

Oksana Zabuzhko. *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*. Trans. Halyna Hryn. Las Vegas: Amazon Crossing, 2011. 164 pp. Paper.

George Steiner, an influential contemporary critic whose work examines the intersection of culture and linguistics focusing mainly on translation and multilingualism, describes the English language as an “indispensable window on the world” for writers worldwide: “To go untranslated, and, specifically, into English and/or American English, is to run the risk of oblivion. ...They *must* be translated if their works, if their lives, are to have a fair chance of coming into the light” (197). Although Steiner’s insistence on the almost messianic role of English as a quasi-universal metalanguage raises questions about cultural domination, the growing power of English as a global *lingua franca* that opens up transforming spaces for cultural exchanges and negotiations can hardly be denied or ignored. Thus, the appearance of Halyna Hryn’s translation of the controversial *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko, a novel that was originally published in 1996 and which became the first post-independence Ukrainian national bestseller translated into a number of languages,¹ seems to be long overdue.

Because of the micropolitics of power imbedded in English, the responsibility of the translator into this language becomes “increasingly complicated,” especially when the “original is not written in one of the languages of northwestern Europe” (Spivak 94). In her dealings with a “minor” European language, Hryn demonstrates both assimilative and transformative strategies in re-coding Zabuzhko’s idiosyncratic mixture of elaborate style, peppered with bookish and, in some cases, archaic lexemes, and an urban slangy register, often interspersed with semi-criminal jargon. For example, when the narrator morphs from an enduring object of her lover’s offensive desires into the monstrous-feminine, “the prison hag,” with “some invisible but suspected criminal past,” bursts out “boldly smashing the fragile vessels of unfulfilled dreams” (5) [“блатне бабисько” з “якимсь невидимим, але вгадним таборовим минулим... трошчачи крихкий посуд незаповнених сподіванок” (Zabuzhko 10–11)].

Hryn continues this fluent and dynamic approach to source-language material in her treatment of Zabuzhko’s poetic insertions, and mostly keeps quite close to the original: “You’re a woman. And that’s your limit. / Your moon sleeps like a silver fish lure. / Like spices off the edge of a knife /

¹ Hungarian (1999), Czech (2001), Russian (2001), Polish (2003), Bulgarian (2005), German (2006), Swedish (2006), Italian (2008), Romanian (2008), Dutch (2009), and Turkish (2011).

Dependency sprinkled into your blood” (17) [“Ти жінка. В цім твоя межа. / Твій місяць спить, як срібна блешня. / Як прянощ з кінчика ножа, / У кров утрушено залежність” (Zabuzhko 21)]. In drawing attention to the formal equivalency of the translation to the source language text, I am not trying to impose a restricting demand for such an affinity as the only criterion of the translation’s excellence, as some stylistic levelling is inevitable in any linguistic transfer. Since it is difficult to find complete lexical correspondences to certain specifically nuanced words or Soviet semi-criminal lingo, Hryn chooses a neutral way of rendering them, turning “лотра” or “зечка-блатнячка” into “bitch” or “a witch, a bitch from the prison zone,” respectively.

However, in some cases, opting for vocabulary more recognizable to English-language readers might lead not only to semantic but also ideological losses in translation. Thus, when Zabuzhko talks about the distinctly Ukrainian type of female beauty, she refers to Cossack Baroque portraits and laments, “ех, була колись Гетьманщина, а тепер пропала!” (132), which is reproduced in Hryn’s translation as “those were the days, now gone for sure!” (149). The only remaining marker of historical contextualization featured in this passage in English is the word “Cossack,” which generally might evoke associations with military or semi-military communities, such as the Ukrainian Zaporozhian Sich or even the Don Cossack Host, which was allied with Muscovy. Moreover, Zabuzhko’s use of *Het'manshchyna* (Hetmanate or Hetman State, 1648–1782) clearly points to the period of the Ukrainian unitary state whose autonomy was progressively destroyed during the reign of Catherine II of Russia (1762–96). The chapter, in which Zabuzhko explores the genealogy of her characters’ pervasive fear, takes the reader into the personified violent history of Russian colonial rule: the narrator and her parents experience daily, severe anxiety under total KGB surveillance, her mother survives the 1930s Holodomor (famine genocide), her grandfather is imprisoned in the Gulag, and her dissident-father is incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital. In this context of the representation of the Soviet totalitarian system’s crippling effects that cultivated a deeply subservient mentality in people, naming the age of Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty acquires particular importance. Therefore, here we have an instance where Zabuzhko’s postcolonial text becomes a space of conflation for politics and language.

It is noteworthy that postcolonial translation theorists associate assimilative sense-for-sense translation with colonial discourse and adopt a ruthless and radical literalism that signals the foreign strangeness of the text in the target language as one of the decisive principles and effective strategies of decolonization. They assert that the deliberate irregularity of translation acts as a sign of cultural difference, thereby interrupting the

“transparency” and smoothness of totalizing practices and discourses. Hryn sets off this foreignness in her translation of Zabuzhko’s soliloquy on language by leaving its key word—*mova*—untranslated when the narrator reads her poetry in Ukrainian to an American audience, whose members do not understand the language, and feels that “something was coming to life, pulsating, firming up, arching into broad billows of flame” (11) [“щось жило, пульсувало, випростувалося, розверзалось провалами, набігало вогнями” (Zabuzhko 16)]. Yet, alongside communicating intentional unfamiliarity by the transliterated Ukrainian word, Hryn changes the verbal and semantic contour at the end of the quoted sentence, pushing it upward, in the direction opposite to the precipitous downward movement in the original.

Although I am fully aware that in the postmodern aesthetic the issue of the original is deemed obsolete, I believe that the translator, embarking on the project of cultural translation, should make an attempt to grasp the writer’s presuppositions and subtleties. However, regardless of some, often predictable, departures from the source text and occasional shortcuts in the target language, Hryn’s vibrant translation seduces the reader into Zabuzhko’s—now English-language—volatile world of repressed desires, historical traumas, and collective existential dramas of Ukrainianness, all encircled by the minimalist, “panoptical” plot of the novel.

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