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Peripeteia in Wonderland: on translating *Alice*

“[...] You know very well you’re not real.”

“I *am* real!” said Alice, and began to cry.

“You won’t make yourself a bit realler by crying,” Tweedledee remarked: “there’s nothing to cry about.”

“If I wasn’t real,” Alice said – half laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous – “I shouldn’t be able to cry.”

“I hope you don’t suppose those are *real* tears?” Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

There are (at least) two reasons that justify the choice of Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to become the subject of an essay written as a contribution to a conference on *Fantastique, fantasy, merveilleux en traduction*. The first reason is that in 2015, the year of the conference, Alice turned 150. She received a multitude of birthday presents, and birthday celebrations were held in many places – from Cambridge to Poznań. Therefore, it seemed fit to offer her yet another gift on the occasion of what seemed a most proper event. Second, “having seeped through the membrane of the original books, [Alice] has spent the past century and a half infusing herself into the language, and the broader social discourse; as a result, we can all too easily picture her, quote her, or follow her example in the nonsense of our own lives without having read – or even feeling that we need to read – a word of Lewis Carroll” [Lane, 2015]. In short, *Alice* is a classic; and, among literary texts originally written (and read) in English, “a typical list would run like this: *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*, to which were later added *The Pickwick Papers* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*” [Lane, 2015].

Interestingly, all the five classics have the same structure: “Every one of those titles contains the leading character, whose fate is to go on a journey, and whose mettle is tested in the process. Each explores a different landscape, or body of water, but all five traverse what you might call the valley of the shadow of life, profuse with incident.” In other words, like Bunyan’s Christian or Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Alice is a pilgrim [Zirker, 2009]. The plot of the book (or, in fact, the two *Alice* books), takes her on a journey through the represented world of Wonderland (or, in the second of the two books, the world behind the looking glass), but what has to be remembered on her 150th anniversary is that her travel takes her through time: she keeps re-appearing in consecutive temporal frames peopled by subsequent generations of readers. And among those readers are not only Alice’s English-speaking fans, but her translators as well as readers of the translations. Because what makes *Alice* exceptional is that she has also been listed as a classic in other world literatures, of which Polish literature is just one. Polish translations make what Edward Balcerzan defines as a translation series [Balcerzan, 1968], and, like the Mouse’s tale, it is rather long; the most recent translation, number 16 in the series, called *Perypetie Alicji na Czarytorium* (“Alice’s Peripeteia on Magic-territory”), appeared in 2015 as yet another gift for Alice on her birthday. In it, Alice’s adventures became “peripeteia,” and I took the freedom to borrow this word for the title of this essay.

The fact that over the years (the sixteen translations range from 1910 to 2015)¹ *Alice* has challenged so many translators makes it an attractive subject of study for those interested in translation at large, and in the translation of the *fantastique* in particular. The categorization does not seem generally agreed upon. Most scholars classify the book as belonging to the genre defined as fantasy, while the organizers of the Kraków conference take it to be a “text foundational for the *pure nonsense* variety” (call for papers, transl. – E.T.). Is, then, nonsense a form of fantasy, and how pure it needs to be to be considered as pure?

Yet another classic, Susan Stewart [1978, quoted in: Tigges, 1987], proposes that literary nonsense might be classified according to the presence of what she defines as “five procedures” [Tigges, 1987: 56-69]. In

¹ For full bibliography of Polish translations, see Tabakowska, 2015.

Alice in Wonderland they are all there. The first of these procedures, defined as *mirroring*, that is, a “presentation of a ‘topsy turvy’ world, [...] a world beyond the looking glass” [Tigges, 1987: 56], is in fact essential: Wonderland is ambiguous and ambivalent (is the Pigeon a bird or a serpent?), well-known categories are inverted (are playing cards objects or people?), the discourse is self-denying (can’t Alice explain herself just because she is not herself?), and metaphors are inversed (is the Mad Hatter actually mad?). The procedure of *imprecision* [Tigges, 1987: 57] leads to a continuing “play with boundaries”: the three sisters in a well draw “everything that begins with an M,” and the reader cannot be sure at all whether the pig that Alice saves from the Duchess’s fury is a pig or a baby. The third procedure, that of *infinity* [Tigges, 1987: 58] is clearly reflected in Alice changing her size, again and again, in consecutive – rather unrelated – episodes that constitute her journey. Number four, *simultaneity* [Tigges, 1987: 59], manifests itself in an effusion of puns and puzzles, portmanteau words and unusual associations (“flamingoes and mustard both bite”). All these characteristics add up to the overall effect (and the last of Stewart’s procedures): that of *arbitrariness*, which Wim Tigges calls “shuffling” [Tigges, 1987: 64] – a mixture of ingredients according to the recipe for pure nonsense – permanent frustration of expectations. The expectations of Carroll’s heroine, but also those of his readers. The former are there, because in spite of all her *peripeteia* Alice still belongs to her reality – the comfortable and well-known world of a middle class little girl, living in Victorian England. The strange world that she falls into is indeed both real (or realistic?) and significantly different from reality. The difference is nicely reflected in Gilbert Chesterton’s classical definition of fantasy, for whom the genre was governed by a splendidly simple rule: “The cosmos goes mad but the hero does not go mad” (Chesterton, *The Dragon’s Grandmother*).

This juxtaposition is fundamental to any discussion on translating nonsense literature, and it is the resulting tension that constitutes the dominant of the *Alice* book: the aspect that plays the crucial role in its understanding and reception, and which has to be kept in the translation [Barańczak, 2004]. As was said, the tension emerges as an outcome of Alice’s *peripeteia* in the “represented world” created by Carroll – *peripeteia* rather than the less dynamic *adventures* (which is Grzegorz Wasowski’s rationale for having chosen the word in the title of his

translation [Wasowski, 2015]). Dictionaries define *peripeteia* as “a sudden or unexpected reversal of circumstances or situation especially in a literary work” [the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*], i.e. a dynamic turn of the plot. In *Alice*, the episodic plot brings a succession of unexpected events, which come as the result of the author’s implementation of the “procedures” that we have listed above. Next, there are the transformations of the protagonist herself – pertaining both to Alice’s character and to external circumstances. Alice keeps changing – both in size and in attitudes, and the changes occur both within the narrow context of the book and in the broad context external to it. She is 150 years old, and so, naturally, she must have aged. But in order to stay “not mad” and thus comply with Chesterton’s definition of fantasy, she must remain “not mad” by contemporary standards. In other words, she should change with time; she might be expected to stop carrying comfits and a thimble in her pinafore pockets, or to put her family at ease by ringing them on her mobile, etc. (for a more detailed discussion, see Tabakowska, 2015). But if she does not do this, she is “mad” by the standards of a contemporary child. In other words, Alice’s Victorian reality becomes a world of fantasy for the contemporary reader. The borderline between fantasy and reality, inherently fuzzy by definition, begins to shift. The mad world of Wonderland moves towards normality, and Carroll’s normal hero moves towards madness.

Translation becomes problematic. From the point of view of the translator, the word *peripeteia* now reveals its other meaning, that is, it signals tribulations that follow from the realization that translating *Alice* must mean translating Alice. Stewart’s “procedure of imperfection” gets an additional dimension.

Translating *Alice* involves the fundamental question about the function that the book is understood to perform. This is threefold: to ridicule, to amuse and to teach. The object of the ridicule is the set of cultural patterns of Victorian England. But what is the reality of 150 years ago, from the perspective of the 21st century becomes – to use a grammatical metaphor – “the present in the past.” As to the second function, what amuses the reader is the contrast between the sane Alice and the mad Wonderland. Finally, what is taught are some things absent from the curricula of Victorian schools: assertiveness, free thought and the ability of independent judgment. All this within the particular framework of

double readership, which so many commentators point out as a significant characteristic of the book. Thus the “adult” layer of the book is the social satire, which has become outdated and thus is difficult to appreciate for an uninformed adult reader. And so is the “children’s” layer, with its didactic function. Amusement, the layer accessible to both readerships, is influenced by the changing relationship between “the normal” and “the mad”.

The translator, keen to remain loyal to the principles of their profession, will be constantly torn between two strategies. On the one hand, they will be invoking their memories, or – in the parlance of the psychologists – integrated memory traces stored in their long-term memory. On the other hand, they will have to keep making reference to their creative imagination. The former, responsible mainly for the effect of mimesis, fails whenever the culture- and time-bound cognitive models do not correspond to those functioning in the Wonderland. For instance, the contemporary (British) model of a “court session” has the twelve jurors making notes on their pads or laptops rather than scribbling on slates, as is the case in the court where Alice gives her evidence. It might be noticed that today the slates are an element of the nonsense: Carroll’s Victorian mimesis becomes Stewart’s contemporary procedure of imprecision, due to the shifting border which separates “the real” from “the unreal”.

Today’s court jurors do not scribble on slates, but “scribbling on a slate” can still be recalled from the translator’s (and their readers’) indirect memory. More problematic are those cases which involve culture-bound gaps. With reference to *Alice*, the frequently discussed illustration is that of *bathing machines*. This strange Victorian contraption makes part of Alice’s (and, for that matter, any Victorian child’s) cognitive model of “summer holiday at the sea” – beside other landmarks, such as “children digging in the sand with wooden spades, then a row of lodging houses and behind them a railway station” [Carroll, 2001: 19]. The Polish culture of today has no counterpart. The translator is in trouble. Their memory might supply a trace specific for the source culture, resulting in choosing such expressions as *kabiny kąpielowe* (shower cubicles, cabanas), or *przebieralnie* (dressing rooms). Alternatively, the translator makes appeal to their creative imagination, and “a world of words come to life” [Ede, 1987: 51]. *Bathing machines* turn into *machiny kąpielowe*

(bathing machinery) or *budki kąpielowe* (bathing booths). Carroll's mimesis turns into the translators' fantasy, since the (Polish) reality does not know of such things.

Standard dictionaries define creative imagination as the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality [the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*]. It is "the ability to create mental images of things absent or things that do not exist". The postulate of non-existence raises some pertinent questions: are such things absent from memory because they had never been perceived in reality, or because they do not exist in the real world? If they are absent in memory of experience, whose memory is it? And whose experience? And in what context is this question actually being asked? Finally, does non-existence in the real world imply non-existence "in general"? Looking for answers to these questions would mean going beyond the scope of this essay and beyond the competence of the present author. However, their significance for the theory of translation seems quite obvious.

More than a century has passed since the challenge of translating *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (into Polish) was first met by the translator. Over those years the number of Carroll's fans, and the fans of his Alice, has not diminished, nor has the number of literary critics and commentators. The sixteen Polish translations have given food for thought to many students of translation and translation theorists. However, while most of them discuss the translations of the *Alice* books, not many pay attention to the translation of Alice. And yet, looking at the *peripeteia* that Carroll's protagonist has gone through over the 150 years sheds light both on the "the mad vs. the sane" tension that constitutes the dominant of the book and on the general historical tendency of translation practices.

Inspired by the idea of the "changing Alices" as presented in an insightful book by Ewa Rajewska [2004], one can observe a regular pattern behind the changes which Carroll's heroine undergoes in time. In the oldest translations, dated 1910 (anonymous, by Adela S.) and 1925 (by Maria Morawska), Alice is naïve and not very bright, constantly patronized both by the characters and by the narrator; Carroll's social satire is transformed into so many didactic admonishments. But the crucial tension between the world that is mad (and menacing, especially to children

who would not listen to grownups) and the timid little girl is manifest. A quarter of a century later (1955, Antoni Marianowicz) Alice becomes a bit older, and bit less naive and silly; the “mad” world is tamed by repeated references to Polish realia (e.g. Polish nursery rhymes). Eighteen years later (1972, Maciej Słomczyński) theoretical principles adhered to by the translator (“as close to the original as possible”) turn Alice into a girl a bit boring and without much sense of humour; often she is “not amused” (and neither is the reader). Somewhat later (1986, Robert Stiller), again in agreement with her translator’s professional creed, Alice becomes a little erudite, an “old tiny” attempting to rationalize her *peripeteia*. The last fifteen years (1995-2015; Jolanta Kozak, Krzysztof Dworak, Bogumiła Kaniewska, Elżbieta Tabakowska) witnessed an avalanche of translations (among other things, because the copyright had by then expired...), showing an Alice who is a smart aleck; strange as her behavior might seem to her readers, it is still justified by her attitude to Wonderland, which she confronts assertively and with stamina. One has to remember, however, that the challenge is reduced, since the Wonderland seems somehow less full of wonders than it might have seemed a century earlier; in fact, it brings to mind the notion of augmented reality, with an image of the real world merged with real-time (computer-generated) images of a world of fantasy.

The metamorphoses of Polish Alices call for an explanation: a linguist, or a critic of translation, might legitimately look for possible answers to the question how these differing portraits of a single model are actually painted. The answer might involve an analysis of lexis (emotionally loaded parlance of the word-mincing Alice and her sugary narrator of 1910 as opposed to the matter-of-fact vocabulary of the Alice of 1986). It might mean investigating the use of morphological derivation (the childish diminutives that characterize the Alice of 1925 as opposed to the grown-up language of the Alice of 1986). It could also be illustrated by the degree of syntactic complexity of the “elder” Alice as compared to that of the language of her “younger” counterparts. Last but not least, like in actual painting, the portrait could depend upon the choice of point-of-view, with different linguistic devices shaping the perspective of an omniscient grown up educator (as in older translations), in opposition to that of a bright and observant child (as in some of the most recent versions). Detailed consideration of these aspects as manifest in

individual translations might certainly produce some new contribution to the massive bulk of the “Alice literature”. At this point, however, it must suffice to observe the general tendency: with time, and in agreement with the changing characteristics of children’s literature over the last century and a half, the differing portraits of Alice as painted by her translators reflect not only the translators’ attitudes to Alice, but also her own changing attitude towards the world of fantasy that she finds herself thrown into.

On her way towards the tamed wonders of the increasingly sophisticated reality, Carroll’s protagonist becomes smarter, less intimidated, more in control of her *peripeteia*. At the same time, she becomes “curiouser and curiouser” from the point of view of her readers – less and less a “normal” girl of her age, more and more a figment of fantasy.

Interestingly enough, the interplay of the real and the fantastic finds a counterpoint in illustrations that accompany the text – the “accompaniment to the word” [Wilkoń, 2011]. The sixteen Polish *Alices* inspired a number of illustrators, and each version is a case of *sui generis* intersemiotic translation. A detailed discussion would merit a separate monograph. The original illustrations by John Tenniel, showing a rather ugly Victorian girl with a disproportionately big head and retained in some of the recent translations (Kozak, 1997; Kaniewska, 2010) seem incoherent: like the Gryphon or the Mock Turtle, Alice becomes an inhabitant of Wonderland, the land of fantasy. The illustrations provided by local artists working at the same time as the translators (Adela S. 2010, Maria Morawska 1925) show a “Polish Alice” – a girl dressed according to the fashion of her time and shown in a “local” setting (in the case of Adela S’s translation, among the wooden houses of the Tatra district!). Paradoxically, the translation dominant, that is, the tension between “the sane” and “the mad,” becomes set off. The strategy of domestication, scorned by contemporary theorists of translation, can thus be advocated in this particular case. The illustrations by Tove Jansson, produced in 1960’s and accompanying the translation published in 2012 [Tabakowska, 2012] are very special: Jansson’s Alice, although a very contemporary “girl next door,” does not specify either the door or the house it leads to. In other words, while being “contemporary” it does not “domesticate.” As an intersemiotic translation it seems the most adequate: it puts into relief the crucial opposition between Wonderland

and its visitor, without crossing the boundary between translation and adaptation.

It is precisely this boundary – fuzzy as so many other boundaries that theorists of translation talk about – that should perhaps be mentioned at this point. The three areas that are usually posited at this juncture are those of translation, adaptation and inspiration. Although the first two categories are protected by law, their boundaries are rather fuzzy, as testified by authors taken to court for copyright violation. In any case, the scale runs from the principle of equivalence to the creed of *les belles infidèles*. As far as the Polish translations of Carroll's classic are concerned, landmarks on this road could probably be set by the chronological sequence of the sixteen texts. They make an exceptionally long translational series, and one might legitimately ask for the reason why so many translations have been produced of a single original text. Their *raison d'être* is the persistent, and permanent, inability to reach the optimum correspondence between the original and the translation [cf. Legeżyńska, 2002: 123 ff.].

What was said above was not intended to juxtapose, assess or comment upon texts that constitute the series of the Polish translations of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Nor was it meant to provide yet another argument for the necessity of and the rationale behind translational series. My claim was that as a genre, fantasy – or (pure) nonsense literature – puts specific demands on the translator. If, as is the case with *Alice*, the dominant of a text consists in the tension between the fantastic and the real, the mad and the sane, then the ever changing reality calls for a re-definition of the relationship, and the dialectic between the two elements becomes decisive. Perhaps more strikingly than with other genres, translatability – the pursuit of the optimum correspondence between the original and the translation – becomes the function of time.

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STRESZCZENIE**Perypetie w Krainie Czarów: o tłumaczeniu *Alicji***

W artykule przedstawiono powieść Lewisa Carrolla *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* jako klasyczną pozycję literatury fantasty/nonsensu, odnosząc tę klasyfikację do „pięciu procedur”, sformułowanych w celu zdefiniowania literatury nonsensu przez amerykańską badaczkę literatury nonsensu Susan Stewart. Z pozycji tłumacza klasyfikacja Stewart pozwala zdefiniować dominantę *Alicji* jako napięcie między „normalnością” bohaterki i „szaleństwem” Krainy Czarów. W kontekście tak pojętej dominanty – a także wymogu podwójnego adresata – w artykule omówione są tendencje tłumaczy widoczne w chronologii serii: wyzwaniem dla tłumacza jest zmieniający się z czasem szeroki kontekst książki. W ostatecznym rozrachunku przekład *Alicji* staje się też swoistym „przekładem *Alicji*”.

Słowa kluczowe: klasyka, seria translatorska, nonsens, dominanta, podwójny adresat

SUMMARY

The article presents Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a classical work within the genre of fantasy, or literature of nonsense. The classification is made according to the “five procedures,” postulated for the genre by the American poet and scholar, Susan Stewart. From the point of view of the translator, the procedures make it possible to define the dominant of the book as the tension between the sane protagonist and the mad world of Wonderland. The criterion of dominant, combined by requirements imposed by double readership, makes it possible to characterize Polish translations of the book, which make a translation series. What becomes a challenge for the translator is the wide context of the book, which changes over time. It is possible to trace, within the series, some general tendencies, as well as to demonstrate that, ultimately, translating *Alice* becomes “translating Alice.”

Key words: classic, translation series, nonsense, dominant, double readership