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Author(s): Daniel Bivona

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Alice the Child-Imperialist and the Games of Wonderland

DANIEL BIVONA

FEW would dispute the claim that Lewis Carroll was fascinated by games and puzzles. His interest in logical and mathematical games has been well documented. Moreover, although he seems rarely to have turned his attention to politics, on at least one occasion when he did—at the time of the Parliamentary debate over the Second Irish Home Rule Bill—he took a characteristic delight in reducing this heated political debate to a puzzle. In fact, his “Home-Rule Mystery” was just one of many Home-Rule puzzles and games introduced to the English market in the months following Gladstone’s introduction of the Bill in February of 1893.¹

A man who could construct a parlor game out of an emotional political issue must, one imagines, have had an extraordinarily detached outlook on politics. Yet one need not be overly surprised that Carroll could find the imaginative material for a puzzle in the debate over Ireland’s place in the Empire. Indeed, a close look at his earlier classic, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, reveals a fascination on his part with the imaginative possibilities latent in a “confrontation of cultures”—the kind of encounter that

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¹See Dodgson’s references to his puzzle in letters to Mrs. G. J. Burch and R. H. Collins in 1893, in *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Morton N. Cohen, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), II, 962, 969–70.

the imperial experience of the nineteenth century was bringing to the forefront of European consciousness. In this work Carroll seems to have been intrigued by the same kind of dilemma that fired the imagination of Swift, a writer with anything but a purely playful intellectual interest in political issues: what happens when one deposits a representative of English culture in a foreign land populated by beings who live by unfamiliar rules? In short, it is time to examine Alice's relationship to imperialism because the dilemma in which she finds herself seems designed to raise questions about her "imperial" assumption that all discourses are either self-evidently commensurable or can be made to seem so.² In *Alice*, Carroll renders a world organized by gamelike social structures in which mastery of the game promises mastery of others.³

²I am extrapolating Richard Rorty's notion of "incommensurable discourses" here by applying it to Alice's failed attempt to "read" the meaning of the "creatures'" words and actions by imposing an interpretive schema which is nothing other than her own English conventionality hypostatized into a metasystem or metalanguage. Rorty argues that "epistemology" performs an analogous trick by attempting to render all discourses translatable through imposing its own set of favored terms: "There is no such thing as the 'language of unified science.' We have not *got* a language which will serve as a permanent neutral matrix for formulating all good explanatory hypotheses, and we have not the foggiest notion of how to get one. . . . So epistemology—as the attempt to render all discourses commensurable by translating them into a preferred set of terms—is unlikely to be a useful strategy" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979], pp. 348–49). Many critics have discussed Lewis Carroll's obsession with rules and rule-governed behavior. Indeed, one might argue that some of the best criticism of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has focused on his interest in games and play, whether it be Kathleen Blake's discussion of the play/work dichotomy (both of which spheres of experience Carroll is said to place in a rule-governed context) or Roger Henkle's identification of Carroll's timid proposal of "free play" as an alternative to a mid-Victorian life of stultifying, repressive, rule-governed work. See Kathleen Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 88, and Roger B. Henkle, "The Mad Hatter's World," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 49 (1973), 102–3. The standard work treating the creatures as spokesmen for various sorts of nonsense is Elizabeth Sewall's *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952). In contrast, my position is that what appears to be "nonsense" in *Alice* is simply "sense" of an alien kind. Lest it be objected that I am overlooking the obvious fact that the "creatures" speak "English" words here, it is worth making the point that such may simply be Carroll's concession to the needs of an English-speaking readership. After all, no modern viewer of a Hollywood World War II film mistakes the Japanese soldiers depicted in it for Americans simply because the director has them speaking English.

³Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport*, p. 16. Blake's book is by far the best critical

An “ethnographic” approach to Alice’s adventures is authorized by the fact that Alice is placed in a world that appears to be, at least potentially, rule-governed, although the rules that give meaning to the behavior of the creatures are beyond her ken and must be discovered by inference. To put it another way, more often than not, what would be “natural” behavior in an English setting is inappropriate in Wonderland; the social codes that determine what is or is not “natural” are very different in the two spheres. Moreover, as Kathleen Blake has argued, language itself is viewed as a kind of game here:

To Huizinga, to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and . . . to Carroll too, language itself is a gamelike system of reciprocally accepted terms and rules, arbitrary, meaningful only by social agreement. From this point of view a realm without games is hard to imagine.

However, rules take on an even greater importance in this text than Blake will allow because, paradoxically, they are so difficult to infer. Not only is it difficult to imagine a realm without games, but the very notion that there might be a realm of experience *not* governed by rules is rendered highly problematic in *Alice*. The text leaves indeterminate—so, one could say, does “life”—the question of whether or not all spheres of social existence conform to a canon of laws of one sort or another.⁵ Thus the commonplace critical assumption that rule violation can pro-

discussion of play as mastery in Carroll. Relying especially on Jean Piaget and Johan Huizinga, Blake sees play as an active drive to incorporate: “Play—spontaneous, disinterested, nonutilitarian—is characterized by a fundamental urge to mastery through incorporation of experience to the ego rather than by adjustment or accommodation of the ego to experience” (p. 18). This definition, however, disqualifies much of Alice’s experience in Wonderland from inclusion in the realm of play: Alice’s attempts to master the “creatures” by inferring the rules governing their “games” are thwarted at almost every turn, even though her growth spurts do afford her occasional opportunities to bully the “creatures.” Bullying, however, is hardly what Blake means by “playing the game.”

⁴Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport*, p. 16.

⁵*Through the Looking-Glass* very clearly raises (without answering) the question of what sort of controlling rationality governs Alice’s “moves” on the chessboard. See Roger B. Henkle, “Carroll’s Narratives Underground: ‘Modernism’ and Form,” in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration*, ed. Edward Guiliano (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1982), pp. 92–93.

vide a clue to unmask the semiotic structure of the Wonderland world is rendered doubtful by the very fact that no one, and especially Alice, can honestly claim to have privileged access to the rules governing the behavior of the “creatures,” and lacking such access, cannot decide such central questions as to whether or not the “creatures” are engaged in competitive games or other non-competitive activities such as rituals.

Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the Queen’s croquet match, in which Alice’s confidence that she knows the boundaries of the game of croquet leads her to assume that she can easily distinguish orderly behavior from disorderly, rule-observing from rule-breaking, sense from nonsense, behavior that is part of the game—say, hitting the hedgehogs with flamingos—from behavior that intrudes on the game from beyond its bounds, for instance, the Queen’s awful command, “Off with his head!” However, Alice’s confidence in her ability to distinguish inside from outside is but a sign of her own unexamined ethnocentric outlook.

Alice recognizes, but only to a limited extent, what her inferential task must be. We know, for instance, that she is especially concerned with correctly inferring rules from the strange behavior she sees around her, and this concern of hers extends even to herself: her own physical stature is determined by her following written rules. One of her first orders of business after falling down the rabbit hole (uninvited, of course; her adventure begins as an intrusion into the White Rabbit’s home in complete disregard of even her own English canon of politeness) is to attempt to shrink herself; yet this shrinking is enabled only by her having followed the instructions written on the label attached to a bottle of liquid: “DRINK ME.”⁶ The stakes in this game of rule inference are rather high, Alice knows, at least at this point in the narrative, because one’s bodily integrity is somehow tied to one’s ability to follow rules successfully: “For she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember

⁶Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, introd. and notes by Martin Gardner (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1960), p. 31. Hereafter, references to this edition appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

the simple rules their friends had taught them" (p. 31). Alice's assumption that bodily shape is somehow connected to following rules is not as odd as it might sound, given the preoccupation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the ways in which systems of rules construct behavioral norms for what is "natural." Bodies are not recognized here until they are named, that is, classified; but even then, misrecognition is an ever present pitfall because of the lack of a universal code. Bodies are as closely linked to the semiotic structure of the Wonderland social system as are the "events" in which Alice participates. Alice's use of the term "creatures"—both an insulting term that diminishes the Wonderland beings and a class name that raises questions about their place in the scale of creation (are they animal or human?)—renders their fuzzily indeterminate status: to her they are, perhaps, merely animate or "animated."

In the case of Wonderland social "events," the resemblance between their Wonderland names and the names of events in nineteenth-century England mislead Alice into mistakenly assimilating them to those familiar to her. For instance, the famous "caucus-race" in which Alice finds herself involved bears few of the features an English public schoolboy would associate with racing: the shape of the race course seems arbitrarily designed; the contestants do not line up together; and the "race" has no clearly defined beginning or ending in time (p. 48). The fact that the event ends with all contestants declared winners and all handed prizes suggests that it is not a contest at all, an inference justified by its name: the word "caucus," at the time a relatively recent linguistic import into Victorian England from the United States, carries the implication of a meeting to iron out differences in order to present a united front for exerting political pressure, a local game of political accommodation within a larger adversarial context rather than a contest with winners and losers.⁷ If there

⁷See the *OED* definition of the use of "caucus" in England: "In English newspapers since 1878, generally misused, and applied opprobriously to a committee or organization charged with seeking to manage the elections and dictate to the constituencies, but which is, in fact, usually a representative committee popularly elected for the purpose of securing concerted political action in a constituency" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971], I, 350). Obviously, the popular nineteenth-century British view of

are to be “losers,” they exist outside of the caucus, not within it. In fact, the entire “race” aspect of the “caucus-race” is de-emphasized in favor of the ceremony of awarding prizes, a ritual which even Alice is forced, quite against her initial impulse, to observe with a show of outward solemnity (p. 50).

The event is significant because it raises the same crucial question about Alice’s problems of interpretation throughout her Wonderland adventure. Rituals, like games, are rule-governed social events; unlike games, however, rituals are seldom held for the purpose of sorting out winners from losers. Obviously, the whole notion of a “winner” is irrelevant to most ritual events. But Alice fails miserably at this central hermeneutic task of sorting out rituals from games in Wonderland because the names of the events misleadingly obscure the important differences between the “large events” here and the events bearing the same names in English life.

Alice’s inability to make these distinctions is the kind of myopia that will eventually result in her complete disruption of Wonderland society in a fit of almost “missionary” zealotry at the end of the book. Thus, not surprisingly, her entrance into the garden and onto the Queen’s “Croquet-Ground,” another of her many intrusions, is preceded by a vow that takes on a rather sinister appearance when seen in this light: “I’ll manage better this time” (p. 104). What she “manages” is to assimilate the game of Wonderland “croquet” into her own English version of croquet, judge the Wonderland version to be an impossible version of the English one, and completely misinterpret the significance of the Queen’s infamous command “Off with his head!” as an event that intrudes on the game from beyond its structure of rules, despite the evi-

the meaning of the word is evoked here on the level of appearances: the Dodo does *seem* to stage-manage the “race.” My point, however, is simply that because Alice lacks an interpretive framework for judging whether or not the “creatures” are *actually* improvising when they *appear* to be (there is no universal code that allows people to make definitive judgments about whether inhabitants of foreign cultures they know nothing about are improvising or strictly following rigid rules laid down in antiquity), the American sense of the word “caucus” offers itself as one plausible sense of the word “caucus” here, especially in light of the other compelling evidence against assimilating the Wonderland “caucus-race” to the English notion of a “race.”

dence that it may well be an event *within* the “game” rather than *outside* it.

Although Wonderland “croquet” does bear some superficial resemblance to the English game (taking out the garbage bears a superficial resemblance to checkers as well, if one views the event from a certain angle and allows for differences of scale), Alice is convinced that she can compete successfully, even when she becomes frustrated with the difficulty. Characteristically, her exasperation soon boils over into the childish assumption, not that it is a difficult game, but that it is a game without rules. As she tells the Cheshire Cat,

“I don’t think they play at all fairly . . . and they all quarrel so dreadfully one can’t hear oneself speak—and they don’t seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you’ve no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive.”
(p. 113)

Alice has no vantage from which to judge whether the creatures are following or breaking the rules. In circular fashion she infers that there are rules from the fact that she has just been struggling to play by them correctly; moreover, her assumption that this Wonderland “game” of “croquet” is identifiable with the English version is a doubtful one, given the fact that the Wonderland event is one which one of the players, the Queen, cannot “lose.” Her leap to the conclusion that there are “no rules” governing this event on the Queen’s croquet ground is merely one of many instances in the text wherein her exasperation with her own ignorance or lack of skill is projected onto the “creatures.” Alice has an imperial penchant for producing her own self-justifying evidence as well as an exasperating (although understandably human) tendency to rationalize her own failures of comprehension.

Thus, Alice’s judgment that the Queen’s execution orders make her “savage” (“Mad Tea-Party”) comes from her too-comfortable application of the rules of English croquet to the Wonderland game. Although she notes that no one ever seems actually to get beheaded (p. 112), she is incapable of processing the implications of that observation. The “order” “Off with his head!” does not seem to be a performative in the Wonderland linguistic universe (nor, for that matter, does the Duchess’s “Chop off her

head!" in the "Pig and Pepper" chapter); but because Alice has only her own English framework on which to fall back, she assumes that it must carry performative force. A more reasonable inference would be that the Queen's "savage" order is actually a part of the game rather than an event that intrudes from outside the game. After all, Alice does notice that the King pardons all those the Queen has condemned. Alice might have more reasonably inferred from that fact that the event called "croquet" in Wonderland is actually a ritual intended to reinforce the power of the King and Queen over life and death, possibly by enacting a pageant of condemnation followed by forgiveness. Not only does this inference help explain the strange fact that no one in Wonderland is ever beheaded, but by identifying the event as a ritual, one accounts for the odd fact that this "game" is a game that one player cannot lose. However, such an inference would require of Alice the flexibility to assign different boundaries to the "game" of Wonderland croquet.

My intent in offering this interpretation is not to insist on a unitary decoding of the behavior of the "creatures," nor, tiresomely, to take Alice to task for childish naïveté. Other equally reasonable explanations might be adduced to account for the same evidence. My point is that Alice's assumption that Wonderland "croquet" is a competitive game says more about her own ethnocentrism than it does about the behavior of the "creatures." Carroll has constructed a world that is radically indeterminate, a world from which most of the "frames" that guide perception of the meaning of events, "frames" usually unreflectively assumed by Victorian children (or adults, for that matter), have been removed. One needs to know the *langue* as well as the *parole*, the system as well as the individual gesture that has meaning only within that system, to make valid inferences about the meaning of events and behavior. Alice's "imperialism," such as it is, is a semiotic imperialism: she is incapable of constructing, on a model radically different from her own, the "system" or "systems" that give meaning to the behavior of the creatures.⁸

⁸The two best critical studies of the *Alice* books to insist on the possibly "logical" (i.e., "rule-governed") basis for the "creatures'" behavior are George Pitcher, "Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll," *Massachusetts Review*, 6, Pt. 2 (1965),

Alice's encounter with the hookah-smoking caterpillar underlines the kind of invasive intruder she has become in Wonderland. The hookah, itself a stock "orientalizing" feature, highlights the caterpillar's foreignness; and the tautological turn that their conversation takes demonstrates, not that the caterpillar is incorrigibly illogical, but rather that he refuses to be comprehended by Alice's categories of meaning. In this instance Alice attempts to read the caterpillar's feelings by analogy with her own in order to impose her own feelings on him (a gesture simultaneously naive *and* imperious). He *should* feel that physical metamorphosis is "very confusing" because she *has*. Of course, where metamorphosis is the norm, the illusion of stasis would "feel very queer," so another sign of Alice's naïveté is the fact that she has it all wrong here. When the caterpillar resists her attempt to comprehend his experience, "Not a bit" (p. 68), she immediately resorts to her favorite form of aggression—making herself look larger:

591–611, and Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Logic and Language in *Through the Looking-Glass*," in *Aspects of Alice*, ed. Robert Phillips (London: Gollancz, 1972), pp. 267–75. Pitcher usefully notes that the text foregrounds Alice's problems of rule inference while demonstrating that Carroll plays with notions analogous to the "language-games" of which Wittgenstein would write years later, although he is not concerned in this essay with attempting to recuperate any of the "creatures" games as "sensible." In her essay, Spacks argues that Carroll satirizes, through Alice, the illogical everyday use of language, or perhaps more appropriately, the illogicality of those who, like Alice, attempt to fit everyday language into the demands of logical rigor. See also Gilles Deleuze, "The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carroll and Antonin Artaud," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979) for the interesting contrast he draws between Carroll's stark depiction of the linguistic "surface" and Artaud's "howl," which defeats all attempts to recuperate it within a linguistic system of meaning. Deleuze argues: "Without this surface that distinguishes itself from the depths of bodies, without this line that separates things from propositions, sounds would become inseparable from bodies, becoming simple physical qualities contiguous with them, and propositions would be impossible. This is why the organization of language is not separable from the poetic discovery of surface, or from Alice's adventure. The greatness of language consists in speaking only at the surface of things, and thereby in capturing the pure event and the combinations of events that take place on the surface. It becomes a question of reascending to the surface, of discovering surface entities and their games of meaning and of non-sense, of expressing these games in port-manteau words, and of resisting the vertigo of the bodies' depths and their alimentary, poisonous mixtures" (pp. 284–85).

"Well, perhaps *your* feelings may be different," said Alice: "all I know is, it would feel very queer to *me*."

"You!" said the Caterpillar contemptuously. "Who are *you*?"

Which brought them back again to the beginning of the conversation. Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar's making such *very* short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, "I think you ought to tell me who *you* are, first." (p. 68)

In the quasi-Hegelian game of "comprehension" that is being played out here, Alice's frustration with her inability to comprehend the experience of the caterpillar (he who closes the circle of the tautology defeats the other's attempt to know him) causes her to resort to literalizing what she is talking about: she tries to look as if she is larger than he. The pun on "short" shifts the discourse back to a literal surface, and Alice attempts to grow to meet the caterpillar's challenge, the challenge of incomprehensibility, by bullying. But the disjunction in the text between "comprehending" and "growing larger than" (Alice knows least when she is the largest, as in the White Rabbit's house, where she cannot perceive what is going on outside, or at the end of the trial when she surrenders all hope of understanding the event in favor of pure disruption) is reinforced in this passage, and suggests that Carroll is undermining the Hegelian equation of "comprehension" with knowledge—precisely the equation which Alan Sandison notes underlies the epistemological form of nineteenth-century imperialism.⁹ "Growing" becomes a poor substitute for "knowing" here, and its insufficiency inevitably draws Alice into a game of violent disruption. Growing is both Alice's substitute for the object of knowledge that she cannot successfully appropriate, and a sign of her incomprehension—thus, the disjunction.

To Hegel, of course, the route to knowledge is via appropriation: the highest form of consciousness is self-consciousness, but self-consciousness that is recognized by an other.¹⁰ Just as the philosopher writing the *Phenomenology of Mind* in his study within hearing range of Napoleon's guns at the Battle of Jena "compre-

⁹*The Wheel of Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), pp. 59–60.

¹⁰"Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized' " (G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Bailie, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 229.

hends" the world-historical figure of Napoleon by constructing a history that includes him in a teleological process culminating in Hegel's own moment of writing, so Alice must grow to "comprehend" that which she would know; although, as already mentioned, the few times she does experience "growth" in Wonderland take her away from self-consciousness—knowledge—rather than toward it.¹¹ Alice's struggle for recognition by the creatures, her will-to-master, drives her beyond any bounds of decency (if there were any such conception of the rules of decency not bound by constraints of time, place, and culture). If there is rule violation in this text, surely Alice is the violator *par excellence*.

The relevance of Hegel's notion of the desire for "recognition" as the driving force behind Alice's will to manage the "creatures" casts some light on some of the more puzzling problems of identity that she confronts. Alice perfectly embodies the Hegelian paradox of identity, the "doubling" that is at the basis of his notion of subjectivity. The imperative that drives the Hegelian "master" to risk his life for recognition involves him in a kind of enslavement to the other: he seeks to attain pure "self-consciousness," but "self-consciousness" that is "recognized" by the other, the "slave," who is himself unselfconscious and fears to put himself at risk.¹² Thus Alice's initial splitting of self in the "Pool of Tears" episode (she becomes both addresser and addressee of her own discourse, performer of feats and self-applauder, the measurer

¹¹Self-consciousness is the next step: for instance, the philosopher's realization that it is *he* who "comprehends" Napoleon.

¹²The master "exists only for himself, that is his essential nature; he is the negative power without qualification, a power to which the thing is naught. And he is thus the absolutely essential act in this situation, while the bondsman is not so, he is an unessential activity. But for recognition proper there is needed the moment that what the master does to the other he should also do to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself, he should do to the other also. On that account a form of recognition has arisen that is one-sided and unequal. In all this, the unessential consciousness is, for the master, the object which embodies the truth of his certainty of himself. But it is evident that this object does not correspond to its notion; for, just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. He is thus not assured of self-existence as his truth; he finds that his truth is rather the unessential consciousness, and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness" (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, pp. 236–37).

and the measured) fills the gap left by a lack of “slaves” to recognize her and presages the way in which she will treat the “other” when she confronts him: as a screen on which she may project her own idea of the other. Not surprisingly, when she meets the mouse after having fallen into her own pool of tears, she immediately gives offense, “*Ou est ma chatte?*” And in no time, she is adding insult to injury by attempting forcibly to embrace him in a false community with herself, signaled by her use of the word “We” (p. 42). The “otherness” of the other is barely acknowledged by Alice in this book; yet, paradoxically, recognition by the other is precisely what she most avidly seeks. All discourse is a species of oneiric discourse here, as the Hegelian “master’s” drive for recognition is marked by a condition impossible to satisfy: to be recognized by the other is implicitly to reduce the other forcibly to the condition of recognizing without himself being recognized in turn; however, the price one pays for being recognized as master is the knowledge that the recognizer is not himself a “master,” and, ultimately, not one whose recognition is worth acquiring.

Alice’s frustration with the contradictions inherent in her Hegelian drive to attain mastery is evident virtually everywhere. She desires recognition but is frustrated with those who ought to be according it to her, the mere “creatures” who have the effrontery to resist her, the beings whose “illogical” games she is incapable of mastering. Her complaints about how the “creatures” argue, such as in her confrontation with the Frog-Footman in the “Pig and Pepper” chapter, display her propensity to return this frustration by projecting it outward:

“How am I to get in?” asked Alice again, in a louder tone.

“*Are* you to get in at all?” said the Footman. “That’s the first question, you know.”

It was, no doubt: only Alice did not like to be told so. “It’s really dreadful,” she muttered to herself, “the way all the creatures argue. It’s enough to drive one crazy!” (p. 81)

Thus, she slides immediately from the dim recognition that she perhaps has no right of entry into the Duchess’s house to the abrasive assumption that the “creatures” are overly argumentative because they too frequently frustrate her will. Her “will-to-mastery” has both these contradictory “subjective” and “objective”

facets: she is incapable of understanding the “creatures” because of her own ethnocentrism, and is frustrated in her attempts to get them to recognize her. In some fundamental respects the “creatures” refuse to engage her at all, neither acknowledging her right to “read” them in her own ethnocentric way nor surrendering their right to “read” her as they please. At times in this book, such as in her confrontation with the caterpillar, their outright refusal to be “read” goads her into the bullying gestures that are the last resort of one driven to be recognized by those she refuses to recognize.

Alice’s difficulty with understanding the references of names casts light on the disjunction between her own linguistic categories and those of the “creatures.” She gains a taste of what it is like to be mistakenly classified when the pigeon calls her, in one of her long-necked moments, a “serpent.” The pigeon’s “mistake,” if one might call it that, is one to which Alice is continually prey: the pigeon abstracts certain essential properties (long-necked, egg-eating) and classifies Alice accordingly with the name that she uses for all creatures who exhibit those qualities (p. 75). This lesson in mistaken classification, however, apparently avails Alice nought, for in the Duchess’s house she generates a great deal of misplaced sympathy for the “creature” the Duchess calls “Pig”:

“Oh, *please* mind what you’re doing!” cried Alice, jumping up and down in an agony of terror. “Oh, there goes his *precious* nose!” as an unusually large saucepan flew close by it, and very nearly carried it off.

“If everybody minded their own business,” the Duchess said, in a hoarse growl, “the world would go round a deal faster than it does.” (p. 84)

As Alice later discovers, the “baby” really is a pig, and thus one would think Alice “ought” to have gleaned the lesson that names attempt to arbitrarily arrest the phenomenal flux by “picking out” as essential properties those that are perhaps characteristic of merely one stage of metamorphosis and, thus, are not then truly “essential.” Hence, the caterpillar’s privileged role in this book is to act as a counterpart of Alice: what is the “essence” of the being we call, at merely one stage of his metamorphosis, “caterpillar”? Carroll later parodies this form of essentialist classification in the

Mock Turtle episode in which bodily “essences” come to be defined in teleological fashion as meat for the table.

When Alice next invades the “Mad Tea-Party” to which, as the March Hare reminds her, she was not invited, her problems with “naming” multiply as she attempts to make sense of what seems on the surface a quintessentially English activity—the tea party. However, the activity in which the Mad Hatter and company are engaged can only be yoked by violence to the English conception. Once again Alice is oblivious to the few clues to the meaning of the “creatures’” behavior that do come her way. As occurs often in the history of imperialism, however, the intruder and natives do achieve at least a provisional sort of mutual accommodation that disguises, at least temporarily, the fact that they live by completely different social codes.

For instance, Alice is initially puzzled about the fact that the table seems to be laid for a great number of guests, although only the Hatter, Hare, and Dormouse are present. Yet the Hatter offers an explanation that seems to be provisionally acceptable to both the “creatures” and Alice:

“Well, I’d hardly finished the first verse,” said the Hatter, “when the Queen bawled out ‘He’s murdering the time! Off with his head!’”

“How dreadfully savage!” exclaimed Alice.

“And ever since that,” the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, “he won’t do a thing I ask! It’s always six o’clock now.”

A bright idea came into Alice’s head. “Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s it,” said the Hatter with a sigh: “it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.”

“Then you keep moving round, I suppose?” said Alice.

“Exactly so,” said the Hatter: “as the things get used up.”

“But what happens when you come to the beginning again?” Alice ventured to ask.

“Suppose we change the subject,” the March Hare interrupted, yawning. “I’m getting tired of this. I vote the young lady tells us a story.” (pp. 99–100)

This passage casts interesting light on Alice’s problems of interpretation for the paradoxical reason that it seems to be one of

the few moments in the text when Alice can find common ground with the “creatures.” However, when she judges the Queen’s order “savage,” she does so only after having made a leap across linguistic levels of which she is oblivious. To judge the order “savage,” she must interpret the statement “He’s murdering the time!” figuratively and the statement “Off with his head!” literally, yet she gives no hint that she is aware she has made such a leap. Had she read both literally, she would have been bound to hold the Hatter in some sort of moral abhorrence, regardless of whether she felt he was unjustly served by the Queen’s order. (The Hatter’s later personification of “Time” suggests he may well be justifiably seen as a “murderer” in at least a provisional sense; like Alice, though, the reader has no privileged access to the Hatter’s system either.) Lacking a framework for interpreting the “creatures” words in their own way, she has no metalinguistic indicators to help her decide when to take something literally or figuratively.

The one seemingly successful inferential leap Alice makes in this passage—her determination that Time’s decision to stand still has frozen the Mad Hatter and March Hare into a perpetual teatime—is actually a glaring example of the limitations imposed by her rigid conventionality: she “naturally” assumes that teatime is determined by the position of the hands on the clock. A more complex inference might be that in a world of perpetual teatime, there is no other time from which teatime may be distinguished—in effect, that there is no “time” in the English sense, since time is an inference one ordinarily makes from changing events. Alice is the “illogical” one here (if one takes “illogical” to refer to her being haunted by metaphysical ghosts) because she takes “time” to be the grounding of events rather than events to be the grounding of time. Thus, the Mad Hatter’s response that “it’s always teatime, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles” might well refer to the lack of a servant named “Time” who will do the dishes for them—at least potentially a “reasonable” response from one whose thinking is not afflicted, as Alice’s is, by the reified metaphysical entity *she* calls “time.” (It is an open question whether or not the Hatter’s “time” is a reified metaphysical entity, an actual animate being or something else entirely; the few hints he offers—

"If you knew Time as well as I do . . . you wouldn't talk about wasting *it*. It's *him*" [p. 97]—raise more questions than they answer.)

As the child in all of us, Alice must press on with her metaphysical inquiries, seemingly unconscious of their metaphysical nature. Having been told that the party moves on as the "things get used up," she asks the question that one eventually hears from all children: "But what happens when you come to the beginning again?" In one sense, the answer is death: the end of the chain of nourishment, the end of the process of displacement. Yet the March Hare's yawning response suggests that he has taken the question in its most boringly trivial sense: a question of the same order as the child's query about the infinite regress, "If God made us, who made God?" It is unanswerable because it is a question about a cyclical process cast in linear terms: a circle has no "beginning."

Thus Alice finds herself posing riddles that have no answers, the very thing for which she reproached the Hatter earlier (p. 97). The cyclical nature of her adventure in Wonderland—pure metamorphosis without a *telos*, a process which denies her the retrospective "knowledge" that closure brings—resembles the way the society of the Mad Hatter and March Hare "appears" to her. As should be clear by now, Alice's quest to master the game of Wonderland is doomed to failure because she will never achieve the kind of self-transcendence necessary to "comprehend" (and dominate) the "creatures." Her quest to learn the rules that will "explain" their behavior—a "mastercode" which will provide the key to understanding their behavior without itself presupposing the categories of their language—is doomed to frustration. She is bound to repeat the mistakes she attributes, in her pigheaded way, to them. Like any good imperialist, then, Alice assumes that because she comes to play a role in the "creatures'" drama by virtue of her undismissible presence, she can thereby dominate it, and successful domination must be the inevitable reward of "comprehension." Of course, as has been certainly clear from at least the time of Freud, playing a role *in* a drama is precisely that which disqualifies one from offering a useful interpretation of the mean-

ing of that drama, for that is the privilege of him who stands *outside*.¹³ Although Alice stands outside of the “creatures’” social system (or systems), she does not stand outside her own, which she has instead elevated into a universal interpretive system called upon to explain all behavior everywhere.

Fittingly, the Hare’s request for a story (a narrative might, because it is finite and linear, provide at least a provisional closure to remove Alice and the “creatures” from their cyclical stasis) is picked up by the Dormouse, who begins to tell a tale that is ultimately disrupted by Alice’s persistent questioning. The Dormouse’s story appears to take him across linguistic boundaries in ways unacceptable to Alice: the pun on “drawing” sends him from describing how the “three little sisters” were attempting to “draw” treacle from a well they were “*in*,” to describing how they “*drew*” “everything that begins with an M” (pp. 102, 103). Whether this story is an “acceptable” tale or not cannot be judged without assuming the kind of universal perspective that Alice’s convention-

¹³In his lecture of 1917 in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Part III, Vol. 16 of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Standard ed., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), Freud acknowledges not only the existence but the therapeutic necessity of transference relationships between doctor and patient. Acknowledging that once the doctor comes to play an important role in the patient’s drama(s), his ability to influence the patient’s “intellectual beliefs” (as opposed to the root cause of his illness) by simple “suggestion” is greatly enhanced. Freud argues that the doctor must work to extract himself sufficiently from the transference so that he will eschew these “easy” interpretive “successes” and draw the patient’s conscious attention to the fact that he is playing a role in his drama: “We look upon successes that set in too soon as obstacles rather than as a help to the work of analysis; and we put an end to such successes by constantly resolving the transference on which they are based. It is this last characteristic which is the fundamental distinction between analytic and purely suggestive therapy, and which frees the results of analysis from the suspicion of being successes due to suggestion. In every other kind of suggestive treatment the transference is carefully preserved and left untouched; in analysis it is itself subjected to treatment and is dissected in all the shapes in which it appears. At the end of an analytic treatment the transference must itself be cleared away; and if success is then obtained or continues, it rests, not on suggestion, but on the achievement by its means of an overcoming of internal resistances, on the internal change that has been brought about in the patient” (p. 453). Thus the analyst must rise “above” the transference relationship to the extent of bringing it to the patient’s attention and subjecting it to criticism.

ality leads her to believe she has always had. For instance, only the conclusion of the tale (which, ironically, Alice ultimately disrupts) could cast retrospective light on the meaning of its elements.¹⁴ Thus the Dormouse casts his frustration with Alice's interruptions in the form of a sulky remark which, for all that, forecasts Alice's role as the writer of her *own* story in Wonderland: "If you can't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself" (p. 101). What Carroll presents in *Alice* is a world in which those who cannot be "civil" have no choice but to "finish" the story for themselves, but "finishing" here means "enacting" it, "playing it out," rather than "telling" it from a safe preserve beyond the point of closure.¹⁵ Like the three sisters in the Dormouse's tale, Alice lives at the bottom of the well out of which she is trying to draw treacle.

¹⁴Note the privilege Hegel accords himself in *The Phenomenology of Mind*: he is the "Wise Man" because he writes at the "end" of history, comprehending the deeds of the world-historical figure Napoleon. This is the privilege of the interpreter of a narrative: beyond the point of closure, one can cast previous events into meaningful order—as events "leading up to" the end—in Hegel's case, the moment of writing the *Phenomenology*. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), pp. 34–35. See the somewhat analogous argument in Peter Brooks' "Repetition, Repression, and Return: *Great Expectations* and the Study of Plot," *New Literary History*, 11 (1980), 503–26. Examining Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an implicit narratological treatise, Brooks argues that the individual death (or the promise of the individual end) has increasingly assumed a privileged position as point of narrative closure: "Freud's essay may offer a model suggestive of how narrative both seeks and delays its end. In particular, his concept of repetition seems fully pertinent, since repetition of all sorts is the very stuff of literary meanings, the basis of our creative perception of relation and interconnection, the means by which we compare and combine in significant patterns and sequences, and thus overcome the meaninglessness of pure contiguity. In the narrative text, repetition constitutes a *return*, a calling-back, or a turning-back, which enables us to perceive similarity in difference, consequence in contiguity, metaphor in metonymy" (p. 512). This perspective also allows one, obviously, to sort out linguistic levels, to "master" the game by distinguishing the figurative from the literal, metaphorical "execution" from "real" execution. The various execution threats which pepper *Alice* appear to be threats to impose this kind of closure, although, significantly, the executions are all deferred.

¹⁵Note Derrida's identification of Hegel's need to master play only by excluding it (Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in his *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 260).



In a sense, one can see Alice's "problem" as a problem of living with the consequences that stem from her living in a "decentered" world: she must reestablish "precedence" in all its senses *for* herself—temporal, spatial, political, and interpretive—so that her own position as, impossibly, both master in the master/slave drama and Hegelian "Wise Man," who lives beyond a point of closure outside of the "game," is preserved. She must reestablish herself, in effect, in the center (which is also the end).¹⁶ Thus, throughout her adventures, Alice seeks to establish temporal precedence (see, for instance, the trial at the end where she insists on the "proper" order of "evidence to judgment to sentencing"), spatial precedence (e.g., at the tea table and elsewhere), political precedence (does the Queen actually have the power to execute her?), in order, ultimately, to impose her own "interpretive" precedence—the power of the interpreter to dominate her material, the ability to "manage" and "make sense out of" unruly matter by extracting herself from that which she would interpret, ultimately an assertion of the "primacy" of the interpreter over the mere material, the right of Alice the child-imperialist to impose a meaning on the behavior of the illogical "creatures."

Ultimately, all of these forms of precedence are based on the Hegelian epistemological model, which privileges the geometric or "spatial" metaphor of "comprehension." To "comprehend" is to metaphorically enclose within a field some matter that is thereby made available to be "known," or mastered.¹⁷ Alice stands

¹⁶In this context it is interesting to note an important necessity governing the Hegelian "Wise Man": he must be an atheist. On the other hand, as Kojève argues, Plato is bound to accept God because to deny the possibility of the "Wise Man" is to transform philosophy into theology (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 91).

¹⁷Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), has usefully pointed to the important implications of this kind of knowledge of the exotic as a kind of "framing" or "corralling": to enclose it, to delimit its boundaries, is to "domesticate" it to an extent, to make it available *for* the person doing the framing. Said writes: "Like Walter Scott's Saracens, the European representation of the Muslim, Ottoman, or Arab was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient, and to a certain extent the same is true of the methods of contemporary learned

“outside” of that which she would master only in the limited sense that she does not share the social codes of the “creatures.” However, that position—the privilege of the alien—affords her no advantage here; in fact, it is her prime disadvantage. To play the game without knowing the rules is to be played *by* the game: to be *inside* the game while pretending to “comprehend” it from the *outside*. However, to be inside the game on these terms is to be at the distinct disadvantage that he who plays without knowing the rules experiences.¹⁸

Orientalists, whose subject is not so much the East itself as the East made known, and therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public” (p. 60).

¹⁸The play/work dichotomy that informs Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* is recapitulated by Kathleen Blake in her discussion of Lewis Carroll (play must be “spontaneous, disinterested, nonutilitarian”; p. 18) as well as by a number of other Carroll critics. The distinction, which might seem to carry all the weighty authority of “intuition,” is actually a quite recently contrived opposition that corresponds to the materialist/idealist metaphysics underpinning the early industrial phase of Western civilization (Jacques Ehrmann, “*Homo Ludens* Revisited,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 41 [1968], p. 46). In deconstructing Huizinga’s use of this opposition in *Homo Ludens*, Ehrmann makes the important observation that the application of this distinction to other cultures constitutes an ethnocentrism of the worst sort: “If play as the capacity for symbolization and ritualization is consubstantial with culture, it cannot fail to be present wherever there is culture. We realize then that play cannot be defined as a luxury. Whether their stomachs are full or empty, men play because they are men. To say that play ‘implies leisure’ is to set forth the problem while placing oneself in an ethnocentric perspective that falsifies the basic data to be analyzed: it is to oppose the notion of work to that of leisure (an opposition which carries with it all the others we have already noted: utility-gratuitousness, seriousness-play, etc.). Such an opposition may be valid in our society (and even there, less and less), but it certainly cannot be generalized to include cultures other than our own” (p. 46). Thus Blake’s otherwise fine analysis of the *Alice* books in *Play, Games, and Sport* is flawed by her assumption that it is possible to distinguish Alice’s being “in the game” from being “outside the game” and her “playing” the game from “being played by” the game (pp. 69–70), as well as to distinguish those moments when she masters her experience by incorporating it from those when she is mastered or incorporated by it (pp. 18–19). *Alice*, however, offers no such guideposts for its readers. As we have already shown, not only does *Alice* subvert facily ethnocentric distinctions between “game” and “life,” but, moreover, any attempt to exclude ritual from the discussion of play and games in this text requires one to buy into a number of questionable assumptions that Alice herself makes. Thus Blake is placed in the ethnocentric position Ehrmann identifies: attempting to read *Alice* by the categories inherited from the very recent history of the West, categories which the book itself masterfully calls into question.

"The Queen's Croquet-Ground" chapter, then, is dominated by Alice's attempt to gauge the power of the "savage" Queen, a task at which she is unsuccessful because of the ethnocentric cast of her outlook: her knowledge is perfectly circular in the sense that it consists solely in what she already knew before coming to Wonderland, basically, the rules of the English game of "croquet" and the official power of the King and Queen over life and death. When she visits the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, though, she becomes involved in a wholesale questioning of the value of "explanations" ("translations" might be a better word) over "repetitions" that casts new light on the tautologies of the caterpillar (or rather, *would* cast new light on it for Alice if she were capable of processing it).

The Queen had earlier warned Alice (in an oblique way, of course, guaranteed to go right over her head) that the "Mock Turtle" is but a creature whose purpose it is to become a meal. "It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from" (p. 124). Not surprisingly, when Alice meets the Mock Turtle and Gryphon, she finds them addicted to the same kinds of teleological explanation which she favors (albeit of an unfamiliar sort). In addition, the Mock Turtle seems dissatisfied, as was Alice, with mere tale-telling; he purports to want "explanation" cast in a metalanguage ("Explain all that"; p. 138).

Thus, it is not surprising that the beings about which they discourse all seem to be creatures whose "animal" existence is but a prelude to their ultimate end as meals: they can be "understood" as "essentially" meals.¹⁹ In fact, Alice even describes (unwittingly, of course) the whiting as configured in a way (tails in mouths; cf. "tales" in mouths) that represents emblematically the circularity of all her attempts to find an explanatory metalanguage. As the Mock Turtle so aptly puts it: "No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise" (p. 137). The mere fact that "eating" or "being eaten" is the *telos* of most of the creatures discussed suggests that events in Wonderland have assumed a distinctively oral "Alicean"

¹⁹The oysters seduced by the Walrus in *Through the Looking-Glass* are the best Carrollian examples of creatures *with whom* one discourses serving ultimately as meals.

cast, a hermeneutic circle from which Alice will never break free.²⁰ Carroll's "obsession" with "orality" or oral forms of incorporation here is his way of working out the visible consequences of the kind of "imperialistic" "recentering" in which Alice engages: to define animals teleologically as meat for the table is but a thin disguise for a process which "recenters" Alice at the "end" of the chain of nourishment; for in Alice's universe, "meals" ultimately exist for the *purpose* of being eaten by human beings like herself.²¹

One of the other senses of "repetition" here must be understood in opposition to "explanation"—reinscription in a different language. However, Alice's confessed inability to "repeat" (everything comes out "wrong," i.e., different) is a sign of her inability to close her own Hegelian circle and achieve "self-consciousness." What she asks of herself is "repetition"; what she demands of the "creatures" is "explanation." In both quests she is frustrated. In the Mock Turtle, she meets a "creature" who throws her own demands back upon her: he "repeats" her own imperial high-handedness. He is dissatisfied with her recitation of "Tis the voice of the Lobster" (p. 139) because he is finally only interested in "explanation" (as Alice was dissatisfied with the caterpillar's manner of escaping her attempt to capture his meaning), but in reproaching Alice for not casting her account in a language outside of the language of the "original," he insinuates that he takes a slightly different sense of "repetition": "'What *is* the use of repeating all that stuff,' the Mock Turtle interrupted, 'if you don't explain it as you go on?'" (p. 140). Thus he apparently ignores the fact that Alice, as she just "explained," cannot "repeat," and he does this in order to distinguish his sense of "explanation" from mere "repetition"—tale-telling or poetic recitation, regardless of whether or not the teller has ever "told" the tale before.

Thus this ambiguity inherent in the term "repeat" (it means both "recite" and "repeat," but is any poetic recitation ever truly a "repetition" of a previous recitation?) becomes a play on words.

²⁰Nina Auerbach, "Alice and Wonderland: A Curious Child," *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1973), 36, has observed this about the book. She argues that Dinah the cat functions as the "personification of Alice's own subtly cannibalistic hunger."

²¹One might speculate on a possible ethical motive for Carroll's famous anti-visitationism: an attempt to preserve the "otherness" of the other, to keep it safe from appropriation for purely human purposes.

The interplay between Alice and the Mock Turtle returns their discourse once again to the linguistic surface, and Alice misses another opportunity to read her difference from the “creatures” out of the differing ways in which each uses words. Ironically, then, the Mock Turtle “appears” different from Alice (and thus, difficult to understand) for the paradoxical reason that he “appears” to be her repetition, the annoyingly obtuse visitor constantly in search of “explanation.” In effect, the circularity of her journey in Wonderland, a circularity guaranteed by the failure of her powers of inference, places Alice in a position guaranteed to feed her already prodigious megalomania. The Mock Turtle is thus aptly named for his propensity to “mock” the alien intruder by parodying her. More generally, Alice is incapable of drawing the line between the mockery directed at her and behavioral customs that have their origin in Wonderland but which we need not necessarily see as directed at her.

What I have implicitly been arguing is that the imperial attempt to “know” is not stymied by its inevitable failure; on the contrary, the “failure” to know is itself converted into a “successful” act of imperial appropriation through the imposition of a discourse that, in circular fashion, finally “produces” the sought-for objects of knowledge. However, it is necessarily important to distinguish this form of recuperation from, say, a discovery of the ultimate commensurability of seemingly incommensurable discourses, the kind of untenable claim to universal truth which “epistemology” makes, according to Rorty. Thus, Alice’s “failure” to “comprehend,” say, the game of Wonderland “croquet” is appropriated as a “success” of an imperial sort (albeit of the solipsistic variety) when she “naturalizes” it as an English game that the “creatures” merely play badly out of an “understandable” fear of the Queen and out of an “incomprehensible” use of inappropriate instruments (flamingos and hedgehogs rather than wooden mallets and balls, as any good Englishman would use). As we have already seen, other ways of accounting for the same appearances are possible. The trial of the Knave of Hearts, then, extends this process even further. Because, in Alice’s view, the “creatures” really “botch” the whole business of justice, they must be set straight by her teaching them the rules for conducting “proper” trials. Nevertheless, in the process of appropriating the Wonder-

land notion of “trial” to her own, Alice violently reinscribes the activity she observes into her own conventional canon of precedence, and, in consequence, makes herself the center rather than the periphery of the action: another solipsistic recentering, which ultimately appoints this rather limited little girl as judge, jury, and executioner of all the “creatures.”

That Alice’s Wonderland adventure comes to a close with a “trial” is only fitting, given the fact that the social ritual of the trial holds an obviously preeminent place in the English system of determining truth. The English “trial” is, above all, a linearly structured event that produces truth retrospectively by closure: when the accusation has been read, the evidence presented and then weighed by the jury, and the sentence pronounced by the judge, the trial is over and the truth is known.²² The evidence is presented so that the jury (or judge) can place it in a retrospective order, enclose it in a field, and make it suitable for judgment. Because the truth cannot be known until all the evidence is in and weighed, the truth cannot be given an accessible form until after the point of closure. Ultimately, this is but to say the obvious: that judgment and guilt (as well as retrospection itself) are necessarily tied to a linear model of the unfolding of events.

Not surprisingly, when the King follows the reading of the accusation with what to Alice is a seemingly peremptory charge, “Consider your verdict” (p. 146), she must assume the position of judge of the judge in order to impose her own notion of “proper” temporal precedence: first accusation, then presentation of evidence, and, finally, judgment. This role of Alice’s is reemphasized later when, in the process of giving her testimony, she lectures the King on the necessity of attaching the “proper” label to the “oldest rule in the book,” “It ought to be Number One” (p. 156),

²²See Dr. Johnson’s antiplatonic definition of juristic truth: “Sir, you [Boswell the barrister] do not know it [the legal case he is arguing] to be good or bad till the Judge determines it. I have said that you are to state facts fairly; so that your thinking, or what you call knowing, a cause to be bad, must be from reasoning, must be from your supposing your arguments to be weak and inconclusive. But, Sir, that is not enough. An argument which does not convince yourself, may convince the Judge to whom you urge it; and if it does convince him, why, then, Sir, you are wrong, and he is right” (James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980], p. 388).

which is another glaring instance of her own presumptuous elevation of the merely conventional to the status of universal.

Once again, however, Alice's aggressive attempt to reshape the Knave's "trial" in a way acceptable to her guarantees that she will be unable to understand what is going on while insuring that her only possible response can be an aggressive one: in this episode a reduction of the "creatures" to a "mere" pack of two-dimensional cards that, nevertheless, somehow unaccountably have played her. Certainly, Alice is oblivious to the cultural significance of the event once again: what kind of "trial" is it in which the guilty party is foreordained by a nursery rhyme cited at the beginning and in which the allegedly "stolen" tarts are entered in evidence because of the impossible fact that they haven't been eaten? Like the Queen's "croquet-match," this event bears the signs of a predestined ritual rather than of an open-ended "contest" that can be decided only as it draws to a close.

Not surprisingly, it is the Hatter who is called as the first "witness." When he enters the courtroom carrying his everpresent teacup still filled with some "unfinished" tea, we are reminded of the endless (and beginningless) tea party which is simultaneously a hint of the difference between Wonderland and nineteenth-century England as well as a sign of the hermeneutic circle in which Alice is caught. In giving his "evidence," the Hatter is asked to perform what seem to be the usual acts of retrospection that Alice would "naturally" expect of a witness. *His* testimony, however, is a brilliant defeat of the very notion of "testimony," and, *a fortiori*, retrospection: not only does he never succeed in re-presenting what the March Hare and Dormouse "said" (pp. 148–49), but he punctuates his account by returning again and again to the banal events of his everyday life (drinking tea, buttering bread), events which are notable only for their unhistoricity, singular only in the unsingular way they repeat themselves endlessly, marking the cyclical repetitiveness of his static, undifferentiated, tea-party life (assuming, perhaps unfairly, that the Hatter's account is governed by an imperative to render his "life," rather than by some other alien discursive imperative that has nothing to do with such a task). The Hatter ironically demonstrates the link between history and retrospection by subverting the latter: asked to "remember," he can only dredge up a litany of the same.

The various threats of execution that pepper the book thus “appear” to be futile attempts to impose a closure on the otherwise cyclical events, a closure that would generate meaning by enabling a retrospective sorting: precisely the kind of “closure” Alice so avidly seeks. Thus when the King threatens execution for the Hatter’s poor powers of retrospection—“You must remember . . . or I’ll have you executed” (p. 149)—he suggests, in inverted form, that execution, the closure of death, is precisely what would enable the retrospective imposition of meaning: precipitating the Hatter out of his cyclical life of endless repetition, of endless substitution of teacup for teacup. As we have already seen, however, none of the Wonderland execution threats carries performative force. Thus it is left to Alice to perform a final “execution” of all the “creatures” by reducing them to “only” a pack of cards, a violent closure which, ironically, merely shuffles them rather than sorts them out and assigns them a meaning. The ending precipitates Alice out of the “creatures” universe while denying her the power to “frame” her experience in a meaningful way (although she does “recuperate” it as the pure dross of a “dream”), a “framing” power which is ostensibly the boon granted to one who steps “outside.” The price she pays for stepping out of the “card game” in which she was somehow played is the inability to “make sense” of the game.

The final chapter, then, merely leaves Alice enclosed within her own ethnocentric system while suggesting that the Wonderland ritual of the trial follows rules quite different from any that Alice has ever heard. The debate over the origin of the verses that are entered as evidence (are they the Knave’s? they neither bear his signature nor are inscribed in his handwriting) underlines the impossible hermeneutic task faced by any representative of Western civilization who wishes to actually “understand” what is going on here. For one thing, the question of precedence is introduced immediately by the Rabbit’s question, “Where shall I begin . . . ?” The King’s banal response—“Begin at the beginning . . . and go on till you come to the end: then stop” (p. 158)—immediately calls attention to the purely conventional status of a manner of reading that would seem necessarily “natural” and “universal.” For Alice to make such a statement would be taxing the limits of our readerly patience by having her render a truism; for

the King to say it, though, is to suggest both that he has assumed the Mock Turtle's role as a parodic "repetition" of Alice the "privileged" interpreter and that, perhaps, such a statement is actually necessary because it is *not* self-evident to the "creatures" attending at the ritual (or, possibly, that the ritual nature of the event renders all statements made within it purely incantatory). Given what we know of the "circular" appearance of events in Wonderland, the King's words might well be taken as a novel prescription for properly unfolding "evidence" (or the King's lunacy might well be ignored by the others as a *pro forma* gesture of respect for his symbolic role).

The verses themselves are interesting because of the way in which they seem to defeat all attempts to attribute meaning to them. Their deictic indeterminacy undermines attempts to recuperate their meaning by *referring* the pronouns to actual beings while simultaneously tempting the reader to construct an interpretation of them that would account for the fact that they seem to be about circulation and appropriation, important themes in this chapter and elsewhere. The seemingly arbitrary way in which ownership of the verses is assigned to the Knave despite the lack of proper "Alicean" evidence is echoed in the words, "They all returned from him to you, / Though they were mine before" (p. 158). Insofar as the verses have any meaning, they seem to have something to do with circulation and ownership, which are privileged themes here because, from Alice's point of view, the Knave can only be condemned on the evidence of the verses if his ownership of them can be proven. Nevertheless, the possibility of assigning the reference of one pronoun to the Knave is doubtful, given the fact that the verses themselves float in a deictic free space.

When the King then proceeds to gloss the verses, he does so not because it matters to the prosecution of the case ("If there's no meaning in it . . . that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any"; p. 159) but because such an effort is its own reward—for obscure reasons. In this, he recapitulates Alice's own hermeneutic effort with similar results: the verses are pressed into service of the King's intention of condemning the Knave by being shown to imply that the return of the tarts to the Queen is evidence of the Knave's guilt (p. 160). Once again, the

cyclical nature of Alice's hermeneutic adventure is recapitulated in the "creatures' " own tautological enterprises.

The return to the frame at the end of the book provides a rather ambiguous closure. Alice's sister substitutes herself for Alice and recapitulates the Wonderland adventures in her own dream, although with an important difference: in Coleridgean fashion, she only "half believed herself in Wonderland," aware that she would eventually awaken to a "dull reality" (p. 163). But this awakening promises a metamorphosis that is a teleological devolution: the "rattling tea-cups" degenerated into "tinkling sheep-bells," the "Queen's shrill cries" declined into merely the "voice of the shepherd boy," the odd Wonderland noises settled into the form of the dull because overly familiar farmyard "clamour" (p. 163). It is hard to miss here both the note of Romantic nostalgia for a lost experience of youth as well as the anti-Romantic repudiation of the sublimity of the pastoral: the sister awakening from the vivid complexity of Alice's dream into the dull "reality" of Wordsworth's rural visions.

Ultimately, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* traces the defeat of the diachronic form of comprehension that Hegel's philosophy envisions, and it does so in a way that constitutes one of the century's greatest comic critiques of its ethnocentric premises. Because Alice fails successfully to frame the events of her adventure, she must flee what has become a nightmare, although that "nightmare" is already being recuperated (by her sister at the end) as a wonderful dream more vivid than the dull life (which is really nothing but boring pastoral narrative anyway) "outside" that dream. One could observe that Alice's inability to capture in her words to her sister the nightmarish quality of her Wonderland adventures encourages that sister to recuperate the narrative of the dream in a way that clearly falsifies it by sugarcoating it, by, in effect, practicing a bit of Alice's own high-handed imperial reconstruction on us readers—another insidious kind of repetition that by now can be seen for what it is. In this sense Carroll may be absolved of the crime for which he has often been condemned: the so-called "crime" of attempting to insulate his readers from the far-reaching lessons of Alice's Wonderland dream by constructing a frame narrative that deliberately trivializes it. If anything, by suggesting that the frame is reconstructing the Won-

derland dream under the guise of recapitulating it, Carroll drives home the “lesson” that there is a bit of the imperial Alice in all of us who engage in the twin activities of both “comprehending” and “repeating.”

Brown University