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Department of English Literature and Linguistics

Proposal for an M.A. Thesis in English with a Focus on Literary Translation

Clash and Collaboration :Translating the  
Poetical Oeuvre of Julia Drabkin

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אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

הצעת מחקר לתואר שני בספרות אנגלית עם דגש על תרגום ספרותי

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## Introduction

I met her for the first time in General Literature. We were sitting side by side. She reached for my notebook and wrote a line, I wrote another two, she wrote three, and by the end of class we had a parody of Frost's "Stopping by Woods." It was our first collaboration:

Years later, after we graduated and travelled our separate ways, I heard she was writing poetry

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

What is this place? – I think I know.  
Come anyone who is with dough  
Come, drown you melancholy here  
And have your nose filled up with "snow".

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

My dear horse must think it queer  
To stop without signboard "Beer"  
This AA never takes a break,  
He is, maybe, sober once a year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

He'd kill you for a whiskey shake  
What an unfortunate mistake!  
I should have stubbed him in his sleep...

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

But I have promises to keep  
And years in this pitch black deep,  
And years in this pitch black deep...

*You will not see me stopping here  
I got no cash – no far, no near  
The only way – to kill this horse  
And sell the meat to Mr. Frost.*

and I heard she was good. I read one of her poems and wondered what if I were to translate it. I racked my brains imagining the strain. Her poems are polyhedral, poignant, powerful, complex, and filled with deep, intrinsic meaning and well-defined poetic formations. Julia Drabkin is an electrifying talent. Who better to help such a poet extend her audience if not a translator?

### Aims and General Description

The proposed thesis, “Clash and Collaboration: Translating the Poetical Oeuvre of Julia Drabkin,” consists, in general, of a literary translation of some of Israeli poet Julia Drabkin’s Russian verse into English. However, it will also describe the process of translating choice texts by one of the most prominent contemporary Russian-language poets whose outstanding work offers not only an emotional charge to the reader, but also a technical challenge to the translator. Drabkin’s lyric eloquence, inventive rhyme, and intricate use of rhythm make adapting her work into a foreign language a worthwhile task for any translator who dares to take on the endeavor.

The poet whose work I propose to translate in this thesis is not yet canonical and none of her poetry has been recognized by the international literary elite of poetry critics, to date. She has not merited a page on Wikipedia nor is she debated in the pages of *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, or *Tin House* literary magazines. But her flamboyant talent has sparked high regard among many members of the Russian poetry-reading public. Through this thesis, I want to help the world recognize her voice and amplify its reach.

## Conceptual Background

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin writes, “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work.” Julia Drabkin’s lyrical poetry pulses with a similar linguistic energy infused with virtuoso command of Russian syntax and poetic forms but seething to burst forth into other languages and frontiers. Drabkin’s verse already reflects a latent cosmopolitan idiom expressed in its ironic, expatriate disinterest toward Russia as well as in a bemused, diasporic tone cultivated over the course of years spent writing Russian poetry in Israel. My work on Drabkin draws on my personal relationship with the author, whom I have known since my first year in Israel, as well as on close study and application of literary translation theory with particular attention to the antipodal yet intertwined relationship of Russian and English linguistic cultures. The proposed thesis will not only convey Drabkin’s brilliant literary work to an English-reading public, but it will also explore solutions to the problem of bridging English and Russian verse by way of a uniquely Middle Eastern link. Translating Drabkin offers an ideal opportunity to use literary translation to draw attention to a compelling if unheralded and unconventional poetic voice while directly engaging the many challenges and opportunities presented by literary translation in the contemporary era of global literary cultures.

### About the author

Who is Julia Drabkin? Her biography is all fragments—snatches of conversations, allusions to past and present life inferred from her poems and prose. She does not speak about herself much. She is 39. Born in Gomel, Belorussia, she had planned to become a mathematician, a natural philosopher—or an actress. Eventually, she did the “right thing”: she studied at Gomel State University in the faculty of philology, got her diploma, married the right man, and then ... moved to Israel. The new reality, its new challenges and unfamiliar points of view, changed her

attitude about what we mean by the word “right”; she realized that what had seemed nonessential, due to its impracticality, now became no less urgent than breathing fresh air or drinking a cup of coffee in the morning. Writing poetry became vital. Since then she has written reams of poetry and prose and has been the laureate of many prestigious poetic contests, recitations, festivals and colloquia in Israel, Russia and North America. Her poetic talent has garnered her umpteen prizes. Publications of her poems are abundant online as well as in the literary magazines in Israel and Russia. Her poetry collection *City Without Armrests* (Russian edition only) is an obligatory purchase for a Russian poetry connoisseur. And yet you have never heard her name. A key reason for this author to be translated is to capitalize on the great potential for wider acknowledgement of her talent in the Anglophone world.

#### Singularity vs. traditional poetic style

Like Ezra Pound in the *Cantos* or José Ortega y Gasset in his idealist philosophy, Julia Drabkin writes texts that tread a fine line between distinctive originality and traditional composition. She has a fondness for the conventional sensibilities of her native language, but she is also never shy about crafting an edgy and unique voice with inventive images and ingenious rhythms. Translating her work necessitates balancing the singular and the traditional in her poetic style. Historical, social and cultural references are important to her work, a characteristic that renders translation of her poems difficult, since such references may be obscure to readers encountering her work outside the source language. But innovation with language can be indicated even in translation and reflected in the target language, English, in this case.

#### Russian and English: points of commonality and conflict

Another conceptual challenge for the translator of Drabkin’s work is the extent to which one chooses to honor or break linguistic barriers by making Russian sound more English, or, vice versa, by making English sound more Russian—perhaps more than conventional English itself.

The languages have specific points of commonality, especially in sound structure, and obvious points of difference with regard to syntax, register, and affect. Work by Benjamin, Frame, and Schleiermacher will guide me in this effort to embed within the source language some of the character of the original language while producing a fluent and clear translation.

## Shape of the Project

In this thesis I propose to translate roughly fifty of Drabkin's poems in a bi-lingual and annotated version. The notes accompanying the translation will do the lion's share of the work of discussing the results of how I choose to deal with the formal and technical complexity of translating Drabkin's poetry. As is readily apparent, the translation process itself will present the main aspects of the translational challenges, such as grammatical issues, conservation of rhyme, questions of rhythm, and so on. These issues will arise over the course of the work, but a preliminary example of the how the thesis will take up challenges of rhythm is presented in the following excerpt.

"Rhythm must have a meaning," Pound said, and this is exactly what Drabkin does—she enthralls the reader with rhyming patterns that work in her verses like a powerful chant full of meaning. You can hear the music in her poems. She uses different meters; among those to which she gives priority are iambic—"Neck-long Giraffe wants a ball, it is stuck near the wall"—and anapestic—"Having sold this good day for no share." Furthermore, Drabkin's use of enjambment has the effect of engendering peculiar poetical segues that serve the purposes of both rhythm and rhyme:

Разменяв этот день на копейки,  
перед тем, как совсем умереть,  
посижу во дворе на скамейке,  
*осмысляя последнюю треть*

*жизни странной. Но смерти не  
струшу, прорубая окошко в груди...*

Having traded this day for no share  
Just before I give up on my ghost  
I will sit on the bench in the square  
*Introspecting one third I have lost*

*Of that life really weird. But dying  
Fear not, hacking vault in my chest...*

However, the translation does not always come out perfectly rhymed and scanned with an absolute preservation of inviolability of the broken lines. Further in the same poem, preserving



the line breaks in English would lead to a serious problem if one were to maintain the rhyme and the rhythm:

Зазнобит просквоженную душу -  
береги ее, Бог, береди.

Love my soul –the keyhole  
God, I'm praying, rip my wounds up,  
but my soul you keep blessed,

чтобы, руки раскинув от страха,  
осторожно пойти по судьбе...

Terrified, I spread my arms all over  
By the fate take my gingerly pace...

At this point, the translator has to face the dilemma of a certain sacrifice which should be taken in favor of the essence of the meaning of the poem over the literal semantic meaning of the words. (Of course, the essential meaning of a poem is ultimately nothing more than a subjective interpretation, approved or, in some cases, rejected by the author if he or she is still alive, but in any case it is an interpretation claimed to be the authorized right one used by the only true, authentic translation.) The translator's responsibility includes resolving an occasionally very compromising duel between a text's literal and more literary translations.

The thesis will also invite me to experiment with a range of solutions to translating the original poems' intricate sound structure. Drabkin is very meticulous about rhyming and internal rhyming, in particular:

... И кто-то умный начнёт глумиться, знакомый вновь заведя куплет,  
что сердце рвать неприлично в тридцать, что опоздала на десять лет.

Мол, напиши, как луны каменя собою красит небес парчу,  
а я о звёздочках не умею, а я о бабочках не хочу.

... And someone smart will start to sneer and chant the same damn old couplet:  
"Don't tear your heart when you're thirty dear! Think, you are ten years too late.

Why won't you write of the Moon jewelry that graces the brocade of sky?"  
To write of butterflies – I don't want really, to write of stars above - never mine...

Obviously, it will be quite problematic to preserve the originally rhymed word in every instance, which is why some substitutions will be made over the course of the work, as in this example, where the significance of the inner rhyming seems to be self-evident and the decision to go in its favor became increasingly resolute.

The thesis will also include reflections about dealing with critics and a discussion of the translator's ambivalence toward the author's interference in the creative process. It will address the blessed, yet quite ambiguous happenstance of close communication between the translator and author throughout the translation process. On the other hand, another psychological issue to be discussed refers to dealing with the "end-product," when the translator becomes a self-critic and has to face her own fears of imperfection in order to find the courage to expose her creative work to public judgment.

This "end-product"—the final collection of translated poems—will constitute about fifty poems and poetic slice-of-life sketches. The thesis will combine these translations with notes that put the work in context of the poet's own creative direction and the work of literary translation, more generally.

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