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# Mental Recreation in Wonderland



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The author argues that children's books are not, as commonly held, either didactic or entertaining and that successful juvenile literature teaches what Lewis Carroll, who wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, termed "mental recreation." Pendlebury contends that learning and play, far from being opposites, can closely resemble one another and sometimes even seem indistinguishable. Using Carroll's works as an example of the delight possible in conceptual play, she explores how his *Alice* stories teach readers to engage in mental recreation by using defamiliarizing reversals and inversions, offering riddle-like conversations, demonstrating how to play with words and ideas, and eliciting the basic pleasures of music through language. **Key words:** children's literature; mental recreation; play with ideas; play with words

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**I**N UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS, scholars often tell their students that children's books fall on one or the other side of an instruction-entertainment divide or, more subtly, that the genre exhibits a tension between the two faculties. Few scholars, however, actually believe it. Perry Nodelman, perhaps the most notable commentator on the relationship between pleasure and pedagogy in juvenile literature, writes that the most successful works "are trying to be optimistic and didactic at once," which seems "inherently self-contradictory" and "leads to ambivalence, subtlety—resonance." Inferior children's books, meanwhile, are "either more purely didactic or more purely optimistic," dispositions that "represent two opposite ways in which adults like to address children, based . . . on different ways of thinking about how children differ from adults."<sup>1</sup> I challenge the notion that optimism and didacticism are opposites, that they are a dichotomy. Using Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories as exemplary texts, I invite readers to engage in cerebral play and, by doing so, to learn about both thinking and pleasure.

I begin by describing a paradigm in which pleasure is cognate with improvement before I briefly discuss Carroll's "mental recreations"—a set of games and word problems he created towards the end of his life with the express goal of nourishing cerebral pleasure. The *Alice* books are probably more effective catalysts of play than these recreations because they invite their readers to experience entertainment and instruction as not only compatible, but intimates, and even indistinguishable from one another. The games and problems, however, have an unavoidable pedagogical goal even though they are designed to be enjoyed. My argument covers some familiar ground: much of the writing on literary nonsense, which treats Carroll as canonic, focuses on the genre's concern with logic and play with meaning;<sup>2</sup> and numerous linguists, philosophers, and literary theorists have explored Carroll's instructive and entertaining manipulation of language and concepts.<sup>3</sup> So, too, Jan Susina has noted the importance of play and games not only in the *Alice* books but in the corpus of Carroll's academic and amusing literature.<sup>4</sup> And Kathleen Blake has remarked that although "the *Alices* are famous for being playful and moral-less . . . without explicit ulterior motive or benefit . . . they do bear a relation to reality and say something about life."<sup>5</sup> I argue that Carroll aims to teach his readers not so much propositional knowledge "about life," but rather a specific type of procedural knowledge: "how to" engage in mental recreation. Hence, I will describe four mechanisms that Carroll uses to teach his readers to play with their minds: he distorts familiar material to defamiliarize the reader; presents conversations that have a riddle-like character to invite continued puzzlement; models cerebral play for the reader to emulate; and draws attention to the musical properties of language. In glossing the instructive-entertaining devices that Carroll uses in *Alice*, I argue for the unsurprising conclusion that pleasures can be taught and that learning can induce pleasure. Lewis Carroll is often seen as the father of entertaining children's literature, but his longstanding desire to instruct and improve is also well known. This essay, then, also seeks to explain how "two seemingly disparate facets of Carroll's personality,"<sup>6</sup> his logician's earnestness and his poet's playfulness— might have, in fact, not only coexisted with but enhanced one another.

### **Feeding the Mind**

In response to Nodelman's dichotomy, Roderick McGillis suggests that we would do better to distinguish not between didacticism and optimism but between two

kinds of pleasure—“elemental pleasure” (an “immediate sensation”)<sup>7</sup> and “alert pleasure” (a result of “cerebral exercise,” of “attention and learning”).<sup>8</sup> As they appear in *Alice*, some of these sorts of pleasures require previous knowledge (for instance, some of the repartee benefits from a sensitivity to language or familiarity with the distorted material). Others help induce learning (those remarks, for instance, that stimulate thinking about or intimacy with language). In fact, it is probably difficult and unnecessary to distinguish requiring previous knowing from inducing learning, since what a reader has half-gleaned before the experience with the book he or she may be three-quarters able to articulate thereafter. At any rate, the notion most central to my argument remains that books can *teach pleasure* (and, by turns, that pleasure can induce understanding) and that the pleasures taught are valuable both in themselves (i.e., for the pleasure they bring) and for the insights they offer.

Although I resist any conclusions about what children (or any readers) take from the books they read, I find it difficult to challenge the belief that most of us choose to read primarily for enjoyment (and that those who read because the master is looming over them with a real or metaphorical teaching rod are probably not reading at all—or at least extracting as little improvement as enjoyment from the activity). Our pleasures include those of absorption or “elemental” delights; those pleasures resulting from knowledge obtained and material understood (or intriguingly misunderstood); and those pleasures that come with self-improvement or cerebral diversion.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith examines discourses on human and animal play for what they reveal about the different disciplines from which they originate. Whereas scientists invested in the virtues of play have been inclined to treat the activity as adaptive—as preparing the young of the species for adulthood by modeling grown-up activities in their games—Sutton-Smith notes a growing tendency not to see play as conferring any advantage for the growing creature, but rather as ludic, as fun. More significantly for my argument, he notes (citing Heinz Werner) that “the behavior of the young is often undifferentiated, labile, rigid, and syncretic” while “our adult categories and definitions . . . imply much more differentiation, stability, flexibility, and discreteness in our observations” and “can easily be misleading about such inchoate forms.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is impossible to tell which children’s or young animals’ activities are adaptive (i.e., constitute learning) and which are capricious and superfluous, (i.e., count as fun). I propose that some juvenile texts (indeed, most of the successful ones) are similarly undifferentiated in their purposes.

That adaptation and entertainment are not “inherently contradictory” at all—not opposites, but intimates—is suggested by the title of Carroll’s 1884 lecture, “Feeding the Mind.”<sup>10</sup> Blake describes the project of “Feeding the Mind” as “to articulate an analogy between feeding the body with food and the mind with ideas.”<sup>11</sup> More importantly, she writes, “Carroll advocates eating,” because what is “good about eating is that something chewed, swallowed, digested is *yours*. Assimilation equals gratification, . . .” and “Carroll’s lecture is not really concerned with usefulness in the ordinary sense. It is concerned with pleasure. When you feed the mind as you might the body, for the fun of feeding, you are moving toward play.”<sup>12</sup> The sense of Carroll’s title, then, is that just as eating nourishes in the long-term and pleases at the moment of incorporation, cerebral activity both nourishes and delights. Carroll’s later fiction, perhaps, suffers from a concern with nourishment abstracted from delight. Richard Kelly argues that in *Sylvie and Bruno* and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* Carroll intersperses the sort of nonsense that characterizes the *Alice* books—the content that, I argue, aims to teach cerebral play—with conventional didacticism. In so doing, he “falls prey to outrageous sentimentality and tedious moralizing”<sup>13</sup> and reduces the impact of the recreational parts.

Yet, the many games and puzzles Carroll invented make his interest in cerebral pleasures clear, as do a number of publications produced around the same time as the *Sylvie and Bruno* books. His *A Tangled Tale* appeared first as a series of mathematical word problems published in *The Monthly Packet* “for the amusement, and possible edification, of the fair readers of that magazine”<sup>14</sup> and, in 1992, Edward Wakeling compiled several unpublished puzzles built on scenes from the *Alice* books.<sup>15</sup> *The Game of Logic* and *Symbolic Logic*, although logic primers, may seem surprising sources of pleasure. In his preface to *Symbolic Logic*, Carroll writes that the book constitutes an effort “to *popularise* [the] fascinating subject [of logic]” such that it may “be of *real* service to the young, and to be taken up . . . as a valuable addition to their stock of healthful mental recreations.”<sup>16</sup> In these works, the character of Carroll’s writing deserves to be considered as well as his goals, for the absurd quality of Carroll’s examples clearly reveals the delight that went into their construction, and a sensitive reader should take them as a nod in the direction of play. Consider one example:

- (1) Puppies, that will not lie still, are always grateful for the loan of a skipping rope;
- (2) A lame puppy would not say “thank you” if you offered to lend it a skipping rope.

- (3) None but lame puppies ever care to do worsted work. (Solution: “Puppies, that will not lie still, never care to do worsted work”).<sup>17</sup>

Carroll’s logic problems produce their humor by creating valid deductive arguments from infelicitous or false premises, since the terms of the argument are irrelevant to its form and form constitutes the concern of logic. There are similarities, here, to his nonsense poetry and prose fiction. In the former case, the poems contained in the *Alice* books are always syntactically—formally—correct (and in the case of the parodies, follow a preexisting structure), but the argument, or content, tends not to be understandable, felicitous, or true. Elements of Carroll’s prose may provide even more interesting examples of formally valid statements with absurd content because *Alice* often spotlights normal conversational idioms to show up their nonsensicality. In his syllogisms, Carroll enjoys hinting at impossibility or idiocy—puppies skip, speak, and do worsted work; ducks waltz; coronet-wearing Members of Parliament consider donkey races.

In Carroll’s logic books, play occurs en route to an explicitly pedagogical goal. He sees recreation and improvement—or “use”—as equally important goals. Significantly, though, when Carroll refers to “use” in *Symbolic Logic*, he does not mean simply “the ability to do logic” (or, of course, the “moral improvement” that is the goal of *Sylvie and Bruno*), but rather “clearness of thought . . . and, more valuable than all, the power to detect *fallacies*.”<sup>18</sup> The goals of clear thinking and cerebral play intertwine because the latter becomes a natural by-product of the former, while the capacity to use one’s mind effectually furnishes the faculty for mental recreation. Carroll’s interest in recreation can also be seen in his earlier *The Game of Logic*, which both contains and celebrates logical play

This game requires nine counters, . . . [and] it also requires one player, *at least*. I am not aware of any game that can be played with less than this number: while there are several that require *more*: take cricket, for instance, which requires twenty-two. How much easier it is, when you want to play a game, to find *one* Player than twenty-two. At the same time, though one Player is enough, a good deal more amusement may be got by two working at it together, and correcting each other’s mistakes.

A second advantage, possessed by this Game, is that, besides being an endless source of amusement . . . it will give the Players a little

instruction as well. But is there any great harm in *that*, so long as you get plenty of amusement?<sup>19</sup>

It might be argued that amusement here constitutes little more than an underhanded way of smuggling instruction into the game. But, contrariwise, instruction might just as well serve as cover for play, and the sportive tone of Carroll's preface suggests, again, that we blunder to try and separate amusement from instruction.

There are several other examples of later works in which Carroll explicitly combined pleasure and learning—and cultivated both pleasures of learning and the learning of pleasure. These have been discussed exhaustively by Blake and in Martin Gardner's *The Universe in a Handkerchief* (1996),<sup>20</sup> but the question remains what these have to do with the earlier *Alice* books or, more pointedly, how “cerebral pleasures” are manifested in Carroll's fiction. And here I propose that we see the later interest in mental recreation as a development of a concern that occurs more intuitively and less systematically in the *Alice* books. My position resembles the one Robert Sutherland expresses about Lewis Carroll's linguistic interests as a whole—that we can see them clearly from the works of his juvenilia to those of his decrepitude, but never arranged into formal systems of principles like those of the twentieth-century language philosophers who drew upon Carroll. Although Sutherland does not make it the main project of his monograph, he repeatedly comments on the status of Carroll's linguistic insights with respect to learning and play, and his final word is that “if there is any educational aim in Carroll's treatment of language, it is subordinated to his desire to amuse and entertain.”<sup>21</sup>

I hold broadly by Sutherland's view, but propose that there is more to be said on the matter. First, I find it enlightening that the “desire to amuse and entertain” is so fertile a source of understanding. This need not surprise us, and philosophers of language are well acquainted with the use of humor and play to expose truths and problems (and, simultaneously, to delight). Perhaps this is a phenomenon best treated by psychologists or scholars of humor, but aestheticians, teachers, and literary scholars do well to bear it in mind. Secondly, as I have contended above, texts such as *Alice* aspire to teach pleasure in language and concepts, such as the capacity to take delight in thought experiments, verbal infelicities, and the aesthetic features of words and sentences.

There are differences between the cerebral play of *Alice* (and Carroll's other fictional works) and the later works of mental recreation. *The Game of Logic*

has been considered “an attempt ‘to disguise a didactic dose with helpings of jam’”<sup>22</sup>—a dud resulting from the fact that Carroll failed to see that “symbolic logic is not for children.”<sup>23</sup> Although Kirk does children an injustice by denying them material that he supposes is boring, difficult, or arcane (or, extremely useful for identifying “fallacies, . . . which [they] will so continually encounter in books, in newspapers, in speeches, and even in sermons”),<sup>24</sup> *The Game of Logic* and its sister texts are indeed didactic (and, at the time that they were produced, Carroll taught logic classes at girls’ schools). But at the same time, Carroll found the practice—or play—of logic advanced by these texts pleasurable in itself. The jam, in other words, is no disguise, but the dish itself, even if some find it sour. The game belongs to the same family as brainteasers, crossword puzzles, Scrabble, and chess, all games enjoyed by some adults and by children not for any edifying effects, but for their own sake.

In *Alice*, meanwhile, play with logic and language is less formalized and goal directed and more intuitive, ambiguous, and playful. I suspect that the books do a better job of engaging a whimsical reader than do the syllogisms, although I think it unclear just what is being engaged. The works of mental recreation do plenty to explain the logical and linguistic humor of *Alice*, but to most of us they are probably less gratifying reads than the novels.

I will now explore some of the cerebral pleasures of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and attempt to explain how the texts strive to awaken these pleasures.

### Large as Life and Twice as Natural

I begin with an episode from *Through the Looking-Glass* in which Alice, delighted to discover the existence of the Unicorn, learns that, from his perspective, she is a “fabulous monster.”<sup>25</sup> This episode constitutes perhaps the most direct invitation to child readers to participate in the upheavals of reality that organize Carrollian concept play. The joke here, like many others in *Through the Looking-Glass*, hinges on the reversal of circumstances in fantasy land from those in Alice’s usual reality. In real life, children are ordinary and unicorns fabulous; in Looking-Glass Land, the situation is inverted. Haigha presents Alice to the Unicorn as a curiosity: “‘This is a child!’ ” he says, “‘We only found it to-day. It’s large as life, and twice as natural!’ ”<sup>26</sup> The Unicorn responds to Alice just as Alice is inclined to respond to the Unicorn—by exclaiming that children are an

imaginary category, by wondering whether Alice is indeed live. This episode might call on a reader who is herself a child (or has been one) to consider her own strangeness and contingency—or at least, to imagine a situation in which being a child is inexplicable. The desired effect of the Unicorn's comment, then, is a sort of distancing and an invitation to lively self-reflection. In the context of the question running through *Looking-Glass* concerning the nature of reality in comparison to dreams, the issue of Alice's unfamiliarity has added metaphysical weight, for the Tweedle brothers have already implied that she has a status similar to that of "fabulous monsters" in their claim that Alice is "only a sort of thing in [the red King's] dream."<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the peculiar description, "large as life and twice as natural," invites an alert reader to contemplate the absurdity of normal idiom. Such a reader might pause to inquire how large life is and whether naturalness can be measured. But Carroll has another joke to make; another pleasure to introduce. This occurs when the Unicorn and Alice make a deal. "If you believe in me," says the Unicorn, "I'll believe in you."<sup>28</sup> This remark should strike us as odd, as faintly absurd, because belief is not the sort of action that can be elicited by a social contract and—since Alice and the Unicorn's belief in one another in no way alters their respective realities—it does not comprise action in the ordinary sense. Earlier, the White Queen boasted to Alice that she could believe "as many as six impossible things before breakfast!" (Alice, sensibly, had already pointed out that "one *can't* believe impossible things.") She also urged Alice to "consider" instead of "cry," since "nobody can do two things at once."<sup>29</sup> Whereas the reversal of the role of child and fabulous monster is relatively straightforward, the peculiar references to belief are more arcane—easy to notice, difficult to explain. This sort of conundrum, then, is one of the primary methods by which the *Alice* books endeavor to teach cerebral play. That is, a conversational exchange occurs (it almost always has the character that later led the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to describe language as a species of game), which seems unusual, absurd, unsatisfactory, or "[not] at all like conversation," and the reader never receives more than a partial explanation of what has transpired.<sup>30</sup> Alice's conversations with the Caterpillar, the guests at the Mad Tea Party, Humpty Dumpty, and the White Knight are examples that philosophers and linguists have discussed at length, but we do not need to be experts to appreciate their playfulness. The philosophical exchanges that appear in *Alice* (some of which—to add a layer of strangeness—include the narrator) are like half-observed riddles, but Carroll's object is not to call upon his readers to find solutions, as he does in his logical

sylogisms (for very often the “riddles” in *Alice* have no solutions). Instead, he invites us to contemplate the problem, to be confused, and sense a hazy connection to the reader’s own world.

In the case of the Unicorn’s deal, an attuned reader may enjoy a joke that hinges on a phenomenon Wittgenstein later described as a communicative error.<sup>31</sup> The Unicorn treats the word *believe* as if it functions like any more sensible verb one might insert into such a sentence (“I’ll rub your back if you rub mine,” for instance). In other words, he “wrongly [treats] a word or phrase as having exactly the same kind of function as another word or phrase, solely on the basis of the fact that they exhibit superficial grammatical similarities.”<sup>32</sup> Although their insights are similar, Carroll’s and Wittgenstein’s purposes were quite different. Carroll’s primarily intends to produce humor through deliberate misuse. Wittgenstein lambasted linguistic carelessness in contemporary philosophical writing and accused his colleagues of assuming that analogous grammar translates to analogous sense.

On several occasions in *Alice*, characters use verbs describing mental acts in contexts that call for descriptions of physical acts, or at least, particular types of mental acts. We would be neither baffled nor amused if the White Queen claimed that she could say six impossible things before breakfast. Not only is belief a mental activity, but it also constitutes a particular sort of thinking, with a special kind of intentionality (it is possible, by contrast, to *imagine* six impossible things before breakfast). One of Carroll’s important concerns in *Alice*, then, is to make light of the peculiar differences between thought and materiality. Indeed, one possible effect of the stories may be to provoke the realization that it is strange indeed that human beings *have* mental lives. The frequent jokes that hinge on a comparison of thinking and doing, combined with Alice’s penchant for pretend play and the unclear status of the fantasy lands with respect to normal reality could (or perhaps, should) evoke contemplation of and play with these issues. Remarks that depend on intuitions about the differences between the mental and the physical are less frequent in *Wonderland* than in *Through the Looking-Glass*, and it may take more perspicacity to detect them in the former. For instance, when Alice asks of the Gryphon what the Mock Turtle sorrows over, the former answers, mocking proletarian dialect, that “‘It’s all his fancy . . . he hasn’t got no sorrow.’”<sup>33</sup> But since sorrow, by definition, *is* a mental phenomenon, the Mock Turtle’s sorrow *is* his “fancy,” so indeed he must *have* it. The double negative in the second clause, then, gives the statement unexpected sense.

One of the most frequent modes by which play is conducted in *Alice* occurs

when familiar language, behavior, or states of affairs are distorted or inverted, as occurs when the Unicorn describes Alice as a “fabulous monster.” Twenty-first-century children have dwindling access to some of the material that are altered in *Alice*, because they are unlikely to recognize some of the references that would have been familiar to the upper-middle-class, Victorian children who comprised Carroll’s first audience. This is especially the case with regard to many of the poems and out-of-use idioms Carroll parodies. It is less often the case when Carroll refers to seemingly immutable tropes such as unicorns and other articles of folklore. And it is never the case where physical, geographical, and logical axioms are at stake.

Although previous criticism has discussed Carroll’s distortions of language and behavior at length, I want to suggest in addition that one of the primary means by which the *Alice* books attempt to engage readers is through transformations in the physical, metaphysical, and geographical realms. In *Wonderland*, Carroll toys repeatedly with the human physics of growth and proportion. Alice not only changes size in response to her environment; her dimensions are also altered. In the first chapters, Carroll repeatedly compares her changes in height to a telescope “opening out”<sup>34</sup> and “shutting up.”<sup>35</sup> This peculiar image in part comprises a sort of eccentric thought experiment, one that should amuse readers in part because of its bizarre mixing of categories that occurs when the text offers an analogy between a human body and an optical device.

Confusions of size and category occur more often in *Wonderland* than in *Looking-Glass*—for instance, in Alice’s interaction with the “dear little puppy,” several times her size,<sup>36</sup> that she encounters after fleeing the White Rabbit’s abode, where she herself filled a room.<sup>37</sup> They also arise in the transformations between and conglomerations of different sorts of creatures—in the baby that becomes a pig; in the fish and frog footmen. But the transformation trope continues in *Looking-Glass*, first in Alice’s inability to distinguish bee from elephant in chapter 3, “Looking-Glass Insects,”<sup>38</sup> and later in both Humpty Dumpty’s bizarre characterization of a “tove” and Alice’s own confusion over the nature of the egg’s garment, which could be either belt or cravat. Whereas the earlier instances of category confusion are primarily amusing, the discussion with Humpty brings out the real philosophical and linguistic issues that underlie the joke. Alice cannot tell belt from cravat because she cannot tell neck from waist. Her understanding of form relies on a definition of standard human form, which Humpty defies.<sup>39</sup> It may become clear, in the context of the Egg’s famous discussion of words and meaning, that these distinctions are (“merely”) consensual. *Looking-Glass* con-

tains many more physical and metaphysical distortions than does *Wonderland* primarily because of the reversal theme. Here, the inversions of time and space are intended to be both entertaining and provocative. A receptive reader should be both delightedly bamboozled at the prospect of time and speed, etc., running backwards and continue to toy with these notions and their implications.

I have described two devices Carroll uses to activate cerebral pleasure in *Alice*—distortions of familiar material and a sort of unsolvable riddle frequently involving a logic joke. Additional examples from *Wonderland* include Alice's conversation with a pigeon who mistakes her for a serpent because both have long necks and eat eggs<sup>40</sup> and her discussion with the Cheshire Cat about which way she ought to go. (The Cat tells Alice that she is sure to "get *somewhere*" if she "only walk[s] long enough").<sup>41</sup> In *Looking-Glass*, the White Queen's baffling comparisons (such as, "I've heard nonsense compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary")<sup>42</sup> comprise another example of an unsolvable riddle.

In *Alice*, logic, or hyper-logic, as Leila May describes it, often exposes the irrationalities of conventional speech and behavior, usually by interpreting literally normative language that we may forget is metaphorical.<sup>43</sup> For instance, in the shop scene in "Wool and Water," Alice wishes "to look around[herself]" before she makes a purchase. The Sheep (or White Queen), however, tells her she "can't look *all* round [herself]" if she hasn't "got eyes at the back of [her] head." The fantasy creatures are also capable of metaphor, and Alice, of literalism: for example, Alice is unfamiliar with the White Queen's use of the rowing term "feather,"<sup>44</sup> which to her bafflement, she attempts to interpret literally. Speech and social norms, too, provide familiar material for other sorts of humorous distortion. In the Queen's (or Sheep's) shop, for example, two eggs are cheaper than one.<sup>45</sup> It is possible to view the many instances of distortion as purely playful, as existing for the perverse pleasure of disfigured ideas. But the disfigurements also come with meanings, usually in the form of exposure. May describes *Wonderland* as "a kind of catalogue of the sorts of things that can go wrong in language."<sup>46</sup>

The several references to school learning in the *Alice* books constitute an important category of familiar material that is distinctively child directed (and in many cases, still accessible to twenty-first-century children schooled on a British or American model). Alice has a habit of regurgitating her school learning and is gently chided for her knowledge of words and ignorance of concepts. But school is also mocked—and formal education exposed—as insignificant, as but a performance of empty words. Maryn Brown hypothesizes that the *Alice* books sympathize with children's "experiences and struggles with tedium, educational

methods, language, mathematics, manners, justice, and their own process of individuation.”<sup>47</sup>

Brown is onto something, but I suspect that children who enjoy and understand the mathematical and linguistic humor of the *Alice* books would have greater access to their insights than those who suffer the most from educational tedium. Some of Carroll’s portrayal of schooling—in particular, the scene in which the Gryphon and Mock Turtle recount their educational experiences using the delightful malapropisms, “Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision”—might be seen as a sort of seduction of a child reader via a shared joke at the expense of what had, at the time *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was first published, recently become a universal childhood activity.<sup>48</sup>

But I think there is more at stake—and more that is both gratifying and educational. Many of the things we can learn from *Alice* are things not taught or practiced in schools, such as play with logic, language, and concepts as well as the raising of questions without the promise of answers. If we take notice of these things, the distortions of the familiar material that occur in the references to school become more than an inside joke between author and reader and an expression of sympathy with children’s plight. They unveil the fact that, like the normative uses of language and “manners” (which, bizarrely, Alice notes, are not “taught”) that can appear constitutive, but are in fact conventional, the usual contents of school learning are sometimes poorly selected and not the most useful ones for understanding the world around us.

There are other means by which the books attempt to teach concept play, which overlap with the “riddles” and distortions described above. One involves modeling verbal or mental activities that a reader can fruitfully emulate, especially in cases where Carroll exposes infelicities in normal language, social interaction, and school learning. Readers enthused by Carroll’s unpacking of conventional activities may continue independently to observe, unveil, and delight in the oddities of the speech and action in their own environments. So too, the distortions, inversions, and nonsense that take place in fantasy can be replicated during verbal play in reality. Perhaps they need not be replicated, but rather simply encouraged, since they already occur in the tall stories and wild imaginings that young children sometimes enact.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes Carroll’s narrative intrusions contribute to this modeling—for instance, when the narrator comments on the exchanges between the creatures and Alice. Alice, for example, demands that the Caterpillar identify himself before she undertakes the difficult task of “telling who she is.” When the latter

asks “‘Why?’ ” the narrator interjects to make clear that this is “another puzzling question”—implicitly, one that a reader might continue to ponder.<sup>50</sup> There are also moments at which the narrator appears to be a participant in the story, hinting that Alice has overheard her own tale—most obviously at the *Wonderland* trial where the “suppression” of a guinea-pig is explained parenthetically and Alice recalls her previous real-world encounter with the term.<sup>51</sup> Episodes like this, I think, are best interpreted as intended to entertain and confuse. The concealed exchange between narrator and character undermines the standard methods of story telling, although it should not be seen as a problem requiring a solution, but an enigma to laugh at and remain puzzled by.

The final pleasure that I think Carroll means to rouse via his performance, especially in the poems of the *Alice* stories, is simply pleasure in language. The books are liberally sprinkled with puns, which often result in confusion, and—while they may make conversation seem a dangerous territory—also delight and inform. Carroll’s neologisms and malapropisms celebrate the sounds of language (by removing the sense of words and directing attention to their music), as do the “grand words” that Alice recites during her descent into Wonderland, even though Carroll mocks her for her pretensions.<sup>52</sup> The poem “Jabberwocky” is the most famous instance in which Carroll privileges sound over sense, but the parodies of *Wonderland*, the poems of *Looking-Glass*, and Alice’s own mumblings (“Do cats eat bats? . . . Do bats eat cats?” she wonders, half asleep, manipulating sounds and ignoring meaning)<sup>53</sup> point to the sonic properties of language. Manipulation of sound suggests that words constitute as much a medium for play as tea parties, nursery rhymes, and ideas.

In conclusion, I would like to cite two passages from “The Philosopher’s *Alice in Wonderland*,” in which Roger Holmes explains the pleasures and the intuitions that Carroll’s stories have for professional philosophers. He writes: “Wonderland and Looking-Glass country . . . are crowded with the problems and paraphernalia of logic and metaphysics and theory of knowledge and ethics. Here are superbly imaginative treatments of logical principles, the uses and meanings of words, the functions of names, the perplexities connected with time and space, the problem of personal identity, the status of substance in relation to its qualities, the mind-body problem.”<sup>54</sup> I have discussed only elements of the “problems and paraphernalia” that Holmes mentions, and I reproduce his remark not to prove that they exist in *Alice*, but as evidence of the cerebral delight that a reader may take in Carroll’s superbly imaginative treatments. I suspect that child readers can take the same delight as the professionals, and that if they do not do

so of their own accord, we are better off instructing them to attend to episodes of conceptual play than to the development of Alice's character.

## NOTES

1. Perry Nodelman, "Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction," *Children's Literature* 28 (2000): 2.
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