

“Invent and subvert: Paula Rego’s illustrations for children’s books”

Filomena Vasconcelos
Universidade do Porto

“... when the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies.” (*Peter Pan*, Ch.3)

1. After six months of hard work to produce the huge canvas of *The Dance* (1988),¹ Paula Rego felt the need of a significant change in her approach to painting, not only as far as her thematic and model references were concerned but also in all technical means involved. Since her days at Slade School in the late 50’s, Rego had become familiar with the technical use of ‘aqua-fortis’ and ‘aquatint’ in the exquisite art of engraving, which often offered her a liberating escape from more complex rituals of painting (Bradley 2002: 47).

In the process of engraving the artist draws directly on a copper sheet (previously prepared with wax), as the images seem to have a fluency of their own, flowing freely and abundantly from her imagination and not from models, as is the case of most of Rego’s paintings. Half-way between pure creation and mechanical ability, in a sort of unpredictable compromise of genius and skillfulness, Paula Rego’s engravings translate her absolute handling of drawing techniques and the need of a correct treatment of lines, forms, colour and shade, aware of the fact that the images printed from the copper sheet will be exactly the reverse from those previously drawn, as in a mirror-like symmetrical projection.²

In close collaboration with the artist and engraver Paul Coldwell, by 1988 Rego started her first series of ‘aqua-fortis’ engravings, fully dedicated to children’s English ‘nursery rhymes’, which she knew well since an early age at St Julian’s School in Carcavelos (Lisbon). Bringing back sleeping memories of childhood, in small melodious lines, typically in a regular rhyming cadence,

¹ Acrylic on paper over canvas: 213.4x274.3cm.

² Paula Rego often uses a mirror to adjust her drawing on the copper to the effect she wants to produce in the printed work.

nursery rhymes were a particularly rich field of images and colours for the artist to capture and recreate out of all imagined characters, both human and animal, little boys and little girls, in their little joys and miseries, together with their most precious toys and pets, living and playing ever after in their endless fantasy worlds, so very much apart from the grey dull world where adults around them seemed to be living, or perhaps just dying...

However, Rego's work in general, from her major paintings – oils, acrylics and pastels – to her watercolours and engravings alike, is never to be taken easily in a straightforward uncompromising way, as it always demands a closer and deeper observation and reading. Rego is above all a story-teller and her paintings and drawings are therefore visual narratives on a chosen theme and the questionings around it, involving people and their particular circumstances: their problems, their woes or celebrations, their clear and ulterior motives, as we see them moving or simply staring upon the canvas or the sheet of paper or copper as *dramatis personae* on a stage. Places, normally closed interior spaces, are actually bi-dimensional sceneries where a single moment of the action occurs and needs to be emphasized, as in a sculpture where, despite its tri-dimensionality, time and motion are seized as if crystallized in a pure eternal moment. Moreover, objects in Rego's paintings or drawings are not merely decorative accessories to the whole scene but are thoroughly symbolic and should be interpreted in the same extension and depth as regards verbal poetic symbols in literature, preserving though their intrinsically iconic and visual quality. When it comes to represent people – as characters in a story or in a play or real actors on the theatre stage – Rego is an utmost perfectionist, not exactly because she portrays them in a strict photographic resemblance to the real model, but rather because she seems to capture as it were their inner physiognomy, which perhaps some may call one's soul. There is no intention whatsoever to show the conventional beauty of men, women, older or younger, and even of children or of all fantastic creatures that inhabit the most incredible realms of imagination. Faces usually show strong features, mostly dark, with dark shiny hair and big expressive eyes; bodies are often stout, even grotesque or repulsive at times, their gestures and movements though always craving intensely for life in full, even when they appear to be repressed or simply latent. Rego takes also great care in choosing and painting her characters' outfits as part of their individual self, paying attention to the slightest detail of materials, embroideries, laces and even jewellery or other accessories.

In fact, for a painter, as for any other plastic artist, everything turns out to be a visual effect, and all feelings or thoughts that literature is able to convey through verbal language, making use of its specific poetic and rhetoric means and devices, has to be rendered in images or shapes, lines, colours and textures in the visual arts. Being thus a painter and relying on the visual outcome of all her drawing and painting skills, Rego deals mainly with emotions, and her painted stories are all about the diversity of human expressions when it comes to convey emotion and the kind of complex feelings that invariably lie beneath. Ethical and aesthetical conventions are thus systematically overruled as a way to unsettle and disturb some of our most imbricate preconceptions or prejudices about human nature and human relationships, as they often put at

stake important social and moral values and threaten the stability of many of our unquestioned beliefs, in rather delicate fields, such as religion, sexuality and childhood. Paula Rego's work is therefore often considered to be complex and controversial, as it generally arouses mixed feelings of wonder, understanding and rejection in the viewer.

2. Looking at her exquisite engravings illustrating children's books the sense of surprise that accompanies our perception of novelty is always present leaving no one indifferent to its shocking quality. Rego is indeed magnificent in her drawings, as engravings so expressively show, but what strikes the viewer in all those works is beyond any technical skills the artist may possess, as it awakes hidden ways and spaces in our thoughts, judgements, sensibilities and fantasies, in a sort of ironic grinning smile that leaves them uneasy, somehow perplexed with no fit answers.

I shall now pick a few drawings and paintings illustrating children's books, in a brief selection of engravings from *Nursery Rhymes* (1988), *Peter Pan* (1992)³ and a pastel work from the *Pinocchio* series (1996)⁴.



Little Miss Muffet III (Etching and aquatint)

“Little Miss Muffet”, a well known traditional nursery rhyme, has a most curious illustration, at once a direct memory of the artist's childhood and an imaginative interpretation of these autobiographical references as they appear fused with metacultural and aesthetic symbols and values. In the engraving, created on a light and sombre basis that plays with all shades between black and white and explores the wide varieties of greys to produce volumes,

³ Engravings first published by The Folio Society, London, 1992.

⁴ Paintings were first presented in the series *Pinocchio* at the *Spellbound: Art and Film* exposition, Hayward Gallery, London, 1996. *Island of Light from Pinocchio* was present at the *Paula Rego* exposition, Marlborough Gallery, New York, December 1996.

shadows and illuminated surfaces, a little girl – Miss Muffet – appears in what seems to be a school uniform, or the like, knee high socks, sitting on a cut tree trunk as she is approached by a huge and threatening spider with a human face. Supposedly, the spider's face was modelled upon the artist's mother, but, obviously, any strict biographical reading of this fact has to be dismissed as utterly inadequate as well as inaccurate. Emerging out of a blank greyish background, and meeting together upon the same foreground reference – a cut tree trunk still deeply rooted on the ground – are the only two characters in the engraving, as actors on a play or film scene performing their different roles. The little girl is holding some kind of object in her hand, trying her best to hide it from her sinister companion, a hairy human faced spider that strives hard to grasp her with her thin arachnoidal legs. Despite her threatening gestures and somehow hideous appearance, the woman-faced spider does not show a frightening or angry expression in her almost smiling physiognomy. The girl, however, appears to be terrified and static, unable to make any move to run way apart from opening wide her eyes in a silent gaze to the approaching spider, as if hypnotized by its dark power.

As in many stories for children, animals or other creatures, usually associated to fantastic or even gothic frames of reference, have their origins in deep mythological structures that throughout the history of different peoples and cultures have been mingled with fragments of real facts often transfigured into legend. From ogres, bad giants, mischievous gnomes and witches, to huge monsters as dragons, serpents, flying pre-historic dinosaurs, or even to smaller arachnids, reptiles or batrachians, like spiders, scorpions, roaches, vipers, toads and frogs, animals and other frightful creatures of a hostile universe are to be taken as symbolic representations, not only of children's fears when facing danger or the unknown darkness of their nightmares, but of human's universal terror before death as the ultimate edge of all our life hopes and expectations. Beyond death is a void of everything and any experience of fear or terror before this ultimate end is above all an experience of deprivation at the nothingness of a nowhere place in a timeless time, as life ceases to be. There is no sense of any sort of typical heroism in the girl's expression or in her passive attitude towards the spider's menacing moves, but simply the quiet expectation of a child who is well aware of her powerlessness, her helpless fragility, and nevertheless keeps her silent confidence that everything will turn out right for a 'happy ending', like in all tales or in all nightmares, as soon as the sun rises and the morning greets at the window for a new day. Beyond the symbolic value of the humanized spider, one third human and two thirds animal, the engraving presents though a sombre nightmarish world, somehow resembling Kafka's claustrophobic metaphor of the insect – a huge roach – in *Metamorphosis*, where the child – or the human figure in general – is confronted with those fears and traumas that threaten even his or her most trivial aims and doings in everyday life, coming specially from those around and closest to him or her: they can be family members (such as parents, brothers and sisters, or other relatives) as well as friends, mates, mere acquaintances and so on. The motherly figure projected into the spider's face, though smiling as it were in all her grasping gestures, adds therefore a questioning remark to "Miss Muffet's" engraving, as it casts a shade of doubt and deception into any possible mother/daughter relationship. No relationship, even in childhood, can be taken

for granted and there are always complex feelings of mixed emotions that undermine even its most solid foundations and values.

Power and weakness or inferiority, domination and submission or bondage, contemptuousness and tolerance, love and affection, misunderstanding and even hatred are feelings that always find a quite distinguished expression in Paula Rego's work, reaching a peculiar neatness in her engravings for children's books, as is the case now of her aqua-fortis and aquatint illustrations for the Portuguese version of Barrie's *Peter Pan* (2005).

3. Looking at the *Peter Pan* series of coloured aqua-fortis and aquatint engravings, so rich in detail and insight, the same controversial analysis of childhood and adulthood is well represented in the way traditional stereotypes are dismissed and a new approach to human relationships is proposed.



The Neverland (Peter Pan Series)

The Neverland (coloured aquafortis and aquatint, 1992) is a thorough example of the enigmatic nature of human's fantasy, as it usually comes forth in a more enhanced imaginative manner in children's dreams, rêveries, or even in their lively conversations, invented stories and make-believe games. Peter Pan's Neverland could be nothing less than an island, a far away island, lost in distant seas and being either a deserted spot where no one lives except fierce beasts surrounded by a luxurious vegetation, or a dangerous mysterious place,

inhabited by all sorts of natives, even cannibals or mean pirates that will not hesitate to kill anyone who happens to show up in their way, disturbing their wrongful activities! This is the kind of 'Neverland' island we find, for example, in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and moreover in Stevenson's *The Treasure Island*. Barrie's Neverland in *Peter Pan* is a more enigmatic dream island, existing in a strange timelessness with a course of events of its own, not free, however, from dangers and threats whilst allowing the Lost Boys with their utmost freedom and pleasure. Endowed with the ultimate bliss of flying, because they simply have "happy thoughts" and eventually a tiny sprinkling of sparkling star dust over their heads, these lost children are friends with Fairies, Mermaids, Red Indians, who help them in their eternal fight with Captain Hook and his crew of pirates.

Paula Rego's engraving of Neverland shows precisely this amazing quality of children's imagination, that is able to intertwine and fuse the most incredible extremes of good and evil, cruelty and bounty, cunningness and innocence, peace and fight, danger and safety. "Children have the strangest adventures without being troubled by them" as Barrie puts it right at start of *Peter Pan* (Ch.1). Rego's Neverland island is an overcrowded tiny piece of land surrounded by rocks and sea waters. Wendy's graceful figure appears flying over the waters on the right, whereas a small shaded Peter Pan shows up also flying on the left background of the engraving over a dreadful giant that emerges from the waters. The foreground presents Captain Hook on the left, dressed in a light pink cloak and wearing his famous Charles II's whig and plumed hat. Strangely enough, his face is a skull, like the skull-symbol on Jolly Roger's pirate flag, and he is sitting on a wooden wheel-chair, pushed by small sized pirates, as he holds up his silver hook in a threatening gesture. A number of disturbing beasts are scattered around the scene, which is also crammed with red indians rowing their small boats. Almost as if intending to bite or somehow to grasp the flying Wendy by her floating dress, a very strange cow-like creature is represented with a cow's skull and a yellow costume, rising up one-legged from the waters, like a nightmarish flamingo; a distant flying bird (perhaps the Never bird of the story) parallels Wendy's flight as it fades away in the horizon line; a long haired black yak is drinking from the sea, while a cartoon-like hippopotamus opens wide its mouth showing all its teeth so as to threaten, or eat alive, two little naked lost boys who swim away to escape; a black enormous bull with an unfriendly expression in its dark eyes and open nostrils is swimming ashore, perhaps to chase the pirates and take some kind of revenge from them; finally, the famous crocodile, that had swallowed a clock in Barrie's *Peter Pan*, appears coloured in a light shade of yellow as it sets feet inland, eventually to kill Hook, being accompanied, as it were, by a large also yellowish hedgehog.

The picture, like the story, lives on the fantasy it creates out of what Barrie describes as the "map" inside a person's mind, which is more intense and vivid in a child's mind, for it runs not in straight logical lines but in "zigzag" daring ones:

"I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of a person's mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's

mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island; for the Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers, and a hut fast going to decay, and one very old lady with a hooked nose." (*Peter Pan*: ch. 1).

Fantasy in children's books is actually the magic keyword for all that vacant space in the mind of a child who is eager to know more about the world and about the place he or she has in it. Children's books, with their enticing illustrations, are therefore lovely and priceless treasures that some day, a long time ago, a fierce pirate, like Captain Flint, Long John Silver or Hook, hid away in a desert island, only to be found by those who would read and follow the secret messages on the secret map. In them childhood turns out to be a state of mind and no longer a moment in time or a brief passage like the flight of a bird, but an ever lasting ability to fly if we just have a "happy thought" and remember something we really love and care for.

4. Paula Rego's *Pinocchio* series of illustrations are mainly constituted by pastel paintings on wood (170x150 cm), while *Island of Light from Pinocchio* is a huge panel (1500x1800cm) on a mixed technique over paper glued on canvas. I will only select one of the pastels illustrating the Cavalo de Ferro Portuguese edition of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*⁵ (*As Aventuras de Pinóquio. História de um Boneco*, Lisboa, 2004): *The Blue Fairy Whispering to Pinocchio*.

⁵ Collodi's *Pinocchio* appeared first in episodes in 1888, in a children's literature Italian journal, having ever since been adapted both to the theatre and cinema, particularly in productions by Walt Disney and Roberto Benigni.



(*As Aventuras de Pinóquio. História de um Boneco, Lisboa, 2004*): *The Blue Fairy Whispering to Pinocchio*.

Like most of the artist's illustrations of children's books, those pictures do not depend exclusively on the written text but appear side by side to it as its complementary or even extensive reading, telling their own version of the story and, eventually, often subverting its most obvious or established meanings. Appealing to feelings and emotions that lie beyond our conceptual understanding of any given verbal message, Rego never gives up a single chance to undermine, to twist and ironise what has long seemed to be doubtless and unquestionable, as she makes the viewer approach the world and everything we know directly through the eyes and not through idealized or 'kitsch-like' notions of what should or should not be right or wrong. Other than concepts, images are exactly images and should be perceived, understood and judged as such: they are shapes, volumes, lines, textures, colours and shades. Ultimately they represent some chosen referent, which is the artist's task to manipulate, to organize, dismember in fragments and assemble again to enter a fictional composition which only virtually and as fiction resembles the pragmatic reality of our common experience.

The Blue Fairy Whispering to Pinocchio is a large pastel on wood, as already mentioned, where the whole scene is painted in a very dark shade of blue, representing a wide and almost empty interior, simply decorated with a small dark red armchair and a dark blue and red patterned rug on the floor. The two only figures on the painting, the Blue Fairy and Pinocchio, are placed in its central the foreground, being deliberately illuminated by an dim external spotlight, which supposedly focuses directly on them, as if to emphasise their

stage performance within a play. Pinocchio appears as a naked little boy, turning his back to the viewer – the audience, so to say – as he places his hands and closed fists behind his back, while he listens carefully to what the blue fairy has to tell him in a whisper to his ear. However, contrary to all conventional expectations, the Blue Fairy is an elderly woman, bare footed and hardly seated on her small armchair, as she bends over the little boy in a secret murmur. Instead of a vaporous fairy dress, this strange, wrinkled fairy with thinning hair wears a quite commonplace blue dress, even though she still keeps a shiny strass tiara on her head to go with the magic wand with a star she holds in her right hand.

The Blue Fairy who is about to embrace the little helpless boy in her tenderness as well as in her mysterious whisper is no longer the angelical maiden we grew accustomed to meeting in fairy tales. Even though she has her magic wand and her strass tiara like a princess' crown, Pinocchio's fairy is perhaps a fairy grandmother, who possesses all wisdom and love that is only due to grandmothers, when they ask their grandchildren in great solemnity if they will keep a very big secret. After the children's promise of silence the fairy grandmother gives them a priceless gift, as great as their most cherished wishes: Pinocchio, the wooden toy, is transformed into a flesh and blood little boy and thus becomes human.

In Rego's painting, however, there is no thrill and enthusiasm to be seen in the boy's encounter with the elderly fairy, but rather a certain constraint or reserve as he stands still in front of her and listens to her whispering. Perhaps she is not a fairy but just a witch... disguised as a fairy with her magic wand and her strass tiara...! But, anyway, she kept her promise making him a real boy, with a fleshly body and maybe even a soul, like humans have, taking forever away from him the heavy burden of his wooden condition.

Rego insists again in the ambiguous quality of her message, as a duplicity that emerges naturally from the utter strangeness and deceptive nature of all we take for granted. As a common feature in the whole variety of her work, independently of which public it is intended to, Rego's paintings, drawings and engravings are as much assertive in their critical points of view and attitudes as they are critical questionings on the ambivalence of human's relationships, so frequently paradoxical in their feelings and choices. Men and women alike are lazy to interrogate and deconstruct the world and its infinite complexity because they think it is hopeless and needless. They remain deeply inert and sceptical before its nonsensical quality, the absurdity of its tragedies, the broken dialogue of people's conversations. Perhaps children are still able to break the heavy chain of indifference and scepticism around them in the adults' world, and perhaps that is what poets, story-tellers, and painters who illustrate children's books best realize when they dare to enter the immense imaginary world of childlike fantasy and start to play joyfully with all its amazing and endless possibilities.

At the very end of *Peter Pan*, Barrie wisely comments that time will ever go on for generations and generations but Neverland will never cease to be nor

children will forget the way – “second to the right, and straight on till morning” (Ch. 4) – as long as they “are gay and innocent and heartless”.

We can't help wondering at the meaning of 'heartlessness'...

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