

The First French *Snark*

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Apologia

There do not seem to be many works in English—or in French, for that matter—dedicated to Louis Aragon's interest in Lewis Carroll. This paper aims to fill a fraction of this gap by investigating the circumstances in which the Surrealist poet translated The Hunting of the Snark into French in 1928. It is not, however, a complete study of the text nor an extensive enquiry into the trajectory of The Snark in France, since there is only so much one can discuss in an article without turning it into a full-scale monograph. The French Snark, in all of its incarnations, would certainly be worthy of a more complex inspection sustained by a stronger use of existing archives, and one may hope that such work will sooner or later see the light of day. In the meantime, here are a few modest bells to tingle.

Preliminary remarks: Carroll in French, 1869-1931

It bears remembering that Carroll has not always been the popular author that he is on the continent today. If we open a small parenthesis about the situation of his works in France in the late 1920s/early 1930s, we can begin to understand the ripples that *La Chasse au Snark* created in the pool of French Carrolliana at the time. Here is a complete list of the French translations of Carroll's works for the 1869-1931 period:

Year	Text ¹	Translation
1869	AAIW	Trans.: Henri Bué / Ill.: John Tenniel (London: Macmillan) First French edition (second issue in 1870). Sold by Hachette in Paris
1908	AAIW	Trans.: Anonymous / Ill.: Arthur Rackham (Paris: Hachette) Deluxe edition (cheaper reprints in 1909, 1910, and 1913)
1910	AAIW	Trans.: B.H. Gausseron / Ill.: Brinsley Le Fanu (Paris: Larousse) Translation of the Stead abridged edition
1912	AAIW	Trans.: Anonymous / Ill.: Harry Rountree (Paris: Nelson) Abridged translation (reprints in 1913 and 1929)
1929	SNARK	Trans.: Louis Aragon / No illustrations (La Chapelle-Réanville: The Hours Press) First French translation of <i>The Hunting of the Snark</i>
1930	AAIW + TTLG	Trans.: Marie-Madeleine Fayet / Ill.: Jean Hée (Paris: Les Œuvres Représentatives) First combined edition of <i>AAIW</i> and <i>TTLG</i> in French
1930	AAIW	Trans.: / No illustrations (Bruxelles: Nord, Nov. 1930) Translation of Ch. VII ("A Mad Tea-Party") for the Belgian review <i>Nord</i>
1931	AAIW	Trans.: Michel J. Arnaud / Ill.: André Noyer (Paris: Denoël & Steele)
1931	TTLG	Trans.: Paul Gilson / Ill.: Anon. (Paris: Denoël & Steele) First standalone translation of <i>TTLG</i> in French

When in 1928 Louis Aragon first endeavoured to translate *The Hunting of the Snark*, only two never-before-published unabridged translations of any works by Carroll had been put into French; one of them did not seem to catch on because no French reader had asked for it (Bué's 1869 translation)², and one of them was an anony-

mous translation, of which the author's identity is still unknown (Anon.'s 1908 text)³. Only *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had been translated to French, and it would take another two years for *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* to follow suit. As for *The Hunting of the Snark*, if you could not read it in English, then you could not read it at all.

1. "A love that starts in the land of through the looking-glass"

While it can be argued that Aragon's translation of *The Hunting of the Snark* is the product of a labour of love for the genius of Carroll, it is also very much the result of a real-life love story between the French author and Nancy Cunard. It is impossible to tell whether without her there would have been a *Snark* in 1929 at all, but it would certainly have been created under very different circumstances and would likely have resulted in a different final text.

Auxiliary doctor, *Croix de Guerre* recipient, intellectual, poet, Dadaist, Surrealist, communist, Louis Aragon (1897-1982) also happened to be a translator at various periods of his life. While his legacy lives on in France, his works remain relatively rarely studied in English-speaking countries, perhaps, as a 43-year-old dissertation already suggested at the time, because of "his ideology" [Griswold Looney, 1979: i].



Louis Aragon, 1927

Notwithstanding this unfortunate and ancient misalignment with mainstream Anglo-Saxon political creeds, Louis Aragon's texts remain pivotal to whomever is interested not only in Surrealism but also in the curious trajectory of Carroll's works in French.

While researching this paper, the question arose of where and when Aragon had learnt English, as understanding a language is the first prerequisite to translating it. The answer is not quite clear. It is true that like most French pupils, he had to pick a foreign language at school, but his biographers do not seem to know which language exactly; it was either English or German. What we do know is that his favourite aunt, Madeleine Toucas, moved to Amesbury (Wiltshire) after marrying an Englishman and that he stayed with her a couple of times in 1915 and 1918 [Forest, 2015: 69], as well as in the summer of 1921 and again in April 1922 [Idem: 193].

In Paris, his family operated a boarding house (Avenue Carnot) throughout Louis Aragon's childhood, and he later recollected "having loved foreign women when [he] was but a child⁴" [Aragon, 1957: 202], which at least gives us an indication that his life had been cosmopolitan from the early years.

The poet's own mother, Marguerite Toucas-Massillon, became a translator in the 1930s [Forest, 2015: 80], which again leaves us with the impression that the family must have been in close contact with the English language in one way or another. Additionally, Aragon's biographers note his close friendship with the American

author Malcolm Cowley [Daix, 2005: 173; Forest, 2015: 210]. And then, of course, there were the British and American expatriates who came to Paris in droves in the 1920s, amongst them Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, James Joyce—and a mesmerising English heiress who was soon to grab Aragon’s attention.

Nancy Cunard (1896–1965) had relocated to Paris in 1920 after separating from a husband she had married four years earlier, undergoing a hysterectomy, and freeing herself, at least symbolically, from her aristocratic father and socialite mother⁵. She was a writer in her own right, whose poems had been published by Hogarth Press⁶, among others.



Young Louis and his mother

Officially, Louis Aragon and Nancy Cunard met in the early days of 1926. They must have at least caught sight of one another before, as they knew many of the same people and frequented many of the places (Zelli’s, the famous jazz nightclub located on rue Fontaine, where American expatriates and some of the Surrealists were regular customers, Adrienne Monnier’s library, etc.). Depending on the sources, they either met through John Rodker, who happened to be Nancy’s lover at the time [Forest, 2015: 270], or maybe E. E. Cummings [Aragon, 1975: 19]; it is not however of dramatic importance for the rest of the story.

Their relationship was punctuated by frequent travels in France and in Europe. In February 1926, for their first trip together, they chose London. Of this budding romance in the British capital, Aragon would later write:

*Un amour qui commence est le pays d’au-delà le miroir
 Les amants croisent dans la rue un monde bizarre et guindé
 Des messieurs comme auparavant on ne s’en faisait pas idée
 Monstres de tous les acabits sur les bus les bancs les trottoirs*

A love that starts is the land of through the looking-glass
 Lovers pass a bizarre and uptight world in the street
 Gentlemen one could never have imagined before
 Monsters of all sorts on the buses the benches the pavement

*Ah Seigneur Dieu le vent qu’il fait à Londres quand il fait du vent
 Le chapelier perd son chapeau Les dormeurs ont le cauchemar
 C’est le temps qu’il faut pour danser le quadrille avec les homards
 La Tortue en entonne l’air et le Gryphon passe devant exactement le mesurer*

Ah Good God the wind in London when there is wind
 The hatter is losing his hat The sleepers are having the nightmare
 It is the right weather⁷ to dance the quadrille with the lobsters
 The Turtle starts singing and the Gryphon passes having to measure it exactly

*Te souviens-tu de la chanson le ton grave de ses paroles
 Le rythme en est précisément le rythme de la nursery
 Mais j'ai beau comme lui mon vers
 Un jour hélas tu t'en iras Alice avec Lewis Carroll*

Do you remember the song the grave tone of its lyrics
 Its rhythm is exactly the rhythm of the nursery
 But I can try my verse like him all I want
 One day alas you will go away Alice with Lewis Carroll

[Aragon, 1956: 176]

How fascinating it is to see that retrospectively, the relationship seems tied to Lewis Carroll in Aragon's reminiscences. He would later comment, "The long-standing obsession I had with these great poems, still then held to be *nonsense*⁸, nursery rhymes— well, children's books. I was probably the only one in France to consider Carroll as a poet of the same class as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and to say so" [Aragon, 1975: 22]. If true, his recollections of having been a long-time admirer of Carroll when he met Nancy would mean that it was indeed Aragon and not Breton who, among the Surrealists, first read Carroll⁹, contrary to popular belief.

In the spring of 1928, Nane (as Aragon called her) pursued her ambition of operating a small press. To this effect, she bought a farm some sixty miles from Paris in Réanville (Normandy), which she called *Le puits carré* ("the squared well"), and a second-hand 200-year-old Belgian Mathieu hand-press sold to her by Bill Bird¹⁰ together with "a good deal of Caslon Old-Face type, wooden furnishings, and an appreciable amount of paper—a handsome Vergé de Rives" [Cunard, 1969: 6]. Bird



Nancy Cunard at her press

himself visited the farm sometime in April to supervise the re-assembly of the press [idem] and found a veteran of the printing craft, a Mr. Levy, whom Nancy Cunard then hired to teach her how to operate the machinery [ibidem]. Soon, both Louis and Nancy were trying their hand at the "upside-down-inside-out world of printing" [ibid.: 11].

2. "The thing shall be done! Bring me paper and ink"

Why Aragon decided to translate *The Hunting of the Snark* is a little blurry. It is not guaranteed that a deeper exploration of either Aragon or Cunard's archives would inform us any further. What is for sure however is that the text had not been requested or commissioned by anyone; "*Snark* was Aragon's suddenly voiced choice," wrote Cunard [ibid.: 43], though she could not remember the exact circumstances that led him to choose this particular text.

This subverts the process of translation entirely; how often can a translator really choose their next task on their own, without being asked to translate this or that text by their publisher? Nancy Cunard voiced some concerns: yes, Aragon's knowledge of English was good enough, and he certainly could write in French, but would he be able to transfer the spirit of the text, with its "purely English humour" [ibid.: 44] into another language? "You'll see what I shall make of this translation," the poet is alleged to have replied, "I can hear it already in my head" [ibidem].

He spent no more than four or five days on the translation of the text in May or June 1928 [Follet, 1991: 228] at *Le puits carré*, working tirelessly while the carpenters and electricians were still hard at work bringing the farm into the 20th century [Cunard, 1969: 44]. His text was soon finished, and he was eager to see it in print. Notwithstanding the author's vigorous approach to the task, composing a text for printing is not a swift affair. Nancy Cunard estimated an average of one page per day [idem: 45] for a text such as the French *Snark*. The typesetting took time, as did the endless calculations regarding the spaces between verses. Aragon would pull all-nighters in the printery, from which he would emerge in the morning with "two or three different versions of a design" [ibidem: 47] to show Nancy. During the same period, Aragon wrote a series of three poems, "Voyageurs," "Voyage," and "Voyages," two of which draw upon extended seafaring metaphors [Aragon, 1929a, b, and c].

At the end of July or in the beginning of August, the couple left Normandy for Venice, where the existing tensions between the two lovers escalated throughout the summer: money—Aragon's lack thereof, Nancy's abundance—had been a matter of concern for some time for the poet [Forest, 2015: 298] who tried to sell his Braque painting *La Baigneuse* to keep up with Cunard's extravagant lifestyle [Aragon, 1974: 129]. Venice only highlighted the difference in their stations in life: "[F]requenter those people I couldn't stand, the people from old Palaces, those places of festivities where I was not welcome because I was nothing more than the boy whom she dragged along, and who did not belong to their world ..." [idem: 129].



La Baigneuse, Georges Braque, 1908

And then the tragedy (almost) occurred. While Nancy went to seemingly endless parties and practised her philosophy of free love with Henry Crowder, an African-American jazzman, Aragon walked the empty streets of Venice, only coming back to their hotel to an empty bed [idem: 130-131]. In September, his jealousy and general unhappiness got the best of him: one night, he tried to commit suicide, failed, and decided to come home. "Let's spit, shall we, on what we have loved together / Let's spit on love, on our unmade beds," he wrote in Milan on his way back to Paris [Aragon, 1929d] in a poem where he once again conjured up mirrors ("a waltz of mirrors, not a dialogue in sight"), perhaps in a sort of last unconscious reminiscence of Carroll and his periodic appearance in the backdrop of their love affair.

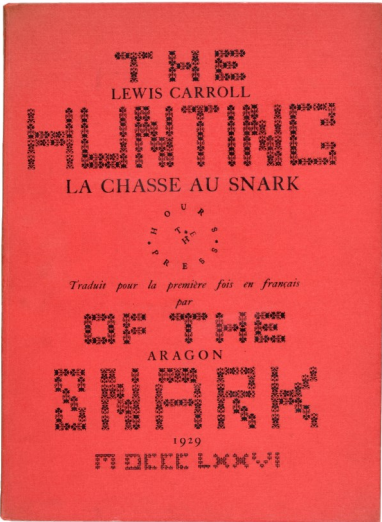
Aragon may or may not have been there for the final printing of his translation at *Le puits carré*, as he occasionally remained in touch with Nane even after he met Elsa Triolet. However, Nancy Cunard later wrote that she “folded the sheets into pages as they came off the new Minerva press” with Henry Crowder [Cunard, 1969: 50] who had come back to Normandy with her.

Let’s close the chapter on Louis Aragon and Nancy Cunard here; him, on the verge of embarking on a new adventure with Elsa, of going to Russia, and of writing some of the most beautiful texts of the French canon, her, already becoming the activist she would remain for the rest of her life, and setting sail for new journeys. Their stories went on, and so did the story of the French *Snark*, whose contents and trajectory we are now going to explore.

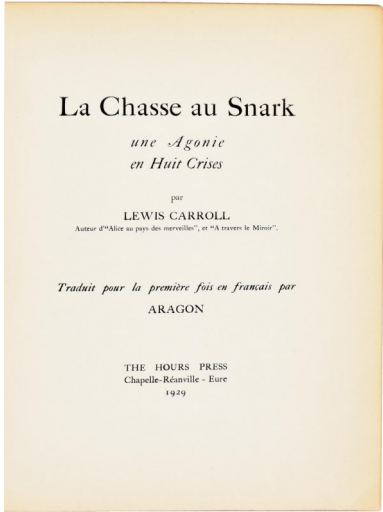
3. “They are merely conventional signs!”

La Chasse au Snark was sold at the price of 644 francs, twice as much as *La grande gaité*, another collection of poems by Aragon, at José Corti’s Parisian bookshop [Corti, 1929] or for 125 francs (one guinea for the British customers) directly from The Hours Press [The Hours Press, undated]. Ten copies were printed on Japan paper, numbered I to V (the five other volumes were not destined to be sold) on top of the 350 copies on Alfa paper, 300 of which were numbered 1-300, and out of which 200 were signed by Aragon, with 50 copies for discretionary use. This brings us to a grand total of 360 copies for this small edition, most of which have survived, though a fair proportion of them are now reserved for the sole enjoyment of a few collectors on the other side of the Atlantic as a cursory search on auction websites informs us; such is the fate of rare Carrolliana.

Like the translation that unfolds in its pages, *La Chasse au Snark* as a material object was designed without much of a commercial concern in mind. With Aragon playing around with possible layouts for the cover [Cunard, 1969: 45] and his incli-



Red paper cover



Title page

nation generally siding towards aesthetics over advertisement, the aspect of the book is yet another example of how this translation was subjected to as little external intervention as possible. Such an approach results in a thin 33-page 12" x 8.75" volume with a rather striking red paper cover on which the English title appears in capital letters made of intricate arabesques, and in French in between the lines of the original title. The cover also bears a mock-stamp of The Hours Press (in actuality, a stamp made by arranging cast metal sorts¹¹ in a circle). The finishing touch in smaller fonts is the mention *traduit pour la première fois en français par Louis Aragon* ("translated to French for the first time by Louis Aragon"). It also shows the year of release both in Roman (1876) and Arabic (1929) numerals. Among the handful of proof sheets that the Bibliothèque nationale de France holds together with their copy of the translation lies a draft of the full-title page where each line is annotated with typographic indications (capitals, small capitals, font size) in Aragon's recognizable handwriting.

The book opens on a translation of Lewis Carroll's preface to *The Hunting of the Snark*. The inscription "to a dear Child" and the entire acrostic to Gertrude Chataway are absent from the French text. Next comes the table of contents, immediately followed by the Ocean Chart. After that, every page that does not contain the first line of a new Fit is decorated with a frieze made of the repetition of the word "SNARK" in capital letters surrounding the page number. For example, the ornament on the second page reads:

SNARK SNARK SNARK SNARK SNARK SN - 2 - RK SNARK SNARK SNARK SNARK SNARK

Other than the Ocean Chart, *La Chasse au Snark* does not contain any illustrations, but on the last page of *Crise Quatrième* (p. 15) appears calligram A¹², which is repeated at the end of *Crise Cinquième* (p. 21) and *Crise Sixième* (p. 25), while *Crise Huitième* (p. 28) ends with calligram B:

S S K

N N R

S N A R K

N R R

S K K

Fig. 1 — Calligram A

S

N

S N A R K

R

K

Fig. 2 — Calligram B

4. "As the word was so puzzling to spell"

La Chasse au Snark is a virtually unique event in the history of contemporary translation in that, as we have noted, it was created in a self-contained environment. Traditionally, and very practically, a literary translation is the product of a collaborative work that involves one translator or more, an editor, a publisher, a typographer, a printer, and a series of book sellers. It is not the case with this text. At the

heart of the process of translation, editing, printing and publishing of the French *Snark* is only one person: Louis Aragon. This self-containedness of the document gives us a remarkable insight into the translation process, which has reached us essentially unfiltered.

As a small point of methodology, it is worth noting that only “binary” mistakes have been considered in the present attempt to produce a partial overview of the translation. Anthony Pym [1992] establishes a distinction between binary and non-binary mistakes, the former being errors where readers or other translators’ reaction would be “that’s wrong!” whereas the latter would be more of a consensus along the lines of “it’s correct, but ... ,” where an external observer might suggest an alternative solution that would improve the style, clarity, or fluency, etc. In a nutshell, and for the sake of this exercise, binary mistakes are errors that objectively conflict with the meaning of the original text (OT) or with the rules of the target language (TL). These mistakes have been spotted thanks to a simple alignment of the translated text (TT) with its original¹³.

In Aragon’s French translation of the *Snark*, we can observe three general types of binary mistakes, sorted into categories we have determined for this paper’s convenience:

- a) *Typos and spelling mistakes*, in the very sense of “typographical errors;” typesetting mistakes where, for example, one cast metal sort is accidentally substituted for another, and spelling errors in the translated text relative to the rules of use of the target language.
- b) *OL/TL lexical deviations*, where a word or an idiomatic expression in the original language has one or more corresponding word or idiomatic expression in the target language but the translation does not use one of these possibilities.
- c) *OT misreadings/misunderstandings*, where the translator fails to understand or misses a grammatical subtlety of the English text.

For the sake of concision, our investigation is limited to two examples per class of binary mistake.

- a) *Typos and spelling mistakes*

L. 2.1¹⁴ The Bellman himself they all praised to the skies—

Quand à l’Homme à la Cloche tous le portaient aux nues

Quant (“as”) is spelled *Quand* (“when”); while the pair is a classic example of homophony that confuses learners of the French language, it is reasonable to assume that a native-speaking author does know the difference and that this mistake is a result of a distraction while setting the cast metal sorts on the printer. This typo was corrected when the text appeared in *L’Œuvre poétique* [1975].

L. 5.55 While strange creepy creatures came out of their dens,

Tandis que d’étranges créatures rempantes sortaient de leurs ombres

Spelling mistake: *rempantes* instead of *rampantes*. Corrected in *L’Œuvre poétique*.

b) *OL/TL lexical deviations*

L. 3.52 And I use it for striking a light

Et je l'emploie à moucher un feu

While the expression *moucher un feu* is rather rare in French (and hardly ever used by anyone but firefighters these days) it is a deviation from *moucher une chandelle* ("to blow a candle") which means "putting out a fire;" if the English Snark is useful to light a fire, its French counterpart only does the opposite.

L. 3.29, 4.29, 5.1, etc. "thimbles" > *gobelets*

Throughout the text, the word "thimbles" is translated by *gobelets* ("tumblers") instead of *dés à coudre* ("thimbles"). This may be due to the graphic and phonological proximity of "thimble" and "tumbler," at least from a French speaker's viewpoint (unless of course the thimble in *The Hunting of the Snark* is a nautical thimble, in which case the French would be well informed to call it *cosse*).

Those OL/TL lexical deviations can be explained by a poetic licence, or a translational choice more than a mistake, but doubts are permissible or even justified.

c) *OT misreadings/misunderstandings*

L. 2.11 So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply

Aurait pu dire l'Homme à la Cloche et l'équipage eut répondu

While an English native speaker would typically understand this statement as the expression of a repeated action in the past, Aragon reads "would" as a conditional auxiliary introducing a hypothetical situation, which leads to a French translation that expresses "would have" instead of "would." The same occurs on L. 2.15 ("So the crew would protest"/*Eut attesté l'équipage*).

L. 4.8 You might have suggested it then?

Vous y avez dû faire allusion

Similar to L. 2.11. The Bellman, annoyed at the Baker for not having disclosed some critical information about the Snark, admonishes him in a rather mild manner, all things considered. "Might have" is to be understood as criticism of a past action; the translation transfers it as a supposition that the explanation must have taken place at some point but that everyone has forgotten about it, thus transferring the responsibility for the potential danger from the Baker to the crew, Bellman included.

On top of those three categories, two special instances of translation have to be noted in that they are not erroneous, but they are rather atypical in the context of this text.

L. 2.24 What on earth was the helmsman to do?

Que diable le timonnier devait-il faire

"Helmsman" is rendered by *timonnier*, which is an appropriate translation except that this specific spelling hasn't been in use since the late 18th century.

ry. Modern French prefers the spelling *timonier* with a single *n*. It is not a typographic error either since Aragon spells it that way twice in his translation, once in the preface (p. i) and in the second Fit (p. 2); it is just an archaism. Changed to *timonier* in *L'Œuvre poétique* [1975].

L. 5.73 “In one moment I’ve seen what has hitherto been

En un mot j’ai vu ce qui jusques ici a été

Jusques, which translates “hitherto,” is somewhat similar to the previous example. It is rather uncommon, but not completely absent from the language, though almost exclusively used in poetry where the final *s* makes the phonetic liaison between the adverb and the next word provided it starts with a vowel; it is the case in the translation of L. 5.73 where *jusques ici* is thus pronounced /zyskæzisi/ instead of the pronunciation of its non-poetic contemporary equivalent *jusqu’ici*, which is sounded /zyskisi/.

Aside from the preface, the French text counts a grand total of two commas and not a single other punctuation mark. The division between two clauses is marked by a capital letter in a fashion that is consistent with Aragon’s other poetical works, like in the following example:

L. 1.5 “Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:

L’endroit rêvé pour un Snark Ça fait deux fois que je le dis

This *Chasse au Snark* is an imperfect text, which makes it all the more special. It is, in many ways, a historical artefact of another era that informs us on the people who made it, much like a broken piece of pottery might teach us about the civilisation that once shaped it. Most translation choices can be directly attributed to the translator without much risk of laying the responsibility where it should not be: without external intervention, the process of transferring a text from one language to another becomes a closed system that is as much a discourse on translation as it is a translation in itself.

5. “A Bandersnatch swiftly drew nigh”

The very chronology of the French translations of Carroll’s books makes for an intriguing pickle regarding the references to “Jabberwocky.” Since *Through the Looking-Glass* had not been translated to French when Aragon undertook his translation of *The Hunting of the Snark* (and would not be for another two years), the instances where the poem was alluded to remained obscure in that they did not remind French readers of anything with which they could have been familiar; there simply was not a frame of reference from which to work, and as a consequence, Aragon had to navigate the stream equipped with nothing but an empty ocean chart.

Within the body of the poem, this does not have very significant repercussions (other than the inevitable “loss” that is bound to occur in the exercise of attempting to translate poetry) because the structure of the poem makes it so that the consequences of the interpretative meaning of a word are generally circumscribed to the quatrain where it appears. Words or expressions whose presence in the French language prior to the translation in which they appear can be attested are marked in bold¹⁵:

<i>The Hunting of the Snark</i> [Carroll, 1876]	<i>La Chasse au Snark</i> [Aragon, 1929]	<i>L'Autre côté du miroir</i> [Fayet, 1930]	<i>De l'autre côté du miroir et ce qu'Alice y trouva</i> [Parisot, 1971]	<i>La Chasse au Snark</i> [Parisot, 1971]
Bandersnatch	<i>bandersnatch</i>	<i>Bandersnatch</i>	<i>Bandersnatch</i>	<i>Bandersnatch</i>
beamish	rayonnant	radieux	<i>rayonnois</i>	<i>rayonnâtre</i>
frumious	<i>fumieux</i>	rapide comme le vent	<i>frumieux</i>	<i>frumieuses</i>
galumphing	cabrioler	revint au galop	<i>galomphant</i>	<i>galompher</i>
Jabberwock	<i>Jabberwock</i>	<i>Jabberwock</i>	<i>Jabberwoc</i>	<i>Jabberwoc</i>
Jubjub	<i>Jubjub</i>	<i>Jubjub</i>	<i>Jeubjeub</i>	<i>Jeubjeub</i>
mimsiest/mimsy ¹⁶	bouffonnants	<i>légeux</i>	<i>flivoreux vaguaient</i>	<i>flivoreux</i>
outgrabe	tomba	<i>sichoufflaient</i>	<i>bourniflaient</i>	<i>bournifla</i>
uffish	furieux	plongé dans ses pensées	<i>lourmait de suffêches</i>	<i>suffêche</i>

Table 2: Words from “Jabberwocky” appearing in *The Hunting of the Snark* and their French translation

This rather superficial comparison already makes it possible for us to draw two conclusions: (1) the early translations of the words that appear in both “Jabberwocky” and *The Hunting of the Snark* show a significant trend toward the replacement of nonsense words by words or expressions that do exist in the target language (5 out of 9 for Aragon, 4 out of 9 for Fayet), while this phenomenon does not exist in Parisot’s translations which are both more recent and penned by the same translator, and (2) even without a common frame of reference, the creatures of the realm (Bandersnatch, Jabberwock, and Jubjub) tend to keep their original English name (though Parisot Gallicises their pronunciation through a simple process of transcription). Additionally, and though this is but a mere inkling that would require a more in-depth investigation, it seems that Aragon’s understanding of the text might have been a little weak in these specific instances. But this all brings us to the frontier of non-binary translation errors, and there is a less indirect point to be made regarding “Jabberwocky” and the consequences of its absence from French culture as a frame of reference.

The original preface to *The Hunting of the Snark* contains a paragraph that refers explicitly to “Jabberwocky,” presented here with Aragon’s translation:

As this poem is to some extent connected with the lay of the Jabberwock, let me take this opportunity of answering a question that has often been asked me, how to pronounce “slithy toves.” The “i” in “slithy” is long, as in “writhe”; and “toves” is pronounced so as to rhyme with “groves.” Again, the first “o” in “borogoves” is pronounced like the “o” in “borrow.” I have heard people try to give it the sound of the “o” in “worry.” Such is Human Perversity.

Comme ce poème a quelques rapports avec le chant du Jabberwock (1), laissez-moi saisir l'occasion de répondre à une question qui m'a été souvent posée: comment prononcer un brillant Tofficiais. Les deux l dans brillant se prononcent comme dans million; et Tofficiais se prononce comme pour rimer avec niais. J'ajouterais que l'o dans gyraldose est prononcé comme l'o dans rose. J'ai entendu des gens qui essayaient de lui donner le son de o dans rosse. Telle est la perversité humaine.

The material impossibility to refer to wordplays that appeared in a text that had not been translated yet makes itself all the more apparent here, as Aragon could not have quoted a text that simply did not exist at the time. As a consequence, the explanation on the pronunciation of “slithy toves” is turned into a hilarious but completely unrelated note on the pronunciation of *brilliant*¹⁷ *Tofficiais*, which is in itself a pun that only works in French, a quip on *brillant officier* (“bright officer”) where the non-negotiable pronunciation of the final *t* of *brillant* repeats itself at the beginning of the following word in order to create a joke at the expense, one might assume, of army men—all the more that the word, Aragon tells us, is supposed to rhyme with *niais* (“daft”). Which is all very well but has nothing to do with the slithy toves, at least according to Humpty Dumpty’s understanding of the phrase.

The second example of the paragraph is similar to the first one. Whereas Lewis Carroll’s preface offered some details on the pronunciation of the first *o* in “borogoves,” Aragon was not left with much choice other than creating a similar situation where a word should have its pronunciation explained. He swapped “borogove” for a rather unique noun: *Gyraldose*—which at the time happened to be a brand of antiseptic marketed towards women “for their personal hygiene.”¹⁸ This choice pushes the buffoonery one step further than the original joke, but this detail aside and all things considered, Aragon did a decent job of finding a pair of French words (*rose/rosse*) containing the same letter pronounced differently.

In any other circumstances, those substitutions would look like attempts to erase the cultural particularities of a text by a translator eager to make it fit into its target language and culture by using items to which his readers are familiar. In this case however, such speculations of intent would remain sterile since the very text referenced here was yet to enter the French canon. In a nutshell, it is impossible to deduce what Aragon tried to achieve with his translation of the preface, and the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that he managed to produce a text that is as amusing to its readers as the original is to English speakers, but in a different way.

The folder at the Bibliothèque nationale de France also contains four pages of the typescript of the preface with handwritten notes by Aragon. This document informs us of the points in the text where the author changed his mind over some formulations and of the corrections he brought to his draft. For example, a footnote has been added next to the word “Jabberwock” to mention Lewis Carroll [sic.]¹⁹ and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*.

In an interview that he gave much later, Louis Aragon explained that he had made a mistake in the translation of the preface of *La Chasse au Snark*, but that he stood by it despite the criticism he had received for it. The problem boils down to a complicated ballet of cross-linguistic shifts in meaning, where the “portmanteau” in English is a piece of luggage that gives its name to a type of wordplay introduced by Carroll via Humpty Dumpty, while the very similar *porte-manteau* is a coat hanger or a hatstand in French, the English portmanteau being *une mallependerie* in France—and of course, there was no French word at all to express the concept of two words combined together, since *Through the Looking-Glass* had not been translated yet:

[T]he word portmanteau means ‘suitcase’ in English, which I could not ignore given the way I lived at the time²⁰. However, in order to describe Humpty Dumpty’s system, it is preferable to keep the English word and to make this translation mistake as it is much easier to understand the concept if you have the idea that two coats can be hung on the same coat hanger, for example. If on the other hand you throw two coats in the same suitcase, it is not as immediately understandable, and the proper translation—*les mots-valise*²¹ (“the suitcase-words”) instead of *les mots porte-manteau* (portmanteau words)—is less understandable²².

[Aragon, 1965]

This last comment offers a perfect summary of how difficult it is to translate Carroll into French, and how much translating *The Hunting of the Snark* prior to *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* must have brought extra complications onto the intrepid translator.

6. “Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes”

No early French criticism of Aragon’s *Snark* seems to have survived. In its stead, two short pieces in English: one in the New Foreign Books section of *The Times Literary Supplement* in June 1929, and another by T.S. Eliot in *The Criterion* in July of the same year. “M. Louis Aragon’s translation of *The Hunting of the Snark* is a masterpiece in its way” [Radice, 1929], reads the *TLS*, which praises Aragon’s aptitude to find humorous equivalents to the English puns, and sees in this French *Snark* “a metaphysical poem of the modern school” [idem]. T.S. Eliot is certainly as enthusiastic, albeit slightly misguided: his review of *La Chasse au Snark* states, “M. Aragon, in an interesting preface, explains the French structure of the ‘telescope words’ of Carroll” [Eliot, 1929]. Aragon did not write any preface; he “just” translated Carroll’s, and the “telescope words” are in fact portmanteaus that have taken a French detour before reverting to English, as if the whole affair of the portmanteau/suitcase/coat hanger had not been convoluted enough as it was.

The earliest reference to *La Chasse au Snark* in the French press that is still available today (apart from promotional material paid for by The Hours Press and Librairie José Corti) appears in a 1932 portrait of Lewis Carroll on the occasion of the centennial of his birth [Charensol, 1932]. In 1933, the protagonist of a serial by François Fosca²³ was astonished to learn that another character has never read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Hunting of the Snark*. She then proceeded to quote the “They sought it with thimbles” quatrain in French, but in a translation that was not Aragon’s and was most likely Fosca’s himself.

In 1938, *Cahiers G.L.M.* (for Guy Lévis Mano) asked a series of Surrealist authors what their twenty essential poems were. Four of them (Jean Villéri, André Breton, Georges Husson, and André Parisot) named *La Chasse au Snark*, with André Breton specifying *La Leçon du Castor* (“The Beaver’s Lesson”) and Henri Parisot²⁴ singling out the first Fit.

Five more Surrealists named other works by Lewis Carroll, mainly *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll had made it to the Surrealist Pantheon, and with him, *The Snark*.

7. “The method employed I would gladly explain”

Without delving too much into Aragon’s aesthetics of translation, of which a lot remains to be said, it should be noted that his practice when translating *The Snark*

was consistent with what he later wrote about translation. In an article titled “*Lewis Carroll en 1931*” published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* in which he gave his audience a sort of formal introduction to the English author on the occasion of the release of the 1930 and 1931 French translations of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, he verbalised a few guiding principles of translation that he seemed to apply to his own work as a translator.

The matter of rhymes in the parodies and poems was the object of particular critical attention on his part. About the 1931 *À travers le miroir*, he wrote, “I cannot see the use, even in a book that is meant to be found under the Christmas tree, to translate the various poems of *Alice* into bad French verse when word-for-word translation is much closer to living poetry” [Aragon, 1931: 26], and Aragon did take his own advice in his translation of *The Hunting of the Snark*. There are no rhymes in his poem, even where they would have been easy to create. But it was not the point, and after all, his own poetry did not require rhymes either. This absence of rhymes does not mean that the text is devoid of musicality, as exemplified by the repetition of similar sounds:

L. 3.9 There was a silence supreme! Not a shriek, not a scream

Ce fut un silence suprême Pas un cri pas un couic

If the poet’s goal was certainly not to reproduce the rhyming patterns of the original, special attention was however given to the way the text would sound once it was read out loud.

To Aragon, the two books published by Denoël and Steele were mere adaptations, not translations (though he never defined the two concepts²⁵), because of the treatment that their translators (Arnaud and Gilson) had made of the texts by trying a little too much—at least according to Aragon—to make them fit within a French template. “English poetry can only be lost in the poor doggerellizing of [Carroll’s] verse,” he added [idem]. He found it futile “in order to obtain a desirable number of feet to torture words that are only there for arbitrary reasons by dint of a syntax peppered with useless inversions and elliptical archaisms” [ibidem], especially since the poems in question only made sense to the English and would not evoke any familiar memory if told to French children²⁶. Without a common cultural reference, what is the point of writing contorted verses that are not going to ring a bell anyway?

Further down the text of *Lewis Carroll en 1931* appears another comment of importance: according to Aragon, translators of Carroll should be reminded “of their duty to remain faithful even to nonsense” [ibid.]. This conservation of nonsense certainly is a feature of Aragon’s translation of *The Hunting of the Snark*; perhaps not in the way he dealt with invented words (see table 2) but in the spirit of the letter, where word-for-word solutions are preferred to more elegant alternatives thus favouring the substance of nonsense over fluency or acceptability.

These comments can be interpreted as the fragments of a manifesto for a decentralised approach to translation where the target language and culture are not calcified standards to which the translator has to measure the text. On the contrary, in this perspective, straying away from the norms of the target language is preferable to domesticating the original. In other words, translation as it is presented in both *La Chasse au Snark* and *Lewis Carroll en 1931* is the space where the familiar

language can make itself unfamiliar in order to welcome the structures and images of what is foreign, and where the readers of the translation are brought out of their comfort zone in order to come closer to the original text in an explicitly centrifugal movement.

It is all the more visible in small details such as the choice of the diegetic language. Like Alice's question *Où est ma chatte?* in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which never fails to place French translators in a delicate situation, the explicit mention of the English language in the original text creates a dilemma for the translator: should the language remain the same, or seeing that it is the language spoken by the characters inside the translated text, should it be transferred too? In other words, do the characters speak English or French in a French translation? Does the Bellman remain an Englishman when he is transported to another world where he speaks a different mother tongue? For Aragon, the answer is yes:

L. 4.19 But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)

L. 4.20 That English is what you speak!"

*Mais j'ai entièrement oublié et cela me vexé fort
Cet Anglais qui est votre langage*

Additionally, in *La Chasse au Snark*, the cultural signifiers have not been transposed to French culture. For example, the currencies (L. 6.58 "forty pound" and L. 7.14 "seven-pounds-ten") remain (*livres* in French), and the Snark, during his stint as a barrister, still wears the British wig (L. 6.11, *perruque*).

Aragon's decentralised attitude to translation as a practice is probably not accidental. As Martine Noël pointed out, Aragon's activity of translation was not isolated from his general writing practice [Noël, 2000: 116], including at a very conscious level. His position was not unique, but he certainly expressed it in a way that could not be any more obvious: he made the choice to incorporate his translations in *L'Œuvre poétique* along with his poems, essays, and longer texts. This inscription of translation within what essentially constitutes his holographic will of poetry meant that to him, the texts that he had translated belonged to the same space as the texts that he had *written*.

8. "But much yet remains to be said"

The case has been made successfully that the dual reading of *Alice* as both books for children and books for adults in France is largely due to the Surrealist introduction of Carroll to the general public [Nières-Chevrel, 1988; 2016]. In many aspects, *The Snark* reduces this duality in that it is almost completely diverted from its younger audience while being quasi-exclusively regarded as a work that pertains to the Surrealist realm. More often than not, *La Chasse au Snark* remains the privilege of connoisseurs of Carroll and of those who do know of and appreciate the Surrealist and Surrealist-adjacent translators of his works. *The Snark*, which once was the focus of the attention of the most prominent Surrealist, and semi-indirectly created this French double-reading and double-audience of Carroll as well as granted him a position on the lists of "great" authors, still remains much less popular than the *Alice* books in France.

While we are seeing three to four new translations, new editions, reissues and reprints of the *Alice* books (mainly the first one) in French each year²⁷, *The Hunting*

of the *Snark* is not as popular or as widespread, which may mean that it is not read as much as them either²⁸. In fact, in terms of numbers, it is more likely that French readers own a copy of *La Chasse au Snark* penned by a Surrealist or by a regular of the Surrealist circles than by any other category of person. Out of the twenty-seven different editions of *The Snark* that are listed in Bibliothèque nationale de France's catalogue, six are by Aragon, eight by Henri Parisot, and three by Florence Gilliam and Guy Lévis Mano, for a total of seventeen titles against ten for the remaining eight translators. And even then, Jacques Roubaud, who is responsible for three of those ten editions, was discovered by Aragon and remains to this day a member of a contiguous movement, OuLiPo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, a "workshop of potential literature" which aims at exploring new structures and patterns).

All in all, the French *Snark* remains an eminently Surrealistic affair even after Aragon, arguably because of Aragon. He was the first in France to regard Carroll as a serious poet, the first to call for a critical edition of his works [Aragon, 1931: 26], and again the first to embark on a translation of *The Hunting of the Snark*. He weaved references to Carroll into his own poems and, to some extent, into his own autobiography. Not only did he admire Carroll, he gave him a space of choice in French literature as he was reinventing it and re-curating it with the Surrealist circle; yet, very few other texts written by non-Surrealists have kept the mark of Surrealism after so many years as resolutely as *The Hunting of the Snark*.

One explanation for this might be that every translation after Aragon's is essentially and necessarily a retranslation, not just in the sense of a "new translation, in the same language, of a text that has already been translated in whole or in part" [Gambier, 1994: 413] but in the sense that any new translator who would undertake the task of translating *The Hunting of the Snark* would undoubtedly know of Aragon's translation, and would then be faced with the decision to position their own work relative to Aragon's. This is a little different from Henri Bué's first French translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or the early translators that followed him in the Interwar period because those translators, albeit of great talent, did not leave a comparable mark on the French *Alice* for lack of personal fame or because of the limited commercial distribution of their translations. Aragon arguably remains by far the most famous name on the list of the French translators of Carroll ninety-three years on.

The case of the French *Snark* is all the more remarkable that for an iconic translation to come into being, it requires for the original to have "ripened" in the target language [Berman, 1990: 6]. In other words, the text must have been previously translated and those previous translations must have proven at least partly faulty for a memorable translation to emerge which will correct those faults. Aragon's *La Chasse au Snark* has it all backwards; it contains errors and inaccuracies that were improved upon in later attempts, but its retranslations are neither as renowned nor as celebrated as it is.

Perhaps Aragon was right all along; perhaps, after all, Lewis Carroll really was a proto-Surrealist and the reason why he is still regarded as one today is not because Breton, Aragon, Ernst and others *decided* that he was one, but because it is the natural category in which Carroll was always supposed to fall. And perhaps *The Hunting of the Snark*, as the most unequivocal manifestation of Carroll's proto-Surrealism in the French imaginary, is exactly where it should be: somewhere in

the middle of an empty ocean chart whose corners bridge 19th century England to 21st century global fantasy, via a small printery in Normandy. 🦄

Note on *la chasse au dahu(t)*: Professional cryptozoologists as well as amateurs of strange creatures that roam imaginary lands at the expense of gullible tourists will be pleased to learn that the French boast of one such critter of interest. The dahu (sometimes spelt dahut) is a small mountain goat-like animal whose asymmetrical legs make it possible for it to walk around the circumference of a mountain always in the same direction. Capturing a dahu is a complicated enterprise that requires two hunters, a bag, and a great deal of luck. Locals take great delight in sending credulous visitors on such a hunt, and though the potential consequences are not as tragic as those faced by the braves who happen upon a Boojum, victims of the dahu may well lose something only marginally less precious than their lives: their pride.

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Endnotes

- 1 AAIW = *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; TTLG = *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*; SNARK = *The Hunting of the Snark*.
- 2 See Romney 1981 and Houyaux 2022a.
- 3 Possibly Jeanne Loiseau (1854-1921) who translated Byron's complete works. The copy of this specific edition held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France bears a note from the publisher in the name of Daniel Lesueur (Loiseau's nom de plume).
- 4 All French quotes have been translated to English for the purpose of this paper by its author.
- 5 Her father was Sir Bache Cunard, 3rd baronet of Cunard, of the Cunard Line fame; her mother Maud Alice Burke, a leading London society hostess.
- 6 Leonard and Virginia Woolf's publishing house in Richmond.
- 7 The words "weather" and "time" both translate to the same word in French, *temps*. Aragon is playing on the dual meaning of the French word in this quatrain, which the author of this paper has miserably failed to convey in her translation.
- 8 In English in the text.
- 9 Another reason to believe that Breton was not at the origin of the Surrealist's interest for Carroll is that at the time, Carroll was not much translated to French (see previous section, "Carroll in French"), and that Breton didn't read English— worse, he found Aragon's taste for the English language "suspicious" [Aragon, 1969: 18]. The earliest known reference to Carroll in a text by Breton occurred in 1932.
- 10 William Augustus Bird (1888-1963) was an American journalist who worked for the Consolidated Press Association in Paris during the Interwar period and who had caught a fancy for hand printing [Ford, 1996: 107]. Among other titles, Three Mountains Press published Ezra Pound's *Indiscretions or une revue des deux mondes* (1923) [Watkinson, 2009: 2] and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1924), which then of course were sold at Sylvia Beach's bookshop, Shakespeare and Company. When his interest in printing dropped, he sold his material to Nancy Cunard [Cunard, 1969: 6].
- 11 The small blocks in which every individual letter or typographic sign is carved.

- ¹² A calligram is a text arranged in such a way that it forms a thematically related image (in the Carrollian realm, “A Mouse’s Tale” is another example that springs to mind); within the Dada/Surrealist context, calligrams are strongly related to concrete poetry in which typographical experiments were used to reinforce the poem’s meaning or convey another layer thereof, after Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918).
- ¹³ While it would be both immoral and illegal to publish the working document containing the alignment of the original text with its French translation because the latter will only enter the public domain in 2053 (for Louis Aragon had a relatively long life, you see), it is not forbidden to share it with one or two friends, old and new, or even not yet acquainted with. Any such friends are welcome to send an email to jhouyau@uliege.be should they like to receive a copy of the aforementioned document.
- ¹⁴ Lines (L) are referenced as follows: the first number stands for the Fit number and the second one for the line number within the Fit. Each number refers to the individual line in the OT as well as its corresponding French translation in the TT. For example, L. 1.3. reads “Supporting each man on the top of the tide / *Soutenant chaque homme à la crête des vagues.*”
- ¹⁵ According to the Trésor de la langue Française informatisé (TLFi), a lexicographic survey of 19th and 20th century dictionaries.
- ¹⁶ “Mimsy” in “Jabberwocky;” “mimsiest” in *The Hunting of the Snark*.
- ¹⁷ Aragon spelled *brilliant* with a second “i”; it is the English spelling and a mistake in French.
- ¹⁸ Which also shows that the generally accepted claim that Marcel Aymé was the first author to use the word *Gyraldose* in a piece of literature (*La jument verte*, 1933) is off by a good four years.
- ¹⁹ Aragon made the same mistake in another footnote in *Lewis Carroll en 1931*.
- ²⁰ That is, constantly packing and unpacking suitcases with Nancy Cunard.
- ²¹ At the time of the interview, *mot-valise* had apparently entered the French language.
- ²² This reflection is all the more revealing that on L. 2.34, Aragon translated “portmanteaus” as *valises*.
- ²³ Nom de plume of Georges de Traz (1881–1980), French novelist.
- ²⁴ It is impossible (and it would not be fair) to talk about Lewis Carroll in French without mentioning Henri Parisot (1908-1979), who translated *Phantasmagoria* [1939], *The Hunting of the Snark* [1940], *Poeta fit, non nascitur* [1941], *Letters of Lewis Carroll to his Child-Friends* [1949], excerpts from *The Rectory Umbrella* [1950], *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* [1963], *The Nursery Alice* [1969], *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* [1969], etc. Parisot spent a copious amount of time with the Surrealists via René Char and José Corti, and resurrected the *Âge d’or* collection at Flammarion where he published, among others, Francis Picabia, Antonin Artaud, Leonora Carrington, and Benjamin Péret. Translator, publisher, writer, Henri Parisot was an inescapable driving force of French Carrollian scholarship.
- ²⁵ The distinction between translation and adaptation remains a matter of constant theoretical negotiation. For the purpose of this paper, we are referring to Isabelle Nières-Chevrel’s explanation according to which a translation is a necessity because of the plurality of languages, while an adaptation is a “non-necessary rewriting of a text in order for it to ‘make it comply with’ a series of ideological and aesthetic banalities.” [Nières-Chevrel, 2008: 27]
- ²⁶ Note that some French translators of the *Alice* books later took a different approach and parodied famous French poems instead.
- ²⁷ According to the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s general catalogue.
- ²⁸ See “Appendix B: Tentative checklist of *The Hunting of the Snark* in French” at <https://snarkology.net/journal/v1f3>
For a timeline of events related to this article, “Appendix A: Selected Chronology” is also available at <https://snarkology.net/journal/v1f3>

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