

Irene Rozdobudko. *The Lost Button*. Translated by Michael Naydan and Olha Tytarenko. London: Glagoslav Publications, 2011. 181 pp. Paper.

Walter Benjamin states that “[t]he task of the translator consists in finding the intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (20). Later he claims that “[a] real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original” (21). In making transparent the translation of Irene Rozdobudko’s *The Lost Button*, Michael Naydan and Olha Tytarenko create an unevenly satisfying experience for the reader. They are successful in making Rozdobudko’s effective use of metaphor stand out, but the footnotes intending to illuminate the reader’s understanding of this intensely Ukrainian milieu constantly distract the reader from the text. In addition, peculiarities in the dialogue make us aware that we are reading a translation, and the overuse of ellipses is awkward and unnecessary in English.

This is the first translation of Rozdobudko into English. As Naydan mentions in his note, Rozdobudko is a journalist, poet, translator, and novelist. Her first book was a detective novel, *Pastka dlia zhar-ptytsi* [A Trap for the Firebird, 2000]. This was followed by the publication of many more detective novels and psychological thrillers. Her style is lively and packed tightly with colourful metaphors.

Naydan and Tytarenko succeed admirably in making Rozdobudko’s constant use of metaphor and simile stand out. One particularly smooth use of metaphor appears in the following passage: “and the wild vegetation reminded me of the sea that rolls powerful, fragrant waves and just about drags you to a depth, from which you can’t swim away” (17). Another example is “I looked like a butterfly with a broken wing: I flapped, trying to fly up, and was able only to comically and vainly whip up dust beneath me” (50). Sometimes, however, the metaphor transgresses into comedy. For example, the following sentence “I was ready to wag my tale and stand on my paws” (34) compares the narrator to a dog.

In one of the most important scenes in the novel when the main character, Denys, becomes captivated by the actress Liza, the translators effectively show the way she remains an enigma to him throughout their interactions: “She clicked her cigarette lighter and for an instant I saw the semicircle of her cheek and the flash of her black pupil” (18). This language hooks the reader and effectively serves to characterize Liza.

Footnotes, on the other hand, draw the reader away from a smooth reading of the text. For example, there is a footnote to explain *ty* and *vy* when this could be integrated into the text: “Like the French ‘tu’ and ‘vous’”

(31). Also, footnotes that dictate pronunciation of names seem unnecessary, such as the following: “Pronounced Leeza” (23).

There are instances in the text, however, where there are no footnotes and the foreign terms are still aptly explained. For example, “And then a little later I inopportunately recalled that this place was swarming with legends about mermaids, niavka river nymphs, mavka forest nymphs, molfar wizards, and witches...” (19). There is a short poem that is also seamlessly woven into the text: “...Tsyn-tsy-lin-tsy! / Precious klintsy! / My main occupatsia- / Is a fast tsyntsyliatsia!” (122) This is explained in the sentence that follows: “‘Klintsy’ means drumsticks, ‘tsyntsyliatsia’ is something like a drum” (122). Since footnotes are prominently used, there are instances where I was expecting footnotes when they were absent. For example, does the average English-speaking reader know what “Ogonyok” (66) and “Shashlik” (78) are?

Dialogue is sometimes considered one of the trickiest parts of writing. When one is in a narrative mode, it is difficult to switch into a colloquial mode. In this translation, when a switch is made into the colloquial mode, it sometimes results in odd turns of phrase. For example, it is doubtful that an English speaker in 2014 would use the phrase “super-duper” (69). Also, “cretin” (77) would probably not flow naturally into one’s thoughts. In English, we think of “my mom” rather than “mama” (92).

In Ukrainian the use of ellipses is quite common, but their numerous presence in this English translation is unnecessary. They are scattered generously throughout the text. The first sentence begins with an ellipsis: “It happened at the end of August 1977... I had just turned 18 then” (13). In English, it would be more effective to use a period. On the next page, the ellipses do not play an important role either and, therefore, could be removed: “We drank like fish since our grade school days and... like juveniles—nothing more expensive than cheap port wine. To be truthful, a little later I was sorry I had gone there...” (14).

“What is imperative is that, in translation, we try to leave our language and go to the other—and not the reverse, which is what is usually done” (63), says Jose Y Ortega Gasset. Naydan and Tytarenko have gone to the other language, Ukrainian, and created a translation that reminds us that we are reading a translation. Still, according to Benjamin, they have successfully completed the task of the translator. They have brought an intensely Ukrainian flavour to an English-speaking audience that is anything but insipid. Rozdobudko’s style is on display in this translation by Naydan and Tytarenko. This psychological thriller is worth the read, keeping the reader in suspense.

Olena Jennings
New York City

Works Cited

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