

## ILLUSTRATING *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM: NEW MEANINGS FOR AN EVERGREEN CHILDREN'S CLASSIC

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**ABSTRACT:** The link between words and pictures is an internal feature of children's literature. This bundle of meanings can be a real challenge for the translator, who has to work both on words and on the pictures and their relation to the words. All this is particularly important when a text has been originated with pictures as an integral part of it, with continuous inter-referential connections between words and pictures and whose illustrations were decided by the author of the book, as it is the case for "*Alice in Wonderland*" by Lewis Carroll, a text which had been re-translated and re-edited several times, by providing it with new sets of images. Thus, the aim of this paper is to show the visual representations of Alice in the last decade, comparing the original drawings by Tenniel with the pictures used in Italian publications, in the attempt to unveil new ways in which Carroll's character and her world have moved from a Victorian fantasy in order to gain eventually new cultural meanings.

**KEYWORDS:** *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Children's Literature in Translation, Illustrated Books, Intersemiotic Translation, Intrasemiotic Translation

### 1. Introduction

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll is one of the most popular children's books of all time, famous not only for its plot and characters, but also for the illustrations made by John Tenniel (1820-1914). There have been a great many re-editions and translations since its publication in 1865, but not all of them have reproduced Tenniel's drawings. Some have commissioned new drawings in order to appeal to a new readership or fulfil a new *skopos*.

When a story for children is re-illustrated, the illustrators can decide to add or omit material, render certain themes more or less explicit, or condense sections into a single image in order to adapt the text to contemporary tastes and ideology. When this is done with reference to a previous or canonical illustration, it becomes a process not unlike that of retranslation.

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyse some of the visual representations of *Alice in Wonderland* that have appeared in Italian publications over the last decade, comparing them with Tenniel's original drawings in an attempt to assess the new cultural meanings that have been accrued in the process. This will then be used to shed some light on the issue of visual retranslation and the reasons for it.

### 2. Illustrations in children's books

Illustrations are important features of children's literature but they do not always function in the same way in every work. According to Gregersen (Nikolajeva, 2006, p. 7), four types

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of illustrated books and picture books can be distinguished according to the nature of the relationship between the words and pictures: the *exhibit* book, where the verbal element is absent; the *picture narrative*, where there are a few or scattered words in the narrative; the *picture book* or *picture storybook*, where the words and pictures act together in a complementary fashion to create a meaningful story; and the *illustrated book*, where the pictures are subordinated to the narrative (that is to say, the story can work independently of the pictures, as in the case of *Alice in Wonderland*).

Illustrations help children to make sense of the story and to remember the plot when they are reading or flipping through the pages on their own. They can also complement the text and expand the contents of the story, providing more detail about episodes that are not described at length. However, as Nodelman (2005) has remarked, pictures and illustrations only communicate within a network of conventions and assumptions; hence, there is need for prior knowledge of the communicative code that children sometimes lack. Visual information is also firmly set in the context of the specific culture that produces and receives it (Mirzoeff, 1999), which means that it is not always readily translatable either.

Line, colour, action and movement, size, location, and symbolism are among the key features of the visual image in illustrated books (Lewis, 2001, pp. 103-123). The quality of the line is important and can be used, amongst other things, to give a hint of movement (through dashes, streaks and shadowing, for example). Colour is likewise important, even though not all books for children are necessarily coloured (Tenniel's illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland* were famously in black and white); one of its various functions is cohesive, in the sense that it can connect or separate important characters or objects in the tale. As far as movement is concerned, characters interact with each other within a space and their actions are figuratively represented. Finally, all of the above elements can interact with one another to produce more complex forms, conveying a particular symbolism which might not be easily interpreted by children, due to their age and inexperience.

The composition of the picture as a whole activates representational and interactive meanings through three interlocking systems: information value, framing and salience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021, pp. 181-182). The placement of a particular element (at the top or bottom, in the centre or at the side) will affect the significance attributed to it within the economy of the overall image, and different aspects can be foregrounded or backgrounded through manipulation of size and proportion. Framing devices can also be used to disconnect elements from the rest, indicating that they might be viewed separately.

### **3. Visual retranslation**

To the extent that illustrations are translations into visual form of textual elements, they can clearly be considered as intersemiotic translations, defined by Jakobson (1959, p. 233) as 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems'. According to Pereira (2008, pp. 105-106), the methodologies employed by illustrators are mostly the same as those used in translation, since illustration is possible only through the re-creation of the textual elements in the light of artistic currents of the age. Thus, it should

be possible to theorize new illustrations of a canonical work as forms of visual (or intrasemiotic) retranslation, thereby opening them up to analysis using the concepts and tools supplied by Retranslation Studies.

A retranslation, in the verbal sense, is generally understood to be a new translation into the same target language of a previously translated text (Koskinen and Paloposki, 2010). Traditionally the process of retranslation was considered to be linear or chronological, with retranslations occurring after a first translation had taken place, usually to update or modernize the language or to correct mistakes or misinterpretations in the first translation (Gürçağlar, 2009, p. 235). However, the concept of aging as the main driving force is not enough to explain the presence of several translations on the market at the same time (*Alice in Wonderland* has had about 300 editions in Italy, and many of them still in print today). Such retranslations fall into the category of ‘active retranslation’, the term used for translations competing for the same audiences within a single market (Pym, 1998, p. 82).

According to the famous ‘retranslation hypothesis’ (Berman, 1990; Bensimon, 1990; Chesterman, 2000), the more time elapses between the original and the translated text, the more literal and faithful the translation is likely to be. However, a retranslation is often produced as the result of a commercial decision, reflecting changes in the historical, cultural and social context of the target text (Cadera and Walsh, 2017). Studies on the retranslation of children’s literature from English, Italian, German, and Dutch into Hebrew (Du-Nour, 1995) and into German and Dutch from Swedish (Desmidt, 2009) suggest that, contrary to the retranslation hypothesis, priority is often given to the target-culture norms of readability. Koskinen (2004, p. 3), studying retranslations of *Alice in Wonderland* in Finnish, remarks that, although the earliest retranslations fit the idea of a closer approximation to the source text, more recent versions have adopted a domesticating strategy instead. This seems to be in line with the idea that retranslations tend to justify themselves by establishing their differences from one or more previous versions (Venuti, 2004, p. 25), something that is especially true in the case of classics that are long established in the target culture and will therefore be recognisable to broad audiences even when they are far removed from their original form.

#### **4. The genesis and illustration of *Alice in Wonderland***

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* stems from a short story, entitled *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*, written by Lewis Carroll for the ten-year-old Alice Liddell and her sisters as a Christmas gift in 1862, after a short boat trip when he had spontaneously invented it to amuse the three girls. From this, the manuscript underwent several changes, including the idea of adding pictures to illustrate the story. At first Carroll intended to use his own illustrations but later changed his mind and decided to contract a professional illustrator, John Tenniel (who was later knighted for his artistic achievements).

Although Carroll had added a portrait of Alice Liddell on the last page of *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* (1862), it seems that the model for the other drawings was

probably her younger sister Edith, for, in the final version of the book, it was an iconic blond girl in a pinafore dress who inspired Tenniel. The novel went through three editions in Carroll's lifetime, each time enriched with chapters, characters and riddles and many other details which nowadays are part of the known plot. Compared to the version that has become canonical, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* is much shorter, since it does not contain the chapters about "Pig and Pepper" and the "The Mad Hatter's Tea Party".

*Alice in Wonderland* is a complex text – a masterpiece of fantasy and nonsense, with a taste for paradox and puns – and unsurprisingly it has been interpreted in many different ways over the years. For Beseghi (2017, p.41), it is an exploration of the dream world and unconscious, with the search for identity tackled through striking metaphors like the mirror, the double and the shadow, as well as through the changes that Alice undergoes through the story (idem, 43-45); for this author, the paradox of being too big or too small represents not only a metaphor of growing up but also a narrative device that allows the child to play with reality by enlarging or shrinking it in order to relive it in a more controllable form.

On the other hand, Alison Lurie (1990) approaches *Alice in Wonderland* as a politically subversive text, full of utopian ideas and caricatures of political personalities of the time, while Masolino D'Amico (1990, p. 129) points out that the apparently whimsical rhymes and verses (which often start from songs, proverbs etc common to Victorian culture, usually with the aim of twisting them) actually mock people that were well known to the children of the time. We can also detect a truly merciless criticism of the educational system of the time and its teaching methods, as supposedly uplifting poems that were painstakingly memorized in the nursery are reduced to nonsense through brilliant parody. Indeed, in the Victorian era, when the child was considered as an imperfect being that had to be educated into adulthood as quickly as possible, this text is unusual for being written totally from the child's viewpoint (Citati, 1987, p. 8). Its plot seems to develop to satisfy a curiosity arising from dissatisfaction with existing explanations of reality, and a desire to explore alternative possibilities (or to peek "behind the scenes" of what a direct look would not grasp) (Faeti, 2010, p. 59-60).

As regards the accompanying visuals, the manuscript version of *Alice's Adventures Underground* was illustrated by Lewis Carroll himself before Tenniel was recruited to produce his famous pictures, and in both depictions, a pre-Raphaelite inspiration can be detected in the blond wavy hair of the girl and her serious expression. Indeed, Carroll's own pictures strongly influenced Tenniel's final drawings<sup>1</sup> to the extent that the illustrations became an integral part of the story, creating a tight bond between the pictures and words within a multimodal narration.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hancer (1985) informs us that about three-quarters of Tenniel's illustrations were based on Carroll's drawings, and that Carroll had given him a complete list of the subjects to be illustrated, noting also their dimensions and positions within the book (see also Jaques and Giddens, 2016). Consequently, any changes that were subsequently made to Tenniel's artwork tended to be minor.

<sup>2</sup> In the original book, there were some optical effects: in one scene the Cheshire Cat vanishes, for example, as when, turning the page, in the same place the reader finds a faint image of the animal (Clayton, 2011, pp. 11-12).

Carroll's interventions did not stop there, however. He actively participated in the design and the aesthetics of *Alice in Wonderland* and carefully studied the placement of the illustrations within the narrative. He also closely monitored the publishing process, inspecting and correcting the various versions, giving importance to page layout and paper quality, and the inclusion of features such as handwriting (Castellani, 2017, p. 104).

The result of this collaboration was a unique book; everything that Carroll had verbally hinted at was translated into a world of images, from the dangers around Alice (which Tenniel creatively depicted so that the events appear to be emerging from the surrounding darkness) to the theatrical quality of the dialogue, echoed by Tenniel in a set of deliberately stiff postures that made the characters look as if they were periodically freezing in a series of tableaux (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015, p. 144). When the book was finally published in 1865, it was widely reviewed and praised, with *The Guardian* declaring that the illustrations to be "still better than the story" (Cohen and Wakeling, 2003, pp. 5-7).

## 5. Illustrating *Alice* in Italy between 2010 and 2021

As a classic for children and part of the literary canon, *Alice in Wonderland* has been re-published and re-translated many times around the globe. In Italy alone, there have been about 377 editions. Re-translating a book that is as rich in detail as this one often entails the retranslation of the illustrations in order to ensure that they are in keeping with the new purpose and readership. In this section we are going to analyse the visual retranslations in five editions published in Italy over the course of a ten-year period. Not all the images of the books will be analysed, but only samples which depict specific episodes from the story or the most famous characters. They will be compared to Tenniel's original drawings, according to parameters such as scene and character selection, composition and style (Rybicka-Tomala, 2020, p. 194).

In the analysis, the verbal translation will not be taken into account, beyond a brief outline of its overall purpose and readership. Instead, we will be examining the illustrations as retranslations of Tenniel's original pictures, identifying three different modes: realistic, humorous or comic, and dark or gothic.

### 5.1 Realistic *Alice*

a) 2010: *Alice nel Paese delle Meraviglie* (De Agostini), illustrated by Massimiliano Longo.

This edition, by the De Agostini publishing company, was produced as part of a relaunch of a historic book series (La Scala D'Oro), famous in Italy during the 1950s, and is explicitly presented as a revised and updated translation. Illustrated by Massimiliano Longo, the story, as revealed by the landscapes and characters' clothing, is still firmly located in Victorian England, but now the mode is realism, very different from Tenniel's satirical treatment. In an interview,<sup>3</sup> Longo claims to have been influenced by the 1907 pen-and-ink drawings of *Alice* by Arthur Rackham, and to some extent, the relationship can be

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <http://wonderlandbookseng.blogspot.com/2013/04/massimiliano-longo-alice-nel-paese.html> (Accessed: 17 June 23).

seen if we juxtapose the three versions (Tenniel's, Rackham's and Longo's), as in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Compared to Tenniel's, Longo's Alice is more mature, and the sharp contrast that he had drawn between her persona (as an embodiment of rationality) and the rest of the Wonderland characters (representing the indeterminacy and the freedom of creativity) disappears. For example, in the episode of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party (Fig. 1), both Alice and the Mad Hatter look like real people. While in Tenniel, the Mad Hatter's big nose and hat, and comically disproportionate traits were indicative of his mental status (historically those who used to work in hat factories often went on to develop mental illness due to the chemicals used), now, the only symbol of madness is the straw on the March Hare's head. In fact, Alice and the Mad Hatter look more like a young couple on a date in the English countryside (recognisable through the cottage in the background).



Figure 1. The Mad Hatter's tea party by (left) Tenniel (1865) (centre) Rackham (1907) and (right) Longo (2010)

Even in the scene where Alice meets the Blue Caterpillar (Fig. 2), the surroundings are quite realistic, though the caterpillar shares some of Tenniel's anthropomorphised and orientalist traits. While Tenniel depicted the Caterpillar shown from behind and framed by a spiral formed by the hose of the hookah pipe (perhaps to recall the effect of hallucination [Castellani, p. 108]), Longo's is more like a real caterpillar and is positioned in profile, though it continues to have human hands and face.



Figure 2. Alice and the Blue Caterpillar by (left) Tenniel (1865), (centre) Rackham (1907) and (right) Longo (2010)

In these two examples, everything seems to guide the readers towards a real world, though with some hints of estrangement.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that this new set of illustrations is aimed at an adult audience that is familiar with the story, and who are accompanying the commercial relaunch of an old collection.

## 5.2 Comic Alice

b) 2012: *Alice nel paese delle meraviglie* (Einaudi Ragazzi) illustrated by Nicoletta Costa.

The Einaudi Ragazzi edition of *Alice* is presented as a new translation (first published in 2006), adapted for a very young audience by the translator, Roberto Piumini, who is also a poet and a writer. The illustrator, Nicoletta Costa, has also adapted the images to the young readership, in simple clear lines with no nuances or three-dimensionality. The style of the illustrations is more cartoon- or comic-like, and the characters are drawn in an (unthreatening) curved rounded style. All of them lack realistic traits, though some of the scenes attempt to represent movement. For example, in the scene in which Alice falls into the rabbit hole, which has been transported to the interior of a house, her hair and apron are shown streaming upwards to indicate falling, while around her, the two cupboards create a sort of tunnel (Fig. 5). There is no equivalent to this scene in Tenniel's version as neither he nor Carroll portrayed Alice falling into the rabbit hole, presumably because the scene is described at length within the pages of the story.

In Figure 6 (the tea party scene), there are no traces of any imaginary land in the background and the scene could be taking place in a contemporary kitchen. Nor does the hatter show any sign of craziness and is smiling affably at Alice. Alice is also smiling (unlike in Tenniel's version where she generally has a sulky expression) and seems to happily accept everything that is happening instead of questioning all the time.



Figure 5. Alice falling into the rabbit hole (Costa, 2012) Figure 6. The mad hatter's tea party (Costa, 2012)

Thus, the simplifications implemented in the translation are reflected in the illustrations, making them suitable for very young children.

<sup>4</sup> This is despite the fact that the Italian illustrator, in the same interview, declared that a classic must be respected in all aspects.

c) 2018: *Alice nel paese delle meraviglie* (Crescere), illustrated by L.D. Festa.

As in the previous example, the illustrations in the Crescere's 2018 edition are in a style reminiscent of comics. This is an abridged version of the book (just 24 pages in total) aimed at toddlers and very young children, and the book itself is a handleable object made of cardboard.

The scene depicted on the cover is the one where Alice falls into the Rabbit hole (Fig. 7). It is full of colour and movement, and Alice looks neither worried nor annoyed by the experience. Although she is blonde and has pigtails, she does not retain any behavioural aspects of Carroll's Alice and is happily floating on air. She is also presented surrounded by objects that the reader will recognise later on, such as a teacup, key, book, and playing cards.



Figure 7. Alice falling into the rabbit hole (Festa, 2018)

As in the previous example, these illustrations, with their simple lines and bright colours, are clearly addressing very young readership. The aim is to appeal young children and to present an adapted version of Alice in a toy-format, where the pictures decorate and simplify the plot.

### 5.3 Dark or Gothic Alice

d) 2012 – *Alice nel Paese delle Meraviglie* (Renoir), illustrated by Xavier Collette.

Dark colours and grotesque characters characterize the style of Collette's illustrations in the Renoir edition, a graphic novel published in France by Drugstore (2010) and translated into Italian two years later. Alice is now brunette and wearing a dark dress. A feature of the illustrator's style is his use of light and the way it creates shadows around the characters, exacerbating the dark dreamy atmosphere of Wonderland. For example, in the playing-card scene (Fig. 8), Alice seems to emerge from the darkness, with a light illuminating her from behind, creating a twilight atmosphere. The composition clearly evokes Tenniel's picture, in which she is shown running for cover, with her arms raised and the cards swirling around her, but now Alice is at the centre of the scene and seems to be controlling the cards, almost like a magician.



Figure 8. Alice and the playing cards by (*left*) Tenniel (1865) and (*right*) Collette (2012)

In Figures 9 and 10, the two characters emerging from the darkness are grotesque in appearance. The White Rabbit is rather menacing with his red eyes pointing directly at the reader, and instead of carrying a fan and a pair of gloves, he is holding a cigar and a cup of tea.



Figure 9. The White Rabbit by (*left*) Tenniel (1865) and (*right*) Collette (2012)

As for the caterpillar (Fig. 10), this creature has a sort of human appearance, and we can just about discern its features in the dark. It seems to be floating on its own smoke, which creates a sort of frame around it. There is no background and the mushroom on which it sits (so important for its magical effects on Alice's height) is not clearly distinguishable as such.



Figure 10. The Blue Caterpillar (Collette, 2021)

As in Tenniel's drawings, these characters all strike a theatrical pose as if they were on a stage with no physical references around them. To interpret them, the reader has to know the story in advance. This version of Wonderland is not a crazy colourful world, but one that is dark and sombre. The style and the composition are tied to the graphic novel genre which targets (young) adults, a readership that will probably be already familiar with the plot and the characters of *Alice in Wonderland*.

e) 2021: *Alice nel Paese delle Meraviglie* (L'Ippocampo), illustrated by Benjamin Lacombe.

Benjamin Lacombe is a French illustrator who produced pictures of Alice in Wonderland purposely for the Italian publishing house, L'Ippocampo. Lacombe wanted to depict an Alice that Carroll would have loved, so he took inspiration from the photographs of Alice Liddell taken by Carroll and created a young girl with an enigmatic gaze who takes on womanly connotations while nevertheless remaining a child.<sup>5</sup> In this set of illustrations, Alice is blonde and has wavy hair as in the original, but her expression is not so much sulky as scared or uncertain as she peers down into the rabbit hole (Fig. 11). Lacombe has chosen to depict the moment preceding the fall into the hole rather than the fall itself, and in it, Alice's cat is present (in the book Alice names her cat Dinah several times, though it is never depicted by Tenniel). The atmosphere is not magical, but rather sombre and mysterious, and the figure of Alice is light in sharp contrast, with a very pale skin and big eyes. If what appears at the bottom of an image represents reality, while what is at the top is ideal, as Kress and van Leuween (2021, p. 191) propose, then Alice seems to be an angelic being looking down into a dark Wonderland from above – a significant inversion of the dynamics at work in the original novel.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.mangialibri.com/interviste/intervista-benjamin-lacombe> (Accessed: 17 June 2023).



Figure 11. Alice and the Rabbit hole (Lacombe, 2021)

As for the Blue Caterpillar (Fig. 12), this is quite similar in composition to Tenniel's, though the perspective is different, as the reader is now observing the scene from beneath. This brings implications not only for size and proportionality but also for how we read the relationship between them. We can clearly see the Caterpillar's fat human face beneath its turban, contrasting sharply with its fat insect-like body, yielding a sort of monstrous hybrid; and although the image is coloured, the tone is rather dark and conveys a feeling of uncertainty and dread.



Figure 12. The Blue Caterpillar (Lacombe, 2021)

This Gothic atmosphere is reinforced in a picture where Alice is sitting on a Victorian armchair in the rabbit's den, surrounded by four or five white rabbits. As a strikingly pale figure in the middle of a dark composition, she has acquired a ghostly, or even zombie-like, demeanour (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. Alice in the rabbit's den (Lacombe, 2021)

As in the previous example, the atmosphere and the style of Lacombe's illustrations seem to aim at a more mature readership.

## 6. Conclusion

The Alice depicted in the Carroll/Tenniel collaboration is a child of her time in her appearance and expression and represents the strictness of Victorian order in sharp contrast with the fantasy of Wonderland. The three groups of illustrations described here all deviate from this image, differing markedly in tone, symbolism or intention from the original drawings. To the extent that they accompany similar adaptations in the verbal narrative, they may be considered as intersemiotic translations of new versions of the Carroll's text. But the fact that they also build on or subvert Tenniel's illustrations (and in some cases other intervening versions, as we have seen), they are also intrasemiotic retranslations in the visual medium.

Though the illustrations presented here are all from the same cultural space and produced within a timespan of nearly ten years, there is apparently no common trend between them. This confirms the idea that a retranslation may be carried out with the aim of introducing a new interpretation of the source text, addressing a different readership or creating a completely new one (Gurcağlar, 2020, p. 487). All of them, to different degrees, seem to be addressing specific readers: while the illustrations in the "comic" Alices are directed at a very young audience, simplifying details and colours, and attenuating the potentially disturbing aspects of the story, the others are clearly aimed at a more mature or adult audience, who may appreciate seeing Alice reworked in gothic or realist mode.

In short, these pictorial retranslations of *Alice in Wonderland* offer examples of inter- and intra-cultural transformations, intertextual interaction and intergenerational

transmission, interacting through the conjoint enterprise of adapting translating, re-translating and transmediating children's literature (Kèrchy and Sundmark, 2020, p. 7).

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