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Review of Emiliano Monge's *Among the Lost* (trans. Frank Wynne)

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Monge, Emiliano. *Among the Lost*, translated from Spanish by Frank Wynne. Scribe, 2018.

———. *Las tierras arrasadas*. Literatura Random House, 2015.

Leonardo Bruni famously complained, in the 1405 preface to his translation of Plutarch, that “authors always get the praise for what is good in a translation, and translators get the blame for what is wrong”. Not so here: this is a great translation of a not-so-great novel; the translator merits sincere praise. Indeed, Frank Wynne offers an object lesson on how to solve at least one major technical problem.

The subject matter is grim and important: as would-be migrants cross Mexico in their attempts to reach the United States, they are captured, robbed, violated and enslaved by human traffickers. In a winding multi-voice narrative that covers a single day, we learn how trafficking works, the reasons behind it and the power relations it creates, liberally enlivened with love and longing between the worst of star-crossed lovers.

The author, Emiliano Monge, is a Mexican journalist whom some of us recognize as a writer of critical opinion pieces in *El País*, one of Spain's major newspapers. When journalism can no longer tell the story, or when human trafficking is no longer news because it has become a regular social and economic practice, the literary takes over, seeking a deeper understanding. The literary here comes from the poetic creation of an oneiric landscape where voices interweave, as of ghosts or near ghosts, interspersed with fragments from Dante's *Inferno*, since the story would also be a descent into hell. The journalistic is also present, however, since passages in italics come verbatim from testimonies of migrants, referenced back to a string of organisations including Amnesty International. That multi-layered plan is stunning and successful. At their best, the voices recall something of Juan Rulfo's *El llano en llamas* (variously rendered as *The Burning Plain* or *The Plain in Flames*), from the little I know of Mexican literature. But Rulfo's were short pieces, poems in prose. This book comprises 345 pages in the English translation, and it feels very long.

I sort of had to read it. Emiliano Monge came to the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2019 and I was his interpreter on stage. This is an excellent book for such a public event, on stage, where one hears an eloquent author talk about the literary plan and the iniquities that are real but not in our news. As an interpreter, I discovered I did not know the names of criminal organisations in El Salvador, since they are definitely not in our news – Emiliano helped me out with that one (an interpreter into English is being checked on all sides). There were many questions, and a discussion: the text as event thus calls attention, creates knowledge and concern. It allows literature to still operate a vital form of public communication about the world, meeting and surpassing

journalism in this case. This particular text as event was also supported by the English PEN's Writers in Translation program, one suspects precisely because of those values. The event was in English and Spanish, with translation making the exchange public.

Much of that is to the credit of the translator Frank Wynne, whose words were being cited and whose work was on sale at the event. The title "Among the Lost" is his – the Spanish "tierras arrasadas" might otherwise be "ravaged lands" or "devastated lands", which is what brought in the Rulfo reference for me, or even "scorched earth", if one were looking for military tactics. The translator's title is more decidedly focused on the people, on Dante, on suffering, which is what the literary event was and should be about. With reason the author trusted the translator, in this and many other instances.

One of the main problems in the novel comes from the names, and herein lies the object lesson. In keeping with the thematics of death, the main characters are called Epitafio, Cementeria, Estela, Sepelio, and so on – all Spanish nouns that have to do with death: Epitaph, Cemetery, Tombstone, Burial, respectively. In his short preface, Frank Wynne notes that some of these names will be reasonably transparent to a reader who has no Spanish (Epitafio, Cementeria) while others are not (Estela, Sepelio – did you recognize them?). What to do? This is a classical translation problem that most literary translators are faced with at one time or another. One solution for all names? Different solutions for different degrees of opacity? There is no universal rule, no wholly right decision, and perhaps no entirely wrong decision either. In this case, the translator called the toss: "In the end, I elected not to translate those names by which characters address one another, feeling more would be lost than gained" (Wynne 2018: ii-iii). It is a classical trade off: the transcribed names situate the narrative in Spanish and convey a sense of unreality, hopefully providing information and readerly motivation to degrees that outweigh the risk of incomprehension. This can be done here because the worlds of Spanish and English overlap considerably, despite the artificial divisions of theory: English readers will mostly decode an occasional *hijo de puta*, recognize where El Paraíso is supposed to be, and might even identify a Llano de Silencio when the term is placed in sentences where a geographical plain would be expected. The trade-off works, to the translator's credit.

That preface, though, could be misleading; Wynne is smarter than that. There are actually several solutions at work here: transcription, as noted, but then there are also names entirely in English, those of the narrated love songs between HewholovesEstela and ShewhoadoresEpitafio. Then minor characters are similarly named after their narrative functions: Hewhoisdeafofmind, Theblindwomanofthedesert. Further, of course, there is the preface itself, which explains the names and constitutes yet another solution. In seeking a trade-off between the comprehension and motivation, Wynne shows that there are actually several ways in which both values can be achieved at once. The idea that translators have to choose one way or the other is very poor theory.

So what went wrong? As I say, I had to read this one, on the bus, as I do. After the first 50 pages or so, when the fireworks of Dante and the verbatim accounts had died down, the thing became hard going. The comprehension was there but the motivation flagged. You know a text is failing you when you fall asleep and miss your stop! Not without a noble heritage, also Mexican: I remember Carlos Fuentes' *Cambio de piel* (Change of skin) and *Cristóbal Nonato* (Christopher Unborn) both having the same remarkable effect on me in another land. It is part of a formalist aesthetic that refuses the cheap tricks of European realism, that resolutely will not allow the reader to

identify with and care about characters: one can identify the names, but not as people. That aesthetic works in short forms where language is enough to create and maintain a world (Rulfo made me want to learn Spanish), but not at length. And there was little that Frank Wynne could really do about that.