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# On *Alice in Wonderland*

Pascal Bruckner

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A GREAT BOOK IS A BOOK that has consequences. We read thousands of pages, but we only remember about ten that sketch a landscape or memories, or evoke an atmosphere in our minds. When these books have the good fortune to be part of children's literature and also read by adults, they continue to suffuse our lives until adulthood and even resonate beyond our mature years through our progeny's acquaintance with them. We wish to revisit the ones that we loved with the spontaneity of our first reading: we have forgotten them, or rather, we remember that we loved and forgot them. *Alice in Wonderland*, first published in 1862, introduces the century of the pampered child that we continue to live in even now: at some point between 1850 and 1968, this "little democratic devil," as Henry James put it, became the new god of the democratic universe, particularly after the Freudian revolution. But Alice is also a very special ambassador from the earliest years: as ordinary humanity's emissary in the land of nonsense, that very British art of inconsistent syllogism, she plunges into the hurrying rabbit's burrow, just as we plunge into meaningful unreason in order to delight these "old children" that we, who scurry around pointlessly before our eternal slumber, have become.

Childhood is the interlude of all these eventualities, the matrix containing all destinies without accomplishing any one of them. But *Alice* is not just one more fairy tale to be added to those by Grimm or Andersen: more than anyone else, Lewis Carroll succeeded in appropriating traditional stories of magicians and fairies to his own ends. He took hold of a cliché all the better to transgress the genre, which is what Nabokov well understood in translating the book into Russian in 1923. Carroll cleverly summons up all the mythologies of the kittingcat, the doggie, all sorts of pets and games like croquet, in order to reassure his readers and then plunge them headfirst into a huge confusion. We find kings, queens, giants, dragons, and unicorns in his texts, but the characters do the opposite of what we expect from them: they blatantly disregard their given role, change their shape, size, and even species, such as the baby boy that Alice holds in her arms and who changes into a little pig (Lewis Carroll, alias Charles Ludwig Dodgson, did not like boys very much).

Shrinking up, stretching out as in that Transformation of a crocodile in Sylvie and Bruno, compressed into just his forehead or strung out over several miles: that is the main interest for Carroll. An elementary Freudian would see an allusion to an erection, but we are obviously not elementary Freudians. With Carroll, trouble always comes after a faultless line of thinking, like the pathological result of extreme logic.

There are several enigmas in this book, just as there are a number of charades that various creatures play out for Alice. The first concerns the possible source of puritanism: due to his family background, Lewis Carroll was destined to become a priest. He wound up being a deacon, since his stammering prevented him from preaching with all the passion that he would have liked. Imbued with Anglican culture, pathologically shy, Carroll managed to invent a text that was sufficiently inoffensive to be pleasing to the society of his time, but subversive enough to interest future generations and captivate open minds. He distilled uncomfortable truths all while hiding behind the masks of mischief and riddles. The hidden meanings can be deduced from the literal sense, and these children's dreams remain innocuous to the casual reader. For the ramblings of a chaste math teacher who never married concealed inclinations that would be condemned in our day. We know that Charles Ludwig Dodgson only liked little girls up to the age of 11. He would invite them to dinner, or for an afternoon snack, or to go boating, and liked nothing better than to take pictures of them, often nude, as if in the garden of Eden. As soon as they turned 12, the Reverend turned his back on them, considering their approaching adolescence as a betrayal unworthy of his interest. This whimsical exercise of his imagination would earn him numerous reprimands from the girls' mothers and most importantly the condemnation of contemporary literary critics (in 2015, a *BBC* documentary openly accused him of pedophilia, and certain literary circles wondered gravely whether his work should be censored or even banned).

He loved to disguise little girls as street urchins or princesses, all while holding them tightly, telling them wonderful stories, punctuating his narratives with kisses. Never going farther than these modest embraces, he maintained a rigorous abstinence. One has to suppose, as Julian Barnes points out, a link between repression and creation: Carroll is hardly the only illustrative example, since Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche were also great asexual figures, who only got engaged to be married in order to better break away and return to their studious solitude. This restraint, however, is the counterpart of an extraordinary creativity that, in addition to his previously published work, resulted in a multitude of rebuses, acrostics, mathematical or logical problems,

along with ingenious creations from day to day, such as the layout of the table preventing guests from jostling each other as they come into the dining room, or this fundamental question: what is produced when a knife divides a loaf of bread? A slice, of course. The more inspiration is bridled by social conventions, the more talent is required to explore the oddities of the everyday commonplace. One finds a profusion of plays on words as well as typographical modifications, twisted, undulating sentences that John Tenniel's wonderful sketches render so well.

For Lewis Carroll, old age is a downfall that fossilizes with habits and conventions, whereas childhood alone is the time of ingenious spontaneity and beauty. Childhood is a moment of flowering that refuses the change that comes with time. One day, we all commit the sin of growing up and aging. In order to illustrate that reality, Lewis Carroll applies the principles of acceleration and confusion to his narrative: as soon as Alice falls into the rabbit's burrow, the plot accelerates at a breathtaking speed up until the end. Two or three inventions that will prove to be classic literary creations spring up on each page. This same celerity can also be found in *Through the Looking-Glass*, even more condensed. It is not just about strange or funny comments: in each case, it involves logical paradoxes, since all of Lewis Carroll's characters, humans, animals, flowers, plants are linguistic or philosophical propositions whose interpretation challenges the mind. There are first of all those famous portmanteaus, words made from two or three others fitted together, but it goes farther than that. Consider the following statement by Humpty-Dumpty, whose smile is so wide that it reaches all the way around his head: "When I use a word [. . .] it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." When Alice objects that the same words cannot mean so many different things, he retorts: "The question is [. . .] which is to be master—that's all." Well before Kafka and George Orwell, who dismantled the mechanisms of Fascism and Communism, Lewis Carroll exposed the mainspring of totalitarian powers: manipulating language, twisting words to make them signify the opposite of what they mean in order to grab and manipulate minds.

And while he recognized that verbs are trickier, harder to control than adjectives (though he buys them off), it was also Lewis Carroll that brilliantly illustrated the play of language in his famous poem "Jabberwocky":

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
 All mimsy were the borogoves,  
 And the mome raths outgrabe.

*Alice in Wonderland* is the meeting of two universes: that of childhood terrorized by the cruelty of adults, and that of language, in that, as Jean Gattegno put it, "it is not a story that he tells us, it is a speech that he is giving before us, a speech in several parts." Carroll's story is situated at the intersection of the children's fancy and the universe of the games that the Reverend Dodgson, who was himself a mathematician, valued more than anything. Beyond the famously wacky escapades of the Mock Turtle or the Mad Hatter, what matters in Carroll's work is meaning: "take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves." Hence the permanent scrambling of Alice's conversations with the Queen, the King, the Mad Hatter, and the Mad Hatter by crosstalk: if it is not possible to agree on the meaning of words, there can only be misunderstandings and only the strongest will force these confusions to be understood as irrefutable truths. Carroll's genius consists of wrapping these difficulties in an unbridled fantasy that we never tire reading. The poet and playwright Antonin Artaud also tried his hand at such portmanteaus and in the 1940s, by a chronological inversion very much in the spirit of Carroll, claimed that Lewis Carroll had plagiarized him. However, his creative attempts to make words crackle are exhibitions, even if Gilles Deleuze, a brilliant commentator on Carroll, seems to find them very important. The imitator is rarely better than the original, even when he claims to be mad. Artaud is laborious, Carroll is delicious. The classic fairy tale encourages children to find their place in a world of adults; Carroll's literature invites adults into the world of childhood, as much as they wish, via an entire set of off-balance, dizzying but controlled lessons.

Another auspicious characteristic is the temporal inversion that once again foreshadows the totalitarianisms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the upside-down world of the mirror, one is condemned before having committed any infraction, and judgement is rendered even before deliberation: the defendant is guilty merely by having been accused. The finger bleeds before getting stuck with a needle. The Queen of Hearts has to run full speed to stay in the same place and not be doomed to immobility (a fine metaphor for progress). It takes an alert reader to grasp or glimpse the many allusions strewn throughout each of the heroine's adventures. Carroll leads his reader on at a sustained, breathless, almost exhausting pace. He eludes or thwarts the initiation that the fairy tale genre is supposed to provide to young minds. His Wonderland is not the world of enchantment but of oddity: all of these characters that cross Alice's path are half-mad, hysterical, or tyrannical, such as the White Queen who, whenever upset, invariably cries out "Off with his head!" They embody the totally whimsical. In Carroll's world, there is

no Other: only receivers or speakers without individuality, and who are transformed, and get diluted in the succession of discourse and songs. At the end of her adventure, Alice has not matured (or rather she has grown up and shrunk back down several times, even sending a letter to her feet such a long distance away); she has had a narrow escape. A book without characters, an uneventful journey, a legend with no conclusion. It is not surprising that this text was written by an eccentric who never grew up and who could never conform to the adult world of Victorian England. André Maurois tells of the time one day when he entered a house believing there were only children. He began to crawl on his hands and knees, growling like a bear, but happened upon a cohort of duly terrified elderly ladies. Realizing his mistake, he got up and walked out in a most proper manner. Our mischievous Reverend managed to take this stupefying pilgrimage called life, leading back and forth between the abyss and the precipice, with a quite melancholy elegance. There is nothing innocuous about abolishing the boundaries of meaning: the work begins with a beneficial fall (Alice wonders if it is possible to curtsy while falling) and ends up with a dizzy spell. We have to accept the loss of all our usual reference points in order to open up to the unexpected, at the risk of going mad. We do not read Lewis Carroll, we listen to his work as if it were a constantly disconcerting and bewitching symphony of letters, meanings and sounds ("If you do not expect the unexpected you will not find it" [Heraclitus]).

How was it possible for such an absurd story to stun and delight so many people, how can we give ourselves over to the lunacies of an eccentric old bachelor? How is it possible for me to love this text so much that I know certain sentences by heart (my other Proustian madeleine is the adventures of Tintin)? *Alice in Wonderland* is an artificial dream that conceals a nightmare. She only gets out of her torments by accident, once when the deck of cards falls on her, and another time when the White Queen drowns in the soup bowl, leading Alice to upset the table. She herself does not want to live in the dream belonging to someone else, the King of Hearts: she wants to remain in control of her daydreams, but the treachery of daydreams delivers her into the hands of alien powers. Wonderland is an ordeal disguised as a childlike idyll, an accumulation of nonsensical oddities scarcely concealing a continuous violence, camouflaged under the appearances of conventional children's narratives. The adults are grotesque and tyrannical, the animals mean and stupid: death hovers ominously over each page. We have to distinguish the childlike capacity for being amazed at everything from the childish propensity toward an all-powerful narcissism. Alice is the confusion and the collision

of these two attitudes. Only the most conventional sort of bedazzlement or contentment is to be found in Carroll's writing: we emerge from his books intrigued, unsettled, susceptible to the demons of surprise. We are far beyond mere plays on words, even though nonsensical utterances are the most ingenious way of keeping tragedy at bay. Carroll the magician, the poet of folly, spent the rest of his life trying to seduce little girls, without chaperon if possible, in memory of Alice Liddell whose only fault was to become a woman and get married. When "there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person" and time is breaking us down, we turn back toward that young girl with "the pure unclouded brow" who was, at naptime, subjected to all sorts of trials: growing tall, shrinking back down, drowning in her tears, answering questions from strange animals. We too may have to endure what Alice experienced, as if setting out on a journey of initiation leading from one void to another during our reading.