

Imagining the World through Alice's Eyes The Adventures of Lewis Carroll's Alice as Bildungsroman

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Abstract In this paper, I would like to discuss how Lewis Carroll's *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* (1865) can be considered to be a Bildungsroman. I will also affirm my idea that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is actually the first novel of a trilogy which comprises also *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889-1893). In this trilogy Wonderland represents the first fundamental stage of Alice's formative journey. I will therefore analyse the world as seen through Alice's eyes, observing her first journey as a constructive one which gives both Alice and the reader the opportunity to change and become more self-aware and responsible. Looking at the world through Alice's eyes makes Wonderland appear absurd, with nonsense seeming to be its main characteristic: at the start of her journey Alice does not have the cognitive tools to understand this new world and so it appears nonsensical. Finally, I'll look at the cognitive tools Carroll gives us to build a new perspective and possibly a new logic. These are: 'relationalism', 'plural identities' and finally, 'conventionality'.

Summary 1 The Adventures as Bildungsroman. – 2 Boredom and Daydreaming. – 3 Curiosity and Desire. – 4 Looking for Clues. – 5 Six Months Later. – 6 To the Reader.

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Alice laughed:
«one can't believe in impossible things»

I daresay you haven't much practice,
said the queen, «when I was your age,
I always did it for half-an-hour a day.
Why, sometimes I believed as many as
six impossible things before breakfast»
(L. Carroll)

1 The Adventures as Bildungsroman

The «Adventures of Alice» can be considered to be the trilogy of novels: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass* and *Sylvie and Bruno/Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*.

Alice's adventures begin when she is sitting on a riverbank feeling bored with nothing to do; they continue in the second novel when she jumps up into the looking glass, determined to understand the rules that govern the other side of the mirror. In these two novels Alice grows up and becomes a much wiser child; she learns how to respect herself and the world around her and to make up her own ideas. In the final novel of the trilogy (*Sylvie and Bruno*) she doesn't actually feature as a character but what remains is the new logic previously learnt by Alice during her metaphorical journeys into her inner world. This new logic is put to the test and expressed by the strange new characters of the final story. Other elements allow us to consider these novels as forming a trilogy. For example, it is interesting to note that the final words of *Through the Looking Glass* are, «Life what is but a dream?» while *Sylvie and Bruno* begins: «Is all our life then but a dream?» Furthermore, the first chapter of this novel opens with a sentence which shows that a story has been temporarily interrupted and is now unfolding again; «and then all the people cheered again». These three adventures can be interpreted as a sort of cognitive research into how the human mind thinks: the cognitive dynamic of Escape and Return (Avanzini 2003) is the common theme, a Leitmotiv that concerns all these books. I proposed and discussed this idea in my book about Alice's journey (Avanzini 2011); trying to sum up what I wrote in those pages, I can say that *Alice in Wonderland* is actually a premise to the journey, the moment when Alice gradually loses her certainties and opens herself up to the possibility that different worlds could exist and could be even better than the one she is used to living in; she casually Escapes from reality without a planned Return - but she does come back, realizing that she has changed. *Through the Looking-glass* represents the conscious beginning of her travelling: she is no more wandering off without a direction; this is a conscious Escape and it has a well-aware Return - Alice wants to come back and knows that she has changed. Finally *Sylvie and Bruno* describes how to properly and consciously use the conceptual dynamics of Escape/Return in everyday life. Escaping from reality and returning to it, without losing one's identity, is a fundamental educational instrument, through which we can learn to use our mind in a critical and responsible way. From this point of view, *Sylvie and Bruno* is the mirror of our 'real' world, since the protagonist, who used to lead an ordinary life, now discovers that *just* in everyday life hides a magic opportunity: at any given moment we can choose to Escape, firmly holding onto our sense of self without being overly concerned about seeing it change slightly; this Escape (which has to be followed by a conscious Return) will enlarge our perspective and enrich our way of thinking, behaving and relating to ourselves and the world outside, acquiring a conscious and at the same time critical attitude. We will learn how to accept the idea of transformation as part of life and to become thoroughly human.

However, in this article I will discuss this idea of cognitive research and personal growth with reference only to the first two novels of Alice, with particular attention to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The first two «Alice» novels, published in 1865 and in 1871, can be considered as Bildungsroman; novels that show how a person's formative years can lead to a better understanding of the world. They are also novels that can have a positive effect on the readers, encouraging them to question themselves and their role in society. These adventures influence Alice positively too, in that she gradually becomes more self-aware, responsible and respectful towards others. She also learns to understand this new world, the characters she meets there and herself. As for the readers, if they want these books to have a meaning, they have to work it out for themselves – they are given the opportunity to become active readers and develop their own minds and perceptions of themselves and the world. This is not actually true of all books, since often the effect that the act of reading has on the public is an Escape without a conscious Return. On the contrary «Alice» novels convey such a sense of nonsense and a sort of 'distancing effect'¹ that brings the readers into looking for some kind of meaning: in this way the unaware Escape is not possible.

Another key feature of the Bildungsroman in Alice's novels is the way in which Carroll describes the world through Alice's eyes, as she finds herself utterly lost in the nonsense world of Wonderland. Nonsense has a significant role here. Alice cannot read or decode Wonderland because it is governed by rules that she does not know or want to understand. It is unreadable, sheer nonsense, yet here lies the key: nonsense can be a way to improve our capacity to read and decode that very same world. Carroll's works contain nonsense but this does not mean that his works are nonsense. Nonsense is the consequence of Alice's inability to relate to her new experiences, especially in the first novel. However, as she starts to gain control of herself and relate to this fantasy environment, the nonsense aspect gradually diminishes. It never disappears completely, for it is impossible for us as human beings to understand reality or life in an absolute way; a little absurdity or nonsense is an inevitable part of our world. How can we understand it if we cannot even be sure that what we are experiencing is for real or just a dream? In Carroll's words, «Life, what is it but a dream?» Furthermore, new sorts of logic will inevitably arise to upset or completely change our idea of the world sooner or later.

Alice's books do not have a plot in the traditional sense but they are metaphorical journeys into understanding the world and the relation-

¹ I am here referring to the *Verfremdungseffekt* used by Bertolt Brecht in his theatrical works: through this effect Brecht wanted the public to be aware and responsible, he did not want theatre to be an Escape from reality but a way to consciously change it.

ship between men and the world itself. From this point of view the role of nonsense is to make us reflect upon the meaning of reality and on our ability to give it a meaning. In these works, Carroll goes beyond the traditional, cause/effect logic, giving Alice and the reader new cognitive tools to understand the world. He is such a sophisticated author that he does not simply do away with conventional logic; instead he demonstrates that it is not absolute and that it can exist alongside other types of logic. What really matters is to be aware that all kinds of logic (including cause/effect) have been invented by human beings and one type cannot be allowed to dominate. When Alice arrives in Wonderland she is only able to use cause/effect logic and this is why she sees everything as nonsense: she is unable to go beyond it and read reality from a different perspective. In *Through the Looking-glass* she becomes gradually more acquainted with the idea that people and the world can think in a different way and she tries to discover this new way. She does so by beginning to respect the diversity of the characters she meets on her way.

2 Boredom and Daydreaming

How does she begin this journey of discovery, this formative journey? Is it all just a dream? At the beginning of her adventures in Wonderland, Alice is bored with having nothing to do. Boredom is the initial cause of her wandering off. Then she suddenly notices a white Rabbit with pink eyes talking to itself so she follows it down the rabbit hole, without thinking about what she's doing or the consequences. She's such a conceited, curious, self confident child that she doesn't feel afraid. She doesn't think the world could be a danger for her; on the contrary, she tends to think of it as her own toy. From the very beginning it could be said she is daydreaming. In this state she goes down a big hole into the ground while following an imaginary rabbit who seems to be part of our real world, but who then leads her to a different one. For both Alice and the reader, it is difficult to understand the relationship between dream and reality and even more difficult to distinguish one from the other.

From a pedagogical point of view, the journey is made possible thanks to the two conditions of boredom and daydreaming. It is this state of self-abandonment and letting-go that leads her to look at the world in a different and more independent way. When you are bored, you need to find a rhythm which is, in musical terminology, a human meaning to the world and to yourself. As for Alice, she does not question this state for she has just one stimulus, which is curiosity. Instinctively, she gives a rhythm to boredom thanks to curiosity and finds a way out of this passive state; she is so curious that she decides to take up this journey wherever it will lead her. She is, in fact, «burning with curiosity». Then she falls down the hole.

While falling she loses her identity but is unaware of the fact; she feels confused, unable to remember her cultural background properly.

3 Curiosity and Desire

Alice overcomes her confusion a little when she gets to the «little door about fifteen inches high». It is here that her curiosity becomes desire, the desire to visit the «loveliest garden you ever saw» (Carroll 1998, p. 12). She manages to transform curiosity into desire and to reinforce the rhythm she was giving herself and the world. She gradually passes from a passive to an active state; curiosity is in fact a passive condition, while desire is an active one, that is, a conscious re-organization of curiosity (Avanzini 2011). Furthermore, Alice has the child's creative mind (Avanzini 2011) and is able to accept what adults usually consider impossible, going beyond the cause/effect logic. The entrance into a new world whose rules and logic are completely unknown is symbolised by the frequent changes of size of Alice who cannot understand what is happening to her. For the reader, these changes of size create a disorienting but also amusing effect. In Italy in fact, the novel had for a time been considered as pure 'divertissement' as opposed to Bildungsroman.² Alice manages to hold on to her 'emotional' direction (her wish to see the garden) and it is this wish which prevents her from getting completely disoriented by all the upsetting changes. The nonsense in Wonderland becomes more and more apparent in these early stages and this makes her get even more confused and unable to give the world a rhythm or a logical meaning.

On the way to the garden Alice meets and gets acquainted with a few of Wonderland's inhabitants. Some of them act as guides. When we arrive at the end of the story and look back at her strange adventures, we see that these characters have given her and the readers clues to avoid getting totally lost and have increased self awareness. The mouse, the Caterpillar, the Cheshire cat are there to assist Alice through all this nonsense and give her clues to help her think and find her own direction. The same applies

2 For example in Fanciulli, Monaci Guidotti we can read: «Who is Alice? And what kind of extraordinary enterprise does she carry out? She is a child; in a summer day she makes a dream, with all the queerness and the incongruence of dream, and I will not summarize it. Some chapters are sort of nightmares; others are totally confused. It is useless trying to find a theme or a central idea or at least a general meaning. There is not. We cannot even talk about a nice formal language [...], furthermore many oddities get lost in translation» (1934). Still years later, Battistelli affirms that «Alice is a child that, in a summer day, makes a long-lasting dream, full of imaginary, inconsistent, unstable visions; if you look for a central meaning, for a framework, you will not find it. The style is not elegant nor fine; notwithstanding this the book had a huge success, maybe because it was the extreme fantastic reaction to moralistic literature» (1948).

to the reader. The first guide she meets is the mouse who will soon leave Alice alone because she chooses her words badly and her careless use of language deeply hurts him: she speaks, for example, about how good cats are at catching mice! Alice will learn step by step that you are also responsible for the words you use – using them wrongly or ambiguously can be misleading or even lead to terrible mistakes. At the end of the *Through the Looking-glass* the red queen reveals to her that «when you've once said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences» (Carroll 1998, p. 224). Despite all this nonsense, the world that Carroll is showing us is a moral one based on how we relate to one other and that eventually there is a price to be paid for behaving badly towards others. Indeed, Alice feels desperately lonely once the mouse goes away. The cause/effect logic here is used by Carroll to enter Alice's mind and help her consider her arrogance and improve her character; if she does not go in this direction, the world will remain impossible for her to decipher.

4 Looking for Clues

Therefore, trying to summarize, the first clue which is given to Alice during her journey is what I would call **relationalism**, that is, the ability for us to relate to each other and to the world, considering the relational nature of reality. If we are not able to respect and relate to other people then the journey of discovery is interrupted and the world and its meaning will remain obscure.

The second clue is given to her by **the Caterpillar**. Alice meets him quietly smoking a long hookah on the top of a mushroom. The Caterpillar addresses her in a sleepy voice and asks her the most critical question: «Who are you?» Alice doesn't know who she is anymore ... «I hardly know, Sir, at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then». The Caterpillar does not understand and asks for an explanation: «What's so strange in being changed?» Alice replies: «I can't explain myself because I'm not myself, you see». The Caterpillar still does not understand, «I don't see», he says (Carroll 1998, pp. 40-41). Alice explains how confusing it is to be so many different sizes in a day but the Caterpillar insists that it is not so. There is a basic difference between them and this is that Alice has a fixed identity, so changes are always a problem for her, while for the Caterpillar identities are always and obviously more than one. Carroll is saying a person needs to have different identities and they exist altogether at the same time; it all depends on who you are relating to and on your subjective viewpoint. This is absurd for little Alice to understand at this stage in the story.

The logic Carroll portrays with the mouse is mainly cause/effect, while the situation is less clear-cut in her encounter with the Caterpillar. Alice

does not really understand what is going on. She keeps saying that her size is ridiculous, showing no respect for the Caterpillar, who is of the same size. However, this is not yet the main point. What has to be underlined is that she is unable to face reality and the dramatic change that is taking place inside her. She was used to having only one conventional logic and learning lots of things without really understanding them – for example, she does a curtsy while falling into a hole in the ground – what is the sense in doing that? None, but she does it simply because it's good manners. The clue that the Caterpillar gives Alice is that people do not have a unique identity and that each identity is environment- and culture-dependent. We must be able to adapt to circumstances instead of being inflexible and rigid.

After the Caterpillar, Alice goes off exploring this strange world further and meets the Cheshire cat, who will give her the third clue. The cat is a key character, because he lives in the space of logic and shows the reader how paradoxical our logic can be. He is an essential guide because he tries to focus Alice's attention on the way we think and most of all on how we should think. The cat is not lecturing Alice. However – he does not tell her what she should think, but *how* to think: he wants her to be more aware of the way her mind works. The first thing she notices is that he had «very long claws and a great many teeth [...] it ought to be treated with respect» (Carroll 1998, p. 56). She tries to talk to him but too ambiguously. The cat points this out to her; as, for example, when she asks which way to go, he answers: «That depends a good deal on where you want to get to». Alice cannot but admit that this is true and tries to be more specific, saying «I don't much care where», to which the cat can only answer «then it doesn't matter which way you go». Alice: «[...] so long as I get somewhere». And the cat: «O you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough» (Carroll 1998, p. 56).

In other words, he tries to make her understand that you need to create a world in common with other people; a world based on logic-culture-language. In order to do this you need to have a clear sense of direction, give yourself a reason for doing things and give meaning to the world since it will not give us one. Alice has to use her words in an accurate way and give them a meaning; she cannot use them just as if they have no correspondence with reality. The Cat is thus introducing her to the idea of 'conventionality', which means essentially 'invented by men and not absolute'. Thoroughly understanding this concept is the key to living in harmony with others: it is not necessary to consider ideas or logic as if they were absolute but it is important to find common ground with others to decide which logic to use to understand each other. That is exactly what the cat does: he tries to make Alice discover the logic she is using without actually being aware of doing so. It is the cat who tells her about the mad-tea party, saying that everyone is mad there, even Alice herself. This

dialogue is interesting because it shows how the cat tries to make Alice think about the language as a convention – an abstract world with its own logic, invented by humans. The word «mad» can therefore have different meanings, depending on the situation and on the meaning we decide to give it. But for the moment Alice does not understand this and thinks the cat is completely absurd. She is unable to understand the sophisticated logic he is trying to show her.

The third clue is 'conventionality', that is that there is no absolute logic but different types of logic, all invented by humans. Logic does not have an absolute meaning, but it is a convention used by human beings to create a cultural world. If we want to be an active part of this world and perhaps even make it a better one, we need to give logic a significance and create common-ground with others, using a proper and conscious language to express our specific intentions. In order to do this, the type of logic we choose to use should depend on the situation (on the concept of 'common-ground' from a cultural and educational point of view cf. Avanzini 2008). Conversely, Alice meets the March hare, the Hatter and the Dormouse at the mad Hatter's tea-party, and discovers what can happen when common ground is lacking. Her new acquaintances behave very differently from the cat: they are not proper guides since they are not a bit interested in Alice. They have no intention of changing their behaviour when she arrives. No dialogue is possible: the characters of the mad-tea party live in their own absolute world and so does Alice. In this way they cannot communicate to one another; the result is total nonsense.

Through all these characters Alice grows up almost without being aware of it. She only finds out that something has changed inside her when, at the end, she tells the whole story to her sister. In other words, when she finally creates a cultural world in common with her sister, through storytelling, Wonderland becomes real and starts to have a meaning. We can say that she creates a common-ground with her sister, which is cultural and represented by the story of Wonderland itself. This marks the end of the first stage in Alice's formative journey.

5 Six Months Later

In *Through the Looking-glass* Alice continues her journey. Six months later, in November, she is at home, talking to her cats when she consciously decides to re-embark on her journey of discovery. The beginning is very different from Wonderland from the beginning of this story, in that Alice questions this new world from the start. «I'll tell you all my ideas about the Looking-glass. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair – all but the bit just

behind the fire-place. Oh! I do so wish I could see that bit...» (Carroll 1998, p. 127). Alice doesn't follow a rabbit without thinking but now she consciously wants to create a new world. Furthermore, she is not sleepy or daydreaming – she is perfectly awake and is playing her own game. She actually wants to go into the looking-glass to discover the logic that governs that world. She also makes an assumption – that 'bit', that is the part of the looking glass that she does not see, maybe goes in the opposite direction. As the story progresses and she observes the world behind the looking glass she gradually changes this assumption. In this novel Alice becomes aware of her intentions; she actually wants to visit the world beyond the Looking glass. She has a direction and intends to find an answer to her question. Even the entrance to the other world is decided by Alice herself, who recites a sort of abracadabra pretending that it is possible to go through the looking glass. Her desire thus becomes real.

Alice is led not only by curiosity, but mostly by the desire to know the other world better: Alice has immediately transformed curiosity into desire because she is more aware of herself and of her feeling. In fact, as I already said, desire is a sort of rational and active rearrangement of curiosity. In this way, organizing her wishes, she will also learn a lot of things about herself. She has indeed become wiser since she no longer accepts the cause-effect logic as unique and is now willing to see the world in different ways. When she goes to the other side of the glass, she immediately notices how different it is from her world. Then she takes another look, saying, slightly arrogantly, that the room is not tidy but then realizes that what she sees is not confusion but life itself. All the strange things in the looking glass appear to be alive: the pictures, the clock and finally the chessmen. She has to adjust her viewpoint to see them, going down on her hands and knees from where, to her surprise, she sees them walking about in pairs. She is opening herself up to new possibilities. This is also the reason why in the looking glass nonsense is present but is less evident. Nonsense is just there to remind us that there will always be something that we won't be able to understand. Reading the story we discover that the looking glass is a world in which Alice can immediately find a direction. The main reason for this is that she supposes this world to be a chessboard and the characters that she meets to be chessmen.

Alice has greatly developed her thinking skills during her journey in Wonderland. Now she is ready to accept that her world may not be the only one, that different kinds of logic and different rules may exist and that she may not be the main protagonist. In other words, she is ready to understand the world in which she finds herself. She makes the assumption that the world is a chessboard and a chess-game is being played out; she is thus attempting to give a meaning to it all. How does she do this? By attempting to be part of it. She becomes a pawn and gives herself a direction – to become queen. She has completely entered the new world

and the new logic. She is no longer the arrogant little Alice of Wonderland. She no longer wanders directionlessly. Here she knows exactly where she wants to go and that is to arrive at the eighth square and become a queen just like in a real chess game. With this assumption she gives a meaning to the world, she understands it and its characters, or she tries to at least. We can note that in this way nonsense is kept under control, even if it does not totally disappear.

We could at this point ask the question; is this new world really a chess-board? In actual fact, it is not important at all. What matters is that:

- a. Alice has gone beyond her world and beyond her logic in order to discover the new logic of the world beyond the Looking glass;
- b. she has chosen to go on this journey with a sense of direction without arrogance;
- c. she gives a meaning to the world beyond the looking glass;
- d. Alice behaves respectfully towards this world and the characters she meets, and she wants learn from them;
- e. the chess-board is a way to establish a common-ground, a place where the rules are clear and the same for everyone.

Most of all, it is a place where everyone can have a role and a direction, thanks to the chess-game. We can say therefore that *Alice's idea* of the chess-board works, because it is a good strategy to go beyond nonsense.

What we cannot say, however, is that *her* idea is true. From a cognitive and educational point of view, absolute and unique truth is something that does not belong to the human mind.

We do not come to understand the world exclusively by accepting it as if it were absolutely real and static. Another way to understand the world is to read it as though it contains also impossible things: if impossible things can be considered possible, as Alice does, then the logic we are in can be transformed into a paradoxical logic and this opens up the potential for other kind of logic. In other words what we normally consider 'impossible' or a 'dream' should be perceived as just a fragment of reality if we really want to decipher reality and to give it a complete, though not definite, meaning.

The red queen exemplifies this paradoxical logic, which is the concept that the impossible can open up the way to different kinds of logic. When I was a child I was terrified of this horrible character who spent her time shouting and threatening everybody «off with her head!» For this reason I couldn't bear to watch the Disney film to the end. Thinking about the significance of this absurd queen I have come to the conclusion that she, like all the other characters in Wonderland, lives in the space of logic and represents the absolute logic that is so absurd that it prevents the world from having any kind of meaning. The story therefore comes to a paradoxical ending: the executioners, for example, are completely lost in front of

a cat whose body has faded away (how can you cut off a head without a body?) It is a problem of logic. In this sense, what we generically define 'impossible' makes the conventional logic we are using explode and we are forced to search for another kind of logic. All of this highlights our human need to find ways of overcoming our differences instead of believing in an absolute and unchangeable world.

6 To the Reader

I do not intend to summarize all the clues that were given to Alice; I will leave that to the reader. What can be certainly said is that Alice makes her formative journey with a contagious enthusiasm. Carroll makes a great gift to the reader: he deconstructs our traditional way of looking at the world but while doing so he offers us another way to comprehend the world and ourselves. He does not leave us alone on this difficult journey.

To summarise his proposals:

- instead of logic, different types of logic;
- instead of thinking in absolute terms, thinking in terms of 'relationalism';
- instead of reality as the only possibility, dream and impossibility as the foundation of all our understanding;
- instead of an absolute and static identity, various and changeable identities.

I think this can be enough for having walked just a little part of Alice's journey. And, as I have begun, I shall conclude with Carroll's words: «You're larger than when I saw you last! Really I think we ought to introduce again! There's so much of you that I have never met before, you know» (Carroll 1993, p. 381).

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