THE WORD MAGIC OF LEWIS CARROLL

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The smashing success of the Tim Burton-Johnny Depp film Alice in Wonderland is vivid evidence of our fascination with Lewis Carroll's work for almost a century and a half.

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All in a golden afternoon
Full leisurely we glide;
For both our oars, with little skill,
By little arms are plied,
While little hands make vain pretence
Our wanderings to guide.

Thus grew the tale of Wonderland:
Thus slowly, one by one,
Its quaint events were hammered out--
And now the tale is done,
And home we steer, a merry crew,
Beneath the setting sun.

On the fourth of July, 1862, a young Oxford don dressed in white flannels and straw boater took the day off to go a-rowing and go on a picnic with a Rev. Robinson Duckworth and three small girls. The don was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who was then, and for more than twenty-five years would remain, mathematical lecturer of Christ Church, and the girls were the daughters of Henry George Liddell, dean of the college.

On that "golden afternoon" ten-year-old Alice Liddell, the middle of the three sisters, begged, "Tell us a story, please," and Dodgson began to spin a dreamtale about another little girl named Alice who followed a white rabbit down a hole and into another world. "Oh, Mr. Dodgson, I wish you would write out Alice's adventures for me," Alice Liddell said before the boating party disbanded. Dodgson granted her wish and in 1865 published Alice's Adventures in Wonderland under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. Public response was so enthusiastic that the author was inspired to follow one masterpiece with another: Through the Looking-Glass appeared in 1871.

The stories of Alice's tumble down a rabbit hole and her adventures on the other side of the mirror are the classics most widely read and adored by both children and adults alike. Carroll has become one of our most quoted authors, and the archetypal characters in his work have become imprinted on world folklore. Alexander Woollcott wrote, "Not Tiny Tim, nor Falstaff, nor Rip Van Winkle, nor any other character wrought in the English tongue seems now a more permanent part of that tongue's heritage than do the high-handed Humpty Dumpty, the wistful Mad Hatter, the somewhat arbitrary Queen of Hearts, the evasive Cheshire Cat, and the gently pathetic White Knight." Why, we may ask, does the work of this girl-doting bachelor exert such a powerful hold on our collective imagination?
Although analyzing Carroll's fantasies is like trying to dissect a soap bubble, surely one source of their enduring appeal to children of all ages is their special sense of wonder about language. Just as Lewis Carroll, an adept amateur magician, made his life a brilliant entertainment through his parlor magic, so, in his writing, he created a magic show of words: words pulled out of hats, words sawed in half, words dancing in the air, words that disappear or show up in strange places and forms. Even his pen name is a complex anagram, Latinization, reversal, and retranslation of his Christian names: Charles Lutwidge to Edgar Cuthwellis to Carolus Ludovicus to Ludovicus Carolus to Lewis Carroll.

In his day-to-day life, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was a classic Victorian fussbudget who, whatever the season, always wore gloves (just like the White Rabbit) and a top hat outdoors. He was possessed by a rage for order that bordered on the pathological. For fifty years he kept meticulous summaries of every letter he ever wrote or received, more than a hundred thousand of them, and maintained a record of the many luncheons and dinners he gave throughout his sociable lifetime, with diagrams showing where each guest sat and lists of just what dishes he had served. But in the brief fantasies he created as Lewis Carroll this careful, ordered man challenged the fundamental assumptions of language and played hob with the basic order and structure of words.

Thus, in the Alice stories the young heroine declares that things are becoming "curiouser and curiouser," the Gryphon is disappointed that Alice, who knows what beautification is, does not know the meaning of uglification, and Humpty Dumpty receives an unbirthday present. In these examples, Carroll purposefully concocts eye-catching and ear-catching words by violating some of the basic conventions of word-formation. Curiouser strikes us as curious because English speakers do not generally add the ending -er to three-syllable adjectives, uglification flies in the face of the rule that -fication can't be attached to adjectives like ugly, and unbirthday seems odd because we seldom prefix -un to nouns. (Untruth and unrest are two exceptions, but they involve nouns of one syllable.) Yet curiouser has come to inhabit the lunatic fringe of our language, and the memorableness of unbirthday has been exploited by a soft drink company that wants us to imbibe its "uncola."

Carroll showed a particular aptitude for making up blends by merging two words and beheading parts of one or both. He called these inventions portmanteau words because he loved to scrunch two words into one as clothes are crammed into a portmanteau, or traveling bag. The most famous example of Lewis Carroll's facile gift for blending is his "Jabberwocky" poem, which begins:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

When Alice asks Humpty Dumpty to explain the word slithy, he answers: "Well slithy means 'lithe and slimy.' You see, it's like a portmanteau -- there are two meanings packed into one word." Dumpty later interprets mimsy: "Well, then, mimsy is 'flimsy and miserable' (there's..."
another portmanteau for you)." Two words that appear later in "Jabberwocky" have become enshrined in dictionaries of the English language -- *chortle* ("huckle" + "snort") and *galumph* ("gallop" + "triumph"). When we today eat Frogurt, drink Cranapple juice, and chew Dynamints, we are sharing Lewis Carroll's *ginormous* delight with portmanteau words.

During the years in which Lewis Carroll was standing language and logic on their heads, C. L. Dodgson was publishing mathematical works, the most famous of these being *Euclid and His Modern Rivals* (1879). Besides the Alice and Snark books, the forms of Lewis Carroll's creativity ranged from whimsical entertainment to mathematical riddles. Puzzles, games, logistic contortions, and symbolic manipulations leapt from his mind and into print, much to the pleasure of the English drawing room set. He wrote, "Mental recreation is a thing that we all need for our mental health," and he left his readers' heads spinning with such word games as Mischmasch, Lanrick, and Syzygies, all based on the rule that by changing a letter in a word, a different word can be produced.

His most popular word game, Doublets, was published regularly in *Vanity Fair* and became the rage of the 1870s. Here are some of Carroll's doublets, with directions as printed in *Vanity Fair*:

1. The words given to be linked together constitute a "Doublet." The interposed words are "links." The entire series is a "chain." The object is to complete the chain with the required number of links.

2. Each word in the chain must be formed from the preceding word by changing one letter in it, and only one. The substituted letter occupied in the preceding word, and all the other letters must retain their places.

One example that Carroll offered was the transmutation of HEAD to TAIL: HEAD-heal-teal-tell-tall-TAIL. In various *Vanity Fair* articles Carroll posed these additional challenges: 1. Drive PIG into STY. 2. Raise FOUR to FIVE. 3. Evolve MAN from APE. Answers repose at the end of this article.

Perhaps the most profound significance of Carroll's topsy-turvy world is contained in his attitude toward the very function of language, as seen in Chapter VI of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Alice complains to Humpty Dumpty, the large, articulate egg (soon to be an omelette):

"I don't understand what you mean by 'glory'":

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 a rather 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 the master -- that's all."

Such banter may sound like sheer nonsense, yet in its way it is quite profound. On the one side, Alice insists that there are limits to our freedom with words, that if you use *glory* to mean "a nice knock-down argument," rather than "fame" or "honor," no one will know what you are talking about. After all, if you mean "no" when you say "yes," you will appear to be a fool or a liar. If you use *hat* to mean "shoes," you are likely to get cold feet.

But on the other side, Humpty Dumpty is also right, for Alice's attitude that words can signify only what the dictionary says they do means thinking of language as being very rigid indeed. Carried to an extreme, Alice's philosophy rules out the use of irony, slang, fanciful words, and new expressive terms. After all, when somebody spills hot soup on your new suit or dress and you say, "That was a smart move," you are not using *smart* in any dictionary sense. When someone at some point decided that *Mickey Mouse* could mean "trivial or unworthy," rather than just the name of an animated cartoon star, he or she invented a meaning that was not enshrined in our lexicons.

Real, everyday language, then, is the result of a give-and-take between originality and the dictionary, an eternal dialectic between Humpty Dumpty and Alice. As Lewis Carroll and his thin-shelled spokes-egg realized, words are living, changing reflections of human attitudes, not dead and petrified artifacts. As long as we human beings remain alive, we shall shape, stretch, and recreate our language. And we shall draw delight and wisdom from the fantasies written by the shy Oxford don whose adopted name has become a synonym for a very special kind of magic.