

TRANSLATING THE
“JABBERWOCKY”
Where the Problems Lie

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The difficult task of literary translation is further complicated when attempting an adequate version of lyric poetry. The person who undertakes this discipline, this spiritual and intellectual exercise, must choose among a series of solutions regarding the content and the structure of the text: 1. the thematic content; 2. the problem of the denotation and connotation of the linguistic signs; 3. the realm of imagery; 4. meter and stanza form; 5. the poet's perception of the universe; 6. the work as part of a literary and cultural tradition. Once these elements have been dealt with, the translator has the option of offering a prose version, employing a stanza form without regard to rhyme or rhythm, creating a poem in Spanish whose structure and form correspond to the original, or creating a metapoem based on the original. An example of each of these possible translations can be found in the Spanish version of the poetry of Paul Valéry by Jorge Guillén.¹

The poem "Jabberwocky" appears in print for the first time in the last number of *Misch-Masch* magazine (1885) -- written, illustrated and published by Carroll himself for his brothers. It appears under the heading "Stanza of Anglosaxon Poetry." It was later incorporated into his work *Through the Looking Glass*.² From the moment of its publication it awakened the interest of children who learned its musical verses, devoid of sense, by heart. Some of the words invented by Carroll have become part of modern English. Critics have avidly sought symbolic, metaphysical, political and psychological interpretations of the text, some of them of a merely impressionistic nature. Few of them have focused on the work from a linguistic point of view.

¹ Cf. "Jorge Guillén y Paul Valery," in Concha Zardoya, *Poesía española del siglo XX*, Vol. 2, (Madrid: Gredos, 1974), pp. 168-219.

² Cf. "Prologue," *The Annotated Alice*, Introducción and Notes by Martin Gardner (New York: C. N. Potter, 1960).

The work belongs to the mainstream of irrationalism which characterizes European poetry from Charles Baudelaire to the thirties in this century. This synchronic irrationalism is manifested in the word-symbol through phonetic identity or through phonetic similarity, and in the meaning through denotation and connotation. There are cases in which the irrational meaning springs from the word-symbol and the irrational appropriates the term. There may also be lexical associations. In Spanish literature we have the case of *jitanjáforas*, meaningless words which provoke an emotional response through their acoustic content, as well as connotative associations through their placement in a conceptual context.

Regarding this subject, Carlos Bosuño,³ in his treatise *El irracionalismo poético (El símbolo)*, offers two illustrative examples, the first from Vicente Huidobro and the second from Lope de Vega:

Al horeñana de la montazonte
 la violondrina y el goloncelo
 descolgada esta mañana de la lunala
 se acerca a todo galope
 ya viene viene la golondrina
 ya viene viene la golonfina
 ya viene la golontrina
 ya viene la goloncima
 ya viene la golonrma
 ya viene la golonrma
 la golonniña
 la golongira
 la golonlira
 la golonbrisa
 la golonchilla

The text by Lope de Vega reads as follows:

Piraguamonte, piragua
 Piragua, jevirarizagua.

We will not stop to analyze these examples since our only purpose is to prove that this phenomenon is not new in literature and that Carroll's creation and the *jitanjáforas* are a product of the symbolist-modernist literature of the second half of the XIXth century.

One of the tasks of the translator of Carroll's poem is to attempt an interpretation of its semantic meaning, even though at first glance it appears devoid of all meaning, mere gibberish based on ingenious

³ Cf. Carlos Bosuño, *El irracionalismo poético (El símbolo)* Madrid: Gredos, 1977), pp. 41-42.

phonological play. Carroll himself, in interviews and letters and in chapter six of *Through the Looking Glass*, in which the poem appears, offers some clues to deciphering its meaning. Here is the text:

Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Dis gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
and the mome raths outgrabe.

From the first reading, the English-speaking reader understands that it is about the advice given to a son by his father regarding

certain wild beasts he might meet in the forest. The youth ventures into the woods in search of these wild beasts, he rests under a tree, thinks about the impending meeting, is able to vanquish the jabberwock, triumphantly carries its head to his father who loudly and happily praises the prowess of his young son. The reader can also perceive the creation of the atmosphere throughout the poem and suspects it is about a primitive tribe in a faraway exotic place. He is equally aware of the melodic rhythm of the verses and of the sonorous charm of the words --gyre and gimble, Jubjub bird, Tumtum tree, snicker-snack, galumphing back, etc.

Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice the meaning of the first stanza. It is around four o'clock in the afternoon, time to prepare supper, and it is put on to broil. He defines slithy as smooth and active, the toves are cheese-eating badgers, gyre and gimble are equivalents for scratching like a dog and boring holes into something; he associates wabe with swab, soak, that is, a hill soaked by rain; borogroves are extinct parrots, miserable and unhappy (mimsy), while raths --green pigs or tortoises-- shriek (outgrabe). He terms them momes, short for "from home," according to Humpty. The interpretation of tortoise comes from the aforementioned annotated version of *Alice*.

Summing up, it was late afternoon and the smooth and active badgers scratched and bored holes in the hillside. The parrots became sad and the tortoises shrieked at the sight of this activity. There could be gnomes around the hills and the birds feared the destruction of their nests. Similarly the tortoises came out shrieking when they heard the badgers scratching outside. From that point on we have to fall back on the semantic associations. The author explained to a group of students who wanted to publish a magazine using the title of the poem, that jabber was a wordy and heated argument and wocer or wocor was the Anglosaxon word meaning offspring, fruit. In modern English we have the words jabber and wacky with a similar meaning. There are some terms in English which could be associated with jubjub: juju (toy); jub (heavy trot of a horse, to strike with a blunt object); jujube (fruit tree). Carroll compounds words in the poem to create new ones: slithy (lithe, slimy); frumious (fuming-furious); Bandersnatch (band-snatch); tulgey (tuly-gey); galumphing (gallop-triumphant); frabjous (frabble-joyous); snicker-snack

(snigger-snap).

The poem contains words which are part of the English vocabulary. They appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: slithy: variant of sleathy; gyre, to turn, whirl around; gimple, variant of gimbal; manx, Old Irish for the Isle of Man; tumtum, sound of a stringed instrument played with a plectrum; toonly, idly; whiffing, blowing in slight puffs; burbled, bubbling sound; uffish, ouff, ouff, and exclamation expressing a sense of stifling; rath, an enclosure made by a strong earthen wall and serving as a fort and place of residence for the chief of a tribe; beamish, variant of beaming, radiant; calloo, a species of Arctic duck; chortle, chuckle, snort. In his work, *The White Knight*, Alexander L. Taylor suggests that the word vorpal combines alternate letters of verbal and gospel, though not everyone shares this opinion.

Once the purpose of the author, the method of creation in his composition and the structure and rhyme of the poem are understood, the translator is better equipped to create a version or to apply in Spanish the same techniques used by Carroll and, whenever possible, use those lexical forms easily adaptable to Spanish. We now offer a possible version of the poem:

El Yaberroque

Era brillizo, y los lizosos tovos
Jiraban y jorodaban en el yerbajo:
Todo mimbrosos estaban los borogrovos
Y los momosos rocoyos garrajeaban.

"¡Hijo mío, cuidaos del yaberroque!
Las mandíbulas que muerden, las garras que agarran.
Cuidaos del ave yuyuba, y corred
Lejos de la frumiosa Bandidada".

Sostuvo en la mano su espada zurpal:
Tanto había buscado al enemigo homomnívoro-
Así que descansó junto al árbol tun-tún,
Y se quedó un rato pensativo.

Y mientras se quedaba con su pensamiento efusivo,
El Yaberroque, con sus ojos flamígeros,
Venía resollando por el bosque túrgido,
Y mientras se le acercaba, borboritaba.

Un, dos, un, dos, y una y otra vez
 El filo zurpal iba chis-chas.
 Lo dejó muerto, y con su cabeza
 Regresó galomfante.

¿Y habéis matado voz al Yaberroque?
 ¡Venid a mis brazos, mi hijo fulgoroso!
 ¡O día frabuloso! Patatán, Patatote!
 Resoplaba en medio de su gozo.

Era brillizo, y los lizos tovos
 Jiraban y jorodaban en el yerbajo:
 Todo mimbrosos estaban los borogrovos
 Y los momosos rocoyes garrajeaban.

It is obvious that we have availed ourselves of two techniques to create this version: the use of existing or related terms in the language and the use of composition of two or more words. Some of the existing words in Spanish are: *giraban* (spun), *horadaban* (bored holes), *yerbajo* (weed), *morrocoyes* (giant tortoises), *garrájean* (shriek), *tuntún* (a tree), *efusivo* (effusive), *flamígero* (flaming, blazing), *resollar* (breathe hard), *yuyuba* (jujube), *túrgido* (turgid), *borboritar* (to bubble), *chis-chás* (clashing of swords), *fulgoroso*, (radiant), *patatán* (this and that), *resoplar* (to snort), *bandidada* (bandit, brigand). We have followed Carroll in the use of "tovos" and "borogrovos". We have created the following terms:

yaberroque	: ya ver roque	: to have seen Roque already
brillizo	: brillo, lizo	: gloss, warp-thread
lizos	: lisos, deslizar	: smooth, glide
mimbrosos	: mimosos, bríos	: affectionate, with spirit
momosos	: Momo, osos	: Carnival King, bears
frumioso	: furioso, rumor	: furious, rumble
zurpal	: zurra, palo	: flogging, stick
homomnívoro	: homo, omnívoro	: man, omnivorous
galomfante	: galopar, triunfante	: gallop, triumphant
frabuloso	: fabuloso, rabia	: fabulous, fury

The sonorous rhythm of English as well as some of the fluidity of Carroll's verses have been lost in translation. While in the English the open vowels —a, e, i— predominate, in Spanish the closed ones do —o, u— in addition to the consonants j, s, rr and z. Although an assonant rhyme has been attempted and this version constitutes only an approximation to an extremely difficult text, we are aware that on some other occasion

forse altro canterò con miglior plectro.