

philology

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LEWIS CARROLL AND IRIS MURDOCH: DIALOGUE AFTER A CENTURY

The article dwells upon influences of L. Carroll's Alice in Wonderland in Iris Murdoch's early novel The Flight from the Enchanter. The analysis is conducted in the terms of inheritance and contradiction with the traditional classical 19th c. nonsense and fairy tales. Attention is paid to the fact that assimilating and embodying the deeper structural principles of Carroll's nonsense Iris Murdoch stays in strong opposition to the child's (childish) mentality. The results show that these principles ("child's" thinking, enchantedness, believing the unbelievable, wordplay as the structural basis) are found in Murdoch's novel but represent the immaturity with which she strongly polemizes.

Key words: L.Carroll, I.Murdoch, nonsense, fairy tale, allusion, contradiction.

I. Introduction Iris Murdoch's heritage of 26 novels is being profoundly analyzed by scholars in different aspects, mostly psychological and philosophic, religious and mythological. The given research will touch upon problem of intertext, and Carrollian influence in particular, in Iris Murdoch's second novel *The Flight From the Enchanter* (1956): a story about a spirited young girl (Annette) who runs away from the exclusive Kensington finishing school in which she has been placed by her cosmopolitan parents, and enters the School of Life. She is caught up in an extraordinary web of intricate and sometimes bizarre relationships dominated by the mysterious figure of Mischa Fox – an all-powerful, international tycoon from whom most of the major characters are trying to escape.

Escaping from an enchanted magic world is a recurring motif of Iris Murdoch's novels, thus they gain some features of an 'anti-fairy-tale' (a fairy-tale acted out in reality with tragic ending) [2, p. 609-620], that's why behind many images and

collisions one can observe the outlines of fairy-tale heroes and motifs though already changed, inversed.

II. Statement of problem *The Flight from the Enchanter* is without a doubt a Carrollian novel, as we can easily see from numerous allusions and quotations in the text. It encompassed many fairy-tales, both folktales and authorial, from Charles Perrault to Antoine de Saint-Exupery, but the atmosphere of absurdity and reversed logics prevails in the novel. The aim of the article is to analyse Carrollian allusions and reminiscences in the early novel by Iris Murdoch on all narrative levels.

III. Results Play upon words, meanings, and names abounds (for example, Mrs. Wingfield's remark about Calvin Blick: 'He's so sharp, he'll cut himself' [3, p. 169]). Madness is also a recurring motif (Mrs. Wingfield claims to have killed her husband, Hunter Keepe gets sick with some kind of schizophrenia, Peter Saward becomes a victim of an absurd obsession – deciphering of the Kastanic script). We encounter several cases of change in size (John Rainborough seems to grow smaller while observing creatures in his garden, and then again bigger, when disturbed [3, p. 119], Annette's eyes also change their size: "the enormous furious surface of her eyes which in memory seemed to grow and grow until they filled nearly the whole picture" [3, p. 125]). There also take place different kinds of transformations: the chandelier turns into waves, the school library into a sacked city, the magnifying glass into an eye, a girl into a mermaid, a child into a woman ("She [Annette] looked to him [Rainborough] much the same child as he had met six years ago, only now, he saw at a second look, she was also a woman. It was absurd." [3, p. 119]) We can even find conscious quotations: John Rainborough analyzing the strange system of promotions in SELIB comes to the following conclusion: "The only difficulty about this liberal, and on the whole uninvincible, system was that it was hard to see what would happen when all members of the staff had achieved the maximum promotion and, as it were all pawns had become queens." [3, p. 82] Calvin Blick while explaining to Rosa the refugee policy uses the following comparison: "After all, it's England. It's like the Duchess in Alice. No one really gets beheaded." [3, p. 275] The pictures on tapestries in Mischa's house are also reminiscent of *Alice* books: "No

human figures were to be seen. [...] a hound loping amiably in pursuit of a rabbit, [...] and a unicorn holding a conversation with a lion.” [3, p. 183]

But all these constructions are meaningless without Alice. And, I should say, there isn't one – there are three Alices in the novel (if we recollect that Alice liked pretending to be several people at a time, it won't sound absurd), namely Annette Cockeyne, Rosa Keepe and Nina the dressmaker. They all know each other but have a problem with loving-liking one another – though it's not surprising if we remember Alice boxing her own ears for cheating in a croquet game. Rosa was very fond of Annette's mother and “tried to be fond of Annette, not without some success” [3, p. 58], “Annette felt towards Nina a mixture of possessiveness, nervousness, and contempt” [3, p. 73], “Annette suspected that really Nina detested her heartily” [3, p. 72]. The women's appearances are as different as can be – Annette is very slim and tall, Rosa is plump, and Nina is of small stature. They are of different age, status, experience, occupation and character. The only one who connects all Alices is the enigmatic Enchanter – Mischa Fox, from whom they all try to escape.

The escapism theme, common of Carroll's and Lear's (as well as of other children's romantic writers) books, in Murdoch's novels acquires quite the opposite meaning – instead of escape from reality and adult life into magic ‘another world’, heroes of her novels fly **from** the Enchanter, thus trying to escape the tyranny of magic. Therefore Alice can turn into Anti-Alice, like we can see in the case of Nina-Alice, which will be looked upon more closely later on.

L.I.Skouratovskaya points out the striking resemblance of the initial passages of the novel with *Alice in Wonderland*, almost citatory vicinity [4, p. 45]: ‘what is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?’ [1, p. 35] thought Alice, and in the first passage of the *Flight from the Enchanter* we read: ‘Annette disliked the *Inferno*. It seemed to her a cruel and unpleasant book’ [3, p. 5]. The episode where Annette leaves school is reminiscent of both *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*: the corridor “looked to her the same, and yet different. At was as if she had walked through the looking-glass” [3, p. 7]. And the funny ‘gift’ episode (where Annette hands in the copy of Browning to the headmistress of her ex-school as a gift, though she has just

taken it from the school library) is almost identical, though reversed, to the Caucus-race prize giving scene: “Then they all crowded round her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble, saying ‘We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble!’; and, when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered.” [1, p. 46]

Alice’s traits of character also seem to be divided between the heroines of the novel – Annette represents curiosity, dreaminess but she lacks prudence which is embodied in Rosa. Apart from it Rosa represents sensibility – she’s the one whose eyes are often bright (Alice’s eyes are often characterized as ‘bright and eager’), though Rosa’s are bright “due to the proximity of tears” [3, p. 60]. Though Rosa isn’t deprived of the inartificial ways of a child: *Kitty* – that’s how she calls her machine at the factory (“‘Oh, Kitty,’ said Rosa. ‘Kitty, Kitty!’ *Kitty, Kitty bang click* said Kitty, like a clever parrot repeating his own name.” [3, p. 40]), this passage strikingly reminds of the *Looking-Glass* kittens: “‘If they would only purr for “yes” and mew for “no,” or any rule of that sort,’ she had said, ‘so that one could keep up a conversation! But how *can* you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?’” [1, p. 120]

Rosa also proves to be Alice in her attitude to Mischa Fox – the Enchanter: “it made no difference. Whether she ran towards him or away it was all the same.” [3, p. 254] Rosa being at Mischa’s s Italian villa thinks of leaving him: “If she were to go away, all this would vanish too, and Mischa should be left, haggard and staring, in some place unimaginably stripped and denuded” [3, p. 269]. It seems that this Alice knows for sure, whose dream it is – not the Red King’s at any rate.

The case of Nina-Alice is mostly controversial and provoking: maybe the only obvious evidence of her being Alice is that Nina wants to escape from Mischa to “Antipodes” [3, p. 141]. Nina represents Anti-Alice, as I have declared it previously: her dreams are nightmares, she’s always depressed and frightened, and she’s a pawn in Mischa’s game without any hope of becoming a queen. But her escape seems to be the most convincing; it’s like Alice falling Down the Rabbit-Hole reflected in the looking-glass: Alice’s relaxed sleepiness (“‘And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, ‘*Do cats eat bats? Do*

cats eat bats?' and sometimes, '*Do bats eat cats?*' for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it." [1, p. 36]) turns into desperate hopelessness (Nina is sitting on the window-sill and thinking about Jesus Christ) – "It was not the senseless blackness of death, the senseless blackness as it was for her. Then her thoughts coiled back: *if not so for him, then not so for her. If for her, then for him too.* A dark confusion rose to cover her. For an instant she felt the terrible weight of a God depending upon her will. It was too heavy." [3, p. 262] [emphasis added] The 'falling' episode is also literally reversed – while Alice is falling upright, Nina "pitched head first out of the window" [3, p. 262].

If one troubles to find other Carroll's hero's, Calvin Blick appears to be the Cheshire Cat (he keeps smiling all the time, always disappears, and he's the hold of *Wonderland*'s reversed logics: "You will never know the truth and you will read the signs in accordance with your deepest wishes. That is what we human always have to do. Reality is a cipher with many solutions, all of them right ones" [3, p. 274].)

Though not only separate personages are coherent to Carroll's heroes – Iris Murdoch left certain recognizable markers throughout the novel: these clues lead to the so-called second layer of meaning, or just add to the psychological portrait of personages. For example, the scene, where Calvin Blick (Mischa Fox's personal assistant) offers to reluctant Hunter Keepe to buy from him the *Artemis* (the magazine established by Rosa and Hunter's mother) and meets Annette, ends in the following way: "'Get out! Get out! Get out!' shouted Hunter. He began to toss the papers up in the air. A cloud of dust spread over the three of them. Annette began to sneeze." [3, p. 17] This brings to mind the scene in Duchess's house: "There's certainly too much pepper in that soup!' Alice said to herself, as well as she could for sneezing." [1, p. 62] This allusion gives a certain tang of cruelty and absurdity of the scene.

Probably the most illustrative example is the episode where Rosa visits Mrs. Wingfield looking for the support in the case with *Artemis*. This scene has strong allusions to both Mad Tea-Party and Advice from a Caterpillar. The following table gives only a few of them:

<i>The Flight</i>	<i>Mad Tea-Party</i>	<i>Advice from a Caterpillar</i>
Miss Foy, Mrs. Wingfield’s companion, is allowed to wash up only once in three weeks – “It takes that long for us to work through all our china”	‘it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.’ ‘Then you keep moving round, I suppose?’ said Alice.	
Mrs. Wingfield: “What do you mean, you’ve no opinion? You must think <i>something</i> about it, one way or the other!” – “I mean,’ said Rosa, ‘that I think you’ve been very rude to Miss Foy.’ – “Well, why the hell don’t you say what you mean?”	‘You should learn not to make personal remarks,’ Alice said with some severity; ‘it’s very rude.’ ... ‘Then you should say what you mean,’ the March Hare went on.	‘What do you mean by that?’ said the Caterpillar sternly. ‘Explain yourself!’
When Rosa is ready to leave baffled by Mrs. Wingfield’s behavior, she says: Sit down girl, and relax. I’m not as mad as I seem.”		Come back!’ the Caterpillar called after her. ‘I’ve something important to say!’
Mrs. Wingfield “closed her eyes and folded her hands on her stomach.” Rosa said ‘Good afternoon.’ Mrs. Wingfield did not reply or open her eyes, and Rosa left the room on tiptoe.” [3, p. 106-114]		She stretched herself up on tiptoe, and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large caterpillar, that was sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

The strange amalgam of wits and madness which we encounter in the image of Mrs. Wingfield is emphasised by these criss-cross allusions. The alleged senile imbecility thus turns into legendary madness of Mad Hatter and March Hare, and vivid mind and insight is equalled with Caterpillar’s practical and open mind.

Play upon meanings and names, being one of the most prominent features of Carroll’s books about Alice, was marked as a characteristic feature of the novel. That’s how Hunter explains why Rosa is working at the factory: “it all comes of being named after Rosa Luxemburg. She never had a chance.” To what Calvin Blick (obviously, named after John Calvin) answers: “Oh, I don’t know. What about me? I got on all right.” [3, p. 12] Thus one observes the polemics with Carroll and a new view of Alice’s Adventures in the afterglow of all the horridness of the 20th c. as opposed to the more or less calm 19th c. Annette – the true Carrollian dream-child –

seems to fail in the real life. She leaves her school and enters a School of Life, and as a result she decides to commit suicide. At the symbolic farewell party she puts in the following way: “‘What price the school of Life now, Annette?’ said Calvin, - ‘It’s the end of term’ said Annette.” The difference in the ways of committing suicide among the two girls is striking and illustrative: Annette chooses death in a dream – sleeping-pills: “I’m going to end this farce” [3, p. 245] ‘I can’t stand this any longer!’ [1, p. 270] But she takes the wrong tablets and postpones her ‘waking’: even in the train, while flying from the Enchanter, she “was absorbed in watching the landscape. A house, a dog, a man on a bicycle, a woman in a field, a distant mountain. She looked upon them all enchanted, lips parted and eyes wide. It was like being at the pictures”. She seems to have never left her fairy-tale.

IV. Conclusion Intertext connection between Lewis Carroll’s tales and Iris Murdoch’s novel which we tried to find out, on the one hand, once and again shows the lasting presence of Alice archetype in the 20th c. English literature (hardly can we find a work of art NOT reminiscent of *Alice* books), on the other hand, it illustrates how this image is changed under circumstances. This trifurcation of Alice’s image is unique in its way and represents all possible outcomes of the infantility and immaturity strongly counterpointed by the author. The second Murdoch’s novel exemplifies her key philosophical idea: introspection is to be decreased to create more awareness of others and thus increasing individual autonomy.

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