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WONDERLAND REVISITED

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S COMMEMORATION OF THE NINEteenth, we have reached the centennial of Alice. Not uncharacteristically, the date has been somewhat blurred. The author, whose fussiness has endeared him to bibliophiles, was dissatisfied with the first edition, so that *Alice in Wonderland* was not publicly issued until 1866. Moreover, if we wish to celebrate the occasion on which the tale was first told, we must look back to that famous boating party of three little girls and two dons on July 4, 1862. That "golden afternoon," as Lewis Carroll describes it in his introductory poem, was actually—as modern research has discovered—"wet and rather cool." Fancy has been at work from the very outset. The rain that had overtaken the same group of five picnickers during an earlier expedition on June 17 seems to have inspired the pool of tears, wherein Alice's sisters Lorina and Edith are immortalized as the Lory and the Eaglet, while their companions Duckworth and Dodgson appear as the Duck and the Dodo. But the date specified in the story is May 4, Alice Liddell's tenth birthday; and, since the heroine of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* is exactly seven and a half just six months later, perhaps her adventures should be predated at 1859.

At all events, the fantasy has now lasted 100 years. What is more surprising, it has withstood the stringent test of translation into forty-seven languages (by the reckoning of Dr. Warren Weaver, whose collection, ranging from Finnish to Swahili and from Chinese to Esperanto versions, should harbor an independent interest for cultural anthropologists). Excerpts have been quoted in, and out of, every conceivable context. Clearly the Alice books must embody certain arche-

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types, they must touch off some of the deeper responses of human consciousness, in order to have penetrated so far beyond their immediate period and culture. Yet, looking back to them from our present distance, we may also note that they were deeply embedded in their mid-Victorian matrix, that they remain as distinctively English as their heroine's name. Now the English have no monopoly on nonsense—or, for that matter, on common sense. However, it may be no accident that they have excelled so conspicuously in both. It may be that the one is the price paid for—or else the bonus gained from—the other, that a hard-working sense of practicality gets its recreation from the enjoyment of absurdity. The nonsense of Lewis Carroll has been defined by a French fantast, André Breton, as "the vital solution to a profound contradiction between the acceptance of faith and the exercise of reason."

It was the voice of reason that spoke through the tongue of Edmund Burke, when he remarked: "Though no man can draw a stroke between the confines of night and day, yet darkness and light are on the whole tolerably distinguishable." What could be more pragmatic, more empirical, more thoroughly British? Yet such reasoning could never have satisfied the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. From his adolescent magazine, *The Rectory Umbrella*, to his Oxford lecture, "Where Does the Day Begin?," he preoccupied himself with precisely this problem, and stood ready to pursue the sunrise around the world in order to prove his point that such distinctions were wholly arbitrary. No wonder we experience some hesitation in putting a finger on Alice's anniversary! We live by those convenient strokes which separate night from day, sleeping from waking, and madness from sanity. But imagination, poetic or scientific—and in Dodgson's case it was both—cannot afford to take anything for granted. It is continually entertaining the most improbable assumptions, following non sequiturs through to their logical consequences, or—like Dodgson—hopefully working out *pi* to an ever larger number of decimals. Speculating in his diary, he asked himself:

> Query: when we are dreaming and, as so often happens, have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do

> things which in waking life would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life? We often dream without the least suspicion of unreality. "Sleep hath its own world," and it is often as lifelike as the other.

If this be madness, it is closely allied to the genius of Hamlet, and there is pith in the Gravedigger's observation that the Prince has been sent to England because "there the men are as mad as he." The Cheshire Cat should not shock us when it observes of Wonderland: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad." The Cheshire Cat itself seems sane enough, so detached from the frenetic proceedings it comments upon that it fades away to a mere head and finally a phosphorescent grin. But if it ends by becoming a mouthpiece, a mascot, a kind of tribal totem for British humor in its imperturbable discernment of oddities, then the episode that follows affords us a glimpse of Oxford—a mad, an endless tea-party, with pointless anecdotes and answerless riddles and feline small talk, presided over by two certified madmen, a Hatter modeled on a local character and a Hare whose watch has stopped at 6.00 o'clock. Tea-time is over, but nothing seems to lie ahead. Three little girls stay forever at the bottom of a treacle well, in the interrupted story of the Dormouse. That "Ancient City," which Dodgson refers to directly in his original manuscript, has constituted an ideal breeding ground for the cultivation of licensed eccentricity and for the humorous interplay between select intelligence and encrusted observance.

When Dodgson characterized himself as the Dodo, the reduplicated syllable echoed his stammer even while pronouncing his own surname, and the extinct bird attested his incompatibility with larger and freer worlds. When "Lewis Carroll" won unique and sudden fame, his donnish self refused to acknowledge the pseudonym that he had contrived by twisting and reversing his first two names. As conservative in politics as he was orthodox in religion, he was attached for almost 50 years to Christchurch, which is a cathedral as well as a college. An unordained cleric, a prim hobbyist, a shy devotee of lost causes and parlor tricks, he passed through a

completely institutionalized career. Professionally he was—from what we gather—a mediocre mathematician and a dull teacher, supremely unconcerned with undergraduates and rather difficult in the common room. "There never *was* such a place for things not happening," he complained of Oxford to one correspondent. To another—another little girl—he confided: "But the great difficulty is that *adventures don't happen*! Oh, how *am* I to make some happen, so as to have something to tell to my darling Enid?" The adventures in his otherwise uneventful life were his friendships with hundreds of little girls, an avocation which we are inclined to view as either insipid or suspect.

All his other hobbies—games, puzzles, contraptions, album-leaves, holiday trips, and not least storytelling—were directed single-mindedly toward that end. Since he was remarkably skilful as a portrait photographer, photographic exposure seems to have taken the place of carnal seduction at the happy climax of these courtships. His flirtations sometimes met with rebuffs from mammas and governesses, and he confessed to a cousin with wistful bravado that he lived "on the frowns of Mrs. Grundy." But there was not much cause to be alarmed. His inamoratas were too prepubescent to have interested Humbert Humbert (though it is worth noting that Vladimir Nabokov's first book was a Russian translation of *Alice in Wonderland*). The biographical record, which is stuffy if not sticky, lends itself to the cruder naïvetés of the psychoanalysts. Its symbolic effect on his writing has been summed up in two or three succinct pages by William Empson—who, as a Cambridge man, was in a special position to elucidate an Oxonian case history. Mr. Empson's essay, though slightly distorted by the effort to fit it into his thesis on pastoral convention, is the most illuminating study we have of Lewis Carroll, for all the bibliographers, antiquarians, and analytic philosophers who have made an oracle of him.

The light it throws upon Dodgson's motivation, though by no means irrelevant, is incidental. In some notes for an unpublished article on dress in the theater (now in the Houghton Library at Harvard), Dodgson wrote: "Base of argument lies in relations of *sex*, without which purity and impurity would

be unmeaning words." One cannot overlook the sexual charge in his celibate cult of his little darlings; but the outcome, by definition, seems rather pure than impure. He once planned to edit a *Girls' Own Shakespeare*, in which he proposed to purify the text of such gross expressions as Bowdler had not excised. The demure Eros of Lewis Carroll was a Victorian ideal of delicacy, feminine yet neither female nor effeminate. We may appreciate it better if, recalling his miserable school days at Rugby, we compare Alice with Tom Brown, and with that admixture of cant and brutality which passed for what the Victorians liked to call manliness.

> Speak roughly to your little boy,
> And beat him when he sneezes . . .

In the endeavor to make things happen, the escape from the monotonous quadrangle of his own existence, Dodgson's chosen companion—indeed his surrogate—was the Dean's daughter, the second one, the one that kept tossing her head back to keep her hair out of her eyes and, when her sisters asked him for a story, hoped "there will be nonsense in it."

Alice, "Child of the pure unclouded brow," with her eager, expressive face, her long, straight hair, and her pinafore that adapts to so many sizes, is the eternal ingénue who combines Miranda's reaction to the wonders of a brave new world with Daisy Miller's resolve not to miss the tourist attractions. No novelist has identified more intimately with the point of view of his heroine. Except for parenthetical comments, which occur less and less frequently, the empathy is complete. "The sole medium of the stories is her pellucid consciousness," as Walter De la Mare has pointed out; this forms the medium for as elegant an exercise in the Jamesian technique of narration as *What Maisie Knew*. Since Alice is in the habit of talking to herself, there can be a good deal of monologue. When she falls silent the narrator, like a good contemporary of Flaubert, can employ *le style indirect libre*: "Down, down, down. Would the fall *never* come to an end? 'I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?' she said aloud." Alice began by tiring of her sister's book because it had no pictures

or conversations in it. Her chronicles are not lacking in those amenities. Each adventure brings a conversation with a new and strange vis-à-vis.

As for the pictorial presentation, it is an integral part of the author's design. He started with his own sketches, chose his illustrator with the utmost concern, and worked with Tenniel in the most indelible of collaborations. Consequently, there is little description in Dodgson's prose. It is all the more convincing because he simply assumes that the sights are there, and that we visualize them through the eyes of his beholder. Instead of describing the Gryphon, he enjoins us parenthetically: "If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture." Picture and text join forces to align the reader's awareness with that of Alice. Her inherent responsiveness is controlled by the consistent gravity of demeanor imposed upon her by the inhabitants of Wonderland. After the aimless competition of the Caucus-Race, when she is compelled to supply the prizes for everybody, including herself: "Alice thought the whole thing very absurd, but they all looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh; and, as she could not think of anything to say, she simply bowed, and took the thimble, looking as solemn as she could." So it is that children learn to suppress their native instinct for laughter in the company of adults. "He talks just as if it was a game!" says Alice of the Red King. But, though it may be a game for her, he is in dead earnest.

Alice soon gets used to the tone of desperate seriousness in which she is greeted by all the creatures she meets, with the exception of the Cheshire Cat, and we get used to the plethora of exclamation points. She is sustained through their dead-pan dialogues by the sense of wonder, the sort of curiosity that animates great poets and scientists. "Curious" is the adjective with which she responds again and again. "Curiouser and curiouser!" is her apt, if ungrammatical, response to the sequence of events. "It was a curious dream," she tells her sister afterward, and that motif is taken up repeatedly in *The Nursery Alice*, the version that Dodgson rewrote for "Infants from Nought to Five." He did not hesitate to tell them how to react:

> Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Alice: and she had a very curious dream.
>
> Would you like to hear what it was that she dreamed about?
>
> Well, this was the *first* thing that happened. A White Rabbit came by, in a great hurry; and, just as it passed Alice, it stopped, and took its watch out of its pocket.
>
> Wasn't *that* a funny thing? Did *you* ever see a Rabbit that had a watch, and a pocket to put it in? Of course, when a Rabbit has a watch, it *must* have a pocket to put it in; it would never do to carry it about in its mouth—and it wants its hands sometimes, to run with.

In this elementary reduction, which may serve to emphasize the sophisticated artistry of the work itself, the rabbit does not talk at all and none of the conversations is reported. The *textus receptus*, by accepting the apparent naturalness of the situation, gains credence for its basic preposterousness. Alice's reactions are delayed. With her, we behold no more at first than a white rabbit with pink eyes:

> There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In an article on the dramatic adaptation, Dodgson made clear that the contrast between the audacity and directness of Alice and the nervous shilly-shallyings of the White Rabbit was intended to stress the invidious comparison between youth and age. Significantly, since he is so worried about his costume, and since he heralds the whole adventure for Alice, the Rabbit is dressed as a herald when he makes his last appearance. Without lingering over the prenatal symbolism of the rabbit-hole or the pool of tears, we may observe that Alice's principal problem—determining her relationship with the

others—is the question of size. This, in turn, becomes a question of eating and drinking, properly or improperly, as every child has been reminded so often that the reminder punctuates the very rhythm of infancy. Alice's enlargements and diminutions are stimulated by a magical succession of eatables and potables. Like Gulliver, she finds herself out of scale with her fellow beings; but she is less concerned with Lilliputians or Brobdingnagians than with her own person and growth: "I never ask advice about growing." Dodgson himself has drawn a haunting illustration of Alice cramped within the Rabbit's house. "How puzzling all these changes are!" she exclaims.

Confused by such dizzying transformations—in short, by nothing more or less than the physiological metamorphoses of girlhood—she undergoes what modern psychologists would term an identity crisis. "Who are *you*?" the Caterpillar asks. In spite of its assurance, no caterpillar can be quite sure who *it* is, after all. "Who in the world am I?" Alice asks herself. Can she be Ada or Mabel? Or is she the White Rabbit's housemaid, Mary Ann? And would some other name confer on her a different personality? "Remember who you are," the Red Queen commands. Yet there may be some advantage, the Gnat whispers, in losing one's name. When Alice's neck grows so long that—in a pigeon's-eye view—she looks like a serpent, the Pigeon asks: "*What* are you?" She replies, rather doubtfully, "I—I'm a little girl." We can hardly blame the Pigeon for retorting: "A likely story indeed!" When she finds herself in the imaginary sphere of the Unicorn, it is he who calls her a fabulous monster. But suspended disbelief is willing to strike a bargain: he will believe in her, if she believes in him. The Lion wearily inquires whether she is animal, vegetable, or mineral. But the Messenger has already presented her credentials: "This is a child! . . . It's as large as life, and twice as natural!"

One of the most touching episodes, and possibly the profoundest, takes place in the wood where things have no name. This is truly that *selva oscura* where the straight way is lost, that forest of symbols whose meanings have been forgotten, that limbo of silence which prompts a cosmic shudder. Less

traditionally, since Dodgson was among the pioneers of symbolic logic, it could represent—in W.V. Quine's phrase—"the gulf between meaning and naming." There Alice comes across an unfrightened fawn, who momentarily allows itself to be stroked. Happily they coexist for a time, undivided by identities or classifications. But the moment of self-recognition introduces a shock of alienation.

> "What do you call yourself?" the Fawn said at last. Such a soft sweet voice it had!
> "I wish I knew!" thought poor Alice. She answered, rather sadly: "Nothing, just now."
> "Think again," it said: "that won't do."
> Alice thought, but nothing came of it. "Please, would you tell me what *you* call yourself?" she said timidly. "I think that might help a little."
> "I'll tell you, if you'll come a little further on," the Fawn said. "I can't remember *here*."
> So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me! you're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.

A universe where the self has no labels or signposts to go by, in Dodgson's account, seems less estranging than a familiar environment which casts us in suspicious and hostile roles. Just as Hawthorne's faunlike protagonist regains the language of the birds and beasts when he returns to the countryside, so childhood has the faculty of communicating with nature spontaneously. Adulthood, on the other hand, superimposes its artifice, and Alice's experiences run increasingly counter to nature.

Seeking to avoid the Queen of Hearts' displeasure, her three gardeners paint her white rose-trees red. The Queen's peculiar game of croquet, by using flamingoes and hedgehogs as mallets and balls, reduces animal life to the inorganic. Alice likewise converses with the flowers, thereby allowing Dodgson to burlesque a pathetic fallacy echoed from Tennyson's *Maud*.

Her royal mentors end by putting her on social terms with the inanimate objects that make up the bill of fare at the banquet: "Alice—Mutton: Mutton—Alice." Her relations with the animals are far from idyllic. Though they are never *he* or *she* but always neuter, most of them are highly anthropomorphic. They argue with her, exhort her to mind her manners, and order her around for all the world as if they were grown people. They seem to bear less resemblance to the benign household pets of Sir Edwin Landseer than—as Madame Mespoulet has shown—to the satirical caricatures of J. J. Grandville, who had provided some notable illustrations for the beast fables of La Fontaine. Lewis Carroll's bestiary is post-Darwinian in its vistas of universal struggle for survival, from the obsolescent Dodo to the suppressed guinea pigs. "Do cats eat bats?," Alice muses, or, "Do bats eat cats?"

No matter. All species prey and are preyed upon, and the domesticated are worse than the wild ones. The predatory crocodile replaces the busy bee, from the *Divine Songs for Children* of Isaac Watts,

> And welcomes little fishes in,
> With gently smiling jaws!

So many of her poems, as Alice retrospectively realizes, have been about fishes or other forms of sea food. The impasse of communication, the exchange of ultimata, and the warfare between two mutually antagonistic realms of creation are haltingly and laconically rendered in "I sent a message to the fish." Doubtless the most memorable of these piscatories is the affecting ballad of the Oysters' betrayal, "The Walrus and the Carpenter"; for the stage version of *Alice* Dodgson was persuaded to soften this stark tragedy with an afterpiece, wherein the ghosts of the Oysters exact a nightmarish revenge upon their sleeping destroyers. Alice's mythical mount, the Gryphon, though it might well claim heraldic connections, chats with her in the vulgar idiom of a hackney-coachman. His partner, the Mock Turtle, is a spurious animal, a sort of zoological back-formation; but it is a genuine dish and may therefore

sing, with the greatest propriety, its lugubrious song to the evening soup—originally the evening star.

Alice's unflagging and versatile appetite leads to certain embarrassments in her encounters. Yet she proves tactful enough to stop herself from admitting that her previous acquaintance with lobsters and whitings has been on the dinner table and not in the ballroom. Her shrinkages have taught her to look at matters from the other side, from the animals' vantage point. She may scorn to be three inches tall, which the Caterpillar naturally thinks is "a very good height indeed." But she learns the hard way from her initial mistake of boasting about her cat Dinah, which hurts the Mouse's feelings and drives the birds away. Cats and kittens, conceivably because of their totemic relation with human beings, are set apart from their fellow creatures ("creatures" being the term that, for Dodgson, embraces both birds and animals). When the offended Mouse consents to tell its tale, this turns out to be a typographical oddity, a calligrammatic poem in the shape of a mouse's tail. The villain is another pet, the dog Fury, who with cold-blooded brutality undertakes to be prosecutor, judge, and jury, like the Snark in the Barrister's Dream. Alice gains a taste of what it feels like to be under such jeopardy when, in her miniature state, she is nearly crushed by a monstrous puppy—a realization made vivid by Dodgson's hatred of dogs.

The fulfilment of the Mouse's caveat is the trial scene. Here the tables are turned, in the sense that the jurors are twelve good creatures and true. One of them is Bill the Lizard again, just as ineffectual with his squeaky pencil as he was in going down the chimney; but, at least, he can write. Alice gains the upper hand again by re-enacting a mishap of a week before, when she had upset a goldfish bowl at home; the reenactment exemplifies how the dreamwork has been conditioned by daily actualities. Through her divagations she has been sustained by the vision of a delightful garden and her hope of attaining the right size to enter it. Entrance to it is implicitly equated with growing up, which is bound to be somewhat disillusioning. When she eventually gets there, instead of dallying among the fountains and flower beds, she is

pressed into service for the crazy croquet game. There have been some previous intimations—the Rabbit, the Duchess, the Fish and Frog Footmen—that, when she reached that enchanted terrain at last, she would find it the precinct of high society. The ugly Duchess, erstwhile so formidable in her own kitchen, has become an affable dowager, who measures an increase of height by resting her chin on Alice's shoulder and insists on pointing out a moral in everything Alice says. How tiresome can they be, these grownups?

In the manuscript, there is but a single matriarchial figure, who bears the compound title "Queen of Hearts and Marchioness of Mock Turtles." Noting in retrospect that this queen is "a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury," Dodgson reminds us of the Mouse's warning against the litigious dog Fury, and of the rage that now and then breaks out in his "frumious" (i.e. fuming and furious) personages. The Queen's habitual ukase, "Off with his head!," is the peremptory exercise of grownup authority. Her face-card features scarcely reveal the rounded lineaments of Victoria Regina, yet Alice could never have set forth upon her adventures from any other realm than a constitutional matriarchy. In *Through the Looking-Glass,* she is shuttled back and forth by two matrons even more sharply differentiated in Dodgson's intentions: the White Queen, who is "all helpless imbecility," and the Red Queen, who is "the concentrated essence of all governesses." The final examination through which they must put her, before she can become a queen in her own right, has its counterpart in the prior volume, when Alice is sent to be interviewed by the Mock Turtle, and recognizes—with due allowance for sea change—the curriculum that she has studied at day school.

Thence we are wafted not back to the garden party but to the culminating trial: a recapitulation of events and a convocation of characters to which Alice reacts with no Kafkaesque passivity. The charge as stated in the nursery rhyme, the theft of tarts, seems to be a breach of the domestic proprieties. We never reach the second stanza, where the Knave gets punished like a mischievous boy undergoing parental discipline. For Alice has been growing steadily—"a very

curious sensation"—until, when she takes the witness stand, she towers above the denizens of Wonderland. She is no longer the spectator but the cynosure. Before she had met anyone, she could soliloquize: "Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!" The thin-skinned Mouse could expostulate with her: "You insult me by talking such nonsense!" But it is the others, more and more, who insult her by talking nonsensically. At their first encounter in the garden, "crimson with fury," the Queen of Hearts had ordered her decapitation, and Alice had retorted boldly: "Nonsense!" Having now attained full stature, she repeats the retort with emphasis: "Stuff and nonsense!" When the Queen repeats her furious sentence, Alice dispels the whole nonsensical phantasmagoria with the sensible exorcism: "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

She is a little girl once more when she awakens, and she must retraverse her adolescence by another route in the sequel. There we soon find her contradicting the Red Queen: "That would be nonsense——" To which the Red Queen majestically replies: "*I've* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!" At a parallel stage to the exorcism of the card-pack, the second finale, Alice qualifies for her crown by the Queens' catechism: "What dreadful nonsense we *are* talking!" At her coronation, once more she tells the phantoms off and brushes them away, pulling out the tablecloth from under them and stirring the hall into pandemonium —as, Mr. Empson conjectures, Dodgson would so have liked to have done with the high table at Christchurch. We must stay with Alice, however. Consciously she seems to rouse herself, as we do when our wishdreams threaten to turn into nightmares. Deliberately she shakes the diminishing Red Queen until the figure dwindles into her black kitten. This has all been a dream, too, like the first one, which ended with Alice's older sister Lorina drowsing off into her own dream of Wonderland, and with the soft noises of the river-bank providing their oneiric sound effects. "There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought!" as Alice has been conscious from the beginning.

Her second dream propels her farther into the stratosphere of metaphysical speculation, where she is informed

that she is nothing but a figment of the Red King's dream. Awakening, she speculates with her kitten as to who was the dreamer and which the reality. "He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!" After the disappearance of the Lion and the Unicorn, she all but dismisses them as a dream within a dream, when she notices the plate for their plum-cake at her feet and meditates an existential challenge.

> "So I wasn't dreaming, after all," she said to herself, "unless—unless we're all part of the same dream. Only I do hope it's *my* dream, and not the Red King's. I don't like belonging to another person's dream," she went on in a rather complaining tone: "I've a great mind to go and wake him, and see what happens!"

"The Hunting of the Snark" has been philosophically interpreted as a fruitless search for the Absolute; the ultimate object of man's quest is foredoomed to vanish away softly and silently; it was the last line of the "Agony" that occurred first to the agonizing poet: "For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see." Q.E.D. Theirs not to reason why. Just what a Snark might happen to be and why the ill-sorted crew should ever have embarked on the ill-fated undertaking are never explained; and, though the dénouement is not unexpected, it is all the more horrible because it remains unspecified. That self-evident "you see" is the hollowest of ironies. *Sylvie and Bruno* carries Dodgson's mood of subjective idealism toward the evanescent conclusion of Shakespeare and Calderón. "Is life itself a dream?" the narrator wonders. And the terminal acrostic of *Through the Looking-Glass* concludes: "Life, what is it but a dream?"

The stuff of dreams is as illusory as those scented rushes which lose their fragrance and beauty when Alice picks them. Yet Dodgson catches the cinematographic movement of dreams when the grocery shop, after changing into the boat from which she gathers the dream-rushes, changes back into the shop which is identifiable as an Oxford landmark. The next phase is the egg on the shelf, which becomes Humpty Dumpty on his wall. The narration, with its corkscrew twists, carefully observes the postulate that Dodgson formulated in his serio-

comic treatise, "Dynamics of a Particle": "Let it be granted that a speaker may digress from any one point to any other point." Alice proceeds by digression through Wonderland, since it does not really matter which way she goes. In the Looking-Glass Land, which is regulated by a stricter set of ground rules, she is forced to move backward from time to time. Dodgson had given himself his *donnée* by sending her down the rabbit-hole "without the least idea what was to happen afterwards." What extemporaneously followed seemed to consist, as he subsequently recounted it, "almost wholly of fits and scraps, single ideas which came of themselves." Though it may have been obsession which gave them a thematic unity, it was artistry which devised their literary form.

Symmetrically, each of the two books comprises twelve chapters. Both of them conflate the dream vision with the genre known as the *voyage imaginaire*; in effect, they merge the fairy tale with science fiction. The journey, in either case, is not a quest like "The Hunting of the Snark"—or that log-book it almost seems to parody, *Moby-Dick*. Rather, it is an exploration—underground, in the first instance, and so originally entitled *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. This relates it to a wealth of symbols for the claustral limits of the human condition, from Plato to Dostoevsky. Falling can betoken many things: above all, the precondition of knowledge. Subterranean descent can land in an underworld, be it Hell or Elysium or the other side of the earth, the Antipodes, which Alice malapropistically calls "the Antipathies"—not so exact an opposite to our side as the Looking-Glass Country, but a topsy-turvydom of sorts like Butler's *Erewhon*. As we approach it, it seems to be a juvenile utopia, what with its solemn games and half-remembered lessons and ritualized performances of nursery rhymes. Before we leave it, it becomes an unconscious *Bildungsroman*, projecting and resisting the girlish drama of physical and psychological development. "What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? [fumes the Red Queen.] Even a joke should have some meaning—and a child's more important than a joke, I hope."

As for the looking-glass, that has been a traditional meta-

phor for narcissistic self-absorption, for art's reflection of nature, and—more abstractly—for the reversal of asymmetric relationships. Scientific commentators may see in it an adumbration of up-to-date physical theory regarding particles and anti-particles. Much more prosaically, it might be suggested that any child who grew up in a semidetached house, and had played in the adjoining house, would take as a matter of course the reversed arrangements of rooms. Dodgson, who liked to write backward, wanted to have some pages of his book printed in reverse. His fondness for inverting standard patterns is humanly personified in the mirror-image twins, Tweedledum and Tweedledee. For him, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had been a discovery, an improvisation, a series of serendipities; whereas *Through the Looking-Glass,* seven years later, was faced with the usual difficulty of sequels. It made up in systematic elaboration for what it lost in spontaneous flow. If it is less organically imagined, it is replete with brilliant paradoxes, some of which do anticipate modern science. On these aspects especially, Martin Gardner has compiled a lucid and suggestive commentary in his *Annotated Alice,* to which I must express a comprehensive debt of gratitude.

Inasmuch as surprise is of the essence, there is little recurrence from book to book. We hardly recognize the Hare and the Hatter of Wonderland when they are metamorphosed into the messengers Haigha and Hatta of the Looking-Glass. The later story takes place indoors during the autumn; its predecessor took place outdoors in the spring. Alice has been impelled underground by a swift train of circumstances; she dissolves the looking-glass, for herself and her kitten, with the hypnotic formula: "Let's pretend." She is more self-conscious on her first trip, and we are more interested in what happens to her. On her second, we tend to accept her and to look around with her, as if we were accompanying her through Disneyland or the World's Fair. The shift from identity to duality is a transference from self to otherness. The presiding figures from the game of cards are as remote as epic deities until the end of Part I. Their counterparts from chess are more regularly present throughout Part II, which is

framed by a chess problem—not a very deliberative one. Alice becomes a pawn, replacing the Queen's daughter Lily, and looks ahead to being queened; whereas—except for her disappointed wish to arrive at the garden—her earlier wanderings, through cavernous passages and quasi-Elysian fields, had no set destination.

The excursion shifts from time to space, from an impressionistic continuum to a more static outlook, as she crosses the chessboard landscape. Above its checkered topography looms the presence of the geometrician who laid it out and manipulates the chessmen. What is happening has happened before and will happen again, at predictable intervals as long as folklore persists. Tweedledum and Tweedledee will fight; the Lion and the Unicorn will be drummed out of town; Humpty Dumpty will fall from his wall and, though not reconstructed by all the King's horses or men, will somehow be enabled to re-enact the performance. Now, all fairylands, utopias, paradises, and other imagined worlds—whatever improvements they may have to offer—are bound to draw their inspiration from the one world that their imaginer knows at first hand. It would be unlikely if Dodgson's creations were not liberally sprinkled with local and topical allusions. Sir John Tenniel, who was mainly a political caricaturist, occasionally injected an overt touch: in his drawing of the Lion and Unicorn we discern the features of rival candidates, the Earl of Derby and Disraeli. The latter also seems to have posed for the traveler dressed in white paper, peculiarly appropriate for a Prime Minister, who sits opposite Alice in the railway carriage.

This locale, a favorite with Dodgson, invites a passing glance at nineteenth-century technology. The chorus of voices that Alice hears, while a passenger, chants a commercial refrain where everything is evaluated at £1000. Since the train is going the wrong way, according to the guard, it escapes to the domain of fancy from the workaday world to which it belongs. Dodgson would try to encompass those two worlds, together with a pious romance, a whimsical tract, and divers other polarities, within the two volumes of *Sylvie and Bruno.* Therein, by means of psychic transitions, the narrative is

systematically transposed from the Commonplace to the Marvelous—from Outland, the regime of conspiratorial adults, "Through the Ivory Gate" to Elfland, the preserve of cloying juveniles. The happiest feature of this ambitious scheme is a device which is used to modulate from one plane to the other. At the transitional moment, a Mad Gardener sings a song whose pattern becomes familiar:

> "He thought he saw an Elephant
> That practised on a fife:
> He looked again, and found it was
> A letter from his wife.
> 'At length I realise,' he said,
> 'The bitterness of Life!' "

If Dodgson had been a romanticist, his daydream might have turned that conjugal letter—that grimly realistic slice of life—into a missive from a fair stranger. Instead—and this is what spells the difference between romance and nonsense—life is made less bitter by the spectacle of a tootling elephant. The transformation is made explicit by the Professor, who is the Carrollian mentor of Sylvie and Bruno, when he persuades the Gardener to unlock, for the three of them, what is tantamount to the gate of fantasy:

> "He thought he saw a Garden-Door
> That opened with a Key:
> He looked again, and found it was
> A Double Rule of Three:
> 'And all its mystery,' he said,
> 'Is clear as day to me!' "

Alice thought she saw a host of chimeras. She looked again, and found it was only a pack of cards or a set of chessmen. There is nothing, of course, so extraordinary in that. Dodgson's achievement was to prolong her reveries, and to lend their figments every appearance of solidity. Occasional echoes recall to us those matter-of-fact details from Alice's waking life—the fishes, the fire irons—which have been transmuted into fantasies. Unlike those of *Sylvie and Bruno*, wherein the two states are kept apart, her imaginative processes blend

them together. "So many out-of-the-way things had happened lately that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible." That state of mind in which everything seems possible can be maintained by preserving the conventions in the most absurd situations. Alice practices making a curtsy, like a properly brought-up little girl, even while she is falling down the rabbit-hole. In one of Dodgson's magazine sketches, his hero thought he saw a signboard advertising "Romancement." He looked again, and was informed that two words had inadvertently been run together: that the sign advertised a much humbler and harder commodity, namely "Roman Cement." Meanwhile, a displaced word could act as an incantation to conjure up a prospect of Elfland.

This transfiguration of commonplace objects and familiar landmarks is largely a verbal process. The slightest variation in spelling or pronunciation can effect a drastic change, but the Cheshire Cat would be equally unsurprised if the baby turned into a pig or a fig. Alice becomes uncomfortably aware that something odd has been happening to her *Weltanschauung* when her memorized arithmetic comes out scrambled and her geography seems to be disoriented. But the real test is—as it should be—poetry, and the transforming device is parody. Periodically she is called upon to recite, or else listen to, a selection of gems from the repertory of the nursery, dimly recognizable but strangely transmogrified. "Some of the words have got altered" in her recollection of Southey's parable about Father William, so that the cautionary elder has become an impenitent prankster, rebuffing the youth's curiosity with a threat to kick him downstairs. This is, by implication, a rebuff to the perpetual questioning from Alice herself. Watts's verses for infants, which are as oppressively moralistic as the Duchess, are released from their didactic burdens in the retelling: the ubiquitous lobster turns ventriloquist and obtrudes itself into "The Voice of the Sluggard."

The distinction between sense and nonsense, in the poem read into the record as evidence against the Knave of Hearts, is obliterated by the omission of proper names. As a result, the reader gropes from relative pronoun to relative pronoun in a game of grammatical blindman's buff:

They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him . . .

The resulting disorientation foreshadows the wood of namelessness or Humpty Dumpty's doctrine that names confer meaning. Alice dismisses the poem as meaningless, though the King endeavors to explicate it, not very successfully. On the other hand, the whispering Gnat succeeds in creating new subspecies of insects by extrapolation from names of existing flies. The Rocking-horse-fly and the Bread-and-butter-fly are worthy subjects for Tenniel's unnaturalism. But the artist firmly balked at the author's notion of a wasp in a wig; that was, he objected, "beyond the appliance of art." It is significant that, when Dodgson composed his ballad about the Walrus, he let Tenniel decide whether the deuteragonist should be a carpenter, a baronet, or a butterfly. Since all three were metrically equivalent, and none required rhymes, the choice was left to depend upon their graphic possibilities—no richer, one would think, for an ostreophagous butterfly than for a periwigged wasp. Verbal considerations were secondary to visual for the nonce.

But, as the Dormouse shrieks when its anecdote trails off into nouns beginning with M, "Did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness!" Ordinarily, the word precedes the thing. *Façons de parler* regain their primitive magic by being taken literally. Thus, to answer the door is to assume that the door has spoken first. Expressions like Time and Nobody cast off their abstractness and take on the misplaced concreteness of personalities. Metaphors, such as "feather" and "catch a crab" when Alice is rowing, can be all too easily hypostatized. Puns are means of unexpected propulsion, because they change the subject so abruptly: they switch fortuitously from one theme to another, with trees that bark like dogs or books so tedious that they dry you off when you get wet. The key words, in Alice's recipe for bread, have a misleading significance for the White Queen:

"You take some flour——"

"Where do you pick the flower?" the White Queen asked. "In a garden or in the hedges?"

> "Well, it isn't *picked* at all," Alice explained: "it's *ground*—"
> "How many acres of ground?" said the White Queen. "You mustn't leave out so many things."

Such redundancies must not be left out, if vital information is to be conveyed. The pun, or any other type of wordplay where relevance is determined by the chance of two sounds coinciding, is a standing invitation to absurdity for better or worse. Insofar as it frees us from the responsibility for being rational, it can be a source of relief. One of the unmistakable marks that make the Snark so inevitable a quarry is its general lack of humor and its particular resistance to punning:

> "The third is its slowness in taking a jest.
> Should you happen to venture on one,
> It will sigh like a thing that is deeply distressed:
> And it always looks grave at a pun."

It seems characteristic of Lewis Carroll that the most touchingly serious of his lyrics should be the acrostic on Alice Pleasance Liddell. Alliteration, as a variant of rhyme, can be meaningful but is often farfetched. The crew that sails after the Snark is so utterly miscellaneous because it is made up of occupations which alliterate with the Bellman: the Baker, the Butcher, the Broker, the Banker, the Barrister, the Bonnet-maker, the Billiard- marker, the Boots, and the Beaver. Alice shows us how to mix things up by affecting the letter, when she plays the word game, "I love my love with an H." Nonetheless, given the semi-rationality of the human mind, even a jumbling together of incongruities must be patterned by some principle of order—if only by an initial consonant. The Walrus talks

> "Of shoes—of ships—of sealing-wax—
> Of cabbages—and kings—"

and sealing-wax is one of the ingredients of the White Knight's pudding (perhaps for personal reasons connected with Dodgson's voluminous correspondence). "It's not easy to be nonsensical," said Marcel Duchamp, the veteran of cubism and surrealism, in a recent interview, "because nonsensical things so often turn out to make sense." Striving for

sheer random heterogeneity, one is much more likely to produce an unconscious association of ideas or a deliberate juxtaposition of opposites:

"And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings."

The value of verse, in this respect, is that its formal constraints are constantly pressing toward a dissociation of sound and sense. The serious poet must struggle against the current; the nonsense poet may float along with it, gurgling happily down the stream. And though there are many varieties of nonsense poetry, which Alfred Liede has earnestly surveyed in his two substantial volumes, *Dichtung als Spiel: Studien der Unsinnspoesie an den Grenzen der Sprache*, "Lewis Carroll is the most enigmatic of nonsense poets." The poem that both illustrates and demonstrates the enigma for us is bound to be "Jabberwocky," which—as its title obscurely hints—seems to be a heroic lay about language. Alice has discovered it in a book, at the outset of her second expedition, and it has filled her head with ideas; but she does not comprehend them until the midpoint, when she encounters Humpty Dumpty, whose onomatopoetic name fulfils his linguistic theories and asserts his cavalier nominalism. "The question is," as he expounds it to Alice, "which is to be master—that's all." The ancient nursery rhyme from which he derives his being was once a riddle rhymed in many languages. The answer is a symbol with many meanings, from the egg that germinates life to the fall that shatters it.

Hence he is fully qualified to be Dodgson's philosopher and philologist; from the precarious eminence of his hybris, he dominates the problems of interpretation; and, after his lecture to Alice on semantics, he sets forth an exegesis of "Jabberwocky" which is a model for higher and newer criticism.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Dodgson, at the age of twenty-three, had lettered this opening quatrain in pseudo-runic characters into his family periodical *Mischmasch*, under the caption "Stanzas from Anglo-Saxon Poetry," and with a commentary anticipating Humpty Dumpty. It was wise of him to leave the Anglo-Saxon attitudes to the King's Messengers in *Through the Looking-Glass*, since the lines have little in common with Old English, except for the alliterative pairing of "gyre" and "gimble," plus a certain profusion of gutturals. As a matter of fact, the metrical scheme is one which could evoke reverberations from a nearer monument:

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Humpty Dumpty puts on a dazzling exhibition of his mastery over words, in glossing the unfamiliar nouns and verbs and adjectives. Some of these are no more than archaisms; others, which interest us more, are neologisms; and the most interesting, among the latter, are those composites which Dodgson invented and patented as portmanteau words for the diction of dreams.

Leaving them opaque, together with the "very curious-looking creatures" that they denote, we are swept along by the firm syntactic and rhythmic structure, which frames the ineffable adventure and makes it perfectly credible, whatever it may mean. That outline is reinforced if, experimentally, we substitute obvious phrases for obscure ones:

'Twas April, and the heavy rains
Did drip and drizzle on the road:
All misty were the windowpanes,
And the drainpipes outflowed.

Lacking the dim suggestiveness of those slithy toves and mome

raths, this is much too flat and prosy; but it indicates, with diagrammatic sharpness, how the exotic colors have been applied within the conventional contours. Let us intensify the experiment by pitching it in a more apocalyptic key:

> 'Twas doomsday, and the rabid curs
> Did yelp and yodel in the void:
> All strident were the trumpeters,
> And the big guns deployed.

This approaches nonsense again, since the very rigidities of syntax and meter—the need to meet formal requirements while sustaining a certain tone, but not necessarily advancing any thought—make nonsense very difficult to avoid and sense extremely easy to neglect. James Joyce, Humpty Dumpty's professed disciple, did not relax these rigidities when he wrote *Finnegans Wake* in prose; rather, he extended them, since his distortions of speech were posited upon correct inflections and set rhythms. Dodgson's surprises, like Joyce's, depend on the calculated subversion of well-established expectations. Order has been artfully deranged to create the illusion of chaos.

"Jabberwocky," despite the double talk of its somnambulistic vocabulary, conforms to all the conventions of balladry. Childe Roland to the dark tower comes; Jack ends by killing the Giant; and, if the Snark proves a Boojum, it is not permitted to vanish away. Grappling with the nameless terrors that menace us all, Dodgson might have boasted, like his insomniac Baker:

> "I engage with the Snark—every night after dark—
> In a dreamy delirious fight . . ."

The White King is similarly obsessed with Bandersnatches, who can never be caught or stopped, but who would seem to be lesser evils than the Jabberwock. The slaying of that dread apparition marks a rite of passage for the beamish boy, whoever he may be. Tenniel depicts him sturdily planted like David before Goliath, confronting a dragon-like foe who is

not less terrifying because—like our timid friend, the White Rabbit—he is wearing a waistcoat. The picture was conceived and executed as a frontispiece to *Through the Looking-Glass*. However, it proved so horrendous that Dodgson feared it might frighten his child readers. Accordingly, he went to the other extreme; after conducting a private poll among their mothers, he decided to replace the hobgoblin with a good genius; and so the book opens with Tenniel's equestrian portrait of the "gentle foolish face" and the ingeniously cumbersome panoply of the White Knight, accompanied by a pedestrian Alice.

Her belated champion deserves the honor; for he is the kindliest of her guides and advisers, indeed the truest hero of her story; and it is their encounter, we are told, that she will always remember most clearly. After the preparatory rounds between Tweedledum and Tweedledee and between the Lion and the Unicorn, there is a climactic battle when the Red Knight cries "Check!" and the White Knight somehow manages to rescue Alice, with the noise of fire irons clanking against the fender not far away. With the loping move of the knight in chess, falling off his horse every pace or two, he escorts her to the square where queenship awaits her. Their farewell is as poignant as Dante's from Vergil at the upper boundaries of Purgatory. But the Knight has a closer precedent in Don Quixote, whom he emulates with his uncertain horsemanship and his headful of chimerical plans. His memorable song, which functions as a kind of cadenza to the work as a whole, parodies Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," where the dejected poet is revivified by the example of the old leech-gatherer plying his humble trade on the lonely moor. An earlier version of Dodgson's burlesque had been separately published, and he drew the character of the Knight to suit the speaker in it. Therefore it is a portrait within a portrait. As Mr. Gardner suggests, Dodgson set up a looking-glass across from his looking-glass.

The image reflected from the one to the other ad infinitum is thus a self-caricature: Dodgson as Lewis Carroll as the White Knight as the speaker of the poem as its interlocutor,

> an aged aged man,
> A-sitting on a gate.

Dodgson admitted as much in a later memoir, "Isa's Visit to Oxford," when he referred to himself as "the Aged Aged Man." No doubt many voices in the two stories are primarily his own: the grumpiness of the Caterpillar, the amusement of the Cheshire Cat, the pedagogy of Humpty Dumpty. In the amiable eccentric who sings the song—and even more in the useless ingenuities, the woolgathering projects, and the endearing crotchets of its quixotic protagonist—Dodgson has offered us his *apologia pro vita sua.* Virginia Woolf discerned that he had preserved a child within him intact; meanwhile his outer self had become a pedant, who measured everyone's words with a literalness which exposed the contradictions by which they lived; yet, in the dialogue between the incongruous pair, childhood took the measure of pedantry. Understandably the White Knight is disappointed when Alice sheds no tears at his recital. But the game is virtually over. Alice has only to leap across the brook, be crowned, and wake up to a less adventurous actuality. The storyteller, folding his chessboard and putting away the pieces, can voice the satisfaction of a demiurge who has populated a cosmos and set it in motion, with the White Knight's vaunt: "It's my own invention!"