

Children's literature and illustrated novels. Educating readers, literary works and visual surprises

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Abstract. This article reflects on the specific literary identity of illustrated novels in children's literature. The specificity of large picture books, to be read over and over, leafing through the pages with amazement, discovering the images emerging from the pages, is a historical tradition that has seen illustrations skilfully become part of the density of meaning in written narration. The figures, often carefully dosed, offer readers another "other vision", projected towards new horizons of interpretation. The literary identity of illustrated novels – for children and for everyone – bears a particular surplus of wonder that draws readers in contemplation, offering the gratuity of a pause to immerse oneself in the figures, in clear contrast to the clichés of brevity and the "fast food" book. Also in this sense, critical attention must be paid to the quality of the published works. The evocative power of the metaphorical corpus of the whole work in fact consists of several styles and languages which, triggered by artistic research, offer a two-fold act of otherness. The novel and the illustration do not waiver their respective complexities, working rather as allies in celebrating the utopian dimension of the literary, aesthetic, emotional, intellectual and educational experience of reading, looking and imagining.

Keywords. Children's literature – Illustrated novels – Picture Books – Education Experience of Reading – Narration

This contribution focusing on children's literature, and the following reflections, refer specifically to illustrated novels – including collections of fairy tales, novellas and stories –, books with pictures in which the text prevails while the illustrations appear here and there according to the preferences of the artist and the choices of the publishers. These literary works, which have characteristics packed with challenges and literary, aesthetic, educational and pedagogic implications, are cornerstones of illustrated books for children as well as other audiences¹. The novel² – on a par with other narrative genres objectively consisting of a large number of pages –, implements its unique literary identity associated with multiform visual contributions, and it is this union that builds a special dialogue with the reader. Endowing literary texts, and consequently also the

¹ See A. Faeti, *Guardare le figure. Gli illustratori italiani nei libri per l'infanzia*, Einaudi, Turin, 1972

² I investigated the issue of the novel in children's literature in the chapter M. Bernardi, *Libertà del romanzo e inquietudine del raccontare*, in S. Barsotti, L. Cantatore (edited by), *Letteratura per l'infanzia. Temi, forme e simboli della contemporaneità*, Carocci, 2019, and in the monograph, M. Bernardi, *Il cassetto segreto. Letteratura per l'infanzia e romanzo di formazione*, Unicopli, 2011

reader, with this precious combination of textuality and illustration substantially means opening up to the complicity of languages and expressive codes, making room for hermeneutic surprises that identify accord or discord, colloquium or soliloquy, between the author and the illustrator. Precisely in this interesting coexistence fuelled by possible vicinities between poetics, as effective expressive counterpoints, lies the need to critically investigate the quality of the illustrated novel, both in terms of education to reading and the relationship created between the reader and the text/illustration, and in terms of the intrinsic specificity of literary works conceived in this way. Consistently with the historically authoritative presence of images in children's publishing and the significant areas of experimentation of visual codes – just think of the luck and extraordinary development in contemporary publishing of editorial forms based on various unique genres, including *picture books*, *silent books* and *graphic novels*³ –, it becomes even more significant to observe what occurs in “books with figures” in which the text in any case prevails. These are novels of different lengths, short stories, collections of fairy tales that demand a disposition to patient reading, distributed over a dilated time, designed to remain within the dimension of narrative temporality of literature, and within the metaphoric sphere of distance and the far away – from here, from material everydayness, from the conventional measurement of socially shared time, from the agitated immediacy of the real. They are volumes in which the captivating presence of illustrations enhances the possibility of gaining an approach to free reading, almost a promise to the reader to enjoy the right to the pleasure of a pause. A pause dedicated to immersing oneself in the figures, those seductive promoters of further planes of escape⁴, in which intuitions, thoughts, imagination and daydreams flourish. On this plane, readers tell themselves secret stories of images and words, rediscovered in the solitude of reading, in the wake of secondary plots set free by the book. If books are infinite, as Giorgio Manganelli⁵ wrote, and are therefore not closed but open systems in every part of the page, ready to release the infinite stories that can be born between the blank spaces between one printed word and the next, then readers of novels with illustrations have always had – and still have – a decisive extra *chance* of being “extended” authors, as Ezio Raimondi⁶ picturesquely describes. Creative escape and self-care, J.R.R. Tolkien suggests for extended reader-authors, following Ezio Raimondi: the reader, becoming the renewed author, gradually finds his own mythopoeia. Referring to children's books that aim to be read and looked at in this perspective means above all considering the cultural and educational depth of editions of novels, and – as explained – other narrative genres, which are rich in written pages, edited and selected for the quality of both text and figures, and for their innovative, peculiar and original impact that this union produces. Such conditions thus mark a break from the use of simplifying, trivializing reading models offering easy dissemination and immediate consumption. Large picture books we think of are not slaves of “presentism”⁷, that most hazardous phenomenon of modern times that forces us to consider only the imme-

³ Research into children's literature includes significant studies on visual phenomena indicated in the references to this work.

⁴See J.R.R. Tolkien (1964), *Albero e foglia*, Bompiani 2000.

⁵See G. Manganelli, *La letteratura come menzogna*, Adelphi, Milan, 1985.

⁶ See E. Raimondi, *Un'etica del lettore*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007.

⁷ F. Moretti, *Un paese lontano. Cinque lezioni sulla cultura americana*, Einaudi, 2019, p. 10.

diate present, the brief, the quick, the here and now, the useful and the practical, forgetting the philosophical and pedagogic foundations of historical vision, meditated time, duration, contemplation, critical reflection and, all in all, education to free and critical thought. If they respond to high-level literary, figurative, aesthetic criteria, large picture books lead the reader to the opposite side, helping to save them from the real risk of “drowning in the existent”⁸. In theoretical terms and, knowingly, partly also in ideal terms, we aim to observe the complex and delicate dynamics intertwined in the reader's intimate relationship with the illustrated novel, considering both the literary properties of the works that share their poetics with illustrations. This dualism comes into play invisibly yet intensely when the book falls into the hands of the reader. Because every narrative and literary genre is a representation of a universe waiting to be explored.

1. Reading and meeting figures

Between the pages of a book we unexpectedly come across an illustration. A plastic scene appears, a frozen image from which a world takes shape. The continuity of reading is interrupted as the text takes a break. Not because this actually happens; there is no interval in the written corpus. Yet the layout allows an image to come to the surface, and suddenly this image expects to be looked at and discovered in all the many details and suggestions it offers. The figure grabs the reader's attention, carrying them towards a renewed interpretation of the story offered by the visual, by a different code, a different narration. The reader falls under the spell of the illustrations scattered among the pages of the novel and, perhaps, even leafs through book in search of them. When he finds them, he stops to scrutinise them, imagining in his own way and anticipating what the story has told so far and what it will tell. The reader is lost in the contemplation of the figures and follows the references they offer, connecting meanings that relate not only to the story he is reading but also intertwined with his own many digressions. These digressions belong to a special form of freedom to be distracted, to waste time, to get lost in the time and space of the union of words and images, shifting attention to associations, combinations of thoughts, fantasies, emotional colours, and recovering one's own knowledge. In the most profitable and pleasurable manner, these all contribute to establishing an immersive, trusting relationship between the reader and the illustrated book. In brief: the reader sets off. He escapes into a parallel universe of Elsewhere, overcoming the apparent boundaries of the text. The imagination's break from time and space is required to allow the journey to begin. Thus the illustrations declare their substantial alliance with the literary pages in the abduction of the reader, and strengthen its outcome. The evocative force of the visual drives the reader to temporarily betray the written page, inviting him to be seduced, eagerly waiting for the next figure. What else has the artist illustrated? The figures are revealed slowly, introducing a further source of attraction and curiosity to the reading experience, like appointments promising adventure that the reader really looks forward to. Reading should always be an adventure. You can usually count the illustrations that appear among the pages of novels on the fingers of one hand: a few, rare images, like feathers

⁸ See A. Faeti, *Specchi e riflessi, nuove letture per altre immagini*, Società Editrice Il Ponte Vecchio, Cesena, 2005, p. 153.

falling randomly here and there and almost never consistent with the events in the plot narrated alongside the figure. Perhaps their miserly existence fills them with even more mystery. Indeed, the limited number of figures may even represent a source of disappointment for the reader who is hungry for images and who would love to see illustrations of some of the narrative sequences he avidly follows. This reader cultivates the expectation of knowing more and seeking affectively and cognitively attractive and stimulating clues in the figure, to fuel his propensity for hermeneutic curiosity. And nor should the often decisive role played by the book cover be neglected. The first meeting with this paper object often follows the invitation offered by the first picture. A reference offered by children's literature in almost all cases. The illustrated cover: a half-open door to a dimension that is still unknown. And it hopes to trigger emotional experiences, promote thought, bring back memories and references to knowledge that are strengthened by reading, helping first and foremost to recognise their presence and meaning. In terms of the intimate relationship created between the child reader, the book and the choice of reading, the appointment with the visual knows and can increase the desire for the reading experience, consolidating its emotional and intellectual value. Of course the history of children's literature – alongside all forms of literature, popular and otherwise – documents the highly frequent participation of figures and illustrations in narrative genres historically considered to be textually bulky. However much literary words reveal secret passages and attract towards unexplored areas, the presence of images adds a significant excess of marvel, which plays an exclusive role in bringing shape and meaning to the corpus of the whole work. Illustrations are themselves a further interpretation for crossing any border. Thus the childhood that encounters figures emerging from among many written pages can – more effectively and more profoundly – capture the state of mind of the metaphorical journey into the far-off land of the story. If the work is able to amaze with its innovative force, it can perhaps provoke that bewilderment that we call estrangement⁹, which is once again the wonder of discovering unusual, unexpected and illuminating points of view which are able to change the initiatory and regenerative flavour. The sense of amazement offered by estrangement may arise from tiny details, different angles, changes in the use or value of an object which is otherwise considered usual, as well as many other factors relating to the style or narrative choices that destabilise ordinary visions, translating them into the languages of extraordinary visions. This leads to a turning point¹⁰, that cognitive movement towards developmental change that triggers the transformative micro-rebirths that reading is able to produce. While reading novels is in itself a journey beyond the horizons of the familiar, moving into internal/external landscapes of the unfamiliar, areas that are still unknown (or at least, that is how it should be), the other narration manifested in illustrations amplifies the opportunities for discovering a metaphorical dimension that does not fear the irruption of the disturbing: in the folds of certainty that break into pieces, in the emergence of unexpected thoughts, the tremors mixed with curiosity and fear produce estrangement, the symptom shared with the evocative force of the work and the emotional experiences of the reader captured by the intellectual stupor triggered by unique re-thinkings and unusual learning. A pact that leads to the “joys of the Inactual”¹¹.

⁹ See V. Sklovskij, *Saggi sul cinema*, Temi Editore, Trento, 2009

¹⁰ See S. Bruner, *La fabbrica delle storie. Diritto, letteratura e vita*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2006

¹¹ A. Faeti, *Specchi e riflessi, nuove letture per altre immagini*, p. 153

2. The metaphorical corpus of illustrated books, the desirable excess of the illustration

As explained, traditionally, these are literary works in which illustrations are not laid out according to a complete and continuative narrative sequence woven organically into the narrated story from start to finish. Rather they are distributed among the pages, and carefully dosed. When the quality of the stylistic research achieves the result of revealing a new universe of representations, illustrations hold the function of scenic images offering the idea of “a different vision”. This vision is surprising and even disorienting, packed with clues to be deciphered in relation to the narrative and metaphorical dimension triggered by the entanglement with the written text. In this sense, the word “vision” specifically refers to the propensity to an imaginative and interpretative dimension of freedom, utopia and, therefore, the original re-processing of the suggested meanings coming from the corpus of the text. The history of illustrations in children's literature documents how the illustrated page can become its own unique symbolic synthesis, taking on the value of icon both in the iconographic heritage of the common imagination and, more intimately, in the sphere of the private museum of the reader's own personal myths. Books with pictures, therefore, which respond to the expectations of an indisputable, clever reader like Alice: “*And what is the use of a book*”, *thought Alice, “without pictures or conversation?”*¹². Alice and Carroll both think of a book in motion, animated by the dynamism of the changes in different linguistic and narrative registers: pictures, intruding actions, theatres of dialogue and pauses of acute philosophical interrogation. In this great novel, everything remains with the mosaic of hazards which make it such a unique and absolute classic. A paradigm of complexity with which children's literature deals cyclically and which, perhaps, is painfully necessary. The metaphorical planes on which Carroll moves in fact contemplate cultural, historical and social, philosophical and aesthetic, indeed psychological challenges culminating in the revolutionary vision of childhood impersonated by that little girl and her metaphorical initiatory journey. All of this is translated with the freedom of technical sharpness of the multiple expressive forms with which the work was conceived. The pain caused by working with Alice to those having to illustrate (and/or study) her is perhaps the symptom of a profound resonance of ambiguity, conflictuality and difficulties beating in the heart of the book: the inexorable metaphorical depth of such a witty literary work, which alludes both to existential conditions of fragility, surprise, uncertainty, vulnerability, alongside the continuous recourse to amazing intelligence and otherness, can become invasive and disconcerting for anyone who comes close. Like some other fundamental classics which, not by chance, have become such, Carroll's novel emanates insistent references to its own hermeneutics of conflict: the illustrations, lyrical pages and bizarre *nonsense* are pervaded by the poetics of doubt, provocation, melancholic and subversive irony, and it is impossible to escape them. Some say that Alice is a “difficult” novel: this objection is often used to defend the discomfort the adult world feels in its approach to a book that combines an incessant variety of formal proposals undermined by meanings that are never harmless and often aim to turn sense ferociously on its head. The girl is always punctual for her appointments with the philosophical question she pre-

¹² L. Carroll, *Alice nel paese delle meraviglie e Attraverso lo specchio*, Einaudi, Turin, 1978, p. 5

sents her arguments to, investigating the dark underworld in her search for the self, she talks with the exhilarating and perturbing parodies of Victorian society, recognises her changing self, speaks all symbolic languages and is never vacuous. Indeed, it should be underlined, the great book about Alice is difficult above all when related to all-too-short novels and stories for children subject to standards of evident dullness and predictable narrative. Yes, then it is difficult, if by “difficult” we mean complex, challenging, rich, interesting, worrying so far as it keeps the reader in a healthy state of intellectual and emotional tension. This is perhaps why it is painful to read. Literature, when it is indeed such, always starts from conflict, as a condition of the existence, exploring the existential, philosophical, social, anthropological, historical and political dilemmas in which it germinated, and so does Carroll. And alongside him, the illustrators called on to tackle this incredible work. Observing the publishing history of the novel in all its textual and iconographic wholeness, we can follow a path of a well-nourished phenomenology of “Alice” styles. From Sir John Tenniell (1820-1914), the first illustrator of Alice, to Arthur Rackham, (1867-1939)¹³, and browsing onwards to contemporary illustrators, we can recognise inheritances, citations, renewals and re-inventions. If, as Antonio Faeti writes, «All illustrators are first and foremost readers»¹⁴, then any artist working on Carroll’s novel will have dealt with that world, establishing his own ties, or keeping a due distance, identifying resemblances and perhaps discordances, reinterpreting and illustrating the book according to his own vision, declaring his own stylistic and poetic choices. More styles, more interpretations of representation, and thus more visions of the world and the historical-literary-authorial context and, primarily, of the image of childhood, and of childhood itself. The multitude of styles is a substantial interpretation for the history of children’s literature as well as literature in general, and involves both the written and the illustrated page. And, we must underline, above all in light of the pedagogic perspective that keeps great stock of the quality of children’s literature and therefore the reader’s education. As Franco Moretti reminds us, referring to the literary text.

Style was used to carefully follow the process by which historical materials were moulded to fit a given vision of the world; style, or rather *styles*, in the plural, because as Simmel once commented, “as long as we know only one style, it is inevitable to understand it as identical to its contents”; it is only when we become familiar with many other different styles that we realise how each of them is an “independent factor”, with the power of order over the materials it applies to. For instance: there were many ways of representing European capitalism in the late 19th century: from Kipling’s melancholic and inflexible sense of duty to Rider Haggard’s adventurous brutality, to Verne’s para-scientific curiosity, Salgari’s melodrama and many others besides. Historical materials were always more or less the same; yet every style sought to “objectify” them, with their own specific “moulding force”, to bind together the arguments of Simmel and Panofsky¹⁵.

¹³ See A. Rauch, *Gli illustratori di Alice*, in Andersen. Il Mensile di letteratura e illustrazione sul mondo dell’infanzia, no. 324, July/August 2015

¹⁴ A. Faeti, *Specchi e riflessi, nuove letture per altre immagini*, cit. p.46

¹⁵ See G. Simmel (1900), *Filosofia del denaro*, Utet, Turin, 1984, cit. in F. Moretti, *Un paese lontano. Cinque lezioni sulla cultura americana*, Einaudi, 2019, p.12.

The multitude of ideas of representation offered in children's literature, from the classics to contemporary publishing, is an inalienable step on the path to deciphering the quality of the works, their iconographic apparatus and editorial models. Here, an example of the history of children's publishing is called for: "La Scala d'Oro", which published over 90 books with pictures, from 1932 to 1945, for the publishing house U.T.E.T., crossing the twenty years of Fascism yet being able to offer quality books distributed over a range of genres targeting young readers in progressive age groups. Novellas, fairy tales, novels, scientific texts, all carefully illustrated.

"La scala d'Oro", with old books, from before the war, on the other hand offered a triumph of varied and sophisticated styles, extraordinary artists like Bisi, Gustavino, Zampini, Mateldi, Moroni, Celsi, Pagot, Nicco, all different, all with their own lively and clearly pronounced personality, alluded to a universe of figures on which the eye was trained, feeding off contrasts, allusions, incredible landscapes from one territory to another¹⁶.

Therefore the comparative possibility that the multitude of styles solicits, provokes and offers for literary genres, for writing, for illustration, must be considered a fundamental category for the qualitative research on children's books, as it is for education to reading, because it helps the reader to acquire an Inactual vision, overcoming the obsession of the present and the inertia of the repetitiveness of epigones, stereotypes and disheartening standards that are always waiting in ambush. Also in this sense it is worth investigating books with pictures, as an exhortation to undertake a dual enterprise of otherness. It is certainly a risk, a challenge, as in its own salvific category the dimension of the Inactual¹⁷ responds to the need to feed off the unending spring of free, critical thought, the search for authenticity and the complex approach to the literary work. From this viewpoint, we can but prefer an educational choice that is able to stimulate the expressive potential of languages the work consists of, within a pedagogic thought that never falls prey to the praises of cultural consent and control systems, but which rather protects the serious quality criteria which, alone, truly respect the child reader. This history of children's literature was and is inseparable from the history of illustrations in children's books, and the different methods in which pictures are included in the text represent a clear and specific characterisation of the approach to the participatory use of books. Upturning this perspective, we may also say the same of the text. Placing words alongside or near images, they move in a dual context. And the quantitative and qualitative relationship between the two codes – linguistic and visual – changes the substance of the expressive, narrative, poetic, literary and iconographic effectiveness of the work, defining it through a new artistic and communicative identity that creates another language. Therefore, evidently, becoming familiar with a picture book that combines illustrations and text according to a narrative model in which the image has ample, prevailing space and storytelling times, constitutes an overall reading experience that requires its own process of observation, of looking, of relational, emotional and thinking styles. Conditions which are activated according to other priorities of participation in reading and making sense, as is obvious, if the reader tackles a novel with illustrations – or a fai-

¹⁶ A. Faeti, *Specchi e riflessi, nuove letture per altre immagini*, cit., p. 153

¹⁷ See G.M. Bertin, *Nietzsche. L'Inattuale idea pedagogica*, La Nuova Italia, Florence, 1977

ry tale with pictures –, when the prevailing attention is oriented to the written text and the fascination of the illustrations is unveiled progressively, almost by surprise. Or again, if the reader comes across a book such as *Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino*¹⁸, in its unabridged version illustrated by Roberto Innocenti, they will embark on a journey accompanied cleverly throughout the whole narration by an uninterrupted path that unites Collodi's story with the poetics of images. Innocenti's great book is one of the greatest examples of how the "craft" of the illustrator can absolutely qualify illustration in a role of total narration along with the text of the whole novel. The silent agreement between Collodi and Innocenti involved two very personal and separate declarations of poetics¹⁹ and styles, therefore two artistic stories, which, being "other", offered two unmistakable visions. The extraordinary contiguity created between the language of Collodi's story and the atmospheres illustrated in Innocenti's plates is the outstanding result: a novel with pictures, of pictures. As we know, the illustrative story of the puppet started with the cartoonists Enrico Mazzanti (1850-1910) and Carlo Chiostrì (1863-1939) and along the way met with artists who reinterpreted the epic of Pinocchio, increasing and defining a catalogue of styles that crossed the artistic and literary tradition of the history of children's literature²⁰. Right from its very first cries, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, a novel with illustrations, could not – and still today cannot – be imagined otherwise, without the iconographic system that retraces the adventures following subsequent stages of transformation of the imagination and the illustrative trends animating children's books over more than a century. But that is not enough. Of key importance is the interpretative category that observes and studies the representations of childhood proposed by illustration, just as, on their part, novels, and major written and oral traditional fairy story collections, have always done. In the portraits of childhood brought to life by authors and illustrators, we can recognise the symptoms of cultural influences that modify the images of childhood in different historical and social contexts. The metaphorical re-processing of artistic languages can be an outstanding way for disorienting and amazing intrusion into the control system of imagination which also skilfully conditions the production of children's books. The representations of childhood that appear on a symbolic plane, dialoguing with the universal, become icons of childhood due to the profound philosophical, anthropological and ontological roots that unite them with the substance of human existence. But these are images of childhood that seek the authentic dimension of being children, they seek it by becoming testimonials of the contradictions, dramas, solitudes, inconsistencies (compared to the adult world) in which those and these historical childhoods have lived and continue to live. To paraphrase Savinio, the tragedy of childhood can only be narrated if we go beyond the inauthentic, lying and trivialising vision given to it by the processes of cultural domestication that are also frequently found in children's literature. When, on the contrary, literary and illustrative works are able to conquer the "other vision", projecting themselves towards the Inactual of the metaphor and the extraordinary, the representation of childhood tells its own story in

¹⁸ See C. Collodi, R. Innocenti, *Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino*, La Margherita, Il Castello Editore, Cornaredo, Milan, 2015

¹⁹ See A. Faeti, *Specchi e riflessi, nuove letture per altre immagini*, cit.

²⁰ See M. Casella, *Respirando carta da risguardi. Lettori e illustratori in fabula*, in E. Beseghi (edited by), *Infanzia e racconto*, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2008

words and images with the intensity and restlessness of estrangement that triggers the excitation of new points of view. The child reader therefore acquires words and pictures for himself and for his self-image in the world which offers opportunities for mirroring, in harmony with the desire for care and self-recognition which are inherent to that child part that adults often deny. We might think of the issue of the child body and the representations that are so specifically problematic, overwhelming and perturbing to paradoxical levels offered in the classics cited here: Pinocchio's plant body, his metamorphoses and trespassing near death; Alice's body, subjected to repeated mutations and her identity threatened. The feeling of agitation characterises the strange and the wonderful, making them privileged fields of fantastic literature, and, in the icons of Pinocchio and Alice, exalts the transformative adventure of the child body, the instability that makes it extraneous to the stable and certain forms of adults. Strange and wonderful, the body that contains the monstrous features of wonder. Fairy tales, novels and illustrated books narrate this mutational aspect, and do not fear to wander onto the awkward paths of the obscure, the denied, the hidden. Reading a novel which arouses doubts and questions and discovering its illustrations, equally enlightened by sudden stimuli, can be an experience filled with both charm and attraction, a step towards leaving the comfort zone which allows the reader to take new and unbeaten paths. Intrinsic processes in the experience of reading, such as identification, recognition, mirroring, along with the tension for knowledge, the pleasure of discovery and the anticipation of the adventure of life, receive a fundamental contribution from the incursion of illustrations, when these are the result of stylistic approaches that are able to offer a hermeneutic view of the visual portrayal. What counts, always, for the whole book: seriously a novel, wholly a fairy tale: T. Todorov²¹ wrote that literature is in danger. To fight this risk it is indispensable to respond with children's literature and education to reading in a perspective of complexity. And with pictures that jump out and startle the readers.

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²¹ See T.Todorov, *La letteratura in pericolo*, Garzanti, Milan, 2008

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