Translation at the Abbey Theatre in 1913: the World Premier of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*[1]

I have wired to Tagore for a complete 'Post Office'.

(W.B. Yeats)

Set inside Jorge Luis Borges' story 'The Shape of the Sword' ('*La forma de la espada*', 1942), is a further story set '[a]round 1922, in one of the cities of Connaught'. [2] This second story is anachronistic and geographically misinformed: misdating the Irish war of Independence and attributing to the province of Connaught cities it does not possess. Assuredly, however, such inexactitude doesn't really matter because the narrative, as told by one John Vincent Moon 'the Englishman from La Colorada' – who is, ironically, Irish, 'from Dungarvan' – concerns the narrator's egregious betrayal by one 'John Vincent Moon'. The story is a self-cannibalizing reference text, the reference being Irish history, which ends in a state of interminable mediation.

Another Borges story, 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' ('*Tema del traidor y del héroe'*, 1944), this one prefaced by an excerpt from Yeats's poem 'The Tower', is also set in Ireland, though we are informed it could be any 'oppressed and tenacious country': 'Poland, Ireland, the Venetian republic, some South American or Balkan state…' Here Borges uses the *theatrum mundi* conceit to suggest that Shakespeare wrote the script of Irish history: 'That history should have copied history was already

sufficiently astonishing, that history should copy literature was inconceivable'. [3] It is conceived nonetheless. Borges, in the strongest Yeatsian terms, instead of plotting a narrative to serve as an allegory for Irish history, uses Irish history to serve as an allegory for a literary space in which the procedures of displacement, treacherous misprision and sly invention are brought to the fore. This is developed in the 1951 essay 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition' where Borges asserts that 'it was sufficient for ['Irish' writers] to *feel* Irish, to *feel* different, in order to be innovators in English culture'[my emphasis]. Here, the particular history of the nation is transformed into a general feeling for literary form. In keeping with his claim that the 'cult of local colour is a recent European cult which the [Argentine] nationalists ought to reject as foreign', Borges suggests that Irish writers have innovated because they have *not* been beholden to the homely platitudes and empiricisms of place.[4]

Another way of putting this might be to say that the Irish writers Borges so admires, from Swift to Joyce, are born translators. Certainly his *Ficciones* can be read as allegories of translation, returning again and again to a source text which has been misplaced or re-catalogued, rumoured to exist but never fully exhibited in the museum of the world. There is, additionally, a significant crossover between this occult indigeneity, which for Borges provides the basis of literary suspense, and what Michael Cronin has termed the political acts of misdirection which characterize the history of translation in Ireland. As a way of resisting the knowledge economy of the English-language, the translator from the Irish often adopted the role of informant, strategically passing on false renderings of local words and place names in order to disrupt the imperial world picture.[5]

In this chapter I want to consider the premier of Rabindranath Tagore's translated play *The Post Office* [*Dakgar* in Bengali) at Dublin's Abbey Theatre on 17 May 1913 in order to test a Borgesian hypothesis: namely, that the local arrives from elsewhere. In fact, I will argue that the play's

peculiar stylization as a modernist 'event' derives from its transposition of genre back and forth across linguistic lines and the fashion in which its displaced, condensed and re-scaled cultural references come to be physically situated on the stage. As well as detailing the several mediations of the play's translation, and noting the characteristic modernity of Tagore's worldly relationship with Yeats, and with the Irish revolutionary Patrick Pearse, whose play *An Rí* [*The King*] was produced as part of the same double bill, I will claim that reading this theatrical occasion as exemplary presents a methodological challenge to students of world literature. The demand that we read across languages – and beyond the European cultures of imperialism – requires also that we reimagine the relation between the local and the global. Fredric Jameson famously held of all 'third-world' or postcolonial texts that they 'projected a political dimension in the form of national allegory': in this way the local experience depicted in the literature could be secured by the national situation, and the felt discrepancy between the 'satisfactions' of reading canonical modernist literature, and works from nations outside the European and American imperium could be resolved according to a historicist imperative to read politically.[6] Notably, however, in Jameson's influential article no mention is made of translation; his is a view of third world literature taken from the institutional perspective of the Global North which, momentarily, forgets the linguistic transformations which allow such texts to arrive into English, Spanish or French. What I plan to do here, however, is to read a literary work for its journey *between* national spaces, which not only recovers the labour of writers forced into translation, but also, by dis-anchoring local meaning from national politics, at the expense even of coherence, disperses the work's effects. In this register, *transnational* literature is always to some degree *translational* literature, best read by the light of Borgesian paradox.

Tellingly, in his short 1914 introduction to *The Post Office* Yeats foreswears social allegory: 'When this little play was performed in London

a year ago by the Irish players, some friends of mine discovered much detailed allegory, the Headman being one principle of social life, the Curdseller or the Gaffer another; but the meaning is less intellectual, more emotional and simple!'[7] This is not untypical for Yeats: finding in Asia a universal life principle, and in Tagore's work in particular, a reason to transcend the national and social allegories of political art. Yet the primitive simplicity which he so admires is, as I've argued elsewhere, the product of a world-literary system which Tagore himself by 1913, during which year he became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, had come to embody.[8] So between national allegory and universal symbol exists a necessary third term of articulation, the system of global exchange, strategically suppressed in Yeats's prose, but operative nonetheless according to the conditions of commercial and linguistic transport. This suppressed articulation is formative within the predicament of translation I want to describe, as well as within the disciplines of world and transnational literatures as we reformulate them today.

Reading Translations

A lot has been written in recent years about Tagore's significance to the rejuvenated field of 'world literature'; and this significance has sometimes been focused through his association with Yeats.[9] The Tagore-Yeats encounter is especially important, it seems to me, not just on account of the presumed greatness of each as cultural spokesperson, but also because their assemblage demonstrates something of how literature circulates, and is produced, transnationally. Read individually, each poet seems to consolidate national meaning, the postcolonial narratives of India and Ireland respectively; but read together they infer a disciplinary path not taken – from the perspective of English studies certainly, but also from that of comparative literature – towards the interactions which define the globalizing space of early C20th capital, and the disavowed labours of

linguistic translation which operate across it. I would like to suggest that what took placed in The Abbey Theatre on 17 May 1913 was not simply another punctual instance of the politicized aesthetics of European modernism, but also a further potential opening onto different reading practices, inferring different political and cultural contexts of production and reception. It's certainly true that modern studies of world literature, or the world-literary system, have often evangelized new ways of reading literature – 'distant'; in translation; at different scales; disrupting Euro-centric periodicity, and using the longue durée from 1500 as the analytic frame. My own endeavour here to describe a reading practice for 'world literature' depends upon the exemplarity of a scene or utterance which catches the artwork in the stylized moment of its trans-national and trans-linguistic circulation. Accordingly, I shall not read *The Post Office* in isolation (as if it could be isolated), but rather through its linguistic and performative transformations, in its relation to other texts, and according to the combined afterlives of these texts, which are, as should become apparent, central and orginary. I will suggest that any text thought about transnationally, moving outside the reference frame of European and American literary canons, lacking therefore the familiar symbolic concordance which establishes a place in an already imagined organization of thought and language, forces us to abandon the methodology of comparison, of comparing like with like – the C19th French and British novel, for example, where likeness is assumed in advance. In the place of comparison we might put the term collaboration, insofar as a transnational work remains open to being 'completed' elsewhere. In the current case, *The Post Office* was 'completed' by means of its theatrical production in Dublin, and according to an overlay of Bengali-Indian, Irish and British-imperial political meanings. Furthermore, as it was being artistically purified within the experimental art space of the Abbey, it remained beholden to the multiple, contaminating procedures of translation. The scene of *worlding* I

shall attempt to describe, then, should be considered for the particular textures and temporalities of its politics and aesthetics, its various origin myths and afterlives, as well as for the multiple, sometimes countervailing discourses it holds together.

A sidestep into another of Yeats's collaborative forays might help us consolidate what is at stake here. When concluding his essay on the Japanese Noh theatre with an unusually frank consideration of the import of cultural hybridity, the poet lands on what might be described as a manifesto manqué for contemporary 'world literature':

> Perhaps some day a play in the form I am adapting for European purposes may excite once more, whether in Gaelic or in English, under the slope of Slieve-na-mon or Croagh Patrick, ancient memories; for this form has no need of scenery that runs away with money nor of theatre building […] my writings if they be seaworthy will put to sea, and I cannot tell where they may be carried by the wind. Are not the fairy stories of Oscar Wilde, which were written for Mr Rickets and Mr Shannon and for a few ladies, very popular in Arabia?[10]

This passage is instructive here for two reasons. First of all, wittingly or not, Yeats places the aleatory within his conception of artistic significance: the addressee of the literary text, by remaining fundamentally unpredictable, a marker of dissemination outside the safe space of the author's own class and nation, accrues the power to decide the meaning of the work. Second, Yeats implies the essential futurity of this transnational space. Notwithstanding his desire to excite 'unconscious memories' (the universal primitivism so familiar and perhaps wearying to the student of modernism), he insists that 'seaworthy writing', writing that travels beyond itself into the world, can do so precisely because it has 'no need of scenery that runs away with money'. This is paradoxical: a travelling artwork that is

necessarily additive, taking on new contexts as it moves, also demands formal reduction by enacting a refusal to cumbersomely and expensively reproduce the scenery of a single historical imaginary. Exceeding what has since come to be known as methodological nationalism, Yeats gestures here to a de-referentialised or nomadic work, whose form is almost nothing, or close to the lines of movement itself.

So how exactly did Tagore's *The Post Office* move to Dublin? And why was it produced in a double bill with Pearse's *An Rí*? Of course the short answer to both questions is 'Yeats's cultural influence'; but the longer, more intriguing response concerns the multiple social and cultural determinations which Yeats helped bring to fruition. In late 1912, Yeats read a translation of Tagore's play, and quickly realized it could consolidate the current 'vogue' for the Indian's writing: it was, he wrote to William Rothenstein, 'a perfect play'. In the same period he watched a student performance of Pearse's work at one of the latter's fundraisers for St Edna's school. Pearse's school was in financial trouble at the time, in part due to the headmaster's commitment to symbolic real estate: its location in the Hermitage in Rathfarnham, where Irish martyr Robert Emmett had once courted his sweetheart Sarah Curran, was proving expensive to keep. Sharing with Pearse a certain high-mindedness in such matters, Yeats supported attempts to keep the educational enterprise alive and in good quarters. Indeed it was on the basis of the school that he deemed Pearse and Tagore bedfellows: according to Yeats, Tagore's Ashram in Bengal was 'the Indian St Edna's'.[11]

For Pearse's part, an early hostility toward Anglo-Irish revivalism had been gradually tempered by an appreciation for Yeats' and Lady Gregory's defence of national literature against the arguments of those other belle lettrists like George Russell (AE) that 'art was [essentially] cosmopolitan'. As early as 1905 he wrote to Lady Gregory of a new comradeship between

the Gaelic League to which he was affiliated and the Irish national Theatre, and, by 1913, his pupils had performed in the Abbey twice.[12] His letters show the extent of his gratitude for Yeats's support; and contemporary accounts suggest likewise that he was both thankful and surprised by the poet's magnanimity. The meeting between the two concerning the staging of *An Rí* is recounted by Kenneth Reddin, a pupil at St Edna's whose mother, a figure in the Dublin theatre of the time, was in attendance:

> My mother and Pearse went in to see Yeats. They were both nervous and pessimistic. It happened that at that time Yeats had discovered the Indian poet and mystic Rabindranath Tagore, and a play of his called *The Post Office*. It was providential. The play is virtually a children's play. Having heard their story, Yeats rose smiling.
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> 'Of course I shall help you and your boys at St Enda's,' he said. 'We'll do Tagore's *Post Office*, and I'll give you two-thirds of the profits. And you, Mr Pearse, will you produce that little play of yours, *The King*? The two plays should go well together!'
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> When they reached the street, Pearse turned to my mother and said: 'It's true, you know. Only a great artist can afford to be greatly generous.'[13]

Yeats's generosity on this occasion is borne out in the programme which makes explicit where the proceeds will go: 'in aid of the Building Fund of St Enda's College, by the Abbey Company (2nd co.) and the students of St Edna's College.'[14] Yet we cannot say it was a generosity without return. By mediating the cultural sympathy between the two plays, he established, and partook of, a multifaceted dilemma of representation. From one vantage point Pearse and Tagore comprised a nascent alliance of pedagogues working in defiance of the imperial education system, but from another, theirs might have seemed a more explicitly revolutionary endeavor, a

political collaboration between Irish and Bengali nationalisms. Furthermore, as we shall see, the connection Yeats made exploited new lines of commercial and linguistic exchange of which he was a major beneficiary.[15]

World Premier

On 17 May 1913 *An Rí* and *The Post Office* were performed together. The night itself is not difficult to imagine: Yeats, avowedly sick of theatre business, suffering under a strict diet (no salt!) meant to cure his increasing distemper while trying to get back to writing poetry, yet still preoccupied by the Abbey 1st company's controversial tour of America; and a few seats away, Pearse, the junior partner, watching with enthusiasm as his own words, directed by his brother William, were reproduced in his pupils' mouths. Tagore was absent, warned not to travel from London by Sturge Moore among others, lest culture be mistaken for politics – though of course they'd already combined.[16] The aesthetic pedigree of the Abbey event was obvious: Lennox Robinson was the named director of *The Post Office*, and Gordon Craig Screens had done the set designs.[17] Significantly, Pearse's political ambition for a self-sufficient Ireland resided for a moment in the same space as the artistic ambition to create an auto-telic artwork, something beautifully released from the logic of political instrumentality: after all, this is how Yeats characterized *The Post Office* in his written introduction. Yet both these ambitions were already contaminated by other unacknowledged means of commercial and linguistic transport.

There is little doubt that Tagore, Craig and Robinson gave artistic pedigree to the occasion, though admittedly their names sat in the programme alongside run-of-the-mill advertisements for Yeats and Lady Gregory's books and for certain Dublin businesses.[18] They also sat in the company of a ghost, for the translator's name Devabrata Mukerjea is missing [Figure 1]. This absence is significant. On 17 May 1913 the

audience watched two plays in the process of translation: a Bengali play translated into English by Mukerjea, and an Irish-language play translated into English (Pearse published *An Rí* alongside his translation *The King: A Morality* in the journal *An Macaomh*, which was later performed in Tagore's school at Santineketan in 1915). These once and future acts of translation contribute to the temporality of both plays, the formal potential of their languages, as well as to the meaning of their performance together. In this light, the omission of any mention of translation from the theatre programme can only suggest that behind the spectacle of the event lay a structural disavowal of its mediations. How did *Dakgar* become *The Post Office*; and why did *An Rí* become *The King*?

Pascale Casanova's often disputed conception of a world literary space remains helpful here, a world 'whose divisions and frontiers are *relatively* independent of political and linguistic borders' [my emphasis].[19] Of course, a lot hinges on the word *relatively*; and the precise nature of the connection between *Weltliteratur* and *Weltmarkt* remains critically underdetermined in Casanova's work. Nonetheless, by characterizing this literary space as 'a market where non-market values are traded' she also conjures a linguistic world whose formative asymmetries are most visible to those forced as the price of entry to undertake the labour of translation. At a time in the early twentieth century when English was becoming the lingua franca of globalization, the question of how distinct national and linguistic cultures move into an expanding 'world space' was becoming ever more complicated. The increasing necessity of translation into English alongside a disavowal of its practice continues today through what Lawrence Venuti calls strategies of domestication. However, as well as producing the ideological conformity of a global literary product, combining European genres with 'local colour', we might also surmise that global processes of domestication carry the potential for new stylizations of language.[20] And what's more, recognition of such depends on highlighting such processes.

As Kathleen Shields has suggested '[b]ecause it is a cluster concept that combines transmission, representation, and transculturation [...] translation is an important pathway connecting inside [the given text] to outside.'[21] Importantly, this proposition can also be reversed. As well as helping us understand the political and social conditions, the cultural reductions which produce the work of world literature in English, a focus on the processes of translation reveals collaborative, multi-authored texts behind the more easily recognizable work as it appears in a single linguistic or national context. This calls for reading practices that do not rely exclusively on close textual readings, or the connoisseurship of pre-given locales, but which also demonstrate, through a *feel* for the contingencies of displacement which produced the published work, a further appreciation for the conflicted history of linguistic assimilation.

In the following sections, I will link the thematic center of Tagore's play, namely the fate of a young boy, Amal, as he attempts to address himself to the wider world, to the global transmissions which determined the play's meaning at the Abbey in 1913. I'll consider, then, the meaning of an Indian play staged in an Irish national context, premiered in transnational collaboration with another non-English-language play, namely Pearse's *An Rí*, and delivered in a translational English which calls into question the authenticity of an original script. Ultimately, it will be through the ambiguity of the body on stage that I focus these issues; arguing that even when it is possible to read Amal symbolically as sanctioning ideas of national sovereignty (representing a preserve of indigeneity), the body of the child actor on the stage disperses meaning for completion elsewhere.

The Sovereignty of Boys

Kenneth Reddin's mis-designation of *The Post Office* as 'virtually a children's play' (see above) is really quite felicitous. Although Tagore didn't write the play exclusively for children, its child protagonist, Amal (meaning 'stainless'

in Bengali), produces through the occasion of his death an image of sovereign childhood, apparently uncontaminated by worldliness.[22] In Pearse's play too, in an even more explicit register, the boy protagonist Giolla Na Naomh ('the servant of the Saints') is sovereign: a living-and dying reproach to the materialist ambitions of the other characters. Here we might briefly recall Jacqueline Rose's seminal warning about the impossibility of children's literature: 'impossible not in the sense that it cannot be written [...] but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child.'[23] Rose's case study is J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* which, she suggests, is less a book written by an adult for a child, than an attempt 'to build an image of the child' inside the text which might secure the unruly child without. We can say, then, of both *The Post Office* and *An Rí* that they are children's plays to the extent that they are written for adults, with children in mind; and that recoverable within each, though not fully acknowledged in either, is the non-representational rupture between the adult fantasy of the child and the child. We might further consider why, albeit in significantly different ways, both plays attempt to secure the child representationally through death.

The reviewer in Dublin's *Evening Telegraph* (J.P.M.), noting this coincidence of child protagonists, also made the apt connection to *Peter Pan* and death: 'Peter Pan, with all J.M. Barrie's whimsical humourous insight into the child-mind, is made say, "To die will be a great adventure." The children in the two plays do not look on death as a great adventure, but they look on it with a total absence of fear.' The reviewer doesn't speculate as the origin and meaning of this infanticidal fantasy, however, preferring to focus on the universal tragedy of having to watch on while a child dies: 'the theme is not confined to any one country or any one race – it is universal; common to all; its interest world-wide.'[24] And yet, of course, children die across the world in very different ways, as these contiguous performances begin to demonstrate. It seems noteworthy, for instance, concerning the death of

Giolla Na Naomh in *An Rí,* that he is the only character who doesn't want to fight: 'While we think of glory he thinks of service', proclaims the Abbot before sending him out to die.[25] This is a device with Christian resonance: a pious hero must be reluctant in order that his deeds can be distinguished from among those of the merely ambitious. It also produces a defense against contamination: the fantasy image of the dying child absolved of willfulness secures the future; and, accordingly, the adults who witness and are moved by the spectacle of infant death are saved from their own impurity. Amal, the sick child in *The Post Office*, is imagined differently. Contrary to Giolla Na Naomh, he declares his ambition to see the world outright; he wants to join the King's postal service, and therefore sets himself against the purifying ideals of quarantine. His death is more enigmatically coded as a result, since his final ambiguous encounter with the King can be read both as a final, even punitive confinement within the security of his grounds, and as his transcendent recruitment to the postal service – a granting of his wish to travel and work in the open.

In *Unseasonable Youth*, Jed Esty has developed a link between capitalist spatialisation and age, identifying what he calls 'novels of frozen youth': 'Antidevelopmental fictions set in colonial contact zones where uneven development is a conspicuous fact of both personal and political life.'[26] Though particularly interested in the adaptations of the European Bildungsroman to 'more conspicuously global, and therefore more uncertain frame[s] of social reference', Esty's study, including of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, invites us to think about how imperial and national narratives produce children and youths in a variety of different modes. We might extrapolate from this the following: as well as the child who is going to develop in accordance with national historical time, there is the child who is forbidden to grow by the imperial world system: those infantilized others who have no world-historical space to grow in to. And then, more unusually, there is the queer child who utters a refusal in response to a prohibition and

employs aesthetic practices to escape the formalization of maturity. This latter child or youth surely has an inescapably theatrical quality. Lilian Jago, the child actor so praised in the 1913 reviews for her performance of Amal in *The Post Office* had also in the same year performed the child protagonist in an English-language production of *The Assumption of Hannele* by Gerhart Hauptmann, also directed by Lennox Robinson. The fact that Hauptmann's play from 1893 is considered the first theatrical work in the European canon to feature a non-adult protagonist is doubtless testament to the historically changing conception of childhood; formations of social sentiment, the advent of psychoanalysis, as well as the imperial politics described by Esty, all had a role to play in creating the possibility of a drama depending on the psychological sophistications of a child. But there is also a question of technique. A child actor necessarily heightens the meta-theatrical aspect of embodiment on stage, since it is not only a matter of the child being good enough to act the part, she is also disposed to contradict the part as an embodiment of the impossible rupture, noted by Rose, between the fantasy of the child and the child. The securing of an image of childhood innocence on stage is inevitably threatened by the necessity of the child actor's technique. Praise for Jago's performance in *The Post Office,* then, indicates a certain uncanniness – *is this child really a child?* – and returns us to the modes of childhood – developing, forbidden, queer – which modernism in its overdetermined global context offers as potential relief from the imperial adult male. In Jago's case, there is the added duplicity of her sex: a girl playing the part of the boy, Amal, in a boy-centric vision of the future.

Significantly, such ironies do not remain outside the text; rather as contextual contradictions, they operate on, and through, the plays' production of meaning. The world-weary saintliness of Giolla Na Naomh in Pearce's *An Rí,* for instance, exempt from the enthusiasms of his peers, is reminiscent of 'little father time' in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, an

infant more absurdly world-weary than any of the adult characters he encounters. In like fashion, the plausibility of Giolla Na Naomh's childhood is made to crack beneath the weight of the symbolic projections it bears. And the same question can be asked of Amal in *The Post Office,* who, though he is restrained in the space of infancy (quarantined within home), and though he talks to the passing world with an apparent innocence, also commands the attention of the adults he hails on account of the precocity of his ambition, such that we may suspect he is an adult in a child's body.

Behind the uncanny question of whether the child before us is really a child, bound up with questions of nature, agency and technique, and the spatialisation of personal development, is the issue of sovereignty. Eugene McNulty has written appositely on the question of law in Pearce's drama, especially how the question of who the law represents intersects with questions of language: was the Irish body, specifically the body that speaks through Irish, and which is read as Irish, positioned outside the imperial law? McNulty's argument points out that the case of the Irish exception, made in forceful anti-colonial terms by Pearse, poses the predicament of the biopolitical in its most general sense: how will the law appear; how will it be written; and how will it be marked on the body? He notes how often in Pearse's drama and short prose, the question of the law emerges through a standoff invoking the process of waiting, thereby framing its non-presentation. It is, says McNulty, according to the 'inter-zonal' logic of anticipation that Pearse's drama can be read alongside Kafka's parable 'Before the Law' as well as with Derrida's famous exegesis of that text.[27] While this is not the place to rehearse either in detail, it is worth remembering that Kafka's peasant, awaiting entry to the law, subject to the door-keeper's 'not yet', is finally, at the point of death, informed that the open gates were intended only for him, and that now they would be closed. For Derrida, this scene exhibits the law through its withholding, 'silence and discontinuity constitute the phenomenon of the law'.[28]

Although this conception of the law and sovereignty is readable within the corpus of Pearse's work, there remains also a suspicion that for Pearse the aesthetic functions only to re-territorialise the law. In other words, the national exception symbolized through art is supposed to keep Ireland free from the instrumental materialism which characterizes biopolitical modernity ('The Murder Machine'). Of course, Pearse's ambition to create a national association of people and values is not itself contemptible, but we are left to wonder at the means and consequences of symbolic foreclosure on the world beyond the nation; especially so since the meaning of Pearse's drama, including of *An Ri*, has come to be articulated almost exclusively through his political martyrdom in 1916, and the subsequent history of the Irish state (which can hardly be said to have protected its people from biopolitical ordinance). It is worth noting, then, that reading *An Rí* alongside *The Post Office* strengthens McNulty's argument – which is also an attempt to recover Pearse's art from its narrower political legacy.

What, then, is the meaning of performing these plays together? In the first place, it showcases their similarities as two plays featuring child protagonists who, although they themselves are not guaranteed rights – they are both ordered around by adult characters – have the symbolic and sacrificial potential to embody a form of sovereignty. But reading the two plays in tandem also produces significant differences, allowing, through a principle of transnational interference, that one might interpret, or even 'complete' the other. In fact, I'd suggest that *An Rí* only arrives at its modernity – a modernity described by McNulty – through *The Post Office*: Amal's waiting is much more prolonged and characteristically Kafkaesque than Giolla Na Naomh's. In fact, Amal's desire for the law doesn't point to any given territory but rather to the extra-territorial transmissions of a postal service; the King as post minister renders a law which both guards its own provenance and defers its appearance. Furthermore, the formal

closure of Amal's death at the end of the play is paradoxically indeterminate, due to a letter which does *and* does not arrive at its destination – a paradox we are able to transfer onto *An Rí* when performed outside Ireland, as in the 1915 production at Tagore's school. Here, the 'national' play, like the letter in *The Post Office*, arrives, and is simultaneously displaced.

An anecdote as told by Yeats to Lady Gregory delights in the peculiar cunning of Tagore's transnational disposition:

> I had a farewell visit from one of Tagore's followers, who has since gone back to India. He told me a charming story about Tagore (do not tell it in America or they will print it). I told him how Sarojini's brother was sad over a poem welcoming the King written by Tagore. The Indian's face was full of amusement. He said, 'The National Congress people asked Tagore for a poem of welcome. He tried to write it but could not. He got up very early in the morning and wrote a very beautiful poem – not one of his best but still beautiful. When he came down he said to one of us, "There is a poem which I have written. It is addressed to God – But give it to the Congress people. It will please them. They will think it is addressed to the King."' He added that all Tagore's own followers knew it meant God but the others did not.[29]

Not only does this uphold the idea that the King to whom Amal pledges his life in *The Post Office* is *not* the British Imperial monarch, but it demonstrates Tagore pursuing a principle of semantic displacement – he relies on the word 'King' meaning different things to different audiences. It also reminds us, however, of the metaphysical straits into which anti-colonial critique is so often pushed: Tagore and Pearse both place *boys* in a position of service in relation to a King, summoning in this way an exceptional resource of unworldly strength working against a material

power. And yet the significant difference, playing out between our two examples, is most readable through the errancy of Amal's desire for the world. Giolla Na Naomh in *An Rí* is the nominated 'last who shall be first': 'I am too young, father, I am too weak' he demurs to the Abbot at the first intimation that he as the 'most innocent' should take the place of the forsaken King on the battlefield (*AR* 74). But then at the moment of appointment he is characterized by exceptional alertness and the economy of his march to death: 'poor King, your marchings have been long. My march will be very short' (*AR* 75). Amal's fate, by contrast, is a prolonged derangement: 'the doctor says all the organs of his little body are at loggerheads'.[30] Indeed his condition verges on a willful refusal to grow up; eschewing the ideals of maturation and health, Amal lands intermittently on facets of pleasure and companionship: 'do you know, yesterday I met someone quite as crazy as I am?' This is not the language of someone who simply wants to get better. So whereas Giolla Na Naomh is depicted as humble and serene, Amal is agitated and paradoxically homesick for elsewhere. Though both boys are fosterlings, subject to cultural rather than blood inheritances, Giolla Na Naomh's sacrifice sublimes him into place: 'oh dead king, oh victorious child! I kiss thee, of white body, since it is thy purity that has redeemed my people' (*AR* 79). Amal's non-sacrificial death and the place it secures remains ambiguous, according to formative miscommunications and deceit.

Here the character Headman is significant. Possessing an administrative power within Amal's community, Headman, who is also conspicuously vain, introduces an element of dramatic conflict which is notably missing from Pearse's Passion play. Put out by the presumption of the boy's claim in Act I that he will soon receive a letter from the King, in Act II Headman arrives at Amal's sickbed with a blank slip of paper: 'ha ha ha, this is the letter' (*PO* 166). Here we have the crucial moment, most simply because the letter has arrived at its destination in counterfeit form: 'how

can it be false?' Headman goads, 'You are the king's chum' (*PO* 166). And yet the semantic insignificance of the blank slip is immediately, and in the very same gesture, redeemed as significant for the fact, and form, of its arrival. Gaffer (a more likeable character) and Headman himself (seemingly repentant for his cruelty) proceed to fabricate a message. But their made-up consolation for the dying Amal, 'the King says I'm calling on you shortly' is soon surprised by the apparent authenticity of a King's herald who enters and announces 'our sovereign king comes tonight' (*PO* 167). Amal dies in the rift of this undecideable structure having arrived at a counterfeit, purely consolatory, and yet also perfectly authentic destination. In other words, a space has been made for the sovereign (The King) by the transmission of a letter, but this is a sovereignty which has not yet been fulfilled, and whose meaning remains ambiguously open. The space created by the postal service, and described by the letter itself, pitched between the counterfeit and the real, returns us also to the uncanniness of the child actor who may or may not be a child. It also connects the play's theme to the event of its performance alongside *An Rí* in Dublin. For a play which leaves open the question of whether or not there can be an authentic text (a letter; a play script), and which theatrically displaces the law, keeping the King guarded within his own anticipated but not yet actualized arrival, is also a work which transfers its signification to the outside: from plot to performance, from its thematic center to the contingent form of its utterance. To say that in *The Post Office* the law arrives without identifying itself is to speak also of its translation.

Translating The Post Office

The accusations made against Tagore's first translations into English, especially of *Gitanjali*, are fairly well known: namely that he was making of himself 'a representative of that otherness so alluring to the Western tradition'.[31] However this accusation conflates two significantly different

points: one, that he misrepresented his own original songs by dressing them up in the garb of oriental seduction, and two, that he smoothed out rather than drew attention to the act of translation. What Tagore betrays either way is himself: the self who wrote poetry in Bengali, or the self who laboured at translation. This is another way of saying that 'Tagore' who won the Nobel prize for making 'in his own English words a contribution to the literature of the West' was never quite himself; rather, he was a performative entity who carried the rumours of a lost authenticitiy, and whose texts, having the character of pseudo-translation, bereft of textual and para-textual markers of effort and exactitude, were possessed of a certain fake ingenuousness.[32] Here once more we have the echo of the child actor secured neither by nature nor by an acceptance of her technical sovereignty. Tagore, likewise, is an uncanny spectre in the field of world literature and translation studies.

In a published conversation with H.G. Wells, Tagore accepted that 'the time for five mile dialects is fast vanishing. Rapid communications make for a common language' he said. And yet, he continued: 'don't you think that in America, in spite of constant touch between America and England, the English language is tending towards a definite moderation and change?'[33] It is the connection between the first and second position that seems to me most significant here; specifically, how the former spatialisation of linguistic difference according to local origins is supplanted and yet continues to inform the latter more temporal, diachronic understanding of linguistic change. And it is Tagore's modernity, I'd suggest, that performs this connection most successfully as a world-making action, which protects the original locale which cannot be reached except in the theatrical moment, as that of Amal's death, pitched between what is fake and what is real.

In keeping with Tagore's own legacy, to recover now the occluded name of Devabrata Mukerjea as the translator of *The Post Office* is not to plot our way towards the authentication of a source text. Rather it provides a

means of attending to the multiplicity of operations which permitted the play to have its first iteration in English – as an unperformed play in 1913, in some sense *The Post Office* did not yet exist in its original form. Mukerjea is most famous in Yeats scholarship for his courtship of Iseult Gonne, and their attempt to translate Tagore's collection *The Gardener* into French. However, his later return to India and incarceration in an asylum might better fit the translator's paradigm: from romantic hero to discarded anonym. 'What you've heard about Devabrata is true. He has completely lost his mind, and there is hardly any hope of his recovery,' wrote Tagore to Yeats in June 1918. 'I tired my utmost to help him…. But the mischief had already been done [unspecified trouble with the British authorities in Calcutta], and the poor boy became worse and worse till he had to be lodged in a public asylum where he is still detained'.[34] Yeats's influence here is not incidental, since it is not implausible to suggest that the Irish poet's verses were among Mukerjea's source texts. In one illuminating moment in the play, while envisaging the King's letter travelling on its way towards him, Amal conjures a pastoral scene: 'the King's postman reaches the open meadow where the cricket chirps and where there is not a single man.' This is in response to the Gaffer who had already avowed a preference in his retirement for building 'a small cabin where […] the birds nest and pass my days counting the sea waves' (*PO* 162-163) Although there were no letterboxes on Innisfree, Yeats's poem had already proved eminently transmittable: a picture postcard from a homesick poet to the world. What this tells us is that Mukerjea's script was not simply translated from Tagore's Bengali but had been translated through and into the idioms and styles of literary English which both betrayed and informed the conception of the original. It is worth remaining sensitive to such literary contaminations and their uncertain temporalities.

Likewise we should pay attention to questions of class as they resolve through idiom and accent. Although we no longer have access to the

play scripts used by the actors in 1913, in 1961 when *The Post Office* was revived at The Abbey, the cast did attempt to (re)naturalise the script. Mukerjea's written dialogue is full of imperial-sounding interpellation, especially from Amal who, despite the bad luck of his quarantine and uncertain origins, interrogates the world in imperial English: '*say*, dairy man, where do you come from?' (*PO* 153) [my italics]. Whereas the Abbey actors in 1961 changed anachronistic, English-sounding words like '*jiggered', 'jolly' and 'how wonderful'* to '*blest', 'lovely', and 'ha ha',* it appears from the evidence of journalistic reviews that the 1913 actors emulated more fully the imperial style.[35] On its transfer to London's Court theatre in July, the language was reviewed as follows in the *London Times*:

> Such expressions as 'awfully', 'jolly good', and 'shut up' contrast strangely with the beauty of most of Tagore's language without really seeming out of place. The part of the boy was played with much delicacy and pathos by Miss Lillian Jagoe. The other actors, though they did their best to represent Indian natives, remained always Irishmen.[36]

Although the colonial prejudice is apparent here, the thematic focus remains apposite; separating out the hybridised elements of the production (class, ethnicity, gender), the reviewer makes conspicuous the politics of literary translation, even while neglecting to mention the translator. What is most striking perhaps, is that he begins by making a virtue of translational contingency: importantly, the upper-class English idiom is not accepted on the basis that it maps faithfully onto the politics of the Indian caste system, but rather because it 'contrast[s] strangely' with the Indian theme.[37] But then what he deems most out of place in the performance is that which is most inexorably and contingently there: the bodies and the voices of the actors, who happen to sound Irish. If the English idiom ('jolly' and so on)

coheres with the universality of Tagore's sensibility, the Irish utterance particularises the occasion to the detriment of the meaning of the play. A not dissimilar implication can be found in the Dublin reviews. In the *Evening Telegraph* the actor Michael Conniffe is praised for playing the part of Gaffer, but 'occasionally [he] made that gentleman too much of a Kiltartan Indian Fakir, with the result that the contrast in the accents of the various members of the company aroused some members of the pit to unseemly, but on this occasion pardonable, laughter'.[38] Here once more the hybridity is noted but quickly reordered; according to the reviewer, the laughter can only mean a degree of aesthetic failure due to the discrepancy between artistic intention and dramatic result. It is apparently absurd to conjoin the vocal embodiment associated with the Irish Revival writings of Lady Gregory and Yeats (known as 'Kiltartan Irish') to the foreign garb of a Bengali drama. And yet what is laughable about the 'Kiltartan Indian Fakir' is also formally significant: here we have two national confections cross-contaminating one another – the 'fake' Irish accent; the 'fake' Indian in the drama – both translated and performed, but realised anew in the contingency of their relation on the stage. As well as indicating aesthetic failure then, the audience's laughter at the Kiltartan Fakir signals a rupture of symbolic codes, and of the established conventions for making national meaning. It is a moment of excessive translation: a doubly dressed, or doubly uttered body, both accented and costumed, which is also, paradoxically, denuded in the moment of being laughed at. The body on stage is the theatrical bare minimum, the most proximate and placed material which finds itself in the same moment symbolically displaced. In this way it stands as a sudden figure of alterity within the historical imaginary. And it is this theatrical moment, I submit, which remains to be read as trans-national. To pick up Tagore's point about 'five mile dialects' in an age of world Englishes: it is not that the local has vanished entirely, rather that it has been mobilised, uttered intermittently as a rupture within

the aesthetic image: a moment of shock, potentially, or, as in Dublin on 17 May 1913, of unexpected laughter.

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[1] I would like to acknowledge the Moore Institute at NUI Galway for awarding me a Visiting Fellowship in 2017-18. Material from the Abbey Digital Archive informs some of this work.

[2] Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Shape of the Sword'. Trans. Donald A. Yates. *Labyrinths*. Edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin Books, 2000 [1962]). 96-101: 97. Of added significance to this chapter is the story's *mise en scène* in General Berkeley's country house, where a mix of philosophical idealism and colonial administration connect Ireland to Bengal: 'The general (whom I had never seen) was carrying out some administrative assignment or other in Bengal'. 98.

[3] Borges, 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero'. Trans. James E. Irby. *Labyrinths*. 102-105:103.

[4] Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition'. Trans. James E. Irby. *Labyrinths*. 211-220: 218.

[5] Michael Cronin 'History, Translation, Post-colonialism'. *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era.* Eds S. Simon and P. St Pierre. (University of Ottawa Press: 2000). Retrieved from http://books.openedition.org/uop/1982

[6] Fredric Jameson, 'Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism. *Social Text* 15 (1986). 65-88: 69.

[7] W.B. Yeats, 'Preface to Rabindranath Tagore, The Post Office, tr. Devabrata Mukerjea (1914)'. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Vol. VI. Prefaces and Introductions*. Ed. William H. O'Donnell. (NY: Macmillan, 1989). 144.

[8] Barry Sheils, *W.B. Yeats and World Literature: the subject of poetry*. (NY: Routledge 2016 [Ashgate 2015]). 61-2, 125.

[9] Prominent examples include: Debashish Banerji (ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals* (New Delhi: Springer, 2015); Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2015); Jean Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

For the Tagore-Yeats relation see: Sirshendu Majumdar, *Yeats and Tagore* (Bethesda, Dublin: Academia Press, 2013).

[10] W.B. Yeats, 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan' *Essays and Introductions*. (London: Macmillan, 1961) 221-237: 236.

[11] Patrick Pearse, *The Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse*. Ed. Séamus Ó Buachalla (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1979) 18. Famously, Pearse would remain for Yeats in 'Easter 1916' a man who 'kept a school'.

[12] Patrick Pearse. *The Letters of Patrick Pearse*. Ed. Séamus Ó Buachalla. (Dublin: Colin Smythe, 1980). 93-4.

[13] Quoted in Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (Irish Academic Press ,2006). 171-2.

[14] Abbey Theatre. *The Post Office*, 17 May 1913 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 1522_MPG_01,p6.

[15] For an account of the Abbey's financial situation around this time, specifically concerning its transformation from a cooperative to a commercial enterprise, see: Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-century Ireland: cultivating the people.* (NY and London: Routledge, 2001). Yeats's correspondence is replete with examples showing how comfortably the poet's mystical identifications, with Tagore among others, fitted with financial accountancy. See, for example, this following letter from June 1913 to his sister Lolly regarding the Cuala Press: 'The Tagore play [*The Post Office*] would have been a distinguished thing to do — it would have sold at once. It would have taken little time to print. Copies of first edition of Tagores book, which I edited, are at £5 a copy. He is at the very height of his vogue. It would bring new life to the press & put off the inevitable day when you will have exhausted your public. No private press lives for ever.' *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Gen ed. John Kelly (Intelex Electronic Editions, 2002). Letters cited by accession number. CL: 2188.

[16] Though one of Yeats's letters suggest Tagore's absence was merely an oversight: 'Dear Mr Tagore: I am afraid that I never told you that we give our first performance of *Post Office* in Dublin on Saturday next May 17. I hope we shall often revive it. It slipped out of my mind that the date was so near & it was only when our manager spoke of it yesterday I have just returned from Dublin — that I remembered I had not told you. I hope you will forgive me. We have been compelled to decide on this new date.' CL: 2166.

[17] Lennox Robinson was a playwright and poet, as well as producer of plays at the Abbey. Gordon Craig was an *avant garde* theatre practitioner, whose reputation Yeats was busy securing by organizing an exhibition of his work in Dublin.

[18] In the Programme for the London performance in July 1913, the *Weltmarkt-Weltliteratur* connection was more pronounced as advertisements for Irish books sat alongside those for Turkish, Persian and Chinese carpets. See: Abbey Theatre. The Post Office, 10 Jul 1913 [programme]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 1562_MPG_01,p9.

[19] Pacale Casanova, 'Literature as a World'. *New Left Review* 31 (2005). 71-90: 72

[20] Lawrence Venuti, The Translator's Invisibility: a history of translation (NY: Routledge, 1995).

[21] Shields, Kathleen. "Challenges and Possibilities for World Literature, Global Literature, and Translation." CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.7 (2013): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2381> [accessed 4/4/18]

[22] Susan Friedman alludes to this aptonymn when reading Tagore's 1901 story *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*) in which another 'Amal' comes of age 'through a complex set of transgendered identifications'. *Planetary Modernism*. 271.

[23] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984). 2-4.

[24] Abbey Theatre. Press Cuttings re: Scrapbook containing news cuttings from 1913. NLI REF 25, 496. 1913-1913. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, ADM_00003671, p172.

[25] Patrick Pearse, *The King: A Morality* [An Rí]. *The Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse*. 67-80: 72. Henceforth all references in the main text: *AR*

[26] Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 2.

[27] Eugene McNulty, 'Waiting for the Exceptional: Pearse's drama and the space between Law and Law'. *Patrick Pearse and the Theatre. MacPiarais agus an Téatar*. Eds. E. McNulty and R. NiGhairbhí. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017). 79-96: 86.

[28] Jacques Derrida, 'Before the Law'. Trans. Avita Ronell and Christine Roulston. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. (NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 1992) 181-220: 192.

[29] W.B.Yeats. *CL*: 2050.

[30] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Post Office* A Tagore Reader. Ed. Amiya Chakravarty. (London: Macmillan, 1961): 148-169:149-150. Henceforth all references in the main text: *PO*.

[31] Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. (NY and London: Routledge, 1996). 150.

[32] Michael Collins has suggested that the Swedish Academy that awarded Tagore the Nobel Prize did have among their members some who could read Bengali and therefore appreciate the range of Tagore's original works beyond *Gitanjali*. However, this fact does not negate the Academy's justification, nor its ramifications for 'world ' culture, that it was the poet's 'own English words' which saw him awarded. See Michael Collins, 'Rabindranath

Tagore and the Politics of Friendship'. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2012). 118-142.

[33] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Tagore and Wells'. *A Tagore Reader*. 106

[34] Rabindranath Tagore, Letter from 17th June 1918. *Selected Letters of Tagore.* Eds. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 208-09.

[35] The actors in 1961 seemed to work off the 1913 script; their alterations can be read in the archive. For example: Abbey Theatre. The Post Office, 10 Jul 1913 [script]. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, 11037_S_0001,p3.

[36] *The London Times*, 11 July, 1913. *Poets to a Poet 1912-1940: Letters from Robert Bridges, Ernest Rhys, W.B. Yeats, Thomas Sturge Moore, R.L. Trevelyan, and Ezra Pound to Rabindranath Tagore.* Ed. Bikash Chakravarty. (Calcutta: Visura Bharati, 1998). 146-7.

[37] Although Tagore was openly critical of the Caste hierarchies, he was not entirely extricated from the politics of Caste, as Tapan Basu argues: 'Caste Matters: Rabindranath Tagore's Engagement with India's Ancient Social Hierarchies'. *South Asia Journal of South Asian Studies* 35.1 (2012): 162-171.

[38] Abbey Theatre. Press Cuttings re: Scrapbook containing news cuttings from 1913. NLI REF 25, 496. 1913-1913. Abbey Theatre Digital Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway, ADM_00003671, p172.