

**“WONDERLAND’S WANDERLAD”:  
JAMES JOYCE’S DEBT TO VICTORIAN NONSENSE LITERATURE**

Aingeal Mary Aisling Clare

PhD

Department of English  
University of York  
September 2011

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the literary relationship between James Joyce and Victorian nonsense, particularly Lewis Carroll. Tracing the defining characteristics of literary nonsense beyond the Victorian period, it aims to assess what we mean by 'literary nonsense', and to evaluate the terms of Joyce's nonsense inheritance. The thesis is divided into four chapters:

Chapter One: "A letters from a person to a place about a thing": The Nonsense Letter.' This chapter looks at central nonsense themes of miscommunication, the (mis)construction of meaning, textual play, and the inadequacies and absurdities of epistolary conventions. My research draws on personal letters from Joyce, Carroll, and Edward Lear, as well as examining the relationship between fictional letters and their host texts, and delivering a detailed analysis of the *Finnegans Wake* letter in its various guises.

Chapter Two: "Mocked majesty": Games and Authority.' This chapter explores the various forms of authority in nonsense, from autocratic monarchs to omniscient authors, and from the parental or pedagogic authority of adults over children to the rigid and unspoken rules of children's games and discourses. The various species of games we find in the work of both Carroll and Joyce are analysed, from the tightly ordered playworlds of chess, cards, and games with logic and language, to the rough-and-tumble hijinks of the *Finnegans Wake* children's twilight street games.

Chapter Three: "Jest jibberweek's joke": Comic Nonsense.' This chapter begins by exploring the Kantian model of incongruous humour we find in the nonsense double act, examining how both Joyce and Carroll emphasise and exploit the double nature of the joke, using it to generate the vaudevillean dialogues and comic contrasts between the many 'collateral and incompatible' pseudocouples who populate the nonsense terrain. It goes on to address the dark underbelly of the comic, identifying a Hobbesian meanness at the heart of nonsense humour. A treatise on the bad pun concludes the chapter, moving from Carroll's portmanteau words to the pun-infatuated jokescape of *Finnegans Wake*.

Chapter Four: 'Nonsense and the Fall.' This chapter offers a unique reading of literary nonsense as a philosophical answer to the Fall. Nonsense texts betray an almost morbid obsession with falling; literal and symbolic falls are a central theme of both the

*Wake* and the *Alice* books, and falls into language, madness, chaos, and forbidden knowledge are staples of the nonsense condition. Ontological crisis and semantic collapse are among this chapter's themes, as it investigates why it is a general and necessary condition of literary nonsense to be always hovering on the edge of the abyss, and forever toying with its own destruction.

## CONTENTS

Introduction	09
1 “A letters from a person to a place about a thing”: The Nonsense Letter.	14
2 “Mocked majesty”: Games and Authority.	48
3 “Jest jibberweek’s joke”: Comic Nonsense.	82
4 Nonsense and the Fall	120
Bibliography	150

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am pleased to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to my supervisor, Derek Attridge, who offered much-needed encouragement and support throughout the gestation of this thesis, and whose intelligence and perceptiveness as a reader is matched only by his patience as a supervisor. I also thank Vicki Mahaffey, who supervised the first year of my PhD, and whose positive influence was felt long after her departure, and Hugh Haughton, who read my early drafts with such thoughtfulness and care.

I acknowledge and thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding my PhD, and those who awarded me the scholarships that allowed me to attend international conferences. Thanks in particular go to the International James Joyce Foundation; University College, Dublin; and the Trieste Joyce Summer School.

I would like to thank my friends, in particular Percy, Sam, Richard Barlow, Paul Fagan, and Justin Quinn, for always reminding me of the Joycean adage '*In risu veritas*'. Lastly and importantly, I thank David Wheatley, to whom this thesis is dedicated with love.

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- AP James Joyce, 1965 (1916). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin.
- CLC Lewis Carroll (ed. Alexander Woolcott), 1999 (1939). *The Complete Lewis Carroll*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions. Only page numbers are cited, as the pages are continuous across all three volumes.
- CNV Edward Lear (ed. Vivian Noakes), 2002. *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*. London: Penguin.
- Cohen Morton N. Cohen, 1995. *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*. London: Macmillan.
- Collingwood Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, 1898. *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- D James Joyce, 1974 (1914). *Dubliners*. London: Penguin.
- Ellmann Richard Ellmann, 1982 (1959). *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FW James Joyce, 1992 (1939). *Finnegans Wake*. London: Penguin.
- Gardner Lewis Carroll (ed. Martin Gardner), 2001 (1960). *The Annotated Alice*. London: Penguin.
- Haughton Lewis Carroll (ed. Hugh Haughton), 1998. *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and 'Through the Looking-glass'*. London: Penguin.
- L James Joyce (ed. Stuart Gilbert), 1957. *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.I. London: Faber and Faber.
- LII James Joyce (ed. Richard Ellmann), 1966. *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.II. London: Faber and Faber.
- LIII James Joyce (ed. Richard Ellmann), 1966. *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.III. London: Faber and Faber.
- LLC Lewis Carroll (ed. Morton N. Cohen), 1979. *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Oxford University Press. Only page numbers are cited, as the pages are continuous across both volumes.
- SLEL Edward Lear (ed. Vivien Noakes), 1990. *Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SLJ James Joyce (ed. Richard Ellmann), 1992 (1975). *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. London: Faber and Faber.

- SLLC Lewis Carroll (ed. Morton N. Cohen), 1982. *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- U James Joyce (ed. Jeri Johnson), 1998 (1922). *Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



## INTRODUCTION

Always sensitive to others' opinions of his work, James Joyce reported in a letter some of the responses he had received from readers of his *Work in Progress*, the ever-expanding draft of what would eventually be published as *Finnegans Wake*:

Another (or rather many) says he is imitating Lewis Carroll. I never read him until Mrs. Nutting gave me a book, not *Alice*, a few weeks ago – though, of course, I heard bits and scraps. But then I never read Rabelais either though nobody will believe this. I will read them both when I get back (L, 255).<sup>1</sup>

Joyce did not embark on the mastadonic project of *Finnegans Wake* with a thorough knowledge of Carroll's *oeuvre* already in his head; any thematic or stylistic overlap between Carroll's writing and the premise of the *Wake* is, he says, a mere coincidence. It is never advisable to take Joyce entirely at his own word on the subject of his influences (he was given to down-playing them, preferring to present to the world an image of a devastatingly original, mercilessly modern writer, born fully-formed), and some critics have contested his claim.<sup>2</sup> There seems in this case, however, little reason to doubt him. It is hardly surprising that some of the books that would become important presences within the *Wake*'s intertextual tapestry were not all lined up and ready to go from the beginning. The *Alice* books are important presences within *Finnegans Wake*, but they are not a premise for it, as Homer's *Odyssey* was for *Ulysses*. Joyce came late to Carroll, but in terms of the *Wake*'s compositional history, his discovery of Carroll's work took place relatively early on, in the sixth year of the seventeen years it would take him to complete the *Wake*; there was plenty of time to absorb Carroll's work and put it to good use.

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 31 May 1927.

<sup>2</sup> It has been suggested by John A. Rea that Joyce in fact *had* read some Carroll before he started writing 'Work in Progress', adapting Carroll's *Mischmasch* parody of Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* in 'Circe' (John A. Rea, "'A Bit of Lewis Carroll in *Ulysses*.'" *James Joyce Quarterly*, Fall 1977 (86-9)). Rea's essay does not provide watertight evidence of Joyce's pre-*Wake* reading of Carroll though, and certainly does not, as Ann Buki has suggested, catch Joyce in the act of dishonesty about his influences, since Rea makes no claims about Joyce having read *Alice* before 1927, and Joyce freely admits to knowing 'bits and scraps,' of which the *Lalla Rookh* example could have been one (Ann M. Buki, 1982. 'Lewis Carroll in *Finnegans Wake*', in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration* (ed. Edward Giuliano). New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 154-66 (154).

Much has now been written about the connections between Joyce and Carroll, from general discussions of thematic overlaps to dutiful lists of everything we know Joyce to have read by and about Carroll, when he read them, and where in the *Wake* he inserted the references.<sup>3</sup> The existence of this body of groundwork obviates, to a large degree, the need for further detective work of this kind. This is not to say that discoveries are not still being made (I have some of my own), nor that such discoveries are of reduced value; only that the laying of these foundations has freed future criticism from its study carrel amongst the archives. Thanks to the scholarly sleuthing of the last fifty years of Joyce studies, we are now in the position of knowing all we are ever likely to know about Joyce's reading of Carroll, and it is from this privileged vantage point that my own thesis can be launched.

As my title suggests, I do not mean to read Joyce's literary relationship to Carroll in terms of influence but in terms of 'debt' or inheritance: a roomier, less prescriptive term. I do not argue for the presence of a conscious imitation of Carrollian nonsense in *Finnegans Wake*, nor do I suggest that Carroll's and Joyce's understanding and use of nonsense are without some important differences.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I contend that to read Joyce through Carroll, and indeed Carroll through Joyce, is to achieve a fuller understanding of both authors: that it is a mutually rewarding exchange. More than this, though, my emphasis is not so much on what Carroll can teach us about Joyce (though there is an element of this), but what Carroll *and* Joyce (and to some extent, Edward Lear) can teach us about nonsense. There is something very crass, not to mention naive, about the idea that nonsense is a genre defined by a brief moment in the spotlight of our literary history; that it was suddenly invented by Carroll and Lear (independently of each other), that nothing like it had ever been seen before, and that it died with the Victorians, leaving as quickly and mysteriously as it came. In fact, as any reader of Anglo-Saxon riddles knows, nonsense has been around roughly as long as English

---

<sup>3</sup> Among these are James Atherton, 1959. *Books at the Wake: A Study in Literary Allusions in James Joyce's 'Finnegans Wake'*. London: Faber and Faber; Ann Buki, *op. cit.*; Adaline Glasheen, 1956. *A Census of Finnegans Wake*. London: Faber and Faber; Edvige Giunta, 1992. "A Raven like a Writing-desk": Lewis Carroll through James Joyce's Looking-glass' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Miami); Daphne Marie Shafer, 2001. "'Wanderlad beyond the Looking-glass": the Dream Worlds of Lewis Carroll and James Joyce' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Louisiana at Lafayette); and James Williams, 2008. 'Nineteenth-Century Nonsense Writing and the Later Work of James Joyce' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge).

<sup>4</sup> As Michael Wood points out in the *London Review of Books*, in a review of Danis Rose's new edition of *Finnegans Wake*, there are some important distinctions to be made between the nonsense we know from Carroll and that which we find in Joyce (Wood, 'Quashed Quotatoes' in *London Review of Books*, vol.32, no.24, 16 December 2010).

literature itself.<sup>5</sup> Neither is it reasonable to assume that nonsense vanished with the Victorians: there are powerful strains of nonsense not only in Joyce's work but in that of T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, and Nabokov; and, more recently, in Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Stevie Smith, and Paul Muldoon. Nonsense was not invented in the nineteenth century, it simply peaked then, finding its most distilled and potent form in the work of Carroll and Lear.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, we must be as precise as possible about the type of nonsense we are dealing with; we must, in the words of Wittgenstein, 'pay attention to our nonsense.'<sup>6</sup> This thesis deals specifically with the themes and forms of Victorian, especially Carrollian nonsense; it possesses, as such, definite characteristics and boundaries, and these should be established. Of course, a full definition of what literary nonsense actually is would warrant another thesis to itself, so it is in our interests here to be brief and to the point.<sup>7</sup> The first thing to say is that nonsense is not, as its name would suggest, the opposite or absence of 'sense'. Rather, it is a way of subjecting what we think of as 'sense' to a playful, yet internally logical and self-sufficient, critique. Literary nonsense is hyper-alert to the complexities and contradictions inherent within language, literature, and life, and it subjects them to a fascinatingly detailed and conscientious scrutiny. As Susan Stewart notes in her study of the subject, nonsense favours the order and internal logic of closed systems, such as those we find in the rules of games.<sup>8</sup> By means of play and parody, nonsense challenges our received ideas, and invites us to see for ourselves the absurdity of the assumptions that allow us our faith in our 'old words, old credentials' (to steal a line from Beckett);<sup>9</sup> it is, essentially, intellectually distrustful. It is also eminently teasing; as Wim Tigges explains, nonsense 'invites the reader to interpretation' while making sure to avoid settling on anything we might think of as a 'deeper meaning.'<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that there aren't 'deep meanings' within nonsense: there are plenty, to which the matter of this thesis will I hope attest. But literary nonsense can be extremely coy about *admitting*

---

<sup>5</sup> Elements of it are to be found in the comic reversals of Chaucer and Rabelais, through the endlessly 'quibbling' (or punning) Shakespeare, to the absurd, delightfully prolix formal experiments of Jonathan Swift and Lawrence Sterne.

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, 1998. *Culture and Value*. Oxford: Blackwell, 64.

<sup>7</sup> For an impressively thorough and discerning literature review of the history of nonsense criticism, see James Williams, *op. cit.*, 8-32.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Stewart, 1989. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. London and Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Beckett, 1970. *Watt*. London: Calder & Boyars, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Wim Tigges, 1987. 'An Anatomy of Nonsense' in *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 47.

to meaning something: its pattern of seeming to mean, denying that it means, and all the while actively meaning is part of its play.

The most influential study of literary nonsense is by Elizabeth Sewell, and it serves as an instructive primer for the terms of the nonsense analysed here, though she can be overzealous in her efforts to isolate nonsense from the rest of literature and turn it out in its own field of abstraction and its 'highly developed and complicated types of play.'<sup>11</sup> Sewell is right that play is the most important element in nonsense (and it is through their play that Carroll and Joyce have the most in common), but to cordon it off from the rest of literature so decisively seems a little rash, especially given the significant and symptomatic presence of literary parody and intertextuality within nonsense. Sewell is nevertheless correct to stress the importance of order and logic in the nonsense universe, and its tendency towards rules, boundaries, and over-organisation. This is where *Finnegans Wake* might begin to look ill-suited to a diagnosis of nonsense: isn't it true that, while Carrollian nonsense is organised and finite, limiting itself to closed structures (such as the *Looking-glass* game of chess) and strict rules of logic, Joyce's is all about extension, the accumulation of words and meanings that tends towards infinity? Yes and no. It is true that the writing of Joyce and Carroll differs in this regard, but false to assume that even though *Finnegans Wake* looks at first glance like a 'puling sample jungle of woods' ((FW, 112.4) or a 'pure and simple jumble of words'), it:

... is not a misaffectual whyacinthinous riots of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it (FW, 118.28-31).

In fact, the *Wake* is excessively, obsessively organised; a mere free-for-all would not have taken Joyce almost two decades, and volumes of meticulously kept notes, to complete. And while this over-organisation can look like (and sometimes spill into) actual disorganisation, Carroll's nonsense is surprisingly apt to do this too.<sup>12</sup>

The nonsense I describe in this thesis is the Sewellian nonsense of rules, order, wordplay, puns, reversals, and logic. It is also the nonsense described by the linguistic

---

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, 1952. *The Field of Nonsense*. London: Chatto & Windus, 25.

<sup>12</sup> This is a problem I tackle in the final chapter of this thesis.

philosopher and nonsense theorist Jean-Jacques Lecercle as ‘conservative-revolutionary’:

It is conservative because deeply respectful of authority in all its forms: rules of grammar, maxims of conversation and of politeness, the authority of the canonical author of the parodied text. [This] is inextricably mixed with the opposite aspect, for which the genre is justly famous, the liberated, light-fantastic, nonsensical aspect of nonsense, where rules and maxims appear to be joyously subverted.<sup>13</sup>

Lecercle’s thesis is that nonsense is structured around this and other forms of contradiction; that it is essentially doubled, conflicted, standing at an oblique angle to canonical literature but at odds with itself at the same time. This is a stance my thesis shares and on which it will build, seeking not only to examine nonsense’s both/and condition, but to account for it in my readings, and to try to penetrate the secret core of the nonsense impulse.

Chapter One, “‘A letters from a person to a place about a thing’: The Nonsense Letter,” studies the central nonsense theme of miscommunication through the prism of the epistolary letter. I argue that the letter is an important textual form for the nonsense to writer, offering him the ideal podium from which to launch his investigations into the (mis)construction of meaning, and the inadequacies and absurdities of epistolary (and, by extension, social) conventions. My research draws on personal letters from Joyce, Carroll, and Edward Lear, as well as examining the relationship between fictional letters and their host texts, exploring some of the ideas Carroll floated for improvements to letter-writing customs, and delivering a detailed analysis of the *Finnegans Wake* letter in its various guises. It ends with a study of the erotics of letters in *Ulysses* which, I hope, shows how the notional problems of miscommunication we see in the nonsense letter become practical quandaries in the lives of Joyce’s characters.

Chapter Two, “‘Mocked majesty’: Games and Authority,” explores the various forms of authority we find in nonsense, from autocratic monarchs to omniscient authors, and from the parental or pedagogic authority of adults over children to the rigid and unspoken rules of children’s games and discourses. The various species of games we find in the work of both Carroll and Joyce are analysed, from the tightly ordered playworlds of chess, cards, and games with logic and language, to the rough-and-tumble

---

<sup>13</sup> Lecercle, 1994. *Philosophy of Nonsense*. London: Routledge, 2-3.

hijinks of the *Finnegans Wake* children's twilight street games. I advance a theory that games in nonsense work against the oppressions and inequalities of the different kinds of authority which nonsense upholds, creating tensions between the need to install rules and hierarchies and the need to break them down through play and parody.

Chapter Three: "Jest jibberweek's joke": 'Comic Nonsense,' offers a reading of the types of humour we find in literary nonsense. It begins with a study of the Kantian model of incongruous humour we find in the nonsense double act, examining how both Joyce and Carroll emphasise and exploit the double nature of the joke, using it to generate the vaudevillean dialogues and comic contrasts between the many 'collateral and incompatible' pseudocouples who populate the nonsense terrain. It goes on to address the dark underbelly of the comic, identifying a Hobbesian meanness at the heart of nonsense humour. A treatise on the bad pun concludes the chapter, moving from Carroll's portmanteau words to the pun-infatuated jokescape of *Finnegans Wake*, as it asks whether nonsense humour is actually funny, and what exactly attracts nonsense to the darker edge of humour, be it cringe-inducing puns, painful pratfalls, or bullying gags at the expense victimised other.

Chapter Four: 'Nonsense and the Fall,' offers a unique reading of literary nonsense as a philosophical answer to the Fall. It notes the morbid attention literary nonsense often pays to the physical and figurative act of falling, and reads the *Alice* books and *Finnegans Wake* in terms of their symbolic falls into the nonsense bugbears of linguistic confusion, madness, chaos, and forbidden knowledge (the overarching premise of *Finnegans Wake* is, after all, the Fall of Man, which caused all 'the unhappitents of the earth have terreumbled from firmament unto fundament and from tweedledeedumms down to twiddlededeedees' (FW, 258.22-4)). After a study of the split personalities of Issy and her prototype, Alice (occasioned, I argue, by a pseudo-moralistic fall from grace), and an account of Carroll's and Joyce's Babelian tendencies, the chapter offers an explanation as to why it is a general and necessary condition of literary nonsense to be always hovering on the edge of the abyss, and forever toying with its own destruction.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ‘A LETTERS FROM A PERSON TO A PLACE ABOUT A THING’:

#### THE NONSENSE LETTER

All the world's in want and is writing letters. A letters from a person to a place about a thing. And all the world's on wish to be carrying a letters. A letters to a king about a treasure from a cat. When men want to write a letters. Ten men, ton men, pen men, pun men, wont to rise a ladder.

FW, 278.13 20

In the straightforward style of a prep school primer, the ‘Nightlessons’ chapter of *Finnegans Wake* informs us that ‘a letters from a person to a place about a thing’ (FW, 287.14-15). The phrase is poached from the language of grammar; through it we hear the definition of a noun, as repeated by Molly Bloom in her meandering monologue: ‘a noun is the name of any person place or thing’ (U, 728-9). It is no coincidence that Joyce uses a part (the letter) to illustrate the definition of a whole (the category of concrete nouns); for the Wakean letter, as a complex, multilayered and polymorphous text with a confused compositional history and an uncertain audience, stands in synecdochic relation to the *Wake* itself. As we come to understand the complexities of the letter in the *Wake*, though, and of the use of the letter form in nonsense as a whole, we recognise Joyce’s borrowed definition, with its cocksure bluntness and rhythmic chantability, to be a wittily ironic oversimplification. The status of the letter is in fact fraught with tensions and contradictions; this is almost as true of the non-fictional domestic letter as the *Wake*’s own ‘epiepistle’ (FW, 108.24). Furthermore, the fictional letter, such as we find subsumed in and dispersed throughout *Wake*, stages a number of tantalizing paradoxes, and challenges our assumptions about textual authenticity, materiality, and meaning. These various tensions and contradictions complicate our reading of the fictional letter, and allow it to tease and resist our understanding in ways altogether typical of literary nonsense. The letter form is a mode of communication which, for all nonsense writers and for Joyce and Carroll in particular, provides fertile soil for the phantoms of misunderstanding, error and uncertainty which haunt the point of intersection between writer and reader, speaker and listener. Biographically too, the fact that the letter form is private, not-for-publication, and so less beholden to the

author's more performative public statements, makes it a unique platform for the whimsical aesthetic, linguistic, and comedic experiments we see in the epistolary styles of nonsense writers such as Carroll, Lear, and Joyce. All the japes and skits Joyce invented and indulged in his letters cannot help but recall Carroll's, the verve and variousness of whose epistolary creations is quite inimitable.<sup>14</sup>

Among the essay titles listed by the children of *Finnegans Wake* as they labour at their homework is 'Advantages of the Penny Post' (FW, 307.1-2); while these 'advantages' are perhaps obvious – an inexpensive and efficient postal system is hard to criticise – it remains true that many letter-writers and -collectors viewed the introduction of the penny post as a damaging influence, threatening to demote the substance of the letter from the thoughtful and witty to the merely functional, and turning the world of letter-writing into a prattling 'gossipocracy' (FW, 476.4).<sup>15</sup> Fortunately for today's readers, any epistolary negligence afforded by the advent of the penny post did not, in fact, manage to quash the playfulness and ingenuity, inspired by figures such as Charles Lamb and Jonathan Swift, of the dedicated epistolographer; indeed, it appears to have made him all the more determined to break the patterns of the formulaic, textbook letter, and to enliven and enhance it. Two prime examples are Carroll and Lear, who reject the disenchanting ordinariness of the letter as mere social currency, as described here in the 'mad' Gardener's song in *Sylvie and Bruno*:

*"He thought he saw an Elephant,  
That practised on a fife:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A letter from his wife.  
'At length I realise', he said,  
'The bitterness of Life!'"*

...

*"He thought he saw an Albatross*

---

<sup>14</sup> Carroll's best biographer, Morton N. Cohen, has compiled a formidable list of the 'new kinds of letters' Carroll devised: 'rebus letters; circular pinwheel letters; looking-glass letters that must be held up to the mirror to be read; back-to-front letters that must be read from the end to the beginning; letters with riddles, hoaxes, and acrostics; fairy letters in tiny writing that require a magnifying glass to read, written on letter paper the size of a postage stamp; letters in verse; verse letters written in prose (to see if the recipient would detect the hidden meters and rhymes); letters with visual effects, with a beetle or a spider crawling across the page. He poured the essence of himself into these letters and unwittingly earned a place in the history of epistolary art' (Cohen, 176-181).

<sup>15</sup> See George Saintsbury (ed.), 1922. *A Letter Book*. London: G. Bell and Sons, and Philip Wayne, *The Personal Art: An Anthology of English Letters*. For Saintsbury, the only thing that has 'done more to kill letters than the penny post' is the newspaper (25).



*That fluttered round the lamp:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Penny-Postage-Stamp.  
'You'd best be getting home,' he said,  
'The nights are very damp!'"* (CLC, 294, 392).

It is the business of the nonsense writer to 'look again': to take received ideas, accepted practices, conventions, traditions, and rules, and, by 'twiddling their eyes', as Bruno would say (CLC, 478), to apply a nonsense logic to them, to 'make strange' and make fun of them, and, perhaps most importantly of all, to draw out the absurdities that are always already present within them. Ergo, the correspondent of a nonsense writer may well find the events of the Gardener's song reversed, and instead of a humdrum letter, receive the epistolary equivalent of a fife-playing elephant, just as a correspondent of Edward Lear's might receive a letter-as-snail, and one of Carroll's a pictogram, puzzle, or a letter from a fairy in minuscule handwriting.<sup>16</sup>

Joyce's personal letters are similarly playful, if not quite as zoomorphic. His letters include backwards or eccentric orthography: 'Dear Oigroig and Neleh', he writes to his son and daughter in law (L, 352). (Backwards writing is a favourite trick of Carroll's, too; a letter to his child-friend Agnes Hull, for example, begins 'My east-red Aggie' and ends with "'evol" to your sisters [from] your vin-log friend' (SLLC, 125-6)). In another example, Joyce writes of a hotel manager in Euston that, 'I met him every morning and wished him a good kday, Mr. Knight. He is a very knice kman' (L, 239). Arguably, the epistolary-cum-alphabetic 'letters play' (FW, 237.19) to which both Joyce and Carroll allow a privileged space in their own letters appeals to them as nonsense writers because the link is at once so arbitrary (it is enabled by a basic pun) and so significant: it forms a node where the possibility of communication meets its root: the non-narrative alphabetic letter without which the narrative letter could not exist. As the critic Talia Schaffer puts it, 'by using the epistle letter, Joyce frees himself to deconstruct the alphabetic letter,' a correspondence which is established by 'the mystic unity of the pun.'<sup>17</sup> Carroll's use of the occasion of an epistolary letter to play with alphabetic letters in names and objects is even more developed than Joyce's, at least in his personal letters; indeed, the link seems so tightly knit into the fabric of

---

<sup>16</sup> A letter to Evelyn Baring from Lear, dated 19 February 1864, takes the form of a drawing of a snail, whose face bears an uncanny resemblance to Lear's own, and on whose shell is scratched a playful note; this is literal snail-mail (SLEL, 194).

<sup>17</sup> Talia Schaffer, 1992, 'Letters to Bidy: About That Original Hen' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 29, 623-42 (627).

Carroll's letters that a caveat to his child-friend Charlotte Rix which warns that she is 'evidently getting confused between the two meanings of "Letters"' seems rather hypocritical in light of his own epistolary-alphabetic games (SLLC, 156). While these games are not quite as prominent in Joyce's personal letters, the conceptual overlap they demonstrate is everywhere in Joyce's fiction, not least in the *Wake's* professorial analysis of the letter in Book 1 Chapter 5, where the 'Tunc page of the Book of Kells' (FW, 122.23) is invoked as a point of comparison with the Wakean letter, illustrating their parallel purpose of drawing attention to 'the physical features and pictorial embellishments of the (narrative) letter's literal components'.<sup>18</sup> We see similar, if rather more understated, artistic conversions of alphabetic characters in Carroll's decorative monograms, which he would offer to create from his child-friends' initials (SLLC, 48). There is also a wonderful letter-poem, which hinges the two meanings of the 'letter' pun perfectly:

I send you  
A picture, which I hope will  
B one that you will like to  
C. If your Mamma should  
D sire one like it, I could  
E sily get her one (SLLC, 26).

Further nonsense features of Joyce's personal letters include breakfast table farces in the style of O.W. Holmes's *Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* (or 'autocart of the bringfast cable' (FW, 434.31)); spontaneous children's stories (*The Cat and the Devil* began life as a letter to his grandson (L, 386)); and Learesque 'nonsense recipes', in which Joyce instructs Giorgio and Helen to take:

... a small cube of Maggi's Allerleigemuslisuppe [...] Leave it to boil gently for an hour asking the local policeman to have an eye on it and to stir it every five minutes with his truncheon. Then take off your boots and stockings and put some soot over your face, and go out carrying a large sack. Then go round to the back door of the convent of S. Vincent de Paul and pull the bell which is marked *Paupers*. [...] Do not forget to thank the policeman and allow him to dip his truncheon in the soup and lick it. Remember to call him Policeman Esquire and not Mr Policeman as people who have not been to a University sometimes

---

<sup>18</sup> Laurent Milesi, 1998. 'The Poetics of 'The Purloined Letter' in *Finnegans Wake*' in *A Collideorscape of Joyce: Festschrift for Fritz Senn* (eds Ruth Frehner and Ursula Zeller). Dublin: Lilliput Press, 306-22 (307). Lucia Joyce's own illuminations in her ABC of Chaucer provide a familial connection here.

do. Then wash and dry yourselves and allow the soup to cool. Then take a bowl of it and two spoons and eat it and the bread very slowly, saying: Every little bimbo has a big babbo but no little bimbo has such a good big babbo as our good big babbo (L, 348).

A final important connection is the one both Joyce and Carroll make between riddles and letters, which will be explored later in the chapter.

This brief tour of the playful personal letters of Joyce and Carroll sets the tone and theme of this chapter, which will now open to a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the nonsense letter, including an examination of the methods by which nonsense writers humorously deform and subvert the conventional letter form to make their own points about meaning, communication, interpretation, and epistolary convention. In the first section, I shall consider some of the ways in which the letter can be seen as duplicitous and contradictory, and how the letter-writer, like the nonsense writer, manipulates assumptions about meaning and identity in a way that makes the letter the site of many crisscrossing, contradictory, or hidden messages, whose meanings may inhabit several separate planes of meaning. Section two examines how nonsense writers test the limits of the letter's spatial, structural, and social conventions, before opening to an exploration of how the Wakean letter, specifically, inhabits a complex metafictional space at once embedded in and set apart from the novel itself, and what this tells us about the relationship between the fictional letter and its host text. A final section studies the erotics of 'letters play', concentrating in particular on the circulating letters of *Ulysses* and their Wakean successors. The main textual focus of this chapter is the Wakean letter in its various guises, but a catalogue of letters from the personal correspondence of Carroll and Lear, together with fictional letters from *Ulysses* and from Carroll's prose works, play a vital supporting role in my arguments.

## 1. THE DOUBLE-EDGED LETTER

Of the many contradictory qualities of the letter, perhaps the most obvious is its dual identity as private document and social dialogue. That is to say, the letter writer opens an intimate space in which private thoughts and feelings are expressed and divulged, but at the same time the letter exists in a public continuum, not only in its inherent insistence on the other within the text – the addressee is present in every line – but also

in its adherence to fixed modes of collective epistolary (and, by extension, social) convention; in its participation in the systematic transference of information via the public institution of the Post Office; and in its amenability to misinterpretation, misappropriation, or miscarriage. Terry Eagleton, in *The Rape of Clarissa*, incorporates this public / private dialectic into his thesis on the epistolary mode of Richardson's novel, noticing that 'the letter [...] lies on the troubled frontier between private and public worlds', and that as such it is 'double-edged: it is private confidence and political weapon, intimacy and intrigue, a jealously protected space in which you never cease to be publicly at stake'.<sup>19</sup> Further, it seems that the letter is not just the site of a struggle between private and public discourse, but that the public nature of correspondence taints the private, making it self-conscious and even calculating.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, we can agree with Nicola Watson when she writes that fictional letters, 'far from representing authentic interiority [...] function instead as the ominous harbingers and allies of scandal and rumour.'<sup>21</sup> This is as true of the Wakean letter, and Martha Clifford's in *Ulysses* for that matter, as it is of the scheming and double-edged letters of sentimental epistolary fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

While it is this earlier genre of fiction on which Watson concentrates, her observations lose no value when applied to Anna Livia Plurabelle's letter in the *Wake*. This letter, ostensibly written by ALP (though there are complications to this, in keeping with the Wakean theme of multiplicitous textual voices and identities or 'multiple mes' (FW, 410.12)), contains several layers of meaning and modes of discourse, which Bernard Benstock has broadly classified as 'personal, political, romantic'.<sup>22</sup> ALP's 'untitled mamafesta' (FW, 104.4) is given a litany of possible titles at the beginning of Chapter 1.5, the last and most resounding of which is a defense of her husband Humphrey Chimpenden Earwicker (hereafter HCE), and reads:

---

<sup>19</sup> Eagleton, Terry, 1982. *The Rape of Clarissa*. Oxford: Blackwell, 54, 51.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Roland Barthes's illustration, citing the Marquise de Merteuil of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: "When you write someone, it is for that person and not for yourself, so you must be sure not to say what you think, but rather what will please that person." For Barthes, this belies the notion of correspondence as transparent and honest exchange; instead, it is 'a tactical enterprise to defend positions, make conquests'. It is telling that Barthes uses the language of war and strategy to characterise the nature of epistolary practice. Roland Barthes (tr. Richard Howard), 1990 (1977). *A Lover's Discourse*. London: Penguin, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Nicola Watson, 1994. *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel 1790 – 1825*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.92. For an account of the incriminatory aspect of the Wakean letter, and its Poean undertones, see Laurent Milesi, 'The Poetics of 'The Purloined Letter' in *Finnegans Wake*' in *A Collideorscape of Joyce: Festschrift for Fritz Senn* (eds Ruth Frehner and Ursula Zeller), 1998. Dublin: Lilliput Press, pp.306-22.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Benstock, 1965. *Joyce-Again's Wake*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 9.

*First and Last Only True Account all about the Honourary Mirsu Earwicker, L.S.D., and the Snake (Nuggets!) by a Woman of the World who only can Tell Naked Truths about a Dear Man and all his Conspirators how they all Tried to Fall him Putting it all around Lucalizod about Privates Earwicker and a Pair of Sloppy Sluts plainly Showing all the Unmentionability falsely Accusing about the Raincoats (FW, 107.1-7).*

This is the letter as public statement. ALP is presenting a united front and playing the familiar public role of loyal wife – a role for which the letter is her stage – despite what she may feel privately on the subject of her husband’s alleged transgression. However, letters are apt to betray their writers’ true feelings, as Dr. Johnson has warned:

In a Man’s Letters [...] his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives.<sup>23</sup>

If the reader of the letter takes time, like Issy, to ‘kool in the salg and ees’ (FW, 262, fn.3), he or she might be rewarded with more than the letter-writer is conscious of communicating, and instead of a straightforward public testimonial, the Wakean letter presents to the reader, by means of signs and slips, ‘a very sexmosaic of nymphosis’ (FW, 107.13-14). Of course, Johnson’s statement that ‘nothing is inverted, nothing distorted’, suggests the wilful ingenuousness of a critic not fully convinced by the schemes and subterfuges of Richardson’s epistolary fiction, and so we must counter his caveat with one of our own: the inherent difficulty of disguising oneself completely in a letter should not give us to presume that the writer of the letter has not succeeded in his disguise.<sup>24</sup>

The tension that is established here between efforts to reveal and efforts to conceal is crucial to the nonsense condition (it is, after all, an essential ingredient for both riddles and jokes), and one of the defining characteristics of the Wakean letter(s). To mean, or to seem to mean, only to confiscate that meaning or to subtly belie it, is a principle of nonsense writing; to communicate is to at once deliver and miscarry, just as

---

<sup>23</sup> Frank Kermode and Anita Kermode (eds), 1996. *The Oxford Book of Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson himself appears unsure about his rather naive epistolary hypothesis, and directly contradicts himself in his *Life of Pope*, writing that there is ‘no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse’. Samuel Johnson (ed. Bruce Redford), 1992. *Letters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 469.

Shaun the Post literally delivers, only to miscarry, the letter, which ends up in a graveyard of failed communications, the dump. The compulsion of the letter writer to mean what he or she means to mean, and the possibility of failure that accompanies this compulsion, reduces the letter to a rather utilitarian, straightforward, unliterary token of exchange. Nonsense, which generally abhors reduction, seeks to alter these values by throwing open epistolary potentiality by any means. Letters are transformed into riddles, jokes, puzzles, verses, and games; conventions are strictly upheld in some places and torn down in others, creating absurd and hilarious hybrids (such as Edward Lear's idioglossic letters, to which I will return). The question of what makes a letter is thrown open to suggestion; assumptions about identity, authorship and reception are toyed with; and, perhaps most importantly of all, the nebulous nature of meaning and communication are held up to constant and detailed scrutiny.

In an earlier paragraph of his letter quoted above, Dr. Johnson makes a pertinent observation:

Some when they write to their friends are all affection, some are wise and sententious, some strain their powers for efforts of gayety, some write news, and some write secrets, but to make a letter without affection, without wisdom, without gayety, without news, and without a secret is, doubtless, the great epistolick art.<sup>25</sup>

This sentiment strongly recalls Carroll's own 'epistolick' hypothesis in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, in which the narrator describes his ideas for 'a new Code of Rules for Letter-writing' with Lady Muriel. The narrator explains that what is:

"[...] *greatly* needed [...] is some way of expressing that we *don't* mean anything."

"[...] Surely you can find no difficulty in expressing a *total* absence of meaning?"

"I mean that you should be able, when you *don't* mean a thing to be taken seriously, to express that wish" (CLC, 529).

Lady Muriel's question is a vexed one. The difficulty of expressing a 'total absence of meaning' is in fact inherent in the language, which cannot help but tend towards meaning, as we shall see later in an analysis of Lear. But the question of how one generates and controls (or fails to control) meaning in a text is forever tempting Carroll

---

<sup>25</sup> Kermode, 1996, 130.

to explore the other end of the spectrum – the meaningless, the vacant, the phatic.

Take the letter used as evidence in the Wonderland trial (all three nouns here should perhaps come in inverted commas). At first, the evidence is presented as a straightforward letter ‘from a person to a place about a thing’, or as the White Rabbit puts it: “‘a letter, written by the prisoner to – to somebody’” (Haughton, 104). It soon transpires that this letter, much like its Wakean counterpart, is neither addressed nor signed. Unlike in the *Wake* though, the letter’s apparent anonymity leaves its readers in no doubt as to who wrote it: as the King informs the accused Knave of Hearts, who must have ‘imitated somebody else’s hand’ while writing the letter, “‘You *must* have meant some mischief, or else you’d have signed your name like an honest man’” (Haughton, 104-05). As the critic Edvige Giunta has noted, both the Wonderland and the Wakean letters are ‘used to incriminate someone, the Knave and HCE respectively’.<sup>26</sup> In addition, both letters appear to have been written privately and exposed to public scrutiny later on; in other words, both have been violated. This private / public doubleness brings us by a ‘*commodius vicus of recirculation*’ (FW, 3.2) back to Eagleton, whose description of the letter as ‘private confidence and political weapon, intimacy and intrigue, a jealously protected space in which you never cease to be publicly at stake’ acquires special resonance here. Of course, any reader choosing to break the invisible seal of a letter not intended for his or her eyes knows what is at stake, and in this sense the letter takes on further powers of incrimination: not only does it incriminate its subject (in both the Wonderland and Wakean cases), its very existence as a temptation to any third party who happens upon it invests it with the power to incriminate its potential, illicit readers. Jane Austen is aware of this bind in *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliot stealthily reads an incriminating letter from her cousin William to her friend. Anne’s shock at discovering her cousin’s true (dishonest) character is mingled with and even mitigated by the guilt of knowing that ‘her seeing the letter was a violation of the laws of honour, that no one ought to be judged or to be known by such testimonies, that no private correspondence could bear the eye of others’.<sup>27</sup>

The courtroom letter, too, is resistant to ‘the eye of others’, in that it is singularly difficult to interpret. It begins:

---

<sup>26</sup> Edvige Giunta, ‘Dear Reverend: “Lewis Carroll and the Boston Girls” in *James Joyce Quarterly* vol 30.3 (Spring 1993), 488-92 (489).

<sup>27</sup> Jane Austen, 1986. *Persuasion*. London: Penguin, 210.

They told me you had been to her  
And mentioned me to him;  
She gave me a good character,  
But said I could not swim (Haughton, 106).

The reader who opens a letter not addressed to him or her may expect to meet bewildering references to events and characters with which they are not familiar; by summoning these storms of floating pronouns in the letter, Carroll plays a great practical joke on his courtroom readers, who in ‘violating the honour’ of the letter meet with the confusion they deserve. Nevertheless, efforts to decode this curious text ensue. The King desperately tries to wring some meaning out of the verbiage, while Alice insists that there is not ‘an atom of meaning in it’ (Haughton, 106). Alice’s estimation is dismissive but excusable: the poem’s garbled syntax and lack of concrete referents render it very close to meaninglessness. The King, on the other hand, has been hypnotised by the text’s powers of suggestion (as well as his own eagerness to prosecute the Knave), and this, incidentally, is one of the most frustrating and alluring trapdoors of literary nonsense as a whole. Its failure, or refusal, to provide deliberate or straightforward meaning is the very thing that whets our appetite for interpretative possibility, and invites us to puzzle it out for ourselves, an opportunity we can no more refuse than Alice can abstain from the bottle of potion labeled ‘Drink Me’.

The King’s analysis is bitterly comic, his earnest quest for meaning in the pronominal chaos of the courtroom letter casting him as a rather ridiculous parody of a literary critic. After briefly considering the idea that ‘if there’s no meaning in it [...] we needn’t try to find any’ (Haughton, 106), he launches into a whimsical assay of both content and context. ‘Could not swim’, he proposes, refers to the Knave, who is made of cardboard and therefore a strict non-swimmer. He continues:

“All right, so far,” said the King; and he went on muttering over the verses to himself: “*We know it to be true*’ – that’s the jury, of course – ‘*If she should push the matter on*’ – that must be the Queen – ‘*What would become of you?*’ – What, indeed! – ‘*I gave her one, they gave him two*’ – why, that must be what he did with the tarts, you know—” (Haughton, 106).

And so on. When his analysis starts to lose credibility with the line ‘*before she had this fit*’ (the Queen ‘never had fits’), he masks his defeat with a bad pun: ““Then the words don’t *fit* you”” (Haughton, 106-07). A similarly narrow but morally more murky attempt



at scientific meaning-extraction can be found in a letter of Carroll's to his child-friend Gertrude Chataway, in which he follows a brief description of a young girl devouring plums with his own coy exegesis:

This is a little fable to do you good; the little girl means *you* – the bad plum means *me* – the other plum means some other friend – and all that about the little girl putting plums to her lips means – well, it means – but you know you can't expect *every bit* of a fable to mean something! (Collingwood, 385-86).

Carroll's sudden truncation of his exegesis is occasioned by a darker motive than the King's; for while the King arrests his analysis as a face-saving measure, seeing the logic of his method begin to unravel, Carroll's hasty about-turn signposts the territory of innuendo and impropriety into which the logic of his own method is steering him.<sup>28</sup>

We might compare the King's outlandish exegesis, and Carroll's more suggestive one, with that of the letter in Book 1.5 of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's stinging pastiche of critical style and practice is more rigorous and systematic than Carroll's, its combination of mimicry and mockery at a higher voltage. Like the King, Joyce's 'captious critic' (FW, 109.24) is both unaware of the absurdity of his analytical pursuit, and unconscious of the lessons he is giving the reader on how to (and how not to) interpret the text within which he himself is operating. Take this passage, for example:

[F]or we also know, what we have perused from the pages of *I Was a Gemral*, that Showting up of Bulsklivism by 'Schottenboum', that Father Michael about this red time of the white terror equals the old regime and Margaret is the social revolution while cakes mean the party funds and dear thank you signifies national gratitude (FW, 116.5-10).

This po-faced *quid pro quo* analysis, each item symbolising or 'signifying' another, lampoons the over-simplified readings of a woolly mode of literary scholarship, heavily reliant on finding or forcing symbolic relationships between the worlds inside and outside of the text. As Bernard Benstock writes, the literalness of the examination of the letter is actually being mocked in this decoding:

Codes are by their nature simple-minded: words, symbols, signs, letters, numbers are substitutes for real meaning, and once the key to the code

---

<sup>28</sup> In his biography of Carroll, Morton N. Cohen quotes this letter as an example of how 'the images that surface in [Carroll's] letters ... reveal his sexual nature' (226).

is available the meaning of the message exists on a non-ambiguous level and is completely literal. *Finnegans Wake* is certainly not written in code-language and no single one-for-one ratio exists between the words Joyce includes and the equivalents the 'keyed' reader interprets. In this mock-Marxian decoding Joyce spoofs such simplistic reading in such verbs as *equals*, *means*, *signifies*, *is*, and in the comic disparity of the associations.<sup>29</sup>

Joyce's satirical foray into textual criticism is meant to instruct us how *not* to read the *Wake*. A straightforward decoding is not sufficient for the challenging nonsense text; to search for or artificially conjure literal meaning from a text whose primary purpose we know to be a dogged resistance to literal meaning is to perform a fruitless doublethink.

We see precisely why in Jean-Jacques Lecercle's linguistic analysis of Edward Lear's nonsense letter to his friend Evelyn Baring, the text of which is quoted here in full:

Thrippsy pillivinx, Inky tinky pobblebockle applesquabs? – Fosky! beebul trimble flosky! – Okul scratchabibblebongibo, viddle squibble tog-a-tog, ferrymoyassity amsky flamsky ramsky damskey crocklefeather squiggs.

Flinkywitsy pomm,  
Slushypipp.<sup>30</sup>

Lecercle's analysis fails to avoid the pitfalls demonstrated so keenly by Joyce and Carroll, surprisingly for a critic usually so alert to nonsense's confidence tricks. His reading begins well, as he sets about salvaging what phonic meaning he can from the letter's apparent gibberish; though where he points out its 'blatant flouting of the conventions of letter-writing' he has made an error that later in his book he will correct. Clearly, it is only *linguistic* conventions that are flouted in Lear's letter; epistolary conventions, from the greeting and polite opening question to the formal signing-off, have evidently been observed. Lecercle skilfully balances the fact of the letter's structural conventionality against its linguistic strangeness, offers some convincing pseudo-translations of Lear's word patterns, and presents the letter as a brilliant illustration of the limits of certain modes of communication once bound by the template of social and epistolary convention.

Lecercle's secondary argument, though, is almost as far-fetched as the *Wake*'s

---

<sup>29</sup> Benstock in "Concerning lost historeve": Book I, Chapter v', Michael H. Begnall and Fritz Senn (eds), 1974. *A Conceptual Guide to Finnegans Wake*. London: University of Pennsylvania Press, 33-55 (36).

<sup>30</sup> Lecercle, 1990. *The Violence of Language*. London: Routledge, 1.

pseudo-Marxist one. The process of analysis to which Lecercle subjects the letter concludes with him figuring Lear's private language as evidence of homosexual desire, concealed in Freudian coinages, for the addressee. When he points out that the reader cannot tell if 'Flinkywitsy pomm' means 'Best wishes' or 'Go to hell,' we suspect that he may have been too quick to consign Lear's word patterns to final undecidability. There are phonic and orthographic patterns similar to Lear's Russian-sounding perversions at the tail-end of Shaun's 'abasourd ... Dutchener's native' speech in *Finnegans Wake*: 'Dotter dead bedstead mean diggy smuggy flasky' (FW, 430.14-16).<sup>31</sup> Here the tone is boozily affectionate (translating as 'this is the best, my fat beautiful bottle'); we imagine, too, that Lear's rhythmic Russo-babytalk ('amsky flamsky ramsky damsky') and quaint Anglophonic constructions ('pobblebockle applesquabs' and 'crocklefeather squiggs', which almost sound like a pair of Dickensian squires) suggest a more affectionate than antagonistic relationship with the addressee. Here, though, we risk performing the same false move as Lecercle, the *Wakean* pseudo-Marxist, and the King of Hearts himself. It is a speculative, rather than strictly critical, intelligence at work here, and it leads us into dangerous waters. Rather than indulge in this speculation as to meaning, it is more productive to consider what Lear achieves with his nonsense letter: an imaginative and instructive mapping of, and mocking of, epistolary conventions, and an illustration of how even apparent gibberish tends towards meaning and invites interpretation. Bearing these twin themes in mind, we can now examine how nonsense writers, using the template of the letter, seek to correct our collective assumptions about the effectiveness and efficiency of written communication, to offer their own whimsical improvements or alternatives to established conventions, and to expose the problems and limitations of both the fictional and non-fictional letter.

## 2. 'A CODE OF RULES FOR LETTER-WRITING': TESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE LETTER

---

<sup>31</sup> 'Abasourdly' is a macaronic portmanteaux of 'absurd' and the French 'abasourdir', to dumbfound.

As I have argued, Lecercle's contention that Lear's letter displays a 'blatant flouting of the conventions of letter-writing' seems a rather careless misreading. Of the three chief examples of nonsense letters we have studied (by Joyce, Carroll, and Lear respectively), only one can be said to actively *flout* epistolary conventions, and that is the letter of the Wonderland courtroom, whose status as a letter is dubious from the start (the White Rabbit concludes, after all, that is 'not a letter' but a set of verses (Haughton, 104)). Conversely, the examples from Joyce and Lear, while eccentric and challenging in their own right, cleave quite emphatically to established epistolary conventions, in ways that confirm and reinforce the 'conservative-revolutionary' condition of nonsense subversions.<sup>32</sup>

As Lecercle has elsewhere shown us, nonsense texts are not as anarchic as we might at first assume: in order to maximise their own absurdity, most operate within familiar, everyday frames and contexts, and uphold all kinds of established hierarchies, rituals, received ideas and *status quos* (hence his characterisation of their methods as 'conservative-revolutionary: cleaving excessively to rules as a means of re-evaluating their legitimacy). The rules of letter writing are among these honoured rituals. In Lear's letter, we find all the features of the standard letter form, and from them we can trace the trajectory of an utterly conventional letter: a 'Dear X' greeting ('Thrippsy pillivinx'), a courteous opening enquiry after the health of the addressee ('Inky tinky pobblebockle applesquabs?'), a friendly private joke ('Fosky! beebul trimble flosky!'), some information or intrigue, or perhaps an invitation ('Okul scratchabibblebongibo, viddle squibble tog-a-tog, ferrymoyassity amsky flamsky ramsky damsky crocklefeather squiggs'), and finally a 'yours sincerely' and a signature ('Flinkywitsy pomm, / Slushypipp').

The mutating letter in the *Wake* also conforms to a standard template, though it appears in many different guises. A neat comparison with Lear's letter appears in one of Issy's footnotes in Book 2.2:

Dear and I trust in all frivolity I may be pardoned for trespassing but I think I may add hell (FW, 270, fn3).

The critic Ronald E. Buckalew has isolated this letter-footnote and decoded it, in a

---

<sup>32</sup> See Lecercle, 1994. *Philosophy of Nonsense*. London: Routledge, 2-3.

reading similar to Lecercle's on Lear both in the ingenuity of its précis and the defectiveness of its critical follow-through. Noticing that several words in the sentence, which appears to form the overture of a rather abstruse letter, don't 'add up' ('frivolity', 'trespassing', 'add hell'), Buckalew sets about replacing them with words which are grammatically and phonetically similar but tonally more apt: 'Dear *Stannie* I trust in all *sincerity* I may be pardoned for *presuming* but I think I may *ask help*'.<sup>33</sup> Apart from the handful of misplaced words in Issy's footnote-letter, we notice the tonal hallmarks of Victorian letter-writing etiquette: the strained earnestness, the tentative clausal structure, the overarching politeness and deferential buffers of the request ('I may be pardoned', 'I think I may'). These traits determine the tone of the letter, obviating the need for verbal precision; indeed, we can piece together the gist of the sentence, despite the fact that many of its most vital signifiers have been hijacked. As an exercise in exposing the latent sterility, or at least arbitrariness, of epistolary conventions while operating within those same conventions, this is a short step indeed from Lear's nonsense letter. In the *Wake*'s well-preserved letter-skeletons, Joyce is reminding us, like Lear, not only that conventions of all kinds can be most effectively ridiculed and overturned when they are doggedly upheld and observed, but that the sincerely-expressed sentiments of the Victorian letter-writer might well represent no more than phatic byproducts of well-established epistolary conventions.<sup>34</sup>

Some of Joyce's examples go one step further than Lear's, and self-reflexively comment on their own form, transmuting from letter to meta-letter, as in this instructive template from the *Wake*'s 'Nightlessons' chapter:

Dear (name of desired subject, A.N.), well, and I go on to. Shlicksher. I and we (tender condolences for happy funeral, one if) so sorry to (mention person suppressed for the moment, F.M.). Well (enquiries after all-healths)

---

<sup>33</sup> Buckalew, 1974. 'Night Lessons on Language' in *A Conceptual Guide to Finnegans Wake* (eds M.H. Begnal and Fritz Senn). London: Pennsylvania State University Press, p.111. The italics are Buckalew's own.

<sup>34</sup> Consider the following as an example of how epistolary conventions can comically obliterate the writer's meaning:

Dear John,

I hate you,

Love Jane (Christopher P. Wilson, 1979. *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*. London: Academic Press, 89). It is useful to bear in mind that the Victorian book market was awash with guides, rules and templates for letter-writing, with reusable templates for every situation and mode of communication, one of which Lewis Carroll authored ('Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-Writing'). In many ways, Joyce's letter-skeletons in *Finnegans Wake* read like spoof versions of these templates. Many of the surviving copies of these epistolary 'self-help' books are now housed in the tower of the Fitzwilliam Library in Cambridge.

how are you (question maggy). [...] (Wave gently in the ere turning ptover.) Well, mabby (consolation of shopes) to soon air. With best from-cinder Christinette [...] kissists my exits (FW, 280.9-27).

Here the letter comments on its own form, at times substituting the form for the commentary. Through this process of rarefaction, the Wakean letter becomes as much about itself as anything else, and on one level functions within a closed, self-referential circuit. As with all texts that contain meta-levels, the letter becomes, as Hugh Kenner writes of Beckett's metafictional *Watt*, 'a typographical artifact which is somehow "about" its own existence'.<sup>35</sup> This, of course, strongly recalls Beckett's own words on the *Wake*: that it is not 'about something; it is that something itself'.<sup>36</sup>

As Lecercle has suggested in *Philosophy of Nonsense*, nonsense texts are not necessarily interested in the flouting of linguistic rules, but the mapping of them.<sup>37</sup> The same goes for epistolary rules, which is the chief reason that Lecercle's earlier contention on Lear's letter as a 'blatant flouting of epistolary conventions' seems so self-contradictory. Both Lear's and Joyce's letter-skeletons ingeniously sketch out a set of epistolary rules and standards; they are cartographical rather than cacographical, mapping conventions rather than flouting them. This is not to say, though, that nonsense writers do not welcome improvements and extensions to the more stale or inadequate conventional practices, as Carroll demonstrates in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. As part of their proposed 'new Code of Rules for Letter-writing', Arthur, Lady Muriel, and the narrator discuss certain traits of personality and speech which the letter is unable to convey, for example shyness:

"Does that show itself in the *letter*?" Lady Muriel enquired. "Of course, when I hear any one *talking* [...] I can see how *desperately* shy he is! But can you see that in a letter?"

"Well, of course, when you hear any one talk *fluently* [...] you can see how *desperately un-shy* she is [...]. But the shyest and most intermittent talker must *seem* fluent in letter-writing. He may have taken half-an-hour to *compose* his second sentence; but there it is, close after the first!"

"Then letters don't express all they *might* express?"

"That's merely because our system of letter-writing is incomplete. A shy writer *ought* to be able to show that he is so. Why shouldn't he make *pauses* in writing, just as he would do in speaking?"

<sup>35</sup> Hugh Kenner, 1961. *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*. New York: Grove Press, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Beckett, 2001. 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce' in *Disjecta*. London: John Calder, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, 38.



difficulty of portraying personality traits in the letter form, thus marking out its expressive limitations. Many of Carroll's literary and epistolary games and experiments of this kind circulate around questions of meaning and identity, in particular the difficulty of controlling the meaning one creates within any given text or correspondence (and, by extension, spoken dialogue). Joyce, too, is deeply concerned with this, as the Wakean letter illustrates in its vagaries, lacunae, contradictions, and obfuscations. The methods by and extent to which meaning can be controlled in a literary text are rigorously tested in the epistolary form, because of its chiefly dialogic purpose. Like a joke, the letter stages a specific communication which can either succeed or fail, and whose success or failure is determined only by the reaction of the reader or receiver (which is why Carroll is careful to emphasize, in his 'Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing,' that 'if it should ever occur to you to write, jestingly, in *dispraise* of your friend, be sure you exaggerate enough to make the jesting *obvious*: a word, spoken in *jest*, but taken as *earnest*, may lead to very serious consequences' (SLLC, 289)). The liability of the letter to communication failure is, I contend, what makes it such an appealing tool for nonsense writers, and what prompts them to play with conventional letter forms, either to enhance them (as we see in Carroll's 'shy man's letter'), or simply to point out their weaknesses and limitations.

Not only is the letter limited by social convention and accepted rules of layout, structure, and diction, it is also subject to lapses in both time and space (the time elapsed and distance crossed from sender to addressee), and restrictions thereof ('Excuse bad writing, am in a hurry', apologizes Milly; 'If my maily was bag enough I'd send you a toxis', regrets Shaun (U, 64; FW, 304.16-17)).<sup>39</sup> And in addition to its dangerous propensity to enter into the hands of the wrong person, betraying the writer, the letter is so effective a tool for deception and disguise (personality traits can be masked; handwriting can be forged) that it is liable to be *written* by the wrong person too, betraying the letter-reader. This idea is floated in *Alice's* unsigned courtroom 'letter', whose status as evidence is undermined by the mystery of its authorship. It is Joyce, however, who gives this problem of the letter his full attention. Mistaken identity, plagiarism, and forgery are recurring motifs in Joyce's late work: there are the *Wake's* circulating references to the fateful misspelling of the word 'hesitancy' in a forged letter by Richard Pigott, masquerading as Parnell (a slip which ends up indicting

---

<sup>39</sup> For a Derridean analysis of this postal lapse, see Andrew J. Mitchell, 'Meaning Postponed': *Finnegans Wake* and The Postcard' in *James Joyce Quarterly* Vol.44.1, Autumn 2006, 59-76.



the forger, but also precipitating Parnell's own fall from grace); the characters' squabbles (and the reader's genuine confusion) over who wrote the Wakean letter – the professor's frustrated outburst of 'who in hallhagal wrote the durn thing anyhow?' (FW, 107.36-108.1) echoing the reader's 'bewilderblissed' exasperation (FW, 107.16); and of course Shaun's vexation at Shem's supposed plagiarism of his work: 'Every dimmed letter in it is a copy and not a few of the silbils and wholly words I can show you [...] The last word in stolentelling!' (FW, 424.32-35).<sup>40</sup>

We see it too in the motif of mistaken or disguised identity in *Ulysses*: Bloom's epistolary pseudonym, Henry Flower, returns to incriminate him in 'Circe' when, insisting to the First Watch that he is 'Dr Bloom, Leopold, dental surgeon' (this itself is a lie, as Bloom works in advertising) Bloom drops his Post Office card: 'Henry Flower. No fixed abode.' (U, 432). When Martha, a fittingly 'veiled figure', appears, she too has been concealing the facts: 'My real name is Peggy Griffin' (U 432-3). More of his clandestine female correspondents emerge to arraign the hapless Bloom, whose 'improper letters' in 'several handwritings' attest to his duplicitous character (U 442, 441). The 'Greek ees' (U, 267) he employs as disguise in his letters to 'Martha' resurface in the Wakean letter as 'superciliouslooking crisscrossed Greek ees awkwardlike perched there and here out of date like sick owls hawked back to Athens', hinting that the author of the Wakean letter is Bloom-like in his deceptions and disguises (FW, 120.19); it is also, of course, yet another example of the 'multiplicity of personalities inflicted on the [...] document' (FW, 107.24-25). Here it is the reader of the letter, rather than the writer, who is compromised by the limitations of the conventional letter form, which do not immediately betray an imposter or expose a fraud. Of course, in this case, one man's constriction is another's opportunity, and if the reader is liable to suffer the consequences of the letter's aptness for disguise, the writer, conversely, only stands to gain from it, provided he or she avoids those perilous slips; remembers 'the spell of hesitancy'; manages to 'Remember write Greek ees' (U, 267).

If part of the nonsense writer's method is to expose the limitations of the letter, the other is to plumb its possibilities. It is the role of the nonsense writer to ask questions of the letter form, as he does of all received ideas and conventions, alert to its paradoxes and problems. In the traditional epistolary novel, the fictional letter is, in general, a closed circuit: it affects the host text, and is affected by it, but it is a sealed

---

<sup>40</sup> The joke here, of course, is that every (orthographic) 'letter' is a 'copy', as is every 'word' in the dictionary, because we don't invent but inherit the language we use.

room, and essentially a separate text, operating on a separate plane, from the main narrative. The nonsense writer sees untapped potential here, and, surveying this sealed room, sets about removing selected bricks, creating opportunities for the letter to leak through to the main text, contaminating and complicating it.

Before we examine the effects of such a strategy, it is worth considering some of these paradoxical structural, spatial, and narratological elements of the fictional letter, all of which contribute to its problematic condition, in more detail. There is, to begin with, the letter's twin status as textual artefact or souvenir on the one hand, and indistinguishable part of the wider text on the other. The fictional letter is at once a separate material entity (complete with envelope, stamp, folds, rips, and stains, as in the *Wake's* 'teatimestained' missive) which stands outside of the text that hosts it, and which directly influences the action and direction of the host text; but it is also an inextricable part of the larger text, printed, bound, and circulated with the rest of the text and existing as an actual, concrete 'letter' only in the reader's imagination. The interpenetration of the letter-within-the-text and the text-outside-the-letter is complex. On the one hand, the letter (usually) furthers plot developments, and thus holds a certain narrative power over the text in which it is situated; this lopsided relationship is the occasion for some of Joyce's most notable and noticeable obfuscations, for the Wakean letter is afforded a much muddier sort of power, not so much directing the 'plot' (such as it is) but by turns confirming, distorting and condensing it. On the other hand, the context in which the fictional letter appears affects and limits whatever meaning the letter is able to convey, and in this sense the letter is subsidiary, operating on a subordinate narrative plane to the rest of the text. A further complicating factor of the text-letter relationship is the physical state of the letter as it is described or reproduced in the host text is curiously dependent on its situation within that text, and on what the larger text would have it signify, as we will see later in Joyce's use of textual errors or physical blemishes in letters from both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

To understand this simultaneously privileged and subsidiary textual space that the fictional letter inhabits, I would like to compare an ingenious illustration of the Wakean letter with a three-dimensional puzzle in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. In his book *Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction*, John Paul Riquelme produces a pleasing illustration of the *Wake's* letter as Möbius strip. The letter's contents, everything from alpha to omega we are told, are written on either side of a strip of paper ('A . . . . . !' on the recto and '? . . . . . O!' on the verso (FW,

94.21-2), which is twisted and ‘cunningly folded’ with ‘Doublends Jined’ (FW, 20.6), to make a never-ending text: a Möbius strip.<sup>41</sup> Adopting the well-established reading of the letter as synecdochic representation of the *Wake* in its entirety, we might view Riquelme’s Möbian illustration as a reading of remarkable imaginative potential. (Though one suspects the critic himself did not realise, or at least did not utilise, the potential of his analysis, which is not extended beyond the letter itself to an analysis of the conceptual structure of the *Wake*, and which is given only a cursory two pages of discussion within his thesis). The possibilities of his reading begin to unravel, however, if we compare this Möbius conception of the Wakean letter with a puzzle presented by the mysterious Mein Herr in Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. To amuse his company, Mein Herr constructs a ‘Fortunatus’s Purse’ from three handkerchiefs tied in such a way that outer surface of one side of the purse is continuous with the inner surface of the other side. It is called the Fortunatus’s Purse because, as Mein Herr puts it, “‘Whatever is *inside* that Purse, is *outside* it; and whatever is *outside* it, is *inside* it. So you have all the wealth of the world in that leetle Purse!’” (CLC, 523). This in itself makes for a fitting description of the *Wake*, which, aspiring to Hamlet’s principle of ‘infinite space [...] bounded in a nut-shell’, attempts to deliver ‘Allspace in a Notshall’ (FW, 455.29) or ‘Ommitudes in a knutshedell’ (FW, 276, lefthand margin).

Now we might view the letter of the *Wake* as a Fortunatus’s Purse, which contains ‘all the wealth’ of its host text, its ‘world’: it is not only artefact, but artifice. ‘Whatever is inside’ that brief, mutating Letter, is outside it; and whatever is outside it, is inside it. And of course, the letter always indicated this, to return to its central Möbian riddle:

Now tell me, tell me, tell me then.

What was it?

A . . . . . !

? . . . . . O! (FW, 94.19-22)

Joyce poses the letter like a riddle, and challenges us to solve it; in answering the riddle, as we would a letter, we are given a privileged insight into the textual possibilities Joyce is exploring. The world the Wakean letter inhabits is also the world it creates, and

---

<sup>41</sup> John Paul Riquelme, 1983. *Teller and Tale in Joyce’s Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

instead of asking whether the chicken preceded the egg or *vice versa*, we find ourselves having to ask: which came first, the letter around which the book revolves, whose discovery initiates the action and affects the book's characters ('It made ma make merry and sissy so shy and rubbed some shine off Shem and put some shame into Shaun' (FW, 94.10-12)); or the book which houses and expands the letter, and whose characters are its authors? These are complex questions. Perhaps, as Wilhelm Fuger has suggested, it isn't a case of which came first but rather which is which, if we take his view that 'the letter and the novel can no longer be separated from each other, since the letter actually *is* the novel – not merely in the form of a mirror-scene or a microversion of the novel itself, but in each and every regard, in a most fundamental way.'<sup>42</sup>

While the letter might seem powerful in its incarnation as Möbius strip or all-inclusive Fortunatus's Purse, its full meaning is perfectly inaccessible without the rest of the text to decode it and convert its content into narrative consequences. For it is almost always the case that when a fictional letter (nonsense-influenced or not) is placed within a text, its literal content – its private thoughts, feelings and observations – only attains significance by the way in which it enables further plot developments, and by the consequences it implies for the characters involved in it or exposed to it. And even while Joyce invests the letter with special Möbian, 'universe in a Notshall' status, he confirms this bind. It is not for nothing he has a chicken discover the 'egg' letter: the letter's host, after all, retains its narrative – and natal – power over the letter itself, whether or not the letter contains 'everything that is outside' it. The fact that the letter is found at the dump, a morpheme that is frequently used to signal that famously obtuse egg, Humpty Dumpty, seals the connection between egg and epistle ('a most alleghant spot to dump your hump' (FW, 129.17-18); 'Hump for humbleness, dump for dirt' (FW, 242.22); 'Humps, when you hised us and dumps, when you doused us' (FW, 624.13-14)).

The chicken and egg puzzler is doubly apt when we consider the natal connotations of the letter as an object, which develops or gestates in the mind and on the page of its author, to be either carried or miscarried by the postal system and delivered by the midwife postman (and Joyce, as we would expect, makes very good use of these puns of (mis)carriage and delivery). Perhaps this partly explains why the letter's long-established link with the female, and with female desire and expression, has become

---

<sup>42</sup>Wilhelm Fuger, "Epistlemadethemology" (FW, 374.17): ALP's Letter and the Tradition of Interpolated Letters', in *James Joyce Quarterly* vol.19.4 (Summer 1982), 405-413 (412-13).

such a fixture of critical discourse on the theme of the letter.<sup>43</sup> An impishly riddling sentence on Shaun the Post exploits this connection brilliantly:

A human pest cycling (pist!) and recycling (past!) about the sledgy streets, here he was (pust!) again! (FW, 99.4-6)

Here, in a game of Chinese whispers,<sup>44</sup> Joyce sets a riddle whose answer is the obviously absent word (post!). The author circles four times around this important word, and as the sentence progresses he ticks off all possible vowels, drawing our attention to the crucial missing vowel: 'o'. Notice the silent pun: the missing word indicates an (epistolary) letter – post – which is missing only because of an absent (alphabetic) letter – o. The riddle is solved when the 'post' is finally delivered, via the letter 'o'. Of course, the significance of this letter is highly suggestive, both a romantic 'sweet nothing', the subject of many a Wakean 'billy doo' (FW, 437.8) but also, vitally, a sign for the vagina. This link harks back to Molly Bloom's Penelope, who is, as Vicki Mahaffey has written, 'obsessed with letter writing as a form of lovemaking, liberal with letters in her mental orthography', and whose quasi-orgasmic, 'cunniform' (FW, 198.25) 'O's fall frequently as regenerative impulses throughout her soliloquy.<sup>45</sup> The epistolary, the orthographic, and the natal are knit together here, perhaps to be sent 'to the post puzzles department' (FW, 364.6-7) for unpicking. That the 'o' is shaped like the wheels of Shaun's post-bicycle, and is a circle, not only like those in which Shaun is cycling and 'recycling', but also like the grand 'communication circulaire' of epistolography, adds further shades of mischief and meaning.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> For further, more conclusive explanations for this, see Carolyn Steedman's essay 'A woman writing a letter' in Rebecca Earle (ed.) 1999. *Epistola ry Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers 1600 – 1945*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 111-33, and also Ruth Perry, 1980. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York: AMS Press. For an analysis of the Wakean women as they are reflected through the prism of the letter, see Claudine Raynaud, 'Woman, the Letter Writer; Man, the Writing Master' in *James Joyce Quarterly* vol. 23.3 (Spring 1986), 299-324.

<sup>44</sup> Also known as 'Whisper-down-the-lane', Chinese whispers is a children's game in which a group forms a line or circle, and the leader whispers a phrase or word to the next person, who whispers it to the next person, and so on. By the time it reaches the end of the line or has come full circle, the phrase is usually drastically, comically altered. I apply a 'Chinese whispers' analysis to the verbal play of *Finnegans Wake* in Chapter Two.

<sup>45</sup> Vicki Mahaffey, 1988. *Reauthorizing Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 175.

<sup>46</sup> Alain Pages argues that since letters 'follow one another [and] imply one another', they follow 'a circular rhythm based on chronological continuity,' ('La Communication circulaire' in Jean-Louis Bonnat and Mireille Bossis (eds), 1983. *Ecrire, Publier, Lire, Les Correspondances* (Université de Nantes, Département de Psychologie, B.P. 1015, 343-61). For more on the significance of the letter 'o' in the *Wake*, and its relation to the Wakean letter, see Talia Schaffer, 1992, 'Letters to Bidy: About That Original Hen' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 29, 623-42.

### 3. 'FOLDED WITH CUNNING': SEX AND THE LETTER

Joyce the man may be said to be even more overtly 'obsessed with letter writing as a form of lovemaking' than his prose Penelope, judging from the feverish urgency and ardour of his pornographic scribbles to Nora Barnacle. Joyce the author is, with good reason, subtler and cleverer in his demonstrations of the sexual desires and misdemeanours of his letter-writing characters, but the 'obsession' with, the persistent yoking of, letter-writing and sex remains self-evident. Having drawn out the pregnant puns surrounding the (mis)carriage and delivery of the Wakean letter, it is now time to examine the (often subconscious) practices, performances, and perversions by which the libidinous undertones of the solitary letter-writer can be traced. We have seen how into Edward Lear's neologic nonsense letter has been (dubiously) read an emotional involvement and even homoerotic desire for the addressee; and how Lewis Carroll's suggestive plum allegory in his letter to a young girl 'reveals his sexual nature.' Joyce's fictional letters contain similar clues and codes by which we can exhume the buried sexual cravings and crimes that colour his novels. In *Ulysses*, for example, the various letters between Bloom, Molly, Milly, Boylan, and Martha, inscribe the sexual transgressions occurring between these characters, either by referring matter-of-factly to a realistic representation of a sexual encounter, or, crucially, by symbolically representing it through a textual slip: a misspelling, a mispronunciation, a physical tear. Martha's letter is a case in point: her language is riddled with different species of error, from misspellings ('I do not like that other world') and the mismanagement of tenses ('I will punish you [...] if you do not wrote'), to elisions ('I feel so bad about.') and comic grammatical blunders ('my patience are exhausted') (U 74-5). Almost all fictive letters in Joyce's later prose come with some kind of sign referring to the sexual transgression that 'marks' or 'stains' the pages, and of course the reputations of those signified within the letter. This inherent slippage could be read as the mark of sin, or as a sign of a fallen and chaotic language which goes hand in hand with man's hubris, pride, or shame.

Let us turn first to that instructive and revealing *Ulysses* letter: Martha Clifford's to Bloom's illicit avatar, 'Henry Flower'. The way Joyce goes about staging this scene is fascinating, and extremely telling. Affected indifference, underlying agitation and a grim bravery in the face of possible disappointment are the vague and

understated emotions with which Bloom enters the Post Office ('Careless air: just drop in to see'; 'No answer probably. Went too far last time' (U, 69)); the soldiers staring down at Bloom from posters on the Post Office walls as he commits his quasi-adulterous act anticipate the Wakean soldiers bearing witness to Earwicker's indecency in the park; solitude is crucial for Bloom both before and after his receipt of the letter – a third party could only play the role of witness or gooseberry to his epistolary affair (M'Coy unwittingly plays the latter in his brief exchange with the preoccupied Bloom). The first thing Bloom does, after thrusting the incriminating article into his pocket, is finger and 'rip' the envelope, in a passage full of unsubtle innuendo: 'His hand went into his pocket and a forefinger felt its way under the flap of the envelope, ripping it open in jerks' (U, 70). The delay between the receipt of and the reading of the letter is well placed to frustrate us, just as Bloom himself is frustrated. The intrusion of the social world (represented by M'Coy) into Bloom's private, erotic one (represented by Martha Clifford) is keenly felt in Bloom's impatience (which we share) and conversational inattentiveness; already titillated by the letter he is furtively fondling, he abandons himself to voyeuristic daydreams about a woman across the road, waiting for a flash of silk stocking from the non-complicit prototype of Gerty MacDowell.

After shaking off M'Coy and taking a moment to survey the 'multicoloured hoardings' of shop advertisements, Bloom escapes to the 'safety' of a quiet lane, whose description is beautifully loaded with significant and gently contrasting metaphors:

He turned into Cumberland Street and, going on some paces, halted in the lee of the station wall. No-one. Meade's timberyard. Piled balks. Ruins and tenements. With careful tread he passed over a hopscotch court with its forgotten pickeystone. Not a sinner. Near the timberyard a squatted child at marbles, alone, shooting the taw with a cunnythumb. A wise tabby, a blinking sphinx, watched from her warm sill (U, 74).

This is the kind of street which, later that day, might accommodate the sort of furtive couplings Bloom can this morning access only in letters. Four details stand out in this scene: the ruins, the children's games, the 'cunnythumb', and the sphinx. Or, to unpack these symbols a little crassly: time and decay, childhood and play, innuendo, sex, and riddles (the cunnythumb is actually a pitcher for small balls (e.g. marbles), but the sexual connotations of the word should not be ignored). This mixture is a heady one, in keeping with the chapter's drowsy narcoticism, and each swirling property is bound in and embodied by Martha's letter, which Bloom can at last read:

Dear Henry,

I got your last letter to me and thank you very much for it. I am sorry you did not like my last letter. Why did you enclose the stamps? I am awfully angry with you. I do wish I could punish you for that. I called you naughty boy because I do not like that other world. Please tell me what is the real meaning of that word. Are you not happy in your home you poor little naughty boy? I do wish I could do something for you. Please tell me what you think of poor me. I often think of the beautiful name you have. Dear Henry, when will we meet? I think of you so often you have no idea. I have never felt myself so much drawn to a man as you. I feel so bad about. Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you. So now you know what I will do to you, you naughty boy, if you do not wrote. O how I long to meet you. Henry dear, do not deny my request before my patience are exhausted. Then I will tell you all. Goodbye now, naughty darling. I have such a bad headache today and write *by return* to your longing

MARTHA.

P.S. Do tell me what kind of perfume does your wife use. I want to know (U, 74-5).

Richard Ellmann's neat summary of the diction of this letter focuses on Martha's errors, which 'are examples of grammatical decay, of language gone gamey.'<sup>47</sup> It is gamey in more senses than one – pungent like stale perfume, decayed like Cumberland Street's ruins, lewd like the cunnythumb, but also game-y: full of emotional games (Martha's) and linguistic games (Joyce's). These are twinned with the children's games that furnish Bloom's inner and outer worlds as he opens the letter: the deserted hopscotch court he crosses with 'careful tread', presumably out of a superstition about not stepping on the lines, and the 'squatted child at marbles' who triggers a memory: 'And once I played marbles when I went to that old dame's school' (U, 74). Childish things assert themselves too in the letter's suggestive language, which assigns to Bloom the sexualised role of a 'naughty boy' whose bad behaviour must be 'punished' by a demanding mother figure (this reverses a template from Swift's *Journal to Stella*, where he calls Stella and Mrs. Dingley 'nautinautinautideargirls'; I dare not say nauti without dear: O, faith, you govern me').<sup>48</sup> Oedipal overtones are reinforced by the 'blinking sphinx' on her warm sill, whose association with riddles makes this the scene of a text-

<sup>47</sup> Richard Ellman, 1984. *Ulysses on the Liffey*. London: Faber and Faber, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Swift, 1948. *Journal to Stella*. London: J.M. Dent, 71.



wide, extra-epistolary, orthographical riddle: the superfluous 'l' in Martha's letter, poached from the (yet-to-happen) misprint in that evening's paper, when an 'L. Bloom' is reported to have paid his respects at Dignam's funeral. The idea of rogue (orthographic) letters breaking from their moorings and drifting through the text, causing mischief by making nonsense out of perfectly sensible 'worlds' is an attractive and playfully Joycean one; that the extra letter in this instance surfaces in Martha's missive seems to comment on the problem of the 'space' of the fictional letter discussed in the previous section of this chapter. By means of the wandering 'l', the letter is hinged to its host text, the relationship between the two interdependent: Joyce has built a portal into the traditionally 'sealed room' of the fictional letter. There are sexual implications here too: the phallic 'l' from Bloom's name has penetrated Martha's acquiescent and accommodating letter, and the roles of giver and receiver take part in a typically 'nonsense', typically Joycean reversal or blurring of opposites, albeit on the separate planes of epistolarity (Bloom is the receiver of Martha's letter) and orthographical pranks (Martha's textual space is the receiver of Bloom's errant letter 'l').

It is interesting to see how these symbolic cornerstones of the scene of Martha's letter – ruins, games, sex, and sphinx – correspond with those of the Wakean letter. Found in the field of decay, the 'Dirt-dump' (615.12), this letter has already become a physical ruin itself, a torn and 'teatimestained' relic. Games and riddles surround it,<sup>49</sup> both in its Möbian construction, and also in questions concerning the letter's status and history:

Wind broke it. Wave bore it. Reed wrote of it. Syce ran with it. Hand tore it and wild went war. Hen trievied it and plight pledged peace. It was folded with cunning, sealed with rime, uptied by a harlot, undone by a child. It was life but was it fair? It was free but was it art? The old hunks on the hill read it to perfection. It made ma make merry and sissy so shy and rubbed some shine off Shem and put some shame into Shaun (FW, 94.5-12).

'Folded with cunning', a reference to the letter's Möbian shape but also the folds of the female genitalia, splices (with cunning) the letter and the female body. This link reasserts itself throughout the *Wake*'s circulating letter fragments, which, according to

---

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, riddles and letters are often yoked together in Joyce, as twin illustrations of the communication or comprehension gap between the 'riddlemaker' (U, 454) and the solver, the letter-writer and reader.

John Nash, envelope the text within their 'litany of innuendo'.<sup>50</sup> In the professorial exegesis of the Boston letter in Book 1.5, the speaker picks up on the 'incestuish salacities among gerontophils' and 'tenderloined passion hinted at' (FW, 115.12), and develops his analysis into a condemnation of those 'grisly old Sykos' (FW, 115.21), a ring of older, often pedagogic males who court the attention of young girls; who include among their number Lewis Carroll, HCE, and Bloom, and 'who have done our unsmiling bit on 'alices, when they were yung and easily freudened' (FW, 115.23).

The professor himself is complicit in this, however, as he is linked with the professor figure to whom Issy (or her second personality, Maggy) writes her loveletter in Book 3.2, perhaps the most notable section in the book for a dual indulgence in sex- and letter-play.<sup>51</sup> In it, Jaun conducts a stern sermon to the girls of St. Bride's, warning of the dangers of those ill-intentioned (and here distinctly Carrollian) 'grisly old Sykos' who 'may soon prove [the] undoing' of their innocence: 'inching up to you, disarranging your modesties and fumbling with his forte paws in your bodice after your billy doos' (FW, 438.3-5). Soon after, Issy / Maggy pens her loveletter to Jaun and a professor figure, or 'grapbed her male corrispondeo to fluster sweet nunsongs in his quickturned ear' (FW, 457.28-9). These 'sweet nothings' are full of 'sweet nonsense': jokes, innuendos, puns, and doubles; more shades of Carroll's 'linkingclass girl' and scraps of Maggy's polymorphous *billet doux* (FW, 459.4). There is plenty of sex: when Issy mentions her 'latest lad's loveliletter', she remembers: 'He fell for my lips, for my lisp, for my lewd speaker. I felt for his strength, his manhood, his do you mind?' (FW, 459.23-9) This lisping develops into a Swiftian little language and, 'to thalk thildish', Issy gives 'a tiss to the tassie for lu and for tu!' (FW, 461.28-30). Here, as in *Ulysses*, sex-talk is hinged to baby-talk via the playful, sinful letter ('Letterspeak, Lettermuck' (FW, 456.26-7)).

So, sex and its trappings have an entrenched and meaningful correlation with epistolarity in Joyce. Returning to the Martha / Bloom correspondence, we shall see how connection is borne out, and examine how these characters' epistolary practices come to describe and define their sexual ones. To turn first to Martha's 'language of flowers', whose scents Bloom blends with the sense of her letter: 'Angry tulips with you

---

<sup>50</sup> John Nash, 2002, 'The Logic of Incest: Issy, Princes, and Professors'. *James Joyce Quarterly* 39.3, 435-55.

<sup>51</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the professor figures in the Wake's letters, see John Nash (ibid.). The professor as receiver of Issy's love letter also represents the psychiatrist Morton Prince, who analysed the multiple personalities of Christine Beauchamp, on whom Issy is partly based. This connection is discussed more fully in Chapter Four.

darling manflower punish your cactus if you don't please poor forgetmenot...' (U, 75). (This resurfaces in the *Wake*, after the longest version of the letter, as 'the languo of flowers' (FW, 621.21), when ALP recalls her husband 'Blooming in the very lotust and second to nill, Budd!' (FW, 620.2-3).<sup>52</sup> From the pin on the flower enclosed in Martha's letter, Bloom's thoughts travel to the pins of women's clothes, and the 'Mairy' of a song in which she:

*... lost the pin of her drawers.  
She didn't know what to do  
To keep it up  
To keep it up (U, 76).*

The habitual association in Bloom's mind between the letter and the female body, or, more specifically, her clothes, is established over a series of mental leaps like this one. During Bloom's conversation with M'Coy, we remember, he is balancing two separate yet overlapping longings: the longing to read the letter in his pocket, and the longing to 'Watch! Watch! Silk flash rich stockings white' of the woman across the road (U, 71). Later, on the strand, as this second longing is fulfilled by Gerty, his attention is drawn back to Martha's letter; again his hand is in his pocket, but the knowing, suggestive language that occasions his breaching of Martha's envelope is now 'soft, sweet, soft' for this parallel 'wondrous revealment', given to us in Gerty's dreamily romantic, girlish register (U, 362-64). During his fraught trial in Circe, Bloom is accused of lying 'on the bed [...] gloating over a nauseous fragment of wellused toilet paper presented to him by a nasty harlot, stimulated by gingerbread and a postal order' (U, 504), and by the Honourable Mrs. Mervyn Talboys, who has perhaps heard of his taste for 'soiled personal linen' (U, 511), of 'implor[ing] me to soil his letter in an unspeakable manner' (U, 442). Like the 'Greek ees', this is another Bloomian trait to resurface in connection with the Wakean letter, which at one point is 'Too Let. To Be Soiled' (FW, 421.8). Here, the sexual 'stain' typically represented by a grammatical or orthographical error, or by a material tear, is bodied forth in an altogether more explicit, scatological way.

Vicki Mahaffey has noticed the triangular relationship between 'sexuality, language, and clothing' in *Ulysses*; I propose that a fourth element, letter-writing, be

---

<sup>52</sup> 'As well as a backwards Dublin, this 'Budd' may signal the penis, whose incarnation as a 'flower' dominates 'The Lotus Eaters', and the Irish for which is *bod*, pronounced 'bud'.

included here for a tidy, letter-shaped square of interdependent associations.<sup>53</sup> Like letters, language and clothes are 'exaggerated representations of physical reality';<sup>54</sup> both letters and clothes are, or can be, containers of secrets, and both perform a subtle balancing act between 'efforts to reveal and efforts to conceal'; as we see from *Ulysses* and the *Wake*, rips or stains on both clothes or letters are apt to write a coded history of the misdemeanours, crimes, or histories of characters; and clothes allow their wearer, as letters allow their author, as much opportunity for disguise as for recognition.<sup>55</sup> There is, in light of these similarities, a comparison to be made between a relationship which is established on an epistolary level, and a relationship which unfolds on a visual, sartorial level: that is Bloom-Martha, and Bloom-Gerty.

Martha and Gerty both wilfully misconstrue Bloom in their somewhat tenuous interactions with him, and their friable, distance-crossing (mis)communications with him (neither of which, importantly, involves speech) enables them to communicate successfully only with a Bloom of their respective imaginations: Martha's Bloom is an unhappy 'naughty boy' who might just be the answer to her own loneliness (he is not), and Gerty's is a 'steadfast, sterling man, a man of inflexible honour' full of 'passion silent as the grave' (he is not). Of course, they are not alone in their deluded, solipsistic relationships; Bloom is equally blinkered (equally wilfully), writing letters to Martha not out of personal sympathy, but only that he may receive hers in return (a motive evidenced by his habitual enclosure of a stamp for Martha's use – an attempt to ensure a response), and viewing Gerty only as a 'hot little devil', and the unanticipated occasion of his orgasm (this occasion, of course, should have been Martha's doing; but in the end Bloom is 'Damned glad I didn't do it in the bath this morning over her silly I will punish you letter' (U, 351)). These two pseudo-amorous communications, then, are one-sided on *both sides*. That the two sexual impulses linking these scenes – voyeurism and masturbation – are tied up with Martha's letter and Gerty's underwear reveals the rather pathetic defining qualities of both relationships: namely, miscommunication, self-delusion, and sexual isolation. It also signifies the essentially solitary, even solipsistic nature of Bloom's 'romantic' 'ononymous letters' (FW, 435.30).

---

<sup>53</sup> Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce*, 155.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Letters in Joyce are also prone to mention clothes. Milly's letter to Bloom, for example, begins: 'Thanks ever so much for the lovely birthday present. It suits me splendid. Everyone says I am quite the belle in my new tam.' (U, 63). Perhaps this is a template for one of Issy's footnote letters: 'Well, Maggy, I got your castoff devils all right and fits lovely. And am vaguely graceful. Maggy thanks.' (FW, 273.22) Remember also that the hen finds the letter from 'Boston, Mass.' amongst 'boaston nightgarters and masses of shoesets', all of which she puts in her 'nabsack' (FW, 11.22-3, 19).

These correspondences stand apart from those between Molly and Blazes Boylan, for the simple reason that Boylan and Molly use words as a means to action: their letter is a merely functional arranger of an actual rendezvous. For Bloom and Martha, letters act as both erotic means and end. Circulating endlessly around one another's words and phrases, their letters lead nowhere, and their repetitiveness is stagnant. Carroll was aware of the black hole of epistolary repetition, warning in his 'Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing' that the consequences of repetition are that 'you will go on, like a Circulating Decimal. *Did you ever know a Circulating Decimal come to an end?*' (SLLC, 288). Martha and Bloom typify that circulating decimal.

Not only is their correspondence repetitious, it manages to mean very little too. Even Martha's threats are vague and non-committal: when she warns Bloom, 'So now you know what I will do to you [...] if you do not write', she is lying. All he knows is that she will 'punish' him, but 'How will you pun? You punish me?' he is compelled to ask (U 75, 268). Their language and dialogue is as empty, vague, and circuitous as the 'poem' Humpty Dumpty recites to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

*"I sent a message to the fish:  
I told them 'This is what I wish.'*

*The little fishes of the sea,  
They sent an answer back to me.*

*The little fishes' answer was  
'We cannot do it, Sir, because -'"*

[...]

*"I sent to them again to say  
'It will be better to obey.'*

*The fishes answered, with a grin,  
'What a temper you are in!' (Haughton, 190).*

Nothing is said in this piscine exchange: everything is phrased with the intention of avoiding both action and signification, and just when it seems like an explanation is about to be made, aposiopesis interrupts. The correspondence between Martha and Bloom is coloured not only by miscommunication, but by non-communication. We understand the letters by their various failures – failure to identify, failure to specify,

failure to clarify – and piece together their possible meanings from omissions and errors. This ultimate failure of communication shows their correspondence to be utterly threadbare; they ‘correspond’ only in that their individual self-absorption and sexual isolation proves to be mutual.

The self-enclosed, autoerotic ‘correspondences’ of the Martha-Bloom-Gerty triangle take us back to the fundamental attribute of the letter which makes it so engaging, as a form, to the nonsense writer. In section two of this chapter, I argued that the tendency of the letter towards communication failure is what makes it such an appealing instrument for the nonsense writer; it strikes him as absurd as both a concept and an object, and is a convenient platform for underlining and undermining our assumptions about the nature of communication, which the letter shows to be inadequate, contaminated, and uncontrollable. Joyce, Carroll, and Lear use the model of the letter to pose questions about the nebulous and multiplicitous natures of meaning and identity as they are generated in a text. The condition of continuous and inexorable misconstruction that brands all of our attempts at direct dialogic interaction runs like a watermark throughout the nonsense letter, and is presented as part of a pattern that stretches back to the fall of Babel, and includes an inventory of riddles, jokes, puzzles, puns, absurd exchanges and juxtapositions, lunatic babblings and stricken silences, omissions, errors, logical fallacies, innuendos, blank pages, violent outbursts, split personalities, semantic and ontological crises, and multiplicitous, contradictory, or indeterminate sets of meanings: an inventory, in other words, of all the defining characteristics of the nonsense condition.

It is the letter’s dialogic status that makes it the perfect device with which nonsense writers can show the idea – or ideal – of clear, direct communication to be a collective illusion, upheld by epistolary conventions which, given their limitations, appear absurd when subjected to scrutiny. Of course, one of the main objectives of nonsense writing is to level this same argument – that we are deceived in our assumptions about the possibility of direct communication – at language as a whole, and it is inevitable that the letter, being not only made of language but bound, by its pun-twin the alphabetic letter, to the very foundations of language, should come implicitly under fire. The reason nonsense writers choose to focus their attack on the letter in the ways I have shown is not only because of its overtly dialogic status and purpose, but also because the letter form is a concrete – and collectively approved – textual template, through which the nonsense writer can test out his theories about

miscommunication, expose the fallacies of our assumptions, and, as we have seen, float inventive alternatives to the standard epistolary model. The communication problems outlined above are judged by the nonsense writer to be a basic and unavoidable condition of language; but because of its essentially inflexible, collectively-sanctioned tonal and structural templates, these communication problems are particularly conspicuous in epistolary letters. The letter-writer, having to contend with lapses in time and space, potential miscarriages or mutilations, not to mention the insuperable challenge of meaning what one means to mean, must inevitably be compromised by the tacit acknowledgment that, in the words of the poet-aphorist Antonio Porchia: 'I know what I have given you; I do not know what you have received'.<sup>56</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

### 'MOCKED MAJESTY': GAMES AND AUTHORITY

*You can deny ... nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play ... The play-concept as such is of a higher order than seriousness. For*

---

<sup>56</sup> Antonio Porchia (trans. W.S. Merwin), 2003. *Voices*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, p.69.

*seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.*<sup>57</sup>

*Don't destroy idols in anger; break them up in play.*<sup>58</sup>

In their innovative study, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Peter and Iona Opie separated the rhymes and songs of children into two broad categories: those 'which are essential to the regulation of [...] games and relationships,' and those which are simply 'expressions of exuberance.'<sup>59</sup> The appreciation of this distinction is integral to an understanding of the dual and contradictory nature of games and their relationship to authority. It is a relationship based on paradox: in order to allow their participants to fully escape from or exclude the external hegemony of, in the Opies' preferred example, adults over children (a hegemony which is manifested in rules, restrictions, punishments, orders, and clearly defined perimeters of what is deemed acceptable behaviour), children's games must follow their own regulatory systems, and be subject to internal laws and restrictions, so as not to become the casualties of chaos, confusion, or boredom. Much like the nonsense literature which so frequently hosts them, games have the peculiar power of covertly reinforcing hierarchy whilst openly flirting with, or even purporting to represent, anarchy; this is as true of complex literary games as of those found in the playground.

It is no coincidence that games share this paradoxical status with the nonsense condition in which they often play a part. Indeed, we might easily view the dual nature of children's games, as described by the Opies, as a local instance of a larger phenomenon, a subspecies of the 'conservative-revolutionary' nature of literary nonsense. As we will recall, the descriptive term 'conservative-revolutionary' is employed by Jean-Jacques Lercercle to account for the way in which literary nonsense 'conservatively' upholds and operates within rules, hierarchies, received ideas and *status quos* as a means of ridiculing them, re-evaluating their validity, or exposing their inherent absurdity – activities which fall into the 'revolutionary' category. By comparing the patterns and functions of nonsense with those of playground games, we find that the 'conservative-revolutionary' is a condition common to both, running from

---

<sup>57</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. London, Granada, 1970, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Marquis de Sade, quoted in Walter Redfern, 1984. *Puns*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Peter and Iona Opie, 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 17.



the intellectual subculture of nonsense (and children's) literature, to the social subculture of playground lore. If nonsense upholds rules and hierarchies as a means of ridiculing and re-evaluating them, so children's games grow naturally from a solid core of well-established cultural norms, values, and customs which can then be modified, distorted, or absurdly exaggerated.

Despite any distortions visited on it during play, this core of cultural orthodoxy is the still point of the turning world of children's games, and it has two principal functions. The first corresponds to the 'conservative' half of the Lecerlean equation: it provides an organising pattern for further developments in any given game, and in this sense it indirectly generates 'rules.' For example, a children's game of kings and queens (such as Alice wants to play at the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass*) will invariably be based on the tenet that kings and queens are rich, have servants, and wield power, ergo their orders must be obeyed. Should a child pretending to be a servant refuse an order of a child pretending to be a king, the rules of the game have been violated, and bitter arguments are likely to ensue: chaos dismantles the internal structure of the game, and unhappiness is the likely result.<sup>60</sup> For J. Huizinga and other play theorists, this 'spoil-sport', who refuses to sufficiently revere the rules of the game, is a serious threat to play, for he 'shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others ... Therefore he must be cast out.'<sup>61</sup> We see how steadfastly children will cling to the roles and rules of any given game in *Finnegans Wake*. When Glugg / Shem is cast as Devil in the children's game of Angels and Devils in Book 2.1, his behaviour, speech and appearance are squarely in a diabolic mould. Even though he has never 'been greatly in love with the game' and is losing badly, attracting bullying taunts from the other children, his role as Devil seems fixed: he

---

<sup>60</sup> In his treatise on play, *Les Jeux et les hommes*, Roger Caillois draws a distinction between the cheater and the spoil-sport in games. He favours the cheater, for: 'Le tricheur, s'il viole [les règles], feint du moins de les respecter ... la malhonnêteté du tricheur ne détruit pas le jeu. Celui qui le ruine est le négateur qui dénonce l'absurdité des règles, leur nature purement conventionnelle, et qui refuse de jouer parce que le jeu n'a aucun sens.' [The cheater, if he breaks the rules, at least pretends to respect them ... the dishonesty of the cheater doesn't destroy the game. The one who ruins it is the spoilsport, who denounces the absurdity of the rules, purely conventional in nature, and who refuses to play because the game lacks meaning]. Perhaps chaos is the greatest spoilsport of all. Roger Caillois, 1958. *Les Jeux et les hommes: Le Masque et le Vertige*. Paris: Gallimard, 38.

<sup>61</sup> Huizinga, 30. Interestingly, history has been kind to those modernist authors who started to expose the 'relativity and fragility' of their writing by similar methods – breaking the rules, making self-reflexive, meta-fictional, or intertextual allusions, highlighting the materiality and fictionality of the text, and so on. Any pariah status they might have endured in the early stages of their careers was quickly dissolved, and innovators such as Joyce, Beckett, O'Brien, and Eliot, have taken their seats among the greats of the literary canon. Literary 'spoil-sports' are evidently more acceptable than their gaming cousins.

cannot, and would not, opt out of it (FW, 90.4).

This fixity of accepted roles – or Flaubertian ‘received ideas’ – operates on a narrative level too: the social norms upheld in the *Alice* books, for instance, allow plot developments utmost freedom and fluency, in the sense that once Alice is established as an upper-middle class child whose values and patterns of behaviour are unlikely to deviate from those of any other upper-middle class child, a basic pattern is established which will prevent all plot developments, however absurd they become, from descending into chaos. Susan Stewart makes this observation in her theoretical study of play space in nonsense, writing that ‘the boundaries of the event [e.g. the story, or game] are given by convention while the space within those boundaries becomes a place of infinite substitution ... [T]he boundaries are fixed and arbitrary, and they surround a permutable and incongruous content.’<sup>62</sup> In this sense, the text is subject to similar conditions, or boundaries, as the game contained therein. The significance of these fixed but invisible boundaries is evidenced in the fact that the existential problems Alice experiences during the course of both books, and which are by turns the result of memory lapses, bodily changes, grammatical loopholes, misunderstandings, and morphing or vanishing names, are largely unable to penetrate Alice’s core socially-constructed identity as an upper-middle class prepubescent female character, and this is what ballasts Carroll’s stories against the threat of chaos (even her split personalities are well-bred and proper).<sup>63</sup> This threat is even announced at the beginning of *Wonderland* when Alice, unsure of her identity after her fall, worries that she might have become another, less fortunate child, in which case:

“I shall have to go and live in that poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with, and oh, ever so many lessons to learn! No, I’ve made up my mind about it: if I’m Mabel, I’ll stay down here!” (Haughton, 19).

But of course, whoever Alice *is* in Wonderland, she is categorically not underprivileged, uneducated Mabel; the narrator quickly quells the idea, changing the focus from her notional ontological anxiety to an immediate ontological danger of a different kind (Alice realises she is rapidly shrinking). Here, Alice’s physical circumstances enact her psychological worries: while she fears that she might be a lower class, ignorant girl, her

---

<sup>62</sup> Susan Stewart 1989. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 171.

<sup>63</sup> I will be examining the ‘threat of chaos’ more fully in Chapter Four.

body is in the act of disappearing, and with it Carroll's entire narrative. If we compare this near miss, or 'narrow escape,' as Alice calls it, to the dissolution of the play-world when a player flouts a rule, we might view the facts of Alice's identity as the rules of the larger game that the writer is playing with the reader. Carroll is no spoil-sport, and he knows that to reject these rules would be to destroy his own narrative.

The second function of what I have called the 'core of cultural orthodoxy' is the 'revolutionary' one: it allows the child within the game a welcome opportunity to erase or adapt, distort or amplify some of the more mysterious manifestations of the adult world, and thus to critique it in similar, if less consciously sophisticated, ways to writers of literary nonsense. The fact cannot be ignored that the dominance of authority figures in games (particularly those that feature in nonsense), and their concomitant power to punish, to restrict, or to impose laws upon their subjects, is the product of the imitative imaginations of the players (for, as Vico observed, 'Children excell in imitation ... they generally amuse themselves by imitating whatever they are able to apprehend.')

<sup>64</sup> Sam Slote, in a genetic study of the games chapter (Book 2.1) of *Finnegans Wake*, posits that 'Children's games are a *mimicry* of adulthood,' noting that they enact 'some aspect of adult society that children have observed ... They allow children to adopt the roles of adulthood within a space circumscribed by their own boundaries.'<sup>65</sup> This echoes the Opies' finding that:

In the confines of a game there can still be all the excitement and uncertainty of an adventure, yet the young player can comprehend the whole, can recognize his place in the scheme, and, in contrast to the confusion of real life, can tell what is right action.<sup>66</sup>

These boundaries are suitably elastic, however, for within them the child can 'extend his environment, or feel that he is doing so, and gain knowledge of sensations beyond ordinary experience'.<sup>67</sup> Both this imaginative 'extension' of the child's environment and the 'mimicry' of the adult world cross the border from a 'conservative' dependence on rules and schemata to a 'revolutionary' editing and ridiculing of the same. This is also true of Carrollian nonsense, which, as Hugh Haughton has written, 'give[s] us not so

---

<sup>64</sup> Giambattista Vico (tr. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch), 1984. *The New Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Sam Slote and Luca Crispi (eds.) 2007. "'Blanks for When Words Gone': Chapter II.1," *How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp.181-213, 194.

<sup>66</sup> Opie and Opie, 2008: *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, vol.I. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 21-2

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

much an adult's view of childhood as a child's view of adulthood. Seen through the lens of Alice, the world of adulthood is [...] 'dismayingly bizarre and perverse' (Haughton, xiii)

In this chapter, I will explore the various forms and guises of authority in nonsense, from autocratic monarchs to omniscient authors, and from the parental or pedagogic authority of adults over children to the rigid and unspoken rules of children's games and discourses. I will begin with my contention that games in nonsense work against the oppressions and inequalities of the various kinds of authority which nonsense upholds, creating tensions between the need to install rules and hierarchies, which are generally deeply embedded in nonsense texts (and, necessarily, in the games themselves), and the need to break them down through play and parody. I will argue that the game-space in nonsense is therefore contaminated by the same contradictions its purpose is to elude; that is, if games provide an antidote to the autocracy of authority figures in nonsense (viz. the Queen of Hearts in *Alice*; a host of patriarchs in the *Wake*; Flann O'Brien's *Third Policeman*), they too must require an antidote to the rules and hegemonies the games themselves enforce, and so on *ad infinitum*. They are therefore not so simple as they might first appear, and this underlying complexity has its roots in the status of nonsense writing and children's games as literary and social subcultures respectively, within which power struggles are always at work – or rather at play.

Following from my readings of games in nonsense as a kind of negative performance both of real-life rules and strictures, and canonical notions of authority and value, I will explore the role of writerly authority in nonsense, critically examining the simultaneous, multi-voiced, patchwork aesthetic so typical of nonsense and nonsense-modernist texts. I will demonstrate how the manner in which children's games and songs are transmitted – indiscriminately, rapidly, and at the mercy of distortions visited upon them by mishearing and misapprehension – plays a vital role in their literary and ontological status. In an analysis of how game structures function narratologically in Joyce and Carroll, I will posit that that the presence of games allows the nonsense writer to indulge his more eccentric notions of authorship and authority. A study of the secret lexicon of children's games, focusing on the Wakean game of 'Colours', will end the chapter.

1. 'NOTHING BUT A PACK OF CARDS':  
POWER, TENSION, AND ORDER IN NONSENSE GAMES

To begin, I would like to return to the idea that during their games children 'cling' to their roles and their corresponding rules, unwilling to break the patterns and codes of conduct dictated by the game itself. We see this in Glugg's fatalistic acceptance of his role as Devil in Book 2.1 of the *Wake*, and in Alice's of her status as pawn in *Through the Looking-glass*. Many play theorists have described this phenomenon in terms of a lesson that children learn through play, and which prepares them for a productive and law-abiding life in adult society:

The contents of the social world that surrounds a child, its moral norms and rules, are reflected in play. Accepting a role, a child complies to [sic] the rules and tries to act according to them ... This improves his absorption of commonly accepted social standards and his formation of moral motivation and voluntary behaviour as well as introducing the child into national and general spiritual values.<sup>68</sup>

Such prescriptive attitudes have their roots in Plato, who urged that children be forbidden to make alterations to the rules and roles within their games, 'lest they be led to disobey the laws of the State later in life.'<sup>69</sup>

The problem with such views lies in just how much of the flavour and tenor of any given children's game must be ignored in order to reach them. The most glaring assumption is also the most naive: that the rules of children's games are of the same species, and for the same general purpose, as the laws of the adult world. For a number of reasons, this is not the case. The 'ambiguity', as Brian Sutton-Smith calls it, of children's play, means that we can never view it as a mere microcosmic representation of adult society: it is liminal, mercurial, and apt to revise Hamlet's famous question into a pleasingly paradoxical condition, 'To be *and* not to be' what it seems. A rule of a children's game, for example, bears little resemblance to a rule of law: on the one hand it is more flexible, in the sense that it is constantly under review and subject to improvements or qualifications, liable to distortions both in its transmission and in its enforcement; yet on the other hand, a game rule is more rigid, in the sense that its very arbitrariness exempts it from any need to change with the times, or be molded to fit new

---

<sup>68</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, 2001. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Opies, *Children's Games*, 25.

contexts. A rule of a children's game dating back to Ancient Greece, for example, may have changed very little in two thousand years, in contrast to the continuous process of amendments necessary to keep much more recent democratic laws concordant with ever-progressing social values. The rule of a children's game, therefore, connotes a law, but not what a law connotes. It is unreasonable to expect that what a child learns in his or her adherence to the rules of a game will encourage law-abidance later in life (indeed, if adults adhered to laws in the same way that children adhere to the rules of games, some laws would be followed so rigorously as to border on the obsessive-compulsive, while others would melt away, mutate or magically appear so capriciously that any legislation would be in a condition of continuous obsolescence: a recipe for the kind of jurisdictional nonsense we find in the 'Trial' scenes of *Alice in Wonderland*). Joyce's joke at the end of the *Wake's* games chapter is especially apt here: rather than entreating their God to 'incline our hearts to keep thy Law', they entreat their Game to 'entwine our arts with laughters low' (FW, 259.7-8). The asymmetry of the relationship between children's rules and adult laws is especially patent in those children's games, described in the Opies' book *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, which are designed to draw attention to themselves, intrude upon adult life, and actively challenge or lampoon its laws. Such games (whose activities commonly include disrupting traffic in the street or knocking on doors, as the Wakean children do while HCE is in the pub (FW, 330.30)) are compared to 'tribal protests,' not only about adults' command over the children themselves, but over the territories on which they play.<sup>70</sup>

Children's play in Joyce might be seen as being rooted in 'tribal protest.' So many of the references to children and play in his writing double up as assertions of rights, particularly of what the child feels to be his or her right to choose how best to fill and manage their time and space. Such concerns are central to the children of *Dubliners*, for whom efforts to seize control of their own time by 'miching' from school ('An Encounter' (D, 19)) or hiding from the relative who might call them in from their play ('Araby' (D, 28)), are coupled with bitterness over the colonisation of their territories: 'One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it – not like their little brown houses, but brick houses with shining roofs' (D, 34). Before the 'man from Belfast', we are told, there was Eveline's father, who 'used often to hunt

---

<sup>70</sup> Opies, *Children's Games*, 31.

them in out of the field with his blackthorn stick; but usually little Keogh used to keep *nix* and call out when he saw her father coming' (D, 34). This watchword, '*nix*,' resurfaces in *Finnegans Wake* in connection with the children, forming part of what the Opies call their 'dialectical lore.' That is, 'the language of the children's darker doings: playing truant, giving warning, sneaking, swearing, snivelling, tormenting, and fighting'; language by which the young Stephen Dedalus is memorably enthralled.<sup>71</sup>

Tribal preservation and protest is a crucial element of Joyce's writing on children from his earliest to his very latest prose, and its symbolic crystallisation of Ireland's colonial condition has not gone unnoticed. As Margot Norris has observed, many of the Joycean child's activities bear an 'imperialistic imprint': 'Clongowes boys compete as York and Lancaster at sums; they play cricket, the British public school game; Stephen plays Napoleon with his Dublin friends; the Caffrey twins build Martello towers like their colonial masters.'<sup>72</sup> We will also recall how Mr. O'Reilly's question in *Ulysses* regarding 'the slaughter of human animals who dare to play Irish games in the Phoenix park' prompts a discussion about 'Irish sport and shoneen games the like of lawn tennis and about hurley and putting the stone and racy of the soil and building up a nation once again and all to that' – so phrased that 'building up a nation' sounds like a game itself (U, 303). Through his representation of children's games as threatened spaces, vulnerable to colonisation, Joyce is able to subscribe to 'the desirability of the revivability of the ancient games and sports of our ancient panceltic forefathers' with more subtlety and less bombast than the Citizen, and yet manage to preserve the children's arena as being ultimately indifferent both to political sensitivities – in the sense that if a game is good, it will be played, no matter its country of origin – and adult prescriptiveness. That is, if 'hurley' were to officially replace cricket at Clongowes, the transgressive power it might previously have shared with unauthorised and unpoliced children's games would be lost. Norman Douglas, whose *London Street Games* provided Joyce with a rich source of games for cultivation and adaptation in the *Wake*, felt that 'organized games' could prove almost as damaging to the 'old games' as the cinema, if it weren't for the fact that 'I don't know a single boy who really cares for "organized games."<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> For '*nix*', see in particular, 'next, next and next' (FW, 231.2); 'Nixnixundnix' (FW, 415.29); 'Nichtsnichtsunchnichts!' (FW, 416.17). Opies, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, 14-15.

<sup>72</sup> Margot Norris, 1992. *Joyce's Web: The Social Unraveling of Modernism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 189.

<sup>73</sup> Norman Douglas, 1916. *London Street Games*. Gloucester: Dodo Press, 49-50.

The argument about Irish games in *Ulysses* demonstrates just how crucial Joyce considered games and play to be to the development and preservation of national culture and identity. Following from this, the child's play in Joyce's colonial Ireland is 'transgressive and creative' in character not only because the children's 'conservative-revolutionary' gamescape is given, like nonsense, to pseudo-anarchic protest, but because Joyce realised, as did the anthropologist Yrjö Hirn whose study of children's games Joyce used as a sourcebook, that an understanding of children's games is essential to an understanding of human history and civilisation.<sup>74</sup> In his essay on sport and games in *Finnegans Wake*, James Atherton identified further contemporaneous writers who agreed that 'children in play re-enact the history of their race.'<sup>75</sup> Uncompromised by any taint of the rather worthy, pedagogic motives we often find running through children's songs, poems and nursery rhymes (which in some cases prove to be barely disguised lessons in history and good behaviour, and which Carroll so brilliantly parodies and unpicks in the *Alice* books), most children's games exist quite outside of the realms of lessons and learning. The uneasy juxtaposition of the classroom and the playground makes games all the more resistant to didactic interference; indeed, if they are to function, both in nonsense writing and in reality, as a kind of relief, antidote, or even corrective to the version of reality urged on players from above, this juxtaposition, friction, and resistance are essential both to the unique status and ultimate survival of such games. With this in mind, we can define games within the same terms we apply to literary nonsense: something which stands apart from what we might call 'mainstream' culture, or cultural orthodoxy, but which is nevertheless defined by this distinction; something whose definition is dependent on what it is not, be it 'that which is not sense' or, in the case of games, 'that which is not serious', or even 'that which is not real.'<sup>76</sup> I will return to these questions in the next section of this chapter.

If a view of children's games as a 'corrective' to authorised versions of reality seems to contradict my earlier assertion that such games cleave to a 'core of cultural orthodoxy,' some clarification is required. The sense in which children's games might be seen to 'correct' authorised standpoints is in their dogged insistence on the

---

<sup>74</sup> Margot Norris, *Joyce's Web*, 189; see Yrjö Hirn (trans. Lucien Maury), 1926. *Les Jeux d'enfants*. Paris: Stock, 3.

<sup>75</sup> James S. Atherton (ed. Jack P. Dalton and Clive Hart), 1966. 'Sport and Games in *Finnegans Wake*' in *Twelve and a Tilly*. London: Faber and Faber, 52-64 (58).

<sup>76</sup> See Huizinga, 26-7.



importance of history; not history as it is taught to children in school, but rather the histories of their games, which are inscribed into the games themselves. Although children's games are firmly rooted in the 'now', being self-contained and taking place within fixed temporal boundaries, they are nevertheless accompanied by far-reaching historical contexts. Asymptotically approaching a crude kind of historicism, children's games have been found to revise, however subconsciously, what children learn from adults, excavating histories and behaviours long since suffocated by Christian teaching, and even subconsciously 'teaching' adults these revised histories – which have been received by play theorists and anthropologists from Hirn and Huizinga to Sutton-Smith and the Opies as fundamental, pagan and primitive truths.<sup>77</sup> This interplay of past and present makes children's games an ideal thematic focus for *Finnegans Wake*, which, in its presentation of complex questions about the relationship between past and present, and concerning different versions and definitions of history, 'denies the historian's fiction that the past can be seen as the past ... and emphasizes continually the interpenetration of past and present, of diachrony and synchrony.'<sup>78</sup>

Joyce's understanding of the assertion of hidden histories through games, evident from his use of Hirn and Quinet as well as from his own artistic pronouncements on the anthropological significance of 'manchild's parlements' (FW, 252.5), makes this reader skeptical of Margot Norris's argument that, in what she sees as the 'paedocentric rewriting' enacted on previous Joycean plots (in particular *A Portrait*) by chapter 2.1 of the *Wake*, Joyce is 'restoring infantile social reality to a plane of serious consideration.'<sup>79</sup> To my mind (and, I think, Joyce's), no such restoration is necessary. For one thing, while the games chapter may have been by Joyce's admission 'the gayest and lightest thing' he had yet written, it is by no means 'infantile.' The children's games are loaded with theological bartering, sexual bargaining, and mythical as well as legal topoi. Numerous different codes and conceits are in circulation. The atmosphere is thick with sexual innuendo; hints at criminal transgression; physical and mental pain (in Glugg's toothache, bruising, and humiliation); threats of libel and blackmail; broodings on the rights of women under English law; presentiments of the Fall, and many more dark motifs, which cluster and accumulate around the game as darkness ('tinct, tint' (FW, 244.13)) descends on the

---

<sup>77</sup> See Caillois, 8-61.

<sup>78</sup> Derek Attridge, 2000. *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Norris, *Joyce's Web*, 190.

gamescape of the street. Far from 'inviting trivialization' of children's play, such allegorical density, not to mention verbal complexity, elevates the chapter and the game itself to a powerful position within the overall narrative. We are by no means 'invited to read children's play with the fatuous optimism of Nausicaa's narrative,' but rather to see in children's play a resounding and rather bloody pageant, as rich in *gravitas* as felicity.<sup>80</sup>

Norris is nonetheless correct, however, when she notes that: '[T]he play of truant children in Joyce's fictions renders adult power more brutally transparent, and invents new forms and new identities ... for children to resist its force.' This being so, the games of Joyce's child characters, like those of real children, frequently use templates from the adult world; and those that don't still turn on similar kinds of tensions and power relations to those of the adult reality which casts the children themselves – the authors and players of the game – as underdogs. Herein lies Joyce's nonsense inheritance, his 'conservative-revolutionary' framework; in order to demonstrate the origins and implications of this more fully, I will now turn to the micropolitical functions of games in Carroll's nonsense world before applying my findings to Joyce's play models.

In the games of 'tribal protest' that pepper his prose from *Dubliners* to the *Wake*, Joyce might be said to offer an example of the effect that adult – and, by extension, imperial – authoritarianism exercises on play culture. In Carroll, we see such authoritarianism in all its frightening, uncensored, and majestic ferocity. The Queen of Hearts, is 'a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion – a blind and aimless Fury,' as Carroll wrote of her *Looking-glass* successor, the Red Queen, in "'Alice" on the Stage' (Haughton, 296). Such characteristics are catastrophic in an autocrat: she is violent, despotic, and chronically contrary, posing a mortal danger to anyone within her firey radius. She embodies not only 'Fury' but absolute authority, and this renders her game of croquet an excellent lesson in the poisoning effect of real (as opposed to pretend) power in a game; the Queen's version of croquet is a brilliant nonsense sketch of a theoretical disparity between a game and its rules. As the game is set to begin, Alice quickly notices that the Queen's understanding of the rules is far from ordinary: 'the croquet balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up ... to make the arches' (Haughton, 73). Rather like Carroll

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

inventing the rules for a new game he called 'Croquet Castles', in which the balls divide into 'Soldiers' and 'Sentinels' who must invade or guard the doors of their respective 'Castles', the Queen has authored for herself a version of croquet more suitable to her purpose than the conventional game.<sup>81</sup> Her purpose, of course, is to win, and sentient balls and arches are naturally advantageous in that regard, as we see the hedgehog-balls and soldier-arches collaborating to ensure the Queen's victory and to protect themselves against the ever-present threat of the guillotine.

With the odds stacked firmly in the Queen's favour, Alice's difficulties are many: in order to even begin to play, she must subdue an errant flamingo and stay a runaway hedgehog, overcome the ground's 'ridges and furrows', and deal with arches that get up and walk away at random. The slapstick comedy in this scene is delightful, but soon takes on menacing undertones when it becomes apparent that failure to take the game seriously may well prove sufficient grounds for execution. As a bemused Alice observes the game enacted around her, we are given a description of its chaotic character:

The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarreling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once in a minute (Haughton, 74).

Here is what happens when the balance between the freedom of a game and its need for rules is removed: the game appears to have no rules, and yet the consequences of breaking them are dire. The freedom granted by an absence of rules is shown to be specious: it becomes a death warrant. The game could be read as a microcosmic representation of the autocratic Queen's mode of government, and an example of what happens when the rules of a game are treated like laws; the only difference being that both the rules of the Queen's game and the laws of her state are as final and all-encompassing as they are fickle and transitory: a typically nonsense state of contradiction and simultaneity.

A further example of the contaminating effect of the Queen's very real power on the game presents itself in Alice's dialogue with the Cheshire-Cat, who asks her how she is getting on with the game:

---

<sup>81</sup> For the rules of 'Croquet Castles', see CLC, 1143-45.

“I don’t think they play at all fairly,” Alice began, in a rather complaining tone, “and they all quarrel so dreadfully one ca’n’t hear oneself speak – and they don’t seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them [...]”

“How do you like the Queen?” said the Cat in a low voice.

“Not at all,” said Alice: “she’s so extremely –” Just then she noticed that the Queen was close behind her, listening: so she went on “– likely to win, that it’s hardly worth while finishing the game” (Haughton, 75).

In other words, the game has lost its tension. The Queen’s power and the inevitable complicity of her fearful, animate croquet apparatus has done away with any notion of competition. This is the opposite of the Joycean ‘tribal protest’: it is a routine and joyless assertion of authority. The game’s apparent spontaneity makes it all the more threatening; as Alice returns to the game after her interlude with the Cheshire Cat, the narrator tells us that ‘She had already heard [the Queen] sentence three of the players to be executed for having missed their turns, and she did not like the look of things at all, as the game was in such confusion that she never knew whether it was her turn or not’ (Haughton, 75-6).

As an illustration of what happens when the rules of games are not respected, the Queen’s game of croquet plays a significant role in Carroll’s ‘conservative-revolutionary’ aesthetic, an aesthetic rooted in the contradiction between his mathematician’s love affair with the indisputable rule and his almost paedomorphic wariness of authority for authority’s sake. The game is dystopian and despotic, unlike the more exuberant modes of play we find in the capering of the Lobster Quadrille, the pugilistic boisterousness of the Tweedles’ battle, or the absurdly egalitarian Caucus Race. There are two final aspects of the game we must bear in mind, however: first, the game is more chaotic and brutal in character than those just mentioned because it is the only one of these to take place within the boundaries of officialdom: in the garden of the head of state, rather than, like the others, in the uncorrupted no-man’s-land of the seashore or wood. The Opies were not the only play theorists to note that children’s play is more aggressive in restrictive environments such as playgrounds, where they are watched by authority figures, than that conducted in their own territories of streets and fields.<sup>82</sup> The ‘quarreling and fighting’ of the croquet players confirms the general rule

---

<sup>82</sup> See Opies, *Children’s Games*, vol.I, 31-3.

that, where play is concerned, oppression begets aggression. Secondly, and importantly, there is the fact that every player sentenced to death by the Queen is quietly pardoned by the King at the end of the game. This fact carries with it a number of possible implications: does it indicate some tacit agreement between the Queen and the King, a repudiation of her absolute authority; or between the King and the players, a resistance of her authority? Did the players know to expect this release from their sentences, and thus know them to be meaningless all along – are the Queen’s calls for execution just another part of the game? Or was the King’s a genuine and spontaneous pardon from the Queen’s genuine and spontaneous diktats? And perhaps most importantly, did Carroll consider these questions himself, or was the pardon a strategic measure designed to mollify potentially distressed child readers (as Alice herself is mollified) and avoid accusations of irresponsibility from adult critics?<sup>83</sup> We are not told. But whether the Queen’s decapitatory fixation is serious, mock-serious, or even both, it may still be read it as an illustration of the contaminating influence of power on games. Whether or not the players are *actually* sentenced to death, the Queen’s authority still has the rather self-defeating effect of stopping the game dead: indeed, her game of croquet has to stop because ‘all the players, except the King, the Queen, and Alice, were in custody under sentence of execution’ (Haughton, 81).

A neat contrast can be made here with the Caucus Race, which is the first game Alice encounters after her fall into Wonderland. As with the hectic, seemingly unregulated proceedings of the game of croquet, in which we will recall that ‘the players all played at once, without waiting for turns’ (Haughton, 74), the Caucus Race too betrays a scant regard for order: ‘There was no “One, two, three, and away!”’, but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over’ (Haughton, 26). The creatures of the seashore, however, are decidedly more democratic than the residents of the palace, and so their similarly confusing, similarly hectic game ends not in mass executions but prizes for all. Here, again, all tension is absent from the game, this time not because of an overabundance of corrupting power, but because of a conspicuous absence thereof. In the game of croquet, the lack of tension is brought about by one player’s autocracy; in the Caucus Race, it is the intense *democracy* of the players which renders the game, as

---

<sup>83</sup> A note in Martin Gardner’s *Annotated Alice* responds to the horror and violence of the Queen’s constant murderous threats, even going to far as to suggest that children ‘undergoing analysis’ should not be allowed access to the book, in case of permanent damage to their fragile psyches (Gardner, 86, n.4).

the Gryphon would say, 'without a porpoise' (Haughton, 90). In these two parallel yet contrasting examples, Carroll shows the reader that what these games lack is what every game needs in order to properly function: order, tension, an element of competition, all born of a natural, internal hierarchy rather than an imposed, external one (such as the Queen's). That such a critique is performed within a literary text which is itself a kind of game is telling; in arguing for method and tension in games within a *text* about games, Carroll is incorporating a literary critical dimension to his thesis. A work of fiction, like a game, should be constructed around a set of tensions or rules; and in order for the game or text to keep its integrity, its author must be staunch but not tyrannical in the application of these rules.

Perhaps to ensure that this argument was not missed, Carroll aligned *Wonderland's* sequel with the trajectory of a chess game, which supplies the book's narrative arch. The *Looking-glass* chess game quickly establishes its natural hierarchy and its tension: Alice, a lowly pawn, is given the task of reaching the end of the board and becoming a Queen. The entire narrative is draped over this charmingly simple, straightforward objective. Together, *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass* present an dichotomic illustration of opposite modes of game-playing: the first fluid and flaccidly structured, the second perfected and tightly ordered. Both make the same argument in favour of order in games, and by extension literary texts, the first by negation and the other by demonstration. Both *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass* use the example of games as an allegory for nonsense: Carroll's argument for order and tension within a game is borne out in his idea of literary nonsense as a perfectly ordered, closed structure, which eschews chaos and madness even as, in its obsessive need for order, it inexorably approaches chaos and madness. It is this same nonsense condition that Joyce achieves in *Finnegans Wake*, whose excessive organisation and inclusiveness serve to 'reintroduce the danger it deprecates,' as Jean-Jacques Lecercle has put it; to invite the chaos it takes such pains to expel.<sup>84</sup> The deepest power struggle at work within these nonsense texts and the games they employ is that between order and disorder: the order of the games, and the texts, is the last stand against the darkness and confusion of chaos, just as the children's games of *Dubliners* take a stand against adult intrusions. But the battle is a losing one, and any victories can

---

<sup>84</sup> Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, 67. I will return to this view of nonsense as teetering on the east-meets-west borderline between order and chaos, in Chapter Four, with reference to Beckett's merging 'minima and maxima' in his essay on Joyce's *Work in Progress* (see Beckett (ed. Ruby Cohn), 1983. 'Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce' in *Disjecta*. Dublin: Calder, 21.)

only be transient and pyrrhic, as Joyce himself knew too well when he wrote of his *Work in Progress*:

I know that it is no more than a game but it is a game that I have learned to play in my own way. Children may just as well play as not. The ogre will come in any case.<sup>85</sup>

The shadow of this 'ogre' is palpable in the nonsense game; Carroll's version is the 'monstrous crow' which terminates the play of the Tweedle brothers (Haughton, 169). Metaphorical evils or ogres threaten the sanctuary of 'childream's hours' (FW, 219.5) in both Carroll and Joyce: puberty, sex, death, forbidden knowledge, scatological fixation, bullying behaviour, and adult intervention all play their part in contaminating the innocence of the Wakean and *Wonderland* childhood, creating a landscape of innuendo and menace. Indeed, Shem admits that he is no longer able to 'play non-excretory, anti-sexuous, misoxenistic, gaasy pure, flesh and blood games ... those old (none of your honeys and rubbers!) games for fun and element we used to play with Dina' (FW, 175.30-35) – Dina mentioned here in reference to the lost innocence of the games Alice played with her kitten Dinah *before* her portentous fall into Wonderland. Shem's relationship with play is irretrievably tainted, either by his knowledge of sex, or the arrival of Freud – an ogre we might twin with 'Eveline's' sinister 'man from Belfast' – onto the formerly unsullied scenes of childhood behaviour.

Further threatening or negative elements to the nonsense game will be examined in the final section of this chapter. For now, we must bear in mind that the role of the game in nonsense texts is crucial both thematically and strategically. The nonsense game is, like the nonsense text it inhabits, a site of deeply complex, covert, and often subconscious fears and desires; and the game stands against, in social and cultural terms, what the text stands against in literary and philosophical terms. By interacting in such complex and subtle ways, game and text provide fertile ground for the critic; each adds to and informs the other, and by studying the game within nonsense and the nonsense within the game, much can be learned about the nature, function, and meaning of both. With this in mind, I will now move from a consideration of political and cultural authority to a more textual approach, and examine how games inform, or

---

<sup>85</sup> Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 16 October 1926 (LIII, 144).

interfere with, the role of the author in nonsense.

## 2. 'TRUST US. OUR GAME. (FOR FUN!)':

### CHINESE WHISPERS, TEXT GAMES, AND DISPLACED AUTHORITY IN NONSENSE

We now have two important parallels between children's games and nonsense writing, and some idea of the complex ways in which they interact within nonsense texts. The first is a question of status: both games and nonsense are most easily defined, as shown at the beginning of the previous section, against what they are not, and thus enact a kind of negative performance of their respective 'cultural' and 'literary' norms. Nonsense is not-sense; play is not-work, not-serious; games and fiction are both not-real: as a group, the terms 'nonsense', 'play', and 'games' fall into a category of conceptual underdogs. The second parallel is a question of structure: both literary nonsense and children's games depend on the right balance of order and spontaneity, hierarchy and democracy. Both are built on the 'conservative-revolutionary' model. By aligning both the status and structure of games with those of nonsense writing, we can see how the inherent status anxiety of these two 'conceptual underdogs', combined with the unique and sophisticated structural considerations employed by both, lends itself to a literature of resistance. Political resistance, as it relates to Norris's and the Opies' ideas of 'tribal protest' in games, is an ever-present topos in the way nonsense writing deals with games, as discussed above. But a more palpable and more dynamic form of resistance can be found in nonsense writing; namely, a resistance against writing itself. The rigorous wordplay, narrative pranks, self-reflexive in-jokes and textual games that help to distinguish literary nonsense from other modes of writing are there in large part in order to tear at the fabric of writing itself, to remove its mask, to expose its contradictions, to highlight its absurdities, but most of all, to question its authority. If Carroll's and Joyce's symbolic use of games as political resistance was qualified in that, as Carroll is unafraid to demonstrate, authority always has the power to quash the game (viz. *Wonderland*-style croquet), when it comes to literary or textual resistance, the situation is reversed: it is the game that can eliminate authority, as the author becomes subsumed with in the self-generating rules of the game he is playing.

To demonstrate this point, I will now turn to a phonetic word game played by



both Carroll and Joyce, which closely resembles a popular traditional children's game called 'Chinese Whispers' or 'Whisper-down-the-lane', and which is based on the idea of misconstruction and communication failure. When Alice comments that Humpty Dumpty's conversation runs "just as if it were a game!" (184), she is expressing one of the most ingrained ideas in Carroll's writing: that dialogue is a verbal sport, chess-like in logic and competition. Carrollian dialogue, much like looking-glass chess, is unconventional and subject to perverse logical twists. In a letter to his sister Henrietta, Carroll describes a rather frustrating tutorial:

*Tutor.* What is twice three?  
*Scout.* What's a rice-tree?  
*Sub-Scout.* When is ice free?  
*Sub-sub-Scout.* What's a nice fee?  
*Pupil (timidly).* Half a guinea!  
*Sub-sub-Scout.* Can't forge any!  
*Sub-Scout.* Ho for Jinny!  
*Scout.* Don't be a ninny!  
*Tutor (looks offended, but tries another question).*  
Divide a hundred by twelve!  
*Scout.* Provide wonderful bells!  
*Sub-Scout.* Go ride under it yourself.  
*Sub-sub-Scout.* Deride the dunderheaded elf!  
*Pupil (surprised).* Who do you mean?  
*Sub-sub-Scout.* Doings between!  
*Sub-Scout.* Blue is the screen!  
*Scout.* Soup-tureen!  
And so the lecture proceeds.  
Such is Life (SLLC, 15-6).

As a mathematics tutorial this is a shambles, but as a game of Chinese Whispers it is exemplary. Unlike Carroll's wordgame 'Doublets', which relies on the orthographic manipulation of letters within words, this 'Chinese Whispers' effect is phonetic, dialogic: it is an example of the 'sounds tak[ing] care of themselves', as the Duchess would say (Haughton, 79). While it is unclear whether Joyce would have read Carroll's 'Chinese Whispers', the game none the less plays a crucial role in the *Wake's* linguistic construction – it is an organising principle of its composition.<sup>86</sup> In the *Wake*, 'Divide a hundred by twelve' could be deliberately read, heard, or written as 'Deride the

---

<sup>86</sup> For a similar reading of 'Chinese Whispers' in Joyce (developed independently of the present author's), see Dirk Van Hulle, 2008. *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-how, Beckett's Nohow*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.

dunderheaded elf', and all the 'doings [and meanings] between.'<sup>87</sup>

*Finnegans Wake* is constructed around a model of simultaneity and superimposition; Carroll's comic sketch could almost be a diagram of what two Wakean sentences would look like once flattened out with a rolling pin. This could work with any of the prolonged and compressed puns we find in the *Wake*, for example:

*Tutor*. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

*Scout*. In the name of the former and of the latter and of their holocaust (FW, 153.31).

*Sub-scout*. ... the fetter, the summe and the haul it cost (FW, 419.10).

In this sequence, the 'pupil' is the reader, receiving each distorted message with 'surprise' and timidly constructing a response. Joyce is the tutor, but also the scouts, as he projects each sentence through a verbal prism and records the potential phonetic mutation of every word, delighting in the resulting layers of sound and meaning. This is the author as Chinese Whisperer, revelling in the *sui generis* errors and vagaries of language as his words and phrases make trans-historical, trans-linguistic, and trans-cultural journeys, arriving on the page much transformed – or disfigured. Perhaps Joyce's games of 'Doublets' in the *Wake* could be read in this way too; not (or not only) as a reinvention of Carroll's letters game, but as a string of Chinese whispers running through the text, for instance:

Item. He was hardest set then. He wented to go (somewhere) while he was weeting. Utem. He wished to grieve on the good persons, that is the four gentlemen. Otem. And it was not a long time till he was [...] Atem (FW, 223.35-224.07)

Rather than letter substitution, this could be interpreted as a game of misheard words, where 'Atem' is a misheard 'Otem', 'Otem' a misheard 'Utem', and so on (for as the author counsels elsewhere in the *Wake*, 'the auditor learns': we are required to listen to the text, not merely read it (FW, 374.06)). Just as in the 'Voyage of Tristan and Iseult', where hiccups interrupt the text to remind the reader of its materiality, here these Chinese whispers words surface every so often to give the impression that the text is

---

<sup>87</sup> The poet Geoffrey Hill makes similar Chinese-whispers-style jokes about mishearing in his book-length poem, *Speech! Speech!*: 'For definitely the right era, read: deaf in the right ear.' (CV, 54). Paul Muldoon, too, is a master of comically mis-received slant-rhymes (see, for example, 'Errata' in *Hay* (1998), London: Faber and Faber, 88-9).

itself no more than an elaborate game, being played by, rather than necessarily written by, the author. Such game-playing disrupts the notion of writerly authority, as we are left wondering who is authoring who – is the author controlling the game or *vice versa*? On a narrative level, the same effect is achieved in *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the game of chess has authority over the narrative (and of course, we are also never sure who is the author of the dream we are following – Alice or the Red King). Joyce's Chinese Whispers effect takes this one step further, as the game is unleashed on the words themselves, so that the notion of authority and authorship comes directly into question, and the game is given the power to threaten the authority which, on almost every other level, only threatened *it*.

It is interesting to consider how this overlaps with the transmission of games themselves. In their studies of 'playground lore', the Opies observed the speed with which games and rhymes were transmitted across country, noting that such efficiency of exchange makes playground lore 'of peculiar value to the student of oral communication, for the behaviour and defects of oral transmission can be seen in operation.'<sup>88</sup> Carroll and Joyce both being ardent students of oral communication, it is easy to see how such a subject attracted them. The Opies comment on the inevitable distortions and competing versions that accompany such swift oral transmission, adding that such variations 'occur more often by accident than by design. Usually they come out through mishearing or misunderstanding.'<sup>89</sup> They then provide several distinctly Wakean examples:

A line in the song 'I'm a knock-kneed sparrow' quickly becomes 'I'm a cockney sparrow'. 'Calico breeches' ... become 'comical breeches'. 'Elecampane' becomes 'elegant pain'. ... At one school the pledges 'Die on oath', 'Dianothe', and 'Diamond oath' were all found to be current at the same time.<sup>90</sup>

Simultaneity, mutation, and error: all abiding artistic features of *Finnegans Wake*, writ large in the transmission of children's games, rhymes, and oaths. We see the children of *Finnegans Wake* taking part in the very same phenomenon, as their rhymes and songs change and distort, whether to adapt to new environments and contexts or simply by way of being misheard, misconstrued, or misremembered. We witness the same in

---

<sup>88</sup> Opies, 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

*Alice*, where the rhymes of her everyday world '[get] altered' phonetically, symbolically and thematically to accommodate her new nonsense surroundings (Haughton, 45).

There is an overlap, too, between the 'pelagiarist pen' (FW, 182.3) with which Joyce composed the *Wake*, and with which Carroll parodically altered existing poems, songs, and fairytales, and the peculiar authorlessness of children's games and rhymes, which are at once invented and remodelled by every child, yet at the same time are only ever copies, unowned and unfettered by one fixed origin or author. That both literary nonsense and children's lore thrive on 'the last word in stolentelling' (FW, 424.34) adds further to their shared condition of fragmented authority, displaced authorship, scattered sources and uncertain origins. Carroll provides us with the perfect demonstration of this with the following anecdote, in a letter to a child-friend:

... A very curious thing happened to me at half-past four yesterday. Three visitors came knocking at my door, begging me to let them in. And when I opened the door, who do you think they were? You'll never guess. Why, they were three cats! Wasn't it curious? However, they all looked so cross and disagreeable that I took up the first thing I could lay my hand on (which happened to be the rolling-pin) and knocked them all down as flat as pancakes! "If *you* come knocking at *my* door," I said, "I shall come knocking at *your* heads." That was fair, wasn't it?<sup>91</sup>

Carroll tells this story as if it is his own invention (indeed, as if it actually happened), but a survey of children's lore tells us otherwise. In a section on nonsense rhymes, the Opies list three sing-song variations on this tale, all involving a combination of cats, door-knocking, and rolling pins.<sup>92</sup> Carroll appropriates the rhyme, fleshes it out with a narrative, and tells it as if it is his own story – exactly the plagiaristic behaviour the Opies found children to display in the circulation of their games and rhymes. In blurring the distinction between original authorship and blatant 'stolentelling', Carroll ruptures the relationship between the author and what is being authored.

The rupture is still more evident in Carroll's use of games and dreams. At the end of *Through the Looking-glass* we are presented with an astonishing conundrum, when the author invites us to decide who dreamt the dream in which Alice found herself: Alice or the Red King. It is a remarkably postmodern, Flann O'Brien-esque confidence trick, as unsettling to the reader philosophically as it is to Alice

<sup>91</sup> Letter to Agnes Hughes, 1871 (SLLC, 49).

<sup>92</sup> Opies, *The Lore and Language of Street Children*, 23.

ontologically when she is moved to assert through tears “I am real” (Haughton, 165). But if this is one way of distancing the author from his work, and the reader from any sure sense of whose authority the work falls under, the chess game is quite another. As an ingenious alternative to the historical novelistic practice of laying out chapter headings and short abstracts at the beginning of a book, Carroll presents the narrative arch of his book in a sequence of chess moves, complete with a diagram and succinct spoiler, posed as a chess problem: ‘White pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves’ (Haughton, 113). Immediately, the author has become subordinate to the game; once the rules and moves of the game have been established, they cannot be deviated from, and the game takes over as the voice of authority. We might compare this strategy with Joyce’s schema for *Ulysses*, in which every move made by his characters has a precedent, and every theme a fixed rationale. In both examples, the relationship between the author and the work is intercepted by the system, which has a strange power over both the author who shaped it and the narrative it then shapes.

Not content with this merely triangular model of authorial distancing, however, both Joyce and Carroll have created a matrix of distancing games and structures, planting games within games to produce a disquieting hall-of-mirrors effect. *Wonderland*’s game of croquet, for instance, takes place within a game of cards, and there are various games of logic subsumed within a game of chess in *Through the Looking-glass*. In her study of nonsense, Susan Stewart writes of the folkloric quality of this ‘nesting’ technique, and cites as an example a pastime much beloved of children, and which, incidentally, the young Stephen Dedalus uses in *A Portrait* when he doodles:

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*  
*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe (AP, 11).*

Stewart, though, limits her description of nesting to the intertextual, referencing stories with stories and quotations within quotations. These methods, she holds, renders the nonsense text ‘a surface inscribed by an infinity of overlapping, mutually

implicating layers of textuality.’<sup>93</sup> Thus the text is able to ‘flaunt its fictive frame and is no longer under obligation to make sense.’<sup>94</sup> But unlike Stewart’s example of Borges’ Pierre Menard’s Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, whose plagiaristic nests defuse, decentre and dissolve the text’s powers of signification while shoring up our notion of what it means to be an author as opposed to, say, a copy-writer, conman, forger, trickster or performance artist (however we choose to view the plagiaristic Menard), Carroll’s nesting of games, rather than texts, do quite the reverse. The games played within games multiply Carroll’s texts’ powers of signification, rendering them conceptually and contextually complex; and on the other hand, authorial power is undercut by the game or games, which wrest narrative control from the author while vying for it between themselves.

A pertinent example of this dual fragmentary function of nested games can be found in the ‘Lion and Unicorn’ chapter of *Through the Looking-glass*. Already we are aware of Stewart’s intertextual nests, as we find ‘all the kings horses and all the kings men’ crashing through the forest to the aid, we are given to assume, of a fallen Humpty Dumpty; these are characters from a separate text, and almost run Alice over as they follow their separate plot. The main textual plane is quickly re-established, though, when the White King remarks that he ‘couldn’t send all the horses ... because two of them are wanted in the game’ (Haughton, 194). But no sooner has the chess game been reasserted than another game is opened up within it, as Alice takes cue from the name of the King’s messenger to begin a popular Victorian parlour game:

“I love my love with an H,” Alice couldn’t help beginning, “because he is Happy. I hate him with an H because he is Hideous. I fed him with – with – with Ham-sandwiches and Hay. His name is Haigha and he lives--”

“He lives on the Hill,” the King remarked simply, without the least idea that he was joining in the game (Haughton, 196).

Now, just as the game of chess governs the over-arching narrative of *Through the Looking-glass*, this internal mini-game takes charge of the internal, mini-narrative of the chapter, quite independently of its internal author (Alice); for sure enough, Haigha’s bag is magically full of ham sandwiches and hay. Once again, the game has wielded

---

<sup>93</sup> Stewart, *Nonsense*, pp.124-5.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

authority over the action.<sup>95</sup> As long as the messengers Haigha and Hatta remain, the chess and parlour games operate alongside one another; when another intertext, the 'old song' of 'The Lion and the Unicorn', is inserted into the mix, the main narrative is redirected, or supplanted, yet again. By creating this dense and multi-layered tapestry of contending intertextual para-narratives and cleverly regressing sequences of games within games, Carroll disrupts the notion of both authorial control and originality, presenting a patchwork of borrowed subplots and pre-existing patterns and game structures.

Never one to be outdone, Joyce takes these Carrollian nests of games even further, incorporating a great many games into the *Wake*, which are enacted on varying narrative planes. There is an unmistakable element of menace and confusion in all these multi-layered games. In the Prankquean passage, for instance, the children are kidnapped by the Prankquean as they play, 'kickheeling their dummy on the oil cloth flure' of their father's 'homerigh, castle and earthenhouse' (FW, 21.12-3). Their game, which is subsumed within the Prankquean's game (based, as we know from Grace Eckley, on two real children's games, 'Mother, Mother, the Pot boils Over', and 'Sally Waters'), which in turn is subsumed within Joyce's game ('Wimmegame's fake' (FW, 375.16-7)), is not a safe place to be.<sup>96</sup> By positioning the Prankquean's game between an inner, micro-scopic game (that of the children) and an outer, macro-scopic one (that of the author), Joyce allows the sinister fiction of child-theft in a real children's game ('Mother, Mother') to become a sinister *reality* in a *fictional* game (that played by the children); we learn, therefore, to assume that if children's games are by definition short-lived and, remembering Joyce's letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, ogre-threatened, a game within a game within a game is even more so.

Joyce employs his games in much the same manner as Carroll. He allows alphabet games to seize temporary control of both the theme and language of his text,

---

<sup>95</sup> Alphabet games have a tendency to do this in Carroll, who wrote in a letter that 'One of the deepest motives (as you are aware) in the human breast (so deep that many have failed to detect it) is Alliteration.' (LLC, 601). Compare the Lamb's story in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*: 'I went to the A-field, and I helped them to make A!' – 'I went to the B-hive, and the B gave me some honey' – 'I went to the C-side, and saw ships sailing on the C!' (CLC, 588). Note also the prominence and plot-driving potential of the letter B in 'The Hunting of the Snark', and of the letter M in the Dormouse's story at the *Wonderland* tea party. Joyce himself was no stranger to that 'deepest ... motive'; alliteration games abound in the *Wake*. Note, for example, an alliterative alphabet game similar to Alice's own: 'Hootch is for husbandman handling his hoe' (FW, 5.9); 'Lel lols for libelman libling his lore' (FW, 250.19); 'Rutsch is for rutterman ramping his roe' (FW, 314.12).

<sup>96</sup> See Grace Eckley, 1985. *Children's Lore in Finnegans Wake*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 105-123.

and allows the structure of games such as chess, Colours, hide and seek, the tug of love, and so on, to temporarily dictate the structure of his narrative. Book III, chapter four of the *Wake* makes a particularly striking nod towards the *Looking-glass* when a strange pseudo-disturbance in the dream sequence is acted out in chess mode. The scene involves the slumbering husband and wife and a child frightened by a nightmare. Whether this bedroom scene is ‘an interruption of the dream or part of it’ remains an open question – just like Carroll’s ‘which dreamt it?’ puzzler at the end of *Through the Looking-glass*.<sup>97</sup> Like the evening children’s games, the scene is a ‘play’ in both senses of the word: a ‘dumbshow’ and a game, played out on the ‘eight and eight sixtyfour’ squares of a ‘tabl[i]er’, or chessboard (FW, 559.14-32). Other games contaminate the chess, however: after ALP’s opening ‘gambit’, which gives her a ‘queen’s lead’, there is an out of place ‘Huff!’ – a draughts move. Though they are ostensibly ‘spill playing rake and bridges’ (rooks and bishops, i.e. chess), mentions of backgammon, whist, and snakes and ladders confuse matters. By intermixing these different species of games, Joyce goes further than to imply his own partial ceding of authorial control; taking his cue from Carroll, he provides a coded commentary on the nonsense author’s role, which is a mixture of skill (represented by chess and draughts), and chance (dice- and card-based games). The nonsense author’s last judgment is less *Dies Irae* than ‘dice’s error’ (FW, 433.30) his game-text ‘overlorded by fate and interlarded with accidence’ (FW, 472.31-2), and unaffected by the standards of ‘the Great Sommboddy within the Omniboss’ (FW, 415.17): the familiar, omniscient, Realistic author-god.<sup>98</sup> Through the game-text, the author presents himself as a ‘pixillated doodler’ (FW, 421.33), responsible for but only indirectly in control of his narrative structures, which are regulated by the game. The battle for narrative control between game and author is one the game can dominate, for whatever narrative power the author awards himself, he is still operating within the rules of his own game, as the author of *Finnegans Wake* knows too well when he writes: ‘I am a quean. Is a game over? The game goes on’ (FW, 269.21-2).

### 3. ‘A DARKTONGUES, KUNNING’:

<sup>97</sup> See William York Tindall, 1969. *A Reader’s Guide to Finnegans Wake*. London: Thames and Hudson, 284-5.

<sup>98</sup> For more on the *Wake*’s ‘alchemy of error,’ see Tim Conley’s excellent *Joyces Mistakes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).



## SECRECY, SHIBBOLETHS, AND STATUS ANXIETY IN NONSENSE GAMES

If the textual game has the habit of destabilising or disrupting authorial control and responsibility, it would also seem to detract the text's canonical status, demoting it from serious intellectual exercise to a merely frivolous diversion. Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, in her study of play-texts and reading games, notes that the very hierarchical 'play-versus-seriousness' dialectic, dismissed as inaccurate by play theorists such as Huizinga and Caillois, has 'impeded serious thematic analyses' of play writing.<sup>99</sup> This extends to nonsense writing, as Susan Stewart points out when she writes that, thanks to the hierarchical distinctions made between seriousness and play, sense and nonsense:

Nonsense becomes appropriate only to the everyday discourse of the socially purposeless, to those on the peripheries of everyday life: the infant, the child, the mad and the senile, the chronically foolish and playful. Nonsense becomes a negative language, the language of an experience that does not count in the eyes of commonsense discourse.<sup>100</sup>

It is fair to say that this peripheral rabble of children and fools accounts for a large cross-section of nonsense protagonists too, from Alice and the Doodles children to Beckett and O'Brien's socially excluded and mentally fragile heroes and the chorus of outcasts in Edward Lear's poems and limericks. Neither can we ignore the fact that, at least for the literary critics and guardians of the golden gates of canonicity, the nonsense readership is also uniquely rich in juveniles and oddballs. The literary and cultural subordination of nonsense mirrors the social subordination of the nonsense protagonist and, conceivably, the nonsense reader. The resulting underground or subcultural status of nonsense, its protagonists, authors, and readers, makes it fertile ground for the sort of codes and shibboleths that circulate so freely amongst those without power, whether it be children in a playground or political activists at a rally. Just as children's games and rhymes germinate freely and quite outside the radar of adults, so too do their codewords; conspiracies, and the internal hierarchies these both produce and protect.

---

<sup>99</sup> Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, 2007. *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett and Georges Perec*. New York: Dalkey Archive, 99.

<sup>100</sup> Stewart, *Nonsense*, 5.

There are countless famous examples of shibboleths in literary nonsense; most, however, are not presented as shibboleths – as exclusive codewords imbued with secret meaning or significance – but rather as innocent gibberish, the kind of amusing, vacant babble that children like to invent. Trophies of this category include Edward Lear’s ‘runcible spoon’ and Carroll’s elusive ‘snark’: nonsense words that signify nothing specific while suggesting a vast spectrum of possible meanings.<sup>101</sup> Critical attempts to hunt down the meaning of the such words have proved as fruitless and absurd as the hunting of the snark itself – a wonderful in-joke on Carroll’s part. A separate category of verbal nonsense lurks behind this supposedly innocuous goobledgook, however: that of deliberate coding, whether in the creation of a made-up word, or a new usage of an already existing word, which is deliberately made to represent something secret, and which therefore becomes powerful. Examples here include Joyce’s ‘heliotrope’, codeword of the Maggies in their game of Colours; Humpty Dumpty’s unique use of the word ‘glory’ in *Through the Looking-glass*; or Ali Baba’s enduring ‘Open Sesame’ – a mystical password which runs through *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>102</sup> The former category – of innocent verbiage – might be described as inclusive to the latter’s exclusive. The first group of words are deliberately lacking in obvious signification, and are thus democratic: as to what a ‘snark’ is, one reader’s guess is as good as another’s, as Carroll was always keen to point out.<sup>103</sup> The latter group is imbued with power: these words are weapons that guard against intruders, or keys that unlock certain privileges and responsibilities to those entrusted with their secrets. They are infused with intrigue, and entangled with notions of tribal identity and secret activity, complementing what Roger Caillois called ‘the affinity which exists between play and the secret or mysterious.’<sup>104</sup>

George Steiner makes a convincing argument for this secret lexicon as a tribal code of honour, at once excluding the other (i.e. adults) while at the same time enacting ‘a night-raid on adult territory’. Like children’s games, which are so often patched together from the socio-cultural bric-a-brac which constitutes their understanding of the adult world, and which are as parodic and rebellious as they are derivative, their language also fuses the imitative and the mutinous:

<sup>101</sup> See my discussion of Edward Lear’s nonsense letter in the previous chapter.

<sup>102</sup> For example, ‘(open shunshema!),’ 98.04-5; ‘*Sesama to the Rescues. The Key Signature*,’ 302.19-21; ‘o szeszame open,’ 333.1.

<sup>103</sup> Carroll wrote to a child friend: ‘As to the meaning of the Snark, I’m very much afraid I didn’t mean anything but nonsense! Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer means. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I’m glad to accept as the meaning of the book’ (Collingwood, 173).

<sup>104</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 4.

The fracture of words, the maltreatment of grammatical norms which, as the Opies have shown, constitute a vital part of the lore, mnemonics and secret parlance of childhood, have a rebellious aim: by refusing, for a time, to accept the rules of grown-up speech, the child seeks to keep the world open to his own, seemingly unprecedented needs.<sup>105</sup>

Not only this though; the child who by turns makes up and mangles the language given to him by the adult world (just as he or she corrupts and converts its cultural norms into games) is not merely preserving his or her own identity, but also actively critiquing that world. As James C. Scott has written:

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. [...] I suggest, along these lines, how we might interpret the rumour, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the powerless as vehicles by which ... they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.<sup>106</sup>

If the public transcript of the *Wake*'s children is their diligent study in Book 2.2, their hidden transcript is the rough-and-tumble, sexually knowing and linguistically cryptic play of the preceding chapter. In section one of this chapter, I argued that children's play is intrinsically linked with ideas of tribal protest in Joyce, and used as an example his tendency to colour the innocuous tensions and power struggles that take place between players of games with dark imperialistic overtones. Steiner's 'secret parlance' – which extends to shibboleths – plays an important role in the politics of Joyce's child characters, whose games are so evocative of diverse forms of oppression and rebellion, and whose speech is accordingly cryptic and idiomatic.

Those *Dubliners* children who would 'mich' from school and keep 'nix' while at play have developed their own private language, inaccessible to adults, and yet, of course, these words can also function as a means of exclusion among the children themselves: Stephen feels alienated from the group of older boys at Clongowes because he doesn't know the meaning of the word 'smuggling';<sup>107</sup> Shem is ostracised from his group of playmates when he fails to guess their codeword, 'heliotrope'. Writing on the

<sup>105</sup> George Steiner, 1975. *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 35.

<sup>106</sup> James C. Scott, 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, xii-i.

<sup>107</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait*, p.40.

high incidence of ‘cloaked references to Gaelic culture or Irish history’ in modern Irish writing in English, Dillon Johnston has noticed ‘two kinds of unstated or suppressed references’, which invite comparison with the idioglossic ‘darktongues’ of the Joycean child (FW, 223.28):

first, those omissions introduced to frustrate a colonial auditor and convey secrets to a primary audience, and, second, those omissions introduced into a song or story when the fuller context is lost over time or simply dropped because in a place as small as Ireland everyone knows the plot.<sup>108</sup>

Such cultural guardedness characterises children’s lore too, whose omissions and secrets tend to be the results of either deliberate barriers to unwanted intruders, or the sign of a collective understanding in which some things are simply too obvious to state. Play theorists and political scientists alike have learned to view such verbal secrecy and separatism as a mode of protest against a ruling power – whether it be British rule or the English language in Johnston’s Irish example, adult authority in the case of children’s lore, or the standards and expectations of mainstream canonical fiction *vis-a-vis* nonsense literature. Joyce’s writing has a stake in all three of these forms of protest, and it is often through games that he enacts it, employing the same rhetoric of power and subversion that children do, albeit unconsciously, in their own games, and in so doing attempting to restore the reputation or status of the subordinate group he is representing.

The children’s game of ‘Colours’ or ‘Angels and Devils’ could be seen as the apotheosis of this ambitious aim. For one thing, while some of the most crucial sourcebooks for the writing of this passage took the form of informative if basic indices such as Norman Douglas’s *London Street Games*, we know that Joyce’s scope reached far beyond the mere listing and interweaving of traditional games and songs. Convinced of the inherent cultural and allegorical importance of these games, Joyce overwrote them with lofty theological, legal, and cultural references. Even during the chapter’s protracted process of composition, these twin themes of child’s play and philosophical gravity were consistently balanced and juxtaposed, as we see from Stuart Gilbert’s *Paris Journal*:

To JJ bi-weekly I read information concerning Angels and Devils (from

---

<sup>108</sup> Dillon Johnston, 2001. *The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland, 1912-2000*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, xiv.

Aquinas; 'Le Diable' by Abbé; Waite's 'Magic') and play English children's singing games, German children's ditto, Dalcroze and French popular songs.<sup>109</sup>

Through its use of the codeword or shibboleth, the Wakean game of 'Angels and Devils' merges the two themes perfectly. The rules of the game are straightforward, and best explained by Joyce himself:

The Angels, girls, are grouped behind the Angel, Shawn, and the Devil [Shem] has to come over three times and ask for a colour, if the colour he asks for has been chosen by any girl she has to run and he tries to catch her.<sup>110</sup>

What Joyce omits to mention here is that the chosen colour, both in the Wakean version of the game and in scores of actual traditional children's games, corresponds to the colour of the girls' underwear, placing the game squarely in that category which is of interest to the child because of 'the incident in it that least appeals to the adult: the opportunity it affords ... to say aloud the colour of someone's panties, as in 'Farmer, Farmer, may we cross your Golden River?''<sup>111</sup> The purpose of the game, then, is that Shem, as Devil, 'must fand for himself by gazework what their colours wear as they are all shown drawens up' (FW, 224.26-7). It is not entirely guesswork, however, as a series of complex and imaginative clues are given throughout the chapter, including one derived from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet:

There lies her word, you reder. The height herup exalts it and the lowness her down abaseth it. It vibroverberates upon the tegmen and prosploides from pomaeria. A window, a hedge, a prong, a hand, an eye, a sign, a head and heep your other augur on her paypaypay. And you have it, old Sem pat as ah be seated. (FW, 249.13-8).

Asterisked on either side by the hint of an alphabet ('abaseth it'; 'ah be seated'), the list is comprised of the equivalents in English of the meanings of Hebrew letters, here arranged to spell H-E-L-I-O-T-R-O-P. Elsewhere similarly ingenious riddles suggest the answer, which Shem nevertheless fails to find. For the children who earlier failed to solve Shem's own riddle ('the first riddle of the universe: [...] when is a man not a

---

<sup>109</sup> Stuart Gilbert, 1993. *Reflections on James Joyce*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 41.

<sup>110</sup> Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 22 November 1931 (SLJ, 355).

<sup>111</sup> Opies, *Children's Games*, 21.

man?' (FW, 170.4-5)), this must seem like fitting revenge, and neither Shawn nor the Maggies lets him off lightly, instead chiding, mocking, and even physically bruising him.

It is no coincidence that during the process of his humiliation Shem's aggression turns on his parents, whom he wishes to blackmail or publicly insult. The game of 'Colours' is, ostensibly, a form of 'illicit play' by any play theorist's definition: it involves, among other things, pranks, toilet humour, sexual slang, taunting, antagonistic laughter, bullying, playfighting, hegemonic interaction, exclusion, and name-calling; or as Joyce would have it, 'hoots, screams, scarf drill, cap fecking, ejaculations of aurinos, reechoable mirthpeals and general thumbtonosery' (FW, 253.26-8). Such forms of play, as the Opies and others have found, are predominantly found where children feel most encroached upon by adults. By channelling the anger he feels towards himself and his peers towards his parents, Shem is betraying his desire for access to the tribe's 'heliotropolis', despite his ignorance of their shibboleth and his attendant victimhood (FW, 594.8).

Not only does the Wakean game of Colours fall into the category of 'illicit play', it is also inherently hostile, turning on the alienation and humiliation of another player. Here Joyce makes an important observation about both the nature of games and of childhood interaction: the taunting of a minority or a weaker Other serves to reinforce the authority and unity of the dominant group. Joyce's interest in this anthropological phenomenon, and the means by which it is manifested, can be traced back to *A Portrait*, and Stephen's humiliation at Clongowes. Caught between the draconian austerity of his teachers and the boisterous mockery of his peers, Stephen is frequently singled out for ridicule by the older boys. Much of Stephen's distress is caused by his failure to gain access to certain secrets of the life and lingo of Clongowes, as when he learns that some boys were caught 'smuggling':

Stephen looked at the faces of the fellows but they were all looking across the playground. He wanted to ask somebody about it. What did that mean about the smuggling in the square? ... It was a joke, he thought (AP, 40).

'Smuggling', like 'heliotrope', is a kind of shibboleth, the ignorance of which casts Stephen, like Shem, in the role of outsider. This is the dark side of the shibboleth, which Joyce is intent on emphasizing: not the word that unites a tribe, but the word that

excludes an Other. Play forms in Joyce are built on exclusion: riddles that the listener cannot answer (Shem's) or that are deliberately kept secret (as in *A Portrait*, when Athy informs Stephen that he knows 'another way' to ask a riddle, 'but I won't tell you what it is' (AP, 22)); games whose purpose is to exclude, such as 'Colours', or which indirectly exclude ('The noise of children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made him feel ... that he was different from others. He did not want to play' (AP, 65)); sports which are themselves excluded (Irish games in the park); jokes which exclude minority groups (such as Mr Deasy's anti-Semitic gag in *Ulysses* (U, 36)), and which even manage to exclude the reader (*Ulysses*' ever-puzzling 'U.P.: up' (U, 151)).

The emphasis Joyce places on the negative element of play, the weight he lends to its powers of exclusion and aggression, harks back to the Carrollian world of killer croquet, unanswerable riddles, and cruel jokes. For both Carroll and Joyce, games not only contain important philosophical and anthropological truths, they also conceal the basest human instincts, in particular the violent, the sexual, and the scatological – hidden elements they share with jokes, a link which will be explored in the next chapter. That Joyce's 'Colours' game yokes these base instincts with eschatological depth is extremely significant; intellectual and cultural hierarchies are powerfully undercut. As Sam Slote has noted in his genetic study of the games chapter, Joyce's belief in the inherent philosophical and "eschatological" nature of the games he incorporated into *Finnegans Wake* is shared with Yrjö Hirn, from whose book *Les Jeux d'enfants* Joyce took copious notes. This "eschatological tendency", writes Slote, 'allowed Joyce to interlace the frivolity of the games with "loftier" matters.'<sup>112</sup> By 'interlacing' not only the frivolous but the crude with the spiritual and profound, Joyce is able to perform a vital 'conservative-revolutionary' nonsense manoeuvre, removing 'privileged signification' and levelling the thematic playing field (pun intended).<sup>113</sup> That Joyce uses the theme of play to perform such a trick is, as I have shown, no accident. We see literary nonsense following the 'conservative-revolutionary' framework by upholding seemingly trivial conventions while simultaneously uprooting deeply embedded and highly complex structures of verbal communication, reader reception, and literary meaning; likewise, children's play attaches itself to the trifling routines and repetitions of the adult world while simultaneously disputing orthodox cultural values and accepted

---

<sup>112</sup> Sam Slote, 'Blanks for when words gone: Chapter II.1', in Luca Crispi and Sam Slote (eds.), 2007. *How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 181-213 (210, n.5).

<sup>113</sup> The removal of 'privileged signification' is one of Susan Stewart's chief requirements for nonsense. See Stewart, *Nonsense*, 118-9.

versions of history and reality. Its use of play allows literary nonsense an ideal vantage point over the worlds of both the adult and the child. It is able to trade and translate ideas between these two worlds, to merge them: it can see the adult world of seriousness and complexity through the prism of the child world of exuberance and curiosity, and *vice versa*. A cross-pollination of ideas occurs between the two: verbal child's play may fertilize the subject of linguistic philosophy, for example, and matters of topical interest in the adult world may find themselves comically corrupted into playground limericks.<sup>114</sup> Such cross-pollination is particularly dominant in Joyce, who as Grace Eckley has noted, 'made children's lore a window to the adult world at the same time he treated adult themes with childish lightness.'<sup>115</sup> This is the nonsense method: it is built upon clever reversals and contractions, which serve to bring to light uncomfortable truths which would otherwise fall foul of both Freud's and the Lord Chamberlain's assiduous censor.

The fact that Joyce draws so heavily upon children's games and the cross-pollination with adult life that such games effect teaches us something about Carroll's use of games too. For while the use of children's games in Victorian nonsense may be written off as a straightforward effort to contextualise and validate the experiences of a child audience, when that child audience is removed, as in Joyce, we discover more complex motivations for the incorporation of child's play, such as those outlined above. Not only do we witness a strange intermingling of child and adult worlds, and a removal of any inherent privilege of one world of the other, we also sense a politics of resistance coming to the fore; for while Joyce and Carroll might treat the child world as equal to the adult world, both writers are also acutely aware of the actual subordination of the child world. The inequality of the relationship between the respective worlds of adult and child, where one takes more than equal share of power and respect, lies in parallel to that of the relationship between canonical fiction and nonsense. The same notion of hierarchy determines both. Thus, in setting itself the task of levelling out playing fields, whether by infusing children's play with dark motifs and eschatological significance, or by caricaturing royalty, or by raising simple word games to the level of linguistic philosophy, nonsense is able to cleverly and subtly salvage its own reputation, to boost its own intellectual and cultural status. If children's games are as rich, as valid, and as

---

<sup>114</sup> See Opies, 'Topical Rhymes' in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, 98-120. Joyce makes great use of the childish-but-topical, lighthearted-but-serious jingle in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

<sup>115</sup> Eckley, *Children's Lore in Finnegans Wake*, xv.



culturally important as adult life, then nonsense literature is as demanding, as rewarding, and as artistically valuable as mainstream, canonical fiction, 'constantly the same as an equal to himself and magnificently well worthy of any and all such universalisation' (FW, 32.20-1).

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **'JEST JIBBERWEEK'S JOKE': COMIC NONSENSE**

For Immanuel Kant, architect of the ‘incongruity’ theory of humour, a joke’s success lies between the ‘something’ of the setup and the anticlimactic ‘nothing’ of the punchline.<sup>116</sup> Out of this core juxtaposition arises a host of similar incongruities and contrasts – the logical and illogical, the profound and the trivial, the high- and low-brow – which meet in the joke’s irreverent punchline. The joke is thus dual in structure: its humour hinges on the conceptual discord between the contrasts and reversals it exploits; after all, nothing can be incongruous on its own. This double nature extends to form, too: the joke requires both a teller and a listener, as Freud noted, in order to exist.

Making nothing from something is a little like weaving gold back into straw: it requires great sophistication alongside a rather perverse rationale, where Racine’s criterion for creativity – ‘*Toute l’invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien*’<sup>117</sup> – is rebelliously flouted. Martin Grotjahn, in his book on literary humour, writes that ‘sophisticated but faulty thinking’ lies at the core of the comic impulse, which is therefore ‘related to the nonsense technique.’<sup>118</sup> He is right: humour, like nonsense, is a relentlessly methodical thwarter of logic, favouring the particular over the general, and the superficial over the profound. All literary nonsense contains an element of humour – that we laugh, however darkly, is a crucial element of the nonsense condition’s diagnostic criteria.<sup>119</sup> One could even go so far as to venture that all humour contains an element of nonsense, though this would be difficult to prove. Certainly anything that prompts laughter involves a jolt to our ‘strained expectation’ – the surprise of witnessing any sensible sentence or everyday scene give way to an error of form. In both the physical and verbal gag, the outer world of words and things presides over the inner world of meaning and purpose: the slapstick comedian gets a laugh when his purpose (walking to post a letter, say) is undermined by some surface rupture (slipping on a banana skin, perhaps), which disconnects his intention from the outcome and injures more than his pride. Likewise, a verbal joke is funny when the content or meaning of a sentence or dialogue is frustrated by a surface semantic ambiguity: ‘My dog has no nose.’ / ‘How does he smell?’ / ‘Awful.’ Here, the word ‘smell’ is the banana skin that trips up the questioner; his disobliging lexicon causes him to fall into the joke, and it is his ‘disappointed expectation’, to quote Cicero, that ‘makes us

<sup>116</sup> Laughter arises from ‘the sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothing.’ See Kant (trans. James Creed Meredith), 1952. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 199.

<sup>117</sup> Jean Racine, 1796. *Œuvres*, vol. 3. Paris: Pougin, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Martin Grotjahn, 1957. *Beyond Laughter*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 8.

<sup>119</sup> As this thesis prefers to describe nonsense as a ‘condition’ rather than a ‘genre’, it seems more germane to use the language of pathology in discussing it: instead of defining nonsense, we diagnose it.

laugh.’<sup>120</sup>

These familiar examples operate on the same principles as literary nonsense, which, like them, endorses a tyranny of the signifier over the signified; this tyranny is their common denominator, or ‘comedy nominator’ as the *Wake* would have it (FW, 283.7). Both nonsense writer and comedian know that every surface word can be manipulated at the expense of internal congruity and semantic integrity; in this sense, both are reverse Rumpelstiltskins, determinedly weaving golden ‘somethings’ back into straw ‘nothings’. Carroll’s craftsmanship and delivery of these nothings is, as we shall see, exemplary; and Joyce, to quote Flann O’Brien’s Sergeant Pluck, is ‘the heir to his nullity and all his nothings.’<sup>121</sup>

The nonsense-humour overlap forms the rationale for this chapter. Section one will focus on the dual structure of the comic – the joke as a dichotomy between ‘something’ and ‘nothing’, and how this is staged in the bantering but combative dialogues between the double acts which populate the works of both Carroll and Joyce. The hostility and exclusionism identified by Freud as the dark underbelly of the human comic impulse is examined in section two, particularly in relation to the treatment of outsiders in Joyce, Carroll and Lear. A treatise on *l’humour noir* and the bad pun concludes the chapter, moving from Carroll’s ‘illstarred punsters’, through Myles na gCopaleen’s notorious ‘Keats and Chapman’ sketches, to the pun-infatuated jokescape of *Finnegans Wake*.

## 1. NONSENSE DOUBLE ACTS

*‘All forces occur in pairs, and these two forces are equal in magnitude and opposite in direction.’*

---

<sup>120</sup> Cicero, 1970. *On Oratory and Orators* (tr. J.S. Watson). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 157.

<sup>121</sup> Flann O’Brien, 1993. *The Third Policeman*. London: Flamingo, 59.

Lewis Carroll’s literary double acts provide us with some of the most memorable, endearing, and iconic figures in the canon. Two observations can be made of them with confidence: all his most famous duos are cruel to each another, and all are comic. All are also firmly pair-bonded. Tweedledum and Tweedledee spend half their time reinventing logic and reciting humorous verse, and the other half competing for attention and staging battles over broken toys. The Walrus and the Carpenter, creations and alter-egos of the Tweedle brothers, walk ‘close at hand’ (originally ‘hand-in-hand’ (Haughton, 159)) through a Daliesque terrain of masterful comic absurdism, but fight bitterly over their haul of oysters. The Hatter and the March Hare, and their *Looking-glass* incarnations Hatta and Haigha, are playful yet bickering, while the Lion and the Unicorn exchange nonsensical pleasantries in between ‘fighting for the crown’ (Haughton, 198). As a general rule in Carroll, where there is comedy there is combat and *vice versa*. Equally, if a Carrollian pair is not actively antagonistic, they are unlikely to be remotely comic – take Sylvie and Bruno, whose relationship is all good manners and treacly mutual affection, and whose two limp narratives altogether lack bite.<sup>122</sup>

What is it about the comic couple, then, that makes them so confrontational? We can agree that not every confrontation between two real or fictional foes is funny; actual fights tend to be clumsy, undignified, and dully routine, and any laughter they might inspire through their own ham-fisted ineptitude would be unintentional and unwelcome. And yet the inverse of this equation is much cloudier: there is, I contend, an element of combat in *every* comic couple in nonsense. What is more, that Joyce’s clowning double acts in particular share a template with far more portentous historical pairs (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau) suggests that there is something not only unhierarchical but anthropologically inevitable about the warring pseudocouple. It goes without saying that while they seem uniquely at home in a nonsense climate, antagonistic double acts were not invented by Joyce or indeed Carroll; they have always existed. We see them in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian myth; in the conflicting twins of Plautus; in Chaucer’s

---

<sup>122</sup> The two *Sylvie and Bruno* books are a disappointment to most *Alice* readers for this reason; the babyishness and sentimentality of its central characters can be hard to take, as can the flaccid and disorganised excuse for a plot. The books are, however, a veritable treasure trove of ideas, aesthetic experiments, and scientific speculations, and if treated as a compendium of Carroll’s impressive philosophical intuitions and theories are enlightening and at times astonishing documents.

squabbling chickens; in the knockabout shows of medieval carnivals and royal court fools, and later in the circus and the Music Hall. After Carroll, we see wrangling pseudocouples in Flaubert's ill-starred dilettantes Bouvard and Pécuchet; in Beckett's glorious procession of paired-off tramps; in Nabokov's shady Doppelgängers; and of course in a varied troupe of television and radio acts, from Morecombe and Wise to Mitchell and Webb, and not forgetting Peter Cook's and Dudley Moore's Derek and Clive, whose recorded dialogues turn on self-perpetuating mutual abuse. Given its history, it seems that the comic, combative double act is something of a cultural monument.

With this whistle-stop tour of the history of the double act in mind, I want to turn to Carroll's and Joyce's own particular brand of it, and to what exactly the double act has to do with the structure of the Kantian 'incongruous' joke. Both Joyce and Carroll emphasise and exploit the double nature of the joke, using it to generate the vaudevillean dialogues and comic contrasts between the character-duos that feature throughout their respective *oeuvres*. Carroll and Joyce were, in their separate ways, very much aware of how the joke's dual structure lends itself to dialogic duels, and in their writing consistently matched the internal contrasts in the joke's structure with the external contests of similarly clashing pairs of characters. For both Carroll's Tweedle brothers, the typical identical-antithetical twin set, and their successors, Shem and Shaun, jesting and jousting are the same, while they themselves are at once incompatible and interchangeable. For both pairs, their paradoxical state is writ large in their 'brother battles', when, even as their incompatibility is staged in boisterous brawls, their interchangeability is exposed in their vertiginous blurring of identities.

We might view Shem and his double-cum-nemesis Shaun, who borrow from the Tweedle template more than once in the *Wake* ('from tweedledeedumms down to twiddledeedees' (FW, 258.23-4)), as reconfigured and updated versions of the Tweedles; they are more complex, they are more historically heavyweight, and there is, in general, more at stake in their arguments. Unlike Carroll's, Joyce's sets of enemy-twins take their place on a spectrum of historical double acts which ranges from biblical adversaries to vaudevillian stooges (a combination which itself seems 'collateral and incompatible,' to steal a line from Louis MacNeice).<sup>123</sup> The greater part of their complexity can be put down to the gigantic cross-cultural palimpsest Shem and Shaun

---

<sup>123</sup> Louis MacNeice, 2007. 'Snow', in *Collected Poems* (ed. Peter McDonald). London: Faber and Faber, 24.

represent; in the *Wake*, they are to be read as the last in a line of historical and literary double acts but also, because somewhere inside them grapple Cain and Abel, the first. And yet, for all their complexity and grandiosity, they remain like the Tweedles clownishly simple: they are for and about boisterous combat, joke-telling and absurd debates. They are a physical endorsement for the human sense of humour, defined by Christopher Bollas as that 'which takes pleasure in the contradictory movements of two objects.'<sup>124</sup> They are stock-in-trade nonsense characters – funny, many-voiced, contradictory, and 'serious at playing around'.<sup>125</sup>

While the Wakean templates are perhaps the most fully-flexed examples of dialogic war and jest, it's important to remember that comic couples crop up everywhere in Joyce. The miching schoolboys in 'An Encounter' are typical prototypes, where the sensitive and bookish narrator stands in contrast to the bold, blunt Mahony. From this early hingeing of high and low, shown in the antagonistic friendship between the shy intellectual and the charismatic buffoon, we can trace all Joyce's later pairings, which could be read as denser reworkings of 'An Encounter's' boyhood double act. Examples of joking pairs from Joyce's pre-Wake output provide a useful guide to Shem and Shaun's more fraught and complex relationship, not least because these comic precursors are very often present in the multi-layered and dizzyingly intertextual brother battles of the *Wake*. After our doubling *Dubliners*, then, we meet Stephen Dedalus, who as he matures often assumes the role of the suffering straight guy to his companion's merciless joker: in *A Portrait*, we contrast the scholarly Stephen with the groin-rubbing Lynch; in *Ulysses*, the sombre Stephen with Mulligan's wise-cracking clown.

The dialogues between these pairs are jokey, but not bantering. They are funny not because both characters quip and bounce witticisms off one another, a method more in line with the contemporary mode of dialogic humour we know from cartoons and sitcoms; they are funny in the more traditional, vaudevillean style, where one half of the duo is straight-faced and serious, struggling to hold his position against the torrent of gags and giggles launched at him from his buffoonish counterpart. Stephen's lecture to Lynch on aesthetics towards the end of *A Portrait* more than demonstrates my point: as Stephen stresses the perfect stasis of the aesthetic emotion, which causes the mind to be 'arrested and raised above desire and loathing,' Lynch's mind is mired quite literally in

---

<sup>124</sup> Christopher Bollas, 1995. *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*. London: Routledge, 244.

<sup>125</sup> Fernando Pessoa, 2002. *The Book of Disquiet*. London: Penguin, 121.

memories of pornographic graffiti and cow dung (AP, 222-3). Stephen's role in this lecture, though he is not aware of it, is not to teach Lynch or tease an engaged response out of him, but simply to feed him lines, which Lynch can then reduce to his preferred form of lewd humour: '— You would not write your name ... across the hypotenuse of a rightangled triangle,' says Stephen. '— No ... give me the hypotenuse of the Venus of Praxiteles,' says Lynch. 'Let us take woman,' says Stephen. 'Let us take her!' says Lynch (AP, 225-6). Mulligan's role in 'Telemachus' is markedly similar, where a solemn Stephen, recast by Mulligan as a rather unsuitable 'Kinch', is thwarted in his attempts to take himself seriously by Mulligan's relentless mockery. When Stephen, in his seriousness, invokes a servant's cracked lookingglass as a symbol for Irish art, his efforts are cheapened by Mulligan, in his churlishness, having proposed 'a new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen' (U, 5).

The meeting and sparring of high and low, as seen in these exchanges, is probably the most common and universal contrast in Joyce's work, and the one most effectively used for comedy. Often it is made to imply a battle between related contrasts - order and chaos, the sublime and the profane, the profound and the trivial, etc. What better way to write about these powerful oppositions than to have them personified by clashing characters; what better way to stage this war of opposites than by having those characters enter into a battle of wits; and what better way to show their complementarity and altogether complicate the situation than to have those characters sometimes fuse, exchange, or reverse? All these objectives come together in the *Wake*, more strongly and more completely than in the previous works, and at times quite problematically.

The question is how these oppositions relate to the comic. Joyce was, as we know, an enthusiastic subscriber to grand theories of celestial unification and terrestrial opposition - this is the most important lesson he took from Giordano Bruno. Shem and Shaun embody a state of earthly disparity, occasionally seeming to fuse into a kind of mongrel approximation of Bruno's theory of 'dualism' as Joyce called it - only to part again on less than polite terms. We find one especially tidy example of this in Jarl van Hooter's 'two little jiminies ... Tristopher and Hilary (FW, 21);' that is, *geminis* Shem and Shaun as distillations of Bruno's aphoristic line: 'In tristitia hilaris hilaritate tristis' (in sadness hilarity and hilarity sadness).<sup>126</sup> The argument here is that everything contains its counterthing; as Borges wrote in his story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius': 'a

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in William York Tindall, 1950. *James Joyce, His Way of Interpreting the Modern World*. London: Scribner, 86.

book which does not also contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.’<sup>127</sup> Later in the *Wake* the interpenetrativeness of Tristopher and Hilary is again represented when we find the Porter parents ‘weeping like fun ... for they were never happier, huhu, than when they were miserable, haha’ (FW, 558.24-5). It is hard not to think of Beckett’s great line from *Endgame* here, when Nell says to Hamm: ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I’ll grant you that.’<sup>128</sup>

So, we find in Joyce’s many oppositions a degree of Bruno-esque ‘Bimutualism. Interchangability. ... Consummation. Interpenetrativeness.’, to quote Shem’s margin in the Nightlessons chapter (308, 7-13). But, of course, it is not quite as simple as that, for mergence is a dubious activity in the *Wake* and it is hard to say if fusion is ever really accomplished, even when the brothers seem at their least distinguishable (as for example at the end of the Butt and Taff episode). It was Harry Levin who first advanced the theory that the twins’ identities ultimately merge, and early Wakeans such as Campbell and Robinson and William York Tindall more or less upheld this assumption. It has since been thrown into doubt, by Grace Eckley, Richard Beckman, Kimberley Devlin and many others, whose various arguments against the idea of ‘mergence’ are extended with varying degrees of success (Eckley’s is based on subtle close readings of the text; Devlin’s on a sometimes heavy-handed reading of the twins’ relationship as a staging of the dichotomy between self and other). My own argument is that part of the reason for the twins’ overall failure to fuse is tied to the importance of the joke structure as an organising principle of their relationship. Returning briefly to Kant, we remember how the joke consists of a pair of opposites – at its simplest, a something and a nothing. There can be a degree of interplay between the two, but they remain fundamentally distinct.

Often when Joyce yokes his favourite opposites – the high and the low – outside of a comic context, he does so in order to bestow upon the low plane something of the significance and respectability of the high. (We see this in the Wakean children’s twilight games, where frivolous high jinks meet and merge with theological clout). *Inside* a comic context, however, the juxtaposition of opposites is not necessarily meant to be merged or resolved: the clash is part of the point. The components of the joke are required to remain in a state of conflict or contradiction, or as Kant would have it,

---

<sup>127</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 1962. ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, in *Labyrinths and Other Stories* (ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby). New York: New Directions Publishing, 27-42 (37).

<sup>128</sup> Beckett, 1986. *Endgame*, in *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 101.



incongruity: it is out of this that the humour arises. In the children's games there is a cross-pollination at work between seriousness and silliness: distinctions are blurred, hierarchies levelled. In the joke, such clouding of distinctions is to be avoided. The joke must retain a 'neatness of identifications', to misuse a line from Beckett;<sup>129</sup> for if the initial clash of opposites loses its sting, the humour risks being lost with it.

The conceptual clash around which the joke is built is, as I've said, fleshed out in the *Wake* into a more candid clash between two principal speakers – quarrelsome brothers who, in their role as vaudevillians, become the joke's teller and listener, physically manifesting the contrasts on which the joke is based. When Margot Norris writes that 'the social teleology of humour, the joker's need for the laughter and endorsement of a listener ... is not present in the *Wake*', she is only half-right;<sup>130</sup> Wakean humour and laughter is indeed *generally* 'unpremeditated and spontaneous', but this doesn't mean that the Wakean characters are oblivious of the social rules of joke-telling, or that they don't, in general, stick to them. Even the drinkers and roisterers of Book 2.3 know that 'they were about to loose a laugh ... as the leashed they might do when they felt ... their joke was coming home to them' (323). In other words, when they know the joke is coming to an end, the least they might do is laugh, to keep the social contract between teller and listener. The children keep a similar contract in the same chapter, and when the 'Knock knock' jokes are told follow the required question-answer protocol: 'Knock knock. War's where! ... The Twwinns. Knock knock. Who's without! ... An apple' (FW, 330).

That jokes and riddles are so much a part of the *Wake*'s thematic and stylistic furniture could be seen as a consequence of the importance of Bruno's dualism to Joyce's overall scheme; for few other modes of discourse manage to distil and embody such fundamental oppositions as high and low, light and dark, something and nothing. Riddles and jokes both demand a Kantian incongruous answer to what might seem like a sensible question, and both are 'incorrigibly plural,' to quote MacNeice's 'Snow' once more: double both in their structure and their transmission. The joking, bickering pseudocouple is, as I have said, a theatrical convention going back centuries – from the antithetical twins of Plautus's plays, to Shakespeare's versions of them in *A Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* and so on, to Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov,

---

<sup>129</sup> Beckett, 1983. 'Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce', in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (ed. Ruby Cohn). London: John Calder, 19.

<sup>130</sup> Margot Norris, 1978. *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist Analysis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 92.

Nagg and Nell *et al.* Given this (specifically) theatrical history, it is no coincidence that when the *Wake* twins' comic dialogues are at their most extended and unpolluted, they are written as if scripted (as with Mutt and Jute, Justius and Mercius, Muta and Juva), or are performed for the stage (see Glugg and Chuff) or screen (Butt and Taff). David Hayman has described the interplay between Stephen and Mulligan in *Ulysses* as 'stageworthy,'<sup>131</sup> and this certainly seems to be what Joyce is aiming for in the *Wake*'s most dialogic scenes: a distillation of opposites and character types which does away with description and relies for its effect on direction, gesture, and dialogue, for maximum clarity and entertainment value. The cut-and-thrust repartee between the *Wake*'s opposing pairs is invariably a lot stronger, funnier, and indeed more 'stageworthy' than that of Richard and Robert in Joyce's only play, *Exiles*, despite the *Wake*'s linguistic obstacles.

Mutt and Jute are the first vaudevillian couple we meet in the *Wake* to have their dialogue laid out in script fashion, based as they are on a pair of American comic-strip characters, Mutt and Jeff. Their scene takes place just after nightfall, and is initiated by an invitation to 'swop hats and excheck strong verbs weak each other' (FW, 16.8-9) (hat-swapping being by-the-by a distinctly vaudevillian convention, memorably used to great comic effect in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*). Jute, as questioner, propels the dialogue, allowing Mutt to deliver a war-themed historical lecture to him. Their speech is marked not just by Anglo-Saxon cadence but by habitual doublings. Their script ends with a sign-off steeped in what Mutt calls 'sound seemetry' [symmetry]:

Mutt. – Ore you astoneaged, jute you?

Jute. – Oye am thonthorstrok, thing mud. (FW, 18)

Echoing one another's phrasing, they also find themselves reflected 'Face to Face,' with a typographical trick stressing not just their doubling but their mirroring. (They reappear in the same attitude in Book 2.2: 'F F, (at gaze, respecting, fourteenth baronet, meet [Mutt], altrettanth bancorot, chaff [Jeff])' (FW, 266)).

Inevitably, in the *Wake*'s 'multimirror megaron of returningties,' Jute and Mutt return as Muta and Juva as dawn approaches (FW, 582.20). Here, their roles are reversed (or mirrored), and it is Muta, the doubting Shem, who does the questioning,

<sup>131</sup> David Hayman, 'Forms of Folly in Joyce: A Study of Clowning in *Ulysses*' in *ELH* (vol.34, n.2, June 1967), 260-83.

and Juva, the priestly Shaun, who provides the certainties. Again they engage in ‘sound symmetry’; sounds from Juva’s mouth are repeated and distorted in Muta’s, so that ‘Dorminus master’ becomes ‘Diminussed aster’, ‘porters of bonzos’ becomes ‘Pongo da Banza!’ and so on. Of course, this isn’t quite symmetry: the phrases are non-identical pairs. The verbal distortion at work is strikingly similar to that of a pair of Shakespearian twins, Dromio and Dromio, whose speech in *A Comedy of Errors* frequently takes the form of statement and warped echo, for example:

Dromio of Syracuse: Maud, Bridget, Marian, Cicel, Gillian, Ginn!

Dromio of Ephesus: Mome, malt-horse, capon, coxcomb, idiot, patch!<sup>132</sup>

There are two parallel interpretations to be made of this kind of ‘sound symmetry’: one is that in mirroring one another’s speech, the Wakean twins become mirror versions of one another, as Lewis Carroll’s Tweedledum and Tweedledee are,<sup>133</sup> and as the Dromio twins are when one says to the other: ‘Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother.’<sup>134</sup> The other interpretation is that, as rivals, one twin is deliberately copying the other, imitating his speech and stealing his lines, as Shaun accuses Shem of doing in Book 3.1., as Tweedledum accuses Tweedledee of doing in *Through the Looking-glass*, and as one Dromio laments when he addresses the other: ‘Oh villain! Though hast stolen both mine office and my name.’<sup>135</sup> While it is certainly quite a paradox, both interpretations are correct, or ‘twyly velleid’ (valid) as Muta would say, and both are borne out in the complex relationship between Shem and Shaun, who as Maren Linett has pointed out, are ‘at once complementary, equal and opposite, *and* an unequal pair dominated by Shaun.’<sup>136</sup>

It’s no coincidence, either, that the Jute/Mutt-Juva/Muta sketches appear at the beginning and end of the *Wake*, those times nearest to twilight. It is telling that the twins are ‘twyly velleid’ – veiled in twilight: for twilight is a classic both-and-neither state, an example of *maxima* meeting *minima*, to paraphrase Beckett’s essay on *Work in Progress*. It is thus the perfect neutral ground for a meeting of antagonistic twins, where

<sup>132</sup> Shakespeare, 1905. *The Comedy of Errors*, in *Complete Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 106.

<sup>133</sup> Martin Gardner conjectures that the brothers are enantiomorphs – mirror image forms of each other – and Tenniel’s illustrations corroborate the theory, bar the one conspicuous error that sees the Tweedles’ names sewn asymmetrically on the left of both their collars (Gardner, 191, n. 3).

<sup>134</sup> Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, 118.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>136</sup> Maren Linnett, ‘The Jew’s Text: “Shem the Penman” and “Shaun the Post,”’ in *James Joyce Quartley* (vol.45, no. 2, Winter 2008), 263-80.

neither the light-representing Shaun nor the dark-signifying Shem has advantage (it is also, for the same reason, the perfect time for a contest between an Angel and a Devil, in the children's twilight games of 2.1). Twilight is also the most common time for a Gothic hero to come face to face with his double in the German Doppelgänger fiction of the nineteenth century, in Dostoyevsky's novella *The Double*, and in the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. The light-yet-dark, dark-yet-light twilight condition is also comparable to the strange climate of 'The Walrus and the Carpenter':

*The sun was shining on the sea,  
Shining with all his might:  
He did his very best to make  
The billows smooth and bright –  
And this was odd, because it was  
The middle of the night.*

*The moon was shining sulkily,  
Because she thought the sun  
Had got no business to be there  
After the day was done –  
'It's very rude of him,' she said,  
'To come and spoil the fun!'*

That this 'both-and-nothing' time of day was Carroll's chosen stage for his great double act ballad is a telling coincidence.

In a fascinating note to Harriet Shaw Weaver, Joyce transcribes the Burmese for twilight, 'Nyi – ako – mah – thi – ta – thi'. Joyce tells Weaver that this translates literally as '(the time when) younger brother (meets) elder brother, does not recognise him but yet recognises him.'<sup>137</sup> This simultaneous recognition and misrecognition has great comic potential – when Shem and Shaun seem sporadically to merge, perhaps each is merely mistaking his other for himself, a bit like another famous vaudeville skit, the mirror gag. Used to great comic effect in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, the mirror

---

<sup>137</sup> Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 23 October 1928, in L, 273. In the same letter, Joyce confesses that 'the only thing I have written in the last 4 months [is] a short description titled 'TWILIGHT OF BLINDNESS AND MADNESS DESCENDS ON SWIFT.'

gag involves one character looking into his mirror, not knowing that it has in fact been smashed and the reflection he thinks he is seeing is actually another man apeing his every move. Joyce makes much of this in the split personality of Issy, whose mirror twin is a projection of a Christine Beauchamp-inspired other. With the brothers though, it is less a sign of psychological fragmentation than of their interchangeable status, as when they swap hats as Mutt and Jute in another Marx Brothers-esque routine. This interchangeability has its roots in the twins' infancy; it is conjectured that they were exchanged in the cradle: 'This one once upon awhile was the other but this is the other one nighadays' (FW, 561.5-6).

This babyhood switch, which marks up the brothers' interchangeability, is a manoeuvre repeated in their battles, as in their fencing match as Butt and Taff:

As he was queering his shoollthers. So was I. And as I was cleansing my  
fausties. So was he. And as way ware puffing our blowbags. Souwouyou.  
Come, thrust! Go, parry! Dvoinabrathran, dare!  
[...] Exchange, reverse.  
[...] And each was wrought with his other. And his continence fell  
(FW, 251.36-252.14).

As Sam Slote has written of this passage, 'In the blur of battle [Shem and Shaun] are indistinct in their exchange and reverse'; during their fight, one becomes an 'antagonistic reflection' of the other – the recognisable-yet-unrecognisable mirror-twin, the collateral-yet-incompatible, comically warring pseudocouple. The slippage between pronouns of the above passage, where 'he' morphs to 'I', which morphs to 'we' and then to 'you', is another common feature in passages relating to Shem and Shaun, and bears a striking resemblance to the climactic fight scene in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Nabokov is a writer obsessed with doubles, a fact he put down to his bilingualism, but which I suspect he also inherited from Joyce. When, towards the ends of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert wrestles with his nemesis-cum-double Clare Quilty, the pronouns become suddenly fluid: 'He rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us'.<sup>138</sup> This Shem-and-Shaun-esque scuffle over the Issy-like *Lolita* is acutely but darkly comic. Its structure resembles that of a joke: the tension, or 'something,' of the protracted (and rather slapstick) scuffle giving way to the resolution: the round 'nothing' of the bullet hole in Quilty's head. In this scene, as in numerous

---

<sup>138</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, 2000. *Lolita*. London: Penguin, 299.

Wakean duels, we see how most the brutal conflict might share its basic structure with the most flippant gag – man slaughter morphing to man’s laughter, as punned in the *Wake* (FW, 433.29-30). Only by emphasising this connection can Joyce justify aligning such great grave Biblical foes as Cain and Abel with a couple of comic-strip clowns. What is particular to the verbal and conceptual structure of the joke is also particular to the form and substance of Shem and Shaun’s relationship. In the combat and comedy of his ‘doubleparalleled twixtytwins’ (FW, 286, fn.4), Joyce is able to replay historical battles loaded with gunpowder and *gravitas*, all the while shoring up his ‘jests, jokes, jigs and jorums for the Wake’ (FW, 221.26).

## 2. ‘SO THEY SMASHED THAT OLD MAN WITH A GONG’:

### HOBBSIAN HUMOUR IN NONSENSE

We have seen how comic dialogues and jokes thrive on meanness; how comic duos are locked into their endless agon of fist-fights and wars of words, and how one loves nothing more than an opportunity to laugh at the other’s expense. The structure of these contests, though, is dependent on the parity of their contestants; theirs is the humour of incongruity, of that which ‘takes pleasure in the contradictory movements of two objects’. It is the absurdist, well-matched, incongruous face-off of Cabbages v. Kings. Where a given pair is unequal in some way, though, the species of humour can no longer be understood in the Kantian way. The knockabout, mutual meanness grows nastier, more brutish – in short, Hobbesian. Laughter for Hobbes is, famously, the ‘sudden glory [caused by] the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves’: a pessimistic vision of laughter as the expression of mankind’s postlapsarian superiority and spite. Centuries later, Baudelaire was to repeat the Hobbesian position, proposing in his misogynistic essay ‘On the Essence of Laughter’ that ‘laughter comes from the idea of one’s own superiority.’ He scorns such ‘pride and delusion’, linking this ‘Satanic’ laughter with the mad, whom (he generalizes) ‘have an excessively over-developed idea of their own superiority.’<sup>139</sup> Laughter for both Hobbes and Baudelaire is the apanage of the Fall, a

---

<sup>139</sup> Baudelaire (ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne), 1995. ‘On the Essence of Laughter’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon, 147-65 (152). Compare this aphorism from

damning indictment of our moral paucity and ignoble motives.

It is a joyless outlook, but one we cannot afford to ignore, as nonsense humour is teeming with the bullies, toughs, and mobs who so capably enforce the Hobbesian position. The menacing ‘they’ of many of Edward Lear’s limericks furnish us with some classic examples, where social intolerance of an eccentric protagonist inevitably leads to mockery and violence:

There was an Old Man with a gong,  
Who bumped at it all the day long;  
But they called out, ‘O law! you’re a horrid old bore!’  
So they smashed that Old Man with a gong (CNV, 160).

And, near identically:

There was an Old Man of Whitehaven,  
Who danced a quadrille with a Raven;  
But they said – ‘It’s absurd, to encourage this bird!’  
So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven (CNV, 172).<sup>140</sup>

Carrollian echoes of quadrilles and ravens aside, the reflex aggression displayed here by the clamouring mob will be recognized by any social psychologist as a fundamental feature of crowd mentality, and by anyone familiar with the superiority theory of humour as a textbook example of Hobbes’s position, where an amorphous ‘they’ made strong by their conformity jeers at a subject made weak by his eccentricity.

As Jean-Jacques Lecercle has pointed out in *The Philosophy of Nonsense* (though not in relation to humour), many of the finest examples of Lear’s mob-menaced limericks are concerned about utterance in particular – not just doing the wrong thing, but saying it.<sup>141</sup> For instance:

There was an Old Man of Ibreem,  
Who suddenly threatened to scream;  
But they said, ‘If you do, we will thump you quite blue,

---

Baudelaire’s fellow Black Humorist, Lichtenberg: ‘The highest level that can be reached by a mediocre but experienced mind is a talent for uncovering the weaknesses of those greater than itself’ (Andre Breton (ed.), trans. Mark Polizzotti, 2009. *Anthology of Black Humour*. London: Telegram, p.63).

<sup>140</sup> George Orwell, commenting on this limerick, noted its distinctly *Orwellian* atmosphere: ‘To smash somebody just for dancing a quadrille with a raven is exactly the kind of thing that ‘They’ would do.’ (Orwell (ed. John Carey) 2002. ‘Nonsense Poetry: *The Lear Omnibus* edited by R. L. Megroz’ in *Essays*. London: Everyman, 973-7 (976)).

<sup>141</sup> Lecercle, *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, 107-9.

You disgusting Old Man of Ibream!' (CNV, 375).

The vocal urges of yet another 'old man' are similarly discouraged here:

There was an Old Man at a Station,  
Who made a promiscuous oration;  
But they said, 'Take some snuff! – You have talk'd quite enough,  
You afflicting Old Man at a Station!' (CNV, 338).

To be plied with snuff is, on balance, a fate more agreeable than being thumped blue, but the crowd's motive and tone are the same in both poems. The verses are rather painful to read, like the pathetic crux of Lear's (even more?) biographical poem 'How pleasant to know Mr Lear!' (not forgetting T.S. Eliot's not-so-pathetic parody of it).<sup>142</sup> Though their tone is matter-of-fact, the limericks actively invite our sympathy for their perennial subject who, in the way of all martyred eccentrics, is solitary, misunderstood, and somewhat feeble. These characteristics, and the hostile, Hobbesian consequences they bring about, call to mind the fate of a fellow literary outsider, Leopold Bloom, whose own 'promiscuous orations' in the Cyclops chapter of *Ulysses* provoke his already hostile company into a Learesque display of violence and ridicule.

The Cyclops chapter itself, though not a typically nonsense text, has many nonsense traits: it is full of verbal slips and tricks, jokes and Rabelaisian reversals, and we need only note a few examples to get a feel for the chapter's Carrollian comic overlay. The characters' wordplay is as witty and sophisticated as Humpty Dumpty's, for instance when Alf entreats Joe not to 'cast your nasturtiums on my character' (U, 307), or when he asks who made allegations about Bloom and Joe admits 'I'm the alligator' (U, 323). 'Could a swim duck?' is the narrator's answer to the question of

---

<sup>142</sup> In this poem we see Lear, like the Old Men of his limericks, piteously under siege:

When he walks in a waterproof white  
The children run after him so!  
Calling out, -- 'He's come out in his night-  
gown, that crazy old Englishman, -- O!'

He weeps by the side of the ocean,  
He weeps on the top of the hill;  
He purchases pancakes and lotion,  
And chocolate shrimps from the mill (CNV, 429).

Eliot's version is more upbeat, but lexically faithful to Lear's brand of nonsense: 'How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot! / With a bobtail cur / In a coat of fur / And a porpentine cat / And a wopsical hat: / How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!' (Eliot, 1985. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 151).



whether he could manage another pint (U, 300), and the lexicon, like that of the games we studied in the previous chapter, is rich with puns, codes, private jokes and Freudian trap-doors. When Bloom 'slopes in' to the pub, affable but uneasy, the stage is set for a deft and unnerving Hobbesian exposition. Immediately he is wary of Garryowen, the citizen's glowering dog, and of the baser, bullying instincts of the company we can understand the dog to represent. While Bloom launches bravely into the first of his many unfortunate orations (or 'codologies'), Garryowen is 'smelling him all the time,' as the narrator cruelly observes: 'I'm told those Jewies does have a sort of a queer odour coming off them for dogs' (U, 292).

Bloom's problem here is on a split-level. It is obvious to the reader that Bloom's outsider status is marked primarily by his manner: his speech is gentler, his arguments subtler, his attitudes more generous than those of the drinkers. The drinkers themselves, however, cannot permit this account of the discrepancy: simply put, it would make them look bad. Bloom, for them, is an outsider not because of his qualities but because of his 'faults': he is a Jew, and he is a scrounger, and he is a bore. Reducing him in this way, they collectively perform a Hobbesian self-deception: 'it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men.'<sup>143</sup> For the narrator, it is a purely reflex reaction to his irritation at Bloom's 'know-all' conversational style; this is why, amidst all the uncharitable assertions and mockeries that prowl through his psyche for the remainder of the chapter, he never once questions the motives behind his mean-spiritedness. His resentments are automatic – unexamined, unreconstructed, Garryowenesque – and the escalating hostility of the episode is similarly mechanistic.

It is this lack of self-reflexiveness that leads the narrator and his companions to warp reality to make it correspond with their own negative impressions of Bloom, which are by this time collective, calcified, and self-perpetuating. The pivotal example of this is of course Lenehan's fatal assumption that Bloom has sneaked off from the pub to collect substantial winnings from a racing bet, an assumption based on an earlier misunderstanding between Bloom and Bantam Lyons. What is remarkable is not Lenehan's assumption itself, which is permissible if ungenerous, but the speed with which it attains the status of hard fact. No sooner has Lenehan stated his suspicion than the company agree that Bloom is a 'dark horse' with a fortune of five pounds in his

---

<sup>143</sup> Hobbes, 125.

miser's pocket (U, 321). Less significant but similar injustices are done to Bloom throughout the chapter: when Bloom commends the antitreating league, for instance, the narrator mocks him inwardly: 'Gob, he'd let you pour all manner of drink down his throat before you'd ever see the froth of his pint' (U, 298). This remark is not only unfair, but from the evidence we have seen, untrue; when Bloom first enters the bar and is offered a drink by Joe, he declines, consenting when pressed to accept a cigar instead. Is this really the behaviour of a notorious sponger?<sup>144</sup> The cigar itself is also used as a stick to beat Bloom with, when the narrator mentions 'his twopenny stump that he cadged off of Joe' (297). The cigar was, of course, not cadged, but settled for somewhat reluctantly: when Joe offered Bloom a drink, Bloom said 'he wouldn't and couldn't and excuse him and no offence and all to that and then he said well he'd just take a cigar.' At the time, predictably, that answer itself met with a sarcastic reception in the mind of the narrator: 'Gob, he's a prudent character and no mistake' (U, 291).

It's clear that Bloom cannot win. The impoverished and impercipient attitude of the narrator and his company towards Bloom is no more sophisticated, and no less cheaply spiteful, than that of Stephen's merciless schoolmates at Clongowes (a link hinted at in the episode's long roll-call of saints, one of whom is listed as 'S. Stephen Protomartyr' (U, 324)). The Clongowes scene in question turns on the matter of whether or not the young Stephen kisses his mother before bed. When Stephen answers, 'I do,' he is laughed at; when he then answers, 'I don't,' he is again laughed at. The episode provokes a physical reaction in Stephen: 'He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed' (AP, 9). Stephen, in his innocence, thinks Wells must be demonstrating a grammatical paradox, but of course Wells and his cronies, like the Cyclopean mockers, are not so high-minded as that; all they are demonstrating is a symptom of the Hobbesian model of scornful laughter; the Darwinian dominion of the strong over the weak; the Learesque cruelty of 'they.'

If we return to Bloom's specific predicament, though, we will see that we have neglected to address an important aspect of the problem: Bloom's own culpability. However much we would like to absolve Bloom from blame by diagnosing the

---

<sup>144</sup> In 'Oxen of the Sun' too, when Bloom is surrounded by boisterous and drunken company, he alone remains sober, taking a drink out of politeness and furtively redistributing most of it: 'And the learning knight let pour for childe Leopold a draught and halp thereto the while all they that were there drank every each. And childe Leopold did up his beaver for to pleasure him ... and anon full privily he voided the more part in his neighbour glass and his neighbour nist not of his wile' (U, 370).

psychopathology of a brutish rabble, we cannot ignore his own social naivety, which exacerbates his situation considerably. Going back to Lear, we can admit that the clamouring mobs of the limericks, for all their severity, are not entirely unprovoked; the wanton banging of gongs 'all day long' would try anyone's patience. Similarly, Bloom's insistence on careful, empirical debate, 'with his *but don't you see* and *but on the other hand*', is clearly not apt for the occasion (U, 293).<sup>145</sup> His frustrated attempts to raise the level of discussion above bawdy jokes, slurs, and gossip grow increasingly inappropriate, and betray a certain inflexibility in his character; he has gatecrashed a carnival and tried to make of it a seminar.

There is a famous nonsense scene in which the same thing happens: a well-spoken and out-of-place stranger arrives halfway through a party, sits down and begins to find fault with the manners and customs of the merry company. Like Bloom, Alice is rather more high-minded than the volatile members of the 'Mad Tea-party;' like Bloom, she is always 'glad to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge' (Haughton, 54); like Bloom, she is persistently trying to steer the conversation into more respectable waters; and like Bloom, her social manner is somewhat awkward and inflexible, an unfortunate combination to which she adds her own brand of aristocratic hauteur. At first, she is not even welcome at the table:

"No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw Alice coming.  
"There's *plenty* of room!" said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table' (Haughton, 60).

Timid Bloom, of course, would never have sat down uninvited, as the citizen ruefully observes: '—The strangers. [...]. Our own fault. We let them come in' (U, 310) (the citizen, of course, at first encouraged Bloom's entrance to the pub with the words 'Come in, come on' (U, 290)). This aside, the events of the mad tea-party chime with those at Barney Kiernan's in a number of ways. Alice and Bloom are frequently singled out for teasing, and their efforts to raise the level of dialogue are consistently (and rudely) interrupted:

---

<sup>145</sup> Robert H. Bell levels the same charge at Stephen Dedalus, whose priggish behaviour provokes the (justifiable) 'impatient mockery' of Buck and others. Only 'magnanimous' Bloom is patient with Stephen, perhaps recognising in him aspects of his own social awkwardness; but Bloom is treated with 'minimal civility for his pains': 'Stephen yawns in Bloom's face and hardly says a word in the shelter; when he does speak, it is to sing an anti-Semitic ballad, or to talk ... over his host's head, or to renew his patent on the egotistical sublime' (Bell, 1996. *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in Ulysses*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 33).

“Really, now you ask me,” said Alice, very much confused, “I don’t think—”

“Then you shouldn’t talk,” said the Hatter (U, 67).

And for Bloom:

– You don’t grasp my point, says Bloom. What I mean is...

– *Sinn féin!* Says the Citizen. *Sinn féin amháin!* The friends we love are by our side and the foes we hate before us (U, 293).

Both Alice and Bloom depart the scene beneath a dark cloud. While Bloom’s exit is the more violent this time around, there is a noticeable correlation between his narrow escape from the hurled biscuit tin and Alice’s fraught departure from the Duchess’s house, an environment as hostile and suspicious as Barney Kiernan’s, and in which babies and frying-pans are indiscriminately lobbed about (Haughton, 55). While the mad tea-party-goers stop short of throwing missiles, they do return to give evidence at Alice’s trial, just as Bloom’s tormentors resurface as witnesses and jurors at Bloom’s trial in Circe.

Of course, the members of the mad tea-party are by no means the only Hobbesian characters in Alice, and neither are they the most extreme. The Caterpillar chapter conjures the same atmosphere of suspicion and intolerance: ““You!” said the Caterpillar contemptuously. “Who are *you*?”” (Haughton, 41). The obsessive interest in Alice’s identity calls to mind similar questions launched accusingly at Bloom, such as Ned Lambert’s: “– Is he a jew or a gentile or a holy Roman or a swaddler or what the hell is he? Says Ned. Or who is he?” (U, 323). The Duchess, too, is citizen-like in her belligerence, and in her ability undermine Alice’s ‘know-all’ tendencies by twisting her words into threats:

“ ... You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis —”

“Talking of axes,” said the Duchess, “chop off her head!” (Haughton, 54).<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> By strange coincidence, just as the abrasive, violent Duchess later returns much changed, full of charm and syrupy affection towards Alice, so the next time we meet the citizen he is ‘choked with emotion’ as he glorifies Bloom: ‘May the good God bless him!’ (U, 460).

The verbal trick the Duchess uses here, which manages triumphantly both to make Alice's knowledge seem ridiculous, to swing the topic of conversation back to her own dark preferences, and to make a punning joke, is similar to Alf's (minus the pun) when Bloom is holding forth on the 'deterrent effect' of capital punishment (note the thematic overlap, by the way): '- There's one thing it hasn't a deterrent effect on, says Alf. [...] The poor bugger's tool that's being hanged' (U, 292). Predictably, Bloom proceeds to account scientifically for this phenomenon, confirming his inability both to read the situation and to adapt to its bawdy level.

Importantly, despite this irritating habit of Bloom's (and Alice's),<sup>147</sup> he nevertheless inspires sympathy in the reader. Despite their social clumsiness, the dignity and good manners of Bloom and Alice are preserved, and the reader remains firmly on their side. In *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecercle draws on Geoffrey Leech's 'Politeness Principle' to analyse the excessively polite behaviour of Alice towards characters who are so relentlessly rude to her. He then reverses it to create the 'Selfishness Principle' by which the citizens of Wonderland live, and whose basic maxim is: 'minimise damage to self, maximise damage to other.'<sup>148</sup> While Lecercle acknowledges that these two behaviours are 'closely linked', he nevertheless proceeds to analyse them separately, giving examples from Carroll's text and clunkily trying to decide which of these show the characters 'minimising damage to self' and which show them 'maximising damage to others.' Not only is his analysis uncharacteristically simplistic, it is fundamentally flawed. By treating each clause of his maxim as a separate entity, Lecercle ignores the causal relationship between them and fails to recognise that, in fact, the *act* of 'maximising damage to other' is a corollary of the *desire* to 'minimise damage to self'; as Byron put it, 'if I laugh at any mortal thing / 'Tis that I may not weep.'<sup>149</sup> In effect, the 'Selfishness Principle' is just another way of phrasing the Hobbesian position on laughter; the comic-aggression of the nonsense troupe is the expression of 'sudden glory,' 'the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.' Compelled by the desire to 'minimise damage' to themselves, and to 'keep themselves in their own

---

<sup>147</sup> A particularly forceful example of Alice's social awkwardness occurs near the beginning of *Wonderland*, when, before an audience of mice and birds, she seems unable to check her chatter about her cat Dinah's 'capital' mouse- and bird-hunting abilities. Inevitably, the company scatters and Alice is left in tears, 'very lonely and low-spirited', but still with only a limited awareness of her error (21-2; 29-30).

<sup>148</sup> Lecercle, 102-4.

<sup>149</sup> Byron, (ed. Jerome J. McGann), 2008. *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Canto IV, line 25).

favour' as Hobbes writes, they set about ruthlessly 'observing the imperfections of other men': maximising damage to others.<sup>150</sup> Bloom and Alice are victims of this Hobbesian version of reality: Alice's name is 'stupid' (according to Humpty Dumpty); her face is 'ordinary' and 'not clever' (Humpty Dumpty and Rose); the Mock Turtle calls her a 'simpleton', while the Duchess tells her, "'You don't know much [...] and that's a fact'" (Haughton, 53). Likewise, Bloom has a 'lardy face'; he is effeminate ('one of those mixed middlings' (U, 323)); he is not-Irish; he is dull.<sup>151</sup> The unfortunate rigidity of Bloom's and Alice's attempts at interaction amplifies their isolation, but the pathos of their predicament rests with the inescapably Hobbesian psychology of their bullies.

Hobbes concludes his analysis by offering the high-minded alternative to the 'sudden glory' of scornful laughter, advising that 'of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn.'<sup>152</sup> Perhaps this is what distinguishes Alice and Bloom most of all from the company which loves to bait them. Bloom's compassion cuts through the invidious atmosphere of Barney Kiernan's as he speaks above the mockery of 'that bloody lunatic Breen' to plead for sympathy 'on account of the poor woman. I mean his wife' (U, 307).<sup>153</sup> In 'Oxen of the Sun' he similarly distinguishes himself, his concern for Mina Purefoy (of whose difficult labour he first hears from Mrs Breen herself) preventing him from entering into the same jocular spirit as the others. The company in the Maternity Hospital is altogether more friendly than that of Barney Kiernan's establishment, but they are scarcely less irreverent, and Bloom is caught between his social obligation to join in and his awareness of the nearby Mrs Purefoy's suffering. Bloom's sympathetic nature puts him at odds with the mocking tone of his

---

<sup>150</sup> Hobbes, 125.

<sup>151</sup> And in Circe, of course, he is much more than this: 'a wellknown dynamitard, forger, bigamist, bawd and cuckold and a public nuisance to the citizens of Dublin' (U, 445). Even Bloom gets off relatively lightly compared to HCE and the 'long list [...] of all abusive names he was called' when he is reviled in the pub, including '*Firstnighter, Informer, Old Fruit, Yellow Whigger,*' and perhaps worst of all, '*Artist*' (FW, 71.05-21).

<sup>152</sup> Hobbes, 125.

<sup>153</sup> Sensitivity and good grace are the qualities Bloom admires in others too. By the time he reaches the pub, he will not have forgotten Martin Cunningham's kindness to him in the funeral cab that morning, when the conversation turned to suicide (a painful topic for the son of a self-poisoner):

- But the worst of all, Mr Power said, is the man who takes his own life.

Martin Cunningham drew out his watch briskly, coughed and put it back.

- The greatest disgrace to have in the family, Mr Power added.

- Temporary insanity of course, Martin Cunningham said decisively. We must take a charitable view of it.

- They say a man who does it is a coward, Mr Dedalus said.

- It is not for us to judge, Martin Cunningham said.

Mr Bloom, about to speak, closed his lips again. Martin Cunningham's eyes. Looking away now. Sympathetic human man he is. Intelligent. (U, 93)

companions, just as it does in the 'Cyclops' episode; but he is no longer on enemy soil, and the gentle qualities that were mocked in the pub ('Gob, he'd have a soft hand under a hen' (U, 302)) are now celebrated:

And sir Leopold that was the goodliest guest that ever sat in scholars'  
hall and that was the meekest man and the kindest that ever laid  
husbandly hand under hen ...' (U, 370).<sup>154</sup>

Alice, too, is considerate towards her fellow creatures in ways the citizens of Wonderland and the Looking-glass cannot understand: in Wonderland she consoles a lonely puppy in the wood, rescues the Duchess's baby from its abusers, hides the condemned card-men from their executioners, and defends the knave amidst the injustice of his trial. In *Through the Looking-glass*, her kindness towards the mentally fragile White Queen is especially touching, and recalls Bloom's own benevolence to the 'blind stripling', whom he helps to cross the road (U, 172-3). Harry Blamires describes this act as 'the impulse ... of the compassionate Jesus-Bloom, and also of the outsider-Bloom, hungry for companionship and sympathetic towards a fellow outsider.'<sup>155</sup> We know from her preoccupations during the White Queen episode that Alice's motives are similar, her goodwill both instinctive and tinged with loneliness: "Only it is so *very* lonely here!" Alice said in a melancholy voice; and, at the thought of her loneliness, two large tears came rolling down her cheeks' (Haughton, 173).

Bloom and Alice, the Hobbesian scapegoats of many a comic scene, are also Hobbesian saviours of others like them, doing 'proper works' to 'free others from scorn'.<sup>156</sup> The situational and behavioural similarities between Alice and Bloom, as illustrated above, border on the uncanny, and prompt us to ask why nonsense is so in thrall to the Hobbesian version of humour. Why does one of its most dominant comic modes centre around persecution and ridicule? And why is kindness so often made to

---

<sup>154</sup> Bloom's penchant for explaining scientific phenomena is likewise positively recast, earning him the Bunyanesque moniker 'Calmer' rather than the scornful 'Know-all' as he uses his knowledge of thunder to soothe a fretful Stephen (U, 377).

<sup>155</sup> Harry Blamires, 1985. *The Bloomsday Book*. London: Methuen, 74.

<sup>156</sup> One might even write a Learesque limerick about it:

There was an Old Fellow called Bloom  
Who drew smirks when he entered a room.  
Like kindhearted Alice  
He was without malice,  
That gentle Old Fellow called Bloom.

stand for the opposite of laughter? The answer will surely tell us a great deal about the nonsense condition itself; for while the particulars of Alice's and Bloom's respective predicaments are consistently and eerily alike, it is unlikely that Joyce was aware of them.<sup>157</sup> Rather, it says something about the Hobbesian atmosphere of nonsense in general, and of the importance of the isolated individual to the nonsense narrative. We might see nonsense as a kind of hysterical existentialism: the most universal nonsense narrative is of the friendless hero wandering through a comic-aggressive landscape, neither understanding nor being understood. This is as true for the protagonists of Lear and Carroll as it is for those of Joyce, Beckett, O'Brien, and Nabokov. However the Hobbesian model of superior laughter has been revised over the years, it nevertheless provides an important imaginative scaffold to the nonsense brand of humour. Crucially, it is also a significant precursor to Freud's theories of the comic, to which, in our search for the link between hostility and nonsense humour, we must now turn.

### 3. 'THE CREW COULD DO NOTHING BUT GROAN':

#### *L'HUMOUR NOIR AND THE BAD PUN*

The problem with all the Hobbesian nastiness we find lurking in the psyche of the nonsense antagonist is that it becomes difficult to extract the humour from the hostility. The 'group drinkards' (FW, 312.31) in Barney Kiernan's tell no good jokes and laugh no 'ethical' laughs: the amusement they enjoy is the result of a heady brew of gossip, tribalism, exaggeration, and inebriation. Their jokes are seldom ones in which the reader can share; like Swift we abhor 'the senseless tribe, / Who call it humour when they jibe,' rising above their callousness and siding with their victim.<sup>158</sup> The humour the reader experiences in the 'Cyclops' episode is derived not from the humour the Cyclopeans enjoy, but from the humour they unwittingly generate in their enjoyment (as well as from Joyce's bravura comic interludes, of course): the clownishness of the

---

<sup>157</sup> It has been suggested by John A. Rea that Joyce in fact *had* read some Carroll before he started writing *Work in Progress*, adapting Carroll's *Mischmasch* parody of Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* in 'Circe' (John A. Rea, 'A Bit of Lewis Carroll in *Ulysses*.' *James Joyce Quarterly*, Fall 1977 (86-9)). Rea's argument is a sketchy one, but even if it is true, there is little possibility of Joyce having studied the Alice books carefully enough on a structural level to work in Carrollian allusions as detailed and subtle as the parallels outlined above.

<sup>158</sup> Swift (ed. C.H. Sisson), 1977. *Selected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet, 85-6 ('Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift').



drinkers, the narrator's lively internal monologue, and the Citizen's hilarious accidents of self-contradiction ('– By Jesus, [...] I'll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will (U, 327)).<sup>159</sup> Recalling the incident later on, Bloom thinks the 'drunken ranters' of Barney Kiernan's 'ought to go home and laugh at themselves' (362-3). This, of course, is the one kind of laughter not accessible to the drinkers; it springs from the 'true humour' or '*risus purus*' that Beckett's Arsene calls 'the laugh of laughs,' in which, as Simon Critchley explains, 'the object of laughter is the subject who laughs.'<sup>160</sup> Being mean-spirited and (like the Cyclops himself) myopic, the 'drunken ranters' are no more capable of laughing at their own expense than *Wonderland's* Queen of Hearts is of losing a game of croquet; for to do so would mean to accept a reality in which they, too, are flawed, fallen, and ridiculous.

But if the humour of these Hobbesian scenes, whether in the pub or at the mad tea-party, is only felt by the reader in an indirect way – we laugh at the jeerers and not at their jeers – what about the humour generated by *actual* jokes? In short, is nonsense humour *funny*? Of course, in an important sense this question is unanswerable: the act of finding something funny is subjective, and operates on a solipsistic level; we can make no blanket judgments and enforce no standards. On the other hand, it is usually easy to recognise a comic animus, whether or not we ourselves are moved by it. I wrote at the start of this chapter that humour is a 'crucial element' of nonsense's 'diagnostic criteria.' Since then, however, we have learned just how black that humour tends to be, finding its home in fights between brothers and in the taunts of bullying gangs. We have studied the situational conditions of nonsense humour and the often brutal forms it can take; but what of the actual jokes themselves? What are they about, who tells them, and are they funny? This final section will endeavour to answer these questions.

If we analyse the content of nonsense humour, it is easy to see the dark preoccupations, mostly with death and mental pain, of so many of the jokes. In his essay on Alice, 'The Child as Swain,' William Empson points out the frequency of Carroll's

---

<sup>159</sup> Of course, in laughing at the unselfconscious Cyclopeans, the reader is also guilty of Hobbesian 'superior' laughter; the comedy in 'Cyclops' is, it seems, inescapably hierarchical.

<sup>160</sup> Critchley, 49-50; Beckett, *Watt*, 46. Arsene expands on 'the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy.' Joyce and Lear are uniquely capable of laughing at themselves: Lear, who signs his letters 'your loving fat friend' or 'the globular foolish topographer' (*Selected Letters*, 187, 163) and whose poems are so full of weeping comic self-portraits and spherical self-caricatures; Joyce, who signs a letter to Giorgio and Helen entreating them to 'Breathe a prayer, drop a tear for / The Crockery Joyce' (13 August, 1935) and who is 'for ever cracking quips on himself' (FW, 463.8). Carroll takes himself a little more seriously, though he does frequently cast himself as comic victim in the stories he tells in his letters to child-friends.



observes that he ‘virtually defines the Joycean human comedy’ in the process.<sup>163</sup>

For Freud, too, death was a powerful comic theme: the ‘crassest’ but also the ‘purest’ kind of humour. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* ends with an example of gallows humour, in which ‘a rogue who is being led to execution on a Monday exclaims: “Well, that’s a good start to the week.”’<sup>164</sup> Here, says Freud, the super-ego of the rogue cleverly shields the ego from the fact of its imminent destruction by joking about it. Following from this, Freud concludes that humour is fundamentally a means of defence against uncomfortable or unnatural truths, which explains why death is among its most popular and ‘purest’ themes. It should come as no surprise that nonsense humour is as awash with death jokes as any other comic mode; but further, it could easily be argued that death jokes are in fact *more* ubiquitous in nonsense than in other comic forms, because, as death jokes are about resisting the real, they fit with perfect logic into a genre whose wider purpose is a sustained resistance to the real.

In an essay on ‘The Uses of Victorian Laughter,’ Donald J. Gray observes that ‘Cruelty, pain, irrationality, death [...] are recurrent topics in Victorian humor’ and nonsense in particular, before offering an interesting genetic reading of the ‘Lobster Quadrille’ in *Wonderland*.<sup>165</sup> He traces a parody of a popular minstrel song, ‘Sally, Come Up’ from Carroll’s diaries, through the original *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, to its eventual (and not very recognisable) form in *Wonderland’s* ‘Lobster Quadrille,’ (which parodies more directly Mary Howett’s verse about a predatory spider and a reluctant fly):

“Will you walk a little faster?” said a whiting to a snail,  
“There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.  
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!  
They are waiting on the shingle – will you come an join the dance?  
Will you, wo’n’t you, will you, wo’n’t you, will you join the dance?  
Will you, wo’n’t you, will you, wo’n’t you, wo’n’t you join the  
dance? (Haughton, 89).

The snail is understandably reluctant to ‘join the dance,’ which seems to be a dance of death (and in which, ominously, the whiting end up with their tails in their mouths, as

---

<sup>163</sup> Robert H. Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce*, 85.

<sup>164</sup> Freud, 2002 (1940). *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*. London: Penguin, 223. This example of gallows humour was revisited twenty years later in Freud’s essay ‘Humour,’ in which it was the principle theme.

<sup>165</sup> Donald J. Gray, ‘The Uses of Victorian Laughter,’ in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (December 1966), 145-176 (167).

served in restaurants, because ‘they had to fall a long way’ (Houghton, 90)). The atmosphere here recalls similar lurings-in of unwary fish dinners in Carroll’s other parodies, ‘How doth the little crocodile’ and ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter.’ In his analysis, Gray notices that Alice must frequently stop herself from revealing the many animals she has consumed to the *Wonderland* creatures, who are justifiably sensitive about such topics. Her self-censorship is generally successful; when the Mock Turtle asks if she has seen whiting, her hasty aposiopesis, “‘I’ve often seen them at dinn---’”, goes unchallenged: “‘I don’t know where Dinn may be,” said the Mock Turtle’ (Houghton, 89). When she is instructed to recite a poem, however, Alice’s diplomatic abbreviations unravel, and her carnivorous customs are exposed with Freudian inevitability as her words ‘come out queer’ and tell of an over-cooked lobster and a picnic shared by a Panther and an Owl, which ends ominously:

*“When the pie was all finished, the Owl, as a boon,  
Was kindly permitted to pocket the spoon:  
While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl,  
And concluded the banquet by-----”*

“What *is* the use of repeating all that stuff?” the Mock Turtle interrupted [...].

“I think you’d better leave off,” said the Gryphon, and Alice was only too glad to do so (Houghton, 93).

Here it falls to the Mock Turtle to interrupt Alice, to spare himself from hearing the poem’s unavoidable last words: ‘While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl, / and concluded the banquet by eating the owl.’ Gray wonders why, if the Mock Turtle is so offended by carnivorous behaviour and so unconvinced by ‘the use of repeating all that stuff,’ he then launches into a rendition of ‘*Beautiful Soup*,’ ‘a curious choice for a mock turtle.’ He concludes rather weakly that the Mock Turtle, ‘in his own unreflecting way,’ has ‘answered his own disturbed question.’<sup>166</sup> In fact, we should give the Mock Turtle more credit; it is not for nothing that André Breton chose the ‘Lobster Quadrille’ chapter to showcase Carroll in ‘*L’humour noir*.’ Far from unreflecting, the Mock Turtle is his own eulogist: mourning and morbidly exulting in his own vividly imagined death-by-soup, not that this delicacy ever seriously threatens to appear on the menu. His actions are worthy of Barthelme’s Lear, and of John Donne too, who indulged the

---

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 174.

morbid pleasure of having himself painted in his shroud. The Mock Turtle is luxuriating in a similar custom, memorably phrased by Howard Jacobson as ‘taking to the grave before the grave can take to you.’<sup>167</sup>

Gray hypothesises that in his treatment of death here, Carroll is ‘relieving his fears of an unsanctified nature by burlesquing its principles’ – being a good Freudian, in other words. While there are many instances of Carroll’s Freudian camouflages, particularly when it comes to sex, it is not entirely convincing that that is what is going on here. For a start, unlike Freud’s rogue who jokes about his own impending execution, the Mock Turtle is not laughing. In fact, his voice is ‘choked with sobs’ as he sings; further, both of Tenniel’s illustrations of him show tears streaming down his face, and his entire meeting with Alice is marked by a ‘constant heavy sobbing’, even as he makes the most consistent and colourful puns of any of Carroll’s characters (Haughton, 83).

There are several aspects to this complex characterisation of the punning depressive, who at once fears and lyricises his own slaughter, but whose ‘Lobster Quadrille’ seems sublimely unaware of its own deathly context. It is my contention that character of the Mock Turtle, and of the Gnat in *Through the Looking-glass* (who develops many of the Mock Turtle’s ideas), holds some vital clues about how we must read nonsense humour, how we can understand or account for the link between death and the pun (a link so central to both Freudian and nonsense humour), and in what way, if at all, we can classify nonsense humour as ‘funny’.

As I have said, the Mock Turtle is the most punning character in *Wonderland*; his paronomasia is systematic and relentless. He gives us ‘tortoise’ and ‘taught us’, ‘lesson’ and ‘lessen’, copious marine puns, and some monsterised areas of study: ‘Reeling and Writhing’; ‘Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision’; ‘Mystery, ancient and modern’; ‘Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils’; ‘Laughing and Grief’ (Haughton, 85).<sup>168</sup> Glossing this last example, Hugh Haughton writes that ‘The Mock Turtle is especially prone to Grief, though his puns inspire Laughter.’ This observation places the Mock Turtle firmly in the ‘tragic jester’ category, joking through tears to please an eager audience. It is based, however, on an unfortunate assumption: that the Mock Turtle’s puns ‘inspire Laughter.’ It is, in fact, remarkably difficult to

---

<sup>167</sup> Howard Jacobson, 1997. *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime*. London: Viking, 223.

<sup>168</sup> Seeing as I have removed some of these puns from their contexts, I will translate for clarity’s sake: Reading and Writing; Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, and Division; History, ancient and modern; Drawing, Sketching, and Painting in Oils; Latin and Greek.

argue that any of Carroll's puns do this – even taking into full consideration the changing comic fashions between the Victorian period, the Modern period, and now. This is probably the most important reminder that the Alice books were written for children: however much literary critics, linguists, logicians, and mathematicians might protest that the books are inaccessible to children in numerous important ways, it is when we look at the quality of the jokes that we must accept one of two possibilities: that Carroll himself isn't funny, or that only children find his jokes funny.

Of course, we are now in danger of falling into the trap, flagged near the start of this section, of trying to make all-purpose value judgments on what is and is not 'funny'. Even Carroll's best biographer, Morton N. Cohen, blunders here, complaining that:

many of the critiques of the *Alice* books seem to have been written by people who seldom laugh [...] they cannot come to grips with these books, where the jests, the shattered shams, the punctured pretenses, and the peals of laughter are essential elements to understanding and enjoying (Cohen, 140).

Perhaps the reading advanced in this chapter is merely humourless, but it has struggled to detect those 'peals of laughter' Cohen describes. Whose laughter does he mean? It seems sensible to read the text on its own terms, and ask what the Mock Turtle's companions think of his jokes. Do his puns, as Haughton and Cohen suggest, 'inspire Laughter' in those around him? The answer is surely a resounding no: Alice is only confused by them, demanding endless clarifications, while the Gryphon remains silently indifferent.

What is more, the puns themselves are fairly gruesome: they invoke nightmarish forms of physical and mental torture. Even verbally, they are not true puns, but have been contorted and disfigured into assuming plainly pessimistic second meanings. They would serve as a decent illustrative answer to the Wakean children's essay question 'When is a pun not a pun?' (FW, 307.02-3), and are of the same type as those Joyce uses throughout the *Wake*, but most potently in his Mock-Turtle-esque lists: 'Ulcer, Moonster, Leanstare and Cannought' (FW, 389.05); 'moanday, tearsday, wailsday, thumpsday, frightday, shatterday' (FW, 301.20-1). Whether or not the reader finds them funny, the Mock Turtle's puns fall short of inspiring laughter in his fictive audience, instead inspiring frustration (in Alice), indifference (in the Gryphon), or downright

despair (in the Mock Turtle himself). In this instance at least, nonsense humour is self-evidently not funny.

Enter the Gnat, whose opening gambit in *Through the Looking-glass* is a weak and diminutive idea for a pun: ““You might make a joke on that – something about ‘horse’ and ‘hoarse’, you know”” (Haughton, 147). That the Gnat is unable even to articulate its own jokes, instead only planting his proposals in the ear of a surrogate, shows its feebleness; the jokes themselves are like ghost notes, bloodless and de-emphasised to almost silence. Soon after its first attempt at humour, the Gnat does it again: ““You might make a joke on *that*”” for a poor pun on ‘wood’ and ‘would’ (Haughton, 147-8). Alice asks it a reasonable question:

“If you’re so anxious to have a joke made, why don’t you make one yourself?”

The little voice sighed deeply. It was *very* unhappy, evidently [...] (Haughton, 148).

During their conversation, the Gnat describes to Alice the various Looking-glass insects, each of whom exhibits the physical features of the pun that its name contains: the Rocking-horse-fly is a rocking horse with wings, the Snap-dragon-fly an airborne plum-pudding, and so on. The Bread-and-butterfly is a particularly tragic figure, being always already doomed to die of starvation on account of its impractical diet of weak tea and cream. When the Gnat finally makes a pun of its own, it tells Alice ““I wish *you* had made it””:

“Why do you wish *I* had made it?” Alice asked. “It’s a very bad one.”

But the Gnat only sighed deeply, while two large tears came rolling down its cheeks.

“You shouldn’t make jokes,” Alice said, “if it makes you so unhappy” (Haughton, 152).

At this point, the Gnat ‘sighs itself away,’ apparently dying of sadness. Clearly the Gnat’s stillborn puns no more inspire laughter than those of the Mock Turtle, and Haughton’s note on the Gnat as ‘sad comedian’ again seems to fall short of an adequate explanation. Far from being funny, or even meaning to be funny, the puns of both these

gloomy characters take pain or death as their subject, seek and receive no laughter, and are resolved in the literal death of the 'illstarred punster' (FW, 467.29).<sup>169</sup>

Carroll was more than aware of the punning joke's potential to elicit pain rather than laughter. Often in the Alice books, the joke's occasion for laughter instead prompts physical pain, and conversely, occasions of pain prompt laughter: Alice never laughs at other characters' jokes, but laughs uncontrollably at the Duchess 'boxing the Queen's ears' (Haughton, 73); the White King's terror as she picks him up (129); and the idea of being beheaded in battle (167). 'The Hunting of the Snark' is particularly rich with pain-inducing laughter, for instance when the Bellman attempts to keep up the crew's lagging spirits:

The Bellman perceived that their spirits were low,  
And repeated in musical tone  
Some jokes he had kept for a season of woe –  
But the crew could do nothing but groan (CLC, 684).

The joke that extracts groans of pain from its audience instead of laughter is a form of anti-humour we find often in Modernist comic writers, particularly Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien. In the *Wake* we find laughter recast as illness as Shem is found 'coming down with the whooping laugh', blurring whoops of laughter with the painful childhood affliction, whooping cough (FW, 423.26), while we recall from the above section on comic double acts the distinctly Beckettian condition of the Porter parents, who 'were never happier, huhu, than when they were miserable, haha' (FW, 558.23-4). In Beckett himself, the urge to laugh is one often rued by his physically blighted characters, when for example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir erupts into a "*hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.*"<sup>170</sup> Ideally laughter and unhappiness are in equilibrium, as suggested by Pozzo's Newtonian meditation on the constant quality of the world's tears, but for physical discomfort to tip the scales too heavily in favour of woe spoils the symmetry of the conceit; and anticlimax, that

---

<sup>169</sup> In Beckett's *Endgame*, there is a striking example of the mortal danger of laughter, as Nagg and Nell reminisce about a narrow escape from drowning caused by a funny story:

NAGG: You were in such fits that we capsized. By rights we should have been drowned.

NELL: It was because I felt happy.

NAGG: [*Indignant.*] It was not, it was not, it was my story and nothing else. Happy! Don't you laugh at it still? Every time I tell it. Happy! (Beckett, 1990, 102).

Clearly, Nagg feels that laughter need not – perhaps should not – be compatible with happiness. The couple's near-drowning demonstrates the Joycean morphing of 'man's laughter' and 'manslaughter.'

<sup>170</sup> Beckett, 1990. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 13.



constant nonsense stand-by, is a useful method of ensuring one element does not get to lord it over the other. O'Brien's (Myles na gCopaleen's) Keats and Chapman sketches, for instance, weave endlessly intricate and absurd narratives that resolve themselves in anticlimactic, profoundly cringeworthy puns, so painfully *unfunny* as to be funny again in a ingenious east-meets-west manoeuvre.<sup>171</sup>

Not all nonsense puns are groan-inducing, though. While few people can claim to read *Finnegans Wake* purely for the belly laughs, there are nevertheless moments of pure punning virtuosity that can elicit a reflex snort from the somberest reader. Modified proverbs and idioms are the best examples: 'Lumpsome is who lumpsum pays' (FW, 270); 'A vagrant need is a flagrant weed' (294, fn.2); 'plotsome to getsome' (312); 'Lard have mustard on them!' (409.15-6); but these are also merely 'loose carollories' of Wonderland's own altered axioms, of which the most famous is the Duchess's 'Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves' (Haughton, 79). Joyce's and Carroll's extended puns may not be particularly 'funny', but neither do they make us cringe; instead, they give us a moment of pure lexical pleasure at the possibility and adaptability of language.

But if the Wakean jokes don't quite make us cringe, like so many of Carroll's do, they don't quite make us laugh either. Professional Joyceans might chuckle together, in their scholarly way, at this or that pun, quip, or surprise allusion; but refract those same jokes onto an audience of undergraduates or lay readers, and the likeliest reaction is a Gryphon-esque silence. Much of this is, of course, to do with difficulty. The history of Joyce's reputation as a comic writer is fairly straightforward, in that it has grown in tandem with our understanding of his work. Throughout most of his career, Joyce was routinely exasperated by a readership that, in general, failed to get his jokes. His complaints about his audience's lack of comic recognition, for both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, are scattered throughout his letters and biography. 'No, no, no [...] it's meant to make you laugh,' he insisted to a visitor who asked about the *Wake*'s 'levels of meaning' (Ellmann, 704); this after a frustrating decade of grumbling that not enough people found *Ulysses* 'funny.' It must indeed have been baffling for him, given how endlessly funny he found his own work, as a sleep-deprived Nora Barnacle tells us: "Jim is writing at his book ... I go to bed and then that man sits in the next room and

---

<sup>171</sup> Some punchlines include: 'Great mines stink alike'; 'Dogging a fled horse'; 'A fête worse than debt'; 'His B.Arch is worse than his bight'; 'Foals rush in where Engels feared to tread'; and so on (Flann O'Brien, 1968. *The Best of Myles*. London: Grafton, 182-95).

continues laughing about his own writing. And then I knock at the door and say, "Now, Jim, stop writing or stop laughing.""<sup>172</sup>

We know that while Joyce was interested in theories of the comic (as a young man he sketched out his own theory, linking the comic to 'joy'), he was suspicious of contemporary, psychoanalytic approaches to the subject. Freud's famous 'relief' theory, whereby the joke short-circuits repressed instincts and desires by allowing the mind to take pleasure – and find relief – in the verbal and conceptual economy of wit, was blithely dismissed by Joyce, as we see here in an anecdote from Ellmann:

One evening when Ottocaro Weiss has been discussing Freud's theory [of humour], Joyce replied gaily, 'Well, that isn't true in this case.' He then told his father's story of Buckley and the Russian General, which was to be mentioned in *Ulysses* and to wind in and out of *Finnegans Wake*. Buckley, he explained, was an Irish soldier in the Crimean War who drew a bead on a Russian general, but when he observed his splendid epauletts and decorations, he could not bring himself to shoot. After a moment, alive to his duty, he raised his rifle again, but just then the general let down his pants to defecate. The sight of his enemy in so helpless and human a plight was too much for Buckley, who again lowered his gun. But when the general prepared to finish the operation with a piece of grassy turf, Buckley lost all respect for him and fired. Weiss replied, 'Well, that isn't funny' (Ellmann, 411).

This passage is illuminating on various aspects of Joycean humour. First, there is the question of why Joyce chose the story of Buckley and the Russian General to show that Freud's theory 'isn't true,' given that the story itself is a composite of war tales 'brought together by a logic not unlike that which informs Freud's dreamwork or jokework', and that its final form, like the rest of the *Wake*, is built on typically Freudian principles of repression unmasked by the irrepressible, economical pun.<sup>173</sup> Second, Weiss's blunt response to Joyce's yarn raises the familiar problem of comic subjectivity: Joyce found this story so fascinatingly funny, and Weiss did not. The passage does, however, give us a good indication of what impressed Joyce comically (though there is the complicating factor of Joyce's emotional investment in his father's joke leading him to overvalue its comic merit). The thematic ingredients of the Buckley story are upturned rank, defecation, and death, while the home Joyce eventually finds for the story embeds it in a

---

<sup>172</sup> 'An Interview with Carola Giedion-Welcker and Maria Jolas,' ed. Richard M. Kain, *James Joyce Quarterly* 11 (1974), 96. Cited in Robert H. Bell, *Jocoserious Joyce*, 7.

<sup>173</sup> Kelly Anspaugh, 'How Butt shot the Chamber Pot': "Finnegans Wake" II.3, *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 32, no.1 (Fall 1994), 71-81 (72).

nonsense context: it is told by double act Butt and Taff, through nonsense 'puns and reedles' (FW, 239.36).

In a chapter on the Irish Bull in his brilliant book, *Beckett's Dying Words*, Christopher Ricks remarks that 'the bull, like the cliché, gravitates towards death, partly because the bull is itself a form of suicidal self-cancellation.'<sup>174</sup> The pun is more a self-duplication than a cancellation, but we may see it as suicidal not only because its two meanings are forever at war, battling for supremacy like a pair of murderous nonsense twins, but because its lowly philosophical status as 'freak or accident', as Derek Attridge has noted, has already banished it to 'the realms of the infantile, the jocular, the literary,' just as its impoverished comic status as 'the lowest form of humour' has banished it from all levels of adult comic discourse (unless it is used ironically, in which case the joke is always on the pun's failure to be funny).<sup>175</sup> O.W. Holmes, whom Carroll greatly admired and who figures a few times in the *Wake* as 'the autocart of the bringfast cable' (FW, 434.31) called the pun an act of 'verbicide,' even though he was himself a skilful punster. In any case, the pun and *l'humour noir* fit well together: both are fairly marginal comic forms which take on leading roles in nonsense. The pun's obvious comic impulse, and its failure to deliver on this, makes it the ideal form for the nonsense writer's meditations on death, allowing jokes to be made while cheating the reader out of an opportunity to laugh.

We might remember from that connoisseur of failed humour, Beckett's Murphy, a method of organising his experiences into 'jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes.'<sup>176</sup> It is possible that Carroll's bad puns and (John) Joyce's Buckley story always belonged to the latter category. But perhaps the Buckley story proves that Freud's theory 'isn't true' for that very reason; by failing to be funny, these jokes fail to supply the pay-off of relief yet they are still, ostensibly, jokes. Far from representing an embarrassment to the Joycean paradigm, however, this failure redirects our miscarried laughter into an inevitable question: since we know that Joyce is prodigiously capable of genuinely funny writing, why are some of his jokes so conspicuously not-funny, and is this deliberate?

In his introduction to *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, John Carey glosses Freud's argument that dreams are forced to adopt the camouflaged form of the

---

<sup>174</sup> Christopher Ricks, 1993. *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 172.

<sup>175</sup> Derek Attridge, 2004. *Peculiar Language*. London: Routledge, 189.

<sup>176</sup> Beckett, 1969. *Murphy*, John Calder, 48.

'dream-work' in their attempts to evade the conscious mind, and 'seem to have a partiality for bad puns.'<sup>177</sup> Carey also notes with 'shock' the jokes at the more 'tendentious' end of the Freudian scale, in which suppressed hostility takes an increasingly overt form, as in the joke of the doctor and husband ignoring the Baroness in childbirth, as they are busy playing cards. If the verbal complexity of the joke, on the model of its oneiric counterpart, is styled the 'jokework', the relationship between the complexity of the jokework and the funniness of the joke is hardly a given. A familiar (and fairly innocuous) joke might run: 'What do you call a dozen lawyers at the bottom of the sea?' To which the answer is, 'A start.' A different version of the joke can easily be imagined, however, substituting the harmless joshing of a professional group with an ethnic slur. The reaction to such a joke would tend in most cases to be straightforwardly hostile: this is not humour, but abuse. Yet the jokework in question remains essentially the same, so what has changed?

Yeats counselled against telling 'the dancer from the dance,' but where jokes are concerned too, teller and context are all; they, as much as its content, will determine whether a joke is funny or merely offensive. It is never a good idea to explain jokes, but when Carroll's hopelessly weak-willed gnat makes its feeble pun on 'horse' and 'hoarse' it apologises for the temerity of this tiny detonation of wit, utterly undermining the joke in the process. In this case, the comedian is neither funny nor offensive: the joke withers and dies from the lack of a will-to-humorous-power (as does the gnat itself). The drinkers in Barney Kiernan's pub, by contrast, could not be more hormonally convinced of their right to give vent to their bullish opinions, however funny or unfunny the jokework in which they clothe them. The consequences of their uninhibited belief in their own funniness, we are left in no doubt, are verbal violence, with the threat of physical violence not far behind; how preferable things would be if the Citizen and Lenehan traded dismal puns and sapless tales about Russian generals. In this sense, faded or failed humour begins to acquire a strangely utopian side. Nevertheless, we must hastily add, *Cyclops* is of course riotously funny. Does the humour reside in the fact that we are laughing at rather than with the drinkers, as suggested earlier in this chapter? Perhaps, but there is surely a little more to it than that. As Shane Weller observes of Baudelaire's theory of humour, 'only the fallen can laugh and [...] the fall at which they laugh is always taken to be the fall of the other.'<sup>178</sup> We

---

<sup>177</sup> John Carey, introduction to *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, vii.

<sup>178</sup> Shane Weller, *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 84.

laugh as a release from our unease at the latent violence in the air, and out of Schadenfreude that the bullies are picking on Bloom and not us, but also, no less uneasily, at a recognition of the fallenness we share with these benighted specimens. Nevertheless, the fundamental thrust of Joyce's humour is to vindicate Bloom in the face of his tormentors. As Morton Gurewitch writes of what he terms Freudian 'disaster-humour':

[It] always involves [...] devictimization. Thus if we are shown a pitiful protagonist – a little man, an underdog, a misfit – disaster-humour will rehabilitate him... This rehabilitation is possible because the protagonist, whatever the way in which he has become a cipher or a creature of misfortune [...] has a good heart that counterbalances his physical, mental, or social inadequacies. Among these inadequacies, the characters' lack of a sense of humour is often conspicuous.<sup>179</sup>

Or as Empson observed of Alice, 'moral superiority involves a painful isolation.'<sup>180</sup> This is certainly something Bloom, too, knows all about.

With this in mind, one might compare the turn in Freud's theories of humour with the publication of the 1927 essay 'Humour', and its increased role for the violent dimension of wit, with his development in the same period of the theory of the death drive. Where it had previously seemed a given to Freud that the organism would seek self-preservation itself and act on the erotic drives to perpetuate itself, he now began to recognise 'the hypothesis of a *death instinct*, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state'.<sup>181</sup> The theory of the death drive adds a tragic dimension to the internal squabbles of id, ego and superego, giving a look of inevitability to the human failure to break the historical cycle of violence and warfare. But in so far as humour is an unruly force, it too is part of this cycle. With its need for tidy control, the ego aspires to purge its world of humour, only to be shielded from the impossibility of doing so by super-ego-derived forbidden humour, most usually on the subject of death.

---

<sup>179</sup> Morton Gurewitch, 1975. *Comedy: The Irrational Vision* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP), 102.

<sup>180</sup> Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 285.

<sup>181</sup> Freud, 1987. 'The Ego and the Id', in Albert Dickson (ed.), *On Metapsychology – The Theory of Psychoanalysis: 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 'The Ego and the Id', And Other Works*. London, Penguin, 380.

As Freud notes: 'in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion'<sup>182</sup>. In this lies the key to understanding the apparent distaste for genuinely funny humour that stalks the nonsense world. When Beckett's *Watt* smiles he copies an action he has seen other people perform but of which, it is hinted, he has no real comprehension himself: 'To many it seemed a simple sucking of the teeth. Watt used this smile sparingly.'<sup>183</sup> The attempt to readmit the forbidden topic of death through humour is resisted by the ego's refusal to get the joke, and the upshot is the particular miscarried delivery that is nonsense humour. As Freud comments of the 'Janus-headed' jokes based on absurdism and *non sequitur*:

The conflation does not lead us to any instance in which the two conflated items really give rise to a new meaning; if we try to analyse them, they fall apart entirely. [...] So in fact only the one interpretation is left to apply to these jokes: nonsense. We can decide one way or another whether we call these productions – which have exempted themselves from one of the most essential characteristics of the joke – 'bad' jokes or deny that they are jokes at all.<sup>184</sup>

Yet they do have a comic effect: 'either the comedy arises from uncovering the modes of thinking of the unconscious [...] or the pleasure comes from comparison with a fully formed joke. [...] There is no denying that it is just this inadequate adoption of the form of a joke [...] that turns this nonsense into comic nonsense.' Nonsense humour allows us to simultaneously acknowledge and disavow the dark secrets at its core. In doing so, it aims to bring the dark zones of violence and death under its control, and bring chaos definitively under its control. But this crusade invariably proves quixotic, and the chaos that threatens to swamp the nonsense world more usually stems from the excess of zeal with which the world of reason prosecutes its campaign. Beyond a certain point, in other words, the pursuit of reason becomes an agent of chaos in its own right, into which it falls unceremoniously but also hilariously. We have now reached the final stage of our comic *hegira*, with everyday comic pratfalls giving way to the biggest upset

---

<sup>182</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 104-5.

<sup>183</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, 23.

<sup>184</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 209.

of all: the fall of man. The humorous secrets of this improbable source of laughter is the stimulus of my next and final chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NONSENSE AND THE FALL

*Darkness falls from the air.*

- Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

*Brightness falls from the air.*

- Thomas Nashe, 'Summer's Last Will and Testament.'

A woman eats an apple; an Irishman slips from a ladder; a twin murders his brother; an egg topples from a wall; a heavenly angel grows cocky; 'a lunatic tower [is] launched at the stars';<sup>185</sup> a little girl plummets down a rabbit hole; a politician misspells 'hesitancy'; a physicist hits upon gravity; an ancient city is sacked; a family man is tried for public indecency; a child learns about sex; a Greek flies too close to the sun; a Baker sees a Boojum: things falling, from the silliest slip-up to the gravest ruin, are ubiquitous in nonsense. When Leopold Bloom, whose mind like Edward Lear's is 'concrete and fastidious' (CNV, 428), recalls from his college curriculum the 'Law of falling bodies: per second, per second' (U, 69), he is doing more than merely testing his memory; he is, like all analytically-minded persons, attempting to understand and control through numbers and logic what otherwise seems frightening and unruly. The law of falling bodies is, as Bloom calculates, 'Thirtytwo feet per second, per second,' a neat and reassuring detail that returns as a fall motif in *Finnegans Wake* as the number 1132, standing not just for consoling mathematical certainty but also for stony Pauline reasoning: 'For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all' (11:32, Paul's Epistle to the Romans).<sup>186</sup> Bloom's instinctive need to reduce the fact of falling bodies to its numerical particulars is not unlike Samuel Johnson's lexical response to the problem in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, whose entry under 'fall' is eccentrically lengthy, and is clearly meant to be exhaustively so. Johnson lists myriad examples, many of them bizarrely specific, and to his prolific ways of falling (drop, diminish, apostatize, sink, recede, and so on) attaches over a hundred illustrative

---

<sup>185</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, 57.

<sup>186</sup> *The Holy Bible (New Revised Standard Version)*, 1995. Oxford: Oxford University Press, New Testament, 157).



quotations.<sup>187</sup> There is a definite sense, in both the Joycean and Johnsonian examples, that anything pertaining to falling must be contained, controlled, categorised, in order to be thought about at all.

Literary nonsense, which cleaves almost fanatically to logic, order, and categorisation, is at once morbidly fascinated, philosophically vexed, and comically saturated with falling. The biblical Fall, which threatens the fixed world of nonsense with a whole cargo of imposters, including death, madness, fear, lust, and – most critically – chaos, presents itself as an immense artistic challenge to the nonsense writer, whether he sees the *culpa* as *felix* or otherwise. It poses a very large question: how can nonsense, which is built on rules and logic, find room for the dissenting voice of its enemy, which seeks to tear down those rules and install chaos and melodrama in their place? The fall is, after all, the single most pervasive motif in *Finnegans Wake*, and a luridly obvious narrative stimulus for both Alice books, particularly *Wonderland* (in Alice's literal fall and subsequent efforts to reach to the Edenic rose garden). As if to confirm rumours of this strange relationship between nonsense and the fall, Wakean allusions to Carroll are commonly embedded in a lapsarian context, for example in ALP's retitling of *Alice's Adventures* as '*Measly Ventures of Two Lice and the Fall of Fruit*' (FW, 106.21), or in the wistful:

Wonderlawn's lost us for ever. Alis, alas, she broke the glass! Liddell locker through the leafery, ours is a mistery of pain (FW, 270.19-22).

Commenting on the connection, Grace Eckley notes that Joyce on this topic 'makes a distinct departure from Lewis Carroll; Joyce celebrates the fall as a necessary part of the ongoing cycle of life' whereas Carroll takes a more solemn view:

Thus, although Joyce stayed close to many of Lewis Carroll's themes, he remains distinctly opposed to prevailing views of the Fall and to Carroll's aversion to sexual matters.<sup>188</sup>

Eckley's observation is true in a broad sense, but potentially quite misleading. Joyce's emphasis, with its strong sense of the *felix culpa* and the always-pending redemption that the fall both implies and enables, does indeed differ from Carroll's, with its belief

---

<sup>187</sup> See the facsimile of the *Dictionary* under 'Fall' in *Samuel Johnson: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (ed. Donald Greene, 1984. Oxford: Oxford University Press), 331-4.

<sup>188</sup> Eckley, *Children's Lore in Finnegans Wake*, 75-6.

in a tragic and terminal loss of innocence; but the divergence is religious rather than artistic. It is true that Joyce's ability to believe in the fall's redemptive power allowed him to treat his characters' sins with humour, and that such conduct was anathema to Carroll (whose letters to friends, editors, writers, and even a Lord Bishop bearing accusations of sacrilegious humour are many, their tone ranging from sympathetic, to stern, to outraged).<sup>189</sup> But in their artistic treatment of, and fascination for, the theme of the fall there is little contradiction; both Joyce and Carroll flirt with ideas of the fall from within the safe confines of their own textual games, rules, and inventions, preemptively rejecting its most destructive consequences, the most dire of which would be a loss of control over their material. Morton N. Cohen, seeking to account for Carroll's judgmental streak in his letters condemning religious humour, writes:

He had a fiercely religious cast of mind, a faith worked out by his own stern rules of logic. To compromise it in any way would have been to abandon it altogether and to find himself in a spiritual desert (Cohen, 306).

For André Breton, that Carroll was Anglican-pastor-logician-mathematician was a perfect signal of 'the appearance [of nonsense] in literature,'<sup>190</sup> but he is forgetting the rigid spiritual mechanics (to use a Swiftian phrase) of the medieval schoolmen. If we cast back to Stephen Dedalus just after his decisive *non serviam*, we will remember that for Stephen, too, religion and logic were by no means mutually exclusive. When Cranly asks him whether, having forsaken 'the God of the Roman catholics,' 'you do not intend to become a protestant?', Stephen counters:

What kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity which is logical and coherent and to embrace one which is illogical and incoherent? (AP, 266).

---

<sup>189</sup> An especially wretched example of this behaviour is given in Cohen's biography, involving a Boston-based student magazine called, in homage to Carroll, *Jabberwock*. Carroll had had a friendly correspondence with the magazine's schoolgirl editors, until he received an issue containing a throwaway limerick beginning, 'There was an old deacon of Lynn, / Who confessed he was given to sin.' The next issue carried the report that Carroll 'had sat down and with a quill of wrath stopped the *Jabberwock* once and for all, saying that he never wanted to see a copy again, and that he was deeply disappointed that the young editors could allow anything in their columns which made light of so solemn a subject as the confession of sin!' (Cohen, 305-6). Perhaps the limerick's deacon protagonist and its clear debt to Lear added insult to injury.

<sup>190</sup> Breton (tr. Mark Polizzotti), 2009. *Anthology of Black Humour*. London: Telegram, 137.

Denominational differences aside, both Carroll's and Joyce's notions of religious faith are bound up in logic and structural coherence, and are as such absolutist: to bend one rule is to abandon the lot. Both writers address the problem of the fall within this logical framework, and Joyce's less sombre attitude towards it is only a consequence of his non-religious (or at least non-believing) approach; artistically, Joyce's treatment of the subject does not diverge in any important way from Carroll's, and is entirely consistent with the nonsense method.

With this distinction made, we can now turn our attention to the way nonsense deals with the problem of the fall, what it means to the nonsense author, and why it seems so important. Elizabeth Sewell was onto something when, in her landmark study *The Field of Nonsense*, she asked, 'If Nonsense is on the side of order, what does it do about disorder?' Answering her own question, she proposes that nonsense is fighting a battle against the forces of disorder, but that:

The battle ... is bound to be inconclusive, because so long as the mind stays in the field of language, to which Nonsense is limited, it cannot suppress the force towards disorder in the mind, not defeat it conclusively... Nonsense can only engage the force towards disorder in continual play.<sup>191</sup>

The fall and its consequences are inscribed into nonsense texts, because it is the only way disorder can be engaged with (and monitored) within such a necessarily ordered framework; as Sewell puts it, nonsense keeps disorder 'continually in play and so in check.' The fascination, therefore, is at once self-destructive and self-preserving.

This chapter will examine three important manifestations of the fall in nonsense. The first describes a fall into madness, and deals with the ontological uncertainty, forgetfulness, and split personalities that torment many a nonsense protagonist. It will compare Issy's many-selved state with Alice's, on whom Issy is partly based. The second considers the fall into language, heralded in the Babel story (a vital Wakean meme), and nonsense's linguistic response to this happy catastrophe. This Babelian discussion will open into a study of the threat of a fall into chaos, asking why nonsense seems so dangerously to tempt what would destroy its fundamental tenets, and what this Adorno-esque vision of the self-annihilating work of art says not just about Joyce's

---

<sup>191</sup> Elizabeth Sewell, 1952. *The Field of Nonsense*, 46-7.

complex and self-conscious inheritance from Carroll but also, as Alice ponders, 'the reason insects are so fond of flying into candles' (Haughton, 151).

### 1. 'THINK OF A MAIDEN [...] DOUBLE HER':

#### MAIDENS, MORALS, AND MADNESS

In the *Wake*, there is no such thing as the *individual*; all characters are irrepressibly divided, doubled. As we saw in Chapter Three, the pseudocouples that abound in nonsense are embodied, comic forms of doubleness; Shem and Shaun, Browne and Nolan, the Tweedle brothers each have distinct bodies but occasionally blurred identities, where one might sometimes stand as the other's 'secondary personality' (FW, 38.26-7), or both might 'coalesce, their contrarities eliminated, in one stable somebody' (107.29-30), always eventually to 'dissimulate themselves,' and reclaim their distinct personalities (384.34). For the principle female characters, however, the 'multiplicity of personalities' we find in Joyce and Carroll must share the same host, without the luxury of a bodily doppelgänger: in the *Wake*, Issy is divided amongst herself, as was Alice before her.

There have been several important essays on the nature of Issy's split personalities, most of which have focused on Issy's fixation on her alien mirror image, whose face is the face of Issy's other personality: the 'linkingclass girl' whom Issy has named Madge (FW, 459.4). The most notable of these is Adaline Glasheen's '*Finnegans Wake* and the Girls from Boston Mass,' which first identified Joyce's debt to Morton Prince and the case of Christine Beauchamp as a foundation of Issy's divided psychological state.<sup>192</sup> In an aside, Glasheen notices that 'Joyce surrounds Issy and her reflection with references to *Alice Through the Looking-glass*', but her limited Carrollian credentials lead her down a blind alley: she claims that Alice 'has no mirror image' and implies that she is merely 'narcissistic' rather than (like Issy) multiplicitous.

---

<sup>192</sup> Glasheen, '*Finnegans Wake* and the Girls from Boston, Mass.', *Hudson Review* (7, Spring 1954), 89-96. See also Morris Beja, "'Dividual chaos': Case Histories of Multiple Personality and *Finnegans Wake*", *James Joyce Quarterly* (14.3, Spring 1977), 241-50; Catherine Driscoll, '*Felix Culpa* – Sex, Sin, and Discourse in Joyce's Fiction' in *Joyce on the Threshold*, ed. Anne Fogarty and Timothy Martin. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005, 171-86.

Edvige Giunta, 'Dear Reverend: "Lewis Carroll and the Boston Girls" in *James Joyce Quarterly* vol 30.3 (Spring 1993), 488-92 (489); and John Nash, 'The Logic of Incest: Issy, Princes, and Professors', *James Joyce Quarterly* (39.3, Spring 2002), 435-456.

In fact, we can clearly see Alice's mirror image as she crosses into the 'Looking-glass house' in Tenniel's illustration (in any case, how can Alice be properly 'narcissistic' if she casts no reflection?); furthermore, there are numerous instances of Alice addressing herself as another (or several others) throughout both of her adventures.<sup>193</sup> Commenting on Glasheen's stillborn comparison, Edvige Giunta repeats her mistake ('it is true that Alice has "no mirror image"'), but sketches out the beginnings of a more sustained critique. This itself fails to do justice to the connection, thanks to a combination of incomplete research and lack of critical follow-through, but makes a promising start.<sup>194</sup>

The Alice-Issy connection may end with mirrors, but it begins with a fall. *Wonderland* opens with a drowsy Alice fixed inside a paradisaean 'golden afternoon', and the first impression we are given is of Alice's restlessness within the stasis: 'Alice was beginning to get very tired ... of having nothing to do' (Houghton, 9). Edenic undertones are not hard to find: for Eve-like Alice, the perfection of her world is starting to drag – without any prospect of adventure – until she meets a talking creature (albeit a rather meek variant on the serpent), who piques her curiosity and promptly lures her to her downfall. Before the first chapter is out, we learn that Alice is in the habit of talking to herself, and sometimes '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' (Houghton, 14). Alice's doubled self, it seems, is no simple case of self-amusing dialogue; there is transgression and punishment involved, one 'good' Alice chastising the other 'bad' Alice when she misbehaves.

This division happens be replicated exactly in Issy, who, as Catherine Driscoll writes, 'is often understood as a duality comprised of opposing versions of herself, frequently represented as a division between good and bad girls.'<sup>195</sup> In the *Wake*, Issy's split personality is given wings as she becomes a 'ravenindove' (FW, 354.28), an unsubtle metaphor for the conflict between the black, bad side of her personality and the

---

<sup>193</sup> Glasheen, 90.

<sup>194</sup> Giunta proposes that the letter from the Boston schoolgirls to Lewis Carroll (see footnote 5) is one likely source for the *Wake*'s 'letter from Boston, Mass.', noting that Joyce would have been aware of Carroll's outrage over their 'irreverent joke' thanks to his reading of Collingwood's biography of Carroll (and noting the Wakean assonance between 'irreverent' and the *Wake* letter's opening 'Dear Reverend'). This does indeed seem very plausible, and it is a little disappointing that Giunta leaves his findings at that, without suggesting what they might signify beyond a casual link. He also wrongly identifies the girls' 'irreverent joke' as an 'anecdote on Washington's diary' instead of the Learesque deacon limerick we now know it to have been (Giunta, *op.cit.*, 489-90).

<sup>195</sup> Driscoll, 'Felix Culpa – Sex, Sin, and Discourse in Joyce's Fiction' in *Joyce on the Threshold*, ed. Anne Fogarty and Timothy Martin. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005, 171-86 (180).

white, dovelike counterpart. It is unusual to catch Joyce getting artistic mileage from such tired Gothic tropes in such an unexamined way; it seems likely that it was simply his way of extracting some use from the fraying experience of watching his daughter's own psychological decline. When Lucia's descent into schizophrenia was beginning to look irreversible, Joyce observed to Georgio that, 'Ella ha delle volte la sapienza del serpent e l'innocenza del colombo.'<sup>196</sup> (Alice, too, is memorably called a 'serpent' in one of her mushroom-induced growth spurts (Haughton, 47)).

However garish its cliché though, it is this division between good and bad which characterised the dissociative Christine Beauchamp's initial personality-split.<sup>197</sup> Beauchamp's reaction to her own 'fall' (prompted by the sexual advances of a male friend) was to divide herself into proxies, who would bear responsibility for her own moral failures, for which she would then rebuke them. The most prominent of these was Sally, who in turn would threaten Christine, writing letters to her mocking her for acting the 'saint.'<sup>198</sup> Issy, too, speaks frankly about her 'bad' other, who attracts scorn while Issy herself prefers school:

my linkingclass girl, she's a fright, poor old dutch [...] I call her Sosy because she's society for me and she says sossy while I say sassy and she says will you have some more scorns while I say won't you take a few more schools and she talks about ithel dear while I simply never talk about athel darling (FW, 459.4-14).

As with Alice, Issy's other self serves both as company ('she's society for me') and as scapegoat. In all three cases, the punishment the 'bad' self receives from the 'good' is both corporal and psychological: Alice boxes her other's ears; Sally makes Christine 'stay awake all night' and collects spiders, to which Christine has a 'nervous antipathy';

---

<sup>196</sup> 'She has sometimes the wisdom of the serpent and the innocence of the dove.' Letter to Georgio Joyce, 21 November 1934 (LIII, 330).

<sup>197</sup> Glasheen describes the moment of Beauchamp's split thus: 'Miss Beauchamp was a cultivated New England girl whose personality was rocked on its foundation one [also garishly clichéd] stormy night when she saw an old friend, one William Jones ("the embodiment of the spiritual") peeping from the top of a ladder into the hospital where Miss B. Was in nurses' training. Jones followed this up by attempting to make love to her at the hospital door, whereupon the decisive split in her personality occurred' (Glasheen, *op.cit.*, 90-1).

<sup>198</sup> Morton Prince, 1906. *The Dissociation of a Personality*. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co, 126. Joyce picked up on this detail, referencing 'that self-penned letter to one's other' (FW, 489.33-4), and Alice is not untouched by this dissociative impulse either, at one point addressing a letter to '*Alice's Right Foot, Esq.*' That Alice's foot is male is also interesting; both Issy and Beauchamp had male 'others' among their cast, and one of Sally's threats to Christine was that she would cut off her hair to make her 'look like a guy' (Prince, p.169), a threat Issy repeats to her own other, Madge, saying that she will paint 'mudstuskers' on her 'to make her a man' (459.6).

Issy makes Madge break her shoes in for her, and paints measles on her face to frighten her (FW, 459.5-16).<sup>199</sup>

These personality splits, which are damaging if only for their physical cruelty, are each a symptom of their owner's fallen state. Given that the Alice who falls into Wonderland is a 'bad' Alice (her fall is the result of a prior fall into sleep during a history lesson),<sup>200</sup> it stands to reason that her journey will mimic a kind of purgatory, during which she must contend with some uniquely threatening and confusing circumstances. This is, of course, the outline of the most basic of fall myths, in which, as M.H. Abrams has written, the fall is understood to be:

[A] fall from primal unity into self-individuation, self-contradiction, and self-conflict, [but also] an indispensable first step along the way toward a higher unity which will justify the sufferings undergone en route.<sup>201</sup>

This is the *felix culpa* which supplies *Finnegans Wake* with its physical structure, its philosophical system, and its mythic power. For Carroll, although the idea of the fall is troubling spiritually, it provides Alice's character with both psychological depth and narrative impetus: her journey through *Wonderland* is saved from mere arbitrary wandering, and she can follow the Gryphon's advice never to 'go anywhere without a porpoise' in good faith (Haughton, 90).

As I have said, one of the stark and immediate consequences of Alice's fall is the splintering of her sense of self; it occurs to her that she might have been 'changed in the night,' and wonders: "'But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!'" (Haughton, 17-18). The last sentence, with its faux-sage tone which is implausible coming from a seven-year-old, is clearly an authorial interruption, like the death jokes we find in the preceding chapter. For Alice as *she* experiences it, her new-found ontological doubt is more of a sudden crisis than a 'great puzzle', and her reaction to it is accordingly pragmatic. Her ontological damage-control is attempted not through existential wrangling, but by ticking off a checklist, as she begins

---

<sup>199</sup> Prince, *The Dissociation of a Personality*, 169.

<sup>200</sup> Similarly, John Bishop has argued that the 'pancosmic collapse' we witness in the *Wake* (which includes 'every conceivable standing structure on earth falling') is 'our hero's fall into sleep.' Bishop, 1993. *Joyce's Book of the Dark*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 306.

<sup>201</sup> M.H. Abrams, 1971. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: Norton, 255.

[...] thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them.

“I’m sure I’m not Ada,” she said, “for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn’t go in ringlets at all; and I’m sure I ca’n’t be Mabel, I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little! (Haughton, 18).

This compare-and-contrast exercise is on the same level as Issy’s primitive differentiation between herself and her other personalities: ‘she says will you have some more scorns while I say won’t you take a few more schools,’ and so on. Alice and Issy are both fallen and so divided; but however philosophically complex their condition might seem, they themselves experience it as a straightforward matter of fact, an equation in search of a solution. The other is by turns described, addressed, punished, played with, but its presence is never explained or accounted for; for Issy and Alice, this is a necessary and self-preserving blindspot, a way of avoiding having to confront the original lapse that triggered the split.

For Alice, the initial trigger was her failure to attend to her history lesson, her fall into sleep; for Issy, as for Beauchamp, it was a sexual shock. Strangely though, it is only Joyce who allows the moralistic undercurrent to assert itself with any force in his writing, from Jaun’s prurient preachifying to Issy and her classmates in Book 3.2 of the *Wake*, to the ghoulish and histrionic hell sermon in *A Portrait*, which causes Stephen’s spiritual panic and makes him feel sharply the ‘silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling, but not yet fallen, still unfallen, but about to fall’ (AP, 175). Conversely, Carroll’s God-fearing approach to the Biblical fall means a tacit refusal to engage creatively with the moral implications of the problem – at least not in his nonsense writing. In the *Alice* books, the moralistic fall shares similar status with the subject of sex in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’: so omnipresent that it is never once so much as mentioned. The reasons for this, given Carroll’s blandishments to those who wrote with insufficient gravity on religious matters, are clear: he was morbidly sensitive to the prospect of blasphemy, which by his own stringent definition included contaminating the religious with the humorous (like his father, Carroll ‘was never known to relate a story which included a jest upon words from the Bible’ (Collingwood, 8)). So, despite the ubiquity of lapsarian themes, of relentless references to pride, sloth, sexual maturity, fatal curiosity, and that elusive rose-garden, Carroll demurs from stating the whole case.



One hint of a darker moral undertone is given in the poetic frontispiece to *Through the Looking-glass*:

Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,  
With bitter tidings laden,  
Shall summon to unwelcome bed  
A melancholy maiden! (Haughton, 117).

As with almost all Carroll's poetry (excluding his comic verse, which has more bite), 'Life's Pleasance', as he titled this poem, falls victim to the mawkish side of Carroll's imagination. All evidence of his parodic wit, logical acrobatics, and verbal exuberance is flushed out of the poems, which are reserved instead for sub-Tennysonian swooning and sentimentality. Interestingly, the same might be said of Joyce's poetry (again, excluding his more caustic comic poems), which rarely rise above the level of Stephen Dedalus's own fey and wilting villanelles in *A Portrait* and which, too, betray an oddly cloying priggishness, and moments of sexual cringing: 'I have consorted with vulgarity / And am indelibly marked with its fell kiss'.<sup>202</sup> Neither Joyce nor Carroll allow their poetry to 'consort with vulgarity', and themselves seem to exhibit a literary personality-split, siphoning their sentimental impulses from their major works and rerouting them via minor, occasional, outwardly proper but artistically twee verse.

In any case, reading the fall moralistically is incompatible not just with the spiritual squeamishness of Carroll's major writing, but with his general attitude towards the moralising strain in nineteenth-century children's literature. The loudest lampooning of this trend in *Alice*, after the brilliant poetic parodies, is found in the secondary personality of the Duchess, who is obsessed with "finding morals in things" (Haughton, 79). The Duchess, in line with other female nonsense characters, exhibits a split personality which (unlike the pantomime duality we see in the nonsense male) is stark, strange, and psychologically disruptive. When Alice first meets her, she is a violent, abusive, chaotic character with Tourette's-like verbal tics and murderous intentions; in their second meeting she is much changed, preaching love and kindness to a disoriented Alice, while her creepily insistent attempts at physical intimacy render her former self possibly the more likable of the two. Her fallenness is self-evident, yet to her 'good' personality, "Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it" (Haughton, 78); she barely utters a sentence without ending with the words, "And the moral of *that* is

---

<sup>202</sup> Joyce, 2001. *Poems and Shorter Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 80.

...” (79).<sup>203</sup> It is clear that Carroll is using the figure of the Duchess to send up the morally instructive (that is, intrusive) tendency of children’s literature of the period; he repeats the move in his Preface to *The Hunting of the Snark*, whose ‘strong moral purpose’, he writes, is equalled only by its ‘noble teachings in Natural History’ (CLC, 677) and to a child-friend writes, of a book he is sending as a gift, ‘The book has got a moral – so I need hardly say it is *not* by Lewis Carroll’ (SLLC, 33). Carroll was teasingly adamant in print and in his letters that his nonsense writing doesn’t ‘mean’ anything, and moralising is an especially suffocating category of meaning. The fall in Carroll’s nonsense, therefore, is far less moralistic than Joyce’s; because Carroll is not able to treat the moral lapse humorously, as Joyce can, he eschews it altogether – or at least tries to.

We have established that Alice’s (and Issy’s) psychologically divided state is a result of her fallenness, and that the moralistic framework to this narrative is both everywhere and nowhere in the writing. It is worth considering an existential parallel to this problem of the Alice’s fallen state, which is both anti-moralistic and anchored in a supremely moralistic doctrine. In *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*, Margot Norris draws on Heidegger to elucidate a Wakean pun on ‘Der Fall Adams’ (FW, 70.5), noting that ‘Heidegger speaks of the condition of the fall, *Verfallen*, not as a traditional moral lapse, but as a falling away from one’s authentic self into a state of “otherness” or inauthenticity.’<sup>204</sup> This seems a profitable way of reading Alice’s condition; all the more so because Heidegger’s own denials about the conceptual overlap between his *Verfallen* and the Biblical Fall seem, as with Carroll, to be masking something. Heidegger’s insistence that *Verfall* does not ‘comport a moral value-judgement’ loosely recalls Carroll’s coquettish insistence that his writing doesn’t ‘*mean* anything.’<sup>205</sup> As Cohen writes on Carroll, ‘Charles knew that most of his creative works bore currents of hidden meaning’ (Cohen, 408); and as George Steiner writes on Heidegger, ‘*pace* [his] denial, the theological model is [...] obvious and imperative.’<sup>206</sup>

Alice’s purpose in *Wonderland* is, vaguely, to reach the rose garden, her ‘wastohavebeen underground heaven’ (FW, 76.33), which turns out in the end to be – like Eden – governed by an wrathful autocrat whose rules are bound to be broken. Her

---

<sup>203</sup> *Finnegans Wake* occasionally mimics this style too, for example: ‘Moral: if you can’t point a lily get to henna out of here!’ (434.18); ‘Moral: book to besure, see press’ (550.3).

<sup>204</sup> Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake*, 84.

<sup>205</sup> Carroll (ed. Roger Lancelyn Green), 1953. *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*. London: Cassell and Company, 351.

<sup>206</sup> Steiner, 1979. *Martin Heidegger*. New York: Viking Press, 96.

purpose in *Through the Looking-glass* is more defined: from her low status as pawn, she must reach the end of the chessboard to become a queen (as the Wakean children recite at the start of their games, seeming to describe Alice: ‘Who are you? The cat’s mother. [...] What do you lack? The look of a queen’ (FW, 223.23-4)). In terms of its structural context as a game of chess, Alice’s journey follows the heroic model, as her pawn’s route takes her directly into the path of danger in the name of securing not just personal glory (“I should like to be a Queen, best”) but strategic advantage for her chosen side (Haughton, 141).<sup>207</sup> As a straightforward case of social climbing though, Alice’s great expectations are cynical and humdrum (though firmly in line with Carroll’s own monarchism and snobbish social conservatism, as well as that of the Liddell family).<sup>208</sup> In an essay on Alice as the fallen and corrupting force in *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass*, James Kincaid has even argued that her ‘rude and tragic haste’ to achieve the status of queen itself marks ‘the loss of Eden’.<sup>209</sup> There is certainly a connection between her royal aspirations and her postlapsarian doubleness: in the opening chapter of *Through the Looking-glass*, the narrator reminds us of Alice’s many-selved state:

She had had quite a long argument with her sister only the day before – all because Alice had begun with “Let’s pretend we’re kings and queens;” and her sister, who liked being very exact, had argued that they couldn’t, because there were only two of them, and Alice had been reduced at last to say “Well *you* can be one of them, then, and *I’ll* be all the rest” (Haughton, 124).

Alice, lonely and frustrated thanks to the gap, in age and disposition, between herself and her sister, is like ‘the solitary child’ in Beckett’s *Endgame*, ‘who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together.’<sup>210</sup> Issy’s isolation from the absorbing twinhood of her brothers similarly encourages her own self-duplication:

---

<sup>207</sup> It would seem, in this sense, to trespass into the territory of folklore and fairy tale, one unfortunate consequence of which is Tim Burton’s disastrous recent effort to reduce and deform the Alice books into a crass and sub-Tolkeinian battle sequence in his film *Alice in Wonderland* (2010).

<sup>208</sup> A choice example of Carroll’s snobbish default setting can be found in a letter to his brother Edwin, in which he describes seeing a play performed by working class children and lingering in the green-room after the event: ‘I did not try to make acquaintance with the children [...], thinking that, as they are only poor children [...], they would not be the better for being noticed and made to think much of themselves’ (SLLC, 37).

<sup>209</sup> Kincaid, ‘Alice’s Invasion of Wonderland’ in *PMLA* (vol.88, no.1, Jan 1973, 92-9).

<sup>210</sup> Beckett, 1964. *Endgame*. London: Faber and Faber, 45. Beckett revisits this topic in a later play, *That Time*, in which voice A recalls talking to yourself who else out loud imaginary conversations there was childhood for you [...] making it up now one voice now another till you were hoarse and they all sounded

Alone? Alone what? ... Pussy is never alone ... for she can always look at Biddles and talk petnames with her little playfilly when she is sitting downy on the ploshmat (FW, 561.33-532.1).

This 'playfilly' (playfellow) is her other, who conveniently appears whenever Issy is bored or lonely. And, just as Alice prefers talking to herself than with the curly-haired Ada or the unfortunate Mabel, for Issy, her imaginary 'self' is far better company than her real classmates:

She will blow ever so much more promisefuller, blee me, than all the other common marygales that romp round brigidschool, charming Carry Whambers or saucy Susy Maucepot of Merry Anna Patchbox or silly Polly Flinders (FW, 562.11-4).

Madge, Issy's other, is far from 'common'; she is by all accounts a majesty herself – a 'Madges Tighe' (369.30), 'madjestky' (335.2), or 'midgetsy' (334.17). By playing with her double Issy is – like Alice – escaping solitude, achieving social lift-off, playing 'kings and queens', and, on the level of her own fantasy, lighting out for the very kind of power and status which triggered the fall of many a heresiarch before her.

One important figure whose fall shares this social climbing dimension is of course Humpty Dumpty, whose story is memorably mythologised by Carroll and then, through Carroll, by Joyce. This ill-starred egg, whose omnipresence in *Finnegans Wake* as one of HCE's many fractured avatars is both a nod to Carroll and yet another unsubtle lapsarian metaphor, is given a uniquely proud and precocious character by Carroll in *Through the Looking-glass*, and it is no coincidence that his fall, just like Alice's and Issy's, is owed to his own moral failings and social aspirations. His chief sin is that of pride (the sin ascribed to Lucifer's fall and forcefully – if farcically – reimagined in Father Arnall's hell sermon in *A Portrait*). Humpty Dumpty is showcased in his *Looking-glass* chapter as a virtuosic literary critic, 'master' of the Babelian confusion of words, and as a pompous social climber who boasts of his royal connections: "Now, take a good look at me! I'm one that has spoken to a King, I am: mayhap you'll never see such another: and, to show you I'm not proud, you may shake hands with me' (Haughton, 183). Of course, he *is* proud, and in deigning to shake

---

the same [...] making up talk breaking up two or more talking to himself being together that way' (Beckett, 1984. *Collected Shorter Plays*. London: Faber, 230-3).

Alice's hand 'as nearly as possible fell of the wall.' Humpty's pride (and his unselfconscious implication that Alice herself might be 'too proud') suggests, as Hugh Haughton has noted, the well-known platitude 'pride comes before a fall' (Haughton, 344, n.6). Compounding his prideful nature is a determined sense of denial or delusion; he refuses to accept both the possibility that he might fall – "Why, if I ever *did* fall off – which there's no chance of" and the irreversibility of a fall's consequences (he is, of course, ignorant of the final line in his destiny, that 'all the King's horses and all the King's men / couldn't put Humpty together again'). When Alice suggests the danger to him, he stonewalls, even as he perches so precariously atop his stone wall; but by the end of his chapter, he has fallen, silently and out-of-shot, and the King's men are sent galloping past Alice on their rescue mission.

In both *Through the Looking-glass* and *Finnegans Wake*, Humpty Dumpty is both already fallen and always about-to-fall (this is emphasised by the *Wake*'s grammatical and historical simultaneity, where 'Then's now with now's then in tense continuant. Heard. Who having has he shall have had. Hear!' (FW, 598.28-9). In the *Wake*, Humpty's 'great fall from the offwall' (FW, 3.18) is HCE's fall from grace; it is also Lucifer's, Adam's, and Eve's, and many others besides:

*Cleftfoot from Hempal must tumpel, Blamefool Gardener's bound to  
fall;  
Broken eggs will poursuive bitten Apples for where theirs is Will there's  
his Wall* (FW, 175.17-20).

The bold assertion of free will in the face of God is what leads to the fall of man. His other chief hubris – his mastery over language – yokes the fall of personal pride with another, more collective kind of fall, and it is this to which we shall now turn.

## 2. 'AND SHALL NOT BABEL BE WITH LEBAB?':

### THE FALL INTO LANGUAGE

[Lebab: from the Hebrew, meaning 'inner man; heart; soul; will; understanding']

In her dizzying encounter with the Red Queen after she has passed through the looking-glass, Alice is reacquainted with the absurdities of the nonsense landscape, where left is right, hills can be valleys, and “[It] takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place” (Haughton, 143). Before they part, the Red Queen arms Alice with a gnomic piece of advice:

“Speak in French when you can’t remember the English for a thing – turn out your toes when you walk – and remember who you are!” (Haughton, 144).

The Queen’s counsel turns out to be tremendously useful in a country where the names for things frequently vanish or switch allegiances; where a frightening Jabberwock prowls through a sort-of-English poem at the margins of sense; where words have ‘a temper’ and are summed up by Humpty Dumpty with the exclamation: ‘Impenetrability!’ (186). The twin feats of remembering English and remembering who one is are connected, and we soon learn that failure to perform one task jeopardises Alice’s chances of success with the other. Her exchange with the Caterpillar in Wonderland establishes the link: Alice’s tongue-tied response to the question “‘Who are you?’” is concomitant with her garbled recitals and inability to ‘explain’ herself (“‘I ca’n’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, Sir,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see” (Haughton, 41)). Her words are “‘wrong from beginning to end’” and she is afraid, she confides to the Caterpillar, that she is ‘changed’ (45).

The schizophrenic potential of bilingualism has been described by the Welsh poet Gwyneth Lewis as an ‘existential nightmare’ and is perhaps best demonstrated by Nabokov, who made an obligatory transition from Russian to English near the beginning of his career, and whose *oeuvre* is fittingly peopled with doppelgängers and split personalities.<sup>211</sup> Beckett, too, is a writer who, in adopting his secondary language as his primary mode of artistic expression, found himself forsaking the dead-end solipsism of his solitary English-language heroes (Murphy, Watt) for the stereophonic friction of his bilingual double acts. The psychological bifurcation of literary bilingualism was hinted at by T.S. Eliot in ‘The Social Function of Poetry,’ when he observed:

One of the reasons for learning at least one foreign language well is that we acquire a kind of supplementary personality; one of the reasons for

---

<sup>211</sup> Lewis, 2005. ‘Preface to *Keeping Mum*’ in *Chaotic Angels: Poems in English*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 143.

not acquiring a new language *instead* of our own is that most of us do not want to become a different person.<sup>212</sup>

Neither Joyce nor Carroll shared the qualms of ‘most of us’. Carroll relished the freedom of writing as ‘a different person’ – the alter-ego of the Reverend Dodgson – and in his letters to children sometimes affected a Clark Kent-esque masquerade (‘Dear Miss Dolly, / I have a message for you from a friend of mine, Mr. Lewis Carroll, who is a queer sort of creature, rather too fond of talking nonsense’ (SLLC, 38)). He also inscribed his work with versions of himself, most notably the White Knight in *Through the Looking-glass*. The young Joyce had his fictional correlative Stephen Dedalus (whose name he briefly adopted as a pseudonym), and wrote himself into the *Wake* as ‘Sunny Sim’ (FW, 305.5), the knowing homologue of Sunny Jim, the name his father used to give him. Joyce would also have enjoyed the similarity between the shape-shifting Bloom of ‘Circe’, HCE, the ever-morphing multicharacter who is ‘more mob than man’ (FW, 261.21) and the continuously circulating rumours about him during logomaniac years of writing *Ulysses*.<sup>213</sup> What is more (to return to Eliot’s point), Joyce and Carroll shared a keen commitment to linguistic scholarship. During the composition of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce plundered the dictionaries of a huge variety of different languages; but before this later lucky-dip approach to foreign languages found the time to master ‘four or five languages fluently enough’, including French, Italian, German, and Latin (SLJ, 281). Carroll, too, was a dedicated language learner, drawing up endless ‘reading schemes’ in his diaries and resolving to:

Make an attempt at something like a system of reading. [...] The plan I have resolved on is:

1st. *Mon: and Thurs: Greek.* Beginning with Thucydides – right through.

2nd. *Tu: and Fri: Latin.* Beginning with Horace – right through. In both books I shall take the rule ‘at the end of a chapter review the chapter: at the end of a book review the book’ etc.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>212</sup> Eliot, 1957. ‘The Social Function of Poetry’ in *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 19.

<sup>213</sup> As he wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver in 1921: ‘A man from Liverpool told me he had heard that I was the owner of several cinema theatres all over Switzerland. In America [there are] two versions: one that I was almost blind, emaciated and consumptive, the other that I am an austere mixture of the Dalai Lama and sir Rabindranath Tagore. Mr Pound described me as a dour Aberdeen minister. Mr Lewis told me he was told that I was a crazy fellow who always carried four watches and rarely spoke except to ask my neighbour what o’clock it was. Mr Yeats [described me] as a kind of Dick Swiveller’ (SLJ, 282).

<sup>214</sup> Carroll, *Diaries*, 75-6 (5 February 1856).

There are a great many entries like this, in which Dodgson exhorts himself to pay proper attention to his language studies. As his interest in Classics lapsed, he made efforts to improve his French, and to take up Italian and German, as well as to shore up his Anglo-Saxon and even begin gathering ‘books for learning Hebrew’.<sup>215</sup> These entries are invariably followed by self-reproach and frustration: ‘My reading scheme is failing,’ he writes in one.<sup>216</sup> It is evident that Carroll’s linguistic talents were considerably weaker than Joyce’s; as Robert Sutherland points out in *Language and Lewis Carroll*, despite his ‘dogged perseverance’ in studying French and German ‘for the better part of thirty years,’ Carroll made embarrassingly ‘little progress’.<sup>217</sup> In 1881, a full twenty-five years after the first earnest ‘reading schemes’ in French were set out in his diary, Carroll floats the idea of taking two French lessons a week, motivated by a desire to ‘if possible, learn *talking* it’; this, after decades of determined study.<sup>218</sup> Despite his lack of natural facility though, Carroll’s interest in language remained earnest and constant, manifested not just in his gallant scholarly efforts, but in the emphatically polylingual frames of reference of his *oeuvre*.

These frames of reference bring us back to the Red Queen’s question: how, if we agree with Eliot’s observation, is Alice to replace her English with French and yet remember who she is? Is it possible, given that Alice is already a ‘different person’, suffering from her Beauchamp-esque split, that hers is a unique case? We might argue that by adopting the language of a ‘different person’, Alice can avoid falling through the loopholes (or rabbit holes) of her mother tongue and take refuge in the safely delineated rules of a foreign one; this way, she can short-circuit the tendency of her language to wrongfoot her and manage, as it were, to give her slips the slip. As we know, Alice’s English is often garbled, and subject to relentless criticisms by the other characters: the Caterpillar rebukes her for her mangled recitations and self-contradictions; the Hatter and the March Hare urge her in vain to ‘say what you mean’; the Red Queen finds much at fault with Alice’s manner of speech, as do the Tweedles. Humpty Dumpty splits hairs over her idiomatic conversation:

“They gave it to me,” Humpty Dumpty continued thoughtfully, as he crossed one knee over the other and clasped his hands round it, “they

---

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 240 (3 February 1866).

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>217</sup> Sutherland, 1970. *Language and Lewis Carroll*. The Hague: Mouton, 40.

<sup>218</sup> Carroll, *Diaries*, 399.



gave it to me – for an un-birthday present.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m not offended,” said Humpty Dumpty.

“I mean, what *is* and un-birthday present?” (Houghton, 185).

And so, identically, does the White King:

“[...] I must have *two*, you know – to come and go. One to come and one to go.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It isn’t respectable to beg,” said the King.

“I only meant that I didn’t understand,” said Alice (Houghton, 196).

These characters display, on the one hand, the fastidiousness of editors, perpetually revising and tidying Alice’s messy sentences, and on the other a hypersensitivity to the absurdities contained within the everyday functions and forms of spoken language. Their sentences test one another, looking for porousness and anything that is open to dispute. As editors, characters like the White King and Humpty Dumpty are completely alert to language’s potential for misinterpretation, and they wilfully misinterpret everything that is said to them in order to make their point. On an intuitive level, though, the lexical and philosophical concerns of Carroll’s characters are extensions of the author’s own instincts about language in its fallen state: the solecisms, ambiguities, and double meanings on which our desire to be understood snags; the self-contradiction of grammatical rules which, if followed too rigidly, create nonsense; the problem of proper names, whose existence seems to impose order over chaos, but in doing so belies the possibility of a perfect, unified order by standing for difference and discord.

This is where speaking French ‘when you can’t remember the English for a thing’ announces its great advantage. Jean-Jacques Lecercle has written that ‘we do not know the grammar of our own language [...] we apply linguistic rules we do not remember having learnt’, and this is true,<sup>219</sup> while Alice’s English is everywhere booby-trapped with the slips and vagaries that come with knowing it instinctively, and being unable to remember ever having learned it, her foreign languages come with the basic assurance of having been plucked straight from a textbook, and hence (unlike her English) are undistinctive, unambiguous, grammatically basic and void of idiom. Having already sensed this, Alice proleptically follows the Red Queen’s advice in her

---

<sup>219</sup> Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 39.

very first verbal exchange with a Wonderland citizen, the Mouse, addressing him with an arch apostrophe: “O mouse!” (Haughton, 21). She does so, we are told, because ‘she remembered having seen, in her brother's Latin Grammar, “A mouse—of a mouse—to a mouse—a mouse—O mouse!”’ The mouse proves unresponsive, and so Alice, presuming him to be French, recites ‘the first sentence from her French lesson-book’, “Où est ma chatte?”<sup>220</sup> This proves an unwise question to ask a mouse, but at least, unlike with her English, there is no question of the Mouse’s having misunderstood her, as he leaps out of the water and ‘quiver[s] with fright’ (Haughton, 21).

Alice’s textbook speech is a comic reflection of the linguistic culture of Oxford, where foreign languages tended to be studied dead on the page rather than alive on the tongue, and forms a noticeable correlation with the type of bilingualism we find in Dodgson’s Oxford-themed prose squibs. These sketches, strangely Swiftian in flavour, are peopled by mad professors and assorted philosophers and lunatics, all of whom seem to find mental refuge and ‘semantic succour’, as Beckett would say, between the covers of foreign lexicons.<sup>221</sup> In ‘The Vision of the Three T.s’, the Professor speaks German only after ascertaining that none of his company speaks that language, and the Lunatic converses in Latin for the same reason; the motto of the Governing Body in Christ Church is ‘an example of a rule in Latin grammar’; the tutor bears ‘upon his head Hoffmann's Lexicon in four volumes folio’, while elsewhere, the ‘architect and head of the House [...] conceived the beautiful and unique idea of representing, by means of a new Belfry, a gigantic copy of a Greek Lexicon’ (CLC, 1027-48).

It is not hard to see why a lover of the reassuringly rigid rules of logic and mathematics should harbour an affection for Greek Lexicons and grammatical drills, nor why the paraphernalia of language-learning should feature so strongly in Carroll’s *oeuvre*. The work which has the most to say about Carroll’s attitude to language is perhaps ‘The Hunting of the Snark’, which might be read as a metaphor for linguistic insecurity after the fall of Babel. Like Alice, the hero of ‘The Snark’ suffers from ontological complications, the chief of which is that ‘He had wholly forgotten his name’:

He would answer to “Hi!” or to any loud cry,

---

<sup>220</sup> Both the Latin Grammar and the French lesson-book have been identified as *The Comic Latin Grammar* (Percival Leigh, 1840) and *La bagatelle: Intended to introduce children of three or four years old to some knowledge of the French language* (1804). See Gardner, 26, n.8-9.

<sup>221</sup> Beckett, 1970. *Watt*, London: Calder and Boyars, 79.

Such as “Fry me!” or “Fritter my wig!”  
To “What-you-may-call-um!” or “What-was-his-name!”  
But especially “Thing-um-a-jig!”

While, for those who preferred a more forcible word,  
He had different names from these:  
His intimate friends called him “Candle-ends,”  
And his enemies “Toasted-cheese” (CLC, 681).<sup>222</sup>

None of these names is especially flattering; they bear resemblance to the ‘abusive names’ given to HCE in the *Wake*, among which figure ‘*Lobsterpot Lardling*’, ‘*Peculiar Person*’, ‘*Artist*’, and ‘*Sways While Falling*’) (FW, 71.10 – 72.16). Taking stock of his particulars, we learn that the one they call ‘Toasted-cheese’ is a Baker, but one with woefully minimal baking skills, and is taken on board purely for his courage. He has a some ominous information about the Snark – that it can also be a Boojum – which is only discovered later, for a typically Babelian reason:

“I said it in Hebrew – I said it in Dutch –  
I said it in German and Greek;  
But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)  
That English is what you speak!” (CLC, 688).<sup>223</sup>

This polylingualism is a fitting condition for the ‘hero unnamed’ of ‘The Hunting of the Snark’, as it was for the frequently tongue-tied ‘A liss in hunterland’ before him (FW 276, fn.7). The failure to strike the right language recalls a passage in *Finnegans Wake* when Mutt prepares to engage Jute in conversation:

You tollerdlay donsk? N. You tolkatiff scowegian? Nn. You spigotty  
anglease? Nnn. You phonio saxo? Nnnn. (FW, 16.5-7).

Like Mutt and Jute, the Baker is a terminally post-Babelian character, whose mastery of diverse tongues still cannot save him from his downfall. His desire to universalise the message he has to impart – a message which has life-saving potential for himself and

---

<sup>222</sup>It is interesting that the Baker’s friends call him ‘candle-ends’, given Alice’s fear that she would cease to exist by ‘going out like a candle’, and that the Baker’s eventual fate is to ‘softly and suddenly vanish away’.

<sup>223</sup>This passage is amusingly glossed by Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller in his spoof reading of ‘The Snark’ as a metaphor for the search of the Absolute: ‘The accounts of the Absolute in German and Greek are famous, while the Hebrew and Dutch probably both refer to Spinoza, who was a Dutch Jew, though he wrote in bad Latin. The forgetting to speak (and write) English is a common symptom in the pursuit of the Absolute’ (Gardner (ed.), 1962. *The Annotated Snark*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 104).

the crew – is the very thing that prevents it from being understood when, like Alice, he ‘forgets the English’. His desire for unequivocal communication results in complete communication breakdown, and points up the impossibility of making all things understood to all people in a post-Babelian universe. The consequence for the Baker is dire, and is witnessed by the entire crew:

They beheld him – their Baker – their hero unnamed –  
On the top of a neighbouring crag,

Erect and sublime, for one moment of time,  
In the next, that wild figure they saw  
(As if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm,  
While they waited and listened in awe.

“It’s a Snark!” was the sound that first came to their ears,  
And seemed almost too good to be true.  
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers:  
Then the ominous words, “It’s a Boo—”

Then, silence.

The Baker’s laughter, then his dramatic aposiopesis, is the haunting acoustic of his fall, and sees him, in the act of vanishing, already reduced to a pre-verbal state. ‘In the midst of the word he was trying to say’ he disappears, along with the word and the rest of his language.

The Baker is a ‘man without qualities’ – he can’t even bake – but the two most important things about him make him the apotheosis of the nonsense (and Modernist) protagonist: he is nameless, yet answers to many names; he is multilingual, yet his language rudely disowns him. These unfortunate contradictions mark the characters of *Finnegans Wake* too, who flit between their many different names, are all ‘diversed tongued’ (FW, 381.20) yet suffer from Carrollian stutters, are all chronically misconstrued by one another, and are all simultaneously fallen and falling, ‘pretumbling forover’ (FW, 13.18). The Baker bears especial resemblance to HCE, the Everyman with multiple names to match, and to HCE’s template Bloom who, as we learn in ‘Ithaca’ is at once ‘Everyman or Noman’ (U, 679). The language the Wakean characters are written through is Joyce’s philosophical answer to Babel, a ‘root language’ (FW, 424.17) or, as Seamus Deane nicely phrased it in his introduction to *Finnegans Wake*, ‘a kind of molten Ur-language’ from which diverse languages will flow (FW, xxx).

This is a defining element of Joyce's nonsense, but also what allows his nonsense to take leave from the Victorian mould he inherited from Carroll; to go beyond linguistic play, and reach instead for an entire linguistic system, outside of any other language and yet striving to inhabit every one. It is what makes Joyce's nonsense different from Carroll's: more cluttered, more ruthless, and far less willing to explain itself. Despite these differences though, the Babelian shift from functional unity of language to a state of friction, diversity and uncertainty is crucial to both authors. Whatever problems Carroll might have had making artistic sense of the Fall of Man all but evaporate when it comes to the Fall of Babel. For nonsense, the linguistic fall is the real *felix culpa*: it created the conditions for nonsense, without which nonsense simply could not operate.

In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke writes that:

Logologically, there is a 'fall' from a prior state of unity, whenever some one term is broken into two or more terms, so that we have the 'divisiveness' of 'classification' where we formerly had a 'vision of perfect oneness'.<sup>224</sup>

When Humpty Dumpty falls, he is broken into more than one piece; when Alice and Issy fall, they become more than one personality; when the pre-Babelian perfect language fell and broke into diverse languages, the first condition for nonsense literature was met, for the simple reason that nonsense feeds on the idea of miscommunication, misconstruction, ambiguity, and contradiction. These ideas would be virtually inconceivable to the pre-Babelian mind, whose language is all unity, transparency, and precision. To the speaker of a perfect, universal language, there could be no possibility of a nonsense sentence, a verbal slip, a joke; such things could not even be framed in the language (in the same way that Swift's Houyhnhnms cannot conceive of a lie, and can only describe this speech-act abstractly and circuitously as saying 'the thing which was not').<sup>225</sup> Polylingualism is, therefore, the key ingredient of nonsense, a fact of which Joyce and Carroll, with their lexicon-raiding registers and macaronic puns, are instinctively aware.

Derek Attridge has written an interesting piece on 'The *Wake*'s Confounded Language' and Joyce's 'masterbuilder' (the Finnegan figure who is, like Ibsen's master

---

<sup>224</sup> Burke, 1961. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. London: University of California Press, 175.

<sup>225</sup> Swift, 2003. *Gulliver's Travels*. London: Penguin, 217.

builder, forever building a tower, from which he is forever falling, which itself is forever doomed to fall). In it, Attridge weighs up the various possible readings of these Babelian falls – as a parable of humility; as a celebration of man’s technological mastery, capable of rousing God’s jealousy; as a paean to the power of man’s desires and the loftiness of his ideas – before rejecting them on the grounds that they ‘arise from the same conception of language [which] cannot be made to cohere with the way language works in practice.’<sup>226</sup> Attridge is rightly suspicious of those explicators of the *Wake* who appear to view the *Wake* as:

[Joyce’s] tower of anti-Babel, designed and built to counter the destructive act of the jealous god who drove the nations apart, and to bequeath to the world an artefact which, by making out of the kaleidoscope of languages a new tongue and a new name to hold humanity together, will succeed where the sons of Noah failed. If much of the *Wake* sounds to us as a Babelian confusion, this must be – so it is assumed – because we are still locked in our monoglot cultural prisons, lacking the energy and enterprise to follow Joyce in his multilingual architectural feat of total unification.<sup>227</sup>

Joyce was not interested in unification, with all its perfection and sterility; for him, the sundering of languages is to be read as an immense artistic opportunity, a great windfall. To travel from a post-Babelian state of linguistic diversity to unification would involve a process of reduction, and could only tend towards a monotone Orwellian Newspeak, or an alternative ‘desperanto’ (FW, 582.8) as Joyce sarcastically called the artificial language, which has the paradoxical status of trying to reduce the diversity of languages by adding another into the mix.

It is worth considering the politics of these two ‘unifying’ languages, in order to emphasise just how misguided the idea of *Finnegans Wake* as an exercise in linguistic unification really is. Esperanto has been credited (or charged) with partly inspiring Orwell’s Newspeak. While Newspeak is designed by 1984’s totalitarian Party to censor and eventually erase independent thought, Esperanto was treated as a threat by non-fictional totalitarian regimes, in particular Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. These contradictions arise from a question of perspective: a totalitarian regime might seek national unification by eradicating those who are different, while a unifying

---

<sup>226</sup> Attridge, (ed. Morris Beja and Shari Benstock), 1989. ‘The *Wake*’s Confounded Language’ in *Coping With Joyce*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 262-8 (265).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

language seeks to eradicate the differences themselves. In one of his Circean transmogrifications, Bloom seems convinced of the unifying potential of Esperanto:

I stand for the [...] Union of all, jew, moslem and gentile [...] Esperanto the universal language with universal brotherhood (U, 462).

This is, however, Bloom at his most ridiculous, the Panglossian naïf Hugh Kenner was given to baiting as a nonpareil of liberal delusions. The humanitarian sympathies he voiced so commendably – if disastrously – in Barney Kiernan’s earlier that day have returned only to make a louder mockery of him, one in which his author this time participates.

Joyce’s sarcastic treatment of artificial languages in the *Wake* (Esperanto, but also Ido, Volapuk, and others) would indicate that he by no means desired Wakese to be included in that group. While those languages aspire to a perfect verbal system in which ambiguities are expunged and contradictions neutralised, Joyce knew that ‘Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children’ (to steal a line from Sylvia Plath).<sup>228</sup> Franz Kafka, knowing this too, goes so far as to wonder how a Babel tower was constructed at all, given the climate of drowsy verbal repletion in which pre-Babelian society must have basked; he adds that, in any case, it did not take the sundering of language to incite conflict between nationalities.<sup>229</sup> Joyce’s aspirations for the *Wake* were not to correct the fractured post-Babelian linguistic condition, but to catalogue and celebrate it; we could even read the *Wake* as an ambitious blueprint for the Borgesian ‘Library of Babel’, striving to contain everything – including, impossibly, itself – and stretching to accommodate all known (and forgotten) languages.<sup>230</sup>

Joyce is not interested, then, in reducing the world’s ‘diverse tongues’ to Bloom’s ‘universal language’ but in exploring what happens when they are combined and extended, ‘dismembered and reconstituted’ (Ellmann, 716). This is why, as Attridge points out, the *Wake* neither laments ‘language’s fall nor [tries] to secure its recovery’; rather, it:

finds its pleasures in the knowledge that language, by its very nature, is unstable and ambiguous [...] Once the belief in a pure communicative language has been abandoned, the sharp difference between monoglot

<sup>228</sup> Plath, 1981. ‘The Munich Mannequins’ in *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 262.

<sup>229</sup> Kafka, 1992. ‘The City Coat of Arms’ in *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Minerva, 433-4.

<sup>230</sup> See Borges, 2000. ‘The Library of Babel’ in *Labyrinths*. London: Penguin, 78-86.

and polyglot discourse disappears; any language is many languages – a Babel of registers, dialects, older and newer forms, slang and borrowed items, accents and idiosyncracies – and all that the *Wake* does is to extend this logic to its comic extreme.<sup>231</sup>

Carroll's nonsense characters are scandalised by the 'Babel of registers' operating within Alice's English, and so their reactions to it are uniformly hostile. As logicians, 'pedantic to the tenth degree,' the Wonderland and Looking-glass creatures are offended by Alice's organic and instinctive relationship to language; they feel they must either correct it, or offer up other, safer languages in lieu of it.<sup>232</sup> However, any replacement language is bound, in time, to acquire the idiomatic complications it was introduced to suppress, and so allows meanings and misconstructions to proliferate all the more, intensifying rather than overcoming the Babelian confusions of the original language (in this case, Alice's English).

As the languages multiply, from French and Latin to Hebrew and Dutch, we witness an acceleration and proliferation of meanings which is, for Carroll's characters, counter-productive and close to chaotic. The alternative is to restrict the discourse to English, but only so as to establish and enforce the limits of an unambiguous, perfectly ordered form of English, ironing out its idioms and contradictions. This, too, is an impossible and counter-productive task, as we clearly see from the Duchess's maddening attempts at it in conversation with Alice. Here, she shows how the 'moral' "Be what you would seem to be" can be "put more simply":

"Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise" (Haughton, 80).

Such sentences are the natural terminus for the Duchess's mania for precision and transparency. Her need for control is the very thing that robs her language of control; her rage for order tips it into disorder. As Lercercle has noted, 'Exaggerated correctness is on the frontier of incorrectness, where, as we know, nonsense is to be found'; this is the last frontier of the Duchess's doomed verbal campaign.<sup>233</sup> The tautological result is,

---

<sup>231</sup> Attridge, 'The *Wake*'s Confounded Language', 267.

<sup>232</sup> Carroll, "'Alice' on the Stage", in Haughton, 296.

<sup>233</sup> Lercercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, 59.



as the *Wake* would put it, 'tootological' (FW, 468.8), and bordering on pure nonsense. There are versions of such sentences throughout *Finnegans Wake*; for example:

regarding to prussyates or quazzyverzing he wassand no better than he would have been before he could have been better than what he warrant after (FW, 359.6-9).

That attempts at clarification result in complication is on one level a typically nonsense exercise in opposites: we are back in the territory where hills can be valleys, and running is indistinguishable from standing still. But, of course, there is more to it than that. That the excessive order on which nonsense is based finds itself tipping into disorder – becoming not just its opposite but its enemy – is bound up in the self-contradictory, even self-annihilating condition of nonsense itself.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I described how Joyce and Carroll use games to illustrate the tension between order and chaos within nonsense, showing how excessive organisation and order serves only to 'reintroduce the danger it deprecates,' as Lecercle has written.<sup>234</sup> I cast chaos as the ogre from a line by Joyce, describing his *Work in Progress*, that bears repeating:

I know that it is no more than a game but it is a game that I have learned to play in my own way. Children may just as well play as not. The ogre will come in any case (LIII, 144).

It seems that Joyce is aware of the losses he is making in trying to keep the destructive forces of chaos at bay by the obsessive and excessive organisation of his 'game.' His description of the ogre reminds me of a line from St Augustine, which Wittgenstein paraphrases when describing the condition of 'running up against the limits of language':

What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter!<sup>235</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, 67

<sup>235</sup> Wittgenstein (in interview) in Friedrich Waismann, 1979. *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*. Oxford: Blackwell, 68-9.

‘It does not matter’; ‘the ogre will come in any case.’ In one sense, it does not matter that in over-reaching for order nonsense brings about chaos, because that chaos was on its way regardless, thanks to the Fall. The point lies in the *tension* between order and chaos, a tension which could only exist after the Fall and which it is the fate of literary nonsense to inhabit. Chaos is vividly present within nonsense, the shadow in its chiaroscuro; and, just as Babel needs to fall before a joke can be cracked, the threat of chaos must loom over nonsense, or else the tension on which literary nonsense is based would evaporate. Nonsense without tension is failed nonsense: the babble of the nursery, the palilalia of the madhouse, and the Artaudian scream are all lacking in structural tension and are closer to gibberish than nonsense. By the same token, light verse, sometimes confused with nonsense poetry, lacks the threat of chaos and with it any tension or texture.

I began this chapter by invoking Adorno and the self-cancelling work of art. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes of ‘the destruction of art which is its salvation,’ claiming that art must necessarily destroy itself if it is to access the ‘single, true, and liberated [...] Beauty’ it strives to capture, since this Beauty can only be represented ‘as a physical reality’ (this would seem to be the opposite of Mallarmé’s ‘ideal flower’, which can only be achieved in art and not in reality).<sup>236</sup> Adorno’s notion of the self-destructive work of art, ‘running up against the limits of language’ and of what can be expressed, as Wittgenstein would have it, holds a mirror to the relationship between literary nonsense and the idea of order. While nonsense is ‘on the side of order’, as Elizabeth Sewell writes, it cannot help but be drawn to the ‘forces of disorder’; like an insect ‘flying into a candle’, like Alice crawling towards the rabbit hole, nonsense edges towards its own destruction in the very act of trying to guard against it. This activity, which brings about disorder by obsessively trying to ensure order, I described in the introduction to this chapter as being ‘at once self-destructive and self-preserving,’ and this is worth considering alongside Adorno’s ‘destruction of art which is its salvation.’ The condition of literary nonsense is to be, like so many of its protagonists, ‘fated for a fall’ (FW, 223.16) and yet already fallen; its rage for ‘Order, order, order, order!’ (FW, 337.35) might seem at first to be a corrective to this state of affairs, but in fact can only ever be a confession of it.

---

<sup>236</sup> Adorno, 1974. *Minima Moralia*. London: Verso, 75.

My discussion of nonsense and order has now led me to the peculiar impasse whereby maximal order coincides with maximal disorder in the looking-glass worlds of Carroll and Joyce, and it seems a fitting conclusion to this chapter to invoke Adorno once more, to help unpick this conceptual knot. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Max Horkheimer ponder the mysterious complicity of enlightenment values in the Nazi barbarism from which the authors had lately fled to the United States. Conventional wisdom would place enlightenment values and barbarism on opposite sides of the ring, but in a provocative reading of the Marquis de Sade (later picked up by Jacques Lacan in his seminar *Kant avec Sade*) Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose Sadean violence as a consequence of the logic of domination implicit all along in Kantian reason. Reason targets the enemies of modernity for obsolescence, but having achieved final victory over myth achieves mythological status in its own right. Ulysses had his monsters and witches as relics of pre-modernity against which to test himself, but, enlightenment having done away with these, enlightened man is in the position of the newly crowned Alice, who “wants to deny something – only she doesn’t know what to deny!” (Haughton, 221). Instead, man in the age of enlightenment achieves selfhood by repressing the primitive drives identified by psychoanalysis – repressing but never purging them entirely, as demonstrated by the persistence of violent neuroses such as anti-Semitism. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this is more than an unfortunate accident, but rather the darkly inevitable concomitant of a reason that has become instrumentalised. If we are the arbiters of full and infallible reason, all that we do is reasonable; but, they continue, there inevitably came a point when ‘survival as affirmed by reason [was] no longer to be distinguished from self-destruction. The two were now indissolubly blended. Pure reason became unreason.’<sup>237</sup>

This is a pessimistic reading of Enlightenment, which has not gone uncontested (for example by Jürgen Habermas), but one with obvious applications to the conflict of order and chaos in Joyce and Carroll, not to mention the dark spectre of violence that lurks omnipresently in literary nonsense. Alice’s progress, in both *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* could easily be cast as a Ulyssean voyage past the relics or snares of pre-modernity, otherwise childhood, from which she can emerge ready for adulthood, otherwise reason; but all too many of the figures she encounters have decided *they* are the heroes of the tale, imposing *their* order on the chaotic world and

---

<sup>237</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 2008. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso, 90.

flibbertigibbets such as Alice (as the Red Queen imperiously pronounces: “I don’t know what you mean about *your* way ... [A]ll the ways about here belong to me”) (Houghton, 140)). Alice is equally tyrannical in her way, as we see her considering the children she would like to turn into pigs, after leaving the Duchess’s house, and is according to Roger Sale ‘transformed into a kind of Circe, turning all those she controls into swine.’<sup>238</sup> Reason has been not just instrumentalised but privatised, causing mayhem and violence, as one grand narrative of reason and entitlement clashes with another.

Beckett observed, in his essay on Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress,’ that:

The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent [...] Maximal speed is a state of rest. The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical; in principle, corruption is generation.<sup>239</sup>

The disorder that would corrupt literary nonsense is what generates it, and the order that would generate nonsense corrupts it. When the Red Queen (who seems the personification of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theory of the barbarity of reason) announces that “[It] takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place” (Houghton, 143), she might as well be quoting Beckett’s line that ‘Maximal speed is a state of rest.’ This both/and condition of Carroll’s nonsense forms the core of its philosophical force, and is the one of the most persuasive reasons for Joyce enlisting Carroll in order to write his great book about the Fall. When Alice worries that she might “go out like a candle,” she is articulating something very close to the process of self-annihilation we see in nonsense, in that nonsense is, by definition, self-annihilating. Without the process of self-annihilation in which a candle engages while burning, it would not function as a candle; equally, without the self-destructive chaos that nonsense tends towards while engaging in order, it would not function as nonsense. The simultaneous corruption and generation taking place within literary nonsense is captured in the *Wake*’s inspired portmanteau word, ‘abnihilation’ (353.23), yoking destruction (annihilation) and creation (*ab nihilo*). As surely as any pseudocouple, generation and corruption, order and disorder, will continue their squabbles until the bitter end, with nonsense as their stage. As Beckett puts it in *The Unnamable*:

---

<sup>238</sup> Sale, 1978. *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 115.

<sup>239</sup> Beckett, *Disjecta*, 21.

From the unexceptionable order which has prevailed here to date may I infer that such will always be the case? I may of course. But the mere fact of asking myself such a question gives me to reflect. [...] If one day a change were to take place, resulting from a principle of disorder already present, or on its way, what then?<sup>240</sup>

In that case, we might decide that order has been disorder and disorder order all along, in the glorious 'chaosmos' of nonsense (FW, 118.21).

---

<sup>240</sup> Beckett, 1975. *The Unnamable*. London: John Calder, 10-11.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, 1979. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (tr. John Cumming). London: Verso.
- . *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, 1974 (tr. E.F.N. Jephcott). London: Verso.
- Abrams, M.H., 1971. *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: Norton.
- Anspaugh, Kelly, 1994. "How Butt shot the Chamber Pot": *Finnegans Wake* II.3' in *James Joyce Quarterly*, 32.1, pp.71-81.
- Atherton, James S., 1959. *Books at the Wake: A Study in Literary Allusions in James Joyce's 'Finnegans Wake'*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1966. 'Sport and Games in *Finnegans Wake*', in Jack P. Dalton and Clive Hart (eds), *Twelve and a Tilly*. London: Faber and Faber, 52-64.
- Attridge, Derek, 1989. 'The *Wake's* Confounded Language', Morris Beja and Shari Benstock (eds), *Coping With Joyce*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 262-8.
- . 2000. *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2004. *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce*. London: Routledge.
- Austen, Jane, 1986. *Persuasion*. London: Penguin.
- Barthleme, Donald, 1981. *Sixty Stories*. London: Penguin.
- Barthes, Roland, (tr. Richard Howard), 1977. *A Lover's Discourse*. London: Penguin.
- Baudelaire, Charles, (ed. and tr. Jonathan Mayne), 1995. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon.
- Beckett, Samuel, 1990 (1986). *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . (ed. Ruby Cohn), 1983. *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. London: John Calder.
- . 1975. *The Unnamable*. London: John Calder.
- . 1953. *Watt*. London: John Calder.
- Begnall, Michael H., and Senn, Fritz (eds), 1974. *A Conceptual Guide to Finnegans Wake*. London: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Beja, Morris, 1977. "Dividual chaoses": Case Histories of Multiple Personality and *Finnegans Wake*', *James Joyce Quarterly* 14.3, pp.241-50.

- Bell, Robert H., 1996. *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in Ulysses*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Benstock, Bernard, 1965. *Joyce-Again's Wake*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Billig, Michael, 2005. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: Sage.
- Bishop, 1993. *Joyce's Book of the Dark*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Blamires, Harry, 1985. *The Bloomsday Book*. London: Methuen.
- Bohman-Kalaja, Kimberly, 2007. *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett and Georges Perec*. New York: Dalkey Archive.
- Bollas, Christopher, 1995. *Cracking Up*. London: Routledge.
- Bonnat, Jean-Louis, and Bossis, Mireille, (eds), 1983. *Ecrire, Publier, Lire, Les Correspondences*. Université de Nantes, Département de Psychologie.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, 1962. 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', in *Labyrinths and Other Stories* (ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby). New York: New Directions Publishing, 27-42.
- Breton, André (ed), (tr. Mark Polizzotti), 2009. *Anthology of Black Humour*. London: Telegram.
- Burke, Kenneth, 1961. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. London: University of California Press.
- Byron, Lord George, (ed. Jerome J. McGann), 2008. *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Caillois, Roger, 1958. *Les Jeux et les hommes: Le Masque et le Vertige*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Carroll, Lewis (ed. Hugh Haughton), 1998. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. London: Penguin.
- (ed. Martin Gardner), 2001 (1960). *The Annotated Alice*. London: Penguin.
- 1962. *The Annotated Snark*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 1999. *Collected Works of Lewis Carroll* (three volumes). Ware: Wordsworth Editions.
- (ed. Morton N. Cohen), 1979. *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (ed. Roger Lancelyn Green), 1953. *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*. London: Cassell and Company
- (ed. Morton N. Cohen), 1978. *Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*. New York: Pantheon, 1982.

- Cicero, 1970. *On Oratory and Orators* (tr. J.S. Watson). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Cohen, Morton N., 1995. *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*. London: Macmillan.
- Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson, 1898. *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Conley, Tim, 2003. *Joyces Mistakes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Critchley, Simon, 2002. *On Humour*. London: Routledge.
- Dalton, Jack P., and Hart, Clive (eds) 1966. *Twelve and a Tilly*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Douglas, Norman, 1916. *London Street Games*. Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008.
- Driscoll, Catherine, 2005. 'Felix Culpa – Sex, Sin, and Discourse in Joyce's Fiction' in Anne Fogarty and Timothy Martin (eds), *Joyce on the Threshold*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005, 171-86.
- Eagleton, Terry, 1982. *The Rape of Clarissa*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Earle, Rebecca (ed), 1999. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers 1600 - 1945*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Eckley, Grace, 1985. *Children's Lore in Finnegans Wake*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Ellmann, Richard, 1982 (1959). *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
— . 1984 (1972). *Ulysses on the Liffey*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eliot, T.S., 1957. *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber.  
— . 1985. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Empson, William, 1974. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions.
- Fogarty, Anne, and Martin, Timothy (eds), 2005. *Joyce on the Threshold*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Frehner, Ruth, and Zeller, Ursula (eds), 1998. *A Collideorscape of Joyce: Festschrift for Fritz Senn*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- Freud, Sigmund, 2002 (1940). *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*. London: Penguin.
- Fuger, Wilhelm, 1982. "'Epistlemadethemology": ALP's Letter and the Tradition of Interpolated Letters' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 19.4, pp.405-413.
- Gilbert, Stuart, 1993. *Reflections on James Joyce*. Austin: University of Texas Press.



- Giuliano, Edward, 1982. *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter.
- Giunta, Edvige, 1992. "'A Raven like a Writing-desk': Lewis Carroll through James Joyce's Looking-glass' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Miami).  
—, 1993. 'Dear Reverend: "Lewis Carroll and the Boston Girls"' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 30.3, 488-92.
- Glasheen, Adaline, 1954. 'Finnegans Wake and the Girls from Boston, Mass.', *Hudson Review* 7, 89-96.  
—, 1956. *A Census of Finnegans Wake*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gorman, Herbert, 1941. *James Joyce, a Definitive Biography*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head.
- Gray, Donald J., 1966. 'The Uses of Victorian Laughter' in *Victorian Studies*, 10.2, 145-176.
- Grotjahn, Martin, 1957. *Beyond Laughter*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gurewitsch, Morton, 1975. *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Hayman, David. 'Forms of Folly in Joyce: A Study of Clowning in *Ulysses*' in *ELH* (vol.34, n.2, June 1967), 260-83.
- Hill, Geoffrey, 2000. *Speech! Speech!* Washington: Counterpoint.
- Hirn, Yrjo, (tr. Lucien Maury), 1926. *Les Jeux d'enfants*. Paris: Stock.
- Hobbes, Thomas, 1983. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin.
- Huizinga, Johan, 1938. *Homo Ludens*. London, Granada, 1970.
- Jacobson, Howard, 1997. *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime*. London: Viking.
- Johnson, Samuel, 1984. *A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (ed. Donald Greene). Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
— (Ed. Bruce Redford), 1992. *Letters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Johnston, Dillon, 2001. *The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland, 1912-2000*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Joyce, James, 1974 (1914). *Dubliners*. London: Penguin.  
—, 1992 (1939). *Finnegans Wake*. London: Penguin.  
— (ed. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann), 1957-66. *Letters*. London: Faber and Faber.  
— (ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz, and John Whitter-Ferguson), 2001. *Poems and Shorter Writings*. London: Faber and Faber.  
—, 1965 (1916). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin.

- . 1998 (1922). *Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kafka, Franz, 1992 (ed. Nahum N. Glatzer). *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Minerva.
- Kant, Immanuel, (tr. James Creed Meredith), 1952. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kenner, Hugh, 1961. *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*. New York: Grove Press.
- Kermode, Frank, and Kermode, Anita (eds), 1996. *The Oxford Book of Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kincaid, James R., 1973. 'Alice's Invasion of Wonderland' in *PMLA* (vol.88, no.1), Jan 1973, 92-9.
- Lear, Edward, (ed. Vivien Noakes), 2002. *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*. London: Penguin.
- . (ed. Vivien Noakes), 1990. *Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lecerclé, John-Jacques, 1994. *Philosophy of Nonsense*. London: Routledge.
- . 1990. *The Violence of Language*. London: Routledge.
- Lehmann, John, 1977. *Edward Lear and His World*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Lewis, Gwyneth, 2005. *Chaotic Angels: Poems in Welsh*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe.
- Linnet, Maren. 'The Jew's Text: "Shem the Penman" and "Shaun the Post,"' in *James Joyce Quartley* (vol.45, no. 2, Winter 2008), 263-80.
- Mahaffey, Vicki, 1988. *Reauthorizing Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Milesi, Laurent, 1998. 'The Poetics of 'The Purloined Letter' in *Finnegans Wake*', in *A Collideorscape of Joyce: Festschrift for Fritz Senn* (eds Ruth Frehner and Ursula Zeller). Dublin: Lilliput Press, 306-22.
- MacNeice, Louis. 2007. *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mitchell, Andrew J., 2006. 'Meaning Postponed': *Finnegans Wake* and The Postcard' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 44.1, 59-76.
- Muldoon, Paul, 1998. *Hay*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 2000. *Lolita*. London: Penguin.
- Nash, John, 2002. 'The Logic of Incest: Issy, Princes, and Professors' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 39.3, 435-55.
- Norris, Margot, 1978. *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake: A Structuralist*

- Analysis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1992. *Joyce's Web: The Social Unraveling of Modernism*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- O'Brien, Flann, 1968. *The Best of Myles*. London: Grafton.
- . 1967. *The Third Policeman*. London: Flamingo, 1993.
- Opie, Peter, and Opie, Iona, 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 2008. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Orwell, George (ed. John Carey), 2002. *Essays*. London: Everyman.
- Pages, Alain, 1983. 'La Communication circulaire'. In Jean-Louis Bonnat and Mireille Bossis (eds), *Ecrire, Publier, Lire, Les Correspondences*. Nantes: Université de Nantes, Département de Psychologie, 343-361.
- Perry, Ruth, 1980. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York: AMS Press.
- Pessoa, Fernando, 2001. *The Book of Disquiet*, tr. Richard Zenith. London: Penguin.
- Plath, Sylvia, 1981. *Collected Poems* (ed. Ted Hughes). London: Faber and Faber.
- Porchia, Antonio (trans. W.S. Merwin), 2003. *Voices*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press.
- Prince, Morton, 1906. *The Dissociation of a Personality*. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co.
- Racine, Jean, 1796. *Œuvres, vol. 3*. Paris: Pougin.
- Raynaud, Claudine, 1986. 'Woman, the Letter Writer; Man, the Writing Master' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 23.3, pp.299-324.
- Rea, John A., 1977. 'A Bit of Lewis Carroll in *Ulysses*' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 15.2, pp.86-9.
- Redfern, Walter, 1984. *Puns*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ricks, Christopher, 1993. *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Riquelme, John Paul, 1983. *Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Saintsbury, George, (ed), 1922. *A Letter Book*. London: G. Bell and Sons.
- Sale, 1978. *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Schaffer, Talia, 1992. 'Letters to Bidy: About That Original Hen' in *James Joyce Quarterly* 29, pp.623-42.
- Scott, James C., 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sewell, Elizabeth, 1952. *The Field of Nonsense*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Shafer, Daphne Marie, 2001. "'Wanderlad beyond the Lokking-glass": the Dream Worlds of Lewis Carroll and James Joyce' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Louisiana at Lafayette).
- Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1905.
- Slote, Sam, and Crispi, Luca, (eds) 2007. *How Joyce Wrote Finnegans Wake*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Steedman, Carolyn, 1999. 'A woman writing a letter' in Rebecca Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers 1600 - 1945*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.111-33.
- Steiner, George, 1975. *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1979. *Martin Heidegger*. New York: Viking Press.
- Stewart, Susan, 1989. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sutherland, Robert D., 1970. *Language and Lewis Carroll*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian, 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Swift, Jonathan, 1948. *Journal to Stella*. London: J.M. Dent.
- . (Ed. C.H. Sisson), 1977. *Selected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet.
- . 2003. *Gulliver's Travels*. London: Penguin.
- Tigges, Wim, 1987. 'An Anatomy of Nonsense' in *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Tindall, William York, 1950. *James Joyce, His Way of Interpreting the Modern World*. London: Scribner.
- . 1969. *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Van Hulle, Dirk, 2008. *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-how, Beckett's Nohow*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Vico, Giambattista, (tr. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch), 1984. *The New Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Waismann, Friedrich, 1979. *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Watson, Nicola, 1994. *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel 1790 - 1825*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wayne, Phillip, 1949. *The Personal Art: An Anthology of English Letters*. London: Longmans.
- Williams, James, 2008. 'Nineteenth-Century Nonsense Writing and the Later Work of James Joyce' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge).
- Wilson, Christopher P., 1979. *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*. London: Academic Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1998. *Culture and Value*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wood, Michael. 'Quashed Quotatoes' in *London Review of Books*, vol.32, no.24, 16 December 2010.