

Alice in a World of Wonderlands: The Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece

In other languages, Lewis Carroll's world takes a remarkable new turn

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

The Wall Street Journal

October 28, 2015

New York - There have been so many commemorations of the 150th anniversary of Lewis Carroll's classic, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," that plummeting down a rabbit hole might now seem as commonplace as "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," even when twisted into nonsense by the Mad Hatter: "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! / How I wonder what you're at!" But at the Grolier Club, in a disarmingly charming exhibition, Carroll's world of logically shaped illogic takes a remarkable new turn. It isn't Alice but "Alice" that falls down the rabbit hole here. The book is the character in this exhibition's narrative, tumbling into an intricate world of challenging peculiarity.

Despite the fact that "Alice" plays with puns and popular poems, English customs and Victorian ideas—which once led friends to tell Carroll the book was "untranslatable"—such insurmountable difficulties have instead inspired a stubborn obsession. "Alice" has become the most translated English novel since "The Pilgrim's Progress." And the exhibition, "Alice in a World of Wonderlands: The Translations of Lewis Carroll's Masterpiece," is an example of that obsession. Its curator, Jon A. Lindseth, has been collecting translations just as the original Alice—Alice Liddell Hargreaves—did in her adulthood, gathering accounts of her adventures in Brazilian Portuguese, Catalan, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Pitman Shorthand, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish and Swedish.

But Mr. Lindseth has gone even further, displaying translations into languages no one speaks (Middle English) or cares about (Esperanto) or whose very existence is startling (Marathi, the language of Mumbai). "Alice" has been reworked into Cockney English, Cornish, Irish and Middle Welsh. The exhibition shows us the book in Hindi, Assamese, Tamil, Teluga and four different Pacific Island languages. Alice, who appears on almost all the jackets, morphs into Marie, Ana, Lize, Lusa, Eiblis, Ealasaid, Else, Adelgyde, Alisz, Aeliseu and Aylee with such rapidity that she might well ask, as she does in the book, "Who am I?"

The exhibition, which is co-curated by Mr. Lindseth and Alan Tannenbaum, gives us a grand tour of this strange universe, beginning with a display case that includes some of Carroll's photography—including one image that, a bit creepily, suggests the author's less-than-ethereal interest in the young Alice—posing her as a slightly saucy 6-year-old “beggar maid.” There is also a copy of an “Alice” manuscript he inscribed to Alice's mother: “To Her, whose children's smiles fed the narrator's fancy and were his rich reward.”

Matters become curiouser and curiouser as we sense the passions that shaped this collection. Here is a 1961 first edition in the Tosk dialect of southern Albania, but we are meant to feel the collector's dismay that the first edition “in the Gheg dialect of northern Albania” is missing. The quest for such rare translations also required considerable endurance; in Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia—said to be the coldest capital city in the world—that meant braving -40 degree temperatures.

If only more of these volumes could have been opened—or understood! For that, you have to turn to an even more grand project that actually inspired the exhibition: a newly published three-volume reference work (aliceinaworldofwonderlands.com) from Oak Knoll Press with the same title as the show and edited by Mr. Lindseth and Mr. Tannenbaum. Its 2,656 pages include contributions from 251 writers, a detailed bibliographical catalog of more than 7,600 editions of “Alice” in 174 languages, and, most remarkably, a sense of how these translations have turned out. An entire volume provides “back-translations.” Every contributor who wrote about a translation was asked to take the “Mad Tea-Party” chapter in that language and translate it back into English without referring to the original, thus giving a sense of the translation's character. Variations are astonishing, as versions of “Twinkle, Twinkle” show.

Even then, we get only a glimpse of the difficulties. How do you translate the Mock Turtle's Core Curriculum into any other language: “Reeling and Writhing . . . and then the different branches of Arithmetic—Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision”? One contributor notes that translations into German pose unusual problems because it “is generally not as rich in homophones as English” and “there is no great tradition of punning in German literature.”

Different cultures do not just translate. They transform. In Norwegian, the Dormouse becomes a marmot; in a Provençal dialect the Hatter becomes a Marble Mason (the phrase for “he's crazy” literally means “he broke the marble”). In a 1910 Japanese translation, Alice doesn't argue with the Mad

Hatter because it would be improper to disrespect one's elders. And of course there are poor translations to consider. A 1961 Finnish translation was so bad that it was banned by Finland's Supreme Court under the "classics protection paragraph" of the Finnish Copyright Act. At what point does "Alice" turn into something that isn't "Alice"? To which we might add, "And why is all this going on?"

The usual answer—so readers of a language will have some access to the original—does not suffice. One possibility is that an inventive translation might confer authority on an obscure language. "A language is not complete," said one translator, "if there are no translations of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Alice in Wonderland." But many translations are not meant for those who use a language, but for those who play with them. We see here a translation into Manx—a "language of the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea"—which lost its last native speaker in 1974. And we are informed about a translation into Literary Late Egyptian Hieroglyphics, now in progress. Thus a book of many puzzles is treated as part of a puzzle itself. And a book that is often about language is treated as a linguistic challenge. In 2012, a computer scientist "translated" the book into "Alphagram": each word's letters are rearranged in alphabetical order (the book's title is "Aceil in addelnnorW").

Carroll also engages in his own variety of translation, transforming the proprieties of his surroundings into something aggressively nonsensical. In "Alice," he alludes to a trite but popular homily by Isaac Watts condemning laziness: "'Tis the voice of the Sluggard: I heard him complain, / 'You have waked me too soon! I must slumber again!'" Carroll's translation: "'Tis the voice of the Lobster: I heard him declare / 'You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.'" There is something nightmarish involved as well, as if a country house tea party had been disrupted by rodents running wild or babies turning into squealing pigs. Carroll undermines order and then, somehow, manages to restore it, as if modernity had been glimpsed and temporarily postponed.

The exhibition is aware of its own eccentricity by showing, too, a satire of its own enterprise by Byron W. Sewell: a translation into an obscure (invented) language Zumorigénflit, "Áloþk's Adventures in Goatland." Here the children's rhyme begins:

Tinkle, tinkle little goat....

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!

How I wonder what you're at!"

-- Lewis Carroll, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"

Twinkle, twinkle, oh my little bat!

What are you doing in the grey evening?

-- rendering of a French translation

Flutter, flicker, you little bat!

Hey, where are you going to go, we'd like to know.

-- rendering of Croatian translation

Now you twinkle winged rat

On what are you so concentrated?

-- rendering of Spanish translation

Little goat, little goat, run up,

Catch a sentence and eat it up.

-- rendering of Yiddish translation

Pussycat, pussycat, scream

With a dumb cry in the night

-- rendering of Belarusian translation

A finch was sitting on a stump,

a-tootling quietly

-- rendering of Czech translation

Along the lake

Near Mt. Triglav

A pot drifts. . . .

-- rendering of Slovenian translation

Twinkle twinkle she-bat

when you're drunken, you're more beautiful

-- rendering of Italian translation

Don't look up to sky

These crows, hawks and birds

In same fashion will fly

-- rendering of Urdu translation

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's critic at large.

(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Lewis Carroll: A Pioneer of Quantum Physics" -- WSJ November 5, 2015 – in the print or online editions)