

THE AGE  
*of*  
ALICE

FAIRY TALES,  
FANTASY, AND  
NONSENSE  
IN VICTORIAN  
ENGLAND

THE AGE OF ALICE:  
FAIRY TALES, FANTASY,  
AND NONSENSE  
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AND NONSENSE IN VICTORIAN  
ENGLAND

*An Exhibition Catalogue*



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# Preface

By RONALD PATKUS

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of one of the world's most famous works of fantasy: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The first copies of the book were printed in July of 1865, to great success. In later years, other editions appeared, with new presentations. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* marked a key transition in literature, but other works incorporating fairy tales or elements of fantasy had appeared decades before and continued to appear throughout the century.

Many of these fairy tales and works of fantasy and nonsense make up part of the extensive collection of children's books in the Vassar College Library. The collection is actually made up of several smaller collections that have been donated by alumna and friends, or developed by the library. Perhaps the most well-known is the Louise Seaman Bechtel Collection, named after the children's book editor. Other collections donated by graduates and friends include the Clarence Lown Collection, the Elisabeth Ball Collection, the Katherine Gesell Walden Collection, and the Paula Lee Schiller Collection of Mother Goose. Also of note is the Vassar College Children's Book Collection, which despite its name is actually a sub-set of the larger collection; it consists of books from a variety of donors and is a major resource. In addition, the Grille collection of rare books includes many high points in children's literature. Together these collections focus on materials printed in the United States and England during the 19th and early 20th centuries, though titles from other places and times are present. There is a great variety of material, including short stories, novels, plays, poetry, primers, chapbooks, and courtesy and conduct books.

In order to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and to showcase its collection of children's books, the Vassar College Archives & Special Collections Library has mounted the exhibition *The Age of Alice: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and*

*Nonsense in Victorian England*. The exhibition draws on material from several of the children's book collections, particularly the Grille Collection and the Vassar College Children's Book Collection. Nearly 40 books are on display, written by a variety of authors; most, but not all, are aimed at children. They are arranged chronologically, so that viewers can gain a sense of how this literary genre developed over the course of the 19th century. Here one will see both famous and not-so-famous titles. An attempt has been made also to highlight the illustrations produced by various artists, since they were an important part of the experience of reading these books. In addition, one will see stories and novels as they appeared not just in book form, but also in periodicals of the time. It is interesting to know that several of the books went through multiple editions, but we have tried wherever possible to show first editions.

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition, and in addition to a checklist, presents four complementary essays by scholars working in the fields of history, bibliography, and children's literature. Lydia Murdoch opens the catalogue with an introduction to the history of children and childhood in the Victorian era. My own essay follows by offering an overview of key fairy tales and works of fantasy and nonsense that appeared during these years. The next essay, by Nikolai Firtich, adds an international perspective to this catalogue by focusing on literary connections between Lewis Carroll and the Russian Avant-Garde. Finally, the postscript by Nancy Willard is a reprint of an essay that originally appeared in the *Knight Letter*, the journal of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America; in it she recounts how she became introduced to *Alice's Adventures* and how Lewis Carroll influenced her as a writer. Together these pieces highlight an important strain in 19th century literature, and its impact on other places and times.

I would like to thank a number of people who were involved in this project. First, I must begin by thanking Justin Schiller and Dennis M V David, who during a pleasant afternoon discussed the exhibition with me and offered the title as an organizing theme. Next, I'm grateful to Vassar faculty who early on became interested in the anniversary of *Alice's Adventures* and ways of marking it; they include Lydia Murdoch, Nikolai Firtich, Nancy Willard, Julie Riess, and Dan Ungurianu. My colleagues



in the Vassar Communications Office (Carolyn Guyer, Jeff Macaluso, George Laws, Janet Allison, Julia Fishman, and Tamar Thibodeau), as usual, cheerfully attended meetings and worked hard to produce this publication, a website, and appropriate publicity. Other Vassar colleagues played a part too, including Sharyn Cadogen (photography), and Baynard Baily and Amy Laughlin (audiovisuals). Dee Wilson organized a number of *Alice*-related events for Vassar's Modfest. Conservator Nelly Balloffet assisted with preparing individual items to be displayed. Without the contributions of all of these people the project would not have been possible.

I hope you will enjoy spending time at the exhibition and reading the essays that follow.



# ALICE AND THE QUESTION OF VICTORIAN CHILDHOOD

By LYDIA MURDOCH

“Who in the world am I?’ Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!”<sup>1</sup> So reflects Alice after she has fallen down the rabbit hole and changed size, first “shutting up like a telescope” until she is only ten inches high, and then “opening out like the largest telescope that ever was,” prompting her to ponder disassociated thoughts of mailing boots to her feet by postal carrier.<sup>2</sup> Literary scholars have identified the existential themes of identity in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), but the question “Who in the world am I?” applied much more broadly to Victorian childhood overall.<sup>3</sup> From the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1837 to her death in 1901, what it meant to be a child transformed dramatically—a process that *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* both marked and took in new directions by presenting a fresh example of active, questioning girlhood.

The first lines of Carroll’s story identify Alice as a particular class of child—one who, unlike most mid-Victorian children, spent her days in leisure and education. “Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do,” wrote Carroll. She initiates her adventures after dismissing the book her sister was reading “without pictures or conversations” as utterly uninteresting. *Alice’s Adventures*, published just five years before the 1870 Education Act introduced a national system of elementary schools for all children, is filled with earnest lessons reworked into nonsensical jabber. Again and again, seeking to find meaning in the disorderly world below, Alice turns to her memorized drills, only to have them fail her. After questioning her identity, she sets out to “try if I know all the things I used to know,” starting first with the multiplication tables—“four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh dear!”—and then moving on to geography: “London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome—no, *that’s* all wrong, I’m certain! I

must have been changed for Mabel!”<sup>5</sup> Yet even amidst all this confusion, Alice never loses sight of her class bearings. She proudly tells the Mock Turtle that she attends a day school with lessons in French and music, and when he asks whether she studies washing, too, she indignantly replies, “Certainly not!”<sup>6</sup>

Victorian ideals of childhood thus remained contingent on class identity, but Alice’s puzzlements in Wonderland also mirrored earlier debates from the 1830s and 1840s over child workers in British factories and mines. Child labor was by no means new to nineteenth-century industrial Britain. In the early eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe celebrated children as young as four working in emerging textile cottage industries.<sup>7</sup> By the 1830s, however, increasing numbers of reformers presented the harsh discipline, physical demands, and long hours of industrial labor as incompatible with the physical, emotional, and moral needs of young children. The Factory Act of 1833, passed the year after Carroll’s birth, banned all children under nine from working in textile mills and limited working



Figure 1



Figure 2

hours of youths between the ages of nine and thirteen to a mere forty-eight hours per week. The following decade, the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842 prohibited all children under ten—as well as all females—from working underground. For Victorian readers, John Tenniel’s illustration of an oversized Alice crouched in the underground hallway wet with the pool of tears would have likely evoked the confinement, isolation, and endangerment of child miners (figure 1). The widely read and reproduced *First Report of the Children’s Employment Commission* (1842) included stark drawings of other children who had not fallen down the rabbit hole, but been lowered down the mine shaft by adults. The most provocative image from the 1842 *Report* showed a young girl, naked to the waist and barefoot, crawling on all fours, the chain between her legs attached to the cart of coal that she pulled through the wet narrow passageway (figure 2). While these paired images approached the question of childhood from very different perspectives, they both revealed worlds in which the very spaces and demands placed on children proved incompatible with their needs.

Alice’s reliance on school drills to check her ever-changing identity also mirrors the 1842 *Report*, in which parliamentary investigators applied the test of knowledge to evaluate the effects of hard labor on child development. Most of the child workers interviewed for the *Report* had never attended school, or only a Sunday school. Their recorded answers to the interviewers’ questions sound strikingly similar to Alice’s nonsensical attempts to recall her lessons. “I don’t know who Jesus Christ is,” said



thirteen-year-old Charles Bayley, “they don’t teach me that; they teach me spelling. I can’t spell horse.” Fifteen-year-old Bessy Bailey claimed, “22 pence is 3 shillings and 1 pence. I don’t know how many weeks there are in the year. I don’t know what Ireland is, whether it is a town or a country.” Another youth said, “I don’t know which is the largest town in England, but I know Wakefield and Leeds.” A sixteen-year-old Yorkshire hurrier declared, “I never heard mention of France. I never heard mention of Wales or of Scotland; but I know people that come from Ireland. I think Ireland is a town as big as Barnsley, where there is plenty of potatoes, and lots of bullocks.” He continued, displaying a great aptitude for monetary calculations (as many of the children did), but little understanding of abstract mathematics: “20 pence is 1 shilling and 8 pence; 32 pence is 2 shillings and 8 pence; 7 times 3 is 32—no, it’s 22.” Twelve-year-old Isaac Bearer was a jumble of contradictions: “I have learnt religion pretty well. I don’t know who Jesus Christ was: I never heard of him. I’ve learnt the Church Catechism: but I don’t know it all. I don’t know what is the largest town in England. Three time[s] ten is twenty.”<sup>8</sup> Highly selective in their questioning, the parliamentary investigators compiled hundreds of statements of evidence such as these to reinforce the point that workers as young as six who spent most of their lives underground were not allowed to become *children*. Stunted in their growth, harnessed like animals, and ignorant of basic religious and civic knowledge, child workers defied the ideals of domesticity and childhood that were becoming so central to middle-class identity by the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign and thus legitimated intervention and protections from the otherwise *laissez-faire* government.

The early sociologist, playwright, and co-founder of *Punch* Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) developed these themes from the parliamentary reports in his studies of street workers. He began this work as a series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle* (1849) and eventually expanded and published the four-volume collection as *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-1862). Like the authors of the parliamentary *Report* on mining, Mayhew highlighted what he understood to be the failures of education for working-class children. Now using dialect, Mayhew recounted one child street vendor as saying “he had heer’d of Shakespeare, but didn’t know

whether he was alive or dead, and didn't care. . . Had seen the Queen, but didn't recollect her name just at the minute; oh! yes, Victoria and Albert."<sup>9</sup> Mayhew also associated the ideal of childhood with play—a key theme picked up by Carroll. Play increasingly distinguished children from adults, though Mayhew asserted that children of the urban working poor had neither the time nor the spaces for healthy entertainments. In his description of an eight-year-old girl street seller of watercresses, he wrote that she “had entirely lost all childish ways, and was, indeed, in thoughts and manner, a woman.” Language fails, as Mayhew struggled even to talk with her, noting, “At first I treated her as a child, speaking on childish subjects.” When he asked the girl about toys and games, she could only offer a “look of amazement,” and when he talked to her of parks, “she replied in wonder, ‘where are they?’” Mayhew concluded, “All her knowledge seemed to begin and end with watercresses, and what they fetched.”<sup>10</sup>

While Mayhew and the parliamentary reports on child workers presented education, not wage labor, as the proper realm of early childhood, Carroll underscored how didactic instruction soon to be extended to working-class children could work against the very forms of play and fantasy celebrated in Wonderland as essential aspects of childhood. Carroll did this most pointedly in his rewriting of the hymns and poems of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the Independent minister whose *Divine Songs for Children* (1715) were still frequently sung and memorized by Victorian youth. Watts stressed children's inherent sinfulness along with the dangers of sloth and disobedience. One of his hymns urged children to offer “Praise to God for learning to read,” for studying the Bible was how the child came to learn “The Danger I was in, / By Nature and by Practice too / A wretched Slave to Sin.”<sup>11</sup> Among the many parodies in *Alice*, Carroll rewrote Watts's moralistic piece “Against Idleness and Mischief” as “How doth the little crocodile / Improve his shining tail, / And pour the waters of the Nile / On every golden scale!,” leaving Alice to conclude, “I'm sure those are not the right words.”<sup>12</sup> Later in the book, Alice finds again that “the words came very queer indeed” as she recites another parody of Watts as “‘Tis the voice of the Lobster: I heard him declare.” Watts's original poem began “‘Tis the Voice of the *Sluggard*,”

and ended with the sort of clear message that always alludes Alice in Wonderland:

I made him a Visit, still hoping to find  
He had took better care for improving his Mind:  
He told me his Dreams, talk'd of eating and drinking,  
But he scarce reads his Bible, and never loves thinking.

Said I then to my Heart, *Here's a Lesson for me,*  
That Man's but the Picture of what I might be:  
But thanks to my Friends for their care in my Breeding:  
Who taught be betimes to love Working and Reading.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing on the Romantics, Carroll rejected Watts's overwhelming emphasis on the innate sinfulness and corruption of all children. Instead of condemning child idleness, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* revels in the imagined worlds of fantasy and play that might open up when the books at hand provided no immediate use.



Figure 3



Figure 4

In many ways, however, Carroll's approaches to childhood remained fixed to the class imaginings of his time. For example, his photographs from the summer of 1858 of Alice Liddell, the real-life muse for *Alice's Adventures*, contrast the young girl posed alternatively "Dressed in Her Best" and as "The Beggar Maid" (figures 3 and 4). Carroll, like many other early photographers of children, such as Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), often photographed his child sitters in costume. The paired images of Alice Liddell show how class identities continued to shape ideals of childhood. When posed "Dressed in her Best," Alice Liddell looks small and childlike, backed against the wall and literally still contained within the garden. "The Beggar Maid," however, takes its title and staging from Lord Alfred Tennyson's famous 1842 poem to depict a very different image of eroticized childhood, again recalling the imagery from the 1842 *Report* on mining. Here Alice looks larger, more adult. Her ragged clothes expose her chest and legs. Her hand-on-hip stance, cupped hand waiting for money, and gathered dress give her the appearance of more woman than child as she seems to step out of the frame with one foot, the other crushing the nasturtium leaves below.<sup>14</sup>

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* marks the shift in Victorian ideals of childhood from work, discipline, and essential sinfulness to education, play, and innocence, however fleeting. The character of Alice also represents a real recognition of child agency, particularly in response to the Queen's death threat. "'Who cares for *you*?' said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'"<sup>15</sup> Yet like all ideals of childhood, *Alice's Adventures* reveals as much if not more about adults than children. Victorian readers thoroughly appreciated how Carroll's masterpiece was a work for all ages, combining "childish simplicity" with "grown-up humor" or "cunning."<sup>16</sup> Nineteenth-century discussions of the book's limitations surprisingly questioned its appeal to young readers. *The Athenaeum*, for example, provided one of the more negative reviews of Carroll's "dream-story," asserting: "We fancy that any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, overwrought story."<sup>17</sup> In a much more positive review, *The Times* concluded: "Certainly we enjoy the walk with Alice through Wonderland, though now and then, perhaps, something disturbing almost causes us to wake

from our dream.”<sup>18</sup> At its core, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* remains a book that inevitably explores childhood from the adult perspective.

## NOTES

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, in *Alice in Wonderland*, 3rd ed., ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 15.
- 2 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 11, 13-14.
- 3 See, for example, Nina Auerbach, “Alice and Wonderland: A Curious Child,” *Victorian Studies* 17 (1973): 31-47.
- 4 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 7.
- 5 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 15-16.
- 6 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 74.
- 7 Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain*, vol. 3 (London: G. Strahan, 1727), 101.
- 8 Children’s Employment Commission, *First Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children (Mines)*, House of Commons Sessional Papers (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1842), evidence from Charles Bayley (no. 91), Bessy Bailey (no. 88), Joseph Whetley (no. 92), William Beaver (no. 93), Isaac Bearer (no. 77), 245-246, 242.
- 9 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, selected and introduced by Victor Neuburg (London: Penguin Books, 1985; reprint from 1865 edition), 175.
- 10 Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 64-65.
- 11 Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (London: M. Lawrence, 1715), 11-12.
- 12 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 16.
- 13 Watts, *Divine Songs*, 46.
- 14 Scholars have long debated the nature of Carroll’s photographs and relationships with young girls, and no doubt will continue to do so. See, for example, contrasting interpretations of these photographs of Alice Liddell in Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998) and Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Loss and Sexuality in Victorian Photographs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). The most recent forthcoming biography of Lewis Carroll by



Edward Wakeling promises to put to rest the view that Carroll had “an unhealthy interest in children.” See Alison Flood, “New Lewis Carroll Biography Finds ‘Nothing Untoward’ in His Relationships with Children,” *Guardian*, November 18, 2014.

- 15 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 95.
- 16 “*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 3.1 (July 1869): 102.
- 17 “*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,” *The Athenaeum*, December 16, 1865, 844.
- 18 “*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,” *The Times*, August 13, 1868, 8.



# THE AGE OF ALICE: FAIRY TALES, FANTASY, AND NONSENSE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

By RONALD PATKUS

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* originated in a tale told by Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) to the children of Henry Liddell, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, during a boating trip in July of 1862. At the insistence of the children, he began to write out the tale, and his manuscript was completed in 1864. The first copies were printed in July of 1865, though interestingly, few survive which bear this year in the imprint, because most were withdrawn from circulation since the artist, John Tenniel, was dissatisfied with the illustrations. A second run was produced in November of 1865, and dated 1866. Many of the original printed copies were sold to the New York publisher D. Appleton, who added a new title page and binding. Despite this complicated publication history, the book sold well both in England and America, and several other printings followed. The sequel *Through the Looking Glass* appeared in 1871. After the copyright for *Alice's Adventures* expired in 1907, a number of new editions appeared, with illustrations by other artists. What is more, there have been many film, television, and dramatic adaptations of the novel since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Given the wide popularity of Carroll's work, it's no surprise that many cultural institutions will be celebrating the publication anniversary in a variety of ways.<sup>1</sup>

As important and influential as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was, we should take care not to let it obscure our appreciation of similar works composed by authors besides Carroll during the same period.<sup>2</sup> The Victorian era (1837-1901), after all, witnessed a great outpouring of fairy tales, and works of fantasy and nonsense. In fact, such works begin to appear in the first year of Victoria's reign, and grew in number in succeeding years, right up to the year of her death. What is more, such books came to the market not only in increasing numbers, but also with increasing success and impact. Over the decades the genre grew,

and eventually an audience for these works was created. Whereas at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century most books for children had an educational or moralistic bent (one thinks, for instance, of the well-known primers, and poems and hymns by the theologian Isaac Watts), by the end of the century many other kinds of books were being offered as well. There seems to be no exaggeration in calling this “The Age of Alice,” as a way of noting the importance of Carroll’s work while also recognizing the contributions of other literary figures.<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest novels which showed signs of breaking away from the moralistic tradition in children’s literature was Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion: A Fairy Tale*, which appeared in 1837.<sup>4</sup> Coleridge was the daughter of the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Apart from some translations, her output was relatively small, and the story of *Phantasmion* is today regarded as her best-known work. The central figure is Prince Phantasmion of Palmland. The book was well-received at the time, and likely influenced later English writers of fantasy. Yet Coleridge’s *Phantasmion* was not the only such work to appear in the 1830s. Also of note is Catherine Sinclair’s *Holiday House*, which was published two years later, in 1839. Sinclair was a Scottish writer who produced many works for children. *Holiday House*, a story of unruly children, incorporates elements of both nonsense and fantasy, and so departs even further from the didactic tradition. A young John Ruskin in 1841 wrote the fairy tale *The King of the Golden River*, though it did not appear in print until a decade later.

In the 1840s, 50s, and 60s more established authors such as Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray produced works with fantastical elements. They each did this after having written a number of books of more realistic fiction. In the early 1840s, a number of years after the publication of his first novels like *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, Dickens launched his series of Christmas stories. *A Christmas Carol* came out in 1843, followed in 1844 by *The Chimes: a Goblin Story of Some Bells That Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In* and other stories in succeeding years.<sup>5</sup> In 1855 Thackeray’s satirical fantasy *The Rose and the Ring* appeared, originally with his own illustrations, and following the publication of his major works. During these decades works also



Figure 1

appeared by other authors who were active in fields other than fantasy. For instance, poet Christina Rossetti's popular *The Goblin Market* was published in 1862, to be followed later by *Speaking Likenesses*.

Apart from writers who primarily worked in realistic fiction or other fields, by mid-century several authors had become especially well known as writers of works for children. One of the greatest was George MacDonald, who wrote a number of books, including *Phantastes* (1858), *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867, figure 1), *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1873), and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883). MacDonald's work became quite popular, and in later years influenced other fantasy writers, like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>6</sup> Another important writer for children was Mary Molesworth, who wrote under the names "Mrs. Molesworth" and "Ennis Graham." Her titles include *Tell Me a Story* (1875), *Carrots* (1876), *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877), *The Tapestry Room* (1879), *A Christmas Child* (1880), and *The Carved Lions* (1895). Though he published a range of works, Edward Lear became best-known for his nonsense limericks, as seen especially in his *Book of Nonsense*, which first appeared in 1846, and went through several editions.

When thinking of the works of fairy tales and fantasy that more and



more were being distributed to the market, we should consider not only the literary nature of the works, but also their artifactual qualities. In other words, readers interacted with actual books that had aspects worth considering. One obvious feature is that these books were relatively small, able to be held easily. Another feature is that a number of these books featured illustrations by major artists.<sup>7</sup> Though Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has over the years been illustrated many times by various artists, one still thinks of the first illustrations created by John Tenniel. Arthur Hughes also illustrated many books of fairy tales and fantasy, including works by George MacDonald and Christina Rossetti. Toward the end of the century, Walter Crane provided illustrations for books by



Figure 2

Mary Molesworth (figure 2, from *The Cuckoo Clock*) and Oscar Wilde. Illustrators played an important role in how a particular book was experienced. In addition to illustrations, books of fairy tales and fantasy also often possessed interesting publisher's bindings, with gilt lettering or illustrations on the front cover.<sup>8</sup> Typefaces varied, but were common to other books published at the time. It is not unusual to find books with the marks of their young readers (inscriptions, bookmarks, etc) present.

The role of publishers in making books available is crucial. The center of publishing in England at this time, as it had been

for centuries, was London, and nearly all of the fairy tales and works of fantasy under discussion here were published there.<sup>9</sup> There were some books issued from other cities, like Cambridge, Oxford, or further north in Edinburgh, but they did not outnumber works published in London. Many of the publishers of fairy tales and works of fantasy are names that are still familiar to us today; they include Chapman and Hall, MacMillan and Co., Smith, Elder & Co., Longmans, Green, and Co., Thomas Nelson and Sons, and Alexander Strahan. Sometimes these publishers issued their books simultaneously from more than one city; works published from London and New York can easily be found.

It's also important to note that sometimes the literature under discussion did not always appear in books; sometimes it appeared in journals and magazines of the period.<sup>10</sup> The periodical format is significant because it presents literary works in a very different way from the traditional book. Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* was first published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1862-63, and F. Anstey's *The Brass Bottle* was first seen in *The Strand*. Both of these periodicals were read by adults, and feature a range of characteristics, such as illustrations, advertisements, and a variety of texts, all of which contribute to a different reading experience. Sometimes the fairy tales and works of fantasy appeared in journals that were specifically intended for children. For example, Norman MacLeod, the editor of *Good Words*, published his story "The Gold Thread" in *Good Words for 1861*, and George MacDonald first published *At the Back of the North Wind* in the same periodical in 1868, before it was made available in book form. Another famous periodical for children was the American publication *St. Nicholas*; though focusing on American writers, it also published English authors, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett.

The publication of fairy tales and works of fantasy continued in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>. In fact, it had become clear that a separate strand of literary production had emerged in England alongside realistic fiction. It was at this time that two works of Oscar Wilde were published: *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). Just a few years later, in 1894 and 1895, *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book* of Rudyard Kipling appeared (figure 3). Between 1889 and 1910 the Scottish writer Andrew

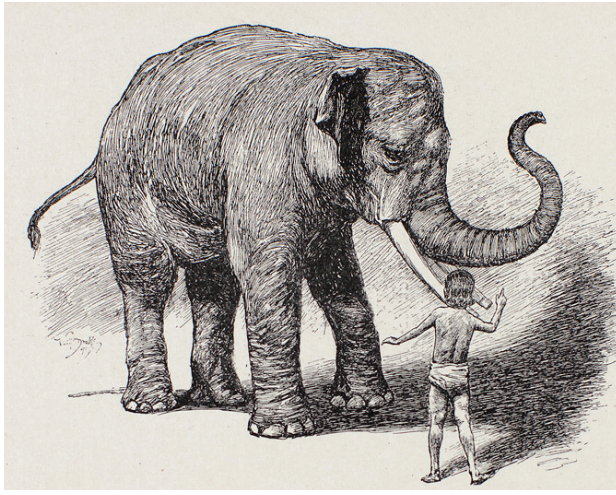


Figure 3

Lang collected literally hundreds of fairy tales and published them in individual volumes, each with its own color, thus for example *The Grey Fairy Book* (1900) and *The Violet Fairy Book* (1901). Edith Nesbit wrote more than 60 books for children; during the last year of the Victorian era (1901) her *Nine Unlikely Tales* appeared. Her three books known as the “Psammead series” began to appear in *The Strand* in 1902.

One should also pause to note that not all of the works of fantasy that were written and published during the Victorian era were aimed at young audiences. Sometimes writers used this genre to create works aimed at adults. They did this because the genre offered them a way to achieve their literary goals in a way that realistic fiction could not. Perhaps the best example of this trend is William Morris. During his lifetime Morris showed remarkable creativity in a number of areas of artistic endeavor, including painting, textiles, and printing. Yet throughout his life his productivity was especially great in the area of literature, and toward the end of his life a number of works of fantasy appeared. Some of his best-known works in the genre include *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), and *The Sundering Flood* (1897). These books were made available to the public

in trade editions, and several were also published by the Kelmscott Press, Morris' own private press.<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent that over several decades, the genre of fairy tales and fantasy had developed greatly. And of course the production of works in this vein did not stop when Victoria's reign came to an end in 1901. To the contrary, the genre expanded further, bringing us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century works by writers like Beatrix Potter, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Sometimes these more-recent works were based on the inspiration of earlier books. Authors read earlier works and were influenced by them. Just as George MacDonald had read Sara Coleridge, C.S. Lewis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would read George Macdonald. The works that have appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have enjoyed immense popularity, and perhaps this too has obscured some of the attention that should be given to books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offers an occasion for us to reconsider not only that work and others by Lewis Carroll—significant as they are—but also others like it written by a range of authors. Even a quick glance makes clear that the field of fairy tales, fantasy, and nonsense in Victorian England was long-lived, rich, and influential.

## NOTES

- 1 A number of books on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* have been published. For the publishing history, a recent work worth consulting is Zoe Jaques and Eugene Giddins, *Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass: A Publishing History* (Burlington, VT, 2013).
- 2 For a recent studies, see Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (Oxford, 1999) and Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Waco, TX, 2005).
- 3 I am grateful to Justin Schiller for suggesting this descriptive phrase.
- 4 The claim is made in John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London, 1997), p. 185. A discussion of the book is given in Jeffery W. Barbeau's intellectual biography titled *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought* (New York, 2014).
- 5 See especially Amberly Malkovich, *Charles Dickens and the Victorian Child* (New York, 2013).

- 6 See Roderick McGillis, *For the Childlike: George Macdonald's Fantasies for Children* (Metuchen, NJ, 1992).
- 7 Of special note are Brigid Peppin *Fantasy: The Golden Age of Fantastic Illustration* (New York, 1976) and Gordon N. Ray, *The Illustrator and the Book in England from 1790 to 1914* (New York, 1976).
- 8 Douglas Ball, *Victorian Publisher's Bindings* (Williamsburg, VA, 1985).
- 9 There are several books on Victorian publishing, including John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten, eds. *Literature in the Marketplace: Victorian Publishing and Reading Practices* (Cambridge, 1995).
- 10 J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel, eds. *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society* (Toronto, 1994).
- 11 The key biography is Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London, 1994).

# WORLDBACKWARDS: LEWIS CARROLL, NONSENSE AND RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

By NIKOLAI FIRTICH

In 1914 Roman Jakobson made the following observation concerning the concept of “worldbackwards” (*mirskontsa* in Russian) proposed by Russian futurist poet Aleksei Kruchenykh (1886-1968) as a literary method for uncoupling narrative from a normal time sequence: “You know, none of the poets have said ‘worldbackwards’ before, only Bely and Marinetti perhaps sensed it a little, but nonetheless this grandiose thesis is fully scientific... and clearly outlined in the relativity principle”<sup>1</sup>. The first expression of this concept in print occurs in Kruchenykh’s commentary on his own poem “Old Tongs of Sunset” published in the collection *A Slap on the Face of a Public Taste* (1912), where he writes the following:

author’s commentary -  
“carrying the world -  
backwards  
in the work of art  
could also be expressed as follows: instead of 1-2-3  
events are positioned as 3-2-1 or  
3-1-2                      this is the way it is in my  
poem”<sup>2</sup>.

Even the typographic composition of this commentary reflects Kruchenykh’s introduction of the concept of an alogical “shift” in chronology that would violate the linear progression of time. The initial notion of “worldbackwards” could then be described as a reflection on the relativity of time in its function within the creative process. In Kruchenykh’s words the artist is free “to trace the world backwards” (Kruchenykh 1999, 54), arranging the narrative episodes without concern for chronological motivation through the reconfiguration of word order, syllables, phonemes, and so on for the purpose of discovering new meanings. This method



is manifest in a number of poems and prose works by Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), most notably in the collection *The Wordbackwards* (1912) and in Khlebnikov's short play by the same title.<sup>3</sup>

Several years after his initial remark, Jakobson again addressed the problem of temporal shifts in literature. In his brochure *The Newest Russian Poetry, Sketch One: Approaches to Khlebnikov* (1921) he discussed the thesis of "worldbackwards" in connection with Khlebnikov's play. Jakobson lists numerous ways in which the device of temporal shift was used by earlier authors such as Lawrence Stern and Leo Tolstoy while pointing out that, in contrast to them, the Russian futurists' use of temporal shift did not require semantic motivation.<sup>4</sup>

It is surprising that Lewis Carroll is not included by Jakobson among the predecessors of Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov. In fact, however, Carroll had put forward a very similar idea in his celebrated Alice books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Introducing Alice to peculiarities of the "Looking-Glass Land" the White Queen says: "Living backwards...always makes one a little giddy at first - but there is one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways." Logical Alice responds that her memory works only one way and that she cannot remember things *before* they happen. The Queen expresses regret at such an unfortunate limitation of Alice's memory and remarks that she, personally, remembers best the "things that happened a week after next."<sup>5</sup>

This is just one of many examples from the work of the English author that exhibits points of correspondence with the ideas and creations of writers and visual artists associated with the Futurist milieu of the Russian avant-garde. Along with the founders of the "beyond mind language" (*zaum'* in Russian, also translated as "transrational language"), Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, other Futurist poets and artists, such as Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Elena Guro (1877-1913), David Burliuk (1882-1967), contributed to this alogical phenomenon that can be defined as an aesthetic movement against conventional logic and reason, designed to debunk the traditional artistic methods. The metaphysical coloring of this movement is evident in its aspirations to arrive at a higher logic and to transcend the boundary of our reality in order to explore other

realms and dimensions. Such a breakthrough is accomplished by creating works of art that appear, from the conventional viewpoint, as either totally nonsensical or, at least, semantically enigmatic.

The question of Lewis Carroll's influence on various fields of literary and visual arts, especially on surrealism, has been addressed in scholarly literature in some detail.<sup>6</sup> In connection with Russia, however, this question appears not yet to have received the attention it deserves, although the first Russian translation of Alice's adventures appeared as early as 1879 under the title *Sonia in the Kingdom of Wonder*. This was followed by three more translations published in the first decade of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> One can therefore assume that this extraordinary tale did not go unnoticed by the many representatives of the Russian avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> Since the field of connections between Carroll and the avant-garde is rather vast, for the purpose of this essay we will limit ourselves to observations that illuminate the relationship between Carroll's "nonsense" and the experiments of Russian "alogists" that led to their arrival at non-objective art.

Three broad areas of correspondence between Carroll's fictional creations and the ideas generated by Russian avant-garde can be identified. The first belongs to the playful field of literary "nonsense," where semantic shifts create images and situations that appear nonsensical from the conventional viewpoint. This area also includes linguistic experimentation, which may involve the creation of new words and even languages. The second area of correspondence lies in the metaphysical (spiritual) realm where other worlds and dimensions are explored or intimated, often in the context of literary techniques that undermine traditional notions of meaning. Thirdly, there is the presence of artistic *épatage* leveled against the dominant contemporary social and cultural institutions.

In the course of recent decades, the metaphysical tendencies of Russian avant-garde received considerable scholarly attention, particularly the links between the concept of hyper-dimensionality advanced by P. D. Uspensky and the theoretical constructs of Kruchenykh and Malevich.<sup>9</sup> In sharp contrast, the playful aspect of the Russian avant-garde expressed in literary and visual nonsense attracted considerably less attention.



Yet the notion of “nonsense” cannot be discounted when addressing the complex of ideas that led to a creation of the transrational language and prepared the path for the appearance of non-objective art in Russia.<sup>10</sup>

Let us take the most elementary example of nonsense poetry from Lewis Carroll, the first two stanzas of a poem “Father William” from the first *Alice* and look at it in the context of the early Russian avant-garde.

“You are old, father William” the young man said,  
“And your hair has become very white;  
And yet you incessantly stand on your head -  
Do you think, at your age, it is right? “

“In my youth,” father William replied to his son.  
“I feared it might injure the brain;  
But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,  
“Why, I do it again and again.” [*The Annotated Alice*, 70]

This playful and at the first glance innocent poem, nevertheless contains ideas which later acquired prominence in Russian Futurist aesthetics. First of all it is the conflict between rational - i.e. conventionally “correct” – “common sense” and thinking that departs from the norm,



Figure 1

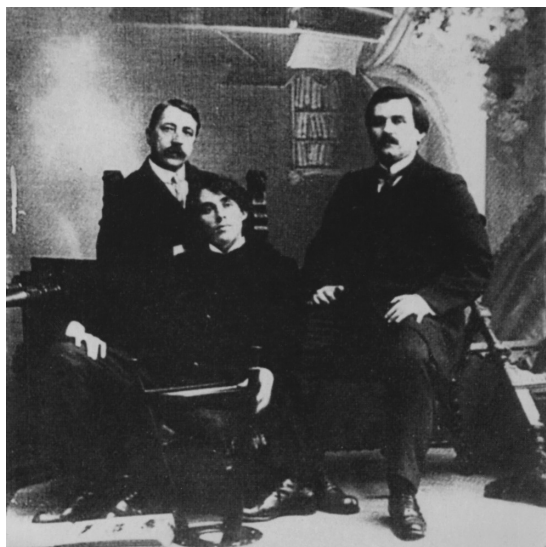


Figure 2

and is therefore unconventional. This is expressed in terms of standing on one's head; in other words, of seeing the world from a radically different point of view (figure 1). The poem also features a rejection of the brain, the seat of logic and rationality. Thirdly, at the heart of the poem we find a clash between "useful" and "sensible" activity with what from a utilitarian viewpoint seems to be "nonsensical" and "useless" behavior.

The idea of the "world turned upside down" was fundamental to the alogical vision of the Russian futurists. One need only mention the famous photograph of Kruchenykh, Matiushin, and Malevich with the piano hanging upside-down in the background, surrounded with upturned furniture (figure 2). This photograph reflects the idea of a semantic shift leading to new possibilities of artistic vision, an idea, also expressed by Elena Guro in one of her poems of 1912:

And, suddenly, I thought what if  
 We turn chairs and sofas upside down,  
 Turn the clock on its head?  
 ...  
 The dawn of a new era would come  
 And will open new lands.<sup>11</sup>

The alogical image created here by Guro is quite similar to Carroll's Wonderland, where all logical connections are shifted and the concept of linear time does not exist. As Alice discovers, everybody is "somewhat out of their minds" and she realizes that tools other than logic and reason are required to comprehend that land. The Cheshire Cat tells Alice: "We are all mad here." When Alice objects to being mad, he calmly responds: "You must be, or you would not have come here" (*The Annotated Alice* 89).

Rejection of rational thought, forsaking of reason as an instrument for exploring the mysteries of creativity, formed the central plank of the Russian futurist platform. A characteristic example is Malevich's statement that crowns the list of futurist Easter wishes of 1915: "Reason - is a prison chain for an artist, therefore I wish to all artists to go out of their minds"<sup>12</sup>. In his booklet of 1916, *From Cubism to Suprematism*, Malevich developed this idea in its application to contemporary art by stating that "all artistic forms are waiting to be freed, so they can speak their own language and not be dependent on reason, sense, logic, various laws of causality, etc..." thus emphasizing again the "non-reasonable" essence of art (Malevich 25).

Malevich's assertion creates a bridge with Kruchenykh's radical anti-utilitarianism as expressed most vividly in the following statement: "Uselessness, senselessness (nonsensicality), mystery of the powerful non-entity - these are the contents of new poetry!" (Sukhoparov 1994, 33). The concepts of "uselessness" and "senselessness" in art (seen in contrast to the utilitarian view of artistic output) were instrumental parts of Kruchenykh's alogical program, which found fertile soil in Malevich's own interpretations of the same themes.

Indeed, Kruchenykh was the most radical and dedicated artist of alogical non-sense. The futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, the libretto for which was written by Kruchenykh in 1913, should be considered as the most outstanding masterpiece of "nonsense" literature of the early twentieth century avant-garde. In this light, parallels with the *Alice* texts of Lewis Carroll are particularly revealing. There are striking similarities between the second act of *Victory* and Alice's experiences during her adventures in Wonderland (Chapters Two, Three, and Four).

Scenes Five and Six of the Second Act of *Victory* describe the mysterious

“10th Country” of the future as seen through the eyes of a character called simply “Fatman.” It is here, in Fatman’s wanderings in this strange land, that the parallels with Alice’s exploits can be discovered. For example, Fatman’s exclamation, “What kind of country is this? How could I know that I would be locked up without being able to move either my arms or legs” (Kruchenykh 2001, 400) reminds of Alice’s reflections on changing in size until she literally gets stuck in the house and cannot move her limbs. “What will become of me?” sadly thinks Alice. “It was much pleasanter at home.” But she immediately exclaims “and yet-and yet-it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life!” (*The Annotated Alice* 58). In Kruchenykh’s text Fatman, after having complained about his predicament, also becomes curious: “...what if one could climb up the stairs to the brain of this house and open there a door #35-oh, what wonders! Yes, all is not so simple here, although it looks just like a chest of drawers, but one just roams and roams around” (Kruchenykh 2001, 400). Alice, as we know, also tries to open the door, beyond which a wonderful garden can be seen, but before she is able to do that she has to wander around quite a bit and experience a number of transformations. Everything she encounters turns out to be not quite what it seemed at the first glance.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice climbs up onto the fireplace mantle shelf in order to get into the “Looking-Glass House.” Inside the Looking-Glass the concept of time turns out to be irrelevant (instead of arrows the clock has a grinning face). Analogously, Kruchenykh’s Fatman, having climbed up into the “Brain of the House,” also seems to be in sort of a “Looking-Glass Land,” exclaiming “‘Wow, I almost fell’ (looks through the crack in the clock: tower, sky, streets are all upside down-just as in a mirror).” He tries to find out what time it is: “Where do your clocks turn, and arrows?” and receives a mysterious reply “both arrows turn back right before dinner” (Kruchenykh 2001, 401). Among the numerous puns on the relativity of time in Carroll’s works, a particularly memorable one is the scene in *Alice in Wonderland* during the “Mad Tea Party,” when Alice also inquires about time and finds out that the clock always points to six o’clock, which happens to be dinner time (*The Annotated Alice* 96-99).

In *Victory*, Kruchenykh’s Fatman, trying to understand the “10th

country,” comes to the conclusion that everything is complicated there: “All the roads here are mixed up and go up to the earth and there aren’t any side exits” (Kruchenykh 2001, 401). He then receives the advice “please, there is an entrance, you can exit right back, there aren’t any others.” In much the same way, but in a text written fifty years earlier, a frustrated Alice tries to walk up to the top of the hill in the Looking Glass Land but always ends up in the same spot from which she had started. Carroll’s Alice and Kruchenykh’s Fatman both try to approach a new reality from a conventionally logical viewpoint and end up in a dead-end situation.

These parallels between the texts of Carroll and Kruchenykh point to the possibility that playfully alogical world of Lewis Carroll was closer

to Kruchenykh’s creative imagination, than, for example, Uspensky’s theoretical constructs about other dimensions.<sup>13</sup> It is also noteworthy that Kruchenykh was one of the most dedicated collectors of children’s art, and not unlike Carroll, paid close attention to the specifics of children’s comprehension and imagination.<sup>14</sup>

Let us return to the scene of the “Mad Tea Party,” which contains themes central not only to Russian Futurism, but to the avant-garde in general. There is, first, the subject of madness, or in other words, the rejection of so-called common sense; second, there is the motif of time treated not in linear but in relative terms; third, there is the matter of behavior that breaches the limits of the socially acceptable. All these themes are presented in a totally nonsensical fashion.



Figure 3



The absurdity of the situation is marked in the beginning of the chapter by the puzzle thrown at Alice by the Mad Hatter: “Why is the raven like a writing-desk?” This absurdist query brings to mind Malevich’s alogist painting *A Cow and a Violin* (1913, figure 3) or Kruchenykh’s assertion that the best rhyme for the word “theater” is the word “cow” (Sukhoparov 1994, 229). The following statement by Malevich is also quite Carrollian: “The supreme work of art is created when the mind is absent.” Then he concludes: “Of course many will think that this is absurd, but to no purpose, because it’s enough to light two matches and put up a wash basin.” (Malevich 57). In all of these cases, as the result



Figure 4

of a semantic shift, we have the creation of a new, free, artistic space to which rational laws cannot be applied. Common sense and reason are useless in this kind of situation and a person needs to rely on intuition in order to function in this space.

The debunking of the traditional perception of time as a linear progression takes a central place in the “Mad Tea Party.” Time becomes an animate being, which could be convinced to move faster, or to go backwards; or it might decide to stop altogether. One needs to recall here that the interpretation of time played an important role in the milieu of the early Russian avant-garde. Aside from the chronological shifts in *Victory* mentioned earlier, it is enough to recollect the famous painting by Malevich, *An Englishman in Moscow* (1914, figure 4) where the word “hour” occupies a central place and a looming fish together with a red arrow forms something akin to a clock pointing to 5 PM, which

happens to be the traditional tea time in England (“five o’clock”). We know that, Velimir Khlebnikov based a number of his theories on his calculations of the cyclical nature of time. However, Lewis Carroll had already addressed many of these issues in his original interpretation of temporal problems, presenting them in a playful and puzzling manner, which affected the imagination of his readers. For example, Carroll’s idea of “living backwards” in the sense of freely moving back and forth in time (as indicated above) found its reflections in Herbert G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* and, notably, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Strange Case of Benjamin Button,” among many others. (*The Annotated Alice* 97, 247)

The eccentricity of the “Mad Tea Party” is expressed by the anti-social behavior of the participants, which may constitute an ironic comment on the artificiality of Victorian manners. The Mad Hatter and March Hare switch their sets of dishes and splash their tea on the Dormouse, which shocks the well-mannered Alice terribly. The *épatage* of Russian futurists comes to mind when one reads these lines. Curiously enough, the ritual tea drinking had often accompanied Futurist public lectures and disputes. Particularly interesting is the fact that Kruchenykh used to splash his tea out onto the respectable audience, trying to awaken it from its bourgeois somnolence (Sukhoparov 1994, 60). By this gesture Kruchenykh, in effect, turned into reality the fictional image created by Carroll. This parallel with Carroll’s Wonderland is further supported by the following sentence from the alogical text of Kruchenykh’s and Khlebnikov’s collection *The Worldbackwards* (1912): “The spilt-out tea and many wonders that killed the pleasers with their light” (23).

This excerpt is from the prose work by Khruchenykh entitled “Journey Around the Whole World” which, arguably, comprises the centerpiece of the book. It is indeed the most experimental text in the collection and has been defined by Vladimir Markov as “an attempt at creating a prose of a totally new type” and compared by him with the much later “automatic writing” of the Surrealists.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it seems that all of Kruchenykh’s poems in this particular collection can also be read backwards, which does not hamper their meaning, because the meaning itself is alogical and non-static.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, in about the middle of the collection we

find a short poem by Khlebnikov typeset in such a way that it can only be read in a mirror reflection.

This points to one more link between Carroll and the Russian avant-garde, this time in the area of linguistic experiment. Many readers are familiar with the famous lines of the “Jabberwocky” poem from *Through the Looking Glass*, which was written in a language of Carroll’s own invention - “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves, did gyre and gimble in the wabe...” etc. When Alice first looks at the poem she cannot read it, for as she says “it’s all in some language I do not know” (*The Annotated Alice* 190). Realizing that it was a “looking-glass book,” Alice decides to hold the book to the mirror, but the meaning of the lines, despite the fact that she can now read them, still remains obscure. Admitting that she cannot understand the poem, Alice reflects that “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas - only I don’t know exactly what they are” (*The Annotated Alice* 197). The poem therefore is written in a language the meaning of which is flexible, non-static, and strikingly similar to Kruchenykh’s method of mixing understandable words with words of his own invention.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian Futurists began their language experimentation with palindromes and the reading of words backwards that gave them a new meaning. The next step was the creation of a new language, which even if read in a mirror would still remain obscure, or as Kruchenykh put it “a language with no particular meaning” (Kruchenykh 2001, 55). In other words, not unlike Carroll’s Alice, the Russian Futurists had gone “beyond the looking glass” into the land of new creative dimensions. Thus, the parallels with Lewis Carroll addressed in this essay help to illuminate the imaginative and playful aspect of Kruchenykh’s “worldbackwards” as part of the alogical current of the early Russian avant-garde. As was testified by Malevich the alogism of Kruchenykh’s *Victory*, in which nonsense and metaphysics were inseparable, was an important steppingstone for the Russian artists’ movement towards non-objective art.

It seems appropriate to end this discussion with a quote from a 1901 essay by Gilbert Keith Chesterton, entitled “In Defense of Nonsense,” where the author argued for the connection between nonsense literature on the one hand, and spirituality on the other.



Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with the syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. The well meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that “faith is nonsense,” does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Chesterton suggested that if “nonsense is to be the literature of the future, it must have its own version of the Cosmos to offer; the world must not only be the tragic, romantic, and religious, it must be nonsensical also.” Therefore, in Chesterton’s view “nonsense will, in a very unexpected way, come to the aid of the spiritual view of things.” (Chesterton 46)

Chesterton’s observation turns out to be quite prophetic indeed if one is to look at development of the avant-garde art and literature in the 20th century. From Apollinaire and Giorgio De Chirico’s “Pittura Metafisica,” through Dadaism and Surrealism to the Theatre of the Absurd and to Post-Modernism, the avant-garde exhibits various manifestations of nonsense and turns to the illogical and mysterious realms, thus, albeit often in iconoclastic fashion, alerting us to the spiritual side of things. Among other important innovations, the Russian avant-garde pioneered “alogism,” which championed “nonsensicality” as the guiding principle of new art, thus establishing a “worldbackward” spiritual connection with Carroll’s Wonderland.

## NOTES

- 1 Sukhoparov, Sergei. *Aleksei Kruchenykh v svidetel'stvakh sovremennikov* (Munchen:Verlag Otto Sagner, 1994), 227. All translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise indicated. *N.F.*
- 2 Kruchenykh, Aleksei. *Stikhotvoreniia. Poemy. Romany. Opera* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2001), 261.
- 3 One of the most successful definition of “worldbackwards” to date is provided by S.R. Krasitskii: “The concept of ‘worldbackwards’ became one of the key principles of Futurist aesthetics...it represents a violation of standard chronology,

rejection of the linear movement of time from past to future, rejection of the commonly assumed connections and causal relations, intensification of alogism, unpredictability, departure beyond the boundaries of traditional positivist assumptions, which led to a sui generis Futurist Gnosticism.” See Krasitskii, S.R. “O Kruchenykh.” *Aleksei Kruchenykh. Stikhotvoreniia. Poemy. Romany. Opera* (St.Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2001), 15.

- 4 Jakobson, Roman. “Noveishaia russkaia poeziia. Nabrosok pervyi: Podstupy k Khlebnikovu.” *Raboty po poetike* (Moscow: Progress, 1987), 284-285.
- 5 Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (New York: Wings Books, 1993), 247-48.
- 6 Of particular interest are the following essays: Jeffrey Stern, “Lewis Carroll the Surrealist” *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration. Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Ludwidge Dodgson* (New York: Clarkson N.Potter, 1982), 132-153; Ann McGarrity Buki, “Lewis Carroll in *Finnegan’s Wake*” in the same collection, 154-166.
- 7 All these translations were soon to be followed by Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ania v strane chudes* [*Ania in Wonderland*], published in Berlin in 1923. For the history of Alice’s translations into Russian, see Nina M. Demurova’s highly informative article “Alice Speaks Russian: The Russian Translations of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 5/ 4 (1995): 11- 29. According to a number of sources, Lewis Carroll’s works on mathematics were considered as quite traditional and unimaginative. Contemporary scholars, however, describe his works on logic, as way ahead of his times. It was these works, as well as the texts of the *Alice* books, that started to attract the attention of modern mathematicians and physicists from the 1930’s in the West and in the 1960’s in the Soviet Union. It appears that the first translations of Carroll’s works on logic were published in the Soviet Union only in the 1970s. For more information on this subject see: Warren Weaver “The Mathematical Manuscripts of Lewis Carroll” and R.B. Braithwaite “Lewis Carroll as Logician” in Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland. Authoritative Texts of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, The Hunting of the Snark. Backgrounds. Essays in Criticism* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1971).
- 8 So far any documentary evidence of futurists’ familiarity with Carroll’s works has not been uncovered. However, the multiple translations suggest that *Alice* books were present in Russian cultural milieu, which makes this connection quite probable.
- 9 Among the best studies that address this issue are: Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Suprematism 1908-1915* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1990); Linda

- Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1983).
- 10 In his fundamental study of Russian transrational poetry Gerald Janecek makes mention of nonsense, but only in passing. He does note, however, that one should not overlook “the playful, humorous, fanciful aspects also to be found in zaum...Zaum can indeed be read for comic, sometimes parodistic effect, and in Kruchonykh there is little doubt that this is intended.” See Janecek, Gerald. *The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego State UP, 1996), 348.
  - 11 Guro, Elena. *Sochineniia* (Oakland, California: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1996), 104.
  - 12 Malevich, Kazimir. *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Gileia, 1995)1, 26.
  - 13 P.D. Uspensky developed his theory of hyper-dimensionality in following two works: *The Fourth Dimension* (1909) and *Tertium Organum: The Key to Mysteries of the World* (1911)
  - 14 In 1913 Kruchenykh published his collection *Porosiata* [*Piglets*], where alongside his own poetry he placed poems by a 13 year-old girl named Zina V. (Zina Vi.A. Kruchenykh. *Porosiata*). In the following year he released a miscellany where the children’s stories were complimented by their own drawings. (*Sobstvennye rasskazy i risunki detei* [*Tales and Drawings by Children*]).
  - 15 Markov, Vladimir. *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 43.
  - 16 What is meant by “backwards” here is not the actual reading of the words from right to left, but, rather reading the sentences, or lines of the poems, in the reversed order.
  - 17 In his commentary on “Jabberwocky” Martin Gardner suggests that “there have been attempts to produce a more serious poetry of this sort - poems by the Dadaists, the Italian futurists, and Gertrude Stein, for example,” (*The Annotated Alice* 192). However, he does not provide examples or analysis of this connection, nor does he mention the Russian avant-garde. A fairly extensive literature on “Jabberwocky” has been produced over the last few decades. For example see: Flesher, Jacquelin. “The Language of Nonsense in *Alice*,”; Sewell, Elizabeth. *The Field of Nonsense*.
  - 18 Chesterton, G.K. “In Defense of Nonsense.” *The Defendant* (New York: Dodd, 1902), 46.

# Postscript

*The following essay first appeared in Knight Letter,  
the journal of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America,  
Volume II, Issue 11, Number 81 (Winter 2008).  
We include it here – in a slightly shortened form – as an example  
of how The Age of Alice touches writers today.*

## THE INVISIBLE TEACHER

By NANCY WILLARD

Every writer has his or her own way of learning to write. And there are two kinds of teachers. First, there are the visible teachers, who stand before us in the classroom, read our work, point out our strengths and weaknesses, and challenge us to write better. Second, there are the invisible teachers, those writers from whom we learn, quite unconsciously, what we may not use for years, until we need it. For me, that writer was Lewis Carroll. Before I tell you what he taught me, let me say a few words about how I happened to find him.

The rambling old house I grew up in was full of books, many of them left by the previous owner of the house, who had bought them to fill his empty shelves so that he would appear at least as well educated as his neighbors. Among the Victorian poetry anthologies with their pages still uncut and the beautifully bound sets of Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, I found a treatise on the human body written for the young, which claimed that all my bodily functions were governed by magic dwarves. One dwarf inhabited my liver, another lived in the chambers of my heart. If I had a stomach ache, I could be certain that the dwarf who occupied my intestines was throwing a tantrum. An illustration showed him scattering gumdrops and chocolates still wrapped in foil, like a maddened child.

It was on one of these bookshelves in our house that I first met Lewis

Carroll. I read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on a summer's day, when I was eight years old, curled up on our back porch in Ann Arbor, and I had just reached chapter four and was reading quietly to myself until I came to the following passage:

"Now tell me, Pat, what's that in the window?"

"Sure, it's an arm, yer honour!" (He pronounced it "arrum.")

"An arm, you goose! Who ever heard of one that size?

Why, it fills the whole window!"

"Sure, it does, yer honour: but it's an arm for all that."

"Well, it's got no business there, at any rate: go and take it away!"

There was a long silence after this, and Alice could only hear whispers now and then; such as "Sure, I don't like it, yer honour, at all, at all!" "Do as I tell you, you coward!" and at last she spread out her hand again and made another snatch in the air. This time there were *two* little shrieks, and more sounds of broken glass. "What a number of cucumber-frames there must be!" thought Alice. "I wonder what they'll do next! As for pulling me out of the window, I only wish they could! I'm sure *I* don't want to stay in here any longer!"

She waited for some time without hearing anything more: at last came a rumbling of little cart-wheels, and the sound of a good many voices all talking together: she made out the words: "Where's the other ladder?—Why, I hadn't to bring but one. Bill's got the other— Bill! Fetch it here, lad!—Here, put 'em up at this corner—No, tie 'em together first—they don't reach half high enough yet—Oh, they'll do well enough. Don't be particular—Here, Bill! Catch hold of this rope—Will the roof bear?—Mind that loose slate—Oh, it's coming down! Heads below!" (a loud crash)—"Now, who did that?—It was Bill, I fancy—Who's to go down the chimney?—Nay, *I* shan't! *You* do it!—*That* I won't, then!—Bill's got to go down—Here, Bill! The master says you've got to go down the chimney!"

"Oh! So Bill's got to come down the chimney, has he?" said Alice to herself. "Why, they seem to put everything upon Bill! I wouldn't be in Bill's place for a good deal; this fireplace is narrow, to be sure; but *I think* I can kick a little."

By this time I was laughing so hard that my mother came out to see if there was somebody with me. In all my reading of fantasy and fairy tales, never before had I come across a scene which included dialogue that was so strongly rooted in everyday speech. The speakers did not talk like characters in a fairy tale, they talked like real people. And only much later did I notice something even more remarkable: Carroll accurately reproduces the experience of hearing a group of people all talking at once.

Tenniel's illustrations give us the pleasure of seeing the characters. But what made them come alive on the page for me was their voices, including the conversations that Alice had with herself as she fell down the rabbit hole. Since both my sister and I often talked to ourselves after our mother put us to bed and turned off the light, this did not seem to me so much a literary device as a realistic one. So you might say that one of the first lessons my invisible teacher showed me was the power of dialogue to tell a story.

Long before I even knew what dialogue was, I was drawn to stories written in such a way that I felt a real person was speaking to me. Indeed, some of my favorite writers were also storytellers. You have only to look at the opening sentence of "The Snow Queen" to know that Hans Christian Andersen was accustomed to telling stories to a gathering of listeners that he did not necessarily know: "All right, we will start the story; when we come to the end we shall know more than we do now." In the notes he wrote on his own work, Andersen says, "I wanted the style to be such that the reader felt in the presence of the storyteller; therefore the spoken language had to be used. I wrote the stories for children, but older people ought to find them worth listening to."<sup>1</sup>

Carroll's audience was entirely different. He knew the children to whom he told the stories. These occasions were a private gathering, not a public event, and he did not feel the need to create the voice of a storyteller, and therefore when he includes remarks addressed to the listener, the tone he uses is far more intimate, suitable for a drawing room. Everyone will remember Alice's reflections as she falls down the rabbit hole. She rehearses what she might say to the first person she meets, and she tries to curtsy. "Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?" At this

point the author breaks into the narrative with a challenge for the reader: “... fancy, *curtseying* as you’re falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?”

Having read in the etiquette books about the importance of a well-executed curtsey, I felt great sympathy for Alice.

Carroll’s asides to the reader not only bring us into the circle of listeners but they also give Carroll the chance to tell us more about Alice than she can directly tell us herself. You remember her attempt, as she is swimming in the pool of tears, to enlist the aid of a mouse. “O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!”

Carroll follows this with an aside, which like so many of the remarks he addresses to the reader, opens with a parenthesis:

(Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen, in her brother’s Latin Grammar, “A mouse—of a mouse—to a mouse—a mouse— O mouse!”) The mouse looked at her rather inquisitively, and seemed to her to wink with one of its little eyes, but it said nothing.

Many years after I’d first read *AAIW*, I took a course in eighteenth-century literature, and found when I read the fiction of Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding that I was already very familiar with their technique of interrupting the narrative with asides to the reader. Lewis Carroll had taught me well. I did not realize until I grew up that what Carroll was really teaching me was the art of conversation as a storytelling device. In the opening sentence of *AAIW*, Alice’s response to her sister’s book makes its importance clear: “what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?” The old etiquette books in our house had a great deal to say on the subject of conversation, and indeed there was one book, *What to Talk About: The Clever Question*, entirely devoted to the subject. The preface described conversation as the art of drawing people together through a common interest in a variety of subjects. A good conversationalist does not talk excessively about himself.

Alice is especially conscious of this art whenever she encounters a stranger who has no regard for it, as in the opening of chapter five:

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice,

“Who are *you*?” asked the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Even less encouraging is Alice’s encounter with the White Queen in chapter five of *Through the Looking-Glass*. The White Queen has lost her shawl and Alice catches it and also catches sight of the Queen running through the woods. Alice goes to meet her with the shawl.

“I’m very glad I happened to be in the way,” Alice said, as she helped her to put on her shawl again. The White Queen only looked at her in a helpless frightened sort of way, and kept repeating something in a whisper to herself that sounded like “Bread-and-butter, bread-and-butter,” and Alice felt that if there was to be any conversation at all, she must manage it herself. So she began rather timidly: “Am I addressing the White Queen?”

“Well, yes, if you call that a-dressing,” the Queen said. “It isn’t my notion of the thing, at all.”

Alice thought it would never do to have an argument at the very beginning of their conversation, so she smiled and said, “If your Majesty will only tell me the right way to begin, I’ll do it as well as I can.”

In both the *Alice* books, the plot is not a series of events that keep us in suspense but rather Alice’s conversations with a cast of characters unlike any she—or the reader—has ever met. When the White Rabbit makes his appearance muttering, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” Carroll hints in a parenthetical comment that the story he’s about to tell might be a dream: “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.” And in *TTLG*, when Alice finds herself dancing around



in a ring with Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the narrative briefly fast-forwards to beyond the end of the story.

“But it certainly *was* funny,” (Alice said afterwards, when she was telling her sister the history of all this), “to find myself singing *‘Here we go round the mulberry bush.’* ”

The scene ends with a query about the etiquette of conversation. Tweedledum and Tweedledee have suddenly stopped dancing.

Then they let go of Alice’s hands, and stood looking at her for a minute: there was a rather awkward pause, as Alice didn’t know how to begin a conversation with people she had just been dancing with. “It would never do to say ‘How d’ye do?’ *now*,” she said to herself: “we seem to have got beyond that, somehow.”

Thanks to the ubiquitous presence of cell phones, we have all had the experience of eavesdropping on casual conversations. Lewis Carroll takes casual conversation to a new level, because his characters see conversation as a kind of game. They know the rules. Even when Alice is conversing with herself, she has a respect for facts and a curiosity that allows her to speculate on where she is and who she has become.

“I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen by this time?” she said aloud. “I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—” (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the schoolroom, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) “—yes, that’s about the right distance—but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I’ve got to?” (Alice had not the slightest idea of what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.)

Falling down the rabbit hole with no notion of where you will land would terrify all of us. There are plenty of fairy tales in which characters find themselves falling into underground chambers, and the sense of danger

is overwhelming. But two things defuse that fear here. The first is Alice's level-headed response to the dangers of the unknown. The second is the reassuring presence of the storyteller himself. We hear his voice in his asides to the reader, reminding us that he is in charge of these events. And we are not surprised when at last we read "suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over. Alice was not a bit hurt..."

What's remarkable about the *Alice* books is the number of alarming situations Carroll introduces and skillfully turns into events both curious and comic. When the Queen of Hearts shouts, "Off with their heads," the order is never carried out, because this is child's play. Alice knows this when she meets the Queen and says to herself, "Why, they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" The repeated image of games, whether croquet or chess or riddles, reminds us that the storyteller is in control here, not the Queen. But the Queen of Hearts is as mild as a kitten compared to the Jabberwock. We know that Tenniel's illustration of the Jabberwock was intended to be the frontispiece of the book, but Carroll had second thoughts about it. I quote from the letter he sent to about thirty mothers, soliciting their opinions:

I am sending you, with this, a print of the proposed frontispiece for *Through the Looking-glass*. It has been suggested to me that it is too terrible a monster, and likely to alarm nervous and imaginative children; and that at any rate we had better begin the book with a pleasanter subject. So I am submitting the question to a number of friends, for which purpose I have had copies of the frontispiece printed off.<sup>2</sup>

There are a number of ways Carroll creates a comfortable distance between his monster and those nervous and imaginative children. Take, for example, his vocabulary. The nonsense vocabulary of "Jabberwocky" does not impede the action, it protects us and diverts us from the gory details. Alice's response to the whiffling burbling fire-eyed Jabberwock and its demise is a model of common sense: "... *somebody* killed *something*: that's clear, at any rate—" Second, the monster exists only on the pages of the book Alice holds up to the mirror. It is not rampaging around the

garden of live flowers. Third, the Jabberwock has been tamed by the meter and stanzas of the poem in which he lives. If you can sing it, clap it, or recite it, you have conquered the Jabberwock.

One advantage of using conversation as a narrative device is the opportunity to include poetry. When Tweedledee entertains Alice with a recitation of “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” he is surely aware that the death of the oysters at the hands, paws, and jaws of the Walrus and the Carpenter is not a pleasant tale, but this aspect goes almost unnoticed when sung or recited in a poem. When my son was very young, we had a recording of *TTLG* read by Cyril Ritchard, and we played it so often that I could not get certain stanzas and phrases out of my head.

‘A loaf of bread,’ the Walrus said,  
‘Is what we chiefly need:  
Pepper and vinegar besides  
Are very good indeed—  
Now, if you’re ready, Oysters dear,  
We can begin to feed.’

When my son was little, I used to read aloud to him every night. And what did I read to him? The books I had loved as a child. If I had not reread the book since my own childhood, I would ask myself, before I read it to him, what scenes or characters I remembered. Later I would ask myself what scenes I’d forgotten. The scenes and characters I never forgot told me something about what makes a good children’s book. Since I have never stopped reading the *Alice* books, I have to ask myself the question differently. What scenes or chapters did you reread over and over when you were a child? That question is easy to answer: the third chapter in *TTLG*, called “Looking-Glass Insects.” The extended conversation between Alice and the Gnat raises a question that probably very few of us have ever thought to ask: Why do insects have names?

“What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where  
you come from?” the Gnat inquired.  
“I don’t *rejoice* in insects at all,” Alice explained,  
“because I’m rather afraid of them— at least the large kinds.  
But I can tell you the names of some of them.”

“Of course they answer to their names?” the Gnat remarked carelessly.

“I never knew them to do it.”

“What’s the use of their having names,” the Gnat said, “if they won’t answer to them?”

“No use to *them*,” said Alice, “but it’s useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?”

Learning the names of animals and flowers and stars was certainly familiar to me as a child. My father was a professor of chemistry with a strong interest in the natural world, especially butterflies, minerals, and fossils, and much of his pleasure came from identifying them. Because my father was a great deal older than my mother, and because my sister and I were born very late in his life, he did not relate easily to small children. One way I could get his attention was by sharing his passion for identifying things. Identifying a butterfly meant naming it. *Swallowtail*. *Monarch*. *Mourning Cloak*. *Painted Lady*. *Skipper*. Naming it did not help you to see or admire the butterfly, only to recognize it. But if you could identify it, you could begin to understand its place in the natural order of things.

So the question-and-answer conversation between Alice and the Gnat was familiar to me. Having warned Alice that further on in the wood things have no names (notice that he does not say lose their names), he urges her to “go on with your list of insects: you’re wasting time.” Alice names three common insects, but the Gnat’s description of their exotic equivalents in the Looking-glass world suggests that looking-glass insects were invented by human hands and are entirely dependent on human activities. Here is the conversation between Alice and the Gnat. (I have omitted the comments on what Alice is thinking):

Alice: Well, there’s the Horse-fly.

Gnat: All right. Half-way up that bush, you’ll see a Rocking-horse-fly, if you look. It’s made entirely of wood, and gets about by swinging itself from branch to branch.

Alice: What does it live on?

Gnat: Sap and sawdust. Go on with the list.

Alice: And there's the Dragon-fly.

Gnat: Look on the branch above your head, and there you'll find a Snap-dragon-fly. Its body is made of plum-pudding, its wings of holly-leaves, and its head is a raisin burning in brandy.

Alice: And what does it live on?

Gnat: Frumenty and mince-pie.

Alice: And then there's the Butterfly.

Gnat: Crawling at your feet, you may ob-serve a Bread-and-butter-fly. Its wings are thin slices of bread-and-butter, its body is a crust, and its head is a lump of sugar."

Alice: And what does it live on?

Gnat: Weak tea with cream in it.

The tone of this exchange is academic, rather like an oral exam. When I was a child, its impersonal scientific tone inspired me to make a little guide book to the fauna of the looking-glass world, in case I ever did find a way of getting there. In the meantime, I had a great longing to construct some of these insects so I could see them for myself. The bread and butter and tea and a lump of sugar would be easy to assemble, but the plum-pudding and holly and the raisin burning in brandy could only be had at Christmas, and I was pretty sure that frumenty, whatever that was, was not available in Ann Arbor.

Carroll locates the wood where things have no names not far from the tree under which the conversation with the gnat has taken place, and the description is brief: "it looked much darker than the last wood." Because Alice is fond of talking to herself, the reader sees through her eyes the experience of names disappearing. And here is how she describes it:

“Well, at any rate it’s a great comfort,” she said as she stepped under the trees, “after being so hot, to get into the—into the—into *what?*” she went on, rather surprised at not being able to think of the word. “I mean to get under the— under the—under *this*, you know!” putting her hand on the trunk of the tree. “What *does* it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it’s got no name—why, to be sure it hasn’t!”

Alice’s experience here is quite unlike the inability to remember a name that many older people experience. A name that slips from your memory is still there, and what can’t be immediately called up will eventually return. But entering the wood where things have no names is a different kind of loss. It is as if the air itself cannot hold the names. The wood has made all the inhabitants equal, and with their names erased, conventional ways of seeing each other have also vanished. As Carroll describes it, the human child and the fawn are walking in a kind of Eden, where the lion lies down with the lamb. It is Alice’s response to all this that hides the dark side of the woods.

Earlier I mentioned Carroll’s skill at walking a fine line between what might amuse children and what would almost certainly terrify them. It’s likely that many children would prefer to face the Jabberwock than find themselves lost and alone in a familiar place that has suddenly turned hostile. I discovered George Macdonald at about the same time I discovered Lewis Carroll, and will never forget the scene in *The Princess and the Goblin* in which the princess Irene loses her way in her own home. We are told that she opened a door which showed her

a curious old stair of worm-eaten oak, which looked as if never any one had set foot upon it. She had once before been up six steps, and that was sufficient reason, in such a day, for trying to find out what was at the top of it.

Up and up she ran—such a long way it seemed to her! until she came to the top of the third flight. There she found the landing was the end of a long passage. Into this she ran. It was full of doors on each side. There were so many of them that she did not care to open any, but ran on to the end, where she turned into

another passage, also full of doors. When she had turned twice more, and still saw doors and only doors about her, she began to get frightened. It was so silent! And all those doors must hide rooms with nobody in them! That was dreadful. Also the rain made a great trampling noise on the roof. She turned and started at full speed, her little footsteps echoing through the sounds of the rain—back for the stairs and her safe nursery. So she thought, but she had lost herself long ago. It doesn't follow that she *was* lost, because she had lost herself, though.

She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then began to be afraid. Very soon she was sure that she had lost the way back. Rooms everywhere, and no stair!... Nothing but passages and doors everywhere! She threw herself on the floor, and began to wail and cry.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, this scene has a good deal in common with the room at the bottom of the rabbit hole in which Alice finds herself.

... she jumped up on to her feet in a moment: she looked up, but it was all dark overhead: before her was another long passage, and the White Rabbit was still in sight, hurrying down it. There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned a corner, "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!" She was close behind it when she turned the corner, but the Rabbit was no longer to be seen: she found herself in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked, and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass: there was nothing on it but a tiny golden key, and Alice's first idea was that this might belong to one of the doors of the hall; but, alas! either the locks were too large, or the key was too small, but at any rate it would not open any of them. However, on the second time round, she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about

fifteen inches high: she tried the little golden key in the lock, and to her great delight it fitted!

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw.

The difference here is not so much in the details of place as in the reactions of the characters to their new surroundings. In Macdonald's story it is the emptiness and the silence which frighten the princess. She is, it seems, the only living thing in this place and there is no one who can help her. Alice's circumstances are more complicated. Having drunk the contents of the bottle she finds on the table, she shrinks to a height of ten inches and is unable to reach the golden key. Though she weeps with frustration, she pulls herself together. "Come, there's no use in crying like that!" said Alice to herself, rather sharply. "I advise you to leave off this minute."

What follows is a comment from the author, which interrupts the narrative and defuses the sense of isolation and helplessness:

She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people.

The underlying subject here is the power of play, both formal, as with cards and croquet, and make-believe, or pretending. It's Carroll's way of reminding the reader there is a way out, and Alice has already found it. She will find it again in the first chapter of *TTLG*, when, addressing herself to her cat, she wishes that she could get into the Looking-glass house.

"Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through—." She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how



she had got there. And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt way, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.

So far we've talked mostly about what I learned from Carroll about writing narrative. But teachers know that what our students learn from us is not always what we set out to teach them.

Now let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, when I was eight years old, I was afraid of the dark. My sister and I had identical mirrors in our bedrooms, which our mother had chosen for us. The mirrors were circular and so large that I could see almost, but not quite, my entire little bedroom in it. Alice's sentiments in *TTLG* were very close to mine when she remarked, "I can see all of it when I get upon a chair— all but the bit just behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see *that* bit!" I never paid much attention to the mirror during the day—after all, I didn't need a glass to tell me what I looked like. But at night the sweep of lights from passing cars seemed to light the reflected room from the inside. And I had heard stories of people who, looking into a mirror at night, saw not their own reflections but the faces of the dead. What better place for a ghost to dwell than that little bit of the looking-glass room I couldn't see?

My mother reminded me there were both good ghosts and scary ones. She often spoke of a night, the week after her own mother's funeral, she felt someone pulling the covers over her shoulder, and when she opened her eyes she saw the ghost of her mother standing at her bedside. She shook my father awake.

"Mother's in the room with us."

My father was a man of good sense.

"If it's your mother she won't hurt you. Go back to sleep."

The only person I could think of who knew about mirrors from the inside and could help me was Alice, who, unfortunately, was only a character in a story. This Alice was not a real person. Of course Lewis Carroll was a real person, but I didn't even know what he looked like.

But did that really matter? Hadn't he taught me that the way out was only the other side of the way in? Just before she jumped through the looking-glass, didn't Alice say, "Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it"? Let's pretend—Let's pretend—I knew those words long before I'd read *AAIW*. Those were the words I needed to make me believe that nothing in the mirror could harm me. Night after night, as I dropped off to sleep, how comforting it was to think of Lewis Carroll, standing in the bit of my looking-glass room hidden from view, forever invisible to me but present nevertheless, watching over me and keeping his eye on the dark.

## NOTES

- 1 *Hans Christian Andersen: The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, translated by Erik Christian Haugaard, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1974: "The Snow Queen," p. 234, and "Notes for My Fairy Tales and Stories," p. 1071.
- 2 Note 32 on Chapter 1, *Through the Looking-Glass*, in *The Annotated Alice*, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner, Forum Books, The World Publishing Company, 1960. (All quotations from the *Alice* books are taken from *The Annotated Alice*.)
- 3 *The Princess and the Goblin*, Strahan and Co, 1872, reprinted, David McKay Company, 1920, pp. 15-17.



# Exhibition Checklist

## CASE 1

Coleridge, Sara. *Phantasmion*. London: William Pickering, 1837.

Sinclair, Catherine. *Holiday House*. Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1839.

## CASE 2

Dickens, Charles. *The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells...*  
London: Chapman and Hall, 1845.

Lear, Edward. *The Book of Nonsense*. London: T. McLean, 1855.

## CASE 3

Ruskin, John. *The King of the Golden River*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1851.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The Rose and the Ring*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1855.

## CASE 4

Tucker, Charlotte Maria. *Wings and Stings*. London, New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1872.

Tucker, Charlotte Maria. *Fairy Frisket*. London, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1874.

## CASE 5

Meredith, George. *The Shaving of Shagpat*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1856.

MacLeod, Norman. "The Gold Thread." *Good Words for 1861*.

#### **CASE 6**

MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858.

MacDonald, George. *Dealings with the Fairies*. London: Alexander Strahan, 1867.

#### **CASE 7**

MacDonald, George. "At the Back of the North Wind," *Good Words for* 1868.

MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*. New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1871.

#### **CASE 8**

Rossetti, Christina. *Goblin Market*. London, Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1865.

Rossetti, Christina. *Speaking Likenesses*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1874.

#### **CASE 9**

Kingsley, Charles. "The Water Babies," *MacMillan's Magazine*, Aug 1862-Mar 1863.

#### **CASE 10**

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. London, New York: Macmillan and Co., 1886.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866.

#### **CASE 11**

Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking Glass*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1872.

Carroll, Lewis. *The Hunting of the Snark*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1876.

**CASE 12**

Ingelow, Jean. *Mopsa the Fairy*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869.

Craik, Dinah Maria Mulock. *Adventures of a Brownie*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1872.

**CASE 13**

Molesworth, Mary. *The Cuckoo Clock*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1877.

Molesworth, Mary. *The Tapestry Room*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1879.

**CASE 14**

Burnett, Frances Hodgson. "Behind the White Brick," *St. Nicholas*, 1879.

**CASE 15**

Anstey, F. *Vice Versa*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1882.

Anstey, F. "The Brass Bottle," *The Strand*, 1900.

**CASE 16**

Wilde, Oscar. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. London: David Nutt, 1888.

Wilde, Oscar. *A House of Pomegranates*. London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891.

**CASE 17**

Morris, William. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. London: Reeves and Turner, 1891.

Morris, William. *The Well at the World's End*, vols. 1 and 2. New York, London, Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896.

**CASE 18**

Kipling, Rudyard. *The Jungle Book*. London, New York: Macmillan and Co., 1894.

Kipling, Rudyard. *The Second Jungle Book*. London, New York: Macmillan and Co., 1895.

**CASE 19**

Lang, Andrew. *The Grey Fairy Book*. New York, London, Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900.

Lang, Andrew. *The Violet Fairy Book*. New York, London, Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901.

**CASE 20**

Nesbit, Edith. *Nine Unlikely Tales*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901.

Nesbit, Edith. "The Psammead, or the Gifts," *The Strand*, 1902.

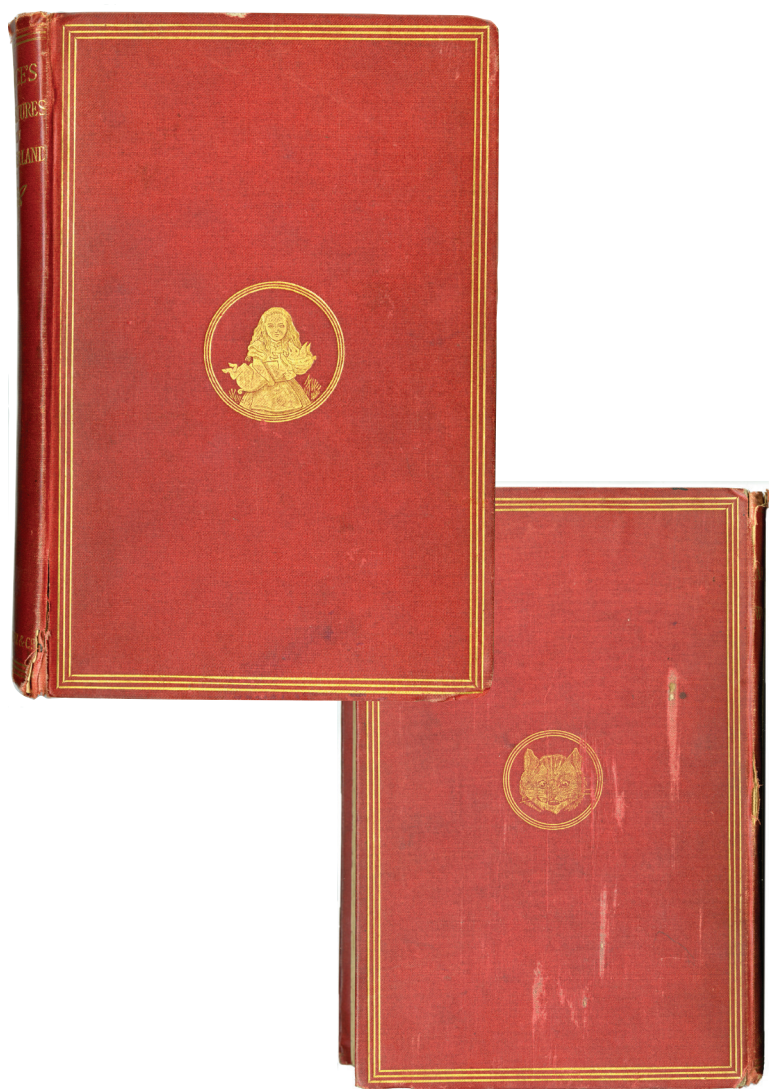
# Images

In this section are illustrations of items  
in the exhibition.

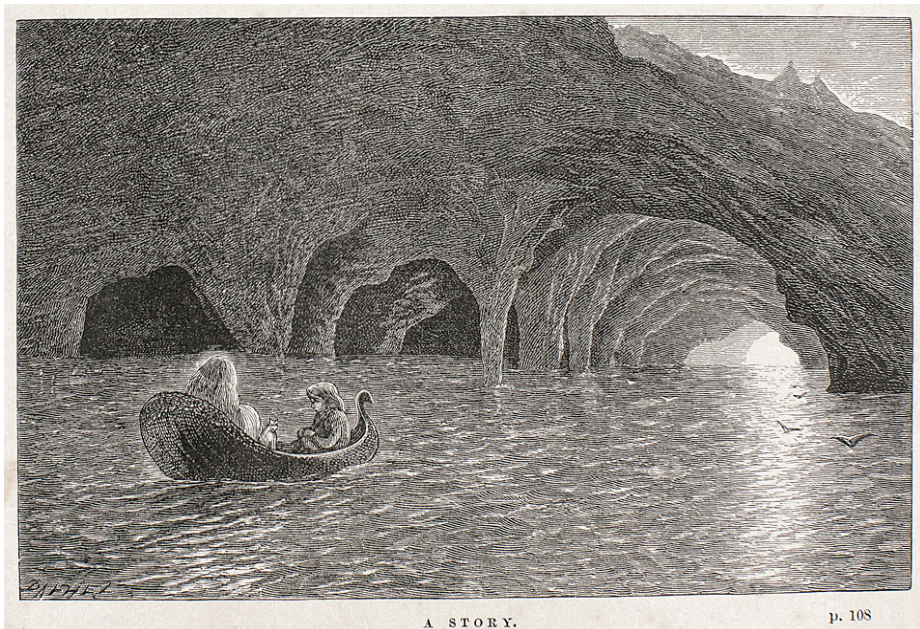


Lear, *The Book of Nonsense* (1855)





Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1866)



Ingelow, *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869)

it's not a clever one!  
Still, you're the right  
colour, and that goes  
a long way."



"I don't care about the colour," the Tiger-lily remarked. "If only her petals curled up a little more, she'd be all right."

Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*  
(illustrated by John Tenniel) (1872)

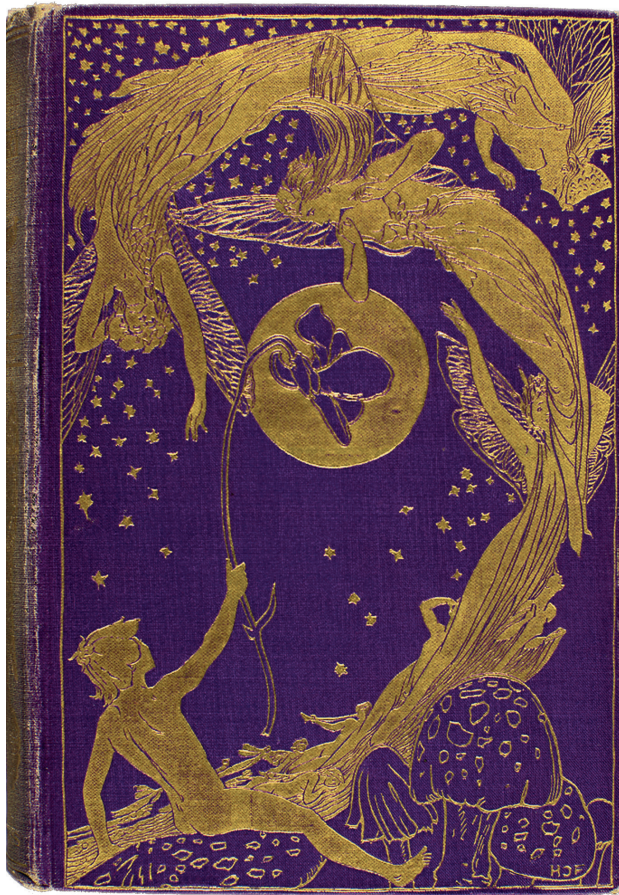




Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses* (illustrated by Arthur Hughes) (1874)



Carroll, *Hunting of the Snark*  
(illustrated by Henry Holiday) (1876)



Lang, *The Violet Fairy Bode* (1901)



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