(Re)presenting
Alice in Wonderland

by Timothy Alan Shaw and Mauro Spicci

One hundred and fifty years after its publication Carroll's Alice in Wonderland *is still today a work that fascinates readers of all ages, nationalities and languages. What makes this work so timelessly appealing? How have different historical periods and cultures re-interpreted Alice, both the work and the character? How can teachers in Italian classrooms still draw interest among their students and encourage them to be active readers of Carroll's novel? These are the questions that we have set out to answer in the following article.*

■ Self-portrait by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.

A classic story

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, more commonly known today as *Alice in Wonderland* by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, writing under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, is a classic story for children in the literary nonsense genre. Published in November 1865, it has been a favourite story for children all over the world for 150 years now, inspiring countless translations, adaptations, illustrations, films and cartoons and songs, its fantastic anthropomorphic characters and playful logic generating a wealth of studies and critical commentaries, and leaving a mark on the English language itself. Carroll's Alice, in other words, has been incredibly re-dimensioned, reread, rewritten, modified, performed, translated and re-translated, becoming an agglomerate of cultural meanings that at times have proved quite astonishing. These manifold meanings form a heritage of inestimable value and immense potential for today's teachers of literature who seek to offer their students a three-dimensional image of Carroll's story and heroine.

Roland Barthes states that every act of "reading is rewriting the text". Based on this premise we may state that many generations of readers have rewritten – and are still rewriting – Carroll's novel, creating ever new representations of the text and the character. We intend to follow two of the developments of these "representations": the first seen in the translations (more specifically Italian translations) of Carroll's test; the second found in the rewriting in the form of images of the character of Alice herself. The ultimate aim of our work is to relaunch *Alice in Wonderland* not merely as an immortal text but especially as a "pretext" which can generate unexpected, new cultural products and, why not, innovative, engaging teaching materials.

Alice: lost (and found?) in translation

Alice begins to appear in translation almost as soon Carroll's book is published. The first editions to appear in Italian, however, were translations of French translations of the original, potentially adding a further element of difficulty and confusion for the Italian translator and reader. The first Italian translation based on the English original appeared in 1872 and has since been followed by an incredible number of new translations, adaptations and "re-visitations", all seeking to make the Alice phenomenon accessible to generations of youngsters. "Timeless" would seem to be an adjective that can fairly be applied to this work; indeed we might feel that any work that has been adopted and adapted by Walt Disney is automatically rendered immortal. The question we should like to

consider, however, is how and how much the reader's experience is influenced by the passing of time and by the shift from one language to another. Did English-speaking children in the Victorian age read the same book as their counterparts or young Italian readers read today?

The question calls to mind Robert Frost's intriguing definition of poetry: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." So much of world literature is accessible to us (necessarily) thanks to those unsung heroes who are translators. Much of it comes through this process relatively unscathed but inevitably something will be lost and the losses tend to be greater in genres where the balance between form and content tips towards form. While poetry is the obvious example, "nonsense" is no less exposed to risk.

What then is a translator's task? Setting aside technical, commercial, legal and scientific translations, where precision, clarity and faithfulness to the original are paramount, we would ask a translator to produce a text which is understandable, reflects (as far as possible) the style of the original and which, most importantly, does not read like a translation! Our translated text should flow freely and naturally, delight eye and ear, and sound as though it were written in the destination language. The translator has to take up a position and find a response to the dilemma so neatly expressed in Italian, "*Tradurre è tradire*" (which loses its impact in English translation!).

Umberto Eco rightly observes that betrayal is inherent in translation which is not merely a transposition from one culture to another but is also a process of adapting pre-existent concepts and contents to contexts which are different or which have never existed before.

The "nonsense" genre is a fascinating case in point. Lewis Carroll does not write nonsense in any real sense ("Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't", as Polonius says). He does something far subtler; he delights in playing with logic, creating fanciful characters and happenings, pokes fun at elements of the Victorian ethos, and most interestingly he exploits the wealth of amusing phonological possibilities offered by words themselves. Sadly, a part of this comes across to the Italian reader as nonsense in a more literal sense, and in this essay we intend to focus on examples of this (necessary?) sacrifice, considering how different translators have tip-toed across this linguistic minefield.

There are so many Italian versions available on the market that a critical analysis of this question would require the space of a book, not of an essay. We will therefore concentrate on just two versions: one is the translation produced by Teodorico Pietrocola-Rossetti, a work of specific interest inasmuch as this was the first Italian translation of the work (1872) and the translator knew Dodgson/Carroll personally; the second is a brilliant, daring Italian version published by Rizzoli in 2013 and translated by Aldo Busi. Highly enlightening the afterword to the Rizzoli edition written by Carmen Covito:

"*Il problema stava nel restituire a questo testo la sua originaria freschezza lessicale e far brillare una per una tutte le mine linguistiche che Carroll seminò nel suo libro. Anche a costo di qualche divergenza esplosiva*". What does today's English reader lose?

Probably the most delightful thing for a little Victorian girl to hear would have been the poems and songs in *Alice*. Eight of the eleven songs or poems used by Carroll are parodies of works which a Victorian would have known. Known and hated, for these are rather pedantic moral tales intended to encourage children to be busy, diligent, obedient, respectful of their elders etc. – in a word, to be and do all the things that children find irksome!

Today we are familiar with Carroll's eccentric Father William, not with the original found in Robert Southey's poem *The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them* (1799), with its last stanza admonishing youth to prepare for old age, thus: "I am cheerful, young man," father William replied, / "Let the cause thy attention engage; / In the days of my youth I remember'd my God! / And He hath not forgotten my age."

And again Carroll's "How doth the little crocodile" fails to call to mind in the modern reader the original by Isaac Watts, enticingly entitled *Against Idleness and Mischief* (1715, but still a standard in Victorian education), opening with: "How doth the little busy Bee / Improve each shining Hour" and closing with a stanza explicitly warning children of the dangers of idleness: "In works of Labour or of skill / I would be busy too: / For Satan finds some mischief still / For idle hands to do."
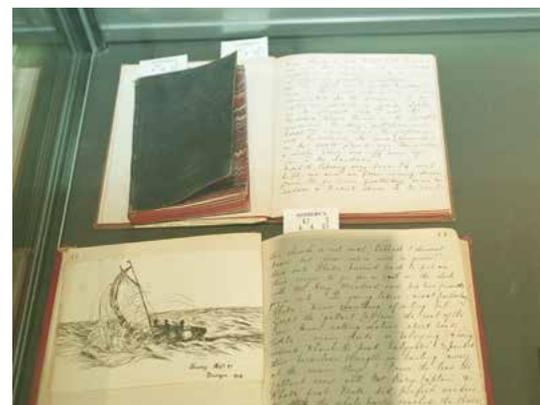
■ Stories and illustrations by Lewis Carroll which used to belong to Alice Liddell, the girl who inspired him to write.

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One final example may be found in this warning against trusting people's flattery (the parody may sound rather ironic when we remember that it was written by a man whose hobby was photographing little girls in various stages of undress). Carroll's "The Lobster Quadrille" is inspired by Mary Hewitt's, *The Spider and the Fly* (1829), in which the incautious fly is drawn into the spider's trap. The original opens: "Will you walk into my parlour?" said the Spider to the Fly and ends quite explicitly: "And now, dear little children, who may this story read, / To idle, silly, flattering words, I pray you ne'er heed; / Unto an evil counsellor close heart, and ear, and eye, / And take a lesson from this tale of the Spider and the Fly."

So much for the passing of time. Let us now consider what is lost in the shift from English to Italian as well as what may be found in this transfer. We will look at just a few examples of moments when Carroll's verbal acrobatics call for bold leaps of fantasy from the translator.
A curious starting point is offered by a phrase that has become a standard expression in English. The opening lines of Chapter II,
"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English)
are rendered by Pietrocola-Rossetti as
"Curiosissimo e sempre più curiosissimo!" gridò Alice (era tanta la sua sorpresa che non sapeva più parlar correttamente la sua lingua)
and similarly by Busi:
"Sempre più stranissimo!" esclamò Alice (era così stupefatta che per un istante si era del tutto dimenticata come si esclama senza strafare).
Both avoid the obvious pitfall of "English", but Busi also dodges the question of grammar.
Alice's perplexity about how to speak to the mouse in the same chapter ("I daresay it's a French mouse, come over with William the Conqueror.")

■ *The Lobster Quadrille* by Charles Folkard.

leads Pizzacola-Rossetti to update the question to a reality closer to 19th-century Italy:
"Scommetto ch'è un Sorcio Francese, venuto quì con Napoleone".
Whilst Busi perhaps judges both contexts sufficiently remote and stays closer to the original:
"Forse è un topo francese, arrivato qua con Guglielmo il Conquistatore."
Pizzacola-Rossetti then continues as he transfers the mouse's historical narrative, intended to be so dry (boring) or "*seccante*" that it will dry out the poor creatures who have been swimming in the pool of tears, and relates the part played by General Oudinot in the Napoleonic Wars.
When none of these dry tales succeeds in drying out the characters, the Dodo addresses the company in a pompous polysyllabic manner:
"I move that the meeting adjourn, for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies".
It would be wholly unjust to criticise Pizzacola-Rossetti for pomposity in his
"Propongo che il parlamento si aggiorni, accioché sieno adottati rimedii più energici"
compared to Busi's:
"Propongo di aggiornare l'assemblea per l'adozione immediata di più drastici rimedi..."
as both are writing for their own age. Neither, however, can render the feeling that simple, spoken English is

monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon, given that Italian is naturally Latin-based and polysyllabic. The criticism levelled at the Dodo (or Dronte for Pizzacolla-Rossetti) inevitably misses the mark in translation:
"Speak English!" said the Eaglet. "I don't know the meaning of half those long words",
which becomes:
"Ma parli italiano!" esclamò l'Aquilotto. "Non capisco la metà delle sue parolone"
for Pizzacola-Rossetti, and
"Parla come ti ha insegnato tua mamma!" disse l'Aquilotto. "Non conoscono il significato di metà di quei paroloni lunghi lì"
for Busi.
There are moments when Carroll's use of homophones for humour work well in Italian.
"You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis' 'Talking of axes', said the Duchess, 'chop off her head!'",
rendered as:
"Ella sa che la terra impiega ventiquattro ore per girare intorno al suo asse" - "A proposito di asce!" gridò la Duchessa, "tagliatele il capo!"
(PR) and as:
"Vede, la Terra impiega ventiquattr'ore a ruotare intorno al suo asse..." "A proposito di asce," disse la Duchessa, "tagliatele la testa!" (AB).
There are other moments when this process fails miserably.
The Mock-Turtle tells Alice about his schooldays, explaining that the schoolchildren called their teacher (a turtle) a tortoise. Alice fails to understand why and is told, rather sharply, that this was because he "taught us", playing on the almost identical sounds of "tortoise" and "taught us". Both translators take up the challenge. Pizzacola-Rossetti's teacher (*una testuggine*) was called a "*tartaruga*" –
"perché c'insegnava a tartagliare,"
whilst Busi's had the same name
"Testuggine, perché a forza di test ti faceva venire la ruggine, no?".
In both cases our poor little girl is

rebuked for being too stupid to see this for herself.

No comment is necessary.

The next landmine follows swiftly in the school-day memories as the Mock-Turtle explains that the hours spent at school were reduced day by day, since the word "lesson" indicates that they "lessen". Quite a challenge!

"Ma è questa la ragione perché si chiamano lezioni," osservò il Grifone: "perché soffrono lesioni ogni giorno."

Pizzacola-Rossetti informs his readers. Aldo Busi tries another solution:

"Ma è per questo che sono chiamate ore d'istruzione," osservò il Grifone: "perché si distruggono l'un l'altra."

Perhaps a little more felicitous and reminiscent of the question that all Italian teachers will have about school-trips (*Viaggio d'istruzione, con o senza l'apostrofo?*).

There are also some moments of pure desperation for translators as Carroll plays on the confusion of fish and boots with the words "soles" (*suola/sogliola*) and "heels/eels" (*tacchi/anguille*). In this case neither translator picks up the glove, choosing simply to skip the passage.

Finally we should take a look at the passage where the Italian reader can only be convinced that he/she is truly reading nonsense. The dormouse tells Alice the tale of three little sisters who lived at the bottom of a well. Curious

enough in itself, but *curiouser* still when we learn that this is a treacle well. Treacle is a sugar syrup, known in Italian as "*melassa*" and there can be very few people in England today who can understand the significance of this well for the original Alice (Alice Liddell). Just two and a half kilometres north of the centre of Oxford on the River Isis (the Thames in Oxford) we can still find a "treacle well", a site of religious pilgrimage where treacle has the mediaeval sense of "healing unguent". What do the three little sisters do in this well? They learn to draw treacle:

"'You can draw water out of a water-well', said the Hatter; 'so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well - eh, stupid?'".

Carroll now proceeds to play on the confusion generated by the two meanings of "draw": extracting (*trarre*) and making pictures with pencil and paper. This play on words creates a problem that Pietrocola-Rossetti fails to notice or fails to solve:

"Ella sa trarre l'acqua dal pozzo d'acqua, non è vero?" disse il Cappellaio; "ebbene si può così trarre melazzo da un pozzo di melazzo - eh! stupidina!"

and which Busi boldly takes up and solves by playing on the double meaning of "*schizzo*" in Italian:

"Se si possono prendere schizzi d'acqua da un pozzo d'acqua," disse il

Cappellaio, "converrai che si potranno anche prendere schizzi di melassa da un pozzo di melassa, no? Grulla!".

As the tale continues we learn that the sisters

"drew all manner of things - everything that begins with an M -'",

allowing Busi to continue with his "*schizzi*":

"Imparavano a disegnare schizzi" continuò il Ghiro, sbadigliando e fregandosi gli occhi, sentendosi cascare dal sonno "e schizzavano cose di ogni genere... tutte quelle che cominciano per emme".

Pietrocola-Rossetti's non-solution moves on with a rather surprising choice that we will understand soon afterwards:

"Imparavano a trarre," continuò il Ghiro, sbadigliando e stropicciandosi gli occhi, perché moriva di sonno; "e traevano cose d'ogni genere - tutto quel che comincia con una T".

The question "why with an M?" invites a predictably illogical answer "'Why not?' said the March Hare."

We will soon discover that there is a reason, found in the list of things that begin with an M:

"mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness - you know you say things are 'much of a muchness' - did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?".

■ *The Queen of Hearts* (Christopher Wheeldon's ballet *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at the Royal Opera House in London).

■ The plaintive wail of Cary Grant, the Mock Turtle, as he pours out his sad lament to Alice (Charlotte Henry) while William Austin in his Gryphon costume.

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This has led us to "much of a muchness" (i.e. very similar) and has led Pietrocola-Rossetti with his letter T to *"una Trappola, un Topo, una Topaja, un Troppo – già, ella dice 'il troppo stroppia' – oh, non ha mai veduto il ritratto d'un 'troppo stroppia'?"* in which, at last, his translation renders explicit the felicitous connection between "*trarre*" and "*ritrarre*". Busi has kept faith with the letter M and produces his own list of artistic subjects: *"macachi, meteoriti, memoria, massima … sai che si dice 'in linea di massima'. Hai mai visto lo schizzo di una linea di massima?"* delightfully adding a line to his drawing.

The edition with Busi's translation, printed with the original in a parallel text, emerges as the better of the two today, in part because it is written for a 21st century reader but more importantly, we feel, because Busi realises that in the "nonsense genre" form is inextricably linked to content, and he has the courage to manipulate the text so as to produce his own verbal fireworks and, we are sure, to delight the young Italian reader today. Pure nonsense can be generated at no cost nowadays with that splendid IT instrument Google translator which offers us this pearl: "*Il Ghiro aveva chiuso gli occhi da questo momento, e stava fuori in un dormiveglia; ma,*

a causa e pizzicato dal Cappellaio, si svegliò di nuovo con un gridolino, e continuò: '–che comincia con una M, come ad esempio mouse-trap, e la luna, e la memoria, e muchness-sai che dici le cose sono molto più di un muchness. – Hai mai visto una cosa come il disegno di un muchness?'". We can only conclude by wishing *Alice in Wonderland* many happy returns of the day ("c*ento o centocinquanta di questi giorni*"). This is a text which has rightly become a *pretext*, a launch-pad for the fantasy of past, present and (we trust) future generations of writers, artists, film producers etc. A text which like Alice herself will never grow old.

(Re)presenting *Alice*

The second aspect of the rewriting of *Alice in Wonderland* that we should like to analyse is the reciprocal exchange between word and image. Since Carroll's novel first appeared words and images have represented an inseparable bond: this is clearly seen in the drawings which Carroll himself prepared for the manuscript edition of his novel and in the countless illustrations made of Alice in the years following 1865.

The topic of rewriting Alice in images is one that has an immediate application in the classroom. This is why we have decided to adopt a less traditional critical approach, proposing a process of analysis which involves the reader – and, ideally, the student – in a path of reflection and active research. From among the innumerable iconographical versions of the character of Alice that have been created since 1865 we have chosen six significant examples, each representing a particular modality of historical reading of Alice and the novel in which she is the protagonist. In teaching terms this activity may be used both in the phase of introducing the novel and its protagonist and in a concluding phase of reflection about them.

FIRST (RE)PRESENTATION: ALICE LIDDELL (1858)

The first picture to be analysed represents Alice Liddell, the historical Alice.

a. Give students 10 minutes to read the following passage (http://www.brainpickings.org/2012/07/04/story-of-alice/). Then ask them to find the answers to the following questions:
  I Who was Alice Liddell?
  II What was the relationship between her and Lewis Carroll?
  III How and where did Carroll meet her?
  IV What concerned Alice's mother?

b. The photograph represents Alice Liddell and was taken by Lewis Carroll himself in 1858. Observe the photograph and answer the following questions:
  I What does this photograph tell you about the person who took it?
  II What does Alice look like?
  III What do you think about the attitude of the girl?
  IV Do you think she likes being photographed?
  V What is Alice's dress like? Why is she dressed up like this?
  VI DEBATE. This photograph, together with many similar other photographs taken by Carroll himself, has raised a series of controversial questions about Carroll's personality. Can you guess why?

SECOND (RE)PRESENTATION: CARROLL'S ALICE

The picture represents Lewis Carroll's own drawing of Alice.

1. Is Carroll's Alice similar to or different from Alice Liddell?
2. What is peculiar about her in this picture?
3. What is she doing?
4. Why is she crouching like this?

THIRD (RE)PRESENTATION: TENNIEL'S ALICE (1865)

This picture is a drawing representing one of the first images of the "fictional" Alice made by the English illustrator John Tenniel in 1865.

1. Focus on the image, compare it with the previous picture and say:

   a if there are any similarities and/or differences between the two versions;
   b if you can you guess Alice's age;
   c what is "normal" and what is not in the picture;
   d what effect the picture has on you as an observer;
   e what would attract you about this picture if you were a child.

FOURTH (RE)PRESENTATION: WALT DISNEY'S ALICE (1951)

In 1951 Walt Disney made a film version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The film is known for having perhaps been Disney's worst box office flop.

1. Focus on the picture representing Disney's Alice and answer the following questions:

   a What does Alice look like?
   b How old does she look?
   c What is different from the previous versions you have analysed?
   d If you compare this picture with Tenniel's drawing, can you describe what is peculiar about Disney's version of Alice?
   e If you compare this picture with Carroll's original portrait of Alice, what is lost? What is added?

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FIFTH (RE)PRESENTATION: TIM BURTON'S ALICE (2010)

In 2010 the film director Tim Burton made a film version of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The picture represents a scene from the film.

1. Look at the picture and answer the questions below:

- **a** What atmosphere dominates the picture?
- **b** What does Burton's Alice have in common with Carroll's Alice?
- **c** How does Burton's Alice differ from Disney's?
- **d** How is Burton's film setting different from Disney's? Focus on colours, shapes, atmosphere, etc.
- **e** How far removed is Burton's Alice from Tenniel's?
- **f** How old is Alice? Does this matter?

SIXTH (RE)PRESENTATION: YOU AND ALICE

Which are the most recent adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland*? It is now your turn to find them. Here are some questions that might help you:

1. It has been said that "Alice's story has been told many times, and as character, text, and cultural concept she has been referenced in locations as diverse as music videos and theme park rides" (Brooker 2001). With the help of the Internet, find a recent adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* and describe what it is like and what its relations with the previous adaptations that you have studied are. Use your imagination: you can choose a song, video-game, graffiti art, theme park ride, etc.

2. If you Google "Alice in Wonderland" you come up with an enormous quantity of images of different kinds, shapes and origins. Choose a picture which you find interesting and put it in relation with the pictures you have analysed. Are there any similarities and/or differences? Does the picture you chose suggest a new interpretation of Alice? What aspects of Alice does the image you have chosen underline? Share your thoughts with the rest of the class.

■ *Alice in Wonderland: Through The Looking Glass* (2016), the sequel to the Tim Barton's Alice.

3. In the film *The Matrix* (1999) Morpheus offers Neo the chance to enter the Matrix by taking the red pill. Here is the quotation from the scene: "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes". Why does a reference to *Alice in Wonderland* appear in a film like *The Matrix*? What effect does it create? Does *The Matrix* add a further layer of interpretation to the ones suggested by the pictures you have just analysed?

Conclusion

The two paths of analysis that we have proposed offer us the image of *Alice in Wonderland* as an extremely fruitful cultural matrix, one which over the course of 150 years has given life to infinite variations, transformations and adaptations in ambits that are very different from that of the "text". What future paths will little Alice follow? In what worlds, languages, media and forms will she/it move? Alice herself asked this question 150 years ago: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The answer, today as yesterday, can only be the same: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

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