

LEWIS CARROLL'S WONDERLANDS: UTOPIA AND HETEROTOPIA IN *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

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ABSTRACT:

The article studies Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland employing the concepts of utopia and heterotopia, which would express two aesthetic attitudes of the text in keeping with its metafictional aspect.

KEY WORDS: *nonsense; utopia; heterotopia; metafiction.*

The first of the two *Alice* books was written in 1862 by Charles Ludwidge Dodgson, then a Don and professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, and given as a Christmas gift to Alice Liddell, the second daughter of the Dean of Oxford. The name of the book was *Alice's adventures under ground*. This same book was revised by the author a few years later, after some elaboration and was published in 1865 under the name of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, signed by Lewis Carroll. This is the book I study.

Since the date of their first publication the *Alice* books have been widely analysed in works of the most different areas and scopes. Bibliographies of and about Lewis Carroll's works have been written and they list – to take Rachel Fordyce's as an example – 978 titles and even so they are only the ones published since the late 1950s. The *Alice* books have been deeply studied by philosophers, mathematicians, linguists, psychoanalysts, critics and scholars of literature, among other fields. They have puzzled and disquieted the imagination of great names in several areas such as Gilles Deleuze, Jorge Luiz Borges, Virginia Woolf, Walt Disney, Monty Python and Caetano Veloso. They have been viewed as psychedelic

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"trips" or feminist texts, among other things. They have been called Victorian, modern, postmodern.

One of the classical studies about the *Alice* books is Elizabeth Sewell's *The Field of Nonsense*, in which the author states that nonsense is a closed field, "a carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason, a construction subject to its own laws" (1952: 5). In this closed field love would be absent. Some years later another critic, Donald Rackin, would contest that and try to verify the presence of love in the *Alice* books in the sentimentality of the episode of the White Knight, Carroll's persona in *Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there*. In the episode, says the critic, love would be present and expressed in the Knight's farewell to Alice, who symbolised Carroll's warmth and creativity of his youth.

Instead of checking whether there is or not love in *Alice's adventures in Wondeland*, I would like to approach the subject in another way. I would like to propose something else: it seems clear that any work of fiction demands from the reader a certain attitude, a certain response to the text and that the text creates in the reader, as s/he reads, a certain kind of effect. Whether this effect will be pleasant or not will depend a lot on the kind of effort the reader has made, although that does not suffice to determine the value of the book as a work of art.

A "comforting" effect I find in *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* as related to the idea of utopia - the beautiful and ideal place to live which would, according to a certain trend of criticism of the *Alice* books (with which I agree), be represented by the garden which the character Alice seeks, and by childhood as the time of happiness. Approaching the concept of metafiction as exposed by Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic narrative: The metafictional paradox*, one might see that utopia not only follows the pattern of circularity found in the metafictional works but also represents that which one might be looking for in reading a work of literature, for the reader of literature, as s/he reads, creates *another world* (which Hutcheon calls *heterocosm*) different from that of ordinary experiences from which s/he wishes to escape. The movement the reader finds in *Alice's adventures* is one of constant self-reference, the fable referring to the act of telling the story,

a circular movement. This creates the impossibility (or the feeling of impossibility) of grasping the complete meaning of the story. It also characterizes as impossible the metaphorical land, and that appears to justify my use of the term utopia.

The "comforting" effect of the text, however, will not be present all through the novel, and perhaps the best sign of that is the episode of the Cheshire Cat in chapter 6. The strange cat who befuddles Alice by appearing and disappearing first suddenly and then in parts (until, one must remember, only its grin remains) is actually the symbol of conscience in the book. It is Alice's conscience, for it reminds her that her choices about the way to go depend only on her will, and it is also the text's conscience, for it knows about Wonderland and tells Alice – whom we identify as the reader of the book – about it.

The strangest thing in the episode, however, seems to be that grin that remains alone in the air (and for posterity). Because it breaks with the idea of "place" which is dear to us – as Wonderland names both the fictional place where little Alice had her adventures and also the very text itself (as a utopian *locus*) – the grin of the cat will be, in fact one of the keys to the understanding of that other feeling, the one of "discomfort" that the text brings.

A place, according to the *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*, is "a particular area or position in space in relation to others" (1987: 783). The place of a grin is on somebody's face. If you take away the face and leave the grin, you will be taking away the place itself. There is no relation where there are not two things to be related. The grin is not even misplaced, in the wrong place, for there is no place for it.

What you seem to have here, thus, is something different from that other no-place – the utopian one – I have been talking about. This new no-place is a vacuum, a black hole in the narrative. To imagine it one might perhaps think of a fourth dimension. To be able to imagine that seems to be the job of the reader of a nonsense story.

In fact, strangeness in Wonderland is to be found since the very beginning of the story in the creatures which there inhabit. In my research I found

that they can be divided into: "fabulous" animals like the White Rabbit, the March Hare, and so on, who possess human qualities: they smoke, they wear clothes, they can speak; one "real" animal (the puppy Alice meets in chapter IV which behaves exactly as a puppy does); and a "mythic" animal (the Gryphon, which emerges from an ancient tradition of fantastic creatures).

Other creatures, which differ a bit from this group and to which I would nevertheless like to call the attention, are the things which in normal or "real" circumstances should be inanimate and which in Wonderland are also fabulous, that is, come alive with human qualities. I have found two examples of those and they are the cards that play with Alice, and the bottles and cakes with the inscriptions "drink me" or "eat me" on them. Another thing to be considered in this group of inhabitants of Wonderland is the other unexpected animation of those which should be things. I refer to the croquet game, where the balls are live hedge-hogs and the mallets live flamingos. They may be considered as "real" as the Puppy, and they do not talk to Alice either. Their role in the story is different, though, for they are supposed to be used as objects.

"Fabulous", "real", "mythic" animals, "fabulous" things, and animals which should be things. That seems to be, at a first glance, the whole picture of the creatures in Wonderland: a slightly uncommon picture with the presence of fantastic beings. It is not too uncommon, however, when we remember that specially fantasy literature is full of them. "Ordinary" animals – needless to say – do not cause any embarrassment either. So, that could not by itself account for the uneasy feeling I try to understand in *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*.

Something that could be argued is that these creatures of different status, however, are placed one by the side of another indistinctively. Thus the Mad Hatter – who is a person – sits at the same table with a talking Hare and a Doormouse, and the fantastic Gryphon dances with a sorrowful Turtle, for example. Yet all this happens in Wonderland, a fictional land and thus, by definition, everything is possible. For it seems that whenever the reader sets off on his/her job of reading, s/he is taken to "another world" (called "heterocosm" by Hutcheon), and forced to accept the rule that this other world does not have to be like the one s/he inhabits. Infinite possibilities appear to be the pattern.

This *common locus* seems to be the same Michel Foucault referred to in the Preface to *The order of things* when writing about a certain Eusthenes, who mingles fantastic creatures in an enumeration and whose text, still according to Foucault, has a certain *syntax*, a certain *order* which allows the fantastic beings to gather together.

Foucault actually contrasts this text to another one, by Jorge Luis Borges, who also created a certain kind of "fantastic fauna" in his text "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins". There, says Foucault, the *order* is adulterated, levels mix until the alphabetical order used by Borges to enumerate the animals loses the sense completely.

To this procedure of Borge's text Foucault gave the name of heterotopia, from the Greek *hetero* (other) and *topos* (place). Heterotopias, thus, are based on this displacement that words or terms seem to acquire when treated this way. It is a different place and in this sense an uncommon one, an isolated and independent space.

In the episode of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, there was a reworking of the notion of place, for – as one might well remember – the grin of the cat is freed from the cat's body and stands alone, floating and occupying an impossible place. This place would be impossible not only because it belongs to the realm of fiction, but because it is logically inconceivable. A place consists of a relation of a specific area with another. The grin standing by itself corrupts the relation that should exist between subject (the Cat) and attribute (the grin), a relation that should define the place of the grin. The result is that the grin loses the possibility of being located somewhere, and is then thought to be in a different (*hetero*) place (*topos*).

As Alice goes on in her adventures in Wonderland – which, as I have tried to demonstrate, is a utopian space, set in the "impossibility" of metafiction – she eventually finds herself in these heterotopian situations, as if inside the frame of her journey in search for the beautiful garden she were transported to different, strange and unusual places.

Also in the changes Alice suffers in Wonderland one may find signs of heterotopias. The pictures made by Lewis Carroll to illustrate the manuscript of *Alice's adventures under ground*, as well as the ones made by Tenniel for *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* could easily demonstrate that. The passage which Figure 1 illustrates is that moment when Alice grows larger in chapter two and "opens out like a telescope".

Note that in both drawings the idea of the component parts of a telescope is kept, as I indicate: segments are marked by the lines on the waist, collar and beginning of her head (in Tenniels drawings, on the right, also at shoulder-length). What is most evident in both drawings, however, is that Alice's body seems to have been stretched out, and not simply grown larger. The body from the feet to the waist seems to keep the usual size, but from the waist on until the head there is an amplification of the torso until it reaches the head, which also looks the usual size. In other words, there seems to be a change in the proportions of Alice's body, and not only in size.

A proportion is defined by the *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* as "the correct relationship between the size, position, and shape of the different parts of a whole" (1987: 831). Once this relationship is altered, the effect is strangeness and discomfort. I believe that this relationship between parts and the whole – which is subverted by the expressed idea of a body opening out like a telescope – is very similar to what Foucault calls an "order" between things, and that a break of this order would be like the break of the correct relationship between parts and whole, and that is what Foucault calls heterotopia.

The idea of movement of the telescope is used again in another moment of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* when, in chapter 5, she shrinks as she eats a piece of mushroom. In the end of the movement, as may well be seen in Figure 2, her head has struck her feet.

In the end of the change there are only the edges – that is, head, arms and feet – of the body left, and it is similar, one may notice, to what happens to a telescope when it is collapsed: the tubes go inside one another and only the last ones – the ones at the ends – are to be fully seen.

The picture left (Fig. 2) resembles that other one (Fig. 3) from Bosch, a "Gryllo". Gryllos are grotesque images of abnormal or normally impossible creatures which take part in an imagery of the fantastic which have been around for a long time in the Western history of art. The gryllo in Wonderland, however, is a sign of Victorian heterotopia. It keeps the reference – the body of the little girl (and anyone can see that the gryllo is still Alice) – and then reconstructs it in a new form – the body minus the torso. The result is that the remote idea of the whole (the full body and the character Alice) is kept, but actually what one has is fragments put together which do not correspond to a unity.

Utopia is a fertile place typical of a fictional work which is unfolded by imagination. More precisely in the case of *Alice's adventures*, it is typical of metafictional work, and one might remember now Linda Hutcheon and her ideas about the mimesis of the process in metafiction. According to her, it is necessary to postulate, instead of a mimesis of the product – that is, that the work of fiction has to be equivalent to the facts and events of "real" life – a mimesis of the process or, in other words, that the process of writing and reading fiction is equivalent to those experiences one has in coming to terms with life. That would bring, I believe, a shift from the idea of a beautiful and ideal place – which for some time was thought to be the product of fiction – to that of, maybe, a beautiful experience, which is the experience of writing and reading. When that experience is disturbing and troublesome, it may be called heterotopian but, anyway (in the case of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*) framed by and keeping a balance with Wonderland.

RESUMO:

O ensaio tem como objetivo analisar a obra Alice's adventures in Wonderland de Lewis Carroll sob a luz dos conceitos de utopia e heterotopia, que expressariam duas atitudes estéticas do texto distintas, condizentes a seu caráter metaficcional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *nonsense; utopia; heterotopia; metaficção.*

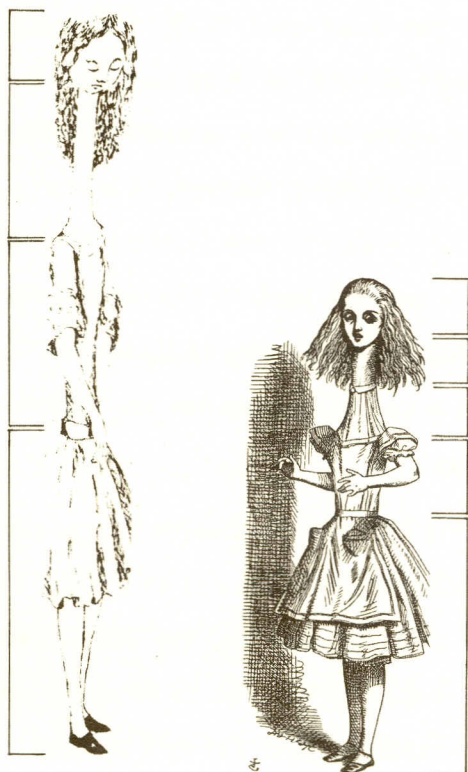


Fig. 1. On the left, Carroll's illustration to *Alice's adventures under ground*. On the right, Tenniel's illustration to *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*: Lewis Carroll observed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976, p. 11.



Fig. 2. Carroll's illustration to *Alice's adventures under ground*. Lewis Carroll observed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976, p. 12.



Fig. 3 Bosch's picture of a gryllo from *The Triptych of Vienna Last judgement*. *The complete paintings of Bosch*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, plate XLIX.

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