

AMBIGUOUS ALICE: MAKING SENSE OF LEWIS CARROLL'S NONSENSE FANTASIES

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Lewis Carroll's Victorian nonsense fantasy novels for children epitomize ambiguity and amazement as founding features of what Barthes calls the "writerly text" (Barthes 1974, 4). Meandering in wonderlands under ground and through the looking glass, where "everything is so strange that nothing is surprising", Alice encounters fantastic and perplexing adventures which destabilize her sense of self, space, time and discourse alike. Eventually she proves to be a fictional embodiment of the implied reader who experiences trials and tribulations on being immersed in a narrative space that is constantly dis/re-organized by the faerial illogic of dreams, delusions, free associations, and nonsense, bound by rules (of language-, chess- and card-games) doomed to be transgressed. In Carroll's multidimensional textual universe one always ends up becoming a co-authoring reader, challenged to revise expectations, to reformulate meanings, to reconsider identity's narrative constructions and embodied interactions, along with their significance in the activation of ever-proliferating, self-deconstructing meaning-events, which earn an inexhaustible status due to their undecidability.

Child readers nearly-automatically suspend their disbelief in order to interpret Alice's make-believe tale in a *literal* way, embracing the fairy-tale fantasy's alternate reality, where even the most bizarre can come true and is accepted as natural simply on account of being "elsewhere", in an unknowable, consistently illogical fictional realm meant to exercise our imaginative capacities. Yet *literalizing* also participates in a more professional biographically and culturally-historically decontextualizing decoding process. Carroll scholars' referential or mimetic interpretations speculate about the real identity of the historical author and muse, in search of missing diary pages, "the Alice Liddell-riddle", and hidden emotions shaping the subtext. Further research attempts to find fictionalized forms of anxieties related to Victorian socio-cultural phenomena ranging

from cutting-edge technological or scientific innovations to restraining bourgeois codes of conduct manifested in Wonderland's weird train journeys, counter-evolutionary hybrid mutants, and mad tea parties. On the other hand, Alice remains an imaginary "surface" upon whom historically-changing desires and fears are projected by means of *metaphorical* readings which associate with the mythified character abstractions, philosophical speculations, and self-reflective meta-takes on "real-life" phenomena. In the eyes of her fellow Victorians she is the very embodiment of the mystified, idealized DreamChild, for the surrealists a traveller of dreamscapes and an alchemist of the word, for the '60s' countercultures a rebel toying with hallucinogenic experiments, for Freudians the agent of infantile drives and neurotic fantasies. Postmodernist scholars' inclination towards rhetorical readings and metatextual recognitions concerning both rule-bound and transgressive-ludic aspects of discourse springs from identifying Alice with a veritable philosopher "putting subject and meaning in process and on trial" (Kristeva 1977, 55).

My study proposes to examine the "curious twists": how referential (literal, mimetic), metaphorical and rhetorical interpretations, or, in other words, complicit, suspicious, and resistant readings interact throughout the reception process of *Alice's Adventures Underground* and *Through the Looking Glass*. I wish to show how the pleasure of the playfully polyphonic text results precisely because it invites us to fall into nonsense, to drift aimlessly from "hypermeanings" of overinterpretation to "pure" textual joys of "meaninglessness" and back, as "language ceaselessly calls into question all origins" (Barthes 1977, 146).

Hugh Haughton inventively refers to Carroll's characters¹ to differentiate between the two kinds of the most likely readerly approaches to the Alice-novels. On the one hand there are *Gryphons* who simply wish to enjoy a children's story without making any effort at serious interpretation, and who claim that adventures should come first, since explanations are such a waste of time. On the other hand, *Queens* insist that even jokes should have meaning, that one should make an attempt to make sense of them, especially when it comes to children and an adult's responsibility for

¹ The passages Haughton refers to are: "'No, no! The adventures first,' said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: 'explanations take such a dreadful time.'" (109) "but the Red Queen interrupted her impatiently. 'That's just what I complain of! You *should* have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning—and a child's more important than a joke, I hope.'" (265) All quotes of the primary text are from *The Annotated Alice. The Definitive Edition* edited by Martin Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001).

them, and stress that Carroll's nonsense is made expressive precisely by its meaningfulness (Haughton 1998, xi). These interpretive stances – potentially functional in the reception of any nonsense fantasy work (especially the ones written for or read by children) – put forward fascinating theoretical dilemmas. They concern just as much the (*im*)possibilities of a perception without interpretation,² and of a joyously forgetful yet revelatory revelry in sustained meaninglessness (see Gryphons's stance) as much as (*im*)possibilities of a neutral, objective meaning-fixation lacking any emotional surcharge or affective side-effects of signification – concomitant with psychic involvement in or corporeal reactions to the reading experience (see Queens's stance). The question is just how compulsively rational over-interpretation (i.e. production of hypermeaning) and the absent-minded bliss resulting from the textual blindspots' undecipherability (i.e. activation of nonsense) relate to each other throughout the reading process; whether reading for joyous adventure like the Gryphon or reading for making sense like the Queen are incompatible alternatives?

Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts forward thought-provoking ideas on the attraction nonsense literature holds for the *logophilic fou littéraire*, a type of reader obsessed with a slow close-reading, meticulously uncovering multiple textual layers. While Lecercle gives a specific, extreme example of the logophilic overinterpretation – Carroll's text being analytically decoded as a reformulation of the Talmud – other such ventures include Wonderland's symptomatic hyper-reading along the lines of drug abuse or criminal confession³ – I would argue that to a certain extent all our critical readings bear characteristics of *folie littéraire* (see Lecercle 1998, 5-20). I

² The question on the (*im*)possibility of a perception without cognition should be complemented by the problematization of the (*im*)possibility of a cognition without interpretation.

³ Dilemmas of referentiality vs. metaphoricity lead towards “rational interpretations turned mad,” *referential* readings aiming at ultimate decodings, wishing to find final solutions for textual enigmas via *literalizations* (literal interpretations of fantastic/nonsense phenomena as mimetic representations of real-life referents) which end up—in the fashion of Lacan's stolen letter (Lacan 1972)—in ambiguous metaphorical meanings in a vertiginous, delirious proliferation of nonsensical, poetical sub/surplus-texts. Extreme overinterpretations of this sort include Jefferson Airplane's 1967 song “White Rabbit” that provides a pseudo-rational explanation of Wonderland's bizarre imagery by associating it with the mind-liberating, hallucinatory effects of psychedelic drugs, or Richard Wallace's 1996 book *Jack the Ripper, Light-Hearted Friend* that outlines a complex theory to accuse Carroll and his colleague Thomas Vere Bayne of committing the famed Jack the Ripper serial murders presumably admitted in anagrammatic confessions, hidden coded in *The Nursery Alice's* text.

wish to suggest that any critical reading attempting a serious take on the Alice books combines features of the Gryphon's and the Queen's interpretive methods as complementaries. The critical reader benefits from the indeterminate meanings of nonsense fantasies for the sake of investing "pseudo-meaninglessness" with his/her own meanings, circumscribing a central textual theme of individual sense inspired by his/her own readerly "identity theme" (see Holland 1975). The *logophiliac critical reader*, in between "objective" connoisseur of arts and biased, enthusiastic fan, is very likely Carroll's text's *ideal reader* who actualizes the greatest possible number of meanings, by relying on both an academically justified theoretical background and on unreliable personal insights: "readerly instincts" fuelled by individual life narrative and cultural-historical-educational prehistory. S/he is equally involved in "scientific research" grounded in etymologization, historical contextualization, deciphering of ideological surcharge, as well as a playfully deconstructive dissection, misreading and emotional embracement, an ecstatic flavouring of each word, expression, character, act or scene. In a way, this reader—likely resembling most of the readers of my study—could be compared to another of Carroll's characters, Humpty Dumpty. Throughout our interpretations we do take ourselves seriously, often elaborating whole philosophical backups for our analyses, yet we tend to "cheat" a bit, "to hold the book upside down" (223) as the eggman does, to slightly reformulate the text's plot structure, its sound patterns, cause-effect or character relations in order to make them precisely meet our expectations, to fit our hypotheses concerning textual meanings, as we try to tame the text's heterogeneity within a coherent reading. The *logophiliac critical reader*, like Humpty Dumpty "makes words mean" "just what [one] choose[s] them to mean – neither more, nor less" (224). However, highly ambiguously, this chosen meaning supported by the interpretation often seems to end up oscillating between being either *more* (Queen's overinterpretation) or *less* (Gryphon's nonsense) than the supposed authorially intended arch-meaning that remains, by definition, unresolvable. Given the evident impossibility of detecting *the* authentic textual signification, readers may gain delight or become confused through their immersion in the Queenly hypermeanings or Gryphonian meaninglessness they (chose to) (un)make, to (de)compose in a Humpty Dumptyan manner.

Alice's question, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things" (224) does not so much concern the *possibility* of (the all too obvious) textual polyphony and interpretive diversity, but more likely makes a metatextual commentary on the ideal reader's *ability* to enter into play with the text's ambiguous ways of (un)making *sense*. It concerns the

reader's *capacity* to cooperate in the various language-games literally enacted in the grotesque moves and incomprehensible choreographies accompanying or replacing most of the interpersonal communicative interactions Alice is summoned to join during her wanderings. (E.g. the Lobster Quadrille with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, the backward running with the Red Queen, the tangled twists and turns of the Caucus Race with birds and mice, or the contrariwise dancing around with Tweedledee and Tweedledum.)

One might muse whether this readerly capacity to "join the linguistic dance" is a matter of willingness or spontaneity, a result of a self-conscious critical attitude, a metalinguistic awareness or, on the contrary, of a prelapsarian infantile intimacy with language's transverbal vocal riches, with minimal units of uttered sounds, poeticizable bits, preceding symbolization and "common sensical frames" set up by socialization. Accordingly a dilemma arises: to what extent is the reading experience dependent on the age of the reader, and could we distinguish a (non)interpretive method based on *reading as/like a child* that would make one a particularly apt recipient of nonsense? Very likely one should not set up a hierarchical model of readerly approaches starting out from the difference between Queens versus Gryphons, adults versus children, meaning-makers versus adventure seekers, sense versus non-sense. Even more so, since children's fantasy as a genre feeds of the very experience of ambiguity, neither/nor, both/and uncertainties, a joyous knowledge of unknowing. As C.S. Lewis elegantly formulates in his "On three ways of writing for children" inspired by Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories"

fairy land arouses a longing for he [i.e. the child reader] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing. The boy reading [a more realistic] school story [...] desires success and is unhappy (once the book is over) because he [his mind concentrated on himself] can't get it: the boy reading the fairy tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. (C.S. Lewis 1982, 35)

Desire, that aims at its fulfilment yet by definition ceases to exist once it is fulfilled, appears to be a *par excellence* embodied experience of *ambiguity* that is decisive of the interpretive activity too. Both in stories and in real lives readers curiously head towards the ending, wanting to reach a stasis (Peter Brooks calls *quiescence*), a closure which comforts by

virtue of providing knowledge; yet we want this end signifying a running-out-of-words to come as late as possible, with us having many-many adventures and Lobster Quadrilles (Brooks' *detours*) beforehand (Brooks 1984, 90-112).

The concept of *infantile desire* seems somewhat paradoxical, considering the post-structuralist assumption that desire springs from the loss constitutive of the socialized subject who is forced, by cultural pressure, to renounce the immediate gratification of drives. Alice's curiosity fully lacks the "mature" melancholy of yearning. She wishes to discover but not to occupy, to see but not to own, to learn but not to change, to drift but not to get lost. Despite her open-mindedness she does not grow fond of any of the fantastic creatures she encounters. Her fleeting interests in and taste for adventures do not have anything to do with adult desire for eroticism, possessiveness, or nostalgia. Instead, a child's desires focus on freedom, play, *joie-de-vivre*, and an *unknown* she does not really want to know that much about, since knowing would signify ceasing to be a child, ceasing to be curious, ceasing to be the very person she is (an ultimate fear throughout the Alice-tales). As the above quote from C.S. Lewis suggests, the lack of a definite object of the infantile desire ends up in the lack of (dis)satisfaction, and unexpectedly provides spiritual enrichment and pure happiness. Instead of targeting persons, it is rather the activity of desiring that counts, and even more so the story created in the meanwhile, inspired by desiring.

Ambiguously, the pleasure of the fantasy world full of surrealistic adventures is the result of – in addition to identification and immersion in an alternate reality of "what if" – the same self-distancing strategy that emerges throughout the experience of Hitchcock's *suspense* (Hitchcock 2001, 136) or Burke's *sublime* (see Burke 1756): a readerly alienation by the knowledge of "this is not really happening", an intellectual meta-text's safe-guard, necessary for a full aesthetic experience. The child's desiring consists of the wish to be in an elsewhere of endless possibilities over the rainbow *and* to stay unchanged at home sweet home.⁴

A fascinating passage in *Adventures in Wonderland* where the fictional Alice compares her phantasmagoric adventures to her previous reading experience in fantastic genre illustrates precisely this ambiguity of the nonsense-reader's desires.

⁴ Numerous film adaptations of Alice gratify this desire –reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz's visual rhetoric–by depicting looking-glass-world and wonderland as versions of Alice's reality, peopled by grotesque alter-egos of her regular acquaintances.

"It was much pleasanter at home," thought poor Alice, "when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole – and yet – and yet – it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what *can* have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up I'll write one – but I'm grown up now" she added in a sorrowful tone: "at least there's no room to grow up any more *here*." (40)

In fact, here the ambiguity of the readerly experience reaches its peak alongside the increasing desire for the text. The heroine whom we are reading about, Alice, positions herself amidst her dream-like adventures not only as a knowing reader of tales aware of the conventional fictionality of the genre, but also as an aspiring future writer who will write for us a storybook about herself. In a Barthesian manner, fictional character, reader and writer become interchangeable, identical.

Moreover, with a sleight of hand Alice distinguishes between *this story* she is participating in and *other fairy-stories* she could safely distance herself from in the past on account of their being clearly 'unreal', fabulous inventions, belonging to Todorov's "pure marvellous" (Todorov 1975, 53), likely inviting metaphorical readings to deduce their moralizing, didactic contents. On the contrary, the Wonderland adventures she is metatextualizing about on the spot, while she is being involved in them, do have real stakes related to her lived experience of hunger, confusion, disillusion, anger, humiliation, and overall curiosity, and thus formulate a story that should be read *referentially* as "real".

Due to a cunning play with time enhancing narrative ambiguity, the true account of queer things *past*, the tale of Wonderland we are actually reading *now* is yet a story to come about in the *future*. It has not been written yet, it belongs to a book ("The Book", the best book ever) Alice will have written by the time she grows up – maybe with the therapeutic purpose of comprehending the incomprehensible. The moment when Alice realizes she is already "grown up," and *is* in fact writing her story, turns language inside out by literalizing a metaphorical expression, while ingeniously capturing the very moment of *coming-into-the-text*, of a *falling into the story* so memorably forecast in the initial episode introducing Alice to a fantasy world through a fall down the rabbit hole. The little girl's "growing up," her coming of age, marking a social change of status accompanying the biological and psychosexual maturation, plays a vital tragic role in the author's emotional life, presumably inspiring his entire *oeuvre* to the extent of gaining an existential and text-motivating significance. Carroll, with time passing, is doomed to lose the innocent

intimacy with his real “childfriend” maturing into a woman, yet succeeds in keeping her (small) by means of turning her into a fictional character in his story. The emotional confusion felt at this inevitable course of events in life, and compensation by means fictions, is reflected in the following line:

“But then,” thought Alice, “shall I *never* get any older than I am now? That’ll be a comfort, one way – never to be an old woman – but then – always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn’t like *that!*” (40)

The lesson to learn concerns the general process of how our narrative construction of identity in any social interaction, as well as our identificatory processes throughout literary reception, result in a *falling-into-story*, thus an inherent fictionalization of one’s identity.

Most thought-provokingly, the trickiness of the narrative structure is reminiscent of a Möbius strip, the mythical Uroboros snake biting in its own tail (the word play on *tale* would be fit here!), or another episode in *Through the Looking Glass*, where Alice is dreaming about the White King dreaming about her: via a twisted *mise en abyme* we read about Alice “pre-reading” about her being written by her own readerly self.

The writer-reader in Alice’s hesitating stream of thoughts illustrates the “amorous moves” of Carroll’s ideal recipient who approaches the text with an infantile desire, a willingness to invent, imagine, forget, misremember and reconsider, while changing steps and paradigms, shifting between different levels of meaning formation. Thoughts meander round-and-round between engulfment by nonsense, co-production of proliferating meanings, ephemeral rest in explanation, followed by metatextual recognitions and deconstructive defamiliarizations, self-revisions towards a return to a revelry in nonsense. However, in a Barthesian manner, the little girl lost, constantly trying to (re)interpret herself (as an implied reader), can also be easily regarded as a dominant facet of the multiple fictional self-portraits of the author. Dodgson pennamed Carroll is just as much there as Alice, pretending to be several persons in her plays, as the stammering Dodo(dgson) bird, the White Rabbit worrying about the immaculacy of his (g)loves, or the White Knight struggling to keep his balance in vain. Thus, on the whole, the fictional textual space is the only place where Carroll and Alice, adult and child, writer and reader, author and muse can unite. They fuse for the sake of a rebellious (re)turn to childhood’s land of eternal possibilities: a celebration of the pre-eminence of sound over sense, play over message, fancy over reality, curiosity over politeness, poetic madness over reason – all complemented by a metatextual awareness of the impossibility, and forever teasing nature of

ideals' sustained enjoyment. Thus, "falling down the rabbit hole with Alice" signifies a "falling into the story" as well as a "falling in love" in a *ménage à trois* of writer, reader and text (Carroll, Alice, Wonderland, Us being interchangeable in all these positions). All await textual pleasures through the dynamics of the narrative that can be called to life by a readerly interpretive consciousness, and left at one's own will, simply by closing the book, and, most importantly, through desire for *the one knows not what*, for this very state of being seduced by the text.

Desire and ambiguity have a specific significance in Lewis Carroll's Alice tales as regards the uniquely immediate interconnection made between the pennamed authorial persona Lewis Carroll and his fictional character Alice. They reach a mythical, metaphorical status inseparable from each other in terms of their enigmatic, much discussed emotional ties—which regardless of their being considered Platonic, spiritual, obsessive or paedophilic love, or savant-autistic love-lack—add an *affective layer* to all readings of Alice, and invite *referential* readings, which decode novels as fictionalizations referring to real life events and persons. Thus, Carroll the fantasist and Alice in Wonderland are complemented by strange doubles, i.e. their real-life egos, Charles Dodgson, the odd Oxford don and voyeuristic photographer of little girls, and the child-muse Alice Liddell, daughter of the Dean of Christ Church, who famously inspired the novel during a boating trip on a bright summer's day.

Interestingly, the two most common and rather contradictory *metaphorical* interpretations of Alice's figure as both a "parable of narrative and linguistic innocence," of prelapsarian goodness *and* an "allegory of experience," adventure, of "philosophical sophistication and perverse intellectual wit" (Haughton 1998, xii) overlap with the most often mythologized antagonistic facets of the author, and as a result give rise to further *referential* readings, putting in parallel personality- and stylistic-, or topical features. Often described by numerous biographers and scholars as an extremely introverted, austere, precise, shy, stammering clergyman and Oxford don absorbed in mathematical reverie and unable to establish "normal" human contacts, Carroll, identified as immaculate asexual hermit, is judged to be just fit to reactivate "linguistic innocence". Yet, ambiguously, his presumed secret self, the enchanting personality revealed only to his child-friends in fairylands and dreamworlds full of ravishing stories and self-made inventive toys—the creation of which could have been fostered just as much by his nostalgia for an idealized childhood, as repressed forbidden desires (for young girls or married women, as Karoline Leach argues [2009])—brings him and his text closer (on this all too obviously binary scale) to the complexities of "experience".

In fact, many *referential* interpretations of the Alice-novels start out from the author's profession, arguing that his being a mathematician, a logician and an unordained priest-teacher serve as proof of the surface nonsense plot's being organized by a strictly rational logic. A mathematician's logic is manifested in leitmotifs of rule-bound chess and card games which theoreticians of metafiction frequently associate with Wittgensteinian language-games governed by arbitrary yet persistent social rules of communication (see May 2007, MacArthur 2004). Strangely, the insistence on Carrollian rationality leads to the most irrational cause and effect relationships, and to nonsensical arguments in referential readings paralleling art and life. Such is Kenneth Baker's claim that Carroll's "pattern[ing] books with witty references to games and puzzles, broaching paradoxes that logicians would not take up until a generation later, suggest the work of a mind undisturbed by emotional pathology": Carroll's logical games are used as counterarguments against his paedophilic desires (see Baker 2002).

Even if insisting on reading Carroll's opus *referentially* as the product of a mathematical mind, one would end up recognizing the inevitable coexistence of sense and nonsense in his ingenious work, simply due to the neglected fact that in addition to having been a serious logician Carroll was also an amateur magician and a spellbinding storyteller. As numerous reminiscences of his childfriends recall, he absolutely ravished, nearly mesmerized his young listeners: invented tales for the little girls to make them sit still while taking their photographs, crafted toy gadgets he carried with him in a huge bag on his excursions to the sea-side to impress children he hoped to win as friends (Wullschlager 1995, 29-65). This ludic aspect of his identity as comic writer and puzzle-maker surfaces in the nonsense layers of his works: the riddles, puns, slips of tongue, free associations, dream-like illogic, the poetic improvisatory wordplay. Although these are frequently celebrated for lacking the cautionary, didactic, moralising aspects characteristic of the contemporary Victorian children's literature, they are not necessarily features that child readers would understand or appreciate.

What young readers are most likely to grow fond of in Carroll's Alice-books are the peculiarly grotesque creatures, the curious adventures and the child heroine lost in her daydreams—typical features of the genre of children's literature. Nonsense fantasies for children traditionally invite a willing suspension of disbelief, encouraging "the acknowledgment of the possibility of a different reality" (Hume 1984, xiv in May 2007, 79) as we enter into Todorov's *marvellous* text-world governed by different rules of functioning (Todorov 1975, 41-58). According to Leila S. May an alternate

textual universe only gains credibility when its rules of functioning are consistent no matter how much they differ from the laws of our mundane reality. Still, I believe that the very essence of Carroll's fictional universe is that its only rule is that there are no rules. This is an ill-logical (un)reality in which one asks riddles without expecting them to be answered.⁵ Likewise, the *literal interpretation* of this nonsensical, alternative textual-reality enhances readings in which overabundant *metaphorical meanings* (often based on "hyper-logics requiring over-literalness" (May 2007, 83)) *will gain primary significance*. Although the *literalized metaphors* contributing to nonsense are left completely unproblematic by virtue of the generic frame – in a children's fantasy it is perfectly possible for hatters to be mad, for cats to grin, for crocodiles to shed tears, and mice to drown – one does not have to be a scholarly reader to realize that these strange characters are literal embodiments of figures of speech invading a gradually pictorialized language.

Carroll's novels gain their fabulous quality by exploiting the enchanted performative and playful functions of an "always-already self-metaphorizing" language. Needless to say *literal(izing) interpretations* will necessarily lead to *rhetorical readings* by metatextually self-aware recipients curious about the functioning of language. They will recognize that, in a Paul De Manian manner, the reduction of words to their "simple", normative, primary meanings seems impossible because of the multiple connotations and associations, not to mention their deconstructive, decontextualizable potential which inherently (e)merges upon reading and (mis)recognizing them (see De Man 1986). Accordingly, Carroll's speech acts, particularly naming, are endowed with magical potential: when a baby is called a pig he is transformed into one; a tree's bark can bow-wow to ward off danger simply by virtue of its homonymic quality; Tweedledum's saucepan becomes a helmet by being called so; the denomination of a cat is enough to scare a mouse away; a person's name condenses one's very essence; the name Alice is supposed to mean Alice-hood itself. Most of the words start to function as magical spells, enchantments or mantras in so far as, besides designating and signifying, they act, they bring into being, they *are*.

It is a *rhetorical reading* coming to metalinguistic recognitions that may realize that the words' miraculous metamorphic nature allows them to represent and affect changing realities: through a homophonic resemblance a tall tale/tail belongs to both a mouse's back and the audience who

⁵ The Hatter's famed riddle "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" becomes 'answerless' on account of the multiplicity of its possible answers, none of them being an ultimate one, and all requiring a linguistic/logical inventiveness on the part of the reader.

listens. Moreover, it has the capacity to affect the poetic structure organized by tale-rhymes and, via what Peirce calls a “visual analogue of poetic onomatopoeia” or “artistic chirography” (Gardner 2001, 35), to transform the storybook’s typography to match the shape of the thing described (the emblematic, figured verse tale on the mouse’s tail is printed in such a way that it resembles the shape of the tail). As Fiona MacArthur suggests, Alice’s shrinking and growing shape-shiftings, by staging the philosophical dilemma of *being oneself* and *being another beyond oneself*, resemble the structure of the metaphor in so far as they blend two distinct elements/states together based on ambiguity (MacArthur 2004, 57). The grotesque creatures of wonderland and looking glass world – the cardboard soldiers and chess queen, the eggman, the mock-turtle, the bread-and-butter-fly, the Jabberwocky, the Cheshire cat present by its absence, or the rabbit with the pocketwatch who is always late – serve as even better examples of a synchronic blending of incompatibles, requiring the reader to picture one decontextualized thing *as* the other. Like the being mentioned in the Jabberwocky poem, the *tove*, who is something like a badger, a lizard and a corckscrew in one, they can be regarded as embodiments of the *portmanteau* word-form invented by Carroll, whereby “two meanings are packed up in one word” as eggman Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice (225). In fact, as Kali Israel points out agreeing with Carol Maver, thinking of Wonderlands, the reader’s imagination is inhabited by a portmanteau-figure combining the Alices of the two novels, the pennamed author Lewis Carroll and the real-life child muse (Maver 1995, 7, Israel 2000, 252).

However, I believe that the point in this topsy-turvy world is that *all* words can be *made* to act like *portmanteaux*. Their supplementary meanings appear as if from a magician’s tool-box, when second-thoughts must activate them in the fact of the realization that the primary denotation is insufficient for the comprehension of the social and linguistic rules/codes one needs to find one’s way. Characters are never stating the obvious; their Janus-faced words – like balls turning into walking hedgehogs on the Queen’s croquet ground – change meanings which are mis/(p)re-read to foster rhetorical readings based on metalinguistic insights concerning unprecedented discursive capacities. The linguistic, physical and psychic *neither/both structuring* is a multiple activation of nonsense, since the meanings these beings, states and expressions carry are not identifiable on the basis of lived experience. They transcend the bounds of conventional common sense, and their interpretation depends on the imaginative faculties of readers wishing to escape the dreaded senselessness. Thus, it is not the very existence of these impossible

creatures and words which is questioned, but their stability and uniformity. Each reader very likely has his/her own sense of the monstrous-miraculous Jabberwocky, possibly enriched by a metalinguistic sense of the very functioning of language constitutive of (alternative) reality(s)'s lived experience. However, while Lecercle praises the metatextual recognition of this misbehaviour of language as the ultimate feat of nonsense, I believe that intellectual pleasure is not all-prevailing, and is likely to be complemented, even predominated by a sheer pleasure of sounds, vocality, a transverbal musicality, or a joy of imagination soaring into unknowns and impossibles.

As Hugh Haughton remarks, Alice on the other side of the looking glass, faced with the incomprehensible nonsensical mirror-poem Jabberwocky, is in fact the personification of us, perplexed readers, our heads filled with the stories' ideas, without knowing what they are (Haughton 1998, x). No matter how likely individual readers are to balance between *referential* and *metaphorical meanings*, Alice's tales are mostly and nearly automatically read *literally* as consistently incongruous fictional worlds where a little girl can shrink tiny and grow enormous by pure chance or at her own will. Arguing in favour of the naturalness of literal readings one can claim that, suiting the fantasy and fairy tale (ir)realities, the word "spell" will likely naturally denote for readers of children's literature the magical activities of mythical creatures, witch-like beings or animated objects, and not the act of naming in order the letters constituting a word.

The readerly compulsion to make sense of nonsense results in a specific type of referential reading, *mimetic reading*, which tries to explain away bizarre, nonsensical events and episodes in the Alice-books through shedding light on them as reflections of real-life Victorian social phenomena. The *Annotated Alice*, the ultimate reference book of all Carroll-scholars, compiled by mathematician, logician, and cultural critic Martin Gardner, provides thorough annotations to the text, allowing for *mimetic readings* grounded in a socio-cultural-historical contextualization deemed to be a fundamental prerequisite for the comprehension of the work.⁶ Gardner suggests that the Alice-books constitute a "very curious,

⁶ Carroll's fiction presumably comments on cutting-edge cultural, scientific, philosophical, and religious ideas or innovations provoking anxieties and enthusiasms which could be sublimated perhaps only by means of fictionalization. I shall mention but a few examples here. The mad tea party and Queen Alice's feast are often decoded as representations of Queen Victoria's impatient way of taking her 5 o'clock tea by dictating an insanely fast pace to all members of her court partaking in the ceremony, but—as May suggests—may also mock tea parties

complicated kind of nonsense” (Gardner 2001, xiii) with multiple layers and a connotative richness that today can only be grasped by contemporary readers willing to embark on background research. One should explore first, meanings which used to be evident for the 19th century British audience but have since been forgotten; secondly, witticisms or side-winks comprehensible only to Carroll’s fellow residents at Oxford; and third, even private jokes understood only by the lovely daughters of Dean Liddell. The most important implication here, I believe, is that the uncovering of real-life phenomena at the root of fiction includes tackling the fantasies shared by the people involved in the creation of the text: referential readings may attempt remembrance of metaphors past, of emotions, impressions and imaginings fuelling the story. On the other hand, whereas Gardner claims that devoid of para-, inter-, sub-textual information the Alice-books remain incomprehensible (uninteresting for adults and frightening for children). I would take the side of C.S. Lewis, arguing that the mentioned “unknown”, “unknowable” facet of the fantasies is enough to fascinate readers of all ages. Likewise, one could find ravishing and convincing interpretations disregarding authorial intentions, biographical data or cultural surrounding, provided the argument is supported by textual evidence lent from the primary text. After all, we should not forget the endless meaning-generating capacity of meaninglessness.

Yet some critics take Gardner’s claim that Carroll’s nonsense can make sense only with reference to the whole intellectual universe surrounding it to

held in English asylums by “mad-doctor” Samuel Tuke to model the “sane behaviour” for inmates (May 2007, 79). Alice’s serving the Queen jam every other day might be a commentary on the Victorians’s ambiguous attitude to children, idealized as angelic and muse-like in a bourgeois milieu, yet exploited by child labour among the lower classes. Her strange train-journey stages the newly introduced revolutionary means of transportation: the steam railway lines opened up a new world for commerce and relaxation alike. As for the sciences, Alice’s shrinkings reflect the increasingly popular daguerrotype photographic method of preserving the past on miniaturized images of children remaining forever small, as well as the technological feat of the telescope. The strange birds running around in the Caucus race are regarded as degenerate mutants stuck midway in the development of species described by Darwin’s evolutionary theory. The Jabberwock, the Snark and the little doors Alice peeps through can be regarded as screen memories, primal scenes of Freud’s theory of the child’s first unknowing experience of sexuality. Moreover, the line “*sometimes* I’ve believed as *many as six* impossible *things* before breakfast” (210) can refer to morning prayers and thus portray the religious scepticism or agnosticism emerging in the era.

the extreme, producing *mimetic interpretations* which focus on minute details of plotline or textual genesis in nearly obsessive-compulsive attempts at finding out the “truth” of/behind the text. This type of approach includes the meticulous analysis of contemporary weather-reports of that *dies mirabilis* when Wonderland was composed on a boating trip for Alice, trying to verify whether it was indeed a sunshiny, golden afternoon as described in the epigraph (Doherty in Gardner 2001, 10). Another example is the explanation of the only non-rule-bound game in the novel, the Caucus race by a biographical reference to a Sunday afternoon school excursion cum tea-party organized by the Oxford group where children soaked in a sudden spring shower were made to run for half-penny prizes to get dry (Wakeling 2003).

The complexity of Carroll's nonsense certainly does not cease to inspire a multiplicity of creative mis/over-interpretations, ranging from reading *Through the Looking Glass* as a cryptogram for the Talmud, providing a Jewish biblical commentary and coded references to the Jewish ritual (e.g. the Jabberwocky is the code name for the Baal Shem Tov of Medzhibish, in the Province of Kamanetz Podolsk in the Ukraine, on the Bug River) (Ettelson in Lecercle 1994, 8), to an analysis of the Alice-books as a secret history of the religious controversies of Victorian England (e.g. the jar of orange marmalade is a symbol of Protestantism, i.e. William of Orange) (Leslie in Gardner 2001, xiv). The rub is that no matter how amusing these interpretations seem, one is more likely to laugh *at* them than *with* them. Nevertheless, the constant urge of readers of Carroll to produce one's own “reasonably mad” over/mis-readings others can laugh at freely leads to Kierkegaard's ambiguous conclusions on laughter as worldview and nonsense as a meaning of life: “Laugh at the world's follies, you will regret it; weep over them, you will also regret it; if you laugh at the world's follies or if you weep over them, you will regret both; whether you laugh at the world's follies or you weep over them, you will regret both.” (Kierkegaard 54).

When the King of Hearts in Wonderland claims that not having any meaning saves a lot of trouble, he ironically forgets that a meaning should be first found in order to be lost by means of nonsense's linguistic subversions, and that being untroubled is not necessarily a pleasurable state, since meaninglessness also implies a storylessness, a stasis we dread so much. For the Duchess's suggestion “'tis love, that makes the world go round” and her apparently mad interpretation of it as “everyone (should) mind their own business” and “take care of the sense” so that “the sounds will take care of themselves” (96) might have some reason behind it; for in the end it is *the love of stories* that connects us in a common business of

homo narrans, a curious, intimate bond we feel the need to take care of as sensible, sense-able tellers, listeners, characters of each others' stories.

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Nonsense fantasies anna krchy. Lewis Carrolls Victorian nonsense fantasy novels for children epitomize. Child readers nearly-automatically suspend their disbelief in order to interpret Alices make-believe tale in a literal way, embracing the fairytale fantasys alternate reality, where even the most bizarre can come true and is accepted as natural simply on account of being elsewhere, in an unknowable, consistently illogical fictional realm meant to exercise our imaginative capacities. Yet literalizing also participates in a more professional biographically and culturally-historically decontextualizing decoding process. them, and stress that Carrolls nonsense is made expressive precisely by its meaningfulness (Haughton 1998, xi). Anna Krchy. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.3909>. Rsum | Index | Texte | Bibliographie | Notes | Citation | Auteur. Lewis Carroll's Victorian nonsense fairy-tale fantasies Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871) provide plenty of fictional reformulations of the Victorians' ambiguous relationship with animals. The vanishing and reappearing Cheshire Cat represents language that is ideologically manipulative and poetically subversive and distinguishes the speaking human subject from animals (Lecerle 1994); the Caucus Race led by the Dodo Bird is an absurd rehearsal of the Darwinian evolutionary theory's competitive struggle for survival (Lovell- This collection of Lewis Carroll's entertaining stories includes both prose and poetry: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass, Phantasmagoria, The Hunting of the Snark, and the complete two-part Sylvie and Bruno. John Tenniel's classic black-and-white illustrations are included in the Alice stories. This collection of Lewis Carroll's entertaining stories includes both prose and poetry: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass, Phantasmagoria, The Hunting of the Snark, and the complete two-part Sylvie and Bruno. Be the first to ask a question about Sense and Nonsense Stories from Lewis Carroll. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia. Lewis Carroll, born Charles Dodgson, was a writer, mathematician, photographer, and a man of religion. Lewis Carroll is a well known British writer throughout the world. As a child, Carroll entertained his brothers and sister as well as the children of his best friend when he was an adult. Lewis Carroll went through many challenges as he was matured, and even though he had to overcome them, his imagination only grew in strength and never waned until near his death. His work of art in the child. Read More. Dreams can be lost memories, past events and even fantasies that we relive during our unconscious hours of the day. As we sleep at night, a new world shifts into focus that seems to erase the physical and moral reality of our own.