

**MACABEA IN WONDERLAND:  
LINGUISTIC ADVENTURES IN CLARICE  
LISPECTOR'S *A HORA DA ESTRELA***

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This article is a consideration of the issues of meaning and logic found in the language used by the protagonists of both Clarice Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela* (1977) and the classic novels for children *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), by the Oxford mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll. By exploring the echoes within the Brazilian text of Carroll's stories of a girl trying to make sense of a world she cannot understand, I hope to highlight Lispector's belief in nonsense and "not-knowing" as intuitive and authentic ways of interpreting the world and the self. Although the relationship between Lispector's work and that of Lewis Carroll, separated by a continent and almost a hundred years, may seem strange, I believe there are enough coincidences to see the journeys in Wonderland and the issues about logic and language that they raise as being a foretaste of many concepts explored further in modernist and postmodernist literature; particularly in Macabéa's adventures in Rio de Janeiro, or "as fracassadas aventuras de uma moça numa cidade toda feita contra ela" (Lispector 1992, 29).<sup>1</sup>

In *After Babel*, George Steiner has traced the appearances and evolution of nonsense discourse from speaking in tongues, medieval heresy trials and secret alchemical languages, through the anarchic word-free experiments of Dada, to the psychological and semantic games of the Surrealists. His conclusion is that there "can be no definitive lexicon or logical grammar of ordinary language or even of parts of it because different human beings, even in simple cases of reference and "naming," will always relate different associations to a given word" (Steiner 206), or, in the words of Humpty Dumpty: "When I use a word [...] it means just

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what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (Carroll 224). According to Gabriele Schwab, the anarchic, rebellious character of nonsense writing can be identified in its wilful disruption of sense, against which it must always be opposed:

Refusing to serve as a “mirror of nature,” it thrives in the delirious space of the looking-glass world in which language no longer “re-presents” but mocks its very foundations and speaks on its own against rhetorical conventions, rules and codes. Literary nonsense uses the excess of the signifier over the signified—which has always characterized the poetic use of language—in order to disturb and to recreate the relation between words and worlds and to fold language back upon itself. [...] It unsettles mental habits formed by rhetorical conventions and thus induces the pleasures of both a temporary relief from the boundaries of internalized rules and an increased flexibility of mind (Schwab 49-50).

The creative endeavour to renew and refresh language with neologisms and unorthodox structures and plots emphasises its malleability, as do the ways it manipulates the reader through meta-fictional references, inviting each reader to make a personal interpretation. In the opinion of Michael Holquist, Carroll’s writing exemplified the most distinctive feature of modern literature:

it best dramatized the attempt of an author to insure through the structure of his work that the work could be perceived only as what it was, and not some other thing; the attempt to create an immaculate fiction, a fiction that resists the attempts of readers, and especially those readers who write criticism, to turn it into an allegory, a system equatable with already existing systems in the non-fictional world (Holquist 147).<sup>2</sup>

This has certainly been the case with the Alice books which have been read from all manner of approaches: the mathematical, the philosophical, the linguistic, the psycho-analytic (Freudian and Jungian), as historical-political allegory, as psychedelic trip and even as a source for naming

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medical conditions such as Red Queen Syndrome or Mad Hatter's disease.<sup>3</sup> The texts lend themselves to such interpretations but it must always be remembered that they were, first and foremost, written as entertainment for children. By creating a text without a moral (but lots of them, pronounced by the Duchess, which effectively cancel each other out), no edifying lessons and no conclusive answers, which only follows the sort of rules that guide the Caucus race (the only rule is that there are no rules), the author constructs an autonomous system, an alternative, looking-glass world, where Alice tries to recite and the words come out wrong, like the world where Macabéa's spelling and logic are unintelligible to others.

Carroll and Lispector produce texts top-heavy in signifiers, but thin on signifieds, with no definitive answers or indeed definitions. One might think of the Mad Hatter's riddle, "What is the difference between a raven and a writing-desk?" (Carroll 79), or Rodrigo S.M.'s question, "Qual é o peso da luz?" (Lispector 1992, 106). More materially, there is the implied question of how to solve the social and economic problems of urban Brazil, which Lispector does not answer and has been attacked for not answering.<sup>4</sup> The answer to all these questions is: nobody knows.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, in an interview for an Argentinean magazine the author confessed her dislike of the definite and pre-defined: "No creo en soluciones ni en explicaciones absolutas. Creo, eso sí, en la interpretación de cada lector. Yo quiero que cada uno entre en el relato, en el conflicto" (Nepomuceno 42).

Of course, when confronted by a puzzling text, one cannot avoid trying to solve it. It is almost irresistible to develop one's own conclusions based on one's own interpretative system of logic and experience, following the examples of Macabéa and Alice in their new environments. It is this irreverence and creativity in words and ideas that lies at the root of the attraction of nonsense writing. It is a game between author, characters and reader and "games involve a means/ends rationality, but aren't in themselves functional: they are played as ends in themselves and in that sense

transcend considerations of sheer utility” (Eagleton 447). The reader gets the sense that Wonderland games are made up by the characters as they go along, improvised at Alice’s expense. Macabéa’s story is also written according to the whim of Rodrigo S.M. who prepares himself almost ritualistically to write, begins when he feels like it, declares he has no idea why he is writing but is compelled to, loses pages, but finally does assert his demiurgic role of author and allow his protagonist to be killed. He teases the reader by making bold statements one minute, to roundly contradict them the next, making false starts and stops, swerving from one storyline to another, questioning the value and veracity of his text, calling it “uma longa meditação sobre o nada” (54), and making such comments as “um meio de obter é não procurar, um meio de ter é o de não pedir e somente acreditar que o silêncio que eu creio em mim é resposta” (28), which is a fine example of looking-glass logic.

Like Macabéa, Alice finds herself alone in a world beyond her control or comprehension, struggling to survive and progress and asking for directions in a series of encounters along her way. Both protagonists come across characters whose behaviour, remarks and enquiries prompts the girls to question their own identity and existence. The characters give them orders and confusing contradictory information, argue with and insult them, lose their tempers, or advise them (usually badly) on how best to proceed through the puzzling alien culture. The reader accompanies the girls on these trajectories and observes their attempts to acclimatise, acculturate and learn the languages and laws of their new environment.

Of course, there are great differences between these heroines, particularly the social dimension: Alice is a seven-year-old Victorian miss used to servants, roast beef and lessons about the British empire, and Macabéa a poor, uneducated, tubercular, nineteen-year-old immigrant in late-twentieth-century Brazil. Alice is often precocious, quite practical and proud of her social skills, while Macabéa, with her rigorously performed rituals of good manners, superstition and recitations of facts gleaned from the radio, is

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the more childlike. Nevertheless, the experience they share, that of arriving in a completely new environment, is stimulating for both, especially in terms of their reactions to logic and language. Alice is a voice of reason attempting to extrapolate meanings and impose order on the irrationality and chaos of Wonderland and Looking Glass Land, whereas Macabéa is a rogue element in the streets of Rio, her lack of common sense making her an agent of disorder and confusion in the lives of the people she encounters. Both girls come up against paradoxical situations or questions with which they deal to the best of their abilities, Alice applying schoolgirl deduction and the rules of etiquette, Macabéa using the teachings of her aunt, and following her own uninformed intuition.

Both girls are on a kind of quest, both have dreams and wishes to fulfil. Alice wants to enter the beautiful garden she has glimpsed through a keyhole at the bottom of the rabbit hole, and, in *Through the Looking Glass*, wants to develop from a pawn into a Queen. Macabéa has never really thought it possible that her life could change and spends much of it in blinkered contentment and acceptance, believing herself to be happy despite her physical discomforts and infirmities. The narrator calls this state “a felicidade pura dos idiotas” (87). She does stare out to sea, as a kind of escape, and dreams about eating her fill and being as pink, plump and beautiful as Marilyn Monroe, but these fantasies are far beyond her reach. As her story progresses she learns to want, however, experiencing sexual desire for the first time but only becoming aware of her piteous state of poverty, ugliness and ineptitude at the very end of the book, when her life is described to her by the fortune teller Madame Carlota.

This use of the traditional quest narrative contains several twists, in both texts. There is a sense that neither wins nor loses anything over the course of their adventures but both merely follow a trajectory which achieves nothing concrete except the narrative we are reading. Macabéa dies, but in the foetal position, amid metaphors of rebirth and plenitude, a bittersweet escape through death for a character who did not fit in anywhere in life. Alice has to return to the real world

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where things work in a way she understands, but where she has no power (as a child, or as a future Victorian wife and mother), and there is little scope for creativity.

Both heroines stand out as unusual female literary protagonists undertaking their own quests through life without hope of romance. They are met by the most inept, abusive and dangerous knights in armour ever to haunt a damsel's nightmares! The Knave of Hearts is not at all likely to steal Alice's heart, nor are the clumsy Red Knight or the melancholy White Knight. Macabéa's erstwhile boyfriend Olímpico lifts her in the air and drops her, is rude to her and finally leaves her for her work colleague. And the most ironic commentary on the dream man on his charger is Lispector's creation of blonde Hans in his yellow Mercedes (the golden future promised her by Madame Carlota) who literally sweeps her off her feet ... and then leaves her to die in the gutter.

Alice and Macabéa could be seen as heroines who exercise little control over their adventures. Alice has been described as a "domestic rebel" whose stories provide "a really hair-raising elevation of consciousness, and ultimately give us, through her actions and criticisms, a very positive 'image' of woman" (Little 195). She must have seemed very unusual to Victorian readers because she does not conform to any of the literary stereotypes of the age: "girl angels fated for an early death (in Dickens, Stowe, and others), [...] impossibly virtuous little ladies, or [...] naughty girls who eventually reform in response to heavy adult pressure [...] [for] Alice is neither naughty nor overly nice" (Leach 123). She is not just a child, but she is not yet an adult either, however much bigger (or smaller) she is than the other characters.

Macabéa too is difficult to describe and hard to identify with or even empathise with. The readers' feelings are manipulated to make us laugh at her one minute, pity her the next, become exasperated with her and then feel moved by her plight (aptly enough, her name is an anagram of "me acaba"<sup>6</sup>). She may not seem a likely heroine but she does follow, albeit at a distance, in the footsteps of Lispector's hero-women, like Joana, Vitória and Lóri, strong women

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who reject the path patriarchal society has prescribed for them and take control of their own destinies.<sup>7</sup> Those characters are all able to make that choice because they have the education and financial means to do so, and a room of their own, whereas Macabéa shares her room with four other girls and can barely afford to eat. However she does conform to the notion of the lone, unfeminine heroine and is strangely resistant and self-sufficient.<sup>8</sup> She is more of a clown or fool figure, a grotesque in a tragi-comedy. Marta Peixoto comments that Macabéa, “both a subject without fissures and a truncated, grotesquely charged version of Lispector’s questing characters, carries their typical moves to a *reductio ad absurdum*” (Peixoto 96).

It is because of the persistent voices of Alice and Macabéa that the narrators of their stories have trouble being heard. The narrator of the Alice books is omniscient and gives the reader clues to the action before the characters notice them. He intrudes into the text, often directly into Alice’s thoughts, commenting on her quirks, habits, defects and traits as well as setting the narrative within realist sequences that explain that the adventures were all a dream. At the end of *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice’s sister concludes that they must have been triggered by the rural noises which had infiltrated the sleeping child’s consciousness: rustling grass, tinkling sheep-bells, the clamour of the busy farmyard (141-2). Beyond this lie the framing devices of introductory and concluding pastoral poems and, in *Through the Looking Glass*, a list of *Dramatis Personae* and a diagram of the chess problem Alice will have to solve to become Queen in eleven moves. And we must not forget that the author was Lewis Carroll but this was a fiction too: the encoded pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.<sup>9</sup> These elements reinforce the game-like structure and premise of the whole experience of reading Alice’s adventures.

The story of Macabéa, who is also a pawn in a bigger game, is framed within the narrator’s commentary on his simultaneous construction of that very story. He introduces himself so there should be no doubt as to his role: “A história [...] vai ter uns sete personagens e eu sou um dos

mais importantes, é claro. Eu Rodrigo S.M. Relato antigo, este, porque não quero ser modernoso e inventar modismos à guisa de originalidade” (26-7). Furthermore, both of these stories are contained within the narrative implied by the dedication by the author “na verdade Clarice Lispector” and its choice of fourteen titles, all of which emphasise the nature of the novel as a process of construction, but also as an artificial construct, a self-contained world which does not extend beyond the borders of the book itself.

Macabéa is one of Lispector’s most paradoxical creations. She is a crossbreed, “fruto do cruzamento de ‘o quê’ com ‘o quê’” (75), and “filha de um não-sei-o-quê” (42), who is simply not equipped for real life: “faltava-lhe o jeito de se ajeitar” (39). She is conspicuous by her association with absence, invariably referred to with words such as “oco”, “vazio” and “vácuo”, and is presented as an emptiness both physical, because she hardly eats, and mental, because her mind is a *tabula rasa* upon which the discourses of others are inscribed. Therefore it is not incongruous that she dreams about owning a well, asking: “Você sabe se a gente pode comprar um buraco?” (65). However, in spite of having a stunted asexual body, she possesses unexpected and copious reserves of laughter and bodily fluids, both blood “inesperadamente vermelho e rico” (98) and tears (68).<sup>10</sup>

In Wonderland the parameters are always changing. The inhabitants metamorphose from one thing into another, and food or drink can modify Alice’s size dramatically. She is always the wrong size (too big to get through the door or too small to reach the key), just like Macabéa who finds it hard to feel comfortable anywhere. Ingrid Muller has argued that the family tie between all the characters (male and female) in Lispector’s short story collection *Laços de família* is that they experience a problematic relationship to their bodies and are excessively conscious of themselves in interactions with others. The protagonist of “Devaneio e Embriaguez de uma Rapariga,” for example, feels her body swell and deflate, reflecting her emotional state, and the diminutive Pequena Flor, “A Menor Mulher do Mundo,” is a character who would not be out of place in Wonderland.

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Nor do words have one fixed meaning but may have several contrasting ones, as exemplified in Humpty Dumpty's "portmanteau" words and the endless puns and ambiguities which frustrate Alice. This constant fluctuation is mirrored in Alice's sense of identity, which is challenged by the creatures she encounters. She first starts to consider that she may be different after drinking a mysterious concoction which makes her "open out like a telescope":

I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? [...] But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle! [...] It'll be no use their putting their heads down [the well] and saying "Come up again, dear!" I shall only look up and say "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else" [...] (24-25).

She tries to work out who she might be by testing her appearance (her hair is not in ringlets, ergo she cannot be Mabel), her knowledge and her memory, concluding that she cannot be Ada, but realising with a fright that she knows so little that she might well be Ada. Later Alice feels she cannot tell the Caterpillar who she is, exactly, because she has changed since the morning: "What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!' 'I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir,' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see'" (53).

Macabéa also experiences a radical change in identity and size after visiting the fortune-teller: "já estava mudada. E mudada por palavras [...]. Se ela não era mais ela mesma, isso significava uma perda que valia por um ganho [...] Tudo de repente era muito e muito e tão amplo que ela sentiu vontade de chorar" (98). Until this moment Macabéa has not understood who she is:

Essa moça não se conhece senão através de ir vivendo à toa. Se tivesse a tolice de se perguntar "quem sou eu?" cairia estatelada e em cheio no chão. [...] Só uma vez se fez uma trágica pergunta: quem sou eu? Assustou-se tanto que parou completamente de pensar. [...] Quando acordava não sabia mais quem era. Só

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depois é que pensava com satisfação: sou datilógrafa e virgem, e gosto de coca-cola (29-30, 48, 52).

She relies a great deal on instinct, lacking the knowledge or experience to tackle complicated situations with any kind of common sense. She is not mentally deficient, but her lack of education and the passivity and acceptance that was beaten into her in childhood (her sadistic aunt's philosophy for rearing children, plenty of punishment as a deterrent against what they might do, is not far from that of the Duchess who advocates speaking roughly to and beating her baby) lead her to simply submit to others:

nem tudo se precisa saber e não saber fazia parte importante de sua vida. Esse não-saber pode parecer ruim mas não é tanto porque ela sabia muita coisa assim como ninguém ensina cachorro a abanar o rabo e nem a pessoa a sentir fome; nasce-se e fica-se logo sabendo (44).

A glimpse of Macabéa can be seen in one of Lispector's newspaper chronicles from the *Jornal do Brasil* in 1970, entitled "Das Vantagens de Ser Bobo," in which the advantages of being stupid far outnumber those of being clever:

O bobo tem oportunidade de ver coisas que os espertos não vêem. O esperto vence com úlcera no estômago. O bobo nem nota que venceu. Desvantagem: pode receber uma punhalada de quem menos espera. É uma das tristezas que o bobo não prevê. [...] Ser bobo é uma criatividade e, como toda criação, é difícil (Lispector 1994, 332-33).

During her adventures, Alice is challenged to identify herself firstly by a pigeon and then by the Queen of Hearts. The Red Queen advises her never to forget who she is. Later, the Unicorn ironically describes Alice as a fabulous monster: a human child "as large as life, and twice as natural!" (241), thus pre-empting Alice's identical response to meeting him. It is even suggested that Alice is not real at all but merely a figment of the Red King's dream, something she is avid to deny. Elsewhere, she goes through a wood where things lose

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their names and then comes face to face with Humpty Dumpty who demands to know her name and business: “‘*Must* a name mean something?’ Alice asked doubtfully. ‘Of course it must,’ Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: ‘*my* name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost’” (219-20).

Names in Wonderland are thus shown to be creative in themselves, for words become things, and characters from songs or sayings come to life, like the Cheshire Cat or Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or are created by metonymic extension, from existing terms, like the bread-and-butterfly and the rocking-horse fly. Names have a special significance in Lispector’s novel too. Macabéa is unable to understand how a word can represent an identity and a personality. Her own unusual name (reminiscent of the Biblical tribe of the Maccabees) provokes surprise and even disgust in other characters. To Olímpico it sounds like a skin disease, but there is a reason behind it:

—Eu também acho esquisito mas minha mãe botou ele por promessa a Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte se eu vingasse, até um ano de idade eu não era chamada porque não tinha nome, eu preferia continuar a nunca ser chamada em vez de ter um nome que ninguém tem mas parece que deu certo (59-60).

When Macabéa asks Olímpico what his name means (as Humpty Dumpty asked Alice), he angrily replies “Eu sei mas não quero dizer!” and her response is a conciliatory “não faz mal... a gente não precisa entender o nome” (61). Although he does not know what it means, Olímpico feels he gained his identity along with his name, having invented several surnames to disguise the fact that he is illegitimate and having earned a reputation back in the Northeast. He says to Macabéa: “É, você não tem solução. Quanto a mim, de tanto me chamarem, eu virei eu. No sertão de Paraíba não há quem não saiba quem é Olímpico. E um dia o mundo todo vai saber de mim” (65). He associates his pompous name with the bright future he has planned, whereas Macabéa associates hers with her sense of lack of identity: “não sei o

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que está dentro do meu nome. Só sei que eu nunca fui importante...” (73).

Alice is a very well brought-up little girl keen to learn about the world she has entered. When she meets someone, she is very careful to introduce herself and carry on a conversation that will be of interest to both parties, expecting her interlocutor to adhere to the normal rules: telling the truth, making their intentions clear, recognising the right of the other to speak, and respecting their opinions.<sup>11</sup> However, in Wonderland a conversation is more like a contest, with the aim of outwitting Alice or getting the last word. She becomes frustrated by the deliberate obtuseness of the Caterpillar, the confusing if plausible logic of the Cheshire cat, the answerless riddles, literal interpretations and rudeness of the Mad Hatter, the puns of the Mock Turtle. She is even driven to talking to herself and giving herself advice. Her attempts at genteel conversation end in disaster, for she can only seem to talk to the Mouse about cats and dogs, her knowledge is undermined by misinterpretation, and the other characters dismiss her words as “uncommon nonsense” (118).

Macabéa too conducts extraordinary interactions with the people around her. She cannot comprehend the most basic notions of interpersonal communication, maybe because she questions values and meanings that the other characters (and the reader) take for granted. She can only manage a successful conversation with Olímpico when they talk about their provincial backgrounds, which are all they have in common. She feeds off several sources in her struggle to survive, her story edging Rodrigo’s out of prominence, but she also absorbs consumer culture, via cinema, fast food, advertising and the media, and the words of those of higher social status (the doctor, her boss), or of those who are full of confidence, like Glória her work colleague and Olímpico. She believes the things she hears unquestioningly and later regurgitates them, or asks Olímpico about them. After a harsh childhood which taught her to obey or be punished, she obediently does what she is told by advertisements in the same way that Alice cannot help following the instructions

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“Eat me” and “Drink Me” attached to magical food and drink. Macabéa learns most of her general knowledge about the world from the radio: “aprendeu que o Imperador Carlos Magno era na terra dele chamado Carolus. Verdade que nunca achara modo de aplicar essa informação. Mas nunca se sabe, quem espera sempre alcança” (53).

Often she misinterprets the radio messages either because she does not possess the linguistic tools or life experience necessary to decipher the meaning, which is, moreover, aimed at a middle-class public, or because she understands literally what should be taken figuratively:

Havia um anúncio, o mais precioso, que mostrava em cores o pote aberto de um creme para pele de mulheres que simplesmente não eram ela. Executando o fatal cacoete que pegara de piscar os olhos, ficava só imaginando com delícia: o creme era tão apetitoso que se tivesse dinheiro para comprá-lo não seria boba. Que pele, que nada, ela o comeria, isso sim, às colheradas no pote mesmo (54).

The semantic system created by the advert is misinterpreted by Macabéa who sees the face cream presented like yoghurt in a pot and imagines its taste and texture rather than its use as a beauty aid. She cannot calculate proportions correctly, but overcompensates according to her rules of politeness and frugality. She fills her coffee with sugar, because the sugar is free, gorges herself on chocolate and makes herself ill but restrains herself from vomiting because it would be a waste of good food.

The job of typist, someone who takes notes, reorganises and sets out the words of others, is not the ideal profession for Macabéa. She confuses the oral with the written, which causes great problems with her spelling: she writes “desiguinar” instead of “designar”, because that is how she says it (29). Similarly, she is fascinated by some words, like “efeméride” simply because of their sound or shape (56). Alice, in contrast, is proud of her wide vocabulary and repertoire of useless facts, although she makes her share of mistakes too. She knows what a “juror” is, and a “whiting,”

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and thinks latitude and longitude are “nice grand words to say” (14), and she is almost sure that the people who live in Australia are called “Antipathies” and that the world takes twenty four hours to spin on its axis.

When faced with someone of a higher social standing than her, Macabéa accepts or agrees to something she does not comprehend, even when it is a question of life and death, so as not to upset or contradict the other person. She assumes a posture of humility and submission and tries to behave with perfect manners, abnegating responsibility and effacing herself before someone who knows best, or at least knows better than her like the doctor who diagnoses her tuberculosis: “Ela não sabia se isso era coisa boa ou coisa ruim. Bem, como era uma pessoa muito educada, disse: ‘Muito obrigada, sim?’” (86).

She is less nervous of asking Olímpico or Glória to explain terms she does not understand, but they rarely know either, which leads to nonsensical exchanges at cross-purposes. Macabéa’s childlike questions resemble the questions and comments of Lispector’s children which she included in some of her newspaper chronicles. Macabéa begins the following conversation with a piece of information, asks Olímpico about technical details and ends up making reference, interestingly, to Carroll’s text:

—Você sabia que na Rádio Relógio disseram que um homem escreveu um livro chamado “Alice no País das Maravilhas” e que era também um matemático? Falaram também em “élgebra”. O que é que quer dizer “élgebra”?

—Saber disso é coisa de fresco, de homem que vira mulher. Desculpe a palavra de eu ter dito fresco porque isso é palavrão para moça direita (66-7).

When he does not know the meaning of a word, Olímpico either refuses sulkily to explain, avoids the issue (“cultura é cultura”), or invents his own wrong meaning. He assumes that many of the words Macabéa has heard on the radio and which are unknown to him must be swear words, probably because by telling her they are taboo words, he does not have to explain them any further. Macabéa’s parroted

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statements are an attempt to share information, to start a conversation. By asking Olímpico to define the meanings of words, she implies that she thinks he is wiser than her and will know the answer. But he does not know and therefore interprets her questions as a threat to his macho self-image, repelling them with ridiculous answers which, nevertheless, she accepts. It is the inability to follow certain basic concepts that make Macabéa socially disabled in the “real world.” She has no command of idiomatic language, such as the particles “pois é” and “olhe,” and she cannot manage a satisfactory conversation involving an exchange of information between locutors.

Alice experiences the same problem. The Caterpillar refuses to admit the idiomatic value of “I see” and “you know,” taking them at literal value and thus complicating their conversation unnecessarily. Alice also misunderstands the Mouse when he says “tale” and “not,” mistaking them for their phonetically identical pairs “tail” and “knot” (36). Another of Macabéa’s irritating habits is to suddenly ask questions which make no obvious sense: “O céu é para baixo ou para cima?” (47); “Eu gosto tanto de parafuso e prego, e o senhor?” (60). These sorts of non-sequiturs compare to the parataxis of some of Lispector’s other late works such as *Água Viva* or “O Ovo e a Galinha,” from *A Legião Estrangeira*, which border on the nonsensical.

The protagonists’ reactions to the nonsense world they are travelling through is bewilderment, frustration, occasionally silence, but no matter how hard they try, they never manage to acculturate successfully. Alice has passed through Wonderland and Looking Glass Land unscathed, but rather than learning something she seems to have unlearned her lessons and come to appreciate the fertile possibilities of language. Macabéa’s endeavours to integrate into a world and a language with which she clashes end in her destruction, but it is a glorious destruction and she reaches a kind of rapture before she dies. Both heroines struggle forth through the text trying to make sense of the world around them, in the same way the reader tries to adapt to the chaotic, back-to-front systems of knowledge, logic and language

which structure the works. Although a reader like Alice strides forth, more or less confident in herself, ready to argue and debate with her interlocutors, one like Macabéa seems more acquiescent and open to the riddles and peculiarities of the world of the text, accepting the amount of information it is willing to grant her. The latter is Lispector's ideal reader, one who is prepared to launch themselves into literature and life without fear of nonsense and not understanding: "Isso é tão vasto que ultrapassa qualquer entender. Entender é sempre limitado. Mas não entender pode não ter fronteiras" (Lispector, 1994, 178).

Notes:

1. In terms of explicit intertextual reference, Macabéa mentions "Alice no País das Maravilhas" to Olímpico after hearing about it on the radio (66). See Iannace for a study of references to literature in Lispector's oeuvre.

2. Lewis Carroll's influence, as well as affecting the Surrealists, has been detected in Joyce, Nabokov, Borges, Pynchon, Vion and a whole host of modernist and post-modernist authors.

3. See the Lewis Carroll home page:  
<http://www.lewiscarroll.org/pop.html>

4. For example, Philip Swanson asks: "Is Clarice's revolutionary new language more than just vagueness after all?" and complains that "the novel never really fully completes the transition from meditation to engagement" (148, 150).

5. Lispector wrote a prize-winning book for children, *O Mistério do Coelho Pensante* (1993) which functions like a detective story, attempting to solve the mystery of how the rabbit escaped from his cage. The narrator admits that she has no idea and asks the reader to make suggestions, an invitation which prompted correspondence from many youngsters, to Lispector's delight.

6. I am grateful to Professor Bernard McGuirk for making this observation.

7. These are the protagonists of Lispector's novels *Perto do Coração Selvagem*, *A Maçã no Escuro* and *Uma Aprendizagem ou o Livro dos Prazeres*, respectively.

8. Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira has discussed Lispector's uncommon and unfeminine heroines in the article "Rumo à Eva do Futuro: A Mulher no Romance de Clarice Lispector."

9. The pseudonym is an adaptation of his real name, Charles Lutwidge, translated into Latin, Carolus Ludovicus, inverted and modernised into Lewis Carroll.

## *Macabéa in Wonderland*

10. Alice's tears almost drown her in Wonderland, but in Looking Glass Land they are not sufficient evidence to prove that she is real when challenged by Tweedledee.

11. See Jean-Jacques Lecercle's comments on the pragmatics of conversation (72-100).

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