

DARWIN ON THE TEL AVIV FREEWAY by Smadar Reisfeld:

A Translation and Its Analysis

A Proposal for an MA Thesis in English Literature

submitted towards an MA in English

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דארווין באיילון דרום מאת סמדר רייספלד:

תרגום ספרותי וניתוחו

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בספרות אנגלית

המחלקה לאנגלית

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1. Aims and General Description

The book I propose to translate is "דארווין באיילון דרום" (ISBN English title: *Darwin on the Tel Aviv Freeway*), written in Hebrew by Smadar Reisfeld, published by Keter Publications in 2007. The book is 437 pages long. The translation will be from the Hebrew to English.

The book is infused with the author's personality and unique voice, presenting a story of love and misplaced passion that eventually leads to an understanding of what is important in a relationship. Combined into the narrative, and forming an integral part of the plot, are passages that relate to Darwin: his life, his work, his theories and his philosophies.

A total of 120 pages of translation will be done. Accompanying the translation will be an "introductory essay" of approximately 20 pages in which I shall discuss various aspects of the book and the translation process: the author's background and how it affected her writing; an analysis of the genre and stylistic considerations addressed in the work, and, most importantly, translation issues that arose and how I dealt with them in my effort to render the English to reflect the voice of the original Hebrew.

Translating this text will offer some interesting challenges. Besides the general challenges of literary translation, it will require accurately representing the Israeli setting and culture to a non-Israel reader. In addition, it will require translating contemporary Israeli realist fiction that is in dialogue with classic nineteenth-century scientific texts.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Introduction

Darwin on the Tel Aviv Freeway combines non-fictional segments about the life of Charles Darwin and his theories of natural selection with a fictional story about Naama, the protagonist, and her attraction to (one might say, obsession with) Charles Darwin. The two genres are woven into a powerful story about the meaning of love and commitment and the manifestations of guilt which are often inflicted on ourselves.

2.2. About the author

Smadar Reisfeld is an Israel author, journalist and writing instructor.

She was born in Tel Aviv. Her father was a Holocaust survivor and her mother a native Jerusalemite. While Reisfeld holds a doctorate in molecular biology from Tel Aviv University (dissertation on the influence of inter-cell interaction on genetic expression in fetal development), today she is involved mainly in the realm of literature. In addition to this novel, she has written books for children and young adults that have received accolades and prizes, and she writes a column for the weekend edition of the “Ha’Aretz” paper that deals with new scientific concepts, and which expresses, similarly to this novel, her fascination with both science and literature. She gives writing workshops in various frameworks (e.g. a forum for Holocaust survivors).

2.3. About the book: Synopsis, narrative style and conceptual issues

Synopsis

Naama, the protagonist, is a nurse who works in the premature infant department of a hospital. She is married to Uri, an installation artist, with whom she is deeply in love and whom she supports financially while he is developing his reputation.

The book begins with a description of Naama’s fascination with Darwin the scientist—not only with his theories, but, with his personality. It then leads us into a plot that is meticulously developed,

weaving within it the stories of the people in Naama's life—friends, colleagues, husband, parents, father-in-law, patients, and, finally, Idan, the father of one of the infants in her ward and who shares Naama's interest in Darwin and the theory of natural selection.

Naama's attraction to (and eventual seduction by) this like-minded man leads her to reassess her relationship with Uri. Subconsciously trying to justify her betrayal, she begins to focus on all that is wrong in her marriage. Yet, guilt overcomes her, and it ends up being expressed emotionally (jealousy and suspicious thoughts) and physically. This physical expression of emotional distress is paralleled to Darwin's emotional and physical problems related to his revelations regarding his theory of natural selection.

As the story reaches its climax, we comprehend how aspects of Darwin's and Naama's lives parallel each other. At the end of the book, the meanings of loyalty, empathy and love become clear to Naama, and she is able to make her choice as to whom deserves her love, loyalty and compassion.

Narrative features and style

Reisfeld's writing is precise and evocative, describing emotions with clarity and thoughtfulness. Descriptions are detailed and clear, allowing the reader to easily invade the mind of the narrator and visualize the movements and emotions that are depicted with great care. In addition, she skillfully weaves in philosophical musings about morals and ethics, and interesting facts from the world of nature. The flowing, expressive prose is full of allusions stemming from the author's Israeli, Jewish and scientific backgrounds.

The narrative is, for the most part, told by a third-person omniscient narrator focalized through Naama. However, there are a few instances where the author breaks through the "fourth wall" and addresses the reader directly. This occurs in the very first paragraph of the book, in the final section (epilogue) and in a few other places within the book.

The story skips back and forth in time, allowing us to glimpse into her past and thus understand the background that leads to Naama's feelings. Her contemplations about Darwin also help us to understand the inner workings of her mind.

Conceptual issues

The translation of literature (or creative non-fiction) requires a very different approach than the translation of academic literature or factual pieces where the details presented take precedence to the author's voice. For this reason, the literary translator has to struggle with many issues.

The main goal of the translator is to give the reader in the target language an "experience" that will be the same—or as similar as possible—to that experienced by a reader in the source language. This is not an easy feat, especially since two readers of the original book may experience it differently, depending on their backgrounds. Consequently, the way the translator herself experiences the book—and this depends on her emotional reaction to the story—will influence her translation.

That aspiration notwithstanding, the literary character of any one language is never the same as another. There are always differences in cultural nuances between the source and target languages, and the issue of allusions to culturally specific items may perplex the reader in the target language. In this novel, Reisfeld's extensive knowledge of Israeli and Jewish culture and heritage permeate the story, with many allusion to the Bible or Jewish liturgy (including direct quotes), Rabbinical commentary, the practice of *gematria*, Jewish traditions and rituals, contemporary Israeli culture (song lyrics), the literal meaning of given names, Holocaust reminiscences, ideas referring to the concept of God and the afterlife, and more. Some of these, of course, can be accurately translated to another language, but the translator must be aware of the emotional character of the issues.

In addition, the novel is lovingly infused with the flavor of the Israeli atmosphere, with meticulous descriptions of slices of Israeli life: the corner sandwich (falafel) shop, the bustle of Tel Aviv, the heat and dust of the desert, hikes in the Carmel mountains, the Passover *seder*, the "Tu Bishvat

tradition,” and more. So while its themes are universal ones (appreciating the love we are given; things we notice and ignore to form our reality; how emotions change our perceptions) and could theoretically take place anywhere, I believe that it is important—not least because of the book’s title—to keep the setting in Israel.

For these reasons, the translation will need to make a conscious effort to allow a non-Israeli and/or non-Jewish reader to comprehend the very Israeli-Jewish character so invocative in the text.

Beyond the specific Israeli nature of the novel, a translator must also be aware of the verbal literary techniques that pervade any book of literature and that are often difficult or impossible to translate accurately. Devices such as wordplay (puns, spoonerisms, rhetorical excursions, double entendres, telling character names, rhyming, etc.), idioms and alliteration must be carefully dealt with in order to successfully (if possible) transfer theme from one culture to the other language.

Finally, the book includes many passages referring to Darwin’s research, biography and musings that were originally written in English. These must be researched and presented in their original English.

3. Shape of Project

My thesis will consist of two main parts: an introductory essay and 120 pages of translation from Reisfeld’s novel.

3.1. Introductory essay

The purpose of the introductory essay will be to point out and discuss issues that come up while translating this novel. The most obvious issue, as mentioned above, will be rendering the prose in English in such a way so as to give it the distinct Israeli flavor that permeates the novel, and making it understandable and believable to a non-Israeli. Parallel with this will be accurately translating the Jewish nuances in the novel, not the least of which are certain biblical passages, explanations of Jewish traditions, and memories of a Holocaust survivor.

I will also address the challenge of authentically presenting the author's voice in English. Her vocabulary is on a mid-to-upper register, but occasionally she resorts to double entendre or plays on words. This is generally a difficult aspect to translate properly.

I will also present a general overview of my experience translating the book and whether I felt that I fully understood the author's intentions throughout. It may be possible that I will report on consultations I may have with the author, should I find it necessary.

3.2. Translation

Rather than beginning on page one and working through until I reach my quota, I propose to choose a selection of chapters so that I may give an overall impression of the various styles of prose included: narrative descriptions, "excerpts from Naama's notebook," information on Darwin (which is told as if the narrator is informing the audience), dialog, introspection (as told from Naama's point of view), Naama's memories of past events (of her father, who was a Holocaust survivor and a "devout" atheist; of her mother, who suffered periods of severe depression; of her childhood; of her early relationship with her husband, etc.), direct address of the author to reader. There are many flashbacks during the novel and sometimes the prose is of a "stream-of-consciousness" nature.

3.3. Background material

For the many references to Darwin's books, letters and notes, I shall have to find the original English source of these references to be true to their wording. For the many references to biblical passages, I will need to refer to an official translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Additionally, because items by Darwin are included in the novel, I will also consult texts regarding Darwin in literature, and how his work has been encompassed in various other works.

Finally, it is imperative to draw instruction and inspiration from the ideas of other translators, and understand how they see themselves in the chain between author and reader.

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