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Drawing the Looking-Glass Country

DMITRY YERMOLOVICH

Illustrators do not often explain why they have drawn their pictures the way they did. What inspires them and what they think as they take up a pencil or a stylus remain confined to a “black box.” But some readers are quite keen to know what thoughts and ideas have crossed the artist’s mind.

A recent bilingual edition of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*¹ included my Russian translation of it and my color illustrations (following a similar edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*).² The books also contained my comments on the Carroll translator’s challenges.

Like translation, illustration is a decision-driven process. The idea of writing about it came to me later and took final shape as an online essay in Russian.³ This article is an extract from it, focusing on six out of the book’s eighteen color pictures.

A literary description is fundamentally different from a graphic image. In words, only some parts of a scene are described in detail, while others may not be mentioned at all. An artist cannot normally depict just some details and leave blank spots elsewhere. The scene has to be depicted complete with all its parts, whether mentioned in the text or not. What the book doesn’t say has to be created, preferably in line with the author’s concept.

But so much for general statements: welcome inside the black box of an illustrator’s mind.

In Figure 1 (page 12), I wanted—paradoxically enough for a dream tale—to achieve a degree of authenticity and recreate a room in a typical mid-nineteenth-century style. My research led me to conclude that the English middle class of the period liked to have a large bay window in the living room, with a fireplace wall at a right angle to it, and this is how I designed my looking-glass room.

In the tale, Alice suspects from the very start that the invisible sides of things may turn out to be very different from what we expect. For me, this meant that the “back” of the fireplace had to differ from its front, preferably in a weird way. Carroll seems to have meant that, too, as he wrote that the mantelpiece clock had the face of a grinning old man.

The idea of portraits making faces made me think of eighteenth-century Austrian sculptor Franz

Messerschmidt, famous for his “character heads,” or busts with countenances contorted into exaggerated emotions. They inspired me as I drew the two figureheads that adorn the mantelpiece. (The reader will surely know that artists often allude, in their pictures, to the work of their colleagues. One example is Tenniel’s Duchess, roughly based on a portrait by Quentin Matsys.)

Carroll also wrote that the pictures on the wall “seemed to be all alive.” To me, this meant they had to be three-dimensional, and I drew a man’s head sticking out of a picture frame and making a face, also in the style of Messerschmidt.

Some people wonder why I decided to make my Alice red-haired. Well, Carroll never specified his character’s hair color. Alice Liddell had black hair, but the writer never wanted his heroine to look like her, and Tenniel drew her as a blonde.

But why couldn’t the Alice of the book be red-haired? The English are famous for their ginger royals and celebrities, such as Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Prince Harry, or Eddie Redmayne (a telling name!). Studies have found that “a third of the population of Britain and Ireland carry red hair genes.”⁴ Not only does red hair add to my Alice’s Englishness, but red is an advantageous color from the artistic point of view.

On the table, Alice finds a book with the poem “Jabberwocky.” I drew it as a miniature copy of John Tenniel’s drawing, another allusion to a favorite artist. (My own version of the beast is different, but I’ll discuss it later.)

In Figure 2 we are looking at the same fireplace and “character” heads. As in the first illustration, the carpet on the floor has a chessboard pattern, for obvious reasons. When drawing the table on which Alice put the White Queen, I decided to make it a chess table with a malachite top, to complement the red-brown tones of the fireplace and carpet with a contrasting color, green.

Behind the table, parts of the wallpaper’s floral design combine into another weird head, that of a woman with puffy cheeks. I did it entirely for fun and as another indication that one can expect anything to appear on the back of things, which one doesn’t normally see.



Figure 1

In drawing chess pieces (the White King, Queen, and Pawn), I tried to reproduce a typical “wooden” texture while giving them a degree of plasticity. As for the White Queen, she is, as we know, a truly weird character who will eventually drown in a tureen, so I gave her a troubled face with big round eyes.

Now the fire screen, or fender. In another tribute to Tenniel, I re-drew his famous image in thick simplified lines, making sure that no part of the lattice looks as if it could fall out (and not forgetting to embed my initials in Russian, D and E, in it). Then I turned the drawing into a 3D object and made it part of this picture and the previous one.

Figure 3 took me twice as long as any other. In fact, it is two drawings in one.

Let’s begin with its lower half. Sitting opposite Alice (and seen through her eyes) is a gentleman dressed in white paper. He is lecturing Alice with a raised finger (“So young a child ought to know which way she is going”). Yet I pictured him as a bon vivant, hence a cigar in his other hand; his red cheeks and nose indicate he has probably had one or two for the road. We have, I believe, all met with this type of passenger: a good-natured man who easily enters into conversations, but quickly turns into a nuisance.

The seating of two passengers in my drawing is slightly at odds with the book. The Goat is not right next to the Gentleman in White Paper—I placed the Beetle between them. I didn’t want a clutter of big bodies: some breathing space was needed. Above the Beetle, another group of passengers can be seen, in-



Figure 2



Figure 3

cluding the Horse. And on their right, I added a train attendant with a fox’s head. It is not the Guard mentioned by Carroll, but he is checking tickets as well.

And now a digression concerning the clothing of animal characters. Tenniel dressed his animals



Figure 4

inconsistently. His White Rabbit wears only a waistcoat and gloves (and a pair of pants during the trial). The Dodo and the Mouse walk around with no clothes on, while the March Hare drinks tea in a full suit. I followed the same policy—or rather lack thereof—leaving the Beetle with no clothing, but dressing the Goat in a long coat. However, so as to show its hooves, I gave it no shoes. Fox the conductor is, of course, in full uniform.

Carroll was being mischievous to the limit as he made a passenger remark, “She must draw the train herself the rest of the way!” I grasped at this and made it the subject of the top picture in a speech bubble. As the bubble’s tail has to lead somewhere, I pointed it at a woman with a bright orange hat ribbon which stands out visually as if to indicate: she’s the one who said it!

Inside the bubble, a red-faced and sweating Alice is pulling the locomotive with an inhuman effort. This nonsense was fun to draw. It also led me to undertake a short study of nineteenth-century steam locomotives. I found that most had a shelf in front, onto which an oil lamp with a reflector was fastened. I intended the cone of light from the lamp, contrasting with a gloomy clouded sky, to create an added dramatic effect, along with bats flying over Alice. And, since she is pulling the engine, the role of the engine driver (whom I portrayed as a guinea-pig) is reduced to watching over her and blowing the steam whistle.

Figure 4 depicts the “tragic” finale of “The Walrus and the Carpenter” poem. It follows from the White



Figure 5

Queen’s riddle that oysters were dirt cheap in England at the time. Presumably, the writer and his child friends ate them often. The poem thus turns a familiar everyday experience, a cheap treat, into a mock tragedy. It is also a spoof of moralizing poems that warned children against disobeying good advice. I am sure that Carroll’s child friends would dissolve into laughter when the poem was read to them. So the picture had to be drawn with a fair share of humor.

Its layout was a challenge, too. It is easiest to depict a meal in a horizontal, or landscape, format, with eaters seated next to or facing one another. But the book’s vertical page format dictated that the Walrus and the Carpenter be placed one above the other, as if watched from an elevation. I seated them separately and made them look different ways, remembering that the Walrus was “ashamed” to look the Carpenter and the uneaten oysters in the eyes. This is also why I depicted him with his back to them.

Before drawing the eaters, I watched several oyster festival videos online and found that most people gnaw shellfish out of shells and throw their heads back so that no oyster juice may miss their lips. This is exactly the position of my Carpenter. For added emphasis, his newspaper hat is falling off his head. He is lifting a poor oyster to his wide-open mouth with his left hand, while his right hand holds an ominously shining knife, which he needs to open oyster shells. I also drew the shameless Carpenter with eyes rolled up in anticipation of pleasure.

Unlike his friend, the Walrus cannot bite oysters out of their shells with his huge tusks, so he uses a fork for the purpose, while the emptied shell remains in his left flipper. Real-life flippers are not good for holding things, so I had to manage to make them look sufficiently dexterous for the task.

I gave the Walrus a bib to underscore his hypocrisy, showing that he was even better equipped for the deceit than the Carpenter.

As for the oysters, I wanted to give them distinctive personalities, each reacting differently to its imminent death. One is numb with horror, another is trying to protest, yet another hopes to escape, a fourth one is bowing to her fate—and so on. I hope these characterizations help reproduce Carroll’s sense of mock tragedy, contrasting with a romantic and peaceful sea with a tall ship in the distance.

Figure 5 represents these lines:

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood . . .

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

My hero’s sword has just chopped off the beast’s head, the trophy with which he will “galumph back” home. The sword keeps moving by inertia, and blood is still gushing from the Jabberwock’s severed neck.

The poem was a spoof of Anglo-Saxon literature, which Victorian children had to study—thoroughly enough so Carroll’s parody made them laugh, no doubt. John Tenniel conveyed the laughing spirit by putting a waistcoat on the monster. Nothing else!

I, too, decided to make my Jabberwock look funny in polka-dot pants and bedroom slippers. To contrast the improbable with the authentic, I browsed through scores of images of Victorian-era slippers and stumbled on a pair that looked surprisingly similar to those of my (then) little cousin in the late 1950s (for some reason, I still remember them). So my Jabberwock’s slippers happen to be Soviet-styled as well as Victorian.

And now to the monster killer. Tenniel drew him as a young boy, something that has always surprised me. Shouldn’t a monster-killer be a strong adult man? They are usually played by bodybuilders in the movies.

My hero is a strongman. But why is he wearing shorts, you may ask? Well, in old drawings, most epic heroes are dressed in short tunics with nothing to cover their legs. Some contemporary artists have taken the tradition further. In Robert Zemeckis’s 2007 version of *Beowulf*, the protagonist prepares to meet with Grendel by undressing himself completely, apparently to remove any hindrance to the impact of his physical energy. Well, I didn’t need my hero to go all the way along that path, so I gave him a pair of shorts.

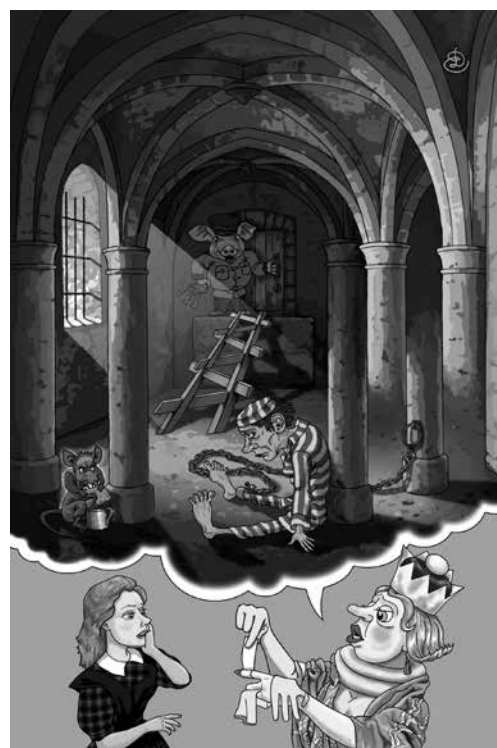


Figure 6

Consider them a conventional fig leaf, or a jocular anachronism to match the Jabberwock’s underwear.

In terms of layout, the hero had to be lifted from the ground to reach the Jabberwock’s neck, given the monster’s size. At first, I put him on a horse, but it looked somehow out of place. Then I toyed with a step-ladder—“but that would be going too far,” as Mary Poppins once said. Finally, I put my hero on a tree stump—a most natural thing to be found in a tulgey wood.

It was fun drawing this illustration, and it is one of my favorites in the series.

In Figure 6, we again see a “two-story” picture, but here the “first floor” takes up about two-thirds of the image. Let’s start from the “ground floor,” however.

The White Queen tells Alice that she lives backwards, while sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger. Now, an anatomical digression. In my picture, she has only four fingers on each hand—why is that?

Let me start with some background. As I have written earlier, it was a daring literary innovation of Lewis Carroll’s that he supplied many of his animal characters with “arms,” “hands,” and other human features.⁵ The idea was adopted by artists, including Disney, Hanna-Barbera, and others, who also came up with the convention of making the “hands” of their human-like cartoon characters four-fingered. Their reasons are not sufficiently clear. I believe they wanted to emphasize the purely conventional and fictional nature of those “funny animals” as distinct from human beings. (I have read explanations that

four-fingered hands are simply easier to draw, but they cannot be taken seriously.)

I followed the convention in the case of my funny animals—and chess pieces as well. They are not people either, which is why the White Queen has four-fingered hands and gloves.

And now to the upper “story” of the picture. It is, of course, in a speech bubble as it refers to the Queen’s words: “There’s the King’s Messenger. He’s in prison now, being punished.”

So here he is, the messenger Hatta, in striped prison uniform and chained to a pillar. When drawing the interior of his prison, I recalled the Chillon castle near Montreux in Switzerland, made famous by Lord Byron’s “The Prisoner of Chillon.” I have visited the castle and taken quite a number of photos inside. The vaulted room where the prisoner of Chillon languished inspired the interior you see in my illustration, although it is far from being an exact representation.

Now let’s look at some details. In my illustrations to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, I drew all kinds of impossible objects, such as a Penrose/Escher staircase, a twisted bridge, and others. Hatta’s prison is a great place for more impossible objects, to emphasize the absurdity of “living backwards” (the man is serving a sentence before being tried or even committing a crime).

First I played with the columns, drawing some with no bases and some with no tops, dissolving in emptiness. Two columns have ambiguous spatial positions: they are both farther away and closer to the viewer than the cell window.

Secondly, in the back of the room, there is a ladder leading up to a door. If you take a closer look you will find that the ladder is also an impossible object.

Having drawn the door, I felt like adding another figure, that of a prison guard with a pig’s head. After all, what is a door for if not to allow guards to check what the inmates are doing?

Hatta, who is sitting on the floor, is so unhappy he is in tears. We will learn later in the book that he was fed poorly in jail. So I added a rat brazenly eating the prisoner’s bread and drinking from his mug. A “long and sad tale” has unfolded out of the Queen’s casual remark.

Limited space does not allow me to discuss the remaining twelve illustrations—a task I may pursue in a later contribution. I believe, however, that I have made clearer what went on in my “black box” as I was doing my pictures, and how they are connected with the writer’s words and messages. An illustrator’s imagination can, of course, soar to unlimited heights, but the text being illustrated is its best fuel.

¹ Кэрролл, Льюис. *Путешествие в 3 азеркалье и что там обнаружила Алиса*/Пер. с англ., предисл., комм. и илл. Д. И.Ермоловича. — М.: Аудитория, 2017. (*TTLG*, trans., annot., and illustr. by Dmitry Yermolovich). ISBN 978-5990794320.

² Кэрролл, Льюис. *Приключения Алисы в Стране Чудес* / Пер. с англ., предисл., комм. и илл. Д. И. Ермоловича. — 2-е изд.— М.: Аудитория, 2017. (*AATW*, trans.,annot., and illustr. by Dmitry Yermolovich). ISBN 978-5990794344.

³ See <http://yermolovich.ru/index/0-219>.

⁴ *The Telegraph*, August 24, 2013.

⁵ Yermolovich, Dmitry. “As You Translate, So Shall You Draw.” *Knight Letter*: Fall 2016. Vol II, issue 27, No. 97, p. 13.

