

# AN INTERVIEW WITH SALVADOR OLIVA: TRANSLATING *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* INTO CATALAN

SÍLVIA MAS

University of Birmingham

Salvador Oliva (Banyoles, 1942) is the author of literary works such as *Terres perdudes* (1981), *Marees del desig* (1983), *El somriure del tigre* (1986) and *Retalls de sastre* (1988). He has also published a substantial number of articles on linguistics, literary criticism, as well as *Introducció a la mètrica* (1988) and *La mètrica i el ritme de la prosa* (1992). Salvador Oliva's translations into Catalan include the complete works of William Shakespeare, *Vint-i-set poemes* by W. H. Auden (1994), *El cas misteriós del Dr. Jekyll i Mr. Hyde* (1996) and *Alicia al país de les meravelles* (1996). He is co-author, with Angela Buxton, of the *Diccionari Anglès-Català* (1983) and the *Diccionari Català-Anglès* (1986). Oliva is currently professor of Catalan Studies at the University of Girona.

There are three translations of *Alice in Wonderland* into Catalan. The first one was done by the *Noucentista* poet Josep Carner in 1927 with

illustrations by Lola Anglada. This version has had several editions until Salvador Oliva's translation in 1996. In the 80s Víctor Compta produced a version of Carroll's literary work. However, this translation has gone virtually unnoticed by the Catalan critics and readers. This has not been the case with Oliva's. Since its publication in 1996, his version of *Alice in Wonderland* has aroused an interesting controversy in the Catalan cultural world. Oliva's innovation with respect to Carner's first translation lies in two aspects: firstly, the use of a more contemporary and simple language which makes the text more accessible to all kinds of public; secondly, the translator's preference for a free version of Carroll's work, namely the attempt to create a similar effect and tone to that found in the original English text rather than to seek a literal translation. This innovative approach and a few omissions, according to Oliva, due to the lack of revision and time, have resulted into some negative critical reviews. All the same, Oliva's version has been extremely well received and valued: *Alicia al país de les meravelles*, published by Editorial Empúries in 1996, was awarded the International Prize for Translation the following year, and it was republished shortly after the first edition. Finally, Oliva suggests a different approach to a legitimate translation of one of the classical texts of English literature.

Silvia Mas— *What is your opinion of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland? Would you compare it to any other work by the English author?*

Salvador Oliva— I certainly think that it is Carroll's best literary work. *Through the Looking-Glass* is also brilliant and it would have been his most outstanding narrative, had he not already written *Alice in Wonderland*.

SM— *Which is the ideal audience for Carroll's Alice in Wonderland?*

SO— Both an adult and a young public. That is actually one of the most attractive features of the work. I personally find Alice's growing up and then becoming smaller again extremely interesting. This has been interpreted from the psychoanalytical approach. Finally, I would also point out Carroll's rich imagination.

SM— *Alice in Wonderland is a fictional text which allows a young reader to enjoy it and remain within a given reading level. And yet, it allows an adult reader to see more than just a set of adventures and to decode many linguistic puns and burlesque passages.*

SO— Indeed. That is precisely what great literary works do. Shakespeare offers a similar range of possibilities.

SM— *We have agreed that Alice in Wonderland is without doubt a magnificent literary work. Let us move a step further on. Why did you decide to translate Carroll's masterpiece into Catalan given the fact that two previous translations had already been done?*

SO— Are there really two?

SM— *Yes. One done by Josep Carner and another by Víctor Comta.*

SO— Yes, you are right. Víctor Comta's translation is rather weak and I immediately put it aside. In fact, I had forgotten it existed. With regard to your question, I should be honest: the reason for this translation was a commission by the publishing house.

SM— *Have you considered translating Through the Looking-Glass or has the editor already asked you in this respect?*

SO— I would love to, but there are so many works I would like to translate. For instance, Jane Austen's works. The problem is that I am too busy. Besides, I believe there already exists a translation of *Through the Looking-Glass*.

SM— *When translating, I suppose you have in mind the public at which the literary work is being aimed. Did you choose a literal translation or did you have a specific audience in mind when translating Alice in Wonderland?*

SO— Firstly, we should accept that the linguistic puns have to be translated. Secondly, and with regard to the issue of the reception levels, I have the following theory: if you translate properly, the resulting text should include all the possible readings, provided you know how to read in the first place. For example, most of the names in Carroll's text are significant: Dodo is the name chosen to describe a character who keeps stammering. However, the meaning of these names is not necessarily known to the English audience. So, achieving the right translation is difficult. One cannot directly translate the proper names and be sure that the potential meaning has been conveyed. Then, apart from proper names, there is the problem of translating the puns in the text. For instance, let us mention the chapter in which the characters are talking about school subjects. Of course, things like that have to be translated...

SM— *Then, would the word play be the most difficult element in translating Lewis Carroll's literary work?*

SO— No. Personally, I find the tone of the text to be the most difficult aspect. The whole process of translating is a matter of tone: you must sing in tune with the original text. It is like playing a given instrument and you have to play the same musical score. And this is complicated. It is attained after constantly rereading and polishing what you have already translated.

SM— *Did you consider the possibility of having a footnote for any difficult puns found in the original?*

SO— No. That would be like accepting defeat.

SM— *And how about footnotes about the context which might clarify the meaning or bring unknown data to the reader?*

SO— This is different from footnotes which possibly clarify linguistic puns. In this case, the footnote would bring cultural information which might not be available to contemporary English readers.

SM— *So you would only have a footnote when it is a matter of clarifying data.*

SO— I think my translation is quite close to the original version in this respect. I had to insert additional footnotes because, obviously, English readers may have more background knowledge of their literary tradition than a Catalan reader.

SM— *So do you see the process of translation as the result of your own writing? Do you create new puns?*

SO- I think so. You have to replace the original pun with a new one.

SM— *As for the poems in Carroll's famous work, I have noticed that, in your translation, you've been able to keep the rhyme or the same metrical structure. In the event of having to sacrifice the meaning in favour of rhyme, which do you think should prevail?*

SO— My initial approach is that I always substitute. That is to say, if what is important in a poem is its rhyme, then I would substitute the content. For example, there is a famous English epitaph which says: "When I am dead I hope it makes you sad, his sins were *scarlet* but his books were *read*". We find a pun in the second sentence —his books were *read*, which is pronounced like the colour *red*. Besides, the use of the adjective *scarlet* may also mean *awfully bad sins*. All these puns are impossible to translate into the Catalan language, because the word *scarlet* does not have two possible meanings. And yet, because I think that everything can be rendered in translation, I suggested the following: "Aquí reposa un escriptor de novel·les vitals, aconseguí la inspiració dels seus pecats mortals" [Here lies a writer of vital novels, he got his inspiration from his mortal sins]. Thus you keep the rhyme, which is what triggers the imagination, and you substitute the word play for a similar one. It is basically a different suggestion. Maybe the aim lies in providing the reader of the translation with a similar stimulus to the one available to the reader of the original version.

SM— *So you are aiming at creating a similar effect.*

SO— Exactly. Sometimes the content itself is not so important because it is not referential language. Therefore, it can always be replaced. The fundamental aspect for me is the rhyme. Without rhyme, the poem of *Father William* would lose all its effect. The translator has to alter the meaning. It is unavoidable.

SM— *You seem to have disregarded the possibility of including the original text which is parodied, even in a Catalan translation. For instance, Martin Gardner's edition of Lewis Carroll's work includes the texts which are being burlesqued.*

SO— I would have liked to do that but I did not have the time. Besides, that was not the sort of edition the publishing house was interested in.

SM— *I think it could be very useful, especially in those passages in which it is not clear which poems or previous works are being subverted.*

SO— I could not agree more. Usually Lewis Carroll parodies bad texts which were popular during his age. However, after some time, those texts have been forgotten because of their lack of literary value.

SM— *At any rate, in some modern English editions of Alice in Wonderland, they do have those old poems as part of the appendix.*

SO— That is excellent. I think there should be a children's edition of Lewis Carroll's masterpiece and another one for scholars and people interested in a more accurate reading. The problem is that the publisher would refuse this latter option in the light of two facts: firstly, a lot of people would read the Spanish translation and secondly, such an edition would turn out to be much more expensive. Besides, since those works are often bought for young readers, too many footnotes do not make the text attractive and as a consequence, they do not sell well.

SM— *Another element which I would like to comment on is the use of italics. Josep Carner, in his translation, keeps the italics from the original version. What was your criterion for not doing so?*

SO— In English, as you know, the use of italics implies focalization. In Catalan that is not possible. We split up sentences to get the same effect. So, in the most important passages, I used this procedure, namely dividing long sentences, but trying not to be too abusive. Too much splitting up may then affect the tone of the text. And I am very concerned with the tone. For me the tone gets absolute priority. In other occasions, the use of italics also indicates emphasis to the person who is reading the text aloud, like the parents to their child. But, generally speaking, a good reader would do that well anyway.

SM— *Going back to the issue of the text footnotes, so far we have talked about puns which must be substituted and poems being mocked. But what happens when there is a lack of a cultural referent? For example, the sentence "A cat may look at a king" in chapter 8. According to Martin Gardner's edition, this is a well-known English proverb and if we are aware of its meaning, the reading is enriched as*

*we understand Alice's subsequent answer: "I've read that in some book, but I don't remember where".*

SO- It is certainly true. A footnote would be very useful in this passage because it is along the lines of the parody. I will take that into account for the next edition, as well as other corrections to which some people have drawn my attention or which I have found for myself.

SM— *There is another interesting passage in Carroll's work: the discussion on the treacle-well. It is related to the following argument: if the three girls were in the treacle-well, how could they draw the treacle out of it? The problem lies in how to translate the word well which has two possible meanings in English. Whichever the choice is in the translation, the resulting text loses one of them.*

SO— Yes. But the most natural choice in Catalan would be "ben endins" (really in). We would not say "pou endins" (in the water-well). That would be too artificial. The truth is that in the translation process there is always some erosion.

SM— *Another similar case is the phrase "much of a muchness" which appears during the famous mad tea-party. A Spanish version offers the translation "más de lo mismo", a choice which keeps both the meaning and the ludic element of words beginning with the letter m. Instead, your version shows a different suggestion: "moltíssim de massa".*

SO— Yes. But don't you think it might have an ambiguous meaning? In any event, I will write that down because the Catalan translation "més o menys el mateix" also begins with *m* and it is actually closer to the original meaning.

SM— *What is your opinion of Josep Carner's translation of Alice in Wonderland?*

SO— I consider myself a very Carnerian person and I took considerable account of his version when I was translating. But although I think it is a wonderful version, my opinion is that it is of not much use nowadays because of the situation of the Catalan language during Carner's period. It is a type of language which can be read by an adult but proves inadequate for a young readership.

SM— *In fact, Carner's version does not keep John Tenniel's illustrations but uses those done by Lola Anglada. And they are not always parallel to Tenniel's. Lola Anglada adds some which might not be so appropriate.*

SO— Certainly. The other issue is that Tenniel is a brilliant illustrator, second to none.

SM— *One of the problems of Anglada's pictures is sometimes the use of a Catalan context: a typical Catalan rural house, for instance.*

SO— Yes, but that illuminates a general tendency of the translators in Catalonia. The famous Catalan version of James Joyce's *Ulysses* shows the picture of a group of old women having some bread with tomato and reading "Fotogramas", a contemporary cinema magazine.

SM— *If things are taken to this extreme, the process of translation might suppose the changing of places, names and traditions which appear in the original version. Then we would only be aware that we are actually reading a foreign literary work by the cover of the book.*

SO— Exactly. You are allowed to produce an adaptation of a given work, but then it should be stated that it is so. Translating is quite another thing.

SM— *Apart from Josep Carner's version, which other translations did you take into account?*

SO— Three Spanish versions and then a couple of French.

SM— *In the event of a difficult passage, do you check other versions and consider their suggestions?*

SO— Not immediately. First I try to translate the passage myself because I might think other versions are also valid but they imply a different tone. Once I have translated a given chapter, then I read other versions. If I realise there is an option I prefer and which interprets the text much better than my translation, then I decide to take it.

SM— *I guess the response to your Catalan version of Alice in Wonderland has been very positive as you have been given the International Prize for Translation this year, precisely because of this book.*

SO— Yes. However, several articles have appeared in recent issues of the weekly magazine *El Temps*...

SM— *Yes, I noticed that.*

SO—I admit there are some valid comments about my translation. But most of them deal with minor and ridiculous details with which I do not agree at all. I translated Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* fairly quickly and I obviously overlooked some details, but Ripoll's remarks in *El Temps* are often irrelevant.

SM— *Apart from this critical response, do you know of any other reactions to your translation?*

SO— Yes. The Catalan newspaper *Avui* published some reviews which spoke highly of it. Some of the things mentioned in *El Temps* are completely wrong from my point of view. As I said, I give much importance to the tone. If a literal translation does not sound good enough, I change it so as to get it right in the second language. Some critics do not really care for such an approach.

SM— *Translation is a big issue and it certainly becomes more difficult and controversial in the case of a masterpiece like Alice in Wonderland. We could carry on this discussion for hours. But I am afraid we have to leave it here. Thank you very much for your collaboration and extremely interesting comments.*

SO— It has been a pleasure, indeed.