

# FICTIONALITY. PLEADING FOR THE POETICS OF POSSIBLE WORLDS: UNDERGROUND VS. THE REVERSED WORLD

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## *Abstract*

The poetics of fiction formulated as a way of escaping conformism and subverting reality is one of the ground rules in Lewis Carroll's books, where fiction and truth intermingle, creating a universe which captures the reader in a game where seriousness, rules, maturity and everything that is related to the world of adults is mocked, having as a result the self-discovery and evolution of the Victorian young lady.

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In a century when the world was going through numerous changes, when industrialization determined people to migrate towards the cities, where they became part of the masses, loosing their identities in the every-day struggle, Lewis Carroll (on his real name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) created a new perspective in literature, one based on a new type of fantasy, on the bending and breaking of rules, nonsense and word-play, which made him one of the most famous writers in the world. The publishing of his first book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in 1865 was a boom in the world of children's literature not only in Great Britain, but all over the world, becoming one of the most translated books in history (Cernauti-Gorodetchi, 2002:1). The second part of Alice's adventures, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, published in 1871, presented a world where the characteristics of Wonderland became sharper, thus, more confusing, determining even Alice to wonder, after waking up from her dream/ hallucination, whether she had reality or not. Consequently, due to this sharper reiteration of the fantastic world, both books started to be considered more than children's literature, encompassing elements that will be later defined as specific to postmodernism.

However, Carroll's books are still listed as children's literature, a possible reason being the fact that imagination is usually seen as specific to childhood, to immaturity, detaching itself from the purity of ideas and concepts, as Plato defines it. This aspect is quite intriguing, as the 20th century comes with a new perspective on imagination, and, consequently, on fantastic literature, which considers the tools of imagination (images and sensation) as much closer to 'reality' than the abstractization specific to reason (Braga, 2007:118). This raises many questions, which may be answered by looking at the way the concepts of art and literature, and more specifically the one of fantastic literature, and their relation with reality have evolved.

In the occidental poetics, for over two thousand years, the relationship between art and reality was constructed almost exclusively on *mimesis*, meaning the imitation of nature through art (Doležel, 1998:39). Nature (reality) was considered to be perfect, thus, the most valuable piece of art was the one that managed to capture this perfection and transfer it in the world of art. Aristotle was the one who tried to stop art from being mere imitation, bringing

into discussions the concepts of "representation" and "creation". However, art continued to be regarded rather as a type of imitation until the intellectual and aesthetic crisis of the 18th century, which brought a new theory regarding the relationship between literature and reality, together with contradicting the existing normative poetics. Baumgarten and Breitinger were amongst the first to consider imagination as having a set of rules of its own, their theories having as a foundation the possible-world theory, formulated by Leibniz (Doležel, 1998:44-45). He considered that fiction is related to worlds that are possible, not in reality, but in another register, which might be parallel to the tangible one. Although his theory was related to the world of philosophy, Bodmer and Breitinger integrated it in the literary theory (Doležel, 1998:46). Mostly through Breitinger's ideas, literature started being regarded as parallel to reality, and not secondary, as it mimics possible worlds. Consequently, the artist becomes, through imagination, a creator which transforms possible things into tangible, concrete ones, and vice versa.

The new perspective on the existing worlds is revolutionary, as they are considered through the possible-world theory to comprise both the imaginary worlds and the world of reality. The two are, however, placed at different distances, the minimal one referring to realistic fiction, and the maximal one to fantasy worlds which contradict reality. The latter is strongly related to the miraculous, Breitinger distinguishing three types of miraculous worlds:

1. allegorical worlds, where objects become people, with reason and spirit, feelings and opinions;
2. aesopic worlds, where animals and nature become people-like, having feelings and opinions;
3. invisible worlds, where mythology and religion irrigate literature.

(Doležel, 1998:49)

When referring to the worlds created by Lewis Carroll in his two Alice books, the Wonderland created in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be defined as an allegorical world, as a pack of playing cards is brought two life, two of the characters created through this technique being representative in Alice's adventures - the King and Queen of Hearts. More than this, the world of Wonderland is also an aesopic one, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, the Dodo, the Caterpillar, the Pigeon being only some of the animals whose questions, opinions and feelings have a decisive role in Alice's initiation. One might also consider that, through the ghostly presence of the Cheshire Cat, that has the ability to show up whenever 'it' pleases and to show only parts of 'its' body, Wonderland could also have elements specific to the invisible world. Respecting the register specific to Wonderland, the Looking-Glass World has elements that characterize all three types of fantastic worlds defined by Breitinger: allegorical, through the pieces of the game of chess; aesopic, through its anthropomorphic characters (the Rabbit, the flowers, the Fawn, the Lion); its is also more of an invisible world than Wonderland, as both Alice's and other characters' reality is put into question through the idea that they might be the results of the Black King's dream.

However, both Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World tend to transgress these types of fantastic worlds as they clearly belong to the dimensions of dreams and hallucination,

worlds considered by Breitinger to be impossible through their inner contradictions (which might be questioned), thus void (theory which does not fully respect the one formulated by Leibniz) (Doležel, 1998:49). It is through Baumgarten's theory that the so-called impossible worlds become possible, in another dimension, of course. This theory introduces the category of simpliciter fiction, Alice's adventures taking place in the heterocosmic one (a type of simpliciter fiction) as the ruling principle of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World is the bizarrerie of nonsense and contradiction.

Despite the discussions and debates triggered by these theories, mimesis remains the ruling principle of art and literature and the possible-world theory has almost no echoes in the following period, as it will be considered to have no purpose. It is mostly with the second half of the 20th century that the theory formulated by Leibniz will be reconsidered and valued, also making the re-reading of the Alice books necessary.

Referring to the Victorian literature, the results of the idea that simpliciter fiction is useless are visible through the popularity of the realistic novels, writers like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, The Brontës, W. M. Thackeray reflecting the harsh reality of the industrialized society in the world of fantasy (Matthews, 2002:3). Despite the popularity of this type of novels, which could find its resort in the empathy the readers felt towards the characters' struggles, which were inspired from the difficulties encountered in a society suffocated by rules, routine and loss of identity, in the second half of the 19th century, the genre of tales (which are strongly related to the fantastic) became more and more popular. This determined the translation of numerous Romantic fairytales written by German writers like the Grimms and H.C. Andersen and also the writing of fantastic stories by British novelists like John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, W.M. Thackeray etc. The adaptation of some of the realistic novelists, like Dickens and Thackeray, to this new direction was a very interesting one, being a combination of realism, sarcasm, irony, and fairytale elements, having a structure specific to folklore (Demurova, 2008:156).

Detaching himself from the general directions formulated, Lewis Carroll created a new type of fantasy, one that was (and still is) profoundly original, which was, at first labeled, and considered by himself, children's literature. It is in time, and mostly with the second Alice book, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, that the fantastic worlds created by Lewis Carroll began to be also seen as more complex than this. The truth is that Carroll's books seem to have a multitude of layers, which can be understood and cherished by different age groups. Thus, from children to elders, readers are fascinated by various elements and characteristics specific to Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World. This is what makes Carroll's imaginary so unique and original for the literary period he belongs to, many of the techniques used, the structures, dimensions, characters and events created bringing into mind the ones specific to avant-garde, surrealism, and postmodernism.

When turning towards the type of fantasy in the two books from the perspective of the 20th century, when the fantastic genre, more specifically the simpliciter fiction, became one of the most popular, determining numerous literary debates, new layers come to light. The main source of fantasy is considered to be reality, with its restraints, rules, which the fantastic world opposes, as it is the result of the conflict between the inner and the outer world. Consequently, fantasy and reality seem to be in an interdependent relationship - fantasy finds its resources in reality, while reality finds its deflation in fantasy. As the reader escapes in

the fantastic world, he has access to spheres that were never touchable, to do things and meet characters considered in the real world to be impossible. Imagination becomes the tool which brakes reality, with all its limitations, giving one the chance to return to his inner self and to find/ re-find his identity, with its repressed desires, thoughts, feelings, and expectations, while the fantastic is "a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of imagination, for what he has lost at the level of faith" (Maurice Lévy in Jackson, 1981:18). Both Carroll's (or should we say Alice's?) worlds are based on the principle of transgression in a dimension closer to the unconscious of one's mind, in this case Alice's mind, a dimension populated by bizzare creatures, a place where unexpected things happen, and where the heroine incites the reader to cross the limits and set the foot in forbidden places.

The fantastic dimension does not have only the purpose of defulation. It also defines and even moulds reality, as it points a finger towards the hidden parts of reality. This does not mean that the fantastic aims only at the negative sides of reality, but at the aspects which are put aside in reality in order to be forgotten because they refuse to follow its rules. Thus, the strong relationship between the fantastic and the unconscious is clear. When Alice falls down the rabbit hole and when she enters another dimension through the looking-glass, she comes in contact with her unconscious, connection suggested through the constant contradictions, rules turned upside down or even broken, nonsens, hallucination, their peak being represented by the questioning of Alice's reality.

Although, considering that fantasy contradicts reality, it might be thought that fantasy is irrational, because it might leave the impression that it denies reason, it is actually "anti-rational", as Iréne Bessiére mentions. This means that, despite the fact that it opposes reason, fantasy still has a set of rules of its own, otherwise it cannot exist. The structure of the fantastic world is an 'oxymoronic', as it places reality and its opposite next to each other and links them through the powerful energy generated between the two (Iréne Bessiére in Jackson, 1981:21). This anti-reality or anti-rational structure may be easily exemplified through the Looking-Glass world, a reversed reflection of reality.

As it has been mentioned before, another important rule of the fantastic world, which might seem contradictory at first, is that it need a certain coherence in order to exist, despite its magic, mysteries and openness towards all possibilities. Consequelty, it needs a pattern of its own, this creating the impression of reality. This impression is created, first of all, through Alice, a girl who is as real as can be, with the exception that she seems able to access worlds that are, not impossible, but invisible to the eye of reason. The hesitation that both Alice and the reader have when entering the fantastic worlds, determined by the odd creatures, the broken laws of time and space, the strange events, soon washes away, as both of them get caught up in the new order, specific to Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World. This effect is more obvious in the first of the Alice books, as some of the characters explain the rules of this new dimension throughout the book (eg. the Cheshire Cat tells Alice that everyone is mad in Wonderland, including her), while in the second one the sensation of cohesion is given only at the beginning, when the Black Queen tells Alice the steps she has to follow in order to become a queen.

The 'anti-' structure specific to the world of fiction does not only apply to characters, events, space and time, but also to language. As Breitinger underlines, language is the most important instrument in creating and extending a fiction world. Thus, besides being

suggestive, language must also be innovative in order to transgress the routine and aridity of the habitual world (Duležel, 1998:53). The poetics of innovation is opposed to the normative poetics, focusing on transgressing the rule. Standing under the sign of "benign humor", introduced in British literature by Edward Lear (Nilsen, 1998:96), the language used by Lewis Carroll in the Alice books is remarkable through the way it bends and breaks the norm. Having a structure fuelled by playfulness, the two fantastic worlds are filled with riddles, games and contests, like the Caucus-Race, Croquet, the Lobster Quadrille, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and the game of chess and the dance with Tweedledee and Tweedledum, in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Even some of the characters are pieces of a game (the King and Queen of Hearts and their pack of cards, the White King and Queen, the Black King and Queen and the other chess pieces, including Alice). But, of course, as the fiction world is marked by nonsense and playfulness, the rules valid in the real world are not valid here, so that the games played, like the Caucus Race, seem to have no rules:

*First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, ('the exact shape doesn't matter,' it said,) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no 'One, two, three, and away!', but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo solemnly called out 'The race is over!', and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking 'But who has won?'*

(Carroll, 1998:26)

Besides this lack of (obvious) rules in the games played, another important characteristic is the seriousness with which they are approached. At the opposite end, aspects which are usually taken seriously, like the trial, in these new dimensions are treated with the most profound disrespect and inconsideration, games and serious matters changing places in the world of fiction. This choice reflects Carroll's defiance towards authority and rigid norms. However, in the Looking-Glass World, everything seems to be much more serious, aspect which may be noticed through the effects it has on the heroine. Alice is no longer irritated, intrigued or amused by most characters' carelessness, but she seems rather troubled, confused and even saddened by their attitudes and actions, until she decides to take revenge on them, just like she did in Wonderland. This might be because, although between the two literary adventures only a few months seem to pass, in reality, when the second Alice book was written and published, the rupture between the Liddells and Lewis Carroll had already taken place, and, thus, the communication between the real Alice and the British writer was somewhat forbidden. More than this, Alice was no longer a child, but a young lady approaching the age of marriage and, thus, to becoming an adult. This might also be why, in the Looking-Glass World, she hurries to become a queen, but when she finally does, she feels more uncomfortable than ever.

Except the obvious games that Carroll introduces in the fantastic worlds, another type of playfulness can be noticed – word-play, through "riddles, poems, conversational misconstructions, and constant plays upon semantic and grammatical anomalies" (Nilsen, 1998:244). For example, the conversation between Alice and the Mouse, in *Alice's*

*Adventures in Wonderland* seems to have no point because of the confusion generated by the misunderstanding of the pronunciation of some words: instead of "tale" Alice understands "tail", instead of "I had not", "a knot". Another characteristic is the focus on the literal meaning of words: *'I see nobody on the road,' said Alice. 'I only wish I had such eyes,' the King remarked in a fretful tone. 'To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!'* (Carroll, 1998:112), plus the mathematical principles applied to language: *'Take some more tea,' the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly. 'I've had nothing yet,' Alice replied in an offended tone: 'so I can't take more.'* *'You mean you can't take less,' said the Hatter: 'it's very easy to take more than nothing'* (Carroll, 1998:65). Carroll's innovation consists in inventing words, like *brillig*, which means *four o'clock in the afternoon*, *to gyre*, which means *to go round and round like a gyroscope* and others, and in introducing, with the second Alice book, the concept of portmanteau words, this consisting in combinations of two or more words into a single word. Humpty Dumpty is the one who explains Alice the meaning of the portmanteau words in *Jabberwocky*: *slithy* is a combination between *lithe* (meaning "active") and *slimy*; *mimsy* is a combination between *flimsy* and *miserable* etc.

Another technique used by Carroll to subvert reality and its rules is parody, through which the writer puts ethics and education into question. The most intriguing and innovative way in which he used parody was to use as a material nursery rhymes that were very popular in the Victorian society, like Isaac Watts' "How Doth the Little Busy Bee" and its parody "How Doth the Little Crocodile", "Tis the Voice of the Sluggard" which became "Tis the Voice of the Lobster", Jane Taylor's "The Star" which was recreated as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat!", to name just a few (Nilsen, 1998:246, Carpenter & Prichard, 1999:17). Some of the characters in the nursery rhymes (Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Humpty Dumpty) also become characters in the fantastic worlds.

However, as the reader enters and wanders in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World, the word that mostly comes to mind is nonsense, Carroll being considered the master of this genre, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle underlines in his book *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. The characteristics formulated by Lecercle are all to be found in the fantastic worlds created by Carroll, worlds which are filled with impossible characters and situations, contradictory conversations, slippery rules, having an order that defies logic and using all these elements to subvert reality, by creating a text which is "more perceptive, or imaginative, or intuitive, than straightforward texts" (Lecercle, 1994:5)

Keeping all these characteristics in mind, it is clear that the answer to Alice's semiotics problem *The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'* found in the reply *'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all.'* (Carroll, 1998:200), was the ruling principle of Carroll's imagination, which he used to create worlds of fiction that helped readers, as the writer intended, to believe in *as many as six impossible things before breakfast* (Carroll, 1998:190), thus recreating the poetics of fiction by undermining the normative poetics.

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