larger frame, though. Several Indian novelists in English have moved away from the limiting binarism of English versus the Indian vernaculars, to project a different vision of multilingualism in an international context. V. S. Naipaul is an early example of the attempt to negotiate the linguistic encounters of the Indian diaspora. More recently, Amitav Ghosh’s novels, *The Sea of Poppies* and *The River of Smoke*, include not only English and the hybrid language of the lascars, but also French, Cantonese and several Indian languages. “India exported her unique methods of adapting to linguistic diversity with her migrants”, says Ghosh. “Wherever they went, Indian migrants proved to be linguistically adaptable in ways that British or French or Chinese migrants were not. If anything, the fact of dispersal speeded up the processes of linguistic flux endemic to the subcontinent. . . . Thus, India exported with her population, not a language, as other civilizations have done, but a linguistic process—the process of adaptation to heteroglossia” (2008: 248–49). In these texts, the connections between different languages are presented in both spatial and temporal terms. These texts demand a recognition of the geographical range and diversity of

Indian English, but also a deepening of our historical understanding of how languages evolved over time through mutual contact and intermingling.

Rahul Bhattacharya's novel, *The Sly Company of the People Who Care*, presents the little-known story of the Indians who went to Guyana as indentured labour, and eventually settled there. The text inevitably recalls the example of Naipaul, yet differs from Naipaul's work in its deliberate mix of local dialects, alongside the sophisticated lyrical prose of the narrator. Bhattacharya says: "Creolese is immediate, vivid, visual, and I felt its energy could be woven with some contrast into a lush standard English. My only aim with this was to create an organic, immersive world. Language is also insight. And the Guyanese patois reveals so much. The entire genesis of a society is in there, the loanwords from Dutch and French and Bhojpuri, rhythms or idioms from Africa, the improvisatory instinct. There is a peculiar poetry to it, and accuracy. A single word, 'bruck-up', describes better than an entire academic paper the condition of any number of 'postcolonial states'" (2011:).

Marking the Incommensurable: Translating for Our Times

Heteroglossia in such texts presents us with an important insight into the way elements of translation can function within single works. Yet this in itself does not solve the problem of vanishing languages in India and the lands around it. The task of translating from orality into writing, print and digital media gains added urgency in this context. In the face of dying dialects and fading languages, it is through such acts of translation that aspects of the world's histories in decline can be salvaged and given a new lease of life. These acts would ostensibly be linguistic, but their insertion into mainstream reading practices and the creation of archives in contemporary media would extend the implication of such activity far beyond the verbal or linguistic domains. Here, translation would work across different mediums of expression, and not just across languages. As Anvita Abbi asserts, 'revitalization' is the only hope for the survival of vanishing identities and maintaining linguistic diversities in our culture (2004: 10).

In a dialogue with David Damrosch on the subject of Comparative Literature/World Literature, Spivak says of Tagore: “he theorizes the imaginative creative bond that travels across national boundaries as *bajey khoroch*, ‘wasteful spending’, a powerful metaphor for what in the imagination goes above, beyond, beneath, and short of mere rational choice toward alterity. The uncertain intimacy open to ethical alterity is ‘wasteful’” (Spivak and Damrosch 2014: 377). The message of Tagore, according to Spivak, is “that what goes across is not immediately profitable or evaluable ..., that it is ‘value-added’ in an incommensurable sense with no guarantees” (ibid.: 377). This lesson, she says, “is hard to learn, in the face of the will to institutional power, through knowledge management” (ibid.).

The practice of translation offers no guarantees. It deals with the incommensurable, and its value cannot be quantified. It produces cultural encounters that ‘shock’ us out of our complacency, and rive us out of our comfort zones. Yet for our project of self-worlding, it seems to hold out a vital promise, one that we would ignore at our peril.

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