

BETWEEN CRATYLISM AND POSITIVISM: THE OLD POEM AND WHAT ALICE FOUND THERE

AMADEU VIANA

aviana@filcat.udl.es

Universitat de Lleida

Resum. Entre cratilisme i positivisme: l'antic poema i tot allò que Àlicia hi va trobar. En aquest article em referiré molt sumàriament a la filologia del dinou, mirant de relacionar-la amb tot el joc de paraules en Lewis Carrol, per tal d'establir-hi una trama correcta de (dis)continuïtats. El meu objectiu és considerar el Jabberwocky de Humpty Dumpty en el context de la feina i les descobertes de la moderna filologia. F. A. Wolf i J. Grimm condensen bona cosa dels experiments radicals i les troballes que tingueren lloc en aquells moments, que podríem contrastar amb les aventures textuales d'Àlicia a l'altra banda de l'espill. Els llibres de l'altra banda necessiten intèrprets i cerquen la versió correcta, original, de la mateixa manera que la interpretació dels mots depèn d'un mètode fiable. Segurament Lewis Carroll com a jove filòleg era capaç de jugar bé amb aquelles troballes, entre un món que s'acabava i un altre que començava.

Paraules clau: Cratilisme, positivisme, Lewis Carroll, filologia moderna, segle dinou, jocs de paraules.

Abstract. In this paper I shall refer summarily to nineteenth century philology in an attempt to relate it with the wordplay found in the works of Lewis Carroll in order to establish a correct range of (dis)continuities. My aim is to consider the Jabberwocky of Humpty Dumpty within the context of modern philological studies and discoveries. F. A. Wolf and J. Grimm condense a good part of the radical experiments and findings that occurred at that time which can now be contrasted with the textualized adventures of Alice on the other side of the mirror. The looking-glass books need interpreters and seek their correct, original versions just as the interpretation of the words depends on a trustworthy methodology. Surely, as a young philologist, Lewis Carroll was well able to play with those findings, between the world that was ending and that which had just begun.

Key words: Cratylism, positivism, Lewis Carroll, modern philology, nineteenth century, wordplay.

1 Objectius

In the beginning was the pun, said Beckett (Redfern 1984:2). And the pun went across our titles and epigraphs and flooded our texts with references. The pun always needs to sink its roots into a dense network of tacit knowledge, without which it does not subsist. We are surrounded by tradition.

I am going to refer very summarily here to a fraction of this tradition, going back to nineteenth century philology. I will mainly emphasise discontinuities, as they indissolubly comprise the plot of facts. Modern linguistics usually appears quite proud of its scientific independence, even arguing a certain distance with respect to its historical origins, if not to historical investigation. But linguistics also sinks its roots in a dense network of traditions dating from the preceding century. If we looked for them in the right way, we would find a strange mixture of vagueness in the classifications, open doubts, isolated nonsense and some hits. In any case, there are many quite interesting aspects to decipher (cf. Droixhe 1978).

Carroll's Alices (Carroll 1865; Carroll 1872) were written in the second half of the last century, when, to clinch things, new philology and linguistic ideas were able to start afresh. To speak of that atmosphere implies considering, at least, two kinds of problems. On the one hand, the new experts in classical philology, able to rescue Latin and Greek studies from the impasse they had found themselves in by focussing a new light on them. On the other hand, those that, focussing on their own vernacular, for the first time charted ancient rhapsodies and popular, old songs, and had to come to terms with and define their national histories. Both problems are nearly correlative. My personal selection is centred in Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) and Jakob Grimm (1785-1863), both of whom condense radical experiments with *Madame Philologie* and, in my opinion, the textual adventures of Alice in the mirror, which are evident from the beginning of the work.

In 1865 classical studies were still important enough to provoke satire. Remember that in chapter nine of the first Alice, the Mock Turtle explained that he never went to the classical master, who taught Laughing and Grief, as "they used to say", this well-known old couple. In 1874, Carroll published his own dialogue about the ancient and the modern, *The Vision of Three T's* (cf. Carroll 1874), where he reminded us that German was the language of science, that scientific questions had to be formulated in this language, and that in science one even cleared one's throat in a German accent. In the third episode of the dialogue, however, the grammar teacher would argue in Latin and in favour of Latin, entering the scene with a well-known German

dictionary. *The Vision of Three T's* happens to be an indirect mirror on the role of languages and the discussions related to them.

My aim now is to compare the episode of Humpty-Dumpty (and in a broader sense the textual presence of the *Jabberwocky*, cf. Carroll 1872) within the context of the discoveries of modern philology. In one curious sense, the Wolf-Grimm programme defies the non-rationalistic philology encouraged by Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth century philosopher, whose *Scienza Nuova* brought together word play and meaning, history and philology, grammar and emotion. Vico's original theories, with which Carroll was unfamiliar, were grounded on the strong conviction of a fruitful relationship between form and meaning. Vico thought that word formation should lead us into ancient problems of knowledge, that adjacency was the right rule for deciphering related meanings and producing new ones. No formal method was invoked, as there was none. A wise tolerance for analogy was welcomed, given that philological devices, considered in their relationship to philosophy, were still rather unsophisticated. Vico's work didn't spread very far in Europe, but the latent spirit of his wispy philology was quite common (cf. Vico 1744).

If Max Müller was Carroll's corresponding author in the nineteenth century, Wolf and Grimm were his translators into a formal programme, as the century went by. These two different sides of the research cannot be forgotten. Friedrich August Wolf was the main representative of *Altertumwissenschaft*, "the knowledge of human nature in antiquity" as the term is usually rendered. He arrived in Halle in 1783, and by 1807 had become the dominant scholar in north Germany. In 1782 he published Plato's *Cratylus*; in Halle he would form a team of teachers with solid scientific backgrounds and he later become a member of the Academy of Sciences of Berlin. He also published Lucian, Cicero and Horace, and was the author of several studies on classical tradition. His *Darstellung der Altertumwissenschaft* (1807) was a manifesto in favour of classical studies, inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt's thesis. As Grafton 1991:217 pointed out, Wolf "could read literary documents historically, in the light of the situation, needs, and values of their original audience. Above all, he could follow the evolution of the Greek spirit, which was faithfully reflected in each period by language, art, and social and political life. (...) True, no modern man could know everything about the Greeks. But a serious effort to make their world and culture one's own would ennoble the mind and soul". The *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) were Wolf's major textual teaching. As is known, it was argued that Homer could not have written both his classical poems, because the Greeks of his day were illiterate.

A more factual, scrupulous textual history was needed henceforth, and, as Grafton 1991:242 has pointed out, this new critical philology began with Wolf himself: “Newcomers to German philology, like the American George Bancroft, were told to master ‘Wolf & yet Wolf & yet Wolf’. The *Prolegomena* were reprinted several times in the nineteenth century so that students could have direct access to them. Like some other classics of German scholarship –F. Schlegel’s *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) is another case in point– Wolf’s work was seldom criticised in detail. Even those who denied the novelty of his general thesis applauded the rigour and originality of his technical work.”

The other side of the programme shares at least these last words with the first side: the approval of the rigour and originality of the technical work. If Wolf opened the door to textual positivism in literary studies, Grimm did the same for linguistic research, with his *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819). The break between literary research and linguistic concerns was an unexpected result of these new trends. A second rendering of Grimm’s grammar, in 1882, took advantage of Franz Bopp’s *Vergleichende Grammatik*, published in different editions between 1833 and 1861, and included his famous insights into morphophonetic rules, proving their explanatory role in fifteen linguistic varieties (cf. Varvaro 1988). These dates help us to understand the standard academic scene concerning textual and linguistic problems (for a relevant comparison, cf. Timpanaro 1981:81–103). Obviously, the great figures of von Humboldt and Schlegel were in the background. But a new formal method was born and ready to be applied in very different linguistic fields. August Friedrich Pott succeeded in verifying its Indo-European roots in his *Etymologische Forschungen* (1833-1836), virtually freeing the method from any specific linguistic structure. The rest of the story is probably well known. Formal rules were able to explain the constraints we meet in ordinary speech. The degree of irregularity and the expanse of oral habits to be admitted in the theory varied from author to author and from school to school. But, “du meme coup”, uncontrolled analogies were drastically suppressed. The method certified the rightness of etymology and separated popular equivoques. Vico’s ancient and emotive associations could be forgotten, even if they carried serious meanings. Contextual meaning was another dimension that had to be put aside: scholarly texts were filled with non-humorous word play, grounded in a sound basis, as Carroll would have said.

Grimm was principally a prestigious librarian of the Royal Library who applied himself to old German poetry. The first volume of his folk tales appeared in Berlin in 1812. The two following works were published with his

brother Wilhelm, who was interested in old sagas. Towards 1815 he began to study the Slavic languages, and that year he published his *Silva de romanices viejos* in Vienna. His German grammar was followed by a *Deutsche Mytologie* in 1878. All this work opened the door for Friedrich Diez and his *Grammatik der romanischen Sprachen* (1838-1843) which appeared in a richer French version in 1876. Romantic linguistics had become romance linguistics, plainly following the design of German researchers. *Die Poesie der Troubadours* (1826) by Diez initiated mediaeval studies, waking the desire to rescue forgotten ballads and put them down in written form. I have not mentioned Ossian, the Celtic Homer, and the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), in part because it was an episode much closer to Carroll's environment, and in part because the sign of Homer should lead us to Wolf's *Prolegomena*. But if I am mainly interested in the way true philology mediates in our understanding of Carroll, this is another chapter of the same story. Surely, forgotten ballads are inescapably linked to invented records, and these contrasts have always been an essential part of philological enquiry. My question then is the very presence of a paradigm that forces so much interpretation and helps to situate Carroll in the linguistic debate.

This is how looking-glass books are: texts that call for interpreters, that search their right, original version, even inverting the alphabet, the simplest device of philological construction. Note that the original version of the *Jabberwocky* cannot be read as it is: it can only be read through the major metaphorical device in the book, the mirror that mediates in the interpretation. Alice guessed it, and thus she used the mirror as a tool, making what she thought as the ordinary reading of the text possible. But here she failed again. It was a text that begged for an interpreter. The problem was delayed, though she realised perfectly well that it was an old ballad that brought her familiar echoes.

This was the first part of the episode. Therefore, the main chess-playing plan of *Through the Looking Glass* was intermingled with textual problems, like rescuing old ballads and giving coherent versions to them. Who was to do it? Humpty-Dumpty was particularly well placed to do so, not because of his odd manners, but because of his mastery of language. He was able to justify, even outwit the tale, the Carrollian sense of pun and wit in a serious vein. He was able to ground and control any linguistic relationship that Alice could find in her journey, offering security and reasoning. In one sense, Humpty-Dumpty represents a rhetorical model, in a period when one was lacking. I am talking of Humpty-Dumpty as a serious interpreter in as far as he did not refuse to face new linguistic problems, exactly like his academic

contemporaries. His ungrounded optimism was shared by the new paradigm. Obviously, it was not rhetorics in the classical sense of the word, but a kind of new and secure approach to solving empirical questions. To be sure, his bad manners were to impress Alice, but that was another discourse entirely. If the scene were to be divided into two different sections, academic discussion and polite behaviour, Alice's silences would win over impolite answers. We will say more in a moment about the winners of academic discussions.

Humpty-Dumpty has a deep trust in his method: "impenetrability", which is to say, "I am the right person to understand this utterance; no one would do it better than me". What kind of method are we talking about? We are talking about the birth of specialists, people who can manage all verbs, adjectives and nouns, each one in their temper. The words are paid for that, which is to say, they will lose their proper meaning in order to pass the philological analysis. Humpty-Dumpty's philology, like his academic counterpart, applies both to popular songs and ancient poems, all the same. And again, like his academic counterpart, it will be difficult to determine who is a trickster and who is doing serious work.

Certainly, this is a real rhetorical problem, I mean, the search for a method to find out who is tricking and who is not. This should be our main problem, and the method should be the main argument under scrutiny. The development of philological sciences implies the growth of a method in Gadamer's sense. Gadamer 1975 can help us to understand how method works and how truth confronts it, like Alice, the true heroine of the story, confronts Humpty-Dumpty's definitions. Her name is a clue for us. Because the problem is not whether Humpty-Dumpty masters his art (a problem to be solved technically, according to accepted practices), but who is making those explanations credible and how he is doing it. This answer lies outside the method. It would show the sense of Gadamer's truth, that fits Carroll's Alice rather well. That's why it is so difficult to know who wins an academic discussion. Words are inside texts, and texts come from human experience, and Alice will not renounce this link in favour of personal meaning.

The remaining problem, then, is how Humpty-Dumpty's style fits well-established etymologies and standard practices. We have talked of Grimm's rules and constraints, that should be of no use to Carroll because he was mainly thinking about word associations. But this is the question: if and why Grimm's *rules and constraints* should be more explanatory categories than *word association*. Carroll was following (in parodical style) Vico's insight into word relationships. Vico believed that word relationships, including their historical dimension, were a clue to meaning. Motivation is the word

for that assumption. All philological tradition before this nineteenth century turn, agrees on motivation as a clue to establishing meaningful relationships. Humpty-Dumpty was applying it to a border case, to hard stuff (as he calls it), but his method works quite well. As far as association is concerned, it was the Socratic method as it was displayed in the *Cratylus*, even with the same irony. Vico took this method further in order to apply it to historical research. In Vico's practices, word speculation and right etymology were sometimes indistinguishable. Vico was a serious scholar who should have rejected word play as a pastime. Humpty-Dumpty is working from the same thesis, and the difficulty of an ancient rhapsody stimulates him. If Carroll was a beginner in modern philology, he could have had doubts about how to combine old and new skills. More philology should have produced a more subtle system of detection.

As we have said, both sides of the new paradigm were relevant to the discussion. Historical proofs validated texts. Etymologies were assessed in ancient, linguistic strata, and in comparative work. Twentieth century linguistics has improved formal and logical approaches and has begun empirical research in contemporary settings. But this new divorce between doctrines comes from Grimm and Wolf's period, even if it shows opposite trends. As we have announced, discontinuities keep the plot running. Carroll can be placed in the story, and his contribution can be assessed beside the large ideological and linguistic controversy.

Humpty-Dumpty has another feature of striking modernity: his confidence in conventions. He is an outright defender of linguistic conventionalism. As we know, for him, words are a by-product of social conventions, of power conventions, if we read the story well. His puns have such a strange effect on Alice because they are presented as pure formalisms, assessing the power of convention. There is no way to take them to their full meaning –well, there will be no way in the future. That is the lesson for Alice, on her way to growing up. Arbitrariness is a modern dream, based on linguistic statements and hard-headed research, and very different from free associations and personal contents. Here we meet Gadamer's work again. Humpty-Dumpty's beliefs include one that words are arbitrarily selected from a shapeless stock, not constructed in order to produce meaning. Another is that social relationships are based on power. If any meaning is produced, he nearly says, it is done on his particular whim. Certainly, this is a perverse sense of arbitrariness that we must put beside other common perversions. Humpty-Dumpty prefers un-birthday presents because one can get more of them. That's glory for him, but it looks very much like a utilitarian doctrine. He also knows

very well how to do subtractions on paper, but he does not realise that the notebook is upside down. The primacy of logical operations over the non-logical, much more everyday, colloquial ones, is another unconvincing trend that keeps spreading in our century. Humpty-Dumpty promotes a rhetoric, challenged only by Alice's fair play in what is probably an unequal struggle. If this was the rhetoric of the times, we should not be surprised that Esperanto and other artificial vernaculars were invented in order to overcome incommunication.

Carroll left us another feature of striking modernity. As he believed that algebra could be used as a new, amusing tool, he also dared to set forth a theory of language in mathematical terms. The *Jabberwocky* handles verbal forms in abstract ways, breaking down the wall between letters and numbers. As a romantic mathematician, he could dream of that pure dialect so much appreciated in our information era, unifying mathematics and syntax. But he put it in verse, inserting his dream in a textual body. His contemporaries were ready to follow contemporary practices, and the *Jabberwocky* was soon translated into Latin and German. In 1872, M.A.A. Vansittart produced the Latin version and Thomas Chatterton, the German one. Another Latin version by one of Carroll's relatives appeared too. Textual histories have always been appreciated in philology.

This was the way the looking-glass poem anchored its roots in its time and context. If Friedrich August Wolf and Jakob Grimm taught us an alternative, more respectful way of approaching texts and verbal analogies, something was also lost with this modern method. Carroll could not have learned it, but his humour showed that he was able to criticise cold manners and abstract indifference. The truths of Alice were not the truths of pure phonetics either. Texts had to count for her. Free analogies should have to be refrained from in the future, but Carroll as a young philologist could experiment the new findings in the balance of two worlds.

References

- [Carroll 1865] L. Carroll. Alice in Wonderland. A. Woollcott, ed., *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll*. Penguin, Harmondsworth (1982), 1865.
- [Carroll 1872] L. Carroll. Through the Looking Glass. A. Woollcott, ed., *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll*. Penguin, Harmondsworth (1982), 1872.

- [Carroll 1874] L. Carroll. The Vision of Three T's. A. Woolcott, ed., *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll*. Penguin, Harmondsworth (1982), 1874.
- [Droixhe 1978] D. Droixhe. *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire*. Droz, Genève, 1978.
- [Gadamer 1975] H. G. Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Continuum, New York, 1975.
- [Grafton 1991] A. Grafton. *Defenders of the Text*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1991.
- [Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983] E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
- [Redfern 1984] W. Redfern. *Puns*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1984.
- [Timpanaro 1981] S. Timpanaro. *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann*. Liviana, Padua, 1981.
- [Varvaro 1988] A. Varvaro. *Historia, problemas y métodos de la lingüística románica*. Sirmio, Barcelona, 1988.
- [Vico 1744] G. Vico. *Scienza Nuova. Opere*. Mondadori, Milan (1990), 1744.