Review of Two Novels by Yuri Herrera (trans. Lisa Dillman)

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Yuri Herrera. *The Transmigration of Bodies and Signs Preceding the End of the World*. Translated by Lisa Dillman. Melbourne: Text, 2016.

———. *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo.* Cáceres: Editorial Periférica, 2010.

———. *La transmigración de los cuerpos*. Cáceres: Editorial Periférica, 2013.

Signs Preceding the End of the World and *The Transmigration of Bodies*, both translated by Lisa Dillman and published together in a single volume by Text, are Yuri Herrera's first two novels to appear in English, although his debut novel, *Trabajos del reino* (2005) (*Kingdom Cons*, Penguin, 2017 and also translated by Dillman) has already earned him some recognition in the Spanish-speaking world. All three of his novels are short (around 25,000 words a piece, at a glance), revolving around protagonist heroes deeply engaged with the complexities of communication and connection in violent environments. His writing in Spanish is characterised by a concentrated lyricism based on – but not completely representative of – colloquial Mexican language, artfully reshaped until it attains poetic depth and power.

Signs follows Makina on her journey across a border and into an unnamed foreign land in order to deliver a message from her mother to her long lost brother. She is a central figure in her community in Little Town, the only one who speaks "native tongue", "latin tongue" and "anglo" in her work at the phone switchboard and, occasionally, as a messenger for the local heavies. She is strong, intelligent and self-sufficient without ever seeming invulnerable, which is key to the sense of tension maintained throughout her nine-stage quest to reconnect with her kin. This nine-chapter structure echoes the legendary Nahua underworld Mictlan, where a deceased soul must overcome nine challenges in order to rest in peace, and its use as an intertextual reference is indicative of the intercultural framework supporting Herrera's wonderful novel: the Mictlan legend is just one of a host of disparate intertexts which guide both the construction and reception of Makina's story, without providing keys for any "definitive" interpretation. Herrera does not hide his sources, but at the same time retains impressively independent control of his material, using both similarity with, and departure from, his reference points to construct a rich and suggestive text. If, as I believe, *Signs Preceding the End of the World* is a masterpiece, it is partly because it is both deeply embedded in multiple cultures and strikingly unique.

This combination of recognisability and unmistakeable particularity, along with its themes of border-crossing, language-switching, and intercultural relations, makes the novel both an ideal candidate for translation and a unique challenge for the translator. Makina lives and functions between cultures, and yet while the afore-mentioned ideas form the guiding themes of the novel, words such as "migration", "translation", "transculturation", and "colonialism" are all conspicuously absent from the text. The novel's exploration of each of these topics is never schematic but always personal; they are not intellectualized, but felt in the characters' flesh – particularly Makina's – and, consequently, the reader's. The language of the original reflects this, using a markedly Mexican Spanish (including a large helping of Anglicisms such as "troca", meaning "truck") peppered with highly polysemic neologisms,

the most important of which is “jarchar”, meaning “to leave” in the context of the novel, but derived from “jarcha”, meaning a verse written in Mozarabic – ancestor language to Spanish – used in Arabic and Hebrew poetry in medieval Iberia. Dillman, after some agonising, opted to translate it as “to verse”. The result is the creation – through dialect – of an imaginary space that both must, and could not possibly be, the Mexico-U.S. border. The question of how to linguistically recreate the categories of “self” and “other” from the other side of a language divide that determines those same categories, although implicit in all translation, becomes more complex when it is this intercultural difference, and its subsequent effect on place and selfhood, which is perhaps the central concern of the novel. Clearly, this is a text that calls for something special from its translator.

In *The Transmigration of Bodies* we are once again introduced to a protagonist who is a professional communicator/negotiator with an acute sensitivity to the importance of language:

> He helped the man who let himself be helped. Often, people were really just waiting for someone to talk them down, offer a way out of the fight. That was why when he sweet talked he really worked his word. The word is ergonomic, he said. You just have to know how to shape it to each person.
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> (Hererra, Tr. Dillman 42)

This is “*el Alfaqueque*”, which Dillman renders as “the Redeemer” – the original word again entered medieval Spanish via Arabic, and refers to a kind of combat agent whose job was to win the release of Christians who had been captured and enslaved by the Moors during the wars of the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, a job that required proficiency in multiple languages. In an unnamed city whose terrified citizens are trapped indoors by a mysterious mosquito-borne illness, the Redeemer is called upon to act as go-between for two feuding families, each of which finds itself with the other’s child in its control.

As in *Signs*, the language of the source text is both geographically anchored to a certain place (the unnamed city feels a lot like Mexico) and subtly estranged, creating a mixed environment of local particularity and dislocation which in some ways recalls “alternative history” science fiction. Disconcertingly, however, *Transmigration* offers no historic explanation of the weird prevailing situation, as we find in, say, Michel Houellebecq’s *Atomised!* (2006, translated English title) or Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-7). This conspicuous absence is particularly effective because it leads readers to recreate the hidden part of the narrative in much the same way as a horror story might only hint at the true nature of a monster – although for all its implied violence, the novel is far too life-affirming to be called “horror”.

Herrera has said repeatedly that in his writing, he considers rhythm to be a constituent of meaning. In that sense, we could say that his work calls for translation techniques as proper to poetry as prose. It’s a demanding brief. When the publishing house that originally purchased the English language rights to *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* received draft copies of the initial chapters of Dillman’s translation, they reneged on their original opinion and decided not to go ahead with the publication because of the complexity of the target text. The rights were then picked up by another publisher: Herrera agreed to the transfer, on the condition that Dillman would still be the translator.

Along with being an extraordinary writer of Spanish, Herrera clearly has outstanding judgement as a reader of English: Dillman’s performance is inspired and her writing merits close attention in its own right. One obvious feature is the inclusion of a healthy dose of hispanisms in the English texts, particularly among words identifying social status or interpersonal relationships, such as “compadre”, “señora” and “jefecita”, which seem more closely bound to their culture of origin because they describe in some way its social

functioning. To that extent we might be tempted to say that she is foreignising the target text, but that would be to ignore the complexity of the linguistic environment she is translating: "Spanglish" is, after all, a dynamic subdialect of both English and Spanish, and could not be said to be wholly foreign to either. It exists – lives – between the two.

Of course, translating geographically-marked Spanish for ethnically-marked English is potentially problematic in terms of the social situation of the characters and narrative, but in *Signs* those questions are effectively resolved by the exaltation of the "intermediary tongue" by the novel itself:

> They speak an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it's like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls, and then two more, and then two more, never exactly the same ones; something that serves as a link […] Using in one tongue the word for a thing in the other makes the attributes of both resound: if you say Give me fire when they say Give me light, what is not to be learned about fire, light, and the act of giving? It's not another way of saying things: these are new things.
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> (Herrera, Tr. Dillman 183-4)

Evidently, the texts' stance on potential richness of the interliminal space between languages not only legitimates, but virtually demands that some of the Spanish text be visible in the English, but it is unclear in this case whether that constitutes either foreignization or domestication. Indeed, for cultures in close contact with each other, these texts challenge the validity of those categories themselves.

This leads us to the second standout feature of Dillman's translations: the aesthetic pleasure offered by her prose. She skilfully deploys the prosodic effects and chimes available to writers of English, modulating pace and subtly linking significations to sounds, especially through assonant rhyme, judicious use of alliteration, and tightly controlled rhythm. These translations are to be read aloud, repeated, and sensually savoured, in much the same way as Herrera's texts can be read in Spanish, although whether that is enough to constitute an "equivalent effect" on the reader is debatable. What is interesting to note, however, is the lineage of this particular style. Herrera has spoken of Raymond Chandler's influence on him, and the mixture of striking similes and unmistakably-oral yet impossibly-cool dialogue that characterises his writing bears a clear relationship with the U.S. hard-boiled detective style. Dillman's translations retain or even enhance the use of this stylistic toolset, but it is not clear whether these techniques make the translation "foreignising" or "domesticating", "visible" or "invisible": the writing itself is visible as an artifice, and that must be desirable for any art that does not attempt to represent itself as a window on reality. The "unreality" of the use of slick, sophisticated English to represent apparently Mexican characters simply forms another part of the fiction that readers must agree to believe in order to enjoy the novels. It is a brave strategy for a translator, and the jury of the Best Translated Book Award have already rewarded the risk with first prize in their 2016 edition. Hopefully Australian readers will be equally appreciative.