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Elizabeth Sewell

Lewis Carroll: Voices from France

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During a 1997 LCS field trip to Paris, many English-speaking members were astounded to discover how seriously Lewis Carroll's work has been taken in France since the days of the Surrealists, and how his children's books have been more or less confiscated by adult scholars, to the point that very few French parents would consider offering non-Disney versions of the stories to kids under the age of twelve at least – when, of course, they feel they have outgrown such silly tales. Carroll's inclusion in André Breton's *Anthologie de l'Humour Noir*, Louis Aragon's paper about him in the third issue of *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* and first ever French translation of *The Hunting of the Snark* as *La Chasse au Snark: une agonie en cinq crises* for Nancy Cunard's Hours Press, Max Ernst's illustrations for *La Logique sans peine* (a partial translation of *Symbolic Logic: Part 1* by Jean Gattegno) and Salvador Dali's for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the numerous literature courses taught on his work in French universities, the inscription of *Wonderland* on the syllabus of the most intellectually demanding competitive exam to recruit high level French secondary school teachers of English (the *agrégation d'anglais*) in both 1966 and 1995, all point to a relocation of the books from the nursery to the highbrows' writing-desk.

Almost all the worldwide famous French scholars in the fields of philosophy, literary criticism, psychoanalytical studies, logics, semiotics or general linguistics whose names you may ever have heard or read have devoted at least a paper, more often than not a book or two, and sometimes a continuous stream of research throughout their

Nina Demurova

Kartinki i razgovory. Besedy o Lyuise Kerrolle
(*Pictures and Conversations. Talks about Lewis Carroll*).
St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2008.

This marvellous volume, titled *Pictures and Conversations* (below, *P&C*) has been carefully collected by Nina Demurova over many years. She is to be greatly thanked for this feast of a book – a fabulous forum of interviews and essays on Russian translations and retellings of Carroll's works, on many people who created the Russian Carrolliana, on illustrations, books, plays, films, operas, and games. All participants, rank and age notwithstanding, were brought together by their passion for Lewis Carroll.

Demurova's volume has an incredible number of excellent *pictures* (I counted 207 illustrations, most in color) and rich *conversations*: forty people provided materials and interviews for this volume. A luxurious edition, glossy paper, hard cover with gold lettering – one wants to touch and handle this book all the time. Great thanks go to everybody who helped to create it: the editor, Irina Stoma; the chief artist, Maria Zakharenkova; and the entire personnel of Vita Nova publishers.

The *P&C* volume includes conversations with literary scholars Alexandra Borisenko and Dmitri Urnov, with translators of Carroll's prose and verse such as a great poet and philologist Olga Sedakova, mathematicians Yuli Danilov and Mikhail Matveev, a philologist and a "reteller" Alexander Florya, a children's writer Leonid Yakhnin, a translator of the classical English poetry Grigory Kruzhkov, and many others.

Their work was not easy. However, as a psychologist and teacher Boris Bim-Bad observes in *P&C*, the great Englishman found in Russia "excellent, first-class translators, who could adequately match Carroll's most difficult paradoxical texts. Not every English writer was as fortunate as Lewis Carroll." Mikhail Matveev says (and I agree completely): "One is inclined to translate Carroll. He challenges and teases his potential translators with complexity of the task, as if he suggests matching your skill against his. Carroll's popularity therefore is an issue somewhat similar to the popularity of *perpetuum mobile* or Fermat's Theorem."

In no other country besides his native England, writes Demurova, does Carroll enjoy such interest as in Russia. A dozen Russian translations of both *Alice* books and about the same number of *Snarks*

exist today. For decades now, Carroll's exquisite, learned wordplay and complex paradoxes have been household items in Russia, their escapist grotesque interpreted for us by Demurova, Zakhoder, Shcherbakov, and many other translators and retellers.

A very interesting essay is contributed by Georgi Gokieli, a recent (1997) translator of *Wonderland* into Georgian – a literary and linguistic environment completely different from Russian. The absurd natural to English folklore, says Gokieli, is completely or almost alien to the Georgian (I would add the same about Russian). The language itself puts rigid limitations on the translation:

Georgian words are usually very long, sentences become heavy ... syntax is very different from Indo-European languages, thus the original's long sentences have to be broken into short ones. We have no 'he' and 'she', and only one singular pronoun for all three genders, so we revert to names or write 'the girl said', 'the old man replied'.

One of the most interesting *P&C* contributors is the mathematician, translator and polymath Yuli Danilov (1936–2003), who translated Carroll's mathematical books (*A Tangled Tale*, *Symbolic Logic*, etc.), famously illustrated by Yuri Vashchenko. Danilov wrote:

The events taking place in Carroll's world are especially vivid, 'palpable', and 'material' since they happen ... following a very strict logic, taken to the absurd ... breaking tight prescribed boundaries. Carroll helps his reader, and invites or provokes his commentators to a living perception of the real world that effervesces around us, looking at it in a cleverly bent mirror of the absurd – to such a perception as children have who are just entering this world.

Here is "practical advice" by Yuli Danilov:

Preparing for any discussion, lesson, lecture, or presentation in any subjects, in any institution of learning, be it a senior kindergarten group, a grade school, a high school, a college, or a university, take any book, brochure or journal edition of Lewis Carroll, and you will find a necessary example. I know this from my own experience, and I must assure you that Lewis Carroll never lets me or anybody down.

Mikhail Matveev, also a mathematician and translator of Carroll, says that "his elegant and fragile logical 'trinkets' catalyse the thought of

the authors of monumental mathematical treatises. One cannot exclude also that *Alice* and *Snark* became even more powerful catalysts for the scientific community.”

“We start our life looking at pictures”, wrote Gennady Kalinovsky (1929–2006), a famous Russian illustrator of *Alice* and other children’s books. The *P&C* book presents a great constellation of very different artists, mainly from Russia, but also from Ukraine, Lithuania, Germany, and Canada. These are: Yelena Bazanova, Yulia Bogatova, Viktoria Fomina, Yulia Gukova, Gennady Kalinovsky, Olga Kiryashova, Alexander Koshkin, Marija Ladigaitė-Vildžiūnienė, Oleg Lipchenko, Alexander Lazarevich, May Miturich, Leonid Tishkov, Dmitry Trubin, Yuri Vashchenko, Tatyana Yanovskaya, Anastasia Zakharova, and others. Many unique illustrations are reproduced from the rich Carrollian collection of A. M. Rushailo (1935–1995).

The *P&C* volume is a mosaic of Carrollian morsels from all walks of art penetrating life. As in a Mad Tea Party, different characters gather here: Xenia Shinkovskaya who makes woolen Cheshire Cats and Vladimir Tseplyaev who carves netsuke Carroll characters out of wood; students engaged in *Alice*-based role games and Pavel Rabin who organized *The Hunting of the Snark* “geopolitical game” across the expanses of Mongolia; Yuri Pogrebnychko who directed a play *The Last Concert of Alice in Wonderland* (2003) and famous animator Andrey Khrzhanovsky who wrote a screenplay for animated film *Your Loving Friend* (1984) based on Carroll’s letters to children (director E. Barinova, artist Yu. Vashchenko).

Carroll forever left his mark on my own literary work and passions, and I was especially honored to contribute for *P&C* volume a small chapter titled “A long journey in search of the Snark”. In 1973, as an 18-year-old student at the Novosibirsk University, I was encouraged by Nina Demurova’s translations and writings to do the unthinkable: translate *The Hunting of the Snark*. I completed the first draft in 1975. Through my youthful stubbornness, I found Demurova’s phone number in Moscow, called her, and was amazed and encouraged by her courtesy and attention. Following her suggestions, I continued to work on the text (it was finished in 1982 but first published only years later, in 2001). Meanwhile, I left Siberia for Turkmenistan to work for many years as a zoologist for national parks. My *Snark* progressed in very exotic environments: in an adobe hut near Kushka (the southernmost town of the Soviet Union) and under the walnuts of Aidere Valley in Kopetdagh Mountains; in stations and airports across

Central Asia where Soviet troops were passing south to Afghanistan. *Snark* (or, to be exact, Boojum) unexpectedly reappeared in my life after we moved to the USA. In 1991–1994, my family and I joined expeditions of our friend, zoologist Gary Polis, in Baja California, Mexico. This part of the Sonora Desert houses *Fouquieria columnaris*, a naked succulent resembling a giant hairy carrot, with hardly any branches or leaves. It was dubbed a Boojum Tree by the English botanist Godfrey Sykes in 1922; when he first saw *Fouquieria* in his spyglass, Sykes allegedly exclaimed: “Ho, ho, a boojum, definitely a boojum!” There is no doubt that I am the only *Snark* translator who saw hundreds of those boojums – and also collected under them hundreds of scorpions to study their DNA “... while strange creepy creatures came out of their dens”!

Demurova’s question “How do you explain Carroll’s popularity in Russia?” was, in my opinion, best answered by Olga Sedakova: “I could only guess: it is that ethereal irrationality, I would say, that dance of meanings that somewhat relieves the perception of the absurd that surrounds us. An everyday Russian absurd is heavy and desperate, it seems to swallow one like a swamp; but here, one finds hidden play. One can play freely with the absurd environment! This is what, as I feel, consoles and pleases our domestic reader.”

Andrey Khrzhanovsky compares Carroll with Bulgakov and Kharmis:

These writers ... offered to our reader the only spiritual space, a space of imagination and fantasy, irony and ridicule that was not occupied by the Soviet power and was out of reach for its propaganda machine ... If one looks for an extreme contrast to such a crystalline imbecilic set of clichés as any directive of the Central Committee of CPSU, one of the best at the opposite pole would surely be Lewis Carroll.

Yuri Vashchenko notes:

what in Europe and England is a subject of nonsense; in Russia more often than not is a subject of reality ... In Russia, we have very definite relationships with nonsense: sometimes it becomes so real it is not nonsense anymore. This murky rocking, just like Humpty-Dumpty, like rocking on a chair – a bit this way, and you are sitting in a dense, legitimate reality, nothing unusual. But a bit that way, and it is lunatic’s raving, you break your neck, and there is no rocking anymore.

Oleg Lipchenko explains:

Carroll and his Alice were among that little that was available for us from the 'free world', the world of free thought. *Alice* is not dissident literature but maybe it is a different order of dissent ... The entire trip is improvised; all encounters are unexpected and not defined by previous events. It is that NON-following fairy-tale rules, its standard structures, which is the most attractive, the most delightful. It is a feeling of freedom. As in a dream.

One after another, Demurova's interviewees declare and agree: Carroll indeed wrote about our life, about our, Soviet absurd, about the totalitarian (should I add postmodernist as well) neglect for truth and logic. We in the USSR took our cues from his dry humour, gentle paradoxes, and existential despair. As a literary scholar and translator Evgeny Vitkovsky wrote recently, "We were told we live in Wonderland, while in reality we lived Behind the Looking Glass."

Victor Fet

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[Note: A longer version of this review, in Russian, appeared in the literary quarterly *Mosti* (*The Bridges*), Frankfurt, Germany]
