

The grotesque in *Alice Books* *

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Lewis Carroll's famous *Alice Books* are in popular view taken to be written for the amusement of children, in a more sophisticated reading these stories are meant for grown-ups who "become children again" after they have read them. The keynote in both views is gaiety and "irresponsible or "bubbling laughter". I would like, in this paper, to concentrate on the question what frightens us in *Alice Books*.

There seem to be very few people who know nothing at all about Lewis Carroll's two famous stories: "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There". Many of us have been read to "Alice in Wonderland" in early childhood. There are fewer among us who continued to read and reread Lewis Carroll's wonderful stories filled full with wise nonsense, but this minority of grown-ups and even grown-ups very much advanced in age has existed ever since the famous *Alice Books* appeared.

At first sight it would seem strange that the stories written for the amusement of children should captivate the attention and interest of so many learned adults among whom there are writers, mathematicians, philosophers, psychologists. Yet, on second thought, there is nothing strange about that interest of grown-ups in these two children's books. Writing about Lewis Carroll on the occasion of the first publication of *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* by the Nonesuch Press in 1939 the famous English novelist, essayist, and literary critic, Virginia Woolf said that "childhood normally fades slowly. Wisps of childhood persist when the boy or girl is a grown man or woman. Childhood returns sometimes by day, more often by night. But it was not so with Lewis Carroll. For some reason, we know not what, his childhood was sharply

* All the quotations from *Alice Books* are from Martin Gardner's edition, *The Annotated Alice*, Penguin Books, 1986.

severed. It lodged in him whole and entire. He could not disperse it. [...] But since childhood remained in him entire, he could do what no one else has ever been able to do – he could return to that world: he could recreate it, so that we too become children again. [...] It is for this reason that the two *Alices* are not books for children; they are the only books in which we become children. President Wilson, Queen Victoria, *The Times* leader writer, the late Lord Salisbury – it does not matter how old, how important, or how insignificant you are, you become a child again".¹

For the grown-ups concentrated on the need to adjust themselves to the real world and moneymaking this world is a dangerous, dull, and sad place. Lewis Carroll shows to us that there are other places, other worlds that can be entered into by the doors of dreams and play and that we can escape from the self-imposed limitations of the world of drudgery and infinitely boring good times by these doors. For, and this should be kept in mind all the time, Lewis Carroll was painfully aware that "All too soon will childhood gay realize life's sober sadness" or that even on a child's spirit fresh from God's hands [...] the outermost fringe of the shadow of sorrow"² has already fallen.

There is an anecdote that *Alice* won Queen Victoria's heart and that she "graciously suggested that Mr Dodgson – Lewis Carroll's real name – dedicate his next book to her. Unfortunately for Her Majesty, his next book was a mathematical opus entitled *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*."³ However this story about Queen Victoria was refuted by Lewis Carroll.⁴

It is certainly very interesting that people steeped in politics and the manipulation of the whole world should have found their childhood and consolation in *Alice Books*. Yet, they have remained inextricably involved in *realpolitik* and quite unfree from the limitations of what is usually considered to be the real world. Not being able to enter Carroll's world of dreams, games, and logic they were doomed to live in the only dull, sad and insipid world they have created for themselves and for all of us. Much more important seems to me to be the interest in Lewis Carroll of such persons as are Virginia Woolf and Ludwig Wittgenstein, one a novelist, the other a philosopher. Wittgenstein was interested in the meaningless statements in philosophy, so he must have been interested in Lewis Carroll's scepticism concerning language as a safe means of communication in both *Alice* books, and Virginia Woolf was preoccupied with his world of sleep and the world of dreams, the world seen "upside down" (as in *Alice through the Looking-Glass*).

¹ V. Woolf, "Lewis Carroll", *The Moment, and other Essays*, Hogarth Press, London, 1947, quoted from Robert Phillips (ed), *Aspects of Alice*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974, pp. 78-79.

² *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, The Nonesuch Press, London, 1939, Introduction by Alexander Woolcott, p. 7.

³ Alexander Woolcott, "Lewis Carroll's Gay Tapestry", in Robert Phillips (ed), *Aspects of Alice*, p. 84.

⁴ *Aspects of Alice*, see note 2, p. 489.

Which one of these world is real, the one we are used and adapted to or those three ones, the world of dreams, the underground world or the world on the other side of the looking-glass, the world of games, the game of cards and the game of chess? All of these worlds have their own rules and they are different from what we have learned to consider to be the laws of reality. And now, reality has become questionable in the hands of Lewis Carroll. I am inclined to think that this relativization of the laws of reality as the only possible and logical conditions of life has always delighted and exhilarated both children and some grown-ups no matter whether they found reality boring and dull, as Alice found it at the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland*, or unendurable as it appeared to Virginia Woolf just before the beginning of the second world war, or downright illogical as Wittgenstein found it to be.

With Lewis Carroll nothing is what it seems to be at first glance but always something else, something different. Thus is true even of his own name. When he wrote stories, puzzles, poems he signed himself as Lewis Carroll, but his name, as few people know, was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Even fewer people know that he was a teacher of mathematics at Christ Church College in Oxford and very few know that he was interested in symbolic logic in its early days. This is very important because it would be hard to understand his *Alice Books* without an awareness of his obsession with logic.

For Lewis Carroll's centenary in 1932 Edmund Wilson wrote an article which he revised in 1952 entitled "C. L. Dodgson: The Poet Logician". In it he claimed that "he was closer, perhaps to Swift and Donne than to the merely whimsical writer like Barrie or A. A. Milne, for Dodgson had a first-rate mind of a very unusual sort: he was a logician who was also a poet."⁵ There is nothing to be added to this statement and nothing to be changed. There is nothing whimsical or illogical in the nonsense of Lewis Carroll. Even his pen name is a pedantic logical game with his own name. His name Charles he transformed into Latin Carolus and then he wrote it down as the English Carroll. And Lutwidge was transformed into Ludovicus and from that into English Lewis. The final stage of this transformation was the change in the order of these names. His surname Dodgson was left out of this transformation. To quote Aldous Huxley from his *Texts and Pretexts* (1933), where he finds similarities between Lewis Carroll and the metaphysicals:

Irrelevancies brought startlingly, and herefore absurdly, together are the stuff of most metaphysical conceits. But the seventeenth-century poets also employed another device for making the reader 'sit up'. Instead of ranging over heaven and earth for an unlikely similitude to the object under consideration, they sometimes turned a fixed and penetrating gaze upon the object itself. This microscopic examination revealed various qualities inherent in the object, but not apparent to the superficial glance. The essence of the thing was, so to speak, brought to the surface and revealed itself as being no less remote from, no less irrelevant to, the conception framed by common sense than the most far-fetched analogy.

⁵ Edmund Wilson, "The Poet Logician", in *Aspects of Alice*, o. c., p. 245.

Thus, Rochester's analysis [in *Upon Nothing*] ingeniously shows that nothing is so unlike a thing as the thing itself. The thing, in this particular case, is Nothing; nothing is so unlike Nothing as Nothing. The coupling of Nothing, philosophically considered, with the everyday Nothing of common sense produces the most startling effects. Nothing proves itself to be quite as absurdly irrelevant to Nothing as gutters are to grief, or as tortoises to grandeur.⁶ The writer who exploited this kind of metaphysical conceit most thoroughly and most ingeniously was Lewis Carroll. Born two hundred years earlier, he would have left behind him, not a children's book but a long devotional poem in the style of Benlowes.⁷

As I have said, with Lewis Carroll nothing is what it seems to be at first glance. One has to pay closer attention and submit things to microscopic, logical examination. Carroll's imagination, as suggested by this play on words with his own name, is altogether logical, intellectual and always following certain rules. Those of us who take an interest in strange coincidences will notice that the name Ludovicus is similar to Wittgenstein's name Ludwig: a very alluring coincidence in the case of two men who devoted themselves so devoutly to discovering the nonsensical in language, one very seriously, the other, before him, joking and playing with words. "What is most like a bee in May?" is one of Carroll's puzzles which he enjoyed to ask little girls to answer. The answer is "perhaps" because "a bee in May" can be turned into "may be" and that means "perhaps".

What is most like a bee in May?

"Well, let me think: perhaps –" you say.

Bravo! You're guessing well to-day!

Truly, there is little difference between "perhaps" and "may be", but is a bee a word or is a word a bee is a very complicated question concerning the relationship of words, of language, to things and this disconcerting question is here, even if in a jocular manner, posed. Closer to logic than to language is a puzzle "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" The answer is: "Both have feathers on them". A raven, as any bird, has feathers and feathers used for writing were placed on writing desks. To find similarities between things apparently unlike was the pleasure both of the metaphysical poets and Lewis Carroll's logical and mathematical mind. It seems to be funny both for the minds of children and grown-ups and makes them laugh, but it makes them think, too. For, to find similarities between things belonging to different realms of being – a writing desk is inanimate matter and a raven is a living being – amounts to obliterating the border lines between animate and inanimate matter, so often mentioned in Wolfgang Kayser's

⁶ Huxley had in his mind a comparison between a tortoise and fishermen "Having shod their heads with their canoes. / How tortoise-like but not so slow, these rational amphibii go!" in a poem by Andrew Marvell.

⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Texts and Pretexts*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1933.

The Grotesque in Art and Literature as a specific feature of the grotesque as a "basic aesthetic category".⁸ The question arises here: What is what? If we are not able to answer this question rationally then things get mixed up, nothing is clear to the intellect any more, cosmos turns into chaos, into the world as an unknowable and dangerous place of grotesque creatures with no laws to rely upon, the very same world which, before we heard the answer to this riddle, seemed to be so well and so rationally ordered and safe.

The title of the first *Alice* book, *Alice's Adventures on Wonderland*, appears to be somewhat misleading putting an emphasis on the wonderful. The first title was *Alice's Adventures under Ground* of which there is a facsimile of 1864 manuscript with thirty-seven illustrations by the author, not by Sir John Tenniel to whose illustrations most of the readers of *Alice Books* are accustomed. These illustrations make an impact much different from those of John Tenniel, they present to us figures that are not simply funny or eccentric, as if described by Charles Dickens, but inspire us with uneasiness and fear. The title itself suggests a visit to a different world that has different rules. Under ground is different from above ground. Above ground we know who we are, everything is predictable and under ground a white rabbit with pink eyes talks and takes "a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket". Not that Alice is astonished at what she saw:

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 another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

Alice is not astonished because she has fallen asleep and the whole thing is a dream, and in dreams, as we know, as well as Alice does, "anything can happen". Dreams subvert the logic of waking life, but what is true then, what is reality?

The first title of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Alice's Adventures under Ground*, is closer in spirit to the title of the second *Alice* book, *Through the Looking-Glass*. It is a different world. Lewis Carroll took pleasure in exposing a written sheet of paper to the mirror to find out that the letters, the words, become unreadable, being reversed in the mirror image. So, on the other side of the looking-glass our

⁸ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, McGraw-Hill, New York, Toronto, 1966, p. 180.

rules, our expectations of what is near or far away, of what is left and right, of what is animate and what inanimate are betrayed and Alice, together with the reader, is frightened simply because our customary rules do not any longer hold good. It is, of course, pleasant, to hear the flowers talking to Alice and assuming the prerogatives of a conscious mind, a subject, watching Alice as a curious flower with petals and two stalks that can walk, but what is more curious is that the house is all the time getting in Alice's way and that a path leads straight to the garden of live flowers, but it appears that it does not lead, or cannot take Alice anywhere.

"I should see the garden far better," said Alice to herself, "if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it – at least, no, it doesn't do *that* –" (after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners), "but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path! Well, *this* turn goes to the hill, I suppose – no, it doesn't! This goes straight back to the house! Well then, I'll try it the other way."

In his *Leviathan* Hobbes is critical of various wrong uses of language. "It is wrong to say", says he, that a "road goeth or leadeth hither or thither" because a road cannot go, or, for that matter, lead you. This is a philosopher's criticism of figurative or symbolic language from the point of view of a rationalist who would like to have a precise and perfect tool for clear thinking but language does not lend itself to pure mathematical formulas and words have connotations. That language is an imprecise tool of conveying thoughts has been a nightmare of philosophers for centuries. I wonder whether Lewis Carroll was aware of this nightmare of Hobbes's in writing this sentence: "And here's a path that leads straight to it – at least, no, it doesn't do *that*." That it does not do that was a suggestion to me that he might have had Hobbes's criticism of language in his mind, because paths do not do things.

The question is, can we rely on language as a means of communication, or is it, in fact, a means of misunderstanding and confusion of thoughts of which we find so many examples in *Alice Books*.

That in Lewis Carroll everything is about words, about language, and not about actual things is clear from every single detail in *Alice Books*. Flowers in "The Garden of Live Flowers" can talk because they are not asleep, since their *beds* are not made soft, as are the beds of flowers this side of the looking-glass.

"How is it you can all talk so nicely?" Alice said, hoping to get it into a better temper by a compliment. "I've been in many gardens before, but none of the flowers could talk."

"Put your hand down, and feel the ground," said the Tiger-lily. "Then you'll know why."

Alice did so. "It's very hard," she said; "but I don't see what that has to do with it."

"In most gardens," the Tiger-lily said, "they make the beds too soft – so that the flowers are always asleep."

This sounded a very good reason, and Alice was quite pleased to know it. "I never thought of that before!" she said.

"It's *my* opinion that you never think *at all*," the Rose said, in a rather severe tone.

And, of course, there is a tree to take care of the flowers.

"There is a tree in the middle," said the Rose. "What else is it good for?"

"But what could it do, if any danger came?" Alice asked.

"It could bark," said the Rose.

"It says 'Bough-wough'" cried a Daisy.

"That's why its branches are called boughs!"

A tree has bark, so it can bark, and has boughs, so it can say bough-wough. So it is not about real things but about words and language not understood as a safe tool of communication but as a disconcerting recalcitrant living being not obeying our everyday logic.

And now, what is reality? Here we come across an indisputable comment on the central idea of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy in the chapter "Tweedledum and Tweedledee" of *Alice through the Looking-Glass*.

"Come and look at him!" the brothers cried, and they each took one of Alice's hands, and led her up to where the King was sleeping. [...]

"He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do and what do you think he's dreaming about?"

Alice said "Nobody can guess that."

"Why, about *you*!" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. And if he left off dreaming about you where do you suppose you'd be?"

"Where I am now, of course," said Alice.

"Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

As is, perhaps, not universally known, Bishop Berkeley thought that *esse est percipi*, to be is to be perceived, but by whom, by God, so the Red King is God and Alice exists only in his dream, so it would be dangerous to wake him up, but Alice cannot even wake him up because she is only an image of his dream and, as Tweedledum says:

"Well, it's no use talking about waking him," said Tweedledum, "when you're only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you're not real."

"*I am* real!" said Alice, and began to cry.

"You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying," Tweedledee remarked, "there's nothing to cry about."

"If I wasn't real," Alice said – half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous – "I shouldn't be able to cry."

"I hope you don't suppose those are *real* tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

There is an interesting comment by Sir Bertrand Russell on the Red King's dream mentioned by Martin Gardner in a note on his *Annotated Alice*. "A very instructive discussion from a philosophical point of view," Bertrand Russell remarked, commenting on the Red King's dream in a radio panel discussion of *Alice*. "But if it were not put humorously, we should find it too painful."

Is it not, in spite of all the humour, painful and frightening, there being no use crying not over spilt milk but over one's own nothingness, one's own irreality. That is why I surmise, Alice has to wake up from both of her dreams, out of fear. One further proof of that, Carroll seems to be a predecessor of Kafka in the chapter "Alice's Evidence" of *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.

"No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first – verdict afterwards."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly.

"The idea of having the sentence first!"

"Hold your tongue!" said the Queen, turning purple.

"I won't!" said Alice.

"Off with her head!" the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

"Who cares for *you*?" said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time).

"You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face.

"Wake up, Alice dear!" said her sister. "Why, what a long sleep you've had!"

And, at the end, Alice has to "run in to her tea", to everyday Victorian reality, although her sister considers it "a curious dream", and has a dream within a dream, dreaming of Alice's dream although she knew, she knew what?

So she sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality.

The end of *Through the Looking-Glass* is very similar, the Red Queen is shaken into a kitten, a reduction of the dream world, of the world of the game of chess and of

the game of cards to sober, dull reality, but with a nostalgic feeling for these other worlds. A compromise, lack of courage, or a mixture of prudence and scepticism? I don't know.

GROTESKA U KNJIGAMA O ALISI

Glasovite Carrollove knjige o Alisi popularno se tumače kao knjige napisane djeci za zabavu. Nešto produhovljenije gledanje na te priče kaže da su one namijenjene zapravo odraslim ljudima koji "ponovo postaju djecom" nakon što ih pročitaju. Zajednički ton obaju tih gledišta je u veselosti i "neodgovornom smijehu". U ovom članku želio sam ukazati na stvari koje nas plaše u knjigama o Alisi.