

The Language of Sense, Common-Sense and Nonsense

Wyższa Szkoła Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna
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The Language of Sense, Common-Sense and Nonsense

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Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957) was a Polish painter and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, son of a law professor and a graphic artist. In 1948 he made his debut at the First Modern Art Exhibition in Cracow. He worked as a teaching assistant at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, where he established the Self-Instruction Group (Grupa Samokształcenia), which included Andrzej Wajda, Przemysław Brykański and others. Its emergence manifested opposition against the aesthetics of colourist art. Wróblewski also did art criticism; he published in *Przegląd Artystyczny*, *Twórczość*, and *Gazeta Krakowska*.

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Introduction

The articles collected in this volume are based upon a firm intellectual assumption postulating that the cognitive categories of sense, common-sense and non-sense are also cultural constructs being perpetuated and (re)produced in numerous artworks. From this perspective, the publication aims to create a forum of academic dialogue engaging the heteroglossia of multidisciplinary and trans-cultural voices whose intellectual *modus operandi* is the quest for unravelling the hermeneutic dilemmas implicit in the languages of (non)sense and disguised as philosophical, literary and artistic insights into the nature of cultural meaningfulness in the textual as well as scopic "regimes" of symbolic reality.

Philosophy and the Absurd

In traditional philosophical inquiries, just to mention Kierkegaard's and Camus' formative insights into the matter, the category of the absurd arises out of the fundamental and ontological disharmony experienced between an individual's search for the elusive meaning and the apparent meaninglessness of the universe. Yet nowadays, scholarly perception and the philosophical interpretation of the absurd seems, as **Guliana di Biase** claims, to have changed: it is no more the adequacy of the world in satisfying our deepest needs which is put in question, but it is these needs themselves that should adapt to a new, individualistic way of conceiving life. The feeling of absurd in our contemporary societies is assimilated to an individual disease: so, in the end, it seems that the individual himself is the problem, not the opacity of the world in which he lives. Hence, in a purely Durkheimian mode of analysis, Di Biase claims that an individualistic society increases the subjective perception of the absurd, while a society motivated by solidarity does the opposite. Since the world can answer to man's demand of meaning only with the

Anna Kérchy

(Un)making Sense of Nonsense in Lewis Carroll's Alice Tales

My paper proposes to trace some characteristics of the interpretive process *making sense of nonsense* through a case-study of Lewis Carroll's Victorian literary nonsense fantasies narrating Alice's adventures in Wonderland and through the looking glass, initially written for children, yet challenging and epitomizing the (im)possibilities of 'adult' meaning (de)formations ever since.¹

My working definition for *nonsense* shall be any discursive claim, written text or act of symbolisation that resembles, and is decoded as language, as meaningful communication, yet its intelligibility becomes dubious, defamiliarised along with our conventional representational and interpretive strategies meant to make sense of it. Nonsense requires recipients, along with the fictionally implied reader Alice, to exercise an inventive linguistic creativity, to make self-corrections, re-readings and playful deconstructions, while exchanging primary (normal, literal, denotative) meanings for supplementary (less obvious, figurative, poetic) ones or vice versa, succeeding to Humpty Dumpty claims of 'that's not what I meant'². Nonsense can result of the confusion of literal and metaphorical meanings. Over-literalisations of idiomatic expressions and figures of speech produce fantastically absurd phenomena characteristic of children's literature, such as mad hatters, grinning cats, or crocodile tears, but the "hyperlogic"³ leading to dialogues like "I beg your pardon?" 'It isn't respectable to beg.'⁴ also belong to the same category. In nonsense literally lived experience gains a symbolical, metaphorical value, like when the little girl's dreaded coming-of-age is fictionalised via Alice's metamorphic growing and shrinking. Nonsense gives up sense for the sake of focusing on sound: "any word can be arbitrarily defined at whim"⁵ purely on the basis of its auditory feel, turning homophones, homonyms, and even antonyms into synonyms (eg. boughs bark saying boughwough, the tortoise taught us, and hills are valleys). Similarly, nonsensical sound sequences, referentless signifiers provoke an unlimited proliferation of sense (like *toves*, described as "something like badgers," "something like lizards" and "something like corkscrews" likely evoke different mental images in each reader⁶). Nonsense springs from semantic and syntactic impossibilities. Half-familiar neologisms turn language topsy-turvy, like in the case of the numerous portmanteaus with fake etymologies in the poem *Jabberwocky*⁷. Tautologies, naturalised category mistakes, "semantically opaque categories"⁸ and logical twists make us wonder whether one can have less or more than no tea at all, whether getting back one's own thimble is really a prize, if seeing Nobody on the road is a proof of good eyesight, or how mock turtle-soup tastes like.

I wish to suggest that the engulfment of any narrative by such nonsense phenomena leads to metalinguistic, metanarrative insights concerning the very (mal)functioning of our sense-making methods. A particular stress is put on the rhetorical function of verbal interactions, which necessarily foreground the inherent metaphorical, visual and vocal quality of language, contributing to the proliferation of poetical, figurative, connotative meanings. Jean-Jacques Lecercle praises as the ultimate feat of nonsense its eliciting a self-reflective awareness of the very ambiguity of common-sense, a pleasurable intellectual excitement resulting from the metatextual recognition of the misbehaviour of language, whereby our focus shifts from the *what* on the *how* of meaning-construction.⁹ Among the most fascinating scholarly takes on the Alice-books, rhetorical readings tackle how Carrollian wordplay discloses the poetic-metaphorical surplus, the political-ideological charge or the socio-cultural-historical residue of 'ordinary', everyday language. Revealing the associative, allusive and imaginative quality of discursive elements and their particular combinations or (sub)versions adds a metadiscursive level to communication.

'Meta-concerns' involved include serious language philosophical issues approaching poststructuralist dilemmas on pantextuality and unspeakability, oververbalization and understatement. Nonsense makes us aware of the paradoxical tension between the simultaneous necessity of misinterpretations and the impossibility of meaninglessness. On the one hand, miscomprehensions are inevitable due to the insufficiency of our communal sign system to unambiguously represent or communicate unmediated our subjective experience of 'the reality,' that we are doomed to lose direct contact with through our socialization, and the succeeding symbolization, verbalization. On the other hand, our being 'always-already' grounded in meaning prevents nonsense from ever

¹ Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice. The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (London: Penguin, 2001)

² Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, pp. 221 and 224.

³ Leila S. May, "Wittgenstein's Reflection in Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 31 (2007), p. 83.

⁴ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 235.

⁵ May, "Wittgenstein's," p. 84.

⁶ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 226.

⁷ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, pp. 155 and 225.

⁸ Fiona MacArthur, "Embodied Figures of Speech: Problem Solving in Alice's Dream of Wonderland," *Atlantis*, vol. 26. no. 2 (Dec 2004), p. 51.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense. The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994)

being meaningless, due to the human senses' and mind's psychic compulsion and evolutionary necessity to trace, memorize and recognize patterns, and to make sense even out of apparent senselessness, a cognitive automatism described by Gestalt psychology. A further tension of signification enacted by nonsense resides between the interpretive communities' consensual meanings and the subjectively intended, individually deviated, private meanings.

In a proto-post-modernist vein, the logician Carroll's rationally based delusional nonsense reveals alternative ways of relating to reality. He goes as far as to circumscribe an epistemology of uncertainty, of unknowing by virtue of doubting the transparency of language and questioning the user's mastery over it. Nonsense, by anatomizing our very language-use, also sheds light on the fictionalized nature of the narratively constructed self-identity and the inherent splitting of the "speaking subject-spoken subject-subject in speech" triad¹⁰. This idea is encapsulated perhaps best by the initial scene when Alice falling down the rabbit hole enters into a fantasy world, and also falls into the text to become a fictional character, a dream child forever small, innocent, curious and cherished in Carroll's imagination. Nonsense highlights the shifts and gaps between reality, reality's experience, experience's cognition that may or may not occur, (mis)representations of the experience of reality, and (mis)interpretations of the (mis)representations. Humpty Dumpty's claim "When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."¹¹ can be easily related to Wittgenstein's "private language argument."¹² It stages both the liberating and the imprisoning nature of the inherent polysemy of discourse, highlighting that the very same conventional sign system prevents us from getting our message exactly through and allows us grounds for playful representation(al reimaginings of our realities). In language games we do not play against each other, but against the game itself, as the rules keep reorganising themselves and each other.

When Lecerle's historical analysis draws parallels between the emergence of rebellious nonsense and of the newly introduced, highly restrictive Victorian public school system that the ultimately non-moralizing text might be meant to parody or compensate for¹³, he shows that the arbitrarily rule-bound, ideologically infiltrated, socially binding side of discourse is just as much a motivation for nonsense as the ludic-transgressive potential of language. The limiting nature of language and the necessity of misrepresentation and misinterpretation are illustrated by the scene where the White King tries to write a memorandum but his words are distorted and end up saying something completely different than intended. It is an outside force, Alice, the reader who leads his pencil that writes "all manner of things that he doesn't intend;" therefore the words he writes are never purely his.¹⁴

The limits of language-use coincide with the limitlessness of meanings. As Carroll writes in a letter commenting on his nonsensical *The Hunting of the Snark*¹⁵ to the Lowrie children, "words mean more than we mean to express when we use them, so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant."¹⁶ Literary nonsense, far from fearing miscommunication celebrates the playfulness of polysemy. It invites to the realization of Roland Barthes' *pleasure-text* where co-authoring individual readers weave meanings into the original texture.¹⁷ (Thus, they enact the very etymology of the word *text(ere)*, that means to weave).

Besides its meta-linguistic, rhetoricising tendencies, nonsense elicits the trans-verbal, embodied experience of language-use. It brings into play the enworlded speaking subject's bodily frame resonating discourse, the material surplus-meanings of incarnated voice (individual prosody, intonation, pitch, melody, or speech impediment as evocative of mood, personality, emotion, experience, etc., and thus carrier of significance), as well as corporeally lived sounds (the musicality of speech, the materiality of signifiers, the shape and sound of letters). These precede/surpass and complement sense, while contributing to the *somatisation of semiosis*¹⁸, to foregrounding the corporeal, physical nature of the signifying activity. Rhetorical readings reveal how the linguistic subversion of nonsensical text culminates in the embodied lived experience of the blissfully rhyming, rhythmic, repetitive, "revolutionary poetic language-use" described by Julia Kristeva as a liminal discursive mode putting "subject and meaning in process/on trial."¹⁹ The symbolically repressed primary drives, desires and bodily energies (re)surface to plug language-users back to the pre-verbal, semiotic, corporeally-marked realms through the musical-material means of sounds, rhythm and letters, logico-linguistic twists, and infinite liberties

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, "The Speaking Subject," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), pp. 210-220.

¹¹ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 224.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §243.

¹³ Lecerle, *Philosophy*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 154.

¹⁵ Lewis Carroll, "The Hunting of the Snark," *Literature.org*, <<http://www.literature.org/authors/carroll-lewis/the-hunting-of-the-snark/>>

¹⁶ quoted in Jan Susina, "'Why is a Raven like a Writing-Desk?': *The Play of Letters in Lewis Carroll's Alice Books*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2001), p. 17.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Pleasure of the Text," in *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 3-67.

¹⁸ Peter Brooks, *Body Work. Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993)

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, "Le sujet en procès," *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 55-106.

of private languages²⁰. Unlike in the Wonderland Duchess's claim²¹, it is the sound that comes first and not the sense. In Carrollian wonderlands we joyously feed on the *embodied voice*, like little girls in the treacle well, where for being well one can only draw manner of things beginning with an "m," such as mouse-traps, the moon, memories and muchness.²²

Beyond common-sense, the knowledgeable feeling of nonsense implies a total experience fusing – without necessarily reconciling – intellectual, emotional and physical stimulations of a language moved by lack and excess alike. The fleshly performative, emotionally invested, trans-verbally embodied sur-charge of signification, the *mise-en-scène* of the incarnated voice resonating the revolutionary poetic language and the corporeal sensations excited in recipients enhance the affective/sensual, in that sense 'trans-sensical' nature of meaning formation.

However, Carroll's images and puns may also be convincingly associated with metaphors of post-structuralist theories of subjectivity. Readers are literally made to fracture the looking-glass as the disruption of sense returns them to the limes-state of the Lacanian "mirror-stage" marking their entry into the socially disciplined realm of symbolization²³. They blissfully get lost in language, while they stumble down the rabbit hole with Alice whose shrinking-growing body constantly "disseminates" just like the Derridean or De Manian "self-deconstructing meaning" doomed to decompose and reorganize itself with each use and each new context²⁴.

Elaborating on the metatextual component, when it comes to readers of Carrollian nonsense, Hugh Haughton inventively differentiates between the two kinds of approaches. On the one hand there are *Gryphons* who simply wish to enjoy a children's story without making any efforts at serious interpretations, and who claim that adventures should come first since explanations are such a waste of time. On the other hand, *Queens* insist that even jokes should have meanings, that one should make an attempt to make sense, especially when it comes to children and adults' responsibility for them, and stress that Carroll's nonsense is made expressive precisely by its meaningfulness²⁵. These interpretive stances – which can be adopted generalised throughout the reception of any nonsense fantasy work (especially the ones written and read for children) – put forward fascinating theoretical dilemmas. They concern the (im)possibility of a perception without interpretation or even cognition, of a joyously forgetful yet revelatory revelry in sustained meaninglessness – matching the transverbal embodied aspect of signification, modelled by the Gryphons's stance. But they also relate to the (im)possibility of a fully rational, neutral, and objective meaning-fixation that would lack any emotional surcharge or affective side-effect usually resulting from psychic involvement in or corporeal reactions to the reading experience – illustrated by the Queens's stance enacting the metalinguistic, self-referential aspect of signification.

Nevertheless, elaborating on Jean-Jacques LeCercle's thought-provoking ideas on the attraction nonsense literature holds for the "logophilic fou littéraire"²⁶ – a type of reader obsessed with a slow close-reading – I wish to suggest that any critical (ie. academic) reading attempting a serious take on the Alice books combines features of the Gryphon's and the Queen's interpretive methods as complementaries. This reader – likely resembling most of the readers of my study – could be compared to another Carrollian character, Humpty Dumpty. Throughout our interpretations we do take ourselves seriously, often elaborating whole philosophical backups for our analyses, yet we tend to 'cheat' a bit, "to hold the book upside down"²⁷ as the eggman does, to slightly reformulate the text's plot structure, its sound patterns, or cause-effect or character relations in order to make them precisely meet our expectations, to fit our hypotheses concerning textual meanings, as we try to tame the text's heterogeneity within a coherent reading.²⁸ The logophilic critical reader, like Humpty Dumpty "makes words mean" "just what [one] choose[s] them to mean – neither more, nor less."²⁹ However, highly

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), pp. 11-100.

²¹ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 96.

²² Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 80.

²³ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Modern Literary Theory. A reader*, eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), pp. 8-15.

²⁴ eg. Paul De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 94. no. 5 (1979 Dec), pp. 919-930. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)

²⁵ Hugh Haughton, "Introduction," *The Centenary Edition of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. xi. The two passages Haughton refers to are: "No, no! The adventures first," said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: 'explanations take such a dreadful time.'" [...] "but the Red Queen interrupted her impatiently. 'That's just what I complain of! You *should* have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning – and a child's more important than a joke, I hope.'" in: Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, pp. 109 and 265.

²⁶ Lecercle, *Philosophy*, p. 3.

²⁷ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 223.

²⁸ While Lecercle gives a single specific example for the logophilic overinterpretation of the Carrollian text decoded as a reformulation of the Talmud, I would argue that to a certain extent all our critical readings bear characteristics of *folie littéraire*. (Lecercle, *Philosophy*, pp. 5-20.)

²⁹ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 224.

ambiguously, this chosen meaning supported by the interpretation often seems to end up oscillating between being either *more* (Queen's overinterpretation) or *less* (Gryphon's nonsense) than the supposed authorially intended arch-meaning that remains by definition unresolvable.

Accordingly, Alice's question, "whether you can make words mean so many different things"³⁰ does not so much concern the possibility of (the all too obvious) textual polyphony and interpretive diversity, but more likely makes a metatextual commentary on the ideal reader's ability or willingness to enter into play with the text's ambiguous ways of (un)making sense. It concerns the reader's capacity to cooperate in the various language-games literally enacted in the grotesque moves and incomprehensible choreographies accompanying or substituting most of the interpersonal communicative interactions Alice is summoned to join during her wanderings. (These are the Lobster Quadrille with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, the backward running with the Red Queen, the tangled twists and turns of the Caucus Race with birds and mice, or the contrariwise dancing around with Tweedledee and Tweedledum.)

The question how compulsive over-interpretation (ie. production of hypermeaning) and the bliss resulting from the textual blindspots' undecipherability (ie. activation of nonsense) relate to each other throughout the reading process is particularly interesting if we return to the question of the (im)possibility of a perception without cognition, and a cognition without interpretation, of looking without seeing, of hearing/reading without being able or willing to comprehend. In the Alice books we find perfect examples for typical readerly reactions to nonsense: on first reading the mirror-poem Jabberwocky, perhaps the most famous example of nonsense verse ever, Alice reacts in the following way: "'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's *rather* hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, ever to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) 'Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't exactly know what they are!'"³¹

This uncertainty concerning the priority of aesthetic pleasure or rational comprehension in their relation to 'understanding', and the interpreter's confusion felt upon facing meaninglessness and unknowing is connected to a curious differentiation made between the oral and the written. In another episode, Alice pondering – on the nonsensical moralising of the Duchess of the type "There's a large mustard-mine near here. And the moral of that is – The more there is of mine, the less there is of yours."³² – says: "I think I should understand that better, if I had it written down: but I can't quite follow it as you say it."³³ While the written, readable text's analysis holds the potential for cognition, even metalinguistic recognitions described above, illuminating meanings and the significance of meaningless, on the contrary, orality, mere uttering or hearing remains the subject and source of miscomprehension, polysemy or ambiguity. The challenge of phonocentricism by logocentrism, the written text as storehouse of meaning versus the faulty, fallible voice leads us to the other aspect of the production and reception of nonsense literature that can be related to the material experience of the voice, sound patterns, transverbal rhythms, repetitions, musicality permeating discourse.

Although poststructuralist literary criticism has associated vocalicity with embodied experience and revolutionary poetic language's capacity to subvert conventional representation through corporeal pleasures of the very sounds's 'feel' invading signification, biographically speaking the voice was a constant source of anxiety for the incurably stammering Lewis Carroll. His speech impediment referred to as a hesitation made him stumble upon words, choke on sounds, especially initial sounds, especially on reading out texts. Conforming to the myth, he not only refused to be ordained a priest on accounts of being unable to preach sermons, but he also had considerable inhibitions in average communicative interaction, making him shy, reserved, austere, and lonely with one single exception. His speech defect is said to have miraculously ceased whenever he entered the company of his child friends for whom he invented the tales that made him legendary.³⁴

Signification's transverbal, vocal-material component, especially the incorrectly uttered sound, or the faultily spelt word complement the primary sense with a surcharge of sensations contributing to surplus (non)meanings approaching nonsense. The repetition of phonemes, sounds, or words characteristic of stammering or stuttering hold various implications ranging from the subconscious, unintentional to the strategic, artistic-ritualistic – all contributing to the generation of nonsense. Among children it can be decoded as emotionally charged baby-talk signalling infantile affection and care (for the infantile) – explaining Carroll's ease among child-friends. It can also be the foundation of language games based on simple linguistic t(r)icks showing how a long enough repetition of any word may result either in the utter loss of meaning or the acquisition of truth value. In echolalic repetitions it might just as well trouble social interaction by merely mirroring others' phrases instead of answering them. It can potentially be accompanied by a 'good vibration' plugging us back to pre-discursive primary drives' corporeal joys that is heralded by psychoanalytically inspired languages philosophies, and that might originate in early-language-user's speech acts being fuelled by the pleasurable repetitive compulsion, as in

³⁰ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 224.

³¹ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 156.

³² Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 96.

³³ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 97.

³⁴ Jackie Wullschlager, "Lewis Carroll: The Child as Muse," in *Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, and A.A. Milne* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 29-65.

the infantile crib-talk – a pre-sleep monologue made by young children in bed – proto-narratives preceding and subverting the conventionally linear narrative logic. In fantastic realms, it can occur in magical incantations' spells, enchantments of mantras, which besides designating and signifying act, bring into being, they *are*. (In Wonderland when a baby is repeatedly called a pig, he becomes one, whereas the name Alice implies Alice-hood.) Finally, it also characterises sleeptalking's discursive sidetracks, the somniloquist's unconscious speech acts, whose very unintentionality turns them nonsensical, regardless of their contents.

Somniloquy, talking while being asleep gains a vital significance in Alice on various grounds. Carroll on inventing tales for child-friends liked to pretend to fall asleep to mock his audience who then duly begged him to continue his improvised stories recalling dream-like fantasies. His fiction springs from his theory of the mind that differentiates between varying degrees of altered states of consciousness: the "ordinary," and "eerie" states are followed by the "trance-like," whereby one unconscious of actuality, apparently asleep, can migrate to fairyland.³⁵ As the epigraph says, the wandering Alice moving phantom-wise under skies can be never seen by waking eyes.³⁶

Alice's adventures share dreams' surrealist illogic, grotesque figures, *cadaver exquisite*-like random narrative structure, textual rules following chess and card games doomed to be transgressed. As Fiona MacArthur suggests, the simulation of a dream allows Carroll to free syntactically frozen linguistic strings from their typical collocational positions, and by disclosing the "mismatch between the child's solutions to linguistic puzzles and their everyday use in communication" to consider their role in a dynamic problem solving activity, whereby learning (responding to incoming stimulus and relating to already held knowledge) occurs while dreaming.³⁷

Even more excitingly, the amateur Victorian photographer Carroll's favourite genre that earned him a dubious reputation posthumously was the still-life-like nude of the sleeping child. Way beyond the paedophilia intents attributed to Carroll's gaze by post-Freudian misreadings, the photographic topic of the naked child asleep functions as tableau vivant transmitting symbolical meanings to guarantee the spiritual elevation of the spectators. Moreover, according to Lindsay Smith, it might have possibly been an attempt to envelop the hesitancy of speech by representing children's disembodied flesh as still, voiceless and miniaturized, and visually reaching a perfection it can never acquire verbally on accounts of being a wonderfully inhibited speaking subject.³⁸

In Carroll, speech impediments have clearly nonsense-generating potentials. Articulate, comprehensible, clear speech regarded to be a prerequisite and guarantee of rational, reliable and respectable personhood is consistently missing from all the fictional self-portraits the stammering Carroll draws of himself in Alice's picturesque stories. The Dodo bird in the Caucus race evokes his own name Charles Lutwidge Dodgson mispronounced as Do-Do-Dodgson. As an icon of extinction (species disappeared during recorded history due to human mistreatment), fossilized in phrases as "dead as a dodo," "to go the dodo's way" (become obsolete, dead) and gaining a mythical, fictionalized, unreal status (people cease to believe it has ever existed), the dodo bird can be associated with stammer, silence, linguistic forgeries, babble, and the questioning of one's own reality-status along with 'normal' speech capacities.

The fictional Alice in Wonderland recalls the mathematician Oxford dean Dodgson writing children's fantasies under the penname Carroll on accounts of her loving to pretend in her plays that she is two persons. Sometimes she even goes as far as to adopt the very stammering discursive style of the author. Her telling stumbling on first person personal pronouns – "Well! *What* are you?" said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something!' 'I – I'm a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day."³⁹ – reveals a destabilisation of the self circumscribed as fundamentally ambiguous, heterogeneous and uncertain. The speaking subject dislocated by the spoken subject, the self overwhelmed and fractured by the voice and polyphonic, ventriloquist play with multiple fictional/authorial personalities (Dodgson-Carroll-Dodo-Alice), just like the sound engulfing the sense typically in fantasies' nonsensical interactions all outline an 'epistemology of uncertainty'. Here unknowing, doubt and an awareness of

³⁵ Marina Warner, "'Stay This Moment'. Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson," in *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 205-220.

³⁶ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 287.

³⁷ Fiona MacArthur, "Embodied Figures of Speech: Problem Solving in Alice's Dream of Wonderland," *Atlantis*, vol. 26. no. 2 (Dec. 2004), pp. 51-62.

³⁸ Lindsay Smith, "Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy," *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 3. no. 1 (2004), pp. 95-105.

³⁹ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 57.

alternatives (alternative possibilities and realities) is a significant constituent of knowledge. Madness makes part of reason, getting lost might be ground of getting somewhere, and meaning formation relies on, or is inspired by both the acoustic (voiced) and the logocentric (written/read), both the affective, the corporeal and the cognitive, logical aspects and non-sensations sensation alike.

Perhaps the most enchanting fictional self-portrait of Carroll is the Knight, the melancholic inventor of nonsensical gadgets (like the bag worn upside down to keep out the rain, or the shark trap adjusted onto a horseback), a bizarre fantasy-creature loitering in wonderland, who struggles to keep his balance on his horse, yet lets go the bridle, and falls to break his bones again and again, stretching his arms towards Alice who repeatedly helps him to gather himself together. The Knight is also a reminder of the very materiality of the signifier, the transverbal musicality of language and the impossibility of nonsense's meaninglessness on accounts of the author's favourite letter B invading his very being. A rhetorically-concerned, deconstructive interpretation's microscopic focus might lead to far-sighted conclusions. I believe that all the words starting with "b"-s in the Knight-passage describing "the great art of riding" homophonous with "the great art of writing" – as in "beginnings," "bones broken," "balance (un)kept," "bridle" meant to control and let loose, "both arms" unable to hold on, falling "backwards," lying on his "back" vulnerable, helpless, dreaming – are poetically telling of the author's alexythmic yet hypersensitive personality; his very being risked and rescued by Alice, who equally denotes the real-life muse, the fictionalized character, and the reader willing to get lost in the text; all Alices, who gain the status of a nonsensical object of desire as subject of identification and source of textuality (as de/re-generators of meanings). The proliferation of "b"-s simultaneously defamiliarises sense by laying stress on sound, and stages a nonsensical venture doomed to gain metatextual signification by marvellously foregrounding our 'be-ing' held and released in a language. This is a language that 'normally' summons and suppresses senselessness, attempts to compensate for the loss of the Real in vain, and proves to be a rule-bound system that nevertheless allows for a 'free fall,' provided we are willing to activate our cooperative readerly imaginative faculties and embodied experiences of meaning-formation, so as to enliven the word into a wonderworld of magic.⁴⁰

Carroll's relation to oral and written representative practices must have been more complicated due to his limited and twisted language-use (his stuttering utterances and language-game-based texts) and a vulnerable personality posthumously diagnosed as a likely case of a high functioning autism spectrum disorder called *Asperger's syndrome*. Symptoms fitting the Carrollian myth include social ineptitude, lack of commonsense and empathy, (difficulties with interaction, communication, imagination, emotional ties), fragmentary-analytical thinking, intense obsessive interest in a specific subject and related restricted repetitive, stereotyped activities and patterns of behaviour, a resistance to change. However, the most important feature is an especially intimate, peculiar relation to language, that might range from highly sophisticated language skills, linguistic inventiveness (creation of an incomprehensible language of one's own), to difficulties with enacting and interpreting linguistic abstractions and non-verbal sign-language (gestures, facial expression, clumsiness), or obsession with difficult words and expressions.⁴¹

Perhaps there is no need for psychopathologisation, and it is in the name of neurodiversity that we should explore the plethora of different, alternative means of making sense and sound. Understanding the psychic-cognitive-physical processes throughout the production and reception of nonsense might help us in understanding those unprecedented contemporary discursive practices which cannot be schematised by conventional communicational models (of the sender-message-receiver triangular structure-type). Online internet telecommunication practices, like the 140 characters-long, SMS-like microblogging self-expressions on *Twitter*, or *Facebook* updates on insignificant daily phenomena narrating what is happening or what is on one's mind at the given fleeting moment are shared with everyone, addressed to no one in particular, and without expecting any particular response or feedback. They uncannily resemble 'mutterances' of talking to oneself under one's

⁴⁰ The passage in question is: "'The great art of riding,' the Knight suddenly began in a loud voice, waving his right arm as he spoke, 'is to keep'—Here the sentence ended as suddenly as it had begun, as the Knight fell heavily on the top of his head exactly in the path where Alice was walking. She was quite frightened this time, and said in an anxious tone, as she picked him up, 'I hope no bones are broken?' 'None to speak of,' the Knight said, as if he didn't mind breaking two or three of them. 'The great art of riding, as I was saying, is—to keep your balance properly. Like this, you know—'He let go the bridle, and stretched out both his arms to show Alice what he meant, and this time he fell flat on his back, right under the horse's feet.'" (Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 251)

⁴¹ See Michael Fitzgerald, *Autism and Creativity* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004)

breath, deviant speech acts, which do nothing in particular despite being uttered, and by failing to fulfil the criteria of a message, approach nonsensical claims. The very name of *twit* is “meant to capture the physical sensation that you’re buzzing your friend’s pocket,” like a “chirp from birds” it signifies “a short burst of inconsequential information:” physical, sensorial, nearly-instinctive, inconsequential, it definitely challenges our commonsense concept of communication. A research has found out that besides news, spam, self-promotion, conversation, and pass-along value, “pointless babble” accounts for most of Twitter’s content (40.55 percent of the total number of messages).⁴² Whether these online ‘mutterances’ reflect the infantile need to express and reinforce our being through words and letters, or constitute artistic *actions gratuites* with *l’art pour l’art* motivations replacing utilitarian purposes, whether they are postmodernist deconstructive attempts at (un)making meanings, inspirational daily brainstorming, or trace brand new form of social networkings, these cyberspatial verbal-errings’ (mal)function seems to adapt a wonderlandish (il)logic. Following the Cheshire Cat’s advice, “it doesn’t matter which way you go,” you are sure “to get somewhere,” “if you only walk long enough,”⁴³ in other words, it does not matter whatever you say, you are sure to be (mis)understood.

⁴² Ryan Kelly, “Twitter Study Reveals Interesting Results About Usage – 40% is ‘Pointless Babble’,” *PearAnalytics*, (2009. Aug) <<http://www.pearanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Twitter-Study-August-2009.pdf>>

⁴³ Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 67.