

Alice's Adventures in Ideology:  
A Study on the Soviet Adaptation of Lewis Carroll's Fantasy

*In the great arsenal used by the bourgeoisie to fight against Socialism, children's books occupied a prominent role. In choosing our cannons and weapons, we have overlooked those that spread poison. We must seize this ammunition from the enemy hands.*

— Lev Kormchy

Starting from the late 1980s cultural turn, translation studies is extended to “a broad network of elements including cultural, historical, political and ideological differences,” according to Hatim and Mason (qtd. in Dutton 1). To consider the ideological aspects of translation, first, the notion of ideology has to be defined. In its classic sense, ideology is “the means by which relations of power, control and dominance are maintained and preserved within any society” (Augustinos 297). Apart from politics, ideology also influences social and cultural aspects of life, which explains its ubiquity, especially in totalitarian regimes. According to van Dijk, ideology is “the basis of the social representations” (qtd. in Dutton 2), while Marx and Engels saw it as “production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness,” including the spheres of “politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc.” (47). Thus, ideology is the superstructure of society that makes up its dominant ideas and values.

Given the ideological aspects of politics and culture, translation also becomes a political act. According to Chesterman, the translator mediates the source culture and the target culture to meet certain expectancy norms, often set by superior officials (qtd. in Dutton 4). Such filtering of the source text is referred to as “ideology of translating,” which is distinguished from “translation of ideology,” i.e., transferring socio-cultural contexts (Dutton 1). To prevent deviancy from stringent standards, certain restrictions are imposed, such as censorship of translated texts that do not adhere to ideological conventions. Finally, foreign texts are often rewritten to become ideologically correct in closed, totalitarian cultures.

In the Soviet Union, several organizations were censoring publications according to the official ideology of the Communist Party. From 1932, all Soviet art had to adopt the only accepted aesthetic of socialist realism, whose slogan was “realistic in form, socialist in content.” Hence, a work's merit was measured by how it contributed to building socialism.

Socialist realism falls under Lefevere's view of ideology as the "concept of what society should be" (qtd. in Fang 160) since the working class became the key element in creating the new society (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 85). Socialist realism also frequently depicted historically optimistic revolutionary victory of the oppressed working-class in the struggle against the upper-class aristocracy or monarchy. The former were represented as honest, brave, and hard-working, while the latter was given such characteristics as tyranny, deceit, and foolishness.

The socialist realism ideology also affected children's literature, which Hollindale defines as "culturally formative" (qtd. in Dutton 5). At first, children's fairy-tales were not supported by the Socialist Party since "the ideology of socialist realism included the building of a perfect socialist society in real life, not in some imaginary fantasyland" (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 19). Thus, fairy tales were criticized as alienating children from reality by promoting conservative bourgeois values (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 20). However, Lev Kormchy, a Soviet writer, stressed the importance of children's literature in promoting communist values by calling it the "forgotten weapon" (Lewycka). Generally, fairy tales have the motif of good winning over evil, which was straightforwardly defined in socialist realism as communist versus bourgeois values (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 80). Thus, fairy tales were gradually accepted due to their didactic power, and developing literacy in children was seen as a path to communism (Lewycka).

The new attitude to children's literature was based on Gorky's idea that "the importance of the fairy tale lies in its capacity to inspire people to make new discoveries" (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 21). Not only did such discoveries include removing social inequality, but also solving a personal problem (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 29). Despite the initial negative attitude to psychoanalysis in the early USSR, the notion of self-reflection was soon politicalized and ideologized. Hence, children's fairy tales began broadcasting socialist propaganda with the didactic role of making children ideologically flawless Soviet citizens by replacing negative traits with will, courage, and endurance through self-reflection (Kukulin 172).

Children's literature had the benefit of freedom that was lacking in adult fiction. Fantasy "allowed writing about other than the present-day reality," and the Soviet censorship soon received it ambiguously (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 18). At first, it was not thoroughly supervised, although later it endured more criticism due to its potentially hidden subversive content, the so-called Aesopian language. For instance, secondary worlds in fantasy could have seemingly contradictory meanings, such as either representing a separate

dystopian world or being a distorted reflection of the Soviet system (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 190). Thus, children's literature became "a channel even for opinions which were officially undesirable" (Salminen, "Gubarev's Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" 201).

The example of such Soviet children's fantasy is Vitali Gubarev's *Korolevstvo krivyh zerkal* (KKZ), which translates into English as Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors. It was published in 1951, a period when socialist realism was strictly orthodox under Stalinism. Its main character is an ordinary patriotic pioneer girl Olya, who exhibits such negative traits as "selfishness, capriciousness, insolence and laziness" (Hellman 454). She enters a mirror from her flat, leading her to a kingdom, where she meets her doppelgänger Yalo. The kingdom, governed by a tyrant king, is full of crooked mirrors that distort reality by showing the opposite, e.g., "people who are thin and undernourished [...] look healthy and well fed" (Salminen, "Gubarev's Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" 202). The mirrors are made by an exploited working class, represented by a boy named Gurd, whom Olya and Yalo decide to rescue from execution. The kingdom's tyrannical monarchy is marked by two opposite extremes: frightening cruelty and ridiculous pomposity.

Despite the unpopularity of Lewis Carroll's works in the 1950s USSR, there are certain resemblances between KKZ and his *Through the Looking-Glass* (TLG). The two stories are set in the traditional pseudo-medieval fantasy worlds. According to Nikolajeva's distinction, they are open-world fantasies, in which both primary and secondary worlds are present and somehow connected, in this case through a mirror, which appears similarly in both stories (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 26). The motif of mirrors serving evil may also be an illusion to "The Snow Queen" since Andersen's fairy tales were popular in the Soviet Union (Hellman 455).

As a mirror effect, both Olya's and Alice's worlds are reversed.

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. (TLG, 18-19)

Оля усмехнулась и внимательно оглядела отраженную переднюю, в которой находилась. Все в ней было наоборот. То, что дома стояло справа, здесь оказалось слева, а то, что там стояло слева, здесь оказалось справа. (KKZ, 10)

Olya laughed and looked closely at the reflection of the hall, where she was standing. Everything was the other way round. What was on the right in the house, here was on the left, and what was there on the left, here was on the right. (KKZ, own translation)

Names in the kingdom are anadromes: Olya's inverted double is Yalo (altered according to the Russian spelling), along with the king Topped (despot), the rescued mirror-maker Gurd (drug, "friend"), and the slave Bar (rab, "slave"), among others. Again, this language play resembles Lewis Carroll's *TLG*; however, in Gubarev's *KKZ* there are certain learnable rules, while in *TLG* it is nonsensical and nonconventional, marked by Alice's question "Must a name mean something?". This predictability and regularity in *KKZ* suggest a social realist perspective of a structured and predictable society. The Soviet translations of Carroll usually commented on "Victorian society [as being] inadequate in comparison to Soviet values" (Karvounidou 36). Thus, this asymmetry of cultures had to be compensated for by transforming Carroll's individualistic, upper-class Alice into a positive socialist character.

One of the perceived inadequacies of Victorian society was its monarchy. Interestingly, all the characters in *KKZ* associated with monarchy bear names of inhuman beasts: Abazh (zhaba, "frog"), Anidag (gadina, "reptile"), and Nushrok (korshun, "kite"). The only person of the aristocracy who does not, however, has a distinct name:

– Яло, он сказал, что короля зовут Топсед, – соображала Оля. – Если здесь, как ты сказала, все наоборот, значит, он... Деспот?

– Деспот, Оля!

– Вот какой это король! (*KKZ*, 16)

"Yalo, he said that the king's name is Topped," said Olya. "If everything is backwards here, it means that he is... Despot?"

"Despot, Olya!"

"Well, that's what this king is!" (*KKZ*, own translation)

The names in *KKZ* do mean something, giving Olya reasons to conclude that the established monarchy is inhuman evil. Yalo's name, however, is more connected with Olya's character education: Olya learns about herself through Yalo, the personification of her weaknesses and vices. In the first scenes, Olya's grandmother wishes Olya could see herself "from the outside." Thus, Yalo plays the role of triggering her self-reflection processes. Eventually, Olya frees herself from negative flaws, developing courage and empathy during the struggle. This transformation reflects the utopian communist didacticism of the mirror motif. Again, it shows that Gubarev's secondary world, unlike Carroll's, is fairly logical:

“good and evil are easy to recognize, one can see clearly one’s true nature and take straightforward actions in order to correct its faulty aspects” (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 62).

In *KKZ*, the mirror-making workers become revolutionaries fighting against their oppressing aristocracy. The first expressed attempt of revolution is made by Gurd, who breaks one of the distorting mirrors with a stone:

– Я рад, что разбил это кривое зеркало! Хоть одним лживым зеркалом будет меньше на свете! Вы для того и расставили по всему городу эти проклятые зеркала, чтобы обманывать народ! Только все равно вашим зеркалам никто не верит! (*KKZ*, 20)

“I am glad I broke that crooked mirror! Now there is one less lying mirror in the world! You have put these damned mirrors in the whole town to deceive the people! Well, nobody trusts your mirrors anyway!” (*KKZ*, own translation)

Olya decides to save Gurd, thus contributing to the revolutionary spirit, which started before her arrival, implying that “the need for revolution is inherent in the oppressed people, which suits well the socialist realist idea of historical optimism.” (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 87). Olya witnesses the rough treatment of workers and servants by the upper-class, which eventually leads her to destroy it completely, instead of simply overthrowing it. Significantly, Olya patriotically praises her home country when she explains why she has to return:

Я не могу остаться с вами, дорогие друзья, потому что нет на свете ничего прекраснее и лучше моей родной страны! Вы, наверно, тоже постройте когда-нибудь такую же светлую жизнь, как в моей стране. Я верю в это, дорогие друзья! (*KKZ* 93)

“I cannot stay with you, dear friends, because in the whole world there is nothing more beautiful or better than my homeland! You too will some day build the same kind of bright life as there is in my country. I believe in that, dear friends!” (*KKZ*, own translation)

Although socialism has been established in the secondary world, Olya still regards her homeland as superior — a paradox of the Soviet belief in international brotherhood of working classes and its national pride (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 87). The primary world of the Soviet fantasy is thus a true utopia.

The functioning of mirrors in the *KKZ*'s plot alludes to *TLG*, but their metaphorical power extends beyond it. Gubarev could be inspired by Marx's *Kapital*, in which society functions as a mirror of an individual self—the idea that fits the didactic purposes of Soviet children's literature (Kukulin 176). Yet mirrors of *KKZ* serve not only Soviet ideological purposes, but also represent a potentially critical political message. The dominant literary model of the USSR was the mirror theory based on Lenin's article "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution," in which art is described as a true mirror of its society. The official interpretation of *KKZ* could thus view Gubarev's fictional revolution as an allegory of the October Revolution, a criticism against the capitalist system, and an inspiration for further socialist revolutions in other countries (Salminen, *Fantastic in Form* 72). However, if Olya's mirror is indeed truthful of its reality, then the story assumes a subversive interpretation, criticizing the post-war Soviet propaganda system, ruled by a dictator, who had to be resisted. Thus, Gubarev either holds up another crooked mirror to Soviet children or mirrors the real state of their country.

It is hard to judge which reading was Gubarev's real intention. He was a member of the Socialist party, closely connected with pioneer organizations (Kukulin 153). However, it by no means could reflect someone's true political stance. If *KKZ* had any Aesopian language, it could only be noticed by adult readers, not children; thus, the story had potentially two messages, which depended upon the reader. This twofold nature is linked with the state of Soviet censorship, in which "subversion [...] could be intended but not discovered, or discovered without being intended" (Salminen, "Gubarev's Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" 203). Still, neither of the interpretations seems superior; rather, they both complement each other.

Gubarev's ideological adaptation of Carroll's fantasy avoided Soviet censorship because of its clear message. It followed all the standards of socialist realism, while "to have found dangerous matter in it might have raised doubts about the purity of the censors' own minds" (Salminen, "Gubarev's Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" 208). Whichever deviant interpretation could be traced in *KKZ*, its target audience was children, who were still not as critical of the ideological system they lived in. Yet the story has been frequently republished and adapted into films and shows, even in modern Russia, suggesting that "new readers are prepared to find new meanings," if we take the story as "a universal criticism of dictatorship" (Salminen, "Gubarev's Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" 212).

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