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## LOGIC AND LANGUAGE IN "THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS"

PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS \*

**E**VEN the most hardy opponents of whimsy, those who resolutely refuse to succumb to the charm of Pogo or Winnie-the-Pooh, have frequently yielded to the appeal of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Of all books intended for children, *Through the Looking Glass* and *Alice in Wonderland* are probably the ones most read by adults with enjoyment. And though the charm of the Looking Glass world, by its very profundity and complexity, remains undefinable, certainly one of its many sources of appeal for adults, and perhaps the one with most far-reaching significance, is the special attitude toward language which the book presents, an attitude brilliantly used as a weapon of social commentary. Through what appears to be mere verbal play, Carroll succeeds in suggesting that the apparent chaos of the dream world is less disorderly than the lack of discipline in the real world, that the problem of appearance and reality has to do with value as well as perception.

In a review of a collection of French folk tales, W. H. Auden once remarked that characters in fairy tales are subject always to certain laws, despite the fact that their world is an emphatically unreal one. One of the two areas he mentions in which such laws inevitably operate is that of language: even the fairy tale universe does not escape the rigorous logic of language. Auden is speaking, of course, of the folk tale, and *Through the Looking Glass* is an extremely sophisticated

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example of the "literary" as opposed to the "folk" fairy tale. Yet in it, too, in a world consciously upside down and backwards, the logic of language holds sway—if to very different purpose from that of the folk tale.

THE EXAMPLE quoted by Auden may help to clarify the point. "We can lie in language," he observes, "and manipulate the world as we wish, but the lie must make sense as a grammatical proposition." Then he quotes from an unnamed fairy tale:

"What are you doing there, good woman?" he asked.

"I'd like to take some sunshine home, a whole wheelbarrowful, but it's difficult, for as soon as I get it in the shade it vanishes."

"What do you want a wheelbarrowful of sunshine for?"

"It's to warm my little boy who is at home half dead from cold."

The logic here is that of the real world; its appearance in the fairy tale serves to confirm our faith in the sanity of our own environment.

But quite the reverse is true in *Through the Looking Glass*, where rigid conformity to the logical demands of language suggests rather a sense of insanity in the ordinary world. Most commentators on Carroll have assumed the opposite: that the insanity is in the Looking Glass world, not in our own. D. H. Monro, for example, in *Argument of Laughter*, remarks that Carroll's technique is "to take some well-worn, trite form of words, and explore it for unexpected and impossible meanings. The method is precisely the method of serious intellectual endeavour—of logic or mathematics. But the object is different. We are no longer concerned to find truth and order and new meaning. We are looking for fantasy and disorder and nonsense."

Only in the shallowest sense, however, does the trip through the Looking Glass reveal disorder and nonsense. Carroll's world of fantasy is most profoundly, in its semantic aspects at least, the sort of world for which such a logician

as Charles Dodgson might yearn: a world of truth and order. That it *seems* disorderly is a condemnation of the ordinary sloppy thinking of the reader and the sloppy traditions of his language; the apparent disorder concealing deep logic is an effective satiric weapon. But let us look at some examples.

At the very beginning of Alice's adventures, she finds herself in a garden full of talking flowers. She asks if they are not frightened at being out there alone, and the rose replies that there's the tree in the middle to protect them.

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

"It could bark," said the Rose.

"It says 'Bough-wough,'" cried a Daisy: "that's why its branches are called boughs!"

A little later, Alice comments that she has never before known flowers to talk. She is instructed to feel the ground, discovers that it is very hard, and is told that usually gardeners make the beds too soft, so that the flowers are always asleep.

PERFECTLY simple puns, these, but puns with a purpose, puns which immediately establish a context. In the actual world, no real relation exists between the bark of a dog and the bark of a tree, and flowers in hard ground are as speechless as flowers in soft. In the topsy-turvy world behind the Looking Glass, on the other hand, there is far more regard for the import of words: their meaning cannot be evaded simply by making distinctions between "bow-wow" and "bough-wough." And the unavoidable suggestion is that our everyday use of language is largely arbitrary and unaccountable.

The same sort of pun continues throughout the book, with ever deepening effect. The Rocking-horse-fly is made of wood and gets about by swinging itself from branch to branch; the Bread-and-butterfly consists of thin slices of bread and butter, a crust, and a lump of sugar, and lives on weak tea with cream in it. But how is the more common horsefly like a horse, the butterfly related to butter? In the Looking Glass world, jam every other day means never jam today—for "to-day isn't any

*other* day, you know." Alice, who sees nobody on the road, is vastly admired by the White King: accustomed to a more severely logical world than hers, he can only see somebody. The Frog can't understand why anyone should answer the door unless it has been asking something; he admonishes Alice for knocking at it: "Wexes it, you know." Alice, become a queen, is rebuked for attempting to slice a leg of mutton after she has been presented to it: "It isn't etiquette to cut anyone you've been introduced to."

All of this is extremely confusing for Alice, as confusing as dreams usually are. Yet the confusion is really a product of her own initial commitment to the ordinary world: she, not her Looking Glass interlocutors, is actually illogical. And to the extent that readers participate in the sense of dream-chaos, the joke is on them—for the apparent illogic of the dream world comes actually from a profound absence of chaos.

THE SIGNIFICANCE of language and its demands is emphasized also in other ways. Principal spokesman, of course, is Humpty Dumpty, who has before now been quoted in serious articles on semantics. "There's glory for you!" he observes, and Alice fails to understand—as well she might.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"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."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the

proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what *I* say!"

Nonsense? In a modern classic of semantics, *The Meaning of Meaning*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards examine the usage of several noted modern philosophers with regard to the word "meaning." This is their conclusion: "In spite of a tacit assumption that the term is sufficiently understood, no principle governs its usage, nor does any technique exist whereby confusion may be avoided." Yet the most elementary principle of semantics is that agreement about the use of signs rather than the signs themselves enables us to communicate. With Humpty Dumpty's method of dealing with words, chaos is come again. For the severe social discipline of language suggested by the puns previously noted, he substitutes an altogether solipsistic discipline—but Ogden and Richards stand as eloquent witnesses to the prevalence of solipsism in the usage of the real world. Again, the Looking Glass world has the logical advantage: if Humpty Dumpty's technique would end by making communication impossible, at least he is clear-sighted enough to know what he is doing. In our world, failures of communication from similar causes are frequently complicated by our unwillingness to recognize high-handed dealings with language.

IN HIS interpretation of "Jabberwocky," on the other hand, Humpty Dumpty shows that the satirist can find a target also in the effort to insist upon exactness. The poem itself, of course, is presented for Alice's mystification in the opening pages of the book. "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas," she says—"only I don't exactly know what they are!" Humpty Dumpty has no such problem. When Alice asks him for an interpretation of the first stanza, he finds no difficulty attaching precise meanings to each word: "Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle." But his interpretation—reducing the splendid stanza to an account of animals resembling badgers, lizards, and corkscrews, going through various gya-

tions in the plot of land around a sundial during the part of the afternoon when one begins broiling things for dinner—destroys the poem. One can hardly think of these grotesque animals and their sundial while appreciating the masterful narrative poetry of "Jabberwocky": it is an interpretation forgotten as soon as it is read. Surely, the filling of the head with cloudy ideas is a higher poetic achievement than the reduction of these ideas to the ridiculous. Alice asks for no more interpretations from Humpty Dumpty, and when he recites to her his own poem, a creation devoid of difficult words or leaps of imagination, it seems to her greater nonsense than the other: she doesn't know what it means, either, but it doesn't fill her head with ideas.

But the ultimate point of Humpty Dumpty's method with language is the same as the point of the gnat's exposition of Looking Glass insect life. In both cases, the central revelation is the same: that language, the symbolic representation of experience, has power of its own. Thus anthropologists find that primitive magic depends upon an equation between the *names* of things and their souls, and semanticists learn that a shift of words in a crucial context equals a shift of emotion. Alice's adventures are an educative process, but even after her encounter with Humpty Dumpty, she never becomes quite wary enough. She is unprepared for the vagaries of the White Knight, who reveals to her that what the name of a song is called, the name of the song itself, what the song is called, and what the song really *is*, can all be different. She is accustomed to a world in which language is used more loosely: it is never used loosely in Looking Glass Land.

**A**ND INDEED the Word has power: this truth is demonstrated repeatedly. A case in point is the wood where things have no names. The Red Queen's final injunction to Alice has been, "remember who you are!" In the mysterious wood, Alice forgets. The result is that she becomes effectively different. She walks through the forest with her arm around the neck of a fawn, which also has forgotten its name and nature. When names return to the two, on the further edge

of the wood, their friendly relationship is destroyed: the fawn darts away in fear, once he has attached appropriate labels to himself and his companion. Toward the end of the book, the White Queen relates the story of a thunderstorm which frightened her so much she couldn't remember her own name. Alice reflects, "I never should *try* to remember my name in the middle of an accident! Where would be the use of it?" But the White Queen is wiser than she; Alice should have learned by this time the high potency of names. As Pythagoras said, "The wisest of all things is Number, and next to this the Name-Giver."

Even the use of nursery rhymes here, so different from anything in *Alice in Wonderland*, is a demonstration of the force of language. The existence of the rhymes itself seems to determine the course of the action related to them: again, a dictum of Ogden and Richards is supported—that "the power of words is the most conservative force in our life." It is the power of words that eliminates the possibility of change from the Looking Glass world: actions are by words eternally fixed, and no deviation from them is conceivable. Tweedledum and Tweedledee fight over their rattle not because they want to—quite the contrary—but because, in effect, the rhyme says they do, and therefore they must. They are forced on by a special sort of fate, the sort most appropriate to a work so largely dominated by preoccupation with language. This sense of fatality caused by the existence of a certain set of words is even stronger in the case of Humpty Dumpty, whose pompousness has an undertone of pathos because of the inevitability of his fall. In his case, the relation between rhyme and actuality is more pointed, as he brags about the fact that if he should fall, the king will send all his horses and men to pick him up. The humorist is here exploiting his special equivalent of tragic irony. So, too, with the King's Messenger, Haigha, words determine, in a simple and direct sense, events. Alice plays the children's game, "I love my love with an H," with his name; she feeds him with Ham-sandwiches and Hay. When Haigha arrives, the King feels faint; his messenger opens the bag hanging around his neck, hands the King a



ham sandwich, and then reports there is nothing left but hay. Alice has exercised no prescience; the words have created the event. And when we hear of the Lion and the Unicorn fighting for the crown, we know with complete sureness that the action will continue through white bread and brown, plum cakes, and drumming out of town: nothing else can possibly happen, because the Word on the subject already exists.

SO IT SEEMS apparent that language is a theme underlying virtually all the episodes of *Through the Looking Glass*. Through four main devices Lewis Carroll makes his points about language: through the punning which demonstrates the looseness with which words are ordinarily used; through the personal discipline imposed on language by Humpty Dumpty and, less extensively, by the White Knight; through the emphasis on the importance of names; and through the convention that existent sets of words can determine patterns of events. The attitudes thus communicated add a special emphasis to the more obvious motif of the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality.

This problem of appearance and reality is, of course, implicit or explicit in all dream narratives: if the action of the dream seems true, it implies the question of whether it is not essentially as true as the more solid waking world. In *Through the Looking Glass*, the problem is certainly explicit. Tweedledum and Tweedledee show Alice the Red King asleep under a tree, and tell her that he is dreaming of her:

"And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"

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

"Not you!" Tweedledum retorted contemptuously.

"You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

"If that there King was to wake," added Tweedledum, "you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!"

The discussion continues, until Alice is reduced to tears by the repeated insistence that she is not real, only to be told, "You won't make yourself a bit realler by crying," and, a bit

later, that she is not weeping real tears. The final question of the book is "who it was that dreamed it all," Alice or the Red King. "He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!" And the narrative proper is followed by a sentimental poem, which ends, "Life, what is it but a dream?"

The question of who is real, Alice or the Red King, which is real, the everyday world or the dream world, is given added intensity by the special attitude toward language so closely involved in the narrative. For the dream world is, as I have tried to show, a world which has as a dominant characteristic a high regard for the demands of language, a world in which language is taken seriously. It seems, to this extent, closer to the realm of absolute truth than the existence from which Alice escapes. If, in other words, it is not actually truer than the other world, it, in a sense, should be; by being more logical, it *seems* more true. Alice, loyal in essence to her ordinary life, although unfailingly courteous to representatives of the world behind the Looking Glass, still has her doubts about the reality of the realm of her values; and these doubts are communicated to the reader. The questions raised by what most critics call Carroll's "word-play" are the questions of modern philosophers. A. J. Ayer, for example, speaks of "the naive assumption that definite descriptive phrases are demonstrative symbols"—that words have *essential* meanings rather than arbitrary ones. And Ogden and Richards carry the matter farther: "No important question of verbal usage can be considered without raising questions as to the rank or level and the truth or falsity of the actual references which may employ them." But Carroll has antedated all three: the question of meaning and the question of value are the very crux of the dealings with language in *Through the Looking Glass*.

FOR THE SATIRIST'S foundation, inasmuch as he concerns himself with language here, is not—like Pope's, for example—in the socially accepted values of his time, or, like Byron's, in personal standards. The play with words, playful

though it is, depends for its satiric effect on the assumed existence of some realm of absolutes, in which there is a real equation between a truth and its symbolic expression. The Looking Glass world is far from this realm of absolutes, but not so far as the "real" world, where play with language is not so free, and where we too often fail to recognize the possibility that there may indeed be a significant difference between what a song is called and what it really is. As Swift, in his discussion of Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, sheds doubts on man's claim to be a rational animal, so Carroll, with none of Swift's venom but with equally high standards, suggests in *Through the Looking Glass* the dubiety of the assumption that human communication is logical and accurate. Both men are concerned with modes of human action; Carroll's special genius, perhaps, lies in his ability to disguise charmingly the seriousness of his concern, to make the most playful quality of his work at the same time its didactic crux.

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### ROLE

Shed self. Assume this other being  
 And act for him his conflicts and unease.  
 But know the play  
 And be forewarned this will be no pretence,  
 That what you set aside is outer seeming;  
 Who loses or finds peace  
 Is you: before you leave behind your sure defense  
 Be certain that you want to walk this stage.

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