Hebrew

Pit'ony[1]

בְּעֵת בָּשָׁק, וּשְׁלֵי פַּחְזָר
בְּאַפְסֵי־חַק סָבְסוּ, מָקְדוּ:
אוֹ אָז חִלְכֵּן הָיָה נִמְזָר
וּמְתֵי־עָרָן כֵּרְדוּ.

Be'et bashak **u**shley pakhzar
be'afsey-khak savsu, makdu:
au az khilken **haya** nimzar
u'mtey-aran kerdu.

„גּוּרָה, בְּנִי, מִן הַפִּטְעוֹן!
מֵחֹד־שִׁנּוֹ, חִיל־צִפָּרְנוֹ!
מֵעוֹף־גְּרְגִּיר תָּנוּס, צְעוֹן
מֵחֶטֶשׁ בְּמְגּוֹנוֹ!"

Gura, bnee, min hapit'on
me'khod-shino, khil-tziporno!
me'of-girgir **tanoos**, tza'on
me'khetesh **bi'**mgono!"

וְהוּא שָׁלַף סֵיפוֹ הַחַז:
נָד, חִפֵּשׂ אֶת פְּחִיק־צָרָיו –
וְכֹה עָמַד בְּצֵל זַמְזָם,
תָּפוּס בְּהִרְהוּרָיו.

Vehu shalaf seypho hakhaz:
nad, kheepes et pkhik-**tzarav** --
vekho amad betzel zamzam,
taphus behirhurav.

עוֹדוֹ עוֹמֵד שְׁפֵה־הָגוּת,
וְהַפִּטְעוֹן, עֵינָיו דוֹלְקוֹת,
וְשָׁוֵשׁ בַּיַּעַר הַמְּנוּד,
בּוֹעֵעַ וְנָקוֹט!

Odo omed shephe **hagoot**
ve'hapit'on, **einav dolkot**
vishvesh **be'ya'ar ha'**magood,
bo'e'ah ve'nakot!

בִּמְחִי חָזוּז – הָבַס! הָבַס! –
תִּכְתֵּךְ הַסַּיִף בְּנִמְהָר!
נָטַל אֶת רֹאשׁ פִּגְרוֹ הַזֵּד
וְאֶל בֵּיתוֹ צָהַר.

Bi'mkhi khazooz - **haves! haves!** -
tikhtekh **ha'sayif be'nimhar**
natal et rosh pigro hazed
ve'el beito tzahar

„אַף קְטַלְתּוֹ, אֶת הפטעון!
אֲחַבְּקֶךָ, יַלְדִּי הַצַּח!
הוֹ יוֹם־צִלְהָה! יַבַּא! יָבָּא! "
בְּחֶדְוָתוֹ פָּצַח.

"Af ketalto, et ha'pit'on?
akhabkekha, yaldi hatzakh!
ho yom-tzilha! yabah! yabeh!
bekhedvato patzakh.

בְּעֵת בָּשָׁק, וּשְׁלֵי פַּחְזָר
בְּאַפְסֵי־חַק סָבְסוּ, מָקְדוּ:
אוֹ אָז חִלְכֵּן הָיָה נִמְזָר
וּמְתֵי־עָרָן כֵּרְדוּ.

Be'et bashak **u**shley pakhzar
be'afsey-khak savsu, makdu:
au az khilken **haya** nimzar
u'mtey-aran kerdu.

Aharon Amir

A Very Hebrew Jabberwocky

Nitsa Ben-Ari

Ever since its appearance in *Through the Looking-Glass* in 1865, "Jabberwocky" has been a translation challenge of considerable magnitude – or absurdity – triggering the imagination of poets, translators, men of letters, as well as pure nonsense fans. Doubly challenging was of course the translation into any language outside the Eurocentric world, such as Hebrew.

Between 1927 and 2012 there were five Hebrew translations of *Alice in Wonderland* and four translations of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Understandably, over such a span of time, the five translations of *Alice* reflect different norms and address different readerships. In 1927, L. Saman (Arieh Leib Semiatizky), editor of Omanut publishing in Frankfurt, translated *Alice in Wonderland* for youth. In the spirit of the period, Saman "converted" the text, replacing the poems/parodies with Jewish alternatives such as children songs by poets Gordon or Bialik, or rhymes from the Passover *Haggada*. He did not use Tenniel's illustrations. Aharon Amir, in 1951, was thus the first to publish a full Hebrew translation of both Alice books in Israel, and the first to translate "Jabberwocky." In 1989, Uriel Ofek published a shorter simplified edition for children of the Alice books, supplying a lovely, not at all juvenile, translation of "Jabberwocky." Rina Litvin followed in 1997 with a full and annotated translation of both books. Litvin explained her translation decisions, even adding a translation of Martin Gardner's notes. In 2012, Atara Ofek came out with a version which proclaimed to strike a balance between the short version for children (her father's) and Litvin's version for grownups. Like Saman's earliest translation, this last one did not use Tenniel's illustrations. True to the same tradition, and allegedly in the spirit of Carroll's original intention, A. Ofek claims to have preferred to translate the parodies with reference to Hebrew poems known to the young readers.

It makes a great difference, says Douglas Hofstadter in his 1980 *Translations of Jabberwocky*, whether the poem is translated in isolation or as part of a translation of

the novel, where the translator must comply with Humpty Dumpty's explanations of the invented words. There is no way of knowing how many have tried their hands in isolated "Jabberwocky" translations into Hebrew. Four however, were published in magazines or internet sites quite recently, between 2002-2009: Menachem David's, Ziva Shamir's, Reuven Kleinman's, and Yuval Pinter's.
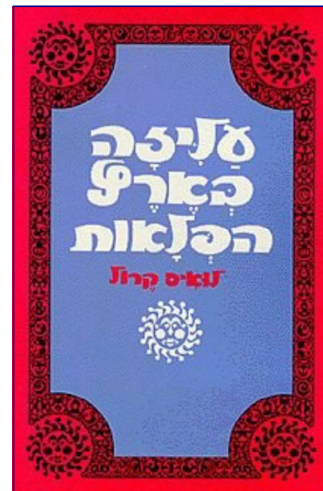
1927   1951

   With each new Hebrew translation, the Jabberwock was endowed with a new name, according to the translator's philological or phonetic impression of the creature. Based on animal names are Ziva Shamir's Bar-Yarbua (Yarbua being the not-so-frightening rodent jerboa) and Aharon Amir's "Pit'on" (possible amalgam of two snake names and jabber in Hebrew). Also based on chatter in standard Hebrew (*pitput*, *lahag*), or in slang (*birbur*, *khantarish*), are Pinter's "Lahagaran", Menachem's "Barbiblut", Uriel Ofek's "Lahagon" and Atara Ofek's "Khantarosh". Kleinman's "Shar'ilan" is perhaps based on the root *raal*, (poison), while Rina Litvin's "Gevereika" is, she claims, an attempt to capture the original sound while creating a portmanteau of *gever* (man) and *reika* (bum). The overall impression is that of a Russian nickname, however, so that Gevereika is not in the least awe-inspiring. All translators except Shamir added the suffix -y in accordance with the original "Jabberwocky."
   The Hebrew translators wrestle with cultural as well as linguistic difficulties, not least the Englishness. Although most of the poem's vocabulary is not to be found in any English dictionary, Carroll's text is morphologically and syntactically, poetically and culturally, English. Carroll himself classified it as Anglo-Saxon poetry, when as early as 1855, he included a stanza (in mock-medieval lettering) of "Jabberwocky" titled "Stanza of Anglo- Saxon Poetry" in *Mischmasch*, the

periodical he wrote and illustrated for the amusement of his family. Whether inspired by a Brothers Grimm's fairy tale, or an old German ballad, where a shepherd kills a griffin that has been attacking his sheep, or by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the fact remains that English speaking readers would recognize it as Anglo-Saxon poetry. Alice herself does not doubt the Englishness of the lexicon when she says the poem fills her head with ideas. Her head has been filled with enough highbrow poems to recognize one. The fact that Carroll inserts a myriad of lexical no-sense – or distortion of sense – into this rigid poetic form, with its quatrain verses, the general ABAB rhyme scheme and the iambic tetrameter, does not undermine its Englishness. In the best tradition of nonsense, where the strictest of forms clashes with the most unruly contents, he molds whimsical gibberish into grammatically coherent and perfectly unintelligible English verses.

| 1997 | 1989 | 2012 |

As a member of the Semitic family, and regardless of influences absorbed over the generations through contacts with European cultures, Hebrew can hardly reproduce an old English ballad. The ballad itself, notwithstanding some sparse Israeli attempts in 20th century poetry, has not been naturalized as a Hebrew genre. Luckily, Hebrew is essentially a verb- based language, and, this being a poem of action where "somebody kills something", the many verbs open the possibility of inventing Hebrew-sounding "equivalents".

It was Aharon Amir who strove to make "Jabberwocky" read and sound like an authentic Hebrew poem. In fact, Amir was the perfect man for the job. Born in Lithuania in 1923, he moved to Palestine with his family in 1933 and grew up in Tel Aviv. Although of *ashkenazi* origin, Amir very soon adopted a remarkable *mizrachi* or oriental accent, along with its guttural pronunciation,

which he deemed more in line with his ideology of integrating in the Middle East. Side by side with his work as founder and editor of the literary magazine *Keshet*, Amir became a prolific translator, translating over 300 books from English and French into Hebrew. His translations of *Alice in Wonderland* (*Aliza be'eretz ha'plaot*) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (*Aliza be'eretz ha'marah*), made him famous, for it brought out both Amir's outstanding proficiency in Hebrew and his talent for improvisation. Indeed, he seemed to revel in the puns and parodies and did not hesitate to add his own witticisms.

Amir's "Jabberwocky" was meant to recreate the twilight ominous atmosphere, the warning of imminent danger, the momentary triumphal cheer and the relapse into gloom. He recruited, especially in the first and last stanza, the help of harsh phonemes, rather difficult to enunciate. He used old fashioned if not archaic turns of phrase. Of the 16 words in Amir's first stanza, 10 are invented, 4 are time modifiers and 2 are half collocations, the marriage of which does not produce any meaningful offspring. The invented words are impossible to decipher. Rather than clarify them, Humpty Dumpty's later "explanations" only add more confusion.

Take, for instance, Amir's use of the plural form in the first stanza. Unlike all other translators, Amir opts not to use the standard plural suffix -im (masculine) or -ot (feminine) to indicate that the creatures (toves, borogroves, raths) swarming there are nouns in plural form. The other translators did so in order to facilitate the reading of the first stanza: Litvin invented *zakhlatz**im***, *smarlakh**im*** (plural masculine). Kleinman: *efshon**im***, *tzfanzif**im***, *khazpir**im***. U. Ofek: *og**im***, *tziprish**im***. A. Ofek: *plool**im***, *tucknish**im***, *tzabud**im***. David: *tyuv**im***, *barguk**im***. Shamir: *tzfardon**im***, *kardon**im***, *khazarzir**im*** (piglets, a perfectly Hebrew noun). Pinter: *letur**ot***, *bargus**ot*** (pl. feminine), *zurakh**im*** (pl. masculine). In pseudo-biblical form, Amir left the nouns in the singular, adding a plural epithet and a plural verb declension: the last line for instance, *metey aran kerdu* is composed of *metey*, half of an old-fashioned collocation signifying "few", the invented noun *aran* in the singular, and the invented verb *kerdu* in the past form plural.

Unlike Litvin, Amir refrains from phonetically echoing Carroll's inventions. He invents Hebrew names for Alice (*Aliza*) and other habitués of Carroll's world (the Jubjub turns to *of-girgir*). The only words he does supply an approximate echo for are the Tumtum tree – which he calls *zamzam*, and the onomatopoeic "verb" *vishvesh* as the equivalent for "came whiffling." Being a purist, Amir does not create neologisms based on Yiddish or modern Hebrew slang. As a result, the world he recreates is baffling, evil, formless, fantastic – and Hebrew. In this, Amir preserves what Zohar Shavit calls the ambivalent aspect of the *Alice* books (Shavit

72). From the point of view of plot, this makes the triumph over the Jabberwock more "heroic," as befits the ballad. If the language is the point, if the aim is to create a sense of linguistic ambiguity and distortion of sense, then Amir's version is ingenious. If satirizing both pretentious verse and ignorant literary critics is the implicit aim, if "Jabberwocky" should serve as a parody of contemporary Oxford scholarship, as suggested for instance by R. L. Green, Amir's version is a perfect Hebrew alternative.

It would only be fair to add that the very qualities which make Amir's "Jabberwocky" so maliciously and deliciously "authentic," risk being rather cumbersome when applied to the whole novel. Amir's translation of the Alice books, brilliant when it comes to the many puns and parodies, relies all too heavily on translation norms of the 1950s. It abounds in fixed Biblical and Talmudic collocations, in synonym binoms replacing single words in the original, and in ornamental alliterations. Ironically, and retrospectively, Amir's "Jabberwocky" is a parody of his own style.[1]

The two translators of the full Alice books, Aharon Amir and Rina Litvin, divided the work between them, so to speak, in that one (the latter) managed to recreate a brilliant Hebrew equivalent of Carroll's poem, while the other succeeded in preserving the poem's nonsensical core while creating a sense of authentic old-fashioned Hebrew poetry.

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[1] Years later, in 1989 I published a series of articles criticizing translators using "Translationese," that old-fashioned literary high register Hebrew, obsolete in original literature but still current in translation. Aharon Amir was one of the main examples, though his erudition stood out among the many epigones.

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