

JSI — Joyce Studies in Italy

Occasional issues

Founder: Giorgio Melchiori

Editor: Franca Ruggieri

Joyce Studies in Italy is an occasional publication aimed at collecting material which throws light upon Joyce's work. Taking an intertextual approach, it hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of Joyce as an individual – and as a writer at an all-important crossroads in Western culture. The project was initiated in the early Eighties by a research team at the University of Rome, 'La Sapienza' which included Barbara Arnett, Carlo Bigazzi, Carla De Petris, Giorgio Melchiori, Jacqueline Risset, Franca Ruggieri and Laura Visconti, with the collaboration of Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli of the University of Bologna at Forlì and Carla Marengo Vaglio of the University of Turin. The team, now coordinated by Franca Ruggieri, has formed an advisory board with the added participation of three new members: Jacques Aubert, Lyon University, Timothy Martin, Rutgers University and Fritz Senn, Zurich James Joyce Foundation. It has been the policy of the group to be open to the contributions of scholars from other institutions, both from Italy and abroad, without imposing a particular house-style on individual entries. We still feel that the research into Joyce that is carried out in Italy deserves to be more widely known internationally and, for this reason, the contributions in Italian are accompanied by short English abstracts.

We hope that the creation in 2006 of *The James Joyce Italian Foundation* – founding members: Rosa Maria Bosinelli, Paola Pugliatti, Carla Marengo Vaglio, Romana Zacchi and Franca Ruggieri (President); honorary members: Umberto Eco, Giorgio Melchiori, Luigi Schenoni – will be welcomed as a means to promote and extend the work undertaken by *Joyce Studies in Italy*.

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JOYCE'S VICTORIANS

Edited by
FRANCA RUGGIERI

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FRANCA RUGGIERI

FOREWORD

Classic, Romantic, Victorian: the recent succession of titles of the volumes of *Joyce Studies in Italy* is yet another immediate testimonial to how Joyce, the man, the writer, the intellectual – his formation, his life, his *opera omnia* – represents a significant and still indispensable crossroads for the tradition and phases of the history of Western culture, and that of Europe in particular. A tireless, omnivorous intellectual *curiosity* spurs him to re-examine the affairs, the tales, the fables, the myths, the ideas, the arts of the classical world, of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, of the *fin de siècle*: it's almost as if every time the uninterrupted flow of the present in the past and of the past in the present could be arranged once and for all in a scheme packed with signs, an endless map, without the margins of universal man. It is precisely the open space of the memory which interacts with the imagery of the artist and which is at the origin of his writing. *Curiosity* is the premise for all progress in all time, in all fields of research, whether literary or scientific. Moreover, curiosity towards the past, in function of a present, lived with dramatic awareness, is the necessary premise in order to re-examine that past with "modern" critical sense. Other, renewed interpretations are solicited together with new challenges in the search for new balances, new forms, in the search for unusual "objective correlatives" of a modern problematic anxiety of rootedness and of inclusiveness, for a new, perhaps utopic, realism where words are ever more able to express things not by chance, but more and more things, perhaps all things.

In the case of Joyce, the deep awareness of being a presence in the flow of history and tradition is, very soon, at the origin of every critical affirmation, of every creative choice. Because of this particular sensitivity to his own being in history, right from his early writings Joyce represents the exemplary materialization of the individual and of the artist, gifted with "historical" and thus with "traditional" sense, in the sense which T.S. Eliot suggested in *Tradition and Individual Talent*, in 1919: "*Tradition* is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the *his-*

"ALL OLD DADGERSON'S DODGES": LANGUAGE
AND MEANING IN LEWIS CARROLL AND JAMES JOYCE

*"The question is," said Alice,
"whether you can make words
mean so many different things."*

Many critics have noted the resemblance between the linguistic and narrative techniques of Lewis Carroll (*pseud.* of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) and those of James Joyce. Indeed such comments have become somewhat of a critical commonplace, yet surprisingly few studies have been dedicated to the systematic study of this relationship. The affinity between the two authors was actually noticed immediately after the publication of *Finnegans Wake* – the work in which Carroll's influence is most evident – though Joyce, who rarely failed to acknowledge his literary debts, always insisted on the originality of his techniques. In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, reacting to these observations, he wrote:

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

According to his own account, then, Joyce had not been inspired by Carroll's innovations but had at most rediscovered them on his own, realizing only at a subsequent stage that many of them had been anticipated

¹ Letter of 31 May 1927 in Stuart Gilbert (ed.), *The Letters of James Joyce*, New York, Viking Press, 1957, p. 255.

by Carroll. This is the view accepted by James Atherton in *The Books at the Wake* where he argues that Carroll must be viewed simply as an 'unforeseen precursor'², given that Joyce read his work only after he had begun writing *Finnegans Wake* and that only after this moment do we find more or less explicit references to *Alice* and its author³.

Curiously, among the many similarities and coincidences between the two writers, there is also this very question of originality: Joyce's words appear to echo what Carroll himself had confessed many years before: "I do not know if 'Alice in Wonderland' was an *original* story – I was, at least, no *conscious* imitator in writing it." (PCLC, 257)⁴ A strange destiny for two writers who closely adhered to the credo of originality and struggled hard to create something entirely different from what had come before. No doubt, as Carroll wrote "perhaps the hardest thing in all literature [...] is to write anything original." (PCLC, 257)

In addressing the question of the relation between Carroll and Joyce, critics usually focus on puns, portmanteau words, and sometimes other more or less explicit echoes of Carroll in *Ulysses* and, especially, in *Finnegans Wake*, always remaining, however, within the domain of witty allusions, intellectual games, or Joyce's encyclopedic ability to compress a number of cultivated references and innuendos in a single word. But, as Martin Gardner says, if "most of the allusions are not in dispute what is one to make of such oddities as the identical initial letters of the names Alice Pleasance Liddell and Anna Livia Plurabelle?"⁵

² James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake*, London, Faber and Faber, 1959, ch. 5, pp. 124-136.

³ Cf. James S. Atherton, "Lewis Carroll and *Finnegans Wake*," in *English Studies*, February 1952, id. *The Books at the Wake*, op. cit.; Ann McGarrity Buki, "Lewis Carroll in *Finnegans Wake*", in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration*, edited by Edward Guiliano, New York, Clarkson N. Potter, 1982.

⁴ The primary sources to which I will be referring are the following: Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* (TAA), with an Introduction and Notes by Martin Gardner, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987; *The Penguin Complete Lewis Carroll* (PCLC), with an Introduction by Alexander Woollcott, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984; James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (SH), London, Granada, 1984; James Joyce, *Dubliners* (D), London, Granada, 1984; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (PAYM), London, Granada, 1983; James Joyce, *Ulysses* (U), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984; James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (FW), London, Faber and Faber, 1982.

⁵ Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 18.

In any case, the purpose of my contribution is to go beyond a listing of allusions and explicit citations⁶ to focus on what I believe is the common idea on which these similarities are based, i.e., Carroll and Joyce's notion of language and meaning, an investigation that I believe will produce some rather surprising results.

Notwithstanding the extreme difference in their literary outcomes, even the most absent-minded reader will have noticed the foregrounding of the formal aspects of language found in the main works of these two authors. Carroll and Joyce shared a variety of interests, among which was a passionate commitment to the study of the nature and function of linguistic signs and of language phenomena in general. Both authors had a strong impulse towards experimentation and original research, both were very receptive to new ideas, their lively and wide-ranging cultural interests combining with sophisticated linguistic intuition and an exuberant imagination.

In both authors, the attention for language took the form of a lively interest in etymology and philology, puns, riddles, parody, regional dialects and sociolects, the history of the English language and of ancient and foreign ones, as well as of a tendency to compulsively collect an abnormal quantity of phrases and words that struck their imagination – what Carroll, with his passion for puns, called as "a huge unwieldy mass of literature." (PCLC, 256).

The period in which Carroll carried out his language studies⁷ – Victorianism – was favorable to such endeavors. Partly under the influence of innovative continental studies, there was great ferment in philology, a growing interest in etymology and the historical development of languages, in sociolects, variation in word meaning, and in general in the theoretical study of the nature and functions of language. The English people embraced with great enthusiasm the scientific study of their language, as evidenced by the growing importance of Anglo-Saxon studies, the passionate polemics on the spelling reform and the standards of English usage, and the growing attention for Celtic languages and regional

⁶ This work has already been brilliantly performed by James S. Atherton and Ann McGarrity Buki in the works cited in note 3.

⁷ His studies in linguistics were not particularly systematic or far-reaching. His interest was sincere but essentially amateurish, and his recurring decisions to engage in more systematic studies were never put into practice. He had a limited knowledge of Greek and Latin and of foreign languages (Italian, French, German, Russian).

dialects⁸. Echoes of these debates are traceable in the historical settings of Walter Scott's works, in the efforts to reproduce dialects and sociolects in novels, in imitations of Medieval ballads, in the passion for puns of the Victorian period. After all, the nineteenth century is the period when "language" – as Foucault tells us – "se replie sur soi, acquiert son épaisseur proper, déploie une histoire, des lois et une objectivité qui n'appartiennent qu'à lui. Il est devenu un objet de la connaissance parmi tant d'autres"⁹.

Carroll was aware of these innovations thanks to his frequent, though mostly casual, contacts with students and scholars of Sanskrit, Anglo-Saxon, and other ancient and modern languages, whom he met in society in Oxford¹⁰. On the other hand, he was not interested in producing scholarly accurate imitations of Medieval verse. His own imitations are limited to the more superficial aspect of ancient spelling and diction, without any philological rigor, and he often uses these features to produce witty puns or even to amiably poke fun at contemporary etymologists. Thus in the pamphlet "The New Belfry" (1872) in which false etymology becomes an instrument of satire, or in his "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry" (1855) where, despite the title, the ABAB quatrain, word order, inflected suffixes, and false etymologies are certainly not features of the Old English original.

In Joyce too, 'scientific' interest in philology rarely influences directly his writing¹¹, in spite of his academic formation and his support of an etymological revival and return to the "truer meaning" of words:

Sometimes they [words] have changed greatly in meaning, as the word 'villain' because of customs now extinct [...] this knowledge tends to make our language purer and more lucid, and therefore tends also to improve style and composition. [...] [Latin] acquaints us with a language, which has a strong

⁸ Eighteen-sixty-four was the founding year of the *Early English Text Society*, and 1858 was the year when the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* began to be compiled in Oxford.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Édition Gallimard, 1966, p. 309.

¹⁰ Cfr. Robert D. Sutherland, *Language and Lewis Carroll*, The Hague, Mouton, 1970, pp. 41-46.

¹¹ For example in "Ivy Day in the Committee Room": "Imminent little drops of rain hung at the brim of [Mr Hynes's] hat" (D, 110) where 'imminent' refers to the Latin root *imminēre* (present participle of *imminere* "to be suspended, to hover over smt"). Or in "Wandering Rocks" in the episode where Parnell's brother is seen playing chess in the DBC cafe: "John Howard Parnell translated a white bishop quietly and his grey claw went up again to his forehead whereat it rested." (U, 247) where 'translated' comes from the Latin *tradūcere* ("move, transfer").

element in English, and thus makes us know the derivations of many words, which we then apply more correctly and which have therefore a truer meaning for us¹².

It is instead the explosive combination of false etymologies, sound-play, archaic words, spurious logic, lexical creativity, and word games that appeals to both Carroll and Joyce, and which characterizes their works. Their main interest seems to be anatomizing words, discovering their most hidden secrets, and communicating them through original combinations of sounds and forms, without concern for correct etymologies or conventional meanings.

Thanks to his amateurish studies of philology and semasiology, Carroll was quite aware of the absence of any natural or necessary connection between the sound of words and the things they signify, and that meanings evolve and words can come to signify, in completely arbitrary ways, things or concepts with which they previously had no connection; that it is often the context or the speaker who determine the meaning of a word; that in time meanings can become more generalized or more specialized, that their connotations can become lofty or lowly; that the vocabulary changes from one generation to the other, undergoing a process of expansion and contraction that speakers are generally unaware of. In other words, Carroll's view of language was rather advanced and sophisticated for the time, a view that twentieth-century linguistics was to sum up as the theory of the arbitrariness of the sign¹³. For example, in "The Stage and the Spirit of Reverence", an article published in 1888 in the journal *The Theatre*, Carroll writes: "no word has a meaning *inseparably* attached to it; a word means what the speaker intends by it, and what the hearer understands by it, and that is all"¹⁴.

The point is made even more explicitly in "Appendix, Addressed to Teachers", the section at the end of his *Symbolic Logic*, where Carroll writes:

¹² James Joyce, "The Study of Languages", in Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (eds), *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, London, Faber and Faber, 1959, pp. 28-9.

¹³ Probably Carroll read at least part of *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought* (1854) by George Boole (1815-1864) who in chapter II makes considerations on the arbitrary nature of the sign similar to those of Carroll.

¹⁴ Quoted in Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *Diversions and Digressions of Lewis Carroll*, [1899], New York, Dover Publications, 1961, p. 183.

I maintain that any writer of a book is fully authorised in attaching any meaning he likes to any word or phrase he intends to use. If I find an author saying, at the beginning of his book, "Let it be understood that by the word 'black' I shall always mean 'white', and that by the word 'white' I shall always mean 'black'," I meekly accept his ruling, however injudicious I may think it¹⁵.

Carroll arrived to this understanding of language also through his activity as professor of mathematics and scholar of formal logic at Oxford University. Both disciplines require careful examination of the functioning and limitations of language as a tool for thinking and communicating, and Carroll fully believed in the need for words to be clearly defined and precisely denote their referent. This was true throughout his life during which he was always attentive to the correctness and clarity of statements. One school report states that at the age of 12 he showed "love of precision argument," and had a mind "so clear and so jealous of error, that he will not rest satisfied without a most exact solution of whatever appears to him obscure"¹⁶. And in the many letters he wrote during his lifetime to young interlocutors, as well as in the brief essay "Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing" (1890), he insists on the misunderstandings in private correspondence that originate from grammatical confusion, lexical imprecision, or lack of clarity in arguments¹⁷.

Yet, Carroll was also fascinated by the frequent approximation and illogical nature of ordinary language, the profound discrepancy between literal and figurative meaning, or between the intention of the speaker and what the interlocutor understood. Especially when subject to the severe scrutiny of logic, or when observed out of context language often turns out to be vague and confused, capable of generating unusual and paradoxical meanings. Speakers are imprecise and often fall victim to lexical and structural ambiguities, confuse symbols with the things symbolized, and lose control over words, which seem to take on a quasi-magical life of their own.

¹⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Symbolic Logic*, 4th ed., London, Macmillan, 1897, p. 166.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, New York, Century, 1898, pp. 24-25.

¹⁷ Also in other aspects of his private life, Carroll sought order and precision in semi-obsessive fashion: when he had to prepare packers he made precise diagrams indicating the positioning of knots; in his home, he had many thermometers in order to always maintain the same temperature; he wrote to the Post Office suggesting improvements to their regulations; of every letter he wrote or received (more than 98,000), he prepared an abstract and filed it in a register along with comments and cross-references..

In Carroll's works, these incongruities are the basis of discourses leading to false or bizarre conclusions or reveal the impossibility of communication. In the humorous dialogues that pepper his narratives, efforts to communicate regularly lead to misunderstandings and incomprehension due to imprecise or confused language, erroneous inferences of the meanings of words, or rigidly literal interpretations of linguistic signs.

Thus, notwithstanding the linguistic eccentricity and inventiveness of his narratives and his playful approach to syntax, Carroll's stance on language was ultimately quite traditionalist and opposed to innovation. The more paradoxically true rings therefore the following statement by Atherton:

It must have astonished Joyce, the *avant-garde* innovator, proud of his Irish nationality, contemptuous of the Church of England, and confident of his own originality, to find that he had been forestalled in so many of his discoveries by a mid-Victorian Englishman in minor Anglican orders¹⁸.

In Joyce too, however, though it may seem surprising in the light of certain results of his narrative verve, the same insistence on lexical precision is found in his essay "The Study of Languages" where, in reference to the allegory of the Seven Liberal Arts in Santa Maria Novella in Florence¹⁹, he relates Grammar (in the classical meaning of Letters) to Arithmetic as "the first and last things in human knowledge." Mathematics is defined as the most important study "for the building of an intellectual man" because "[i]t is the study which most develops his mental precision and accuracy, which gives him a zest for careful and orderly method." The relationship is reinforced by stressing their common base, i.e. precision and correct expression:

Mathematics and the Sciences of Numbers partake of the nature of that beauty which is omnipresent, which is expressed, almost noiselessly, in the order and symmetry of Mathematics, as in the charms of literature; so does Literature in turn share in the neatness and regularity of Mathematics. [...] the study of languages is based on a mathematical foundation, and sure of its footing, and in consequence both in style and syntax there is always present a carefulness, a carefulness bred of the first implantings of precision. So they are no mere flourishes of unkempt, beautiful ideas but methods of correct

¹⁸ James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake*, op. cit., p. 131.

¹⁹ Curiously, Joyce mistakenly attributes this work (1365-1367) to Memmi, whereas it belongs to Andrea Bonaiuti, also known as Andrea da Firenze.

expression ruled and directed by clear regulations, sometimes of facts, sometimes of ideas²⁰.

As a mathematician, Carroll was used to manipulating symbols and fascinated by the possibility of organizing them in different ways or repositioning them on the basis of combinatory rules. He frequently took pleasure in manipulating words along similar lines, altering graphemes, phonemes, words or phrases, rearranging them in different phonemic or syntagmatic orders, as if they were pawns in a new game with surreal outcomes. Both Carroll and Joyce were struck by the enormous difference that even a small variation in the letters of a word could make in the meaning. Throughout their works we find language games such as anagrams, acrostics, fill-ins, word-ladders (what Carroll called "doublets"), palindromes, portmanteau words, and in general all those linguistic constructions in which different meanings are generated through the alteration of graphic or phonetic forms or through their apparently arbitrary rearrangement. Similar mutations and nuances of meaning were produced through the use of assonances and alliterations, or following the rules of apophony and paronomasia.

Differences naturally remain: Joyce used lexical indeterminacy and ambiguity to suggest semantic affinities, sometimes very remote ones, in order to extend the connotations of words and amplifying their meanings. Carroll on the other hand used the flexibility of language to create lexically, syntactical and contextual equivocations in order to playfully and more immediately show how fine a line divides sense from nonsense and how easily it can be crossed, generating confusion and misunderstanding. It was precisely this aspect of his work, at once humorous yet firmly rooted in the concreteness of language, on the border between logic and paradox, that in the twentieth century was most responsible for turning Carroll into one of the founding fathers of experimental, avant-garde and postmodern literature.

Carroll and Joyce's books are therefore full of word-games, puns, onomatopoeias, extravagant neologisms that delight and intrigue us, amusing us with their nonsense. The foregrounding of the linguistic element provokes us, involving us in the dynamics of the text, making us actively take part in the creation of multiple meanings and diverse perspectives. Linguistic ambi-

guities force us to reread, intensifying our awareness of signification mechanisms, and test our abilities as readers. But there is more to it.

The observation of the structural features of linguistic games can give a significant contribution to the decoding of nonsense, but the latter cannot be reduced to a merely rhetorical or stylistic device, or worse to a *divertissement*. Nonsense is not simply a metanarrative device functioning only within the reassuring boundaries of the literary text. It continuously exceeds those borders to invade extra-literary reality. The words that confuse Alice and Stephen Dedalus disorient us too, question ours as well as their capability or possibility of controlling meanings, they undermine our comprehension, and cast a veil of doubt over our modalities of apperception and communication through language. If, as Hugh Kenner writes, "language is a Trojan horse by which the universe gets into the mind"²¹, then nonsense presents us with the image of a world devoid of substance and logic, and ultimately threatens the integrity of our very identity.

Under its benign surface, the apparent lightness and impalpable folly of nonsense hides profound epistemological and ontological doubts, since it is precisely through language and word games, through the collision and collapse of the usual systems of signification, that Carroll and Joyce question our way of understanding, knowing and communicating through language, as well as our reassuring view of ourselves and the world.

In the world of Alice and Stephen Dedalus, stable and unequivocal meanings do not exist, and everything, from words to reality, is transformed under the pressure of their questions and their uncertainties. The world they live in is an unstable and metaphorical one in which continuous transformation forces a constant process of renegotiation of meanings and redefinition of one's identity. Reality, language, the individual self, all turn out to be processes, bearing within themselves the possibility of the reversal of meaning, and therefore their potential self-destruction.

For example, the foregrounding of language is often tied, both in the *Portrait* and in the two *Alice* books, to a growing self-awareness of the two main characters. Alice and Stephen are constantly searching for precise means of expression, since words are a basic and formative foundation of their perceptions and their modes of learning. Their language becomes increasingly articulated and analytical, reinforcing their identities and

²⁰ James Joyce, "The Study of Languages", in Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.

²¹ Hugh Kenner, "The *Portrait* in Perspective", in Morris Beja (ed.), *James Joyce Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook*, London, MacMillan, 1973, p. 129.

helping them mature as human beings. Both seek to understand reality through words, though they may not be aware of the fact:

Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learnt them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world about them. (PAYM, 58)

But words turn out to be often disjointed from their meaning, empty containers resembling the marmalade jar on which Alice read "ORANGE MARMALADE" but to her great disappointment it was empty" (TAA, 27). Or they are Stephen's "heaps of dead language": words that "had been so silently emptied of instantaneous sense," (PAYM, 162) that appear to have lost all denotation. In structuralist terms, it is as if Alice and Stephen were constantly faced with signifiers without signifieds. For young Stephen in *Stephen Hero*, for example, words do not necessarily have a relation to reality, in fact they have a quasi-mystical power to transcend language itself: "[words] lost all instantaneous meaning [...] and became wonderful vocables" (SH, 33). And while in the discussion with the Gnat, Alice holds fast to the notion that names are useful precisely as labels thanks to which things can be identified, conceived, and discussed, meaninglessness is always around the corner:

'What sort of insects do you rejoice in, where *you* come from?' the Gnat inquired.

'I don't *rejoice* in insects at all,' Alice explained, 'because I'm rather afraid of them – at least the large kinds. But I can tell you the names of some of them.' 'Of course they answer to their names?' the Gnat remarked carelessly.

'I never knew them do it.'

'What's the use of their having names,' the Gnat said, 'if they won't answer to them?'

'No use to *them*,' said Alice; 'but it's useful to the people who name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?'

'I can't say,' the Gnat replied. (TAA, 221-22)

While the Gnat tries to attribute an identifying function to words that lack it, the duck seeks a referent for a grammatical word lacking a specific meaning:

'Found *what*?' said the Duck.

'Found *it*,' the Mouse replied rather crossly: 'of course you know what "*it*" means.'

'I know what "*it*" means well enough, when I find a thing,' said the Duck: 'it's generally a frog or a worm. (TAA, 47)

On other occasions, words reveal unexpected autonomy, independently evoking strong emotions thanks to a quasi-magical power that has nothing to do with the characteristics and qualities of their referent. In *Sylvie and Bruno* the narrator comments: "For an entirely stupid woman, my Lady's remarks were curiously full of meaning of which she herself was wholly unconscious" (PCLC, 284). Similarly, in the *Portrait*, the light smell of wine on the breath of the rector during Stephen's first communion, sparks in him a series of associations to the word 'wine': "The word was beautiful: wine. It made you think of dark purple because the grapes were dark purple that grew in Greece outside houses like white temples" (PAYM, 43). The sensual connotations powerfully come to surface, somewhat at odds with the religious setting.

This ability of words to signify more than they say is heightened when words turn into symbols, as in the episode in which Stephen hears Protestants make fun of liturgical passages referring to the Virgin Mary. "Tower of Ivory" and "House of Gold" are obviously symbolical expressions, more than literal ones. Stephen interprets them subjectively, in the light of his sensual experience:

Eileen had long thin cool white hands [...] They were like ivory; only soft. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory* [...] Her fair hair had streamed out behind her like gold in the sun. *Tower of Ivory. House of Gold*. By thinking of things you could understand them. (PAYM, 39-40)

Carroll was both amused and disturbed by the power of words to engender different interpretations, to evoke in the mind of the interlocutor an uncontrollable swarm of emotional responses and personal associations with little or no relation to the referent: in short to mean more than intended. Indeed, in spite of Humpty Dumpty's efforts to control meanings, people seem in reality to endow words with an independent existence, authority, almost a sovereign will; they make words their master, subjecting themselves to their emotional power, allowing them to condition their perception of reality.

Indeed, words can turn out to be related in strange and unforeseen ways, giving rise to musical sequences with a dark evocative power: "How beautiful the words were where they said *Bury me in the old churchyard!* A

tremor passed over his body. How sad and how beautiful! He wanted to cry quietly but not for himself: for the words, so beautiful and sad, like music" (PAYM, 22). And when Stephen loses his habitual, though superficial, control over reality, words begin to generate sequences of other words through assonance, paronomasia and apophony, retracing the etymological chain, returning to the roots of a yet indistinct meaning, arranging themselves in an array of terms that allude to yet more intimate associations, creating a multilinguistic proliferation of meaning:

Did anyone ever hear such drivel? Lord Almighty! Who ever heard of ivy whining on a wall? Yellow ivy; that was all right. Yellow ivory also. And what about ivory ivy? The word now shone in his brain, clearer and brighter than any ivory sawn from the mottled tusks of elephants. *Ivory, ivoire, avorio, ebur.* (PAYM, 162)

A deep emotional effect is aroused in by ancient languages – especially Latin – whose words possess powerful evocative overtones:

Cranly stopped to listen, saying: – *Mulier Cantat.* The soft beauty of the Latin word touched with an enchanting touch the dark of the evening, with a touch fainter and more persuading than the touch of music or of a woman's hand. (PAYM, 220)

More than referring to real objects, words seem to create a veil between the speaker and the world, a world that the pattern of words may suggest but not refer to. A veil that becomes even thicker in puns and portmanteau words: words made of words, signs squared, double meanings, language failures, all mechanisms thanks to which the illusoriness of meaning, its diaphanous opacity, is foregrounded, condensing itself in unstable and unbalanced terms. It is as if what Alice and Stephen perceive are not things (signifieds) but words (signifiers), a texture of ambiguous linguistic signs that do not correspond to the reality of the referent. Language bears only an illusory similarity to things. Words seem to hinder the concrete perception of reality rather than making it possible.

Yet, while hindering perception, the veil of signs remains suggestive of those hidden realities that characters seek: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read" (U, 42), says Stephen in "Proteus". In *Ulysses* what Stephen sees and wishes to 'read' is the vast sea of encrypted signs

beyond which lies the object of his desire and research. An object no more visible than the reality that lies beyond the words that signify it. But the perception of these signs that hide reality still suggests "a possibility of escaping from the network of concrete reality that encloses him, of passing through the veil"²². Bloom, on the other hand, is powerfully attracted to this dense layer of appearances, made of voluptuous material images, particularly those associated with women.

The notion that language conceals reality suggested in the works of Carroll and Joyce belongs in fact to a long philosophical tradition that can be traced back to the works of John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume²³. The role of Berkeley (1685-1753), the Irish philosopher of immaterialism who anatomized the conventions hidden in perception, is particularly important. According to Berkeley, matter does not exist except when we are observing it, that is, we cannot know any 'real' object that lies 'beyond' the object as we perceive it. What we know of an object is our perception of it. If we must speak of 'real' objects, all our words must refer exclusively to the perceived object, since nothing exists except these perceptions which belong to the subject.

In his essay "William Blake" (1912), Joyce includes Berkeley among those who would be victimized "if we must accuse of madness every great genius who does not believe in the hurried materialism now in vogue."²⁴ In his notes for *Exiles* he mentions Berkeley as an example of the tendency of Celtic philosophers to "incertitude or scepticism"²⁵, though paradoxically Berkeley's goal was precisely to counter scepticism.

Starting from the dichotomy of signifier and signified – "in truth, there is no such thing as one precise and definite Signification annexed to any general Name"²⁶ – Berkeley in *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) addresses the problem of the "deception of words"²⁷. One of his central

²² Sheldon Brivic, "The Veil of Signs: Perception as Language in Joyce's *Ulysses*", in *ELH*, 57, 1990, p. 742.

²³ Particularly: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748).

²⁴ James Joyce, "William Blake", in Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²⁵ James Joyce, *Exiles* [1918], London, Granada, 1982, p. 157.

²⁶ George Berkeley, "A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge", in *Philosophical Works*, Michael R. Ayers (ed.), London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1992, p. 73.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

points is that we never see things, but only signs that stand for the physical characteristics of things, and that therefore the material reality to which language appears to refer in fact exists only in our mind. Reality remains hidden behind a "Curtain of Words"²⁸ and our sensorial experiences, for example the perception of distance, do not exist outside ourselves, they are constructions generated by a series of visual impressions:

what we immediately and properly see are only lights and colours in sundry situations and shades, and degrees of faintness and clearness, confusion and distinctness. all which visible objects are only in the mind, nor do they suggest ought external, whether distance or magnitude, otherwise than by habitual connexion as words do things²⁹.

For this reason, speaking of Berkeley and his observations on distance, Stephen writes in "Proteus":

The good bishop of Cloyne took the veil of the temple out of his shovel hat: veil of space with coloured emblems hatched on its field. Hold hard. Coloured on a flat: yes, that's right. Flat I see, then think distance, near, far, flat I see, east, back. Ah, see now! Falls back suddenly, frozen in stereoscope. Click does the trick. You find my words dark. Darkness is in our souls do you not think? (U, 54)

In Carroll, epistemological certainty, which for Alice is tied to the Cartesian cogito, vacillates in the episode of the Red King in which the Tweedle brothers, starting from the theories of Berkeley, define the universe, including all material objects and Alice herself, as "sorts of things" that exist only in the mind of a creator. It follows, they argue, that Alice is only a presence in the dream of the Red King, and "If that there King was to wake," – adds Tweedledum – "you'd go out – bang! – just like a candle!" This possibility (which remains, one might add, open to the end of the story) would imply that Alice has in reality no identity and no agency other than that allotted to her in the King's dream: "you're only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you're not real." Faced with this radical negation of her existence, Alice's identity is shaken, as shown by her

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

²⁹ George Berkeley, "An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision", in *Philosophical Works*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

emotional reaffirmation of her reality ("I *am* real!" said Alice and began to cry"), immediately countered by Tweedledee: "You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying, [...] there's nothing to cry about." (TAA, 238-39).

For Alice, her tears, like the stone that Samuel Johnson kicked to confute Berkeley's theory of immateriality, are concrete manifestations of her existence and are external to her mind: "If I wasn't real," Alice said – half-laughing, through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous – "I shouldn't be able to cry." The statement is based on common sense, on the empirical categories of experience, but the two brothers are quick to attack its hidden assumption: "I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt." (TAA, 238-39).

The question "Which dreamed it?", as already mentioned, remains open to the end and implicitly underlines the seriousness with which Alice, and through her Carroll, addresses the problem. Alice's final considerations spoken to her cat Kitty are exemplary, from this perspective: "Now let's consider who it was that dreamed it all ... it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course but then I was part of his dream too!" (TAA, 343-44). This considerations spark an infinite multiplication of specular reflections between the parallel dreams of Alice and the Red King in which the materiality of existence inexorably vanishes or is at best indefinitely postponed: Alice dreams of the King, who is dreaming of Alice, who is dreaming of the King, and so on.

As the episode shows, in nonsense, paradox, meaning inversions, the breakdown of linguistic coherence does not only destabilize known meanings, but also the certainty of one's subjectivity. The self can no longer be guaranteed and neither can the world outside language. As Deleuze suggests paradoxes "always go in two directions at once, and tear up the subject along these dual lines. Paradox is first of all what destroys commonsense as a single sense, but also what destroys commonsense as the assigning of fixed identities"³⁰.

For Stephen in the *Portrait* too what is at stake is the certainty of the phenomenality of his being, and to bolster his identity in times of crisis he appeals to a uniformly denotative language, the closest possible to concrete and objective meanings:

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Logica del senso* [*Logique du sens*], Milano, Feltrinelli, 1984, p. 11.

His very brain was sick and powerless. He could scarcely interpret the letters of the signboards of the shops. By his monstrous way of life he seemed to have put himself beyond the limits of reality. Nothing moved him or spoke to him from the real world unless he heard in it an echo of the infuriated cries within him. He could respond to no earthly or human appeal, dumb and insensible to the call of summer and gladness and companionship, wearied and dejected by his father's voice. He could scarcely recognize as his own thoughts, and repeated slowly to himself: – I am Stephen Dedalus. I am walking beside my father whose name is Simon Dedalus. We are in Cork, in Ireland. Cork is a city. Our room is in the Victoria Hotel. Victoria and Stephen and Simon. Simon and Stephen and Victoria. Names. (PAYM, 85)

And since the problem of identity is closely related to that of language, the impossibility to reflect oneself in one's words, or even in one's voice, produces an internal scission and a distance from one's self that immediately undermines subjectivity. The fear of "not finding the right words" immediately leads Alice to the conclusion that she is not herself:

her voice sounded hoarse and strange, and the words did not come the same as they used to do: [...] 'I'm sure those are not the right words,' said poor Alice, and her eyes filled with tears again as she went on, 'I must be Mabel after all.' (TAA, 38)

Something similar, but with marked political overtones, happens in the *Portrait* when Stephen, during a much cited conversation with his dean, denounces his estrangement from a language that does not belong to him, implicitly affirming his Irish identity:

the language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (PAYM, 172)

The fear of losing one's self recurs in many of Alice's paradoxical adventures. She often meets creatures who ask her to identify herself or mistake her for someone else, to the point that she too is no longer certain of her identity. After falling in the rabbit hole, she wonders whether she might be one of her friends ("I wonder if I've changed in the night? Let me think;

was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I?" TAA, 37); the White Rabbit mistakes her for her maid Mary Ann; when the caterpillar asks her who she is, she does not know how to reply ("I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'" TAA, 67); the fawn does not recognize her as a human being and the pigeon even mistakes her for a snake; when Alice reaches the wood of the things without name, her anxiety grows because she can no longer remember her name and therefore is no longer certain of who she is ("Then it really *has* happened, after all! And now, who am I?" TAA, 226). Alice's anxiety is provoked by this radical encounter with her finitude and precariousness, an encounter dramatized in her meeting with Humpty Dumpty, where the conceptual import of her name is questioned:

'[...] tell me your name and your business.'

'My name is Alice, but –'

'It's a stupid enough name!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?'

'*Must* a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully.

'Of course it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: 'MY name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.' (TAA, 263)

Proper names are for Humpty Dumpty what guarantees permanence and meaning to one's identity. What these episodes underline is a 'truth' that Alice seeks with all the resources of her Cartesian logic to reject: the incommensurability between the intuited self and the perceived one, where what is at stake is the apparently stable nature of the first, and the mutable and uncontrollable nature of the second. To her great chagrin, Alice finds out she cannot ignore this dichotomy, which is constitutive of the self; that she must necessarily face the absolute quality of this incommensurability.

Stephen too, in the *Portrait*, falls prey to the same anxieties and uncertainties. His name is Stephen Dedalus, but when Nasty Roche asks him "What kind of a name is that?" (PAYM, 8) he is incapable of answering. He is his name, but also something else, which is still highly unstable and which he is incapable of judging and defining.

Obviously, Alice's world is very different from that of *Portrait*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. A bizarre, but playful world (though at times subtly threatening and violent), while Joyce's world is a dense and complex uni-

verse. Using the distinction between surface and depth made by Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, it is possible to state that Carroll is interested in the surface and Joyce in the depth.

According to Deleuze, Carroll does not go beyond the veil of language, beyond rhetorical sophism, metaphors, and capricious interactions of signs and meanings. "Plain superficiality is the character of a speech" writes Carroll in "The Dynamics of a Parti-cle" (PCLC, 1018). Speaking in general of the adventures of *Alice in Wonderland*, one may say that after initially falling in holes, wells and caverns, the heroine soon re-emerges and perceives the world in terms of its surface, though that world as well is populated by monsters like the Jabberwocky. She reaches or returns to the surface, and "the animals of the deep become secondary, leaving room for *paper figures* without depth. One could say that the ancient depths has been spread out, has turned into width"³¹.

One must not be misled, however, by the apparently belittling and derogatory connotations of the term 'surface'. It is not an indication of 'superficiality'. Rather, in Deleuze's view, it means that what can be known lies all "on the surface", as maintained also by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Alice's upside-down world is the world of "superficial effects" because everything takes place on the level of linguistic signs; because, as becomes more evident in *Through the Looking-Glass*, meaning, while present in all that we do, cannot be understood, fixed, or arrested so as to grasp its essence and depth. Paradox and nonsense are therefore the most effective tools that Carroll's characters have for questioning the world we know, and at the same time to criticize the fallacy of our main instrument of communication and learning: language. Again Deleuze: "Paradox appears as a destitution of depths, a disposing of the events on the surface, an arranging of language along that limit"³².

The crystalline symmetries and the humor of inverted logic taken to the extreme provides interpretative grids and structures that save Alice from falling prey to the complete irrationality of Wonderland, a world in which no absolute truth exists and in which every new encounter distorts and remodels reality, threatening to turn it into something that can be neither understood nor communicated. In Carroll, as we have seen, there was a strong impulse to dominate disorder and linguistic or mental 'confusion'.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Logica del senso*, op. cit., p. 16.

³² *Ibidem*.

One may say that the mathematical rigor of the multitude of logical and linguistic games in the books of *Alice* and in *Sylvie and Bruno*, keep chaos at bay, imposing a rigid order on the disorder of action and incoherence of thinking: "Mathematics is suited to this purpose because it creates surfaces and pacifies a world whose deep-seated mixtures can be terrible"³³.

Yet, just as the "curtain of words" makes reality and the remote world of meaning unknowable but at the same time indicates its presence, so is nonsense not immune to the fascination and horror of a force that transcends it. In Wonderland, "the world of the deep grumbles under the surface and threatens to shatter it: though exposed, spread out, the monsters still haunt us"³⁴. The incongruities, paradoxes, and semantic ambiguities of nonsense suggest meanings that, while illogical, remain plausible. This is evidenced by Alice's continuous efforts to adapt to the arbitrary logic of this upside-down world, in her effort not to be overwhelmed, not to give in to the dissolution of her identity and her self. The challenge for Alice – always so respectful of order, so attracted by it, so anxious to give meaning to things – is to accept this journey in which traditional moral and behavioral norms turn out to be questionable or inapplicable.

Thus, though reality is never explicitly represented, it remains in the background of each episode, a sense behind every nonsense. The world of the deep can always emerge on the surface. It exists only as a possibility, but yet it exists, it hovers and threatens, though never erupting on the scene of Wonderland. As Bertrand Russell said about the dream of the Red King during a radio program, "[it is] A very instructive discussion from a philosophical point of view. But if it were not put humorously, we should find it too painful." Thus, though the Snark and the Jabberwock are two surface monsters, they are still "monsters" whose claws "can laterally render or even make us fall again into the abyss we believed we had escaped"³⁵.

In Wonderland, as we have seen, the danger of slippage in meaning is mainly a threat to identity, which remains vulnerable and at risk. Identity is constantly threatened by death and extinction or, worse, by the possibility of its non-existence. In this case, too, while the *Alice* books do not explicitly address the question of the erasure of conscience and of the

³³ Gilles Deleuze, "Lewis Carroll", in *Critica e clinica*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1996, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 37-38.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Logica del senso*, op. cit., p. 88.

cogito, an epistemological and ontological terror remains, which threatens to destroy its Cartesian subjectivity. An identity based on the belief that it is possible to know oneself self-reflexively, as empirically stable subjects existing outside language.

Thus, for Deleuze, Carroll's surface is the liminal external zone that is contiguous to the internal surface and to the deep: "it surrounds the entire world in such a way that what is inside lies outside and what is outside is inside.... The continuity of the straight side and the reverse one replaces all degrees of depth"³⁶. It is the surface of Fortunatus's Moebius-band like Purse described by Carroll in *Sylvie and Bruno*: "Whatever is *inside* that Purse, is *outside* it; and whatever is *outside* it, is *inside* it. So you have all the wealth of the world in that leetle Purse!" (PCLC, 523). It is for this reason that what happens in *Alice* happens in nonsense on the level of language: in order to exist meaning must advance always in a two-sided fashion, presenting at once its straight side and reverse side, always made explicit but never fully understood.

Alice pauses at the border of signified and signifier and, therefore, can cross it. Instead, Stephen and even more HCE and the other characters of *Finnegans Wake* immerse themselves in the deep magma of signifiers, all the way to where signs are still formless, still undetermined, staminal strands that yet have to enact the form that they potentially possess, and therefore possess also its negation. In other words, Joyce pursues to the end the journey to the deep and "in the deep, all is horrible, all is nonsense"³⁷. While the adventures that Carroll tells us about, including *Sylvie and Bruno* which was probably the work Joyce was referring to, in the letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver cited in the beginning, are based on the uncertainty between dream and reality³⁸, and remain uncertain to the end, Joyce instead turns *Finnegans Wake* in a total immersion in an oneiric world in which every individuality is dispersed in a universe where one is always an element in the dream of someone else. It is from Carroll, however, that Joyce probably takes the idea of writing a story capable of communicating

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, "Lewis Carroll", *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁸ In *Sylvie and Bruno*, the narrator continuously goes from dream to reality: "So, either I've been dreaming about Sylvie," Bruno thinks at the beginning of the story "and this is the reality. Or else I've really been with Sylvie, and this is a dream! Is Life itself a dream, I wonder?" (PCLC, 272).

the magmatic fluidity of language and identity that we find in dreams. As Atherton notes: "Joyce was probably the first person to realize that Lewis Carroll was a fertile inventor of new and accurate devices to portray the dream-state"³⁹. In his preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*, Carroll tells how in dreams a character can merge into another one, or become two distinct and contradictory figures at once. And in *Finnegans Wake* the identities of characters change, vanish, or coalesce into one another, incessantly, following a "vital and metamorphic rhythm that has nothing of the horror and danger it has in the *Alice* books. On the contrary, it becomes a natural and usual practice, as suggested, for example, in passages like, "every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time." (FW, 118.21) The self of the deep is naturally unstable, and given that identity and language are closely related, words too become confused, mutable and mutant, "variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeable meaning vocable scriptsigns." (FW, 118.26).

Joyce's language inevitably shatters, dilates, mixing graphemes and phonemes, and establishing countless associations inside and outside the text. It thickens in concretions that give substance to this hypnagogic world, incessantly flowing under its surface as an impetuous and unstoppable river. A language meant to express – as Lacan says – the movement of language beyond specific significations, and which seems bent on making explicit the multiple connotations of words, discovering or creating connections, even where they possibly do not exist, almost as if they were endowed with an autonomous life, a deep shapeless and metamorphic nucleus, capable of capturing in a dizzying and spiraling motion multiple meanings and allusions. Words resonate with one another, they combine through neighboring meanings and radiate outward towards multiple interpretations, immodestly showing all their morphological, phonetic, etymological, multilingual similarities: "Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Yup. Pores to dilate dilating. Tup" (U, 273), or "To tell how your mead of, mard, is made of." (FW, 374.1). In these sentences the combination of apophony and paronomasia makes words repeatedly resonate through a series of chained phonemes that extend their semantic field in a fascinating proliferation of meaning. In his description of the

³⁹ James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

letter of Anna Livia Plurabelle, Joyce seems almost to be parodying his own style of writing: "It is told in sounds in utter that, in signs so adds to, in universal, in polygluttural, in each auxiliary neutral idiom, sordomutics, florilingua, sheltafocal, flayflutter, a con's cubane, a pro's tuture, strassarab, ereperse and anthongue athall. (FW 117.12)

In creating this "florilingua", Joyce takes Carroll's intuitions and language games to the extreme consequences turning *Finnegans Wake* into a giant "Jabberwocky". The principle of the portmanteau word – "two meanings packed up into one word" (TAA, 271) – transforms every word in a junction leading in multiple directions, undertaking an infinite number of journeys, in the pursuit of the desire to create "a book that will not tell simply a story, but an ocean of stories"⁴⁰, the history of humanity itself. From this perspective, Joyce's choice is much more integral, radical, and pressing than Carroll's, though unraveling terms like "astroglodynamologos" (FW, 194.17) or "volupkabulary" (FW, 419.12) requires much more effort than Carroll's tamer 'slithy' or 'gyre'.

In so doing, Joyce discovers new grammatical, syntactical, and lexical potentialities, and invents a new language within language, a language in some ways foreign. Donald Davidson – the celebrated analytic philosopher – in an essay entitled "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty", wrote that in *Finnegans Wake*:

Joyce takes us back to the foundations and origins of communication; he puts us in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture, to assume the perspective of someone who is an alien or exile. As we, his listeners or readers, become familiar with the devices he has made us master, we find ourselves removed a certain distance from our own language, our usual selves, and our society. We join Joyce as outcasts, temporarily freed, or so it seems, from the nets of our language and our culture⁴¹.

Joyce believed his words to be '[w]ords of silent power' (FW, 345.19). He believed he possessed all words and that it was only a matter of prop-

⁴⁰ Michel Butor, *Introduction aux fragments de "Finnegans Wake"*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, p. 12.

⁴¹ Donald Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty", in *Proceedings of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters*, 1989, p. 56, reprinted in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16, Peter French, Theodore E. Uehling and Howard Wettstein, (eds.), University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, pp. 1-12.

erly arranging them in sequence, "in order to give his vocabulary the elasticity of sleep, to multiply the meaning of words, to permit the play of light and colour, and make of each sentence a rainbow to which each tiny drop is itself a many-hued prism"⁴². Almost echoing Humpty Dumpty's arrogant words – "When I use a word [...] it means just what I choose it to mean" – Joyce confessed to Eugene Jolas: "I have discovered that I can do anything with language I want"⁴³.

One may say that Joyce starts off from Humpty Dumpty's arrogant position, that is, the notion that a term can be used in entirely arbitrary ways and made to signify whatever one wants. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty attributes entirely arbitrary meanings to 'glory' and 'impenetrability', attracting the attention of many philosophers of language, semiologists, and linguists. In explaining to Alice why "un-birthday" presents are preferable to birthday ones, Humpty-Dumpty argues that in the first case one gets presents 364 days a year, whereas there is,

'only one [day] for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'

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

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

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

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

'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.' [...]

'Would you tell me, please', said Alice 'what that means?'

'Now you talk like a reasonable child', said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. 'I meant by "impenetrability" that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life.'

'That's a great deal to make one word mean', Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

'When I make a word do a lot of work like that', said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra.' (TAA, 268-70)

⁴² Patricia Hutchins, *James Joyce's World*, London, Methuen, 1957, p. 178.

⁴³ Seon Givens (ed.), *Two Decades of Joyce Criticism*, New York, The Vanguard Press, 1948, p. 13.

The complexity of thought that Humpty-Dumpty wishes to convey through the words 'glory' and 'impenetrability' is not reflected, however, by those terms and there is therefore the risk that, even after having explained them, Alice might be unable to grasp their full meaning. When the code is modified, the more complex and articulated the meaning one wishes to communicate, the higher the risk of generating uncertainty and confusion. Carroll seems aware that if "a lot of work" is required of a word, the word will fail to communicate to the interlocutor the entire meaning intended by the speaker. From this perspective, then, if a word contains too many heterogeneous ideas (as is constantly the case in *Finnegans Wake*), to the point that the interlocutor has difficulties remembering or imagining all of them, or grasping their totality in a single interpretative act, then one should avoid trying to condense it into a single term.

For this reason, the control that Humpty-Dumpty wishes to exert over words and meanings, adapting them to his necessities is an act of enormous presumption: meanings always elude the power of the speaker. Meaning travels according to routes that are completely independent of communicative intention, as shown by the "Jabberwocky", which preserves an illusion of sense notwithstanding its lack of referential meaning: "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas -- only I don't exactly know what they are." (TAA, 197). For this reason, Carroll assigns these words to a character eternally condemned to repeating the drama of his fall and whose destiny, which he pretends to ignore, is already entirely inscribed in a book of nursery-rhymes. Carroll himself in *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) confesses:

As to the meaning of the Snark? I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense! Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant⁴⁴.

Humpty-Dumpty presents himself as the grand master of words, the ruler of written poems and of those yet to be written, but in fact commits a great sin of pride and turns out to be an imposture. The impenetrability he refers to is equivalent to the fall he re/enacts: it is the failure

⁴⁴ Quoted in Evelyn Hatch (ed.), *A Selection from the Letters of Lewis Carroll to his Child-friends*, London, MacMillan, 1933, pp. 242-243.

to rigidly combine meaning and referent, the inevitable failure of any private language.

Through the many references, including metaphorical ones, to Humpty-Dumpty's fall in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce certainly wishes to stigmatize Humpty-Dumpty's presumption, what he considers as the character's linguistic fallacy. Also because Humpty-Dumpty's position might be taken as an authoritarian view of language in which the strongest impose their meaning. Joyce instead searches for a language that defies ownership, a language that precedes words themselves.

But in *Finnegans Wake* there are also positive references to Humpty-Dumpty who become symbols of the rise after the fall, a process destined to repeat itself endlessly. There is a strong undercurrent of justice, in his insistence on the right to attribute whatever meaning he wishes to a word, insofar as any discourse has, or should have, a degree of creativity tied to the autonomy of the speaker. From this perspective, Humpty-Dumpty's claim is a protest against all linguistic tyrannies that would impose a univocal sense on words; a gesture against the assumption that there are common meanings evident to and accepted by everyone, or that there is only one 'correct' meaning.

The possibility of intellectual and spiritual freedom fascinated Joyce throughout his life. One cannot fail to remember Joyce's countless programmatic statements about his drive to transcend the obstacles to expression created by existing languages. As Hugh Kenner wrote in reference to *Finnegans Wake*: "Joyce worked seventeen years to push the work away from 'meaning'; adrift back into language"⁴⁵. For this reason, animated by "a generalized desire to escape the authority of the word"⁴⁶, even in single words, even in the most common ones, Joyce tries to avoid specific, univocal, imposed meanings. Like Humpty-Dumpty ("I make a word do a lot of work"), Joyce demands a lot of his words, but at the same time, he, so to speak, allows them to freely produce their meaning, a plurality of meanings, in the profound belief that "the spirit of language was working through him of its own volition"⁴⁷. In other words, in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce sets in motion a semantic process he cannot control and that he does

⁴⁵ Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1955, p. 304.

⁴⁶ James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 10.

⁴⁷ James S. Acherton, *The Books at the Wake*, op. cit., p. 15.

not wish to control. The architecture of the work rests on the concept of "portmanteau word", whose polysemic and unstable nature undermines the concept of authorial intention. All readers can generate different readings, let themselves be carried away by assonances, by multiple connotations, leading in different and sometimes opposite directions. As Joyce himself wrote "every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypical readings" (FW 20.14).

The impossibility to impose a univocal meaning is counterpointed by the specular impossibility of interpretation. In the Sheep episode, in chapter V of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice can see what lies in front of her and behind her, but cannot look sideways:

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things – but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold. 'Things flow about so here!' she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at. (TAA, 253)

Whatever objects Alice tries to look at more closely shifts to the shelf above it and, once it reaches the last one, moves beyond the ceiling. The scene suggests the impossibility of arriving to precise and definitive meaning, because meaning continuously escapes us, remaining always inaccessible. Just as Alice cannot observe the object she wants, which appears before her only to escape her, so does meaning appear in every communicative act, yet remains beyond any specific interpretation. It can never be grasped in its essence, in its essence of meaning as such. Full understanding remains beyond human capability.

For his part, it is known that Joyce discouraged erudite exegesis and that he too believed, manipulating the Duchess's speech to Alice, that readers should "[t]ake care of the sounds and the sense will take care of itself." In *Finnegans Wake* too a professorial voice, in discussing the finding of Anna Livia Plurabelle's letter, warns us that interpreting a text is as inappropriate as imagining naked a woman we have just met:

to concentrate solely on the literal sense [...] of any document to the sore neglect of the enveloping facts themselves circumstantiating it is just as hurtful

to sound sense (and let it be added to the truest taste) as were some fellow in the act of perhaps getting an intro from another fellow turning out to be a friend in need of his, say, to a lady of the latter's acquaintance, engaged in performing the elaborative antecistral ceremony of upstheres, straightaway to run off and vision her plump and plain in her natural altogether preferring to close his blinkhard's eyes to the ethiquethical fact that she was, after all, wearing for the space of the time being some definite articles of evolutionary clothing, inharmonious creations, a captious critic might describe them as, or not strictly necessary or a trifle irritating here and there, but for all that suddenly full of local colour and personal perfume and suggestive, too, of so very much more and capable of being stretched, filled out, if need or wish were, of having their surprisingly like coincidental parts separated don't they now, for better survey by the deft hand of an expert, don't you know? (FW, 109.12-30)

Carroll has attracted a lot of attention from twentieth-century literature and especially from avant-garde movements. The surrealists, especially, welcomed him in their Pantheon, citing him in the first Surrealist Manifesto (1924), including him in the *Antologie de l'humour noir* (1939), writing essays on him, and translating his works. Carroll's humor was seen as an effective tool against all the ideologies and impositions of common sense. In their rejection of mimesis, their radical renunciation to the reproduction of reality through words, the avant-gardes have used nonsense as a tool to undermine language as an instrument of communication and representation, and to reveal what resists language, what remains unsayable and irrepresentable. The entire avant-garde, in all its movements and currents, has investigated the possibility of creating a new language capable of revealing the extraneousness of language.

For Joyce, as Artaud said about himself, it was necessary to "abandonner le langage et ses lois pour les tordre" and look for a "nouveau langage". It is perhaps significant that both these authors were interested in Carroll, even while distancing themselves from this strange Victorian pastor. For Joyce, as for Carroll, notwithstanding all the differences mentioned above, the question was not one of finding a language through which to communicate, understand and define. Rather the point was to "say" rather than to "say something". It is again Hugh Kenner who suggests that Joyce had his attention "fixed on people talking not on what the words "really" meant" ⁴⁸ because understanding goes hand in hand with

⁴⁸ Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce*, op. cit., p. 304.

not understanding, just as meaning or sense is accompanied by nonsense. For Carroll too nonsense is part of sense and it is for this reason that sense, while present, remains unattainable, like the empty spaces in the shelves in the shop of the Sheep. In order to exist, sense must always advance in this dual fashion, presenting at the same time its straight side and reverse side, which allows it to be always made explicit, yet never fully understood. As Deleuze argues, sense or meaning is always implied. In the very moment I begin to speak I imply and assume the existence of a meaning of what I am saying, yet I never say the meaning of what I say. In other words, nonsense is the true indication of sense, a path leading to sense that we never fully cover. This path is the one that Carroll and Joyce, in different ways, decided to explore through their works.

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