

The Impossible Poem Demanding Translation

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Perhaps every language is, in its own way, a kind of nonsense. Certainly any language is ‘double Dutch’ or ‘Greek to me’, at least to begin with, at least in part, from the point of view of those entering from the outside of it. *My* language is gibberish, for instance, to children yet to acquire it, to foreigners and (bar perhaps a few words) to animals, even of close acquaintance. For those who already have language, accepting that there is indeed meaning, words newly encountered more or less alert the new tongue’s non-native to the presence of a mirror. At an instant one sees same things reflected and realizes that access to such things (to the reality of the world) was necessarily by means of a mirror – a mirror made of words.

What if we could step through such a mirror and mean, in *other* words, just what (and just as) we had meant before? This is of course how one comes into a language. And in the case of foreigners, there are Nabokovs and Conrads to show us just how well, in exceptional cases, it can be done.

But – not so fast with the assumption of meaning! Things look, feel, taste, smell differently in different languages. Meaning is a manxome foe! And met in tulgey woods! How do we meet meaning, for instance in a poem?

Certainly, there are points of view from which all poetry is nonsense – the kind of reflexive (if not dangerous) nonsense, where, in Jakobsonian terms, the focus is on the signifier rather than signified, on the message *itself* and code *in its own right*, rather than on what is being said. And surely this is not what words are for, not their true function, but rather a kind of playing with or at them?

Childhood seems to many to be a generally nonsensical state – full of wonder and innocence and play perhaps – but a state in which the adult rules of sense and logic have yet to be firmly established. Childhood is that state in which meaning

has not quite arrived, but in which there is every hope that it may be on the way. And might perhaps be reached by way of unmeaning sounds and signs; by way, that is to say, of something like nonsense.

Whoever (whichever sensible adult, that is to say) encounters children or non-native speakers of her/his language has an (otherwise unavailable) opportunity to consider its means, to think, that is, about how and why things said in that language are understood and are otherwise taken for granted.

For many, certainly, religion of any stripe, is a species of nonsense – the kind of nonsense believers take for granted as truth. Conversely, how could religion countenance the idea of a talking animal? This is, at the time Lewis Carroll was writing, precisely what the world’s makers and users of language were beginning to appear to be. And the world was beginning to seem a kind of topsy-turveydom. Developments in biological science seemed to be carnivalizing the great chain of being as it had been known until then.

One might from all these observations go on to remark that for Charles Dodgson, aside from mathematics, every aspect of his life was intimately and intricately involved in nonsense, one should not say of one kind or another, but rather of every kind altogether. Which might leave mathematics in the role of some kind of universal and magical truth, the kind that works regardless of which side of a mirror you stand on. Mathematics as the straight man in a more and more comical universe!

Give “Jabberwocky” and *Through the Looking-Glass* their immediate external context and we see, along with the shadow of Charles Darwin, that the British Empire was a curious and paradoxical kind of nonsense machine in its own right. In the effort of ordering and civilizing the world (and of bringing it home in glass cases) all kinds of unheard nonsense needed to be taken into account. We can see in Alice’s queendom in *Through the Looking-Glass* presage of the child rule of other worlds C. S. Lewis delivers in Narnia (a world, one notes, of talking beasts). While C. S. Lewis’ fantasy was a nostalgic one, made past the peak of empire, Lewis Carroll’s reads as more of a foretelling. And in “Jabberwocky” it shows us how the taming of empire is a deadly business. There are monsters of unknown make and model that have always been, and that are always going to have to be, slain. There are heads that will have to be brought home for trophies.

For poetry and for childhood and for their interaction, for empire and likewise for poetry, “Jabberwocky” is a representation of the rite of passage—transcendence to adulthood—reduced to rote mock-heroic gibberish (gibberish of the kind which becomes more cleverly meaning the more closely we look at it). “Jabberwocky” is a compromise text—one which on “another level” bears a

critique of its face value assertion; here the adult lauded passage to adulthood is made absurd by the mode of its delivery.

And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy
O frabjous day, calloo callay

And there is a chortle for joy, there is the resting by the tum tum tree, there is the uffishness of thought. All of this meaning nonsense is suggestive of Kristeva's (pre-thetic) semiotic chora in *Revolution in Poetic Language*; that is to say, in this case it suggests a poetic struggle to recover innocence in the form of sound before the sense, in the "pre-sense" of an unrecoverably foreign and ancient language. "Jabberwocky" is likewise a rite of passage for the poet/translator (for the translator who is also, and necessarily, a poet).

Like *Finnegan's Wake* (and possibly more so), like the *Dao de Jing*, one may say that Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" has been much translated (and much more translated than many comparably important texts) precisely because translating it represents such a daunting challenge. It might seem at first surprising that such a difficult poem – such an apparently unanchored text – would have been so frequently attempted, until one realizes that translating something like "Jabberwocky" (and there is nothing else like "Jabberwocky") is a sport (or a quest or a rite of passage) for a certain kind of poet/translator. It is a kind of an ultimate challenge for translators – to make someone else's nonsense your own. What exactly does the task entail? In "Jabberwocky" we are dealing with an old apocryphal story in a place that isn't, in a book that never was, found in mirror writing, accessed only through a mirror, in a language that doesn't exist and so can't have been spoken, discussed at length by characters in fiction. Not to mention the fact that all of this is being dreamt. And further, the elegant fragility of that fact: that should the red king wake then all will dissolve, and you and I and everyone involved will simply go out like a candle. The further into the story and its circumstances, the remoter seems any possibility of extricating oneself from it. Perhaps as in fantasy more generally, all this is calculated to remind one of one's own implausibility, of just how unlikely our world and our existence are.

Who can resist so many impossibles? And yet the story in the poem in the book in the mirror *can* be understood and, more than understood, is deeply suggestive, perhaps in ways natural language more typically struggles to voice.

The international auxiliary language, Esperanto, seems an ideal language vehicle for the translation of "Jabberwocky". Esperanto is the world's best known

and most popular un- natural language. Apart from being of almost the same historical moment, Esperanto and “Jabberwocky” have enough in common to offer a near mirror image. On the one hand we have a non-existent (yet presumed to be fully formed, complete) language coming into being, on the other hand we have fragments suggesting a language lost. A language of the future as opposed to a language of the past. A language for which humanity might not be quite ready as opposed to a language humanity is unable to return to or remember. A symptom of an irretrievable past on the one hand, a system for an unattainable ideal on the other. In either case, much imagination is involved in the effort of extracting a fictional difference from so much that is already known. One might, in either case, be inclined to deride irrelevancies piled upon impossibles. But is this not something along the lines of a function for literature in the most general sense? Here are two demonstrations of the kind of play that makes new meaning possible.

Beyond all this though, I think, for poets, there is another aspect to the challenge of “Jabberwocky”. “Jabberwocky”, in all its uniqueness, is a kind of ideal poem. Not an Ur- poem, more something in the line of an ultimate poem, a poem of the nth degree – a poem that succeeds, in an essential way, in doing what poems more generally set out to do. In a nutshell that would be to fashion, from existing materials, both new meaning and new means of meaning. Of course, it appears *prima facie* in the case of “Jabberwocky” that the means of meaning are new (i.e. the words are invented) and that the meaning (i.e. the coming of age story) is old. But the fact that the poem is understood at all (is able to present as a puzzle) proves that the means of the poem’s making are already available: if not all of the words are already known, they are nevertheless in some sense already possible. The first mirror impression of the poem was misleading, but easily set right *with* an actual mirror. The poem makes new as it makes do with at least the sounds and graphic symbols available. And the act of doing this and the puzzles with which it presents the reader constitute a new kind of meaning: the poem as cipher in multiple dimensions (genre, language, frame, for instance). Should one say, once the story is more or less understood (‘*somebody* killed *something*, that’s clear at any rate’), that the puzzle and the poem are ‘solved’, then one is left nevertheless with much more meaning to unfold (‘Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas’). “Jabberwocky’s” depths are unfathomable precisely because no dictionary (despite some inclusions on its behalf) and no Humpty Dumpty (despite that character’s Trump-like self- confidence) could ever be relied on to reveal the secrets of the work. In semiotic terms, one might say that in this poem there is no telling denotation apart from connotation. Words only appear (only sound as if)

they have a surface in this poem. Known words (articles, conjunctions) join the dots. The feeling that a code has been cracked once we come to ‘see’ the simple story told is belied by the recognition that there can be no ‘code’ as such; all we have in the original are elements of a particular natural language, recombined suggestively to mean in a way they could not have meant before. And here we have the ideal notional conditions of every new poem worth reading. Should the argument seem circular, please just step a frame away, to catch the poem in its habitat.

Perhaps this is not so easily done? We needed a mirror to read the poem, but the poem is itself a mirror. It reflects back what the reader already knows (but perhaps does not know s/he knows) – of his/her means of meaning, of the structure of stories, of the sound quality of the language more generally, of the mysterious signs of suspense and of resolution (in sense as in rhyme), of mood as words convey it, of heads filled with ideas.

In “Jabberwocky,” we witness, as we do in all successful poetry, a tightrope walk between obviousness and obscurity. Put simply: on the side of obviousness, say what has been said already and is too easily understood and no one will have cause to be impressed; on the side of obscurity, say what cannot be understood and, obviously enough, no one will understand. “Jabberwocky” is an elegant experiment with a paradox with which all successful poetry must wrestle. Obviousness and obscurity are equally plentiful in the poem – the story is already known and the language, for obvious reasons, cannot be known. And yet, as every effort at translation of “Jabberwocky” reveals, the language has in some sense already filled our heads with ideas. Here is *the heimlich /unheimlich déjà-voodoo* quality of the work – it is a novel means of finding ourselves where we have already been but could not have known until now.

With this poem in particular we are building a picture of a very interesting place for the translator of poetry to be, and especially for someone who is translating into her/his native language. Though it is not so, the translator begins, in this very particular case, with an illusion of an almost neutral space: the original text appears to be foreign both to the source and to the target language.

Translation is wonderful training for poets, and this brings those who dare into the immediate contradiction that you need to be a poet in order to translate poetry, but that translating poetry is a royal road to the laurels of the art. Of course, it is not the only road. And by no means do I mean to suggest that only beginners at poetry have attempted “Jabberwocky” translations. This volume, in many instances, gives the lie to that idea. My point is that the decision to attempt a “Jabberwocky” is a decision to apprentice oneself to poetry making, and much

more particularly than in the case of taking on a form (be it haiku or sonnet or ghazal, sestina or villanelle). Taking on “Jabberwocky” is taking on a world made possible by bravely going where no poet has been before. Translators are always stepping into foreign made shoes and those of Lewis Carroll would certainly be hard for Imelda Marcos to fill (‘EAT ME’/‘DRINK ME’). The daredevil translator who chases this prize has declared her/himself a native speaker of nonsense. What choice has that translator then but to kick off shoes, step through the mirror and onto a merry-go-round that never seems to rest, because there could always be another word, another way to go, another forgotten frame.

This game is all about framing and re-framing, stepping forward and stepping back, seeing things already there, but from another angle. The mirror business is irresistible because the translator begins, a little like Alice and her erstwhile companion, the fawn, in a wood, this time, where names have no thing. This is exactly what we should expect in the case of a text so firmly focused, in Jakobsonian terms, on the poetic function. (Of course Humpty Dumpty will attempt to remedy this lack [by virtue of his understanding of all poems ever written and of many yet to be composed], but with how much success, we can each judge for ourselves.) The reader’s work in this poem (and so the work of the translator) is to see with mere sound through the graphic signs. The work of the translator is to see and show and bring the reader along, in a wonderful and paradoxical proof of how universally meaning is culturally determined.

Returning to the idea that every language is, from another point of view, nonsense, we need to deal briefly with the canonic status of the world’s most famous nonsense poem. The classic quality of this particular text, which is after all in a way why we are all here in this particular volume, guarantees a frustratingly tainted freshness for its many re-readers. Like the rose in the garden that won’t be sniffed twice, one simply cannot retrieve the experience of *coming to understand* such as accompanied a first encounter with “Jabberwocky”.

And yet, personally I have found that, as with the works of Lewis Carroll more generally, I discover more every time I look. And so am drawn back to the poem. One of the best ways of looking again is of course to translate, because the serious translator, if well equipped, is the closest reader of any text.

I feel that this poem – however we read it – is asking two important parallel and unanswerable questions: these are – what’s the point of nonsense (?) and what’s the point of poetry (?). One might further then ask – why bother with the nonsense of translating nonsense poetry? One might think any or all of these questions irrelevant to anyone who has even come such a short way into this collection. Are such questions worth answering? Indeed, are they answerable?

I think the questions are answerable and worth answering because in our appreciation of “Jabberwocky” we are sharing a guilty pleasure, a pleasure the classic status of the text reveals as long pre-dating any living reader or translator or theorist.

As a parody of genre (or perhaps of the self-consciousness of genre), “Jabberwocky” connects all those whom it lights up with something more human than language as we are used to using it. Here is the reaching beyond the known of words (the filling of the head with ideas) familiar to anyone who has come *into* a language, that is to say it is *Heimlich* to anyone who can speak/read/listen/write any language at all. If we agree with Wittgenstein that the limits of my language are the limits of my world then here we find new horizons, of the uncannily familiar kind.

One reads, one mulls over, one works with the poem in the vain effort to get that first whiff back, to smell the rose as it first drew us in. But, in the manner of Tantalus’ eternal punishment, this horizon recedes as we approach. The wonderful thing about teaching “Jabberwocky” is that it allows us vicarious appreciation of the innocence of a first encounter. We are wiser to the poem but we witness the first joy of nonsense coming to be known. Teaching the poem to non-native speakers of English has a special magic, because with them one can appreciate some of the pleasure of their way of being in your language (however troublesome that may be to them more generally, in practice). One can experience some of the pleasure of being inside and out of the language at the same time.

So here we have Wittgenstein’s world expanded but by means of the Fortunatus’ purse (a kind of 3D möbius strip) will we meet in *Sylvie and Bruno*. Here is the whole universe in tightwoven fabric, because the inside *is* the outside (and of course vice versa).

To return the question of efficacy just posed. The point of being with “Jabberwocky” is that it is (paradoxically, counter-intuitively) an encounter with newness, with difference. It is the place in words words have not yet been been and yet we visit by their means. In this way we may say that every attempt at translating “Jabberwocky” constitutes an effort at reclaiming the innocence with which the text may have been notionally approached in the original. The “original” is of course, in the case of this particular text, a beautiful misunderstanding, it being the only example we have of its own unnamed language – a language that exists only in so far as we are able to imagine it, and only by this means (by the means of imagining furnished us in the story). And what has this “language”, this “original” to do with the idea of poetry more generally? As something archaic, notionally lost, it posits a *faux* origin for poetry more generally. So we have here an ultimate

poem with *faux*—Ur projection! A poem that takes us back as it takes us away.

While it will be not quite right to claim that source and target language as far from the text as from each other in this poem, one is nevertheless tempted to see things that way (much in the manner the modern English reader may not at first recognize *Beowulf* or Chaucer or Burns as of her/his own language),

In this book, the experience of meeting “Jabberwocky” is repeated many times; and though, it is true, a finite number of times, nevertheless an infinite series is suggested. Or perhaps something more in the manner of Borges’ famous circular library? That “Jabberwocky” should be uniquely achieved in every possible language is a tribute at once to poetry, to nonsense, to innocence. It is indeed a coming of age for all of these activities. The translation of “Jabberwocky” is a way of untainting the innocence of the idea of an original. I believe that this accounts for the popularity of the sport.

References

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