

Editorial

Wonder is Really Nothing

*'As we lie down to sleep the world turns half away
Through ninety dark degrees.'
- Elizabeth Bishop*

G.K. Chesterton said that nonsense was the literature of the future. There is no better proponent than Charles Lutwidge Dodgson writing as Lewis Carroll, no greater triumphs of nonsense than the *Alices*. Carroll insisted his books 'meant nothing,' made no sense.

Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer means. So whatever good meanings are in the book, I'm glad to accept as the meaning of the book.¹

Alice, according to Carroll, was intended to be 'trustful, ready to accept the wildest impossibilities with all that utter trust that only dreamers know.' Carroll's dream story is one with loops, entanglements, and passages that lead to nothing. It was essentially a new way of writing dreams: while Jonathan Swift took pains to explain everything, and Shakespeare carefully laid the groundwork for what was to come in his midsummer capers, Carroll offered no explanations whatsoever. Alice follows a rabbit straight down a hole and is in Wonderland, a space where you open doors with keys only to find more doors, games are played with animate objects, and events repeat ad infinitum.

1 Lewis Carroll, quoted in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild As Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses 1865-1971* (Penguin 1981)

Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf wrote, ‘slipped through the grown-up world like a shadow.’

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. In order to make us into children, he first makes us sleep... the two *Alices* are not books for children; they are only books in which we become children.

Wonderland is a universe where words are given multiple meanings (‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’). Carroll saw sentences as mere forms, the concrete meanings of which were insignificant. His method of composition was interesting:

Alice and the *Looking-Glass* are made up almost wholly of bits and scraps, single ideas which came of themselves. In writing it out, I added many fresh ideas, which seemed to grow of themselves upon the original stock...every such idea and nearly every word of the dialogue *came of itself*. Sometimes an idea comes at night, when I have to get up and strike a light to note it down. I cannot set invention going like a clock, by voluntary winding up; nor do I believe that any *original* writing (and what other writing is worth preserving?) was ever so produced.²

Anthony Burgess suggests that Joyce’s ‘verbal technique comes straight out of Lewis Carroll,’ and that it is Humpty Dumpty (‘humptyhillhead,’ ‘tumpytumtoes,’ ‘humponadimply,’ ‘humpteen dumpteen,’ ‘homompsy doompsy,’ ‘numpty wumpty,’ ‘humbly dumbly’) who explains

2 Lewis Carroll, *ibid*

the dream-language of *Finnegans Wake*, the quintessential text of modernist literature:

And even if Humpty shell fall frumpty times as awkward again in the beardsboosoloom of all our grand remonstrancers there'll be iggs for the brekkers come to mournhim, sunny side up with care.

Indeed, links to Lewis Carroll—and Charles Dodgson, and Alice Liddell—litter the book: ‘old Dadgerson’s didges,’ ‘wonderland’s wanderlad,’ liddel oud oddity,’ ‘Lewd’s carol.’ Yet in 1927, five years into the writing of the *Wake*, Joyce claimed, ‘I have never read him till Mrs Nutting gave me a book, not Alice, a few weeks ago - though, of course, I heard bits and scraps.’³

Finnegans Wake wasn’t composed as one narrative unit. Rather, Joyce drafted it in sections, and not always in the order that appears in the final version, working using an assemblage writing process (‘bits and scraps’), a composite of words and phrases. This fragmentation resembles a dreamscape, not connected by a linear development or circular pattern, Guido Almansi⁴ suggests, but in a kind of Möbius strip (what Lacan calls a *huit intéreur*, an internal eight), a spiral progress from one point to the next, as with the *Wake*, a book with no beginning or end. The whole of human history washes through H.C. Earwicker’s (Here

3 A letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 31 May 1927. Quoted in ‘Appendix 2: ‘Begin Again...Stop!’, David Greetham, *The Restored Finnegans Wake* (Penguin 2012)

4 Guido Almansi, *Theatre of Sleep: Anthology of Literary Dreams* (Picador 1986)

Come's Everyone[’s]) populous head as he dreams.

In order to write the *Wake*, Joyce had to ‘put the language to sleep.’

‘In writing of the night, I really could not, I felt I could not, use words in their ordinary connections. Used that way they do not express how things are in the night, in the different stages - the conscious, then semi-conscious, then unconscious... When morning comes of course everything will be clear again... I’ll give them back their English language. I’m not destroying it for good.’⁵

The world announced its modernity by manufacturing languages: Joyce’s ‘night language’ (Finneganes), Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, William Carlos Williams’s ‘The Great Figure,’ Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Einstein’s $E=mc^2$. ‘The modernists,’ Peter Conrad writes, ‘were convinced that everything remained to be said, and invented new languages like Dada for the purpose of making those unprecedented announcements. Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* coined the neologism ‘quark,’ which meant nothing much.’⁶

André Breton saw Carroll as the ‘vital solution to a profound contradiction between the acceptance of faith and the exercise of reason.’ Dada followed Carrollian *non sequiturs* to their (il)logical conclusions. Duchamp was a virtuoso of nonsensical puns but conceded, ‘it’s not easy to be nonsensical because nonsensical things so often turn out

5 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce: New and Revised Edition* (Oxford University Press 1982). Quoted in ‘Appendix 2,’ Greetham, *ibid*

6 Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life & Art in the 20th Century* (Thames and Hudson 1998)

to make sense.’ Tristan Tzara insisted ‘DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING,’ though psychoanalyst and Dada poet Richard Huelsenbeck was more illuminating, saying it was ‘the child’s first sound expresses the primitiveness, the beginning at zero, the new in our art.’ The movement turned childhood games into constructive exercises for adults, and performances, like the Dada Night of 1916, into unseemly Tea Parties, with Tzara cast as a Mad Hatter.⁷ (He had advertised his intention to urinate in different colours and took offence when the exhibition was not allowed.)

The art of writing, as in Tzara’s ‘To Make a Dadaist Poem,’⁸ was becoming child’s play:

Take a newspaper.
 Take some scissors.
 Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make
 your poem.
 Cut out the article.⁹

7 Joanna Walsh plays with the Mad Hatter’s riddle, ‘Why is a raven like a writing-desk?’, in her essay, ‘The Eye & the Word,’ *gorse* no. 3, March 2015

8 Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto on Feeble & Bitter Love* (1920): www.391.org/manifestos/1920-dada-manifesto-feeble-love-bitter-love-tristan-tzara.html#.VfLIItxoVFw

9 This cut-up technique was adopted by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin in 1959, a ‘montage technique’ from painting applied to ‘words on a page.’ Burroughs cut phrases from newspapers and magazines, and collaged the fragments to form writing. The method was later picked up by David Bowie, who saw it as a ‘kind of Western Tarot,’ to compose songs. Interestingly, Burroughs and Gysin also invented a Dream Machine, a stroboscopic flicker device ‘viewed’ with closed eyes.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.
 Shake gently.
 Next take out each cutting one after the other.
 Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.
 The poem will resemble you.
 And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.

Look at Peter Blake's collaged cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and you will find Lewis Carroll and also a hookah. John Lennon's interest in Carroll¹⁰ seeped into The Beatles' lyrics, most notably on 'Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds' ('looking-glass ties') on that record, and 'I Am the Walrus' on the *Magical Mystery Tour* album. Of 'Lucy,' Lennon told *Playboy*: 'The images were from *Alice in Wonderland*. It was Alice in the boat. She is buying an egg and it turns into Humpty Dumpty.' Look closer again at the album sleeve, and you will see an uncredited James Joyce. It is lore that Lennon cribbed from the *Wake* ('so way out and so different...he just went, he just didn't stop'¹¹) as well.

'Personally, I think that Lewis Carroll's *Alice* is one of the most important and amazing books produced by this civilisation,' said filmmaker, and theoretical writer in the Czech-Slovak Surrealist Group,¹² Jan Švankmajer. Known

10 'I was passionate about *Alice in Wonderland* and drew all the characters. I did poems in the style of the *Jabberwocky*. I used to *live* Alice.' John Lennon, quoted in Hunter Davies, *The Beatles* (Norton 2009)

11 BBC Radio interview with John Lennon, 6 June 1968

12 'Surrealism formed an ideological bridge from anarchism over

for his disquieting use of stop-motion animation, often juxtaposed with live actors and traditional Czech puppetry, Svankmajer's *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky* 1988) interprets the dream aspect of the novel. It is perhaps the most literal, and lucid, reading of Carroll's text:

‘So far all adaptations of *Alice* (including the latest by Tim Burton) present it as a fairy tale, but Carroll wrote it as a dream. And between a dream and a fairy tale there is a fundamental difference. While a fairy tale has got an educational aspect—it works with the moral of the lifted forefinger (good overcomes evil), dream, as an expression of our unconscious, uncompromisingly pursues the realisation of our most secret wishes without considering rational and moral inhibitions, because it is driven by the principle of pleasure. My *Alice* is a realised dream.’¹³

The film begins with Alice (played by Kristýna Kohoutová) throwing stones into a stream while her sister reads a book (‘And what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation?’). The opening credits are intercut with a shot of Alice's lips as she speaks, ‘Alice thought to

Marxism back to anarchism. To me, Surrealism is a certain rebellious stance on life and the world. Its contemporary stance is critically aimed at the current state of civilisation. Surrealism has taught me many things: it developed my perception of imagination, instilled in my mind that there is only one poetry, no matter which means we use to express it, and last but not least, it freed me from fear of collectivity. Surrealism is in fact a great collective adventure.’ Jan Švankmajer, *Sampsonia Way*. www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2012/06/05/freedom-is-becoming-the-only-theme-an-interview-with-jan-svankmajer/

13 Mark Stafford and Virginie Sélavy, Interview with Jan Švankmajer, *Electric Sheep*: www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2011/06/14/interview-with-jan-352vankmajer/

herself. ‘Now you will see a film made for children. Perhaps. But I nearly forgot! You must close your eyes otherwise you won’t see anything’—a device Švankmajer uses throughout the film.

Švankmajer’s *Wonderland* is a surreal and troubling dreamscape, suffused, like Carroll’s, with the politics of inanimate objects: playing cards, stuffed animals, sewing kits. Everything is dreamed out of household items (the caterpillar is fabricated from socks, hedgehogs out of pin cushions, the mushroom is a wooden knob, the shrunken Alice a doll), as Kurt Schwitters would have assembled for his *Merzbau*,¹⁴ yet, like Carroll’s inverted logic, everything operates beyond the realms of sense. Says Švankmajer:

‘Animation is, so far, the only way of breathing life into inanimate things. Children’s games work with the same magic. This kind of magic is the point where childhood and animation intersect with each other... I like things that have passed through human hands. Things that have been touched. Such things are charged with emotions that are capable of revealing themselves under certain, extremely sensitive circumstances. I collect such objects, surround myself with them and in the end I cast such ‘fetishes’ in my films.’

With its clever word play, unconscious symbolism, and

14 Known for his collages of advertisements, newspapers, and debris, made in the wake of the First World War, Dada artist Kurt Schwitters developed a working process which he called *merz*—a nonsense word that became his brand (a *merz*-artist who made *merz*-paintings), and his studio his *Merzbau*, an abstract walk-in collage composed of grottoes and columns and found objects.

www.merzbarn.net/hanovermerzbau.html

celebration of utter nonsense, it's little surprise that Surrealist Salvador Dalí was drawn to the book ('The only difference between me and a madman is that I'm not mad'¹⁵). Dalí and Carroll (the Dada and the Dodo) are, pardon the pun, on the same page. 'The biography of a surrealist, as revealed by himself, is inevitably a long drama of terrors and tortured doubts,' wrote Margaret Case Harriman in 'Dream Walking,' her *New Yorker* profile of Dalí.

A surrealist is governed by the Freudian principle of licking the tar out of his subconscious by putting down loudly in writing, painting, or ordinary speech all the things his subconscious mind tries to frighten him with in whispers. As other people try to forget their early fears and later doubts and to submerge them in what seems to them a normal existence, the surrealist concentrates on his terrors, writing about them, talking about them, painting them, until he has got them to a point where he can kick them around and make them say uncle. The catch in this, from a non-surrealist point of view, is that he is liable to dramatise everything that he ever did or dreamed in order to make a better book, a better picture, or perhaps just more entertaining conversation.¹⁶

Dalí realised that, instead of suppressing his fears, all he had to do was 'paint them and become famous.' And it was to Dalí Alfred Hitchcock turned to create a dream sequence for Gregory Peck in *Spellbound* (1945), unhappy with the

15 Dalí produced thirteen illustrations in 1969 for a special edition of Carroll's book for Maecenas Press-Random House, reprinted in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: 150th Anniversary Edition*, edited by Mark Burstein (Princeton University Press 2015)

16 'A Dream Walking,' (1939) Margaret Case Harriman, *Profiles II, Selected from the New Yorker* (Penguin 1944)

‘fuzziness’ of Hollywood depictions, and attracted to the sureness of the Surrealist’s style:

‘I wanted to convey the dream with great visual sharpness and clarity—sharper than film itself. I wanted Dalí because of the architectural sharpness of his work. Chirico has the same quality, you know, the long shadows, the infinity of distance and the converging lines of perspective. But Dalí had some strange ideas. He wanted a statue to crack like a shell falling apart, with ants crawling all over it. And underneath, there would be Ingrid Bergman, covered by ants! It just wasn’t possible.’¹⁷

Dalí allegedly produced over twenty minutes of footage, cut due to obscenity laws—Hollywood legend says that the artist exploited Freudian sexual symbolism to the extreme—so much so, that only four-and-a-half minutes appear in the final film. ‘I can’t make out just what sort of a place it was,’ recalls the amnesiac patient played by Peck. ‘It seemed to be a gambling house, but there weren’t any walls, just a lot of curtains with eyes painted on them. A man was walking around with a large pair of scissors, cutting all the drapes in half.’¹⁸ And then a girl came in with hardly anything on and started walking around the gambling room, kissing everybody.’

Freud tells us dreams represent our repressed desires, are a ‘conceptualisation and personification of the unconscious

17 Alfred Hitchcock interviewed by François Truffaut, 1962:
www.openculture.com/2011/07/alfred_hitchcock_recalls_working_with_salvador_dali_on_isplaybound.html

18 The cutting of the eye with scissors recalls the famous scene in Dalí and Luis Buñel’s film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Tristan Tzara’s recipe for a Dada poem relied on the same utensil.

imagination largely contaminated by the conscious.' G.K. Chesterton, that 'the centre of every man's existence is a dream. Death, disease, insanity, are merely material accidents, like a toothache or a twisted ankle.' But, William Demnet sets it most precisely of all when he writes,

'Dreaming permits
each and every
one of
us to be
quietly
and safely
insane
every
night
of
our
lives.'