

Book Reviews

Reviews of Fiction and Poetry

Lewis Carroll, *Dee Erläwnisse von Alice em Wundalaund*, trans. Jack Thiessen. Westport: Evertime, 2012. Pp x + 138, with illustrations. Softcover, \$17.04.

On July 4, 1862 Charles Dodgson, mathematics lecturer at Christ Church Oxford, together with Pastor Robinson Duckworth, and three Liddell sisters went on a rowing tour on the Thames River. Ten year-old Alice Liddell together with her thirteen and eight year-old sisters urged Dodgson to tell them a story and thus began the tale that became *Alice in Wonderland*. Dodgson went on to publish the story under the pen name Lewis Carroll in 1865 and it has delighted young and old alike since then.

The first translation of *Alice in Wonderland* was into German in 1869 and since then the story is believed to be second only to the Bible in the number of languages that it has been translated into. Jack Thiessen's translation is the first into Mennonite Low German and it joins a host of translations into minority languages published by Evertime. Thiessen's translation is a remarkable achievement in that that it translates "nonsense" literature from one social context, Victorian England, to the primarily agrarian context of the Low German diaspora of Dutch-North German Mennonites. Thiessen's text preserves and parallels the word play of the original to a remarkable extent, but not without some

compromises. As an experiment in using Plautdietsch as a literary language, the translation is rich and stimulating. If one of the aims of the translation is to produce actual children's literature, Thiessen's translation will likely fall short due to the pressing need to "invent" language that will be unfamiliar to Low German speaking children.

It is important to note that this reviewer is neither a linguist nor scholar of Mennonite Low German and not one who can claim particular knowledge of children's literature. I come to a reading of *Alice em Wundalaund* through an interest in the history of Low German-speaking Mennonites and the fact that my first language was *Plautdietsch*.

Translating *Alice in Wonderland* is a daunting task. As anyone who is conversant in more than one language will readily acknowledge, the structure and morphology of any two languages are never the same or even parallel. In that sense the translation of any text implies compromise. The translator must balance accuracy with trying to render the intended meaning, emotion, or nuance of the original. Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is, however, even more challenging. The story is rife with word play: puns, parodies, personification, unusual metaphors, and verses with allusions to other English poetry, all the while claiming to be a story for children.

Thiessen deals with the challenges of word play by either avoiding the passages altogether by creating alternate text, or by maintaining the playfulness of the original by creating parallel Low German word play. In some cases the difficult puns are simply avoided. See for example:

"Miene Jeschijcht ess lang enn trurijch!" Doabie tjiit see Alice met een Seifza aun. "Lange Jeschijcht! Dann mott dee woah senne!" säd Alice, ... (31-32)

"Mine is a long and a sad tale!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing. "It is a long tail, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the mouse's long tail. (1869 edition, published by Lee and Shepard, 36)

The homophony of "tale" and "tail" cannot be accommodated in the Low German and Thiessen chooses to simply avoid the play on words by leaving it out and inserting a new much simpler construction where Alice notes that a long tale must be true. In the similar case of "axis" and "axes"(65), the former is translated as "axle" and the latter as "axes", which leaves the subsequent dialogue somewhat unreferenced.

There are also instances where Thiessen invents his own word play to parallel that of the original. To parallel Mock Turtle's learning the branches of Arithmetic, namely "Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision," (p 143), Thiessen creates "Zusche, Auftratje, Veväl-

frätunge enn Stehle.” (107) Here he leans on Antonie Zimmerman’s 1869 German translation, a debt he acknowledges in the preface, to create a parallel word play in Low German. When Alice protests, she is told that “uglification” is the opposite of “beautification,” and similarly “Välfräte”, eating too much, the opposite of starving.

Thiessen is at his best when he uses unique Low German expressions to convey the meaning of the original. When the caterpillar takes “not the smallest notice of her or of anything else,” (1896, 58) Thiessen counters with “dee sich nich een bleiwen Donst omm ahr oode sesst wem tjemmad.” (47) Carroll’s “she thought, and rightly too, that very few girls of her age knew the meaning of it all,” (1869, 164) becomes “daut mau weinich tjliene Mädtjess enn ährem ella äwahaupt von soohne Sache eene blausse Ohninj haude.” (120).

Mennonite Low German is a living language that has evolved as it accompanied Mennonite migrations to Russia, Canada, Mexico and South America. Thiessen is generally reluctant to incorporate non-Germanic expressions into the text, although there are a number of examples where he does. One of the more interesting occurs when Carroll’s Dormouse talks of mousetraps, moon, memory and “muchness,” (1869, 109) where Thiessen maintains the alliteration with “Musfaul,” “Mohn,” “Mamma,” and “mucho,” (82) with “mucho” a loan word from the Spanish that is used among Mennonites in Paraguay.

The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland is a challenging story to translate and Thiessen has created a marvelous example of the capabilities of Low German to be more than the language of the everyday, the role it has performed for centuries. Alice, and the other characters, that emerge in the Low German version are as recognizable and genuine as they are to English readers. Unfortunately as most Low German speakers generally do not read the language themselves and do not teach their children to read it, *Alice em Wundalaund* will likely not be a contribution to children’s literature. And even if it was read to children aloud, they would struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary and would largely miss its appeal to the childhood imagination. However, as a piece of Low German literature it is a treasure.

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