

Hot air balloons
to Catch a B

To Catch a Bandersnatch¹

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There is a possession and a madness inspired by the Muses, which seizes upon a tender virgin soul, and, stirring it up to rapturous frenzy, adorns, in ode and other verse, the countless deeds of elder time for the instruction of after ages. But whosoever without the madness of the Muses comes to knock at the doors of poesy, from the conceit that haply by forced art he will become an efficient poet, departs with blasted hopes, and his poetry, the poetry of sense, fades into obscurity before the poetry of madness.

Plato, *Phaedrus*

I. Prelude: Alice in Hermeneutica

In a story called “The Book of Sand”, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges tells a story about a meeting between a dealer in rare books and an itinerant Bible salesman, who sells him a very old and worn volume of Holy Writ in an Arabic script. The peddler called it “The Book of Sand” because like the sands it was without beginning and without end and contained an infinite number of pages. One simply could never turn to the first page or the last and of those pages in the middle, no page which had once been seen could, after turning, ever be found again.

While Borges intended this as an allegory for all books, or perhaps more broadly, for the limitlessness of our search for knowledge, I often feel he may have been specifically referring to the *Alice* books² of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, *pseud.* Lewis Carroll.

It is doubtful if any two people have ever read quite the same version of these - I certainly never have. They are a constantly shifting, paradoxical mirror of an alien land, one that lays so close to ours as to share a surface (much as the sides of a cube share an edge) whose layers of meaning are revealed as we live, laugh, and grow wise. Upon every reading, at the very least some hitherto undiscovered phrase will leap from the page, rich in symbolism or suggestion. Sometimes the entire work will be seen in a new light.

¹ The title of this paper takes its name from the following dialog in *Through the Looking-Glass*, chapter 7: “But aren’t you going to run and help her?” Alice asked, very much surprised at his taking it so quietly. / ‘No use, no use!’ said the King. ‘She runs so fearfully quick. You might as well try to **catch** a Bandersnatch!’“. The dialog quoted in Part IV of this paper, which contains the phrase “to **stop** a Bandersnatch” occurs a bit earlier in that chapter. Various incarnations of this paper have alternated between the two phrases.

² I will conform to the unfortunate, but practical convention of binding two sometimes extremely dissimilar works, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* together as one opus upon occasion.

I should like to enumerate a representative few of the literally hundreds of existing interpretations³ of these works. Shane Leslie, in “Lewis Carroll and the Oxford Movement” finds the Looking-Glass a thinly disguised history of the religious controversies of Victorian England. William Empson, in “The Child as Swain”, sees the Pool of Tears as a satirical microcosm of Darwin’s evolutionary theories. Robert Sutherland’s “Language and Lewis Carroll” is full of “signification by morphemic identities” and such. Peter Heath’s marvelously annotated *Philosopher’s Alice* finds in them “surprising insights into abstract questions of philosophy”, and his notes prove these books contain elements of subjective nominalism, Calvinistic predetermination, and somehow the Duck ends up as “illogical positivist”. Thomas French, in *Alice in Acidland*, believes she is on a psychedelic trip. Phyllis Greenacre, among a host of psychoanalytic interpreters, thinks her eating the mushroom was “an act of oral aggression.” In Judith Bloomingdale’s “Alice as Anima”, we learn that her coronation was an “unconscious anticipation of Mary as Queen of Heaven”, and that the Duchess was the “Madonna ... in its most grotesque form.” However, my favorites so far are Dr. Abraham Ettleson’s *Alice In Wonderland: The Secret Language of Lewis Carroll Revealed* and *Through the Looking-Glass Decoded*, wherein he finds the book an elaborate code⁴ for the daily and holiday rituals of Orthodox Judaism.

Of course, everyone has a right to *think* about these interpretations, about as much right, as the Duchess reminds us, “as pigs have to fly,” but “explanations take such a dreadful amount of time”, and there is a fine line to be walked between the assumption that fantasy or myth implies deliberate allegory, and the knowledge that the very stature of these works as immortal splendors is based upon this very quality of enigma, of sand. Freudians will forever be seeing them through Viennese spectacles, Ecclesiastics through the inverted binoculars of the Church, and all of us will continue, as Joyce put it, to “Wipe your glosses with what you know.”

In reading these, one is most reminded of the Trial Scene at the end of Wonderland where the King manages to twist the ambiguous poem “They told me you had been to her ...” into a confession.

“Why, look you know, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery ...”

Shakespeare, “Hamlet”

³ The best collection of these is to be found in *Aspects of Alice*, edited by Robert Phillips.

⁴ E.g., if you read “Jabberwocky” in the Hebrew manner, from right to left, you get Ykcow rebbaj, or Rebbaj Ykcow, which of course is Rabbi Jacob. You couldn’t deny that if you tried with both hands.

II. A Meeting of the Minds

So let us ask the question: what makes *these* the Books of Sand? Why are they said to be the most quoted works outside of Shakespeare and the Bible? Simply this, that they are recognizable as exquisitely crafted artifacts of the “shared mind”, perhaps the first secular infusion into this world of literature of a certain type: the literature of the “collective unconscious”⁵ as Jung lovers would put it.

In current psychological jargon,⁶ we have two distinct “minds” which are located as mirror images on the left and right sides of our brains. The “left brain” is the mind of intellect, logic, sanity, Confucianism, social behavior. It is the coolness of Yin: literal, lineal, and analytic. The Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Its bright daylight surface might be symbolized by a **writing desk**.

The “right brain”, contrariwise, is the mind of intuition, insight, myth, dreams, fantasy, the imagination, Taoism. It is the warmth of Yang: metaphorical, simultaneous, and synthetic. Lewis Carroll. Its dark dreamy depths may be symbolized by a **raven**.

So *why is a raven like a writing desk?*

This is a world of paradox, but while the left brain sees irreconcilable opposites the right brain says, with **Whitman**,

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself.
I am large, I contain multitudes.*

It is the fugal interplay of these two hands of consciousness that determines our thoughts and behavior. One delineates the printing of musical scores, scales, acoustics, historical notes, instrument manufacture, and performance schedules. The other dreams/composes/plays/hears the *music*. While some like to pretend that only the left bank exists, in the daytime world of lawyers and business, and others live too far up on *Rive Droite* (dreamers, schizophrenics, artists), it is those in touch with *both sides*,⁷ drinking from the wellspring of inspiration in the company of an talented (mental) amanuensis, who are the truest contributors to humanity. What boating up the Isis was for Lewis Carroll, the after-years of patient toil were for Mr. Dodgson.

⁵ This terminology is, in this writer’s opinion, unfortunately backwards. The “unconscious” is infinitely deeper, richer, and potentially far more *aware* than the “conscious” mind, although its indexing and retrieval system is, characteristically, illogical. The “thinking” mind is more controlled in this manner, hence is called “conscious” which is, if you’ll excuse me, putting the *hors* before Descartes. I now propose, and will adhere to the term *Ur-conscious* (*Ger.* primal, ancient).

⁶ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes.

⁷ Just as the *left* side of our brain controls the *right* side of the body, there is a crossover in the terminology, as we associate *right* with the normal consciousness and moral order (righteous, right livelihood, dextrous), and *left* with the dark side (left-handed compliment, out in left field, sinister).

This “conscious” mind then, in the theories of Huxley,⁸ Bergson, and others is in the main a filter which conceals far more than it reveals.⁹ It is the Porlock of vast and infinite realms of the *Ur*-conscious.¹⁰

III. It’s Magic!

So where exactly then is, in Freud’s terminology, the “royal road to the subconscious”? It is not the province of this essay to deal with the plethora of psychological techniques and cults,¹¹ which proliferate around us which deal with “opening the sixth circuit” (Leary), “getting It” (est™, via Zen Buddhism), “snapping”, “finding Jesus”, or what have you. I am not particular as to terms, but I find the most convenient for the process “metaphor”,¹² and for the destination “magic”.

The term “magic” I employ not in its most grotesque sense, that of stage tricks and sleight-of-hand, though they *did* seem to amuse Mr. Carroll no end;¹³ nor even in the romantic sense of an inexplicable and wondrous quality of experience, though certainly the *Alice* books contain these elements (and in fact led to his downfall as a writer in his self-styled masterworks, the *Sylvie and Bruno* books); but Magic in its highest sense - the principle of metaphor, of synergy, of illumination, or, simply, that the whole *qualitatively* exceeds the sum of its parts. Language is infinitely richer than the sum of its words, as words are more than the sum of their letters. Subatomic idea-forces and probabilities become atomic; atomic realities molecular; molecular reactions chemical, then elemental; compounds are formed, leading to organic cells, tissues, organs: behold a man.

The whole exceed its parts. These books are twin looking-glasses facing each other, like those in old-time barber shops, in whose pages infinite levels, hidden and secret treasure troves of wisdom, are unveiled on each reading, while the aesthetic surface remains constant. This is *magic*, this is *metaphor*.

⁸ *The Doors of Perception*

⁹ Huxley quotes the admirably yclept philosopher C. D. Broad: “Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to *protect* us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.”

¹⁰ Coleridge affixed a note to “Kubla Khan” explaining that the vast bulk of it had not been transcribed because his dream had been interrupted by “a person on business from Porlock”.

¹¹ This essay was originally written in 1970, became a part of my senior thesis in 1972 (University of California at Santa Cruz), was rewritten in Marin County, California in 1979/80, edited in 1992, made HTML-compliant in 1996, and slightly revised in 2000.

¹² Aristotle defines metaphor as “midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace.”

¹³ *The Magic of Lewis Carroll* by John Fisher, 1973

"It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun.

Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet"

Not that they share sun-like qualities, rather that at this metaphoric level Juliet *is* the sun. It's not true, but it is Truth.

*"Our king holds all the Indies in his arms;
and more, and richer, when he strains that lady.*

Shakespeare, "Henry VIII"

IV. How I Wonder What You're At

*The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand:
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it would be grand!"*

The quality most common to all works of Magic is the quality of sand: elusiveness.

Meanings are dislocated - hidden in unexpected places, multiplied and split, given over to ambiguity, plurality, and uncertainty, the dream represents a decentered universe.

Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*

Elusiveness, whose *technique* is ambiguity.

"However, somebody killed something, that's clear at any rate."

Yes, dear Alice, prosaically clear, but hardly as immortal as what came whiffing through the tulgey wood.

And it certainly *did* seem a little provoking ("almost as if it happened on purpose," she thought) that, though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful rushes as the boat glided by, there was always a more lovely one that she couldn't reach.

Vladimir Nabokov, who was among the first translators of *Alice* into Russian (1923) among other things, spent his life collecting butterflies which, as anyone who has tried it knows, is an exquisite combination of pursuit, stealth, and seduction. This applies equally to butterflies of the species *Literatura* as *Lepidoptera*. Let us turn to **Borges** again:

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights and certain places - all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something: the immanence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.

These moments, *epiphanies*, contacts with the magic/metaphoric mind, the awareness of the billionfold potentialities *not* chosen in any moment - this is what is echoed in moments of linguistic ambiguity. The most magical of all occurrences are these breaks in the form: something that is true at one level of metaphor is suddenly seen in terms of another level. Communicational borders are crossed, context and content enter into the circle of confusion.¹⁴

“Would you - be good enough - “Alice panted out, after running a little further, “to stop a minute - just to get - one’s breath again?”

“I’m good enough,” the King said, “only I’m not strong enough. You see, a minute goes by so fearfully quick. You might as well try to stop a Bandersnatch.”

There is a feeling then, for both artist and his silent partner, the reader, that despite one’s best efforts, there will always be the implication of vast depths of the unwritten, the could-have-been-written.

His answer trickled through my head like water through a sieve.

This is at the core of most magical writings, and its symbol is most often the young girl.

Why is the most popular love story in the Western world, perhaps then by implication our society’s archetype of the perfect love, the story of a fourteen year old girl who spends a total of *one evening* with her Romeo? Ah, perfection. Ah, elusiveness ... To have grown old together in a respectable suburban neighborhood in Verona would hardly be the poignant allegory it is. Helen, the abducted bride, was twelve when she launched a thousand ships. Dante’s beloved Beatrice was but eight when he met her.

Nabokov uses Lolita, also twelve, a nymphet possessed in body but never in soul, as the corporeal symbol of this quest for the ungraspable. In the sandiest book of all time, the most linguistically playful, ambiguous, and multilevel book ever written, Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (below), the central story of this centerless book is a father’s implied voyeuristic escapades with his young daughter and her twin. And need we mention Madama Butterfly, fifteen, or even the Virgin Mary, who was fourteen when she bore her child?

¹⁴ a term borrowed from photography. A longer dissertation on this statement would be inappropriate here, but may I refer you to Gregory Bateson’s “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia” and Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.

So what are we “rejoicing” in? Stuff and Nonsense! Works of a powerful humor whose structural foundation is, if you’ll excuse the grandiosity, Truth. Freud’s discovery of the extent to which our “conscious” life is controlled by the *Ur*-conscious hints at the ineluctable importance of the role of language in this process. We have entered, by rabbit hole or looking-glass into the realm of magic, *a.k.a.* metaphor, inspiration, genius, imagination, humor. The tradition was brought to the secular world for the first time by Lewis Carroll who invoked, by innovative linguistics, this dark realm of Chaos and Old Night, and of splendors undreamed. This linguistic tradition was taken up in a series which includes such luminaries as Ezra Pound, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S.Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Mallarmé in France, but above all, James Joyce, and it is to him, and his debt to Carroll, that I would like to turn for a minute.

V. Joyce - Carroll Noates

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

Shakespeare, “Hamlet”

Alice’s fictional adventures in Wonderland took place on the 4th of May 1859, the corporeal Alice (Liddell)’s seventh birthday. Eighty years later, again on the 4th of May, 1939, a book was published simultaneously in England and America which stands in relation to post-Carrollian English as the “Alice” books to the Victorian. It was a feverishly overgrown tropical island whose dense oneiric jungle grew out of the winds of Wonderland which had once born aloft a seed called “Jabberwocky”. It was written in a language loosely based on English,¹⁵ and was called *Finnegans Wake*. It was immediately received as *glossolalia*, but as the years went by this work, while still enjoying only a tiny and cultish readership, is slowly becoming recognized as the greatest work¹⁶ of the twentieth century’s acknowledged master of English prose.

Joyce did not know of Carroll’s work until he was halfway through this “Work in Progress” as it was then known, although he had heard bits and pieces from friends. What he *did* read was *Sylvie and Bruno* and finally, years later, the *Alice* books.

It must have astonished Joyce, that avant-garde innovator, proud of his Irish nationality, contemptuous of the Church of England, and confident of his own originality, to find that he had been forestalled in so many of his discoveries by a mid-Victorian Englishman in minor Anglican orders.

¹⁵ “The Kink’s English”, of course

¹⁶ Not to diminish from the glories of *Ulysses*, but one *must* pay attention when the author of such a work, at the height of his creative powers, spends seventeen years to produce his next work, his *chef-d’oeuvre*. Public indifference and textual difficulties will, in time, be overcome and this first example of a new species of literature will come shining forth in a radiance all its own, the *sacred* text that Joyce intended. One simply does not compare the “Ode to Joy” with the *Quartet #131 in C# minor*.

James Atherton, in *The Books at the Wake* calls Carroll Joyce's "unforeseen precursor" in an essay from which the above was taken.

The surface of *Finnegans Wake* is a Jabberwock of gargantuan proportions. Its primary linguistic technique is the condensing and interweaving of two or more words into one, which was called the "portmanteau"¹⁷ by Carroll (after a kind of small suitcase). But Carroll's *enfant terrible* consisted of words such as "slithy", which Humpty Dumpty explained was composed of the words "lithe" and "slimy". If "slithy" could be packed into a portmanteau, it would take a steamer trunk to hold a self-referential construct of Joyce's like "astroglodynamologos".¹⁸

Joyce also discovered in Carroll such things as the attempt to portray the dream state by the drifting and merging of identities and personalities, and the multilayered use of language to reach the *Ur*-conscious: not only to describe it, but to *actively stimulate its use*.¹⁹ He finds in Alice another incarnation of the inspiration of the young girl Art being pursued by the stammering old Dodgson of its realization. A looking-glass twin as the symbol of self-reflection, self-absorption, self-referentiality. Humpty Dumpty as symbolic of the Cosmic Egg, and the Fall of man, and Isa Bowman, one of Carroll's child friends and the actress who brought Alice to the stage, are found therein, but it is the jabberwocky which is the most conspicuous feature of the *Wake*: at once the most crucial, rewarding, and difficult. These suitcases must be delicately and carefully packed.

The art of packing is the last lecture of wisdom.

James Stephens, *The Crock of Gold*

There must be a structural resemblance to ordinary words, for there is little art in simple concatenation. Rather, the meanings must be found in phonetic, morphological, etymological, and rhythmical resemblance. It is a technique of such power that the entire work can be summed up in a sentence:

...every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time: the travelling inkhorn (possibly pot), the hare and turtle pen and paper, the continually more and less intermisunderstanding minds of the anticollaborators, the as time went on as it will variously inflected,

¹⁷ In the Introduction to *The Hunting of the Snark*, Carroll talks of this technique in speculating that when Pistol had enquired "Under which King, Bezonian, speak or die?" and Bardolph had confused Richard and William, he would have said "Rilchiam". (Actually, he was speaking of the two Henrys - Henry the Fourth?)

¹⁸ From the sublime heavens of our aspirations (L. *astro*, star) to the bowels of our earthly cloaca (*troglydyte*, cave-dweller, from Gr. *troggle*, hole + *dyein*, to enter) the explosive (*dynamite*) patterns of change (*dynamics*) and energy (*dynamo*) of this *mono/dia-logue* portrays the Word (Gr. *logos*).

¹⁹ Joyce himself notices a "prophetic" quality to this work, as befits the *Ur*-conscious. Opening the *Wake* at "random" often produces the kinds of results usually associated with casting the *I Ching* or the Tarot.

*differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeable meaning vocable
scriptsigns. (11.21)²⁰*

or a single word “volupkabulary”.²¹ (419.12) *Finnegans Wake* has (thankfully) thusfar found no Humpty Dumpty to translate it into simple English.²²

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master - that’s all.”

We have all had the experience of taking a perfectly ordinary word and repeating it, *mantram*-like, until it has lost all meaning and becomes pure sound.²³ Joyce himself discouraged scholarly exegeses and believed, with the Duchess, that his readers should

“Take care of the sounds and the sense will take care of itself.”

The genius of this technique is that it places the reader in contact with the other “ineluctable modality”, the *Ur*-conscious, and even the most common of words are festooned with bouquets of associations.

An exercise, by way of example:

The original Alice, the girl to whom Carroll told his immortal tale, was the daughter of the Dean of Christ Church, Henry George Liddell, co-editor of the foremost Greek lexicon of his day. He named his child Alice, a name of unquestionably Greek derivation, although its exact source is unknown. Speculation runs through *alis*, “abundantly”; *aletheia*, “truth”; *alyso*, “to wander in mind” [akin to the Latin *hallucinor*]; *allistos*, inexorable; *allos*, another; *alastos*, unforgettable; *lithos*, “stone”; *lis* or *lisse*, “smooth”; *lussa*, “madness” [or *alussa*, “curing madness”]; or perhaps *alion*, “a land of wandering” (Wanderland?).

We may regard Carroll’s setting of *this* girl in these books as an “inexorable, unforgettable, smooth wandering in the mind - another madness - a Wanderland, abundant with the stone truth.” But I digress...

alis	ἄλις	abundantly
aletheia	ἀλήθεια	truth
alyso	ἀλύσσω	to wander in mind

²⁰ References from *Finnegans Wake* are by page and line numbers in the standard Viking edition, e.g., (11.21) is page 11 line 21.

²¹ A voluptuous looping kabalistic vocabulary.

²² An attempt has been published which puts a brief section into “Basic English”.

²³ If you have not had that particular experience, try Hamlet’s approach and repeat “words, words, words” thirty times.

allistos	ἄλλιστος	inexorable
allos	ἄλλος	another
alastos	ἄλαστος	unforgettable
lithos	λίθος	stone
lis / lisse	λῖς / λισσή	smooth
lussa	λύσσα	madness
alussa	ἄλύσσα	curing madness
alion	ἀλήϊον	a land of wandering

Phonetically related is the Latin *lux*, “light”, hence *Lucia*, Joyce’s young daughter who became quite mad; and *Lewis* himself. Taking all this into *consideration* (from the Latin *con* - with, *sideris* - stars) and never forgetting the *allure* of *elusive illusions*, rest here a moment, and (*alleluia!*) play the game (*L. lusus*) of *liaisons* and *scions*, mysteries *Eleusinian*, and take a simple commonplace word which, in this case, has the ouraboric quality of reflecting its meaning on itself and say it aloud; you will hear a few **allusions**:

allure	elusive	illusions
	Eleusinian	hallucination
Alice	Lucia	Lewis
allusions		
<i>lux</i>	<i>alleluia</i>	<i>lusus</i>
	liaisons	scions
	all loose shuns	
	all us Ions	

And now, dipped into the storm-tossed seas of the *Ur*-conscious, the retentive and stodgy notions of language are beginning to warp and to crack around the edges, and let a bit of daylight in. We must not set about in the first ecstasy of discovery to blast open all rules, and descend into chaos and gobbledygook. It is the unique genius of men like Carroll and Joyce to restrain, to structure, to contain. Humpty Dumpty always paid his words extra when he made them do a lot of work, and Alice “didn’t venture to ask what he paid them with” but the reading of *Finnegans Wake* leaves little doubt: his sight, his reputation, his sanity, and, finally, his life. But this is the destiny of Icarus, who caught the “air of a different world” and as the sun strikes the feathers which have fallen back to the ground at just the right angle, their iridescence reveals traces of the “fabulous artificers” who inspired the possibility of Flight.

All old Dadgerson’s dodges one conning one’s copying and that’s what wonderland’s wanderlad’ll flaunt to the fair (374.1)

*Though Wonderlawn’s lost us for ever. Alis, alas, she broke the glass!
Liddell lokker through the leafery, ours is mistery of pain. (270.19)*

Alicious, twinstreams twinestrained, through alluring glass (528.17)

For always down in Carolinas lovely Dinahs vaunt their view (226.2)

I am yam ... Dodgfather, Dodgson and Coo (481.35)

And there many have paused before that exposure of him by old Tom Quad, a flashback in which he sits sated, gowndabout, in clericalease habit, watching bland sol slithe dodgsomely into the nevermore, a globule of maugdleness about to corrugitate his mild dewed cheek and the tata of a tiny victorienne, Alys, pressed by his limper loser. (57.23)

And here “in the high places of Delude of Isreal” (331.18), we leave Shem the Penman/Shun the Punman in the midst of “jest jibberweek’s joke” (565.14) and return to the

...high white night. Whitest night mortal ever saw ... Lewd’s carol (501.28)

And if you will excuse an abrupt change in narrative, now that our terms have been defined, and all disclaimers as to meaning have been dutifully uttered, I should like to briefly retell, by way of example, how this one gentle reader has seen the various eggs of meanings successively disappearing from every shelf upon closer examination.

VI. Fugue: The Dream-rushes

“It shall be called Bottom’s dream, because it hath no bottom”

Shakespeare, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”

To begin, well, near the beginning anyway, my father is slightly mad. After all,

“I’m mad, you’re mad, we’re all mad here”

As a student in college he wrote two papers on Carroll comparing Alice’s world to those of Henry Ford and Aldous Huxley. My first contact with Wonderland, therefore, was as they were meant to be first encountered - read out loud, by an Elder, to a child. But let us leave this happy little lad and join a teenager setting out, with all the pharmacology of Western culture at his disposal, to rediscover Wonderland.

“Things flow so about here...”

Ah, the days spent “drifting down the stream/Lingering in the golden gleam”. The Cyril Ritchard records made the perfect companions to an eight hour trip “our wanderings to guide”. Each stage²⁴ was so clearly delineated. “Imperious Prima flashing forth ...”

The excursion into the preposterous sends one with renewed pleasure into the actual.

C. S. Lewis

But those drug references! Man, Mr. C. must have been some crazy head! The hookah-smoking caterpillar, the endless “Eat Me”s and “Drink Me”s among the magic mushrooms. The question had to be asked: could anyone *know so well* and not have indulged? Laudanum was freely available at the time, and of his contemporaries, Coleridge was into opium, Baudelaire and Dumas hashish. Was this really the “unforgettable, inexorably strange smooth wandering in the mind, abundant with the stone truth”? And what *did* happen during those two years missing from his diary?²⁵

I’m afraid we must leave such speculations up in the Smoky Mountains from which they emanated. A careful reading of his diaries, and the biographies of *Mssrs.* Collingwood and Green left it difficult to conjure up an image of the Reverend Dodgson “on the loose wig” after a hard day at Christ Church. I (reluctantly at first) concluded that the answer must lie elsewhere. Where was that little golden key?

About this time (early 70s now) the woods of Santa Cruz, wherein I was attending the University of California, were fairly teeming with Cosmic Consciousness. Gurus now replaced connections, meditation getting high, and harmonious holistic Insights into the Mysteries abounded.

It was to the Looking-glass I now turned in search of Meaning. It became the Quest Myth, a seven stage Voyage of Illumination to answer the Caterpillar’s “Who are you?” Alice (All us / All is) was the virgin soul, the eternal Seeker, and her ever-protean Teacher took on many forms but was often found in the Lotus Position

Humpty Dumpty was sitting, with his legs crossed like a Turk ... and, as his eyes were steadily fixed in the opposite direction ... he didn’t take the least notice of her ...

echoing in some detail his earlier incarnation as the Caterpillar

... with its arm folded ... taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else ...

²⁴ In *The Psychedelic Experience*, Dr. Leary’s paraphrasing of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, he identifies three stages of the voyage.

²⁵ And what, pray tell, is one to make of this, from Carroll’s “The Dynamics of a Parti-cle”: “Differentiating once, we get LSD, a function of great value.”? An idea of peculiar currency. “Put on the joint!”, “Remove the joint!” indeed.

Sometimes she was split into the Noble Left Hand Path (the contrary and paradoxical Red Queen) and the Noble Right Hand Path (the gentler White Queen, who traveled backwards in time). My speculations at the time turned, I confess, to such questions as “Could there be any symbolism to the corkscrew?”

“It’s more like a corkscrew than a path”

I mean, Humpty Dumpty woke the fish with one, and arrived at the Queen’s with one in his hand. Was it the Mystic Spiral? DNA’s helix?

I arranged an elaborate schema for fitting Wonderland into the Tarot deck, from the appearance of the Herald (the White Rabbit) corresponding to 0 - The Fool through the Trial (XX - Judgement), and the reawakening (XXI - The World). After all, didn’t she say “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!”?

VII. No Matter! Never Mind! No Mind! Never Matter!

(It) presents a surface so bizarre and irrational yet so colorful and striking, that some ... who approach it for the first time fail to make sense of it, while others, attracted by this surface, take it up in a purely frivolous and superficial spirit. Either response would be unfortunate.

If this seems like a criticism of the Alice books, it is not surprising, but it is actually from an introductory essay to some Zen Buddhist writings by **William Barrett**.

In my first venture into the realm of theses I set out, armed only with my fan and white kid gloves, to prove that Alice was really a derelict Canon of Zen Buddhism, full of *koans*, which are “exactly like a riddle with no answer”.

Zen is perhaps the most directly experiential form of Buddhism. It migrated from the humid jungles of Northern India (where it was known as *Dhyana*,²⁶ meditation), through the plains of China (where it was *ch’an*), and through the mountains of Japan (where it became *zazen*), and finally, often in the spirit described above, to the “eggheads”, “Beats”, and “hippies” in the West. **Dr. D.T. Suzuki** the most literate expositor of Zen today, describes it thusly:

Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature on one’s own being ... All the treatments, sometimes literary and sometimes physical, which are most liberally and kind-heartedly given by the masters to inquiring souls, are intended to give them back to the original state of freedom ... It is to be effected by meditating on these utterances that are directly poured out from the inner region undimmed by the intellect or the imagination ...

²⁶ Do I recall a cat by that name?

*When the cloud of ignorance disappears, the infinity of the heavens is manifested.*²⁷

These “utterances from the inner regions” are called *koans*, and their aim is to give a sudden understanding, insight, enlightenment or *satori* beyond normal consciousness. The parallels of method and aim between the Zen masters and their disciples, and those of the Wonderland are striking. Zen’s aimless aim is to “open the mind-flower” to become a

*Child of the pure unclouded brow
and dreaming eyes of wonder*

Zen demands insight into the problem of problems, the paradox that paradox exists, by denying *everything*, even itself, as real. Its methods, like those of the Wonderland characters, are apparently illogical, sarcastic, even cruel, and yet the treasure is a thousand times worth the perils of the journey. Suzuki places these *koans* into seven categories, as follows:

PARADOX

One day Subhuti, in a mood of sublime emptiness, was sitting under a tree. Flowers began to fall about him.

“We are praising you for your discourse on emptiness,” the gods whispered to him.

“But I have not spoken of emptiness,” said Subhuti.

“You have not spoken of emptiness, we have not heard emptiness,” responded the gods.

“This is the true emptiness.”

And blossoms showered upon Subhuti as rain.

GOING BEYOND THE OPPOSITES

One day four traveling monks appeared at the temple of Hogen and began to build a fire. While they were building the fire, they began arguing about subjectivity and objectivity.

Hogen asked: “There is a big stone. Do you

Alice went timidly up to the door, and knocked.

“There’s no sort of use in knocking, said the Footman, “and that for two reasons. First, because I’m on the same side of the door as you are: secondly, because they’re making such a noise inside, no one could possibly hear you.”

“There are no mice in the air, I’m afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that’s very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder.”

And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and

²⁷ *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, edited by William Barrett

consider it to be inside or outside your mind?"

A monk answered: "From the Buddhist viewpoint everything is an objectification of mind, so I would say that the stone is inside my mind."

"Your head must be very heavy," observed Hogen, "if you are carrying around a stone like that in your mind."

CONTRADICTION

A monk asked the sixth patriarch of Zen, "Who has attained to the secrets of Wobai?", Wobai being the mountain where the fifth patriarch resided.

The patriarch replied, "One who understands Buddhism has attained to the secrets of Wobai."

"Have you attained them?"

"No, I have not"

"How is it," asked the monk, "that you have not?"

"I do not understand Buddhism."

AFFIRMATION

A monk asked Joshu, "When the body crumbles all to pieces and returns to the dust, there eternally abides one thing. Of this I have been told, but where does this one thing abide?"

The master replied, "It is windy again this morning."

REPETITION

Hogen asked one of his disciples, "What do you understand by this: 'Let the difference be

went on saying to herself in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" and sometimes "Do bats eat cats?" for you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it.

"That's just what I complain of! You *should* have meant! Even a joke should have some meaning - and a child's more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn't deny that, even if you tried with both hands."

"I don't deny things with my hands," Alice objected.

"Nobody said you did," said the Red Queen". I said you couldn't if you tried

The Footman seemed to think this a good opportunity for repeating his remark, with variations. "I shall sit here," he said, "on and off, for days and days."

"But what am I to do?" asked Alice.

"Anything you like," said the Footman and began whistling.

"I'm afraid you've not had much practice in riding," she ventured to say, as she was helping

even a tenth of an inch, and it will grow as wide as heaven and earth.’?”

The disciple said, “Let the difference be even a tenth of an inch, and it will grow as wide as heaven and earth.”

Hogen, however, told him that such an answer would never do.

Said the disciple, “I cannot do otherwise, how do *you* understand this?”

The master at once replied, “Let the difference be even a tenth of an inch and it will grow as wide as heaven and earth.”

EXCLAMATION

A monk asked Joshu, a Chinese Zen master: “has a dog Buddha nature or not?”

Joshu answered, “Mu!”

[The symbol “Mu” is the negative which can be interpreted as a simple “no” to the question, a “no” to the entire metaquestion (that is, it neither has nor doesn’t have a Buddha nature), but it is usually thought of as just a sound, a bark, and the question is left open as to whether it was uttered by the Master, the Buddha, or the dog.]

SILENCE

A monk came to Shuzan and asked, “Please play me a tune on stringless harp.”

The master was quiet for some little while, and said, “Do you hear it?”

“No, I do not hear it.”

“Why,” said the master, “did you not ask louder?”

him up from his fifth tumble.

The knight looked very much surprised and a little offended at the remark. “What makes you say that?” he asked, as he scrambled back into the saddle, keeping hold of Alice’s hair with one hand, to save himself from falling over on the other side.

“Because people don’t fall off quite so often, when they’ve had much practice.” “I’ve had plenty of practice,” the Knight said very gravely: “plenty of practice!”

“How should I know?” said Alice, surprised at her own courage, “It’s no business of mine.”

The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, began screaming “Off with her head! Off with _”

“Nonsense!” said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent.

“Come back!” the Caterpillar called after her. “I’ve something important to say!”

This sounded promising, certainly. Alice turned and came back again.

“Keep your temper,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, swallowing down her anger as well as she could.

“No,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she

had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing. For some minutes it puffed away without speaking: but at last it unfolded its arms, took the hookah out of its mouth, and said “So you think you’re changed, do you?”

The aim of these koans is “understanding” - the realization that beyond the “gateless gate,” although everything is as it was (the shared surface again) everything is as different as possible. There is a saying attributed to **Seigen Ishin**:

Before a man studies Zen to him mountains are mountains, and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters.

This, of course, is the frame story of *Through the Looking-Glass*, the kitten becoming the Red Queen and then shaking/waking into the kitten again.

This problem of understanding is nowhere put more perfectly than by the White Knight, who explains

“You see,” I said to myself, “the only difficulty is with the feet: the head is high enough already. “Now, first I put my head on top of the gate - then the head’s high enough - then I stand on my head - then the feet are high enough, you see - then I’m over, you see.”

Under-standing. You see?

Perhaps the most succinct summary of Zen in all literature was put into evidence at the Alice’s trial.

*If I or she should chance to be
Involved in this affair
He trusts to you to set them free.
Exactly as we were.
My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.*

The fact that it is *evidence* is most important. If we are to believe the mystics and Zen masters, we are all asleep, and we must find ways to wake up. These “hints”, like those we find in dreams, that we *are*, in fact, asleep, build up until the evidence is overwhelming and we awaken.

*“Shadow of me! Which art not me but representest thyself to me as me;
here I may find a shadow of light which will devour thee, the shadow of
darkness.*

George Macdonald, *Phantastes*

VIII. WOOL AND WATER

In my next paper, in a Quixotic jab at Sufi metaphysics, I attempted to prove that Mr. Dodgson, an “enthusiastic member of the Psychological Society” according to his biographers, was deliberately weaving a Sufic tale akin to the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin.

Sufis, who are commonly thought to have arisen from mystical Moslem sects, though they consider themselves as the inner core of every religion, even the ancient, are called the “People of Mystery.” Their name derives from the Arabic word *Suf*, meaning *wool*, a reference perhaps to their dress, or perhaps to the cloud of obscurity in which their doctrines and teachings are transmitted.

Perhaps the most well known of Sufi allegorical verse is the “Rubayat of Omar Khayyam”, where he sings of divine, or God-realized intoxication, but, for the sake of the uninitiated, refers only to “*wine*”, and the pleasures of being “drunk”. They speak of the *ninety nine* names of God.

It seems to me then that Carroll left us a pretty direct clue in the verse

*Then fill up the glasses with treacle and ink
Or anything else that is pleasant to drink
Mix sand with the cider and wool with the wine
And welcome Queen Alice with ninety-times-nine*

Their path is one of the journey back to the Godhead. Most people begin this journey only out of dissatisfaction, with desperately wanting to believe in the divine on one hand, and seeing nothing but suffering, evil, and unfairness on the other.

*One thing was certain: that the white kitten had had nothing to do with it -
it was the black kitten's fault entirely.*

The journey back to this primal state of awakened consciousness has *seven* stages. Alice, who in Carroll's curiously evocative phrase “began to remember that she was a pawn”, takes a seven stage journey through the Looking-glass from Q2 to Q8 and awakens to find a golden crown on her head

“But how can it have gotten there without my knowing it?”

Although the Sufis often use wine as a metaphor for this state of grace, Mr. Carroll seems rather fond of soup. They speak of the “pearl of great price,” that there is no treasure upon earth that is not mere baubles and trinkets in the awesome and ineffable Reality.

“Who would not give all else for twop-
Ennyworth only of beautiful Soup.”

And it is into the soup the White Queen disappears in the final “chaosmos” of the Checkmate.

Ah yes, the Checkmate. In those final *gonzo* pages, when “all sorts of things happened in moment” and Alice rips away the veil of her previous realities by seizing the tablecloth, and giving a yank, her successive realizations that she was not a pawn, but a Queen; not a Queen, but a player of the game; not a player but the Dreamer, and to continue, as we close the book, not even the Dreamer, but really Lewis Carroll, dream of Mr. Dodgson - perhaps a perfect parable of the flowering stages of Enlightenment, the transformation of perspective as one awakens to higher dimensions of experience.²⁸

IX. Mathemagic

Dimensions. Let us not forget that Mr. Dodgson was a professional mathematician (as was your humble reporter). That Carroll was interested in dimensionality is borne witness by several books in his library, including Charles Hinton’s *The Fourth Dimension*. In a simple analogy, we have all had the experience of driving past a jumble of trees which suddenly, for one exquisite moment, line up in rows and the orchard is revealed. Even after the reversion to the apparent chaos, the revelation, the higher perspective, is forever ours.

To be mathematically precise...A point has **zero** dimensions, a line **one**, a plane **two**, a volume **three**, a hypervolume **four**, and so on. If you will excuse an anthropomorphism, just as a point realizes it is one end of a line, a line realizes it is the edge of a plane, infinitely and incomprehensibly vaster than its previous perception yet still the same, one has the feeling of *In-sight*, of the solution to the *koan*, of a quantum leap to another level of abstraction. The game of chess employed in *Looking-glass* provides a perfect example of dimensionality.

Chess is essentially a game of **one** dimension (*i.e.* opposing forces). It is played on a **two** dimensional surface, the board. The forces (called pieces) are either of **one** dimension

²⁸ In fact, the whole dream happened in a moment. Mystical experience seems to take place in a dimension of time perpendicular to our own (the *irrealis*). When Mohammed was led through the Heavens by Gabriel and given the *Quran*, the entire experience happened between the time he dropped a pitcher of water and the first drop could spill. It is interesting to note that Alice awoke as she was “catching hold of the little creature in the very act of jumping over a *bottle* which had just lighted upon the table.”

(the pawn, which moves only forward in a straight line);²⁹ **two** dimensions (Rooks, Bishops, Kings and Queens) which have two degrees of freedom, or directions of movement; and the piece which gives the game its intricacy and life, the **three**-dimensional Knight. It is three-dimensional in the sense that it can pass over another piece in its move, whereas two-dimensional pieces would be blocked. Carroll chooses *this* piece, the wayward and transcendent Knight as his self-image in the book.³⁰

I also at that time went into metaphysical questions of relative time (the Mad Hatter, the White Queen), relative motion (the Red Queen), and questions such as who exactly is dreaming whom (the Red King). And surely the Cheshire cat *must* have once belonged to Mr. Shroedinger.³¹

X. Eleison Wonderland

The Sufis say that all religions, at their heart, contain essentially the same truths and wisdom. I therefore reasoned that, as Mr. Dodgson was an Anglican minister his spirituality may have been purely mystic Christianity, the way of Merton, deChardin, and the Saints.

“Well, perhaps you haven’t found it so yet,” said Alice, “but when you have to turn into a chrysalis - you will some day, you know - and then after that into a butterfly ...

Turn into a Christ/Alice? This resulted in a 143 pages entitled “Christ, Myth, and Fantasy - a Study of the Oxford Christians” - the world of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and the seminal George MacDonald.

As you can imagine, the books were once again easily reshaped into a Christian mythos. From the questions of dualism posed by the splitting of the Godhead into Good and Evil (Dinah and the black and white kittens, becoming Humpty Dumpty and the black and red Queens) I went on to “prove” that the quintessential summary of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, his reception in Judea, and the gathering of the Gospels and the spread of early Christianity were to be found in Humpty’s poem “I sent a message to the fish,” the fish, of course, being an early Christian ikon.

It also went rather extensively into the realm of *Faerie*, which Carroll’s preface to *Sylvie and Bruno* commented on (including the “eerie” state, halfway between that world and

²⁹ Of course the pawn, when capturing, can move in the left-right direction, but never in the front-back direction until it becomes a Queen on the last rank.

³⁰ The move “castling” wherein two pieces pass *through* (not just around) each other, could only take place literally in a **four**-dimensional universe. Similarly, “*en passant*”.

³¹ Martin Gardner’s invaluable *Annotated Alice* contains rather extensive treatments of these subjects. And note some Joycean prophecy in *FW* 266.33: “I have heard this word used by **Martin** Halpin, and old **Gardener** from the glens of Antrim.”

this), and where it stood in relation to those other worlds which are so near to our familiar one - the subconscious, the astral, the symbolic. I shall spare you the grisly details, but would like to quote from **J. R. R. Tolkien's** "On Fairy Stories," as it is relevant:

Fairy stories are not, in normal English usage, stories about fairies or elves, but about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky, and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree, and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.

...The definition of a fairy story depends upon the nature of Faerie, the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country...Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible...Faerie itself may perhaps be most nearly be translated by Magic - but its magic is of a peculiar power and mood (It) is deep and high and is filled with many things: all manner of birds and beasts are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an everpresent peril; both sorrow and joy as sharp as swords. In that land a man may count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness make dumb the traveller who would report it. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates shut and the key be lost. The fairy gold too often turns to withered leaves when it is brought away. All that I ask is that you, knowing these things, will receive my withered leaves, as a token that my hand at least once held a little of the gold.

XI. Impenetrability! That's What I Say!

"Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased." I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

But since those salad days, as I stood deep in uffish thoughts, I have returned to the last refuge of the lover, the collecting of artifacts. In joining my father in this quest for ever more rare and interesting editions, translations, indexes, and memorabilia (ranging from original photography of Carroll to plastic Alice pencil sharpeners), I sometimes wonder for what it is we are really searching. Is it the first handwritten copy of *Alice's Adventures under Ground* to flow from the pen of Mr. Dodgson, or is even that only an *aide-mémoire* of a lovely afternoon on the Isis, and even that but a small point in eternity's bounty of the *Ur-conscious* mind? I am particularly a collector of illustrators, for what *is* the use of a book without pictures of conversations? We also devote a certain

amount of time to the Lewis Carroll Society (and, for a decade, to the West Coast Chapter) in order to meet fellow beachcombers along “such quantities of sand”.

But always, faithfully, I return to the “Liddell with no answer,” holding a few more withered leaves. The wind has shifted once too often for me to know a hawk from a handsaw. *Alice* has been analyzed, satirized, inspected, dissected, gleaned, weaned, picked, pocked, rotated, quotated, and made to fit into more square holes than you could shake a spear at. She has been Kinboted now for five generations. I am guilty, too, dear, and will say no more.

*Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies,
Never seen by waking eyes.*
