



## Lewis Carroll and psychoanalysis: Why nothing adds up in wonderland

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*Each generation of psychoanalyst has found different things to value and sometimes to censure in Lewis Carroll's remarkable fiction and flights of fancy. But what does Carroll's almost 'surrealist' perspective in the Alice stories tell us about the rituals and symbols that govern life beyond Wonderland and Looking-Glass World? Arguing that Carroll's strong interest in meaning and nonsense in these and later works helps make the world strange to readers, the better to show it off-kilter, this essay focuses on Jacques Lacan's Carroll – the writer–logician who stressed, as Lacan did, the difficulty and price of adapting to the symbolic order. By reconsidering Lacan's 1966 homage to the eccentric Victorian, I argue that Carroll's insight into meaning and interpretation remains of key interest to psychoanalysts intent on hearing all that he had to say about psychic life.*

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In 1966, near the height of his fame, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan gave a short tribute to Lewis Carroll on French national radio that described why he and the Surrealists championed the quirky Victorian. What sparked their admiration, Lacan explained, was Carroll's interest in “all kinds of truths – ones that are certain even if not self-evident” (Lacan, 2002, p. 9).<sup>1</sup> The truth apparently snared in Carroll's fiction is that our culture adopts rules that can seem absurd, even ridiculous, when seen too close and interpreted too literally. And while a lot of fiction strives quite diligently to imitate those rules, Carroll joined iconoclasts such as Jonathan Swift in upending them, to cast a wry light on their sometimes ludicrous foundations. Much of Lacan's tribute voices the ensuing paradox about meaning and nonsense, to assess what it might teach Alice and her reader as they meditate on Wonderland.

This essay adopts a similar perspective to ask: what is Carroll's nonsense about and what is its overall effect? What does it tell us, too, about the Victorians' symbolic order and the divergent, often surreal realm of fantasy that the *Alice* stories delight in extending? In seeking to answer these questions, I hope to show that Carroll found a way of thinking about fantasy

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<sup>1</sup>Lacan first presented this homage on 31 December 1966 on France Culture, under the title 'A psychoanalyst comments'. For the most part I follow Russell Grigg's unpublished translation, 'Homage to Lewis Carroll'.

and symbols that was deeply paradoxical and counter-intuitive. As Lacan pointed out in his ‘homage’, Carroll advanced an approach to subjectivity that has much in common with psychoanalysis, given their shared interest in ontology and the limits of meaning. The *Alice* stories “manage to have such a hold” on readers, he declared, because they touch on “the most pure network of our condition of being: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.” In its commitment to analyzing all three registers, moreover, “psychoanalysis is in the best position to explain the effect” of such fiction on readers, including how and why Alice’s madcap adventures in Wonderland “won over the entire world.”<sup>2</sup>

Interest in the most nonsensical aspects of our culture led Lacan to rethink an argument previously put forward by the Surrealist André Breton – that Carroll had used nonsense as a “vital solution to the deep contradiction between an acceptance of madness and the exercise of reason.”<sup>3</sup> To Breton, Carroll was the Surrealists’ first “master in the school of truancy,” because he offset the “poetic order” with the madness – even the supposed tyranny – of rationalism.<sup>4</sup> Rather than simply repeating that line, however, which downplays much of the interest and originality of Carroll’s creativity and thinking, Lacan’s tribute aimed at something more: He wanted to rescue Carroll’s insight into the way human beings are compelled to adapt to broader cultural demands. As Lacan put it, almost pitting his reading against generations of devoted readers seeking only innocent pleasure from the *Alice* stories, Wonderland generates ‘unease,’ even a type of ‘malaise,’ by revealing how individuals struggle to conform to cultural systems to which they are not especially well suited (Lacan, 2002, p. 9).

The idea that Wonderland is a platform for anxiety and malaise complicates Breton’s more free-and-easy celebration of Carrollian nonsense, hinting at an underside to the latter that generates both joy and suffering in Carroll’s protagonist and reader. Lacan here predates Gilles Deleuze’s insight, in *The Logic of Sense*, that Carroll’s nonsense has an internal logic to it, and thus a meaning of its own, which competes with that of standard, everyday sense. Carroll “remains the master and the surveyor of surfaces,” Deleuze later contended. “Surfaces which were taken to be so well-known that nobody was exploring them anymore. On these surfaces, nonetheless, the entire logic of sense is located” (1969, p. 93).<sup>5</sup>

That assessment proved central to how Deleuze and Lacan would view the paradoxical insights of several earlier and contemporary fictions, including Poe, Joyce, Genet and Duras. As Lacan put it in ‘Homage,’ concentrating more on the psychoanalytic implications of Carroll’s perspective, the doors on which the fictive pushes often reveal ‘discordances of personality.’

<sup>2</sup>In the original: “Cette œuvre ... touche au réseau le plus pur de notre condition d’être: le symbolique, l’imaginaire et le réel ... C’est la psychanalyse qui peut rendre compte le mieux de l’effet de cette œuvre ... dont il faut rappeler ... a conquis le monde” (Lacan, 2002, pp. 10, 9).

<sup>3</sup>André Breton, *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, quoted in Marret (2002, 342; my translation).

<sup>4</sup>‘Poetic order’ is Breton’s term.

<sup>5</sup>Gilles Deleuze (1969) ‘Thirteenth series of the schizophrenic and the little girl’, p. 93. See also Lecercle (1994, especially pp. 134–64).

What matters in the *Alice* stories is that the text prepare Alice – and the reader – for the powerful, counter-intuitive insight: “One only ever passes through a door one’s own size [*On ne franchit jamais qu’une porte à sa taille*]” (Lacan, 2002, p. 11).

Although the same could almost be said about the way literary critics and psychoanalysts have approached Carroll’s fiction and life, that is partly because Carroll tried to draw a sharp line between his pseudonym and his identity as Charles Lutwidge Dodgson: Oxford mathematician and logician, author of a significant book on *Symbolic Logic*; experimental novelist and poet; and Anglican clergyman beset by religious doubt (he was ordained in 1861). That line has only increased speculation on what, exactly, Dodgson was so intent on separating off and assigning to his other, pseudonymic identity. As Lacan observed, “Lewis Carroll is indeed divided [*est bien divisé*] ... but the two are necessary for the realization of his work” (Lacan, 2002, p. 11).

Lacan, it must be said, found more significance in Carroll’s ‘eminent’ fiction than in Dodgson’s more prosaic life, and was quite intent on displacing the question of psychobiography altogether. His homage was directed entirely at Carroll, the invented name, even as he acknowledged how its counterpart “made himself the servant of the young girl,” Alice Liddell. Yet the *Alice* stories partly confound that displacement of psychobiography, forcing the authorial back into view. Among other factors, including his dedication of both novellas to Liddell, Dodgson wrote himself obliquely into *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) as the bumbling, doting White Knight. No real examination of the *Alice* stories can therefore proceed without at least noting the space, even gulf, that Dodgson tried to create between his names and their respective identities.

At least initially, psychobiography bears quite heavily on our approach. We cannot ignore that Dodgson’s talent for nonsense and philosophical games is almost as famous as his passion for the 10 year-old Alice Liddell, on whom his protagonist was carefully modeled. That passion was so ardent that Liddell’s concerned parents finally prevented the 30 year-old from seeing her. Published after this ban, Dodgson’s text was thus partly an attempt at overstepping it, in reminiscence, to record the happiness that he had earlier experienced. As Dodgson wrote at the start of *Through the Looking-Glass*, representing his and the girl’s age differences, her maturation, and the parental ban as a type of fatality borne of “frost, ... blinding snow, / [and] the storm-wind’s moody madness”: “I and thou / Are half a life asunder ... No thought of me shall find a place / In thy young life’s hereafter.”<sup>6</sup> The Victorians were certainly more accepting of child brides than we are today, but that even Liddell’s parents drew a line in the sand indicates that by Victorian customs Dodgson had gone too far.

With Carroll, by contrast, the praise that critics frequently bestow on his fiction seems commensurate with its artistry, adventurousness, and semantic intelligence. It is to Carroll that we attribute such outsized flights of fancy

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<sup>6</sup>Lewis Carroll, dedication to *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1872; reprinted, 1998, pp. 117–18). Subsequent references to this combined edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* give page references in main text.

as a mad tea party peopled by raucous, acrimonious creatures – almost a mini-society in dissensus. He also gives us philosophically-minded insects imitating classical Athens as they debate the meaning of life; babies that turn into pigs at the drop of a hat; the surreal grin of a cat that floats eerily across the sky; and the queen of a chess game transfigured miraculously into a sheep dressed as a grandmother, before she morphs into a kitten whom Alice asks, in turn, whether *it* dreamed the whole scenario.

‘Which dreamed it?’ is indeed the fascinating ontological question that orients the end of *Looking-Glass*, with implications for our wondering whether Dodgson or Carroll is finally responsible for such vertiginous fantasies, and thus whether they stem from a besotted Oxford don, manifest themselves from the mind of a remarkably original writer, circulate comically in the brain of a cat, or arise from the imagination of an inquisitive yet precociously self-assertive girl.

Most of the antics that Carroll relays in Wonderland seem pointedly to flatter Alice into believing that she sees through the many escapades, to what is beyond them – as if she were partly outside the worlds of each novella and thus able to gauge them from a position of relative mastery. From the works themselves, we also learn that the comparison Carroll sets up between Wonderland and the Victorians’ symbolic order is not in the least flattering to the latter. Nor does that comparison – and its associated critique – end with the *Alice* stories. Both are extended with still greater anxiety in *Sylvie and Bruno* (1991[1889]), Carroll’s proto-Joycean novel, which styles Fairyland and Outerland as largely interchangeable. As Carroll writes in the novel’s preface, signaling his fascination with psychology and consciousness,

I have supposed a Human being to be capable of various psychical states, with varying degrees of consciousness, as follows:-

- the ‘eerie’ state, in which, while conscious of actual surroundings, he is *also* conscious of the presence of Fairies;
- a form of trance, in which, while *unconscious* of actual surroundings, and apparently asleep, he (i.e. his immaterial essence) migrates to other scenes, in the actual world, or in Fairyland, and is conscious of the presence of Fairies.

(Carroll, 1991[1889], p. 389; original italics)

Three additional criteria convey the novel’s imagined states of being, indicating how seriously Carroll tried to maintain such ontological distinctions.

But while he was busy working out such matters in his fiction, Dodgson at Oxford sought to present mathematics as a palliative for ‘mental trouble.’ He also made a habit of returning mail addressed to Lewis Carroll, saying that the figure was to him ‘unknown.’ We might interpret this last move as a strategy for coping with unwanted notoriety; as a sign of anguish over an increasingly buried chapter of his life; or even, as Lacan hinted, as a type of dissociation whereby two identities (Carroll and Dodgson) can flourish only because Dodgson held them so rigidly apart.

Art and biography appear to part company over these interpretive dilemmas. For how we interpret the enigmas attached to both of these registers is, as the *Alice* stories show, central to determining what questions she and the reader can ask about them. As Lacan put it in the passage cited earlier, Carroll seems to want to “prepare” her for the lesson that “one only ever passes through a door one’s own size” (Lacan, 2002, p. 11) – a statement hinting that an answer can emerge only after one has discovered the question attached to it. Approach such a portal from the wrong direction, with the wrong premise or at the wrong time, and awareness of it – much less passage through it – is unlikely. The idea is rather like that of Wonderland itself, in which much happens the wrong way round, playing havoc with cause and effect, meaning and intention, inference and interpretation. Alice has to shrink or expand to enter a different ontological realm. She has to adapt to circumstances, and does so sometimes with relative ease, at other times with intense difficulty.

One of the questions Carroll implicitly poses at such moments is whether interpretation can decipher “the most pure network of our condition of being: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real (Lacan, 2002, p. 10).” The matter bears heavily on psychoanalysis, Lacan averred, given its interest in the psychical patterns and distortions that magnify suffering, stoke unease, and prevent mourning. In Wonderland, as in Outerland, those distortions persist not just because both realms are thoroughly imbued with nonsense, but also because investigation into both novellas enables but does not end interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In *Through the Looking-Glass*, for instance, in a significant metafictional moment, Humpty Dumpty adopts an interpretive code that is comically incapable of addressing what other characters say and mean. As he declares: “When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less ... The question is ... which is to be master” (Carroll, 1998, p. 186).

A successful outcome to such attempted mastery is of course as elusive to Humpty Dumpty as it is to other figures in Wonderland. Oblivious, however, he veers down another idiosyncratic track: how words assume – then seem almost to contain – a life of their own. Carroll himself dubs a few of them ‘portmanteau’ words, capturing the idea that meaning is almost literally encased in them. Freud later adopted that terminology as his preferred figure for the dream and its associated process of condensation; the Carrollian example is almost a textbook example of that process. But Humpty Dumpty’s observations are whimsical rather than substantive: “They’ve a temper, some of them,” he asserts, “particularly verbs ... – however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That’s what *I* say!” (Carroll, 1998, p. 186; original italics).

Impenetrability would come to mean different things a generation later, when Carroll was finishing *Sylvie and Bruno* and writers such as Henry James, George Meredith, and Joseph Conrad were cultivating a style of difficulty seemingly intent on signaling what, in life and relationships, is most opaque and resistant to meaning. Yet in the end, as all of these writers

<sup>7</sup>See Laplanche, 1999, pp. 138–65; also Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 20–36.

signaled in their fiction, opacity is not a mask to screen intention. As Freud also understood (and described in his 1899 essay, *Screen memories*), the screen ends up representing a wish that the ego may have struggled to hide. When, for instance, the Red King in *Looking-Glass* inadvertently blurts out that he is practicing a kind of automatic writing – that his pen records “all manner of things that [he doesn’t] intend” (p. 131), Carroll makes clear that it is through language that the unconscious speaks, revealing truths that the symbolic order struggles to veil, including – a final tease – that there often *isn’t* that much to hide.

This too epitomizes Lacan’s interest in Carroll: a fascination with the complexity of surfaces, an agility with thought, and an awareness of the price of symbolization. Despite the apparent distance between Carroll and Dodgson concerning the *Alice* stories, then, the ‘malaise’ that Lacan identified in both works highlights a remarkable set of strategies for describing and masking loss. The *Alice* stories are, we might say, both a brilliant solution to the pain that Dodgson experienced over Alice Liddell and an intense meditation on the broader consequences of that loss when individuals adapt to a social order whose laws and customs frequently teeter between meaning and absurdity.

Comedy was not the only genre in which Carroll voiced doubts about the price of adaptation. He wrote plaintively in the preface to his late and strikingly named *Pillow Problems Thought Out During Sleepless Nights* (1893):

There are sceptical thoughts, which seem for the moment to uproot the firmest faith; there are blasphemous thoughts, which dart unbidden into the most reverent souls; there are unholy thoughts, which torture with their hateful presence, the fancy that would fain be pure. Against all these some real mental work is a most helpful ally.<sup>8</sup>

In this account of uncertainty, nonsense – like mathematics – appears compensatory, almost reassuring. As Hugh Haughton observed: “Nonsense can convert the disorderly world of unbalanced feeling into externalized absurdity.”<sup>9</sup> By Dodgson’s reckoning, mathematics brings to a halt his zany fantasies because it wards off the ‘unholy,’ the ‘sceptical,’ the ‘blasphemous’ – and surely also the erotic. In distinguishing between real and ersatz ‘mental work,’ Dodgson appeared to want to eliminate *internal* challenges to his faith and duty. Yet those persist – even thrive – in his fiction, which elaborates fantasies thoroughly at odds with the identity and stability that Dodgson tried to present to the world.

This discrepancy is startling, and a challenge to his readers. From at least one perspective, Dodgson’s struggle – and the model of repression it evokes – sounds classically Victorian. It implies that he represented desire as an irrational temptation undermining his professional stability as an Oxford don. The same assumption oriented early Freudian readings of the *Alice* stories by William Empson, Phyllis Greenacre and Paul Schilder, each of

<sup>8</sup>Carroll, introduction to *Pillow Problems Thought Out During Sleepless Nights* (1893), as quoted in Florence Becker Lennon, 1962, pp. 108–9.

<sup>9</sup>Hugh Haughton, introduction to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, p. xxiii.

whom saw Alice as a stand-in for an oedipal drama that Dodgson acted out unconsciously in his fiction.

Yet this model is the cause of considerable misunderstanding about that fiction. Among other concerns, it tends to downplay the psychological complexity of the writing, which thematizes how little control and understanding authors have over their creations, and why adaptation *per se* may not ultimately be such a simple or desirable outcome. When Lacan focused on Carroll's proto-Surrealism, for instance, he captured that aspect of the work's originality, even as he left key psychobiographical questions about Dodgson hanging, because unasked.

Fascinated by the gap between these approaches, including what they presume and make possible in literary and psychoanalytic criticism, I want to advocate something of a middle way between them. Especially in the case of Carroll/Dodgson, one cannot rule out psychobiography, not least because the author flirts with a version of it that tests its assumptions and interpretive accuracy. Yet some forms of psychobiography – including analysis of details and events in Dodgson's life – are clearly not sufficient, when applied to Carroll's imaginative fiction, to account for its many varied and brilliant effects. In the *Alice* stories and *Sylvie and Bruno*, for instance, the model of ontology that Carroll adopts renders the unconscious as external, impersonal and disembodied, in ways that Lacan would later view as exemplary, and the symbolic order as brittle, precarious, and often disturbingly arbitrary.<sup>10</sup> The assumption that the work correlates with its author's unconscious desires also misses Carroll's larger point about how fantasies define us and why blind-spots in our thinking manifest themselves more broadly in the culture as indications of its own "holes in discourse."<sup>11</sup>

Largely overturning the depth-model of subjectivity, Carroll's fiction most often focuses on the play and limits of meaning across semantic and ontological registers. As the narrator observes in *Sylvie and Bruno*, almost doffing his hat at the myriad philosophical and metafictional questions that ensue: "‘Either I've been dreaming about Sylvie,’ I said to myself, ‘and this is the reality. Or else I've really been with Sylvie, and this is a dream! Is Life itself a dream, I wonder?’" (Carroll, 1991[1889], p. 10).

Like Carroll, Poe, and several others, Lacan also presented life as a type of dream, with the unconscious structured as its language, and the symbolic order imbued with its associated myths, fantasies and beliefs. That much has been said before. Additionally, Carroll's artistic and intellectual games render that language by such idiosyncratic signifiers as 'Boojum,' 'Snark,' and 'slithy toves.' Not all such neologisms are nonsensical. 'Chortled,' another Carrollian coinage, has since entered our language as a delightful verb. But the underside to this inventiveness is worth underlining because critics have found it easy to minimize: The 'vertigo' that ensues from Carroll's model

<sup>10</sup>See Lacan, 'Logical time and the assertion of anticipated certainty' and 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis,' *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 2007, pp. 161–75, 197–268. For more on psychoanalysis and symbolization, see Rosolato (1969).

<sup>11</sup>See Lacan, 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis,' *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 2007, p. 253.

dramatizes a difficulty for Alice – and her reader – in adapting to the peculiar world of language and symbols. That is because the rules and rituals governing her world seem both whimsical and arbitrarily enforced. They serve as a check on contingency and freedom in Wonderland, while casting the adult world beyond it as authoritarian and almost willfully perverse. Consider the angry Queen of Hearts, whose face explodes with rage the moment others question her capricious, unjust orders. In each instance, her verdicts are a foregone conclusion.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, moreover, the problems stemming from such arbitrary authority and meaning greatly intensify. The novella is organized as a game of chess, with Alice *qua* pawn dreaming eventually of becoming Queen as she tries to negotiate the moves and aims of other pieces (or characters). But nothing is quite as it appears, and any suggestion that the novella's world follows the rules and logic of chess is thoroughly deceptive.

As Alice tries progressing by train from the third to fourth squares on the chessboard, a surreal idea in itself, the guard on the train “angrily” demands to see her ticket, then scolds her for replying, quite reasonably: “There wasn’t room for one where [I] came from. The land there is worth a thousand pounds an inch” (Carroll, 1998, p. 146). Instead of heeding her, the guard morphs disturbingly, and unaccountably, into an inner chorus, with “a great many voices [saying] all together ...,” “Don’t keep him waiting, child. Why, his *time* is worth a thousand pounds a minute.”

The incident represents a troubling, almost threatening intrusion by the adult world into an ostensibly child-like narrative. Indeed, immediately after the guard berates Alice, a gentleman begins gratuitously to hector her, though he is dressed from head-to-toe in white paper. In Sir John Tenniel’s illustration of the scene, Alice looks uncharacteristically chastened and bashful, drawn to scale diminutively against the overbearing adults, while the gentleman strongly resembles Benjamin Disraeli (his first term as Prime Minister shortly preceded the novella’s publication [see Figure 1]).

Next to the papered Disraeli in Tenniel’s image is a goat (whose face, according to many commentators, bears a marked resemblance to





Gladstone's) who pipes up that Alice may not know her alphabet, but ought to know her way to the ticket office (again, overlooking that there wasn't one). And next to the goat is a beetle – too small to be visible in the image – which seems compelled to ratchet up the criticism by adding, comically but also sadistically, "She'll have to go back from here as luggage!" (p. 147).

Using all available Victorian optics to gauge and fathom her, the guard peers at her "first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera glass." At last he says, "'You're traveling the wrong way,' shuts the window," and goes away. But by that point, Alice thinks to herself, "there's no use in speaking," as most of her attempts at communicating bring neither understanding nor accountability. "The voices didn't join in, *this* time," the narrator assures us significantly, "as she hadn't spoken, but, to her great surprise, they all *thought* in chorus . . . , 'Better say nothing at all. Language is worth a thousand pounds a word!'" (p. 146).

The demand that Alice hears, though nothing at this point is said, neither adds up nor is one with which she can reasonably comply (she cannot create a ticket office where none exists). Yet since the demand intensifies, the choric relentlessness takes on the attributes of an excessively judgmental supplement to an irrationally chaotic Wonderland. The two arguably go hand-in-glove in Carroll's world, driving expectations that Alice cannot begin to fulfill, much less resolve.

Since these issues surpass biographical details, engaging the many psychological and intellectual currents that swirl around them, Carroll's interest in the asymmetry between Wonderland and the world beyond it teaches Alice that the symbolic order does not – and cannot – add up.<sup>12</sup> Documented keenly by the train-guard, the gnat, the bewildered White Knight, and the carpenter, the ensuing disjuncture in the novella drives Carroll's already counter-intuitive perspective, making an already off-kilter world seem as if it is sometimes ruled by a truly senseless rationale.

In his tribute to Carroll, Lacan claimed that psychoanalysis is "best position[ed] to explain" the ensuing strangeness and its paradoxes because of the power it accords fantasy, identification, and symbolization (Lacan, 2002, p. 9).<sup>13</sup> Earlier Freudians thought so too – though with a quite different sense of the cause and effect of that strangeness. So much so, in fact, that Paul Schilder came close to denouncing Carroll's work for the very emphasis that Lacan later saw as grounds for praise: its willingness to suspend disbelief so radically that it amounts almost to a "refusal of reality" (p. 10).

In the years immediately before Freud's death, when a struggle emerged historically in psychoanalysis over the ego's role in adapting the child toward the world,<sup>14</sup> Schilder largely pathologized Carroll for the dearth of consolation his fiction provided children. As Schilder asked in his *Psychoanalytic remarks on Alice in Wonderland and Lewis Carroll*, an essay that appeared in the 1938 volume of the *Journal of Mental and Nervous Disease*:

<sup>12</sup>For four quite different perspectives on this issue, see Deleuze, 1990, pp. 82–93; Holbrook, 2001; Lecercle, 1994; Holquist, 1969, pp. 145–64.

<sup>13</sup>In the original: "C'est la psychanalyse qui peut rendre compte le mieux de l'effet de [ces] œuvre[s]."

<sup>14</sup>See Hartmann (1958[1939]).

How did Carroll come to this queer world? It is a world without real love. The queens and kings are either absurd or cruel or both. We would suspect that Carroll never got the full love of his parents ... Are some of the animals also representatives of the parents? ... Do the insects represent the many brothers and sisters who must have provoked jealousy in Carroll ...? What was his relation to his sex organ anyhow? ... There may have been in Carroll the wish for feminine passivity and a protest against it ... As in all forms of primitive sexuality, the promiscuity in Carroll's relation to children is interesting.

(Schilder, 1938, pp. 165–6)

After lamenting Dodgson's 'immature' understanding of family dynamics, Schilder delivered a similar verdict on his fiction – even though an identical one could easily apply to any literary work that is broadly surreal, uncanny, written for children, or plain fantastical: “I suspect that nonsense literature will originate whenever there are incomplete object relations and a regression to deep layers involving the relation of space and time on the basis of primitive aggressiveness” (1938, p. 167). Schilder deemed even vaguely experimental fiction morbidly pathological; only classic realism held sway for its apparent commitment to psychical maturity. Presumably, Edward Lear's nonsense poetry, George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1981[1858]), Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales would, with countless others, be liable to a similar verdict.

But, while psychoanalytic literary criticism in the 1930s tended to seek the answers to literary enigmas in the psyches of the author, it was not monolithic in its reasons for doing so. In 1935, for example, William Empson conceded – without dismissing – the strangeness of Carroll's fiction, though he invoked psychoanalysis in hopes of demystifying it. According to Empson, Carroll gave us “the child as swain” who passes through a bewildering landscape peopled by fantastic creatures, to emerge wiser and more mature at the other end (Empson, 1966, p. 217). Alice should thus be relieved that the Queen of Heart's quixotic execution fantasies remain dreamlike; she awakens to a world that is apparently more rational and coherent.

Yet Empson's stress on the symbolic logic of that world missed part of what makes Carroll so uncanny as a writer and thinker: the nightmarish quality of the Alice stories, whose almost Kafkaesque undertones hint that such irrational aggression does not end, but intensifies in waking life, especially when adults direct it at children. As the critic Donald Rackin famously observed, Alice is “the reader's surrogate on a frightful journey into meaningless night,” where “practically all pattern, save the consistency of chaos, is annihilated,” leaving the works to affirm “the sane madness of ordinary existence” (Rackin, 1966, pp. 314, 313, 325).

Empson's Freudian hermeneutics also ended up disturbingly close to the model that Carroll parodies through Humpty Dumpty. Alice is, he claimed, “a father in getting down the hole, a foetus at the bottom, and can only be born by becoming a mother and producing her own amniotic fluid.” The famous cat is, moreover, “a very direct symbol of this ideal of intellectual detachment; it appears only as a head because it is almost a disembodied

intelligence, and only as a grin because it can impose an atmosphere without being present” (Empson, 1966, pp. 217, 218).

Although, for different reasons, Empson’s and Schilder’s deductions missed the warnings against making such assumptions – warnings that recur throughout the novellas themselves – Schilder did usefully mention, in implicit rebuttal to Empson’s psychoanalytic pastoral: “One is astonished to find in [Carroll’s] pleasant fairy stories the expression of an enormous *anxiety*.” Alice, he observed perceptively, is often depicted as “standing bewildered.” “She does not know what to do.” “She does not even know her name.” “She cannot find the word ‘tree.’” When she wants to repeat a poem, “another poem comes out, to her distress.” “She moves and comes back to the same place.”<sup>15</sup> Schilder was surely correct, moreover, in noting that “most of her anxieties are connected with a change of her body” – its size, appetites and the threats it receives from relentless, unreasoning adults. The anxiety would seem to be largely about Alice’s ability to adapt to a world to which she feels peculiarly ill-fitted and ill-suited. And certainly, Wonderland, in a comic rendition of the aggression circulating in Victorian nationalism and imperialism, does not exactly go out of its way to make room for her. (Nor necessarily should it; the contrary expectation could be just as troublesome.) The interest is in the friction and conflict that ensue.

Phyllis Greenacre was similarly astute in describing the cruelty and violence of Wonderland. In her 1955 *Swift and Carroll: A Psychoanalytic Study of Two Lives*, she declared:

The great charm of the tale lies in the panorama of grotesque caricature expressed in the general mixture and fusion of identifies of the animals, insects and strange human beings whom Alice meets. Through all this is a cacophony of cruelty so extreme as to be ridiculous: animals eat each other up, a baby turns into a pig and is abandoned to wander away into the forest, decapitation is a general threat, and a Cheshire Cat does appear smiling though separated from its own body.

(Greenacre, 1955, p. 182)

But Greenacre also saw Carroll’s parody as reducible to an unresolved oedipal drama, which manifests itself not as anxiety or voyeuristic pleasure, but rather as guilt and self-recrimination:

The controlling and encasing functions of his superego were paramount and in themselves unbelievably aggressive – toward him. They seem to have been derived from the extreme intensity of his pregenital aggressions; from the way in which these engulfed and carried with them the normal phallic urges; and from the enforced precocity of the conscience development which prohibited so widely and so devastatingly. His nonsense, detached and meaningless as it consciously appeared to him and as he intended it to be for others, nonetheless contained his innermost secrets, *the primal-scene excitations, the oral-anal-phallic urges bringing their complementary fear of punishing destruction.*

(*ibid.*, pp. 274–5, my italics)

<sup>15</sup>Carroll, as quoted in Schilder, 1938, p. 161.

From this premise, there is no way to address nonsense without rendering it either a failing on the author's part or an unexamined symptom of his pathology.

One reason these quasi-Freudian typologies correspond imperfectly to the fiction itself, Lacan later made clear, is that Carroll's novellas anticipate Freud in complicating the notion of a clear divide between the worlds of adults and children. Alice's bizarre, unpredictable experiences work themselves out without tragedy, teleology or recourse to a preordained fate. Chance and necessity are thus interesting variables in the fiction, sometimes colliding with moments of extraordinary, capricious cruelty ('Off with their heads' being only the most memorable). At other times, Alice tries to fathom whether the symbolic order is hiding an enigma or, indeed, is hiding that it *hasn't* one. In this respect, the drama over adaptation is not worked out in advance; it is staged throughout as an active problem that Alice and the reader must face but cannot easily overcome. Individual pathology is thus, to some degree, beside the point. The issue is structural and ontological, concerning the limits of sense and reason in a world that often abides by neither.

If, as Lacan encouraged, we view the relationship between malaise and joy in Carroll's fiction as a structural dilemma governed by tensions between being and meaning, then we are more likely to see the fiction as pinpointing what is most paradoxical about the symbolic order – that it arises out of, and cannot finally evade, nothingness. In his approach to Carroll, Lacan also frames the interpretive and ethical stakes of psychoanalytic literary criticism, especially when it focuses on a writer drawn to representing what is most senseless and surreal about becoming a person.

"It isn't trifling," Lacan observes, "that Alice appeared at the same time as [Darwin's] *Origin of Species*, to which she is, one could say, the opposition" (Lacan, 2002, p. 12). Six years in fact fell between their publications, though Carroll's inspiration to create Alice came three years after Darwin's treatise caused a minor earthquake in Victorian thought and culture. Still, Lacan's overall point holds: whereas Darwin used lineage and genealogy to address the evolution and atavism of species, Carroll pushed the analogy in the opposite direction, inverting endings and beginnings to readjust psychic time, while unraveling the sequences by which we fathom ontogenesis belatedly, after the fact. As one unnamed lady "exclaims enthusiastically" in *Sylvie and Bruno*, "A development worthy of Darwin! ...Only *you* reverse his theory. Instead of developing a mouse into an elephant, you would develop an elephant into a mouse!" (Carroll, 1991[1889], p.31).

Tenniel's illustrations nicely capture this ontological challenge. They emphasize not just the difficulty but also the price of Alice's attempts at adapting to circumstances. Alice is first too small (see Figure 2), then too big (see Figure 3) for the world she tries to inhabit. She is both unprepared for it, yet joining it long after it has established rules and laws with which she struggles to comply.

Carroll here deftly anticipates the radical argument that Lacan would popularize from Freud's (1920) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: because of our capacity for reflection and consciousness, we miss the 'right moment' of



biology and arrive *too quickly* into a symbolic order that we can grasp and comprehend only quizzically and belatedly. Carroll also doubtless plays a Darwinian joke in having the then-extinct Dodo not only vibrantly alive in Wonderland, but also likened, with amusing ludicrousness, to Shakespeare.

In these ways, Carroll's non-Darwinian ontology makes unexpected patterns of meaning and resemblance collide in Wonderland. Its many creatures miraculously share the same language yet rarely communicate straightforwardly. As Alice observes of the 'Jabberwocky' (not the monster, but the famous parody of Tennysonian sentimentalism that misrepresents it): "It seems very pretty ... but it's *rather* hard to understand!" "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas," she adds, "only I don't exactly know what they are!" (Carroll, 1998, p. 134).

The drama over the exact meaning of signs extends to Wonderland's legal apparatus where a presumption of guilt long precedes any state of innocence. The inversion of guilt and innocence acquires a strong psychical

inflection, with accusations of wrongdoing predating even the *fantasy* to act. “Sentence first – verdict afterwards,” shouts the Queen of Hearts, demanding punishment through execution whether or not a ‘crime’ of even mild impropriety has occurred.

In all senses, then, nothing quite adds up in Wonderland. None of the creatures in Wonderland easily coexists – each is peevish, irrepressible, and for the most part insistently singular. At the same time, nothingness amounts to an ontological dimension that Carroll and Lacan take very seriously, and with good reason. The patchwork quilt of our symbolic order is, they show, held pincers-like by the real. To confront the limits of the latter – as Alice does repeatedly, with her pointed questions, quirky imagination, preternatural respect for rules, and sometimes whimsical joy in breaking them – is to expose, in the 19th century no less, a rickety structure held together by desire, illusion and force, a volatile combination at the best of times.

One reason Lacan found so much to admire in Carroll’s fiction is that the novelist tended to celebrate in children an unwillingness, even a studied refusal, to adapt to the world (a feature that is especially notable in a writer who, in most respects, was both a logician and stickler for rules).<sup>16</sup> Similar pockets of refusal pepper Victorian fiction, from the mavericks like *Oliver Twist*, Pip and Nicholas Nickleby who traverse so many Dickensian worlds, to startling disjunctures in Kipling’s profoundly original and complex novel, *Kim*. What distinguishes Carroll from these writers is his willingness to make that refusal integral to his fiction, to serve as a guiding ethic for his protagonist. The effect, Lacan observed, is a “singular joy” [*une joie singulière*] that tends to collide with the unease and malaise that *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* differently engender (Lacan, 2002, p. 9).

Examples of that type of glee recur as periodic prompts in the *Alice* stories, from the Gryphon who urges everyone to break into song to the Mock Turtle and Lobster-Quadrille who caper about with unself-conscious pleasure. But when the games fall away in Carroll’s fiction, as they do quite noticeably, a brooding melancholy replaces them that is emphatically jarring. Without the crazy banter, Alice (as Paul Schilder recognized) is also left at the mercy of inexplicable forces. One sees then a greater rationale for the melancholia, for the fiction tends to lament the consequence of that adaptation – almost to the point of asking whether such a heavy sacrifice is finally worth it.

Perhaps the clearest source of bewildered sadness in *Through the Looking-Glass* is the hapless, semi-ridiculous White Knight, whose plodding kindness and reflections are modeled loosely on those of Carroll himself. He arrives in a bid to ‘rescue’ Alice from a competing Red Knight, then falls off his horse so many times that she ends up rescuing *him*.

“What does it matter where my body happens to be?” he muses. “My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head-downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things” (Carroll, 1998, p. 213). He sings

<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, Lerer’s (2010) remarks on Dodgson’s study, *Symbolic Logic* (1977[1896]), in *What Lewis Carroll taught us*.

to Alice a song alternately called ‘The Aged Aged Man’ and ‘Ways and Means,’ and she, the narrator insists emphatically, is so moved that she takes in the scene “like a picture” and sits “listening, in a half-dream, to the melancholy music of the song” (p. 214).

The interlude with the White Knight comes just before Alice crowns herself Queen, as he notes forlornly, and his song is full of questions and injunctions, including ‘How is it you live?’ and ‘Come, tell me how you live!’ – lines said to be “cried” several times (pp. 215, 216). The Knight and the new Queen part shortly thereafter. In his bumbling courtly love and earnest solicitude, however, he tries to warn her about a problem that he cannot quite articulate: “I’ll tell thee everything I can: / There’s little to relate.” While this is all the content he seems able or willing to share, the meaning of his caution is more structural than substantive, which gives it greater weight and urgency.

A similar idea runs through the surreal, quasi-cannibalism of the ‘Walrus and the Carpenter’ interlude, whose explicit warning to children appears to be ‘Avoid talking to strangers,’ but whose broader message extends all the way to religious discipleship. The little oysters – their “coats ... brushed, their faces washed, / Their shoes ... clean and neat” – eagerly follow the Walrus and the Carpenter, eventually “waiting in a row” for further instructions, as if lined in a church pew (pp. 160–1). The two adult figures then “feed” on the youngsters, gorging on them until the last one is gone. Coming especially from an Anglican clergyman, the image is jarring in a poem otherwise focused on children’s meek submission to orders.

Any relation between the White Knight’s warning and the allegory of the Walrus and the Carpenter is, of course, conjectural. Still, their shared thread makes clear that adaptation to the world of adults is not without risk or cost. As Lacan would put it, one receives some meaning for the ‘being’ he or she is forced to give up, but it is not a fair exchange and much is lost in translation. Those witnessing the loss fail to symbolize it completely because recognition of what has gone comes too late. As Carroll wrote elliptically: “Even *men* very often fail to ‘desire’ what is, after all, the best thing for them to *have*” (Dodgson, ‘Resident women-students’ (1896), as quoted in Gattégno, 1976, p. 169).

Masked as an allegory about being ‘wrong’ for the world, the *Alice* stories reveal both the generative possibilities and the unwelcome distortions of the symbolic order. In refusing to imitate or rationalize the comic pretensions of a system only loosely bound by rules and signifiers, Carroll gives us that world aslant and askew. His oblique perspective underscores the fantasies and psychical effects that exceed symbolization – fantasies that in his fiction come to assume ardent, impossible meaning.

## Translations of summary

**Lewis Carroll und die Psychoanalyse: Warum sich im Wunderland nichts addiert.** Viele Jahrzehnte lang fühlten sich Psychoanalytiker von Lewis Carrolls experimenteller Science Fiction und seinen Höhenflügen der Fantasie angezogen. Aber was sagen uns eigentlich solche Fantasien und die nahe verwandte Nonsense-Dichtung über die symbolische Ordnung des viktorianischen Zeitalters aus? Mit dem Argument, dass Carrolls „surrealistische” Perspektive hilft, uns diese Welt fremdartig erscheinen zu lassen

und sie auf neue Weise zu betrachten, konzentriert sich dieser Aufsatz auf den zu zahlenden Preis und die Schwierigkeit, uns ganz allgemein an Systeme anzupassen, die von Zeichen und Symbolen beherrscht werden. Lacans psychoanalytischem Tribut an Carroll folgend, argumentiere ich, dass das Interesse des viktorianischen Logikers an Bedeutung und Nonsense verschiedene psychoanalytische Argumente über Fantasien, Oberflächen und wechselnde Identifizierungen vorweg genommen hat.

**Lewis Carroll y el psicoanálisis. Por qué nada tiene sentido en el País de las Maravillas.** Durante décadas, los psicoanalistas se han sentido atraídos hacia la ficción experimental y la fantasía de Lewis Carroll. ¿Pero qué nos dice realmente esa fantasía – y su pariente cercano, el sinsentido – acerca del orden simbólico victoriano? Argumentando que la perspectiva ‘surrealista’ de Carroll contribuye a hacer que ese mundo se vuelva extraño para nosotros para que podamos verlo con nuevos ojos, este ensayo se centra en el costo y la dificultad de adaptarnos de manera más general a sistemas gobernados por signos y símbolos. Partiendo del tributo psicoanalítico de Lacan a Carroll, sostengo que el interés del lógico victoriano por el significado y el sinsentido anticipa varios argumentos psicoanalíticos acerca de las fantasías, las superficies y las identificaciones proteicas.

**Lewis Carroll et la psychanalyse: pourquoi rien ne s'additionne-t-il au pays des merveilles?** Depuis des décennies les psychanalystes se sont sentis attirés par la fiction expérimentale et les élans fantaisistes de Lewis Carroll. Mais qu'est-ce qu'une telle fantaisie – et le non-sens qui lui est lié – pourrait nous apprendre au sujet de l'ordre symbolique propre à l'époque victorienne? L'auteur de cet article, soutenant l'hypothèse que la perspective « surréaliste » de Carroll contribue à nous rendre étrange cet univers là et à nous le faire voir sous un autre jour, centre sa réflexion sur les difficultés que nous avons à nous adapter de façon générale à des systèmes régis par des signes et des symboles. En s'appuyant sur l'hommage psychanalytique rendu par Lacan à Carroll, l'auteur suggère que l'intérêt du logicien victorien pour le sens et le non-sens ait anticipé bon nombre d'arguments psychanalytiques relatifs aux fantasmes, aux surfaces et aux identifications fluctuantes.

**Lewis Carroll e la psicoanalisi, o il motivo per cui nulla ‘torna’ in Wonderland.** Per decenni gli psicoanalisti sono stati attratti dalla narrativa sperimentale e dai voli di fantasia di Lewis Carroll. Ma questa fantasia e il nonsense, ad essa strettamente collegato, cosa ci rivelano dell'ordine simbolico vittoriano? Sostenendo l'idea che la prospettiva ‘surrealista’ di Carroll ci rende perturbante quel mondo, mostrandocelo sotto una nuova luce, questo lavoro si incentra sul mostrare quanto difficile e faticoso sia per noi, anche in senso più generale, adattarsi ad un sistema fatto di segni e simboli. Muovendo dal tributo psicoanalitico di Lacan a Carroll, propongo che l'interesse dell'autore vittoriano per il significato e il nonsense anticipi diversi argomenti psicoanalitici come quelli di fantasia, di superfici e di identificazione proteiforme.

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