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Lewis Carroll, *scientifictionist* (Part II)

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Abstract

Considers Carroll “as a writer of science fiction, as a forerunner (in a general way) of Lewis and other SF writers.” Cites examples from a number of Carroll’s works.

Additional Keywords

Carroll, Lewis—Relation to Science Fiction; Science fiction in Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll, scientifictionist (Part II)

Joe R. Christopher

The two science-fictional episodes in Sylvie and Bruno Concluded unfortunately occur in an anticlimactic order, so I am arbitrarily discussing them out of sequence. Near the end of the book, the Professor gives his long-delayed science lecture in Outland (Ch. 21, "The Professor's Lecture," with a brief conclusion in Ch. 22, "The Banquet"). Carroll plays this for burlesque, perhaps because he (as Dodgson) was troubled by the teaching of science at Oxford University, as is shown by his letter, "Natural Science at Oxford," published in the Pall Mall Gazette, 19 May 1877.¹¹ The lecture consists of some Axioms, the exhibition of Specimens, the explanation of a Process, and a few Experiments. The tone is suggested by this passage about Axioms:

'An Axiom, you know, is a thing which you accept without contradiction. For instance, if I were to say "Here we are!", that would be accepted without any contradiction, and it's a nice sort of remark to begin a conversation with. So it would be an Axiom. Or again, supposing I were to say, "Here we are not!", that would be--'

'--a fib!' cried Bruno.

'Oh, Bruno!' said Sylvie in a warning whisper. 'Of course it would be an Axiom, if the Professor said it!'

'--that would be acceptable, if people were civil,' continued the Professor; 'so it would be another Axiom.'

'It might be an Axledum.' Bruno said: 'but it wouldn't be true!' [S&B, Ch. 21]

Not all of the lecture is this poor, but the above suggests the reduction of science which Carroll thinks is funny. Bruno is presumably meant to function like the small boy in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, or perhaps like a more judgmental Gulliver in a milder Grand Academy of Lagado; but his comments undercut what might be taken as an amusing parody by raising moral issues. (Alice did not spend her time in Wonderland flatly denouncing others as liars.) Parody--I do not think Carroll reaches the level of Swiftian satire--should be allowed to make its own comment in its own way.

During the exhibition of Specimens, the Professor shows an elephant which, under a minimifying-glass or Megaloscope, appears--and then is--small as a mouse and stands on the palm of the Professor's hand; likewise, a Flea, with the viewing tubes on the Megaloscope reversed, is the size of a horse; it gets out of the compartment and leaps away. Perhaps the latter episode can be held parallel to the giant insects which infested SF movies in the 1950s. Actually, the comparison to a modern dramatic form is not displaced: the whole of the Professor's lecture reads much like a nar-

rative version of a Victorian stage entertainment, combining slapstick and magic, and ending with a literal explosion as the Professor's final Experiment blows up. Dodgson was an inveterate theater goer (surprising in his age for a clergyman), but the general level of dramas in the Victorian Period was not high--and "The Professor's Lecture" (if I am correct about its theatrical resemblances) does nothing to alter one's view of the time.

In the Sylvie and Bruno books, there are several sets of characters--with one in Outland, the other in England--who are thematically tied together by blends (as the narrator enters or leaves the "eerie" state) or by verbal echoes--Lady Muriel and Sylvie are one example, and the Professor and Mein Herr (he has no other name) are another. So it is with some appropriateness that the science fiction in Sylvie and Bruno Concluded involves only the Professor and Mein Herr.

The latter shows up at two social occasions only. He is a "venerable old man--a German obviously--"who has a "magificent beard" (S&BC, Ch. 7, "Mein Herr"). A hint about his extra-terrestrial origin occurs on the second occasion. He is speaking of a friend of his who, via balloon, visited a planet so small that one could walk all the way around it in twenty minutes. The account of a battle on it, which he gives, suffers from the same problem as the mock battle on Gulliver's handkerchief in Lilliput: the space seems inadequate for the events narrated. (How could such a small planet--or asteroid?--support two armies, or even contain a full-scale battle?) Also, the account of shooting around the planet implies a heavier gravitational force than the size suggests (simply to keep the bullets from going into outer space). Mein Herr goes on to report on this small planet's government, and then--

'You say you are "told" what happens in this planet,' I said. 'May I venture to guess that you yourself are a visitor from some other planet?'

Bruno clapped his hands in his excitement. 'Is oo the Man-in-the-Moon?' he cried.

Mein Herr looked uneasy. 'I am not in the Moon, my child,' he said evasively. [S&BC, Ch. 11, "The Man in the Moon"]

Later that evening Mein Herr discusses the introduction of "the British Principle" (of having opposition within an institution, taken from the two parties in Parliament) into the Army in his nation--which led to a military defeat.

...large tears began to roll down his cheeks. ... 'This caused a Revolution; and most of the Government were banished. I myself was accused of Treason, for having so strongly advocated "the British

Principle". My property was all forfeited, and--and--I was driven into exile! "Now the mischief's done," they said, "perhaps you'll kindly leave the country?" It nearly broke my heart, but I had to go! [S&BC, Ch. 13, "What Tottles Meant"]

This is all that Carroll gives by way of background, but it is enough to indicate the subtype within the science-fictional field. In the nineteenth century and for at least two centuries earlier, the use of the Moon as a setting for social satire is wide spread. William Blake left in manuscript "An Island in the Moon" (c. 1787), for example, where the island is obviously Great Britain.²² Mein Herr's reference to a friend's balloon voyage to a small planet is in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" (1835; rev. 1840). The combination of such materials indicates that Carroll knew the tradition, slightly outdated as it was by his day.

But the point of the tradition is satire, and Carroll has some of that, as well as (typically) other things--paradoxes, quibbles, and extrapolations. In Mein Herr's first appearance, for afternoon tea (Ch. 7), he suggests to Lady Muriel the sewing of a Fortunatus' purse from three handkerchiefs--it would be a version of the Klein bottle, probably, if it could be done, with topologically no inside or outside. He refers to a Möbius strip (or an Afghan band, for magicians) in the discussion, although he uses no technical names. The discussion of this purse--a purse which contains all the world--leads to a discussion of Time which has been wasted.

'Well, in my--I mean in a country I have visited,' said the old man, 'they store it up: and it comes in very useful, years afterwards!'

Typical of Carroll's humor in the Alice books and elsewhere, this is little more than a quibble on the phrase about "wasting time," a taking of a metaphor literally. The hesitancy of Mein Herr to say that it is his country is used again in the second conversation--an obvious enough device, but effective in the tea-table and dinner settings.

The Earl was listening with a slightly incredulous smile. 'Why cannot you explain the process?' he enquired.

Mein Herr was ready with a quite unanswerable reason. 'Because you have no words, in your language, to convey the ideas which are needed. I could explain it in--in--but you would not understand it!'

'No indeed!' said Lady Muriel, graciously dispensing with the name of the unknown language. 'I never learnt it--at least, not to speak it fluently, you know. ...'¹³

So far this first conversation has introduced some paradoxes in connection with Fortuna's purse and a verbal ingenuity. The rest of the

first conversation is about at this level. Mein Herr describes railroad trains without engines: the tunnels from one place to another run in straight lines through the ground--gravity pulls the trains down for the first half of the trip and they coast up for the second half; no one mentions friction and wind resistance. Mein Herr describes a method of avoiding runaway horses which end with upset carriages: the horse is in a space in the middle of the carriage, and if he gets frightened, he can be raised off the ground by a belt under him attached to a windlass--and thus his galloping cannot upset the carriage. By this point, Mein Herr has dropped the pretense of having visited this country, and is now speaking of "our" practices. His final comment is about unmatched oval wheels on their carriages, which give the passengers the benefits of a rolling sea voyage without any danger of drowning. Perhaps, of the matters mentioned in this conversation, the raisable horse is intended as a semi-serious suggestion; the engineless train would not work, and an unsteady carriage, with its probable creation of "sea"-sickness, seems unlikely to have wide-spread popularity. Obviously the last idea is intended as an odd and amusing custom of "foreigners."

The second conversation is at a dinner party ten days later. It begins in Chapter Nine, "The Farewell-Party"; continues in the latter part of Chapter Ten, "Jabbering and Jam," in Chapter Eleven (already mentioned), Chapter Twelve, "Fairly-Music," and Chapter Thirteen (also previously mentioned); and concludes very briefly and rather disappointingly--much as conversations at parties are often interrupted or broken off--at the start of Chapter Sixteen, "Beyond These Voices." There is no reason to trace the topics here in the same detail as above, but a brief survey will suggest the approach. Mein Herr tells of methods tried for introducing matters of interest and novelty for conversation at dinner parties, including a split, revolving, circular table, at which guests in the center moved one way and those on the outside the other--so one had new persons to talk to throughout. Later, after dinner, Mein Herr refuses to be drawn about his age; he tells about people being bred for lightness, so that no one ever sinks into water and drowns. (There have been some later SF stories in which Artificial Selection is used on humans, as in Robert A. Heinlein's Methuselah's Children (1941 serial; rev. 1958 book), where financial rewards cause some people to breed for longevity.) Mein Herr tells of getting money back from the government for mailing a package because the packing--"cotton-wool" he calls it, presumably meaning the raw cotton--has been bred for lightness until it is lighter than air; if a person must pay to mail a heavy package, then the government must pay him for mailing one with a negative weight. Mein Herr tells of a map of his country (he is back to admitting he is talking about his country again) inspired by British maps, but on the scale of a mile to a mile; the farmers objected to it being opened out. On his friend's visit to a small planet (to echo Gore Vidal's title for an SF television script of c. 1955), the friend found a government consisting of a number of kings and a single subject--kings who made con-

tradictory laws. Mein Herr, who once taught in a university in his country, tells of their esteem for the most obscure teachers, and of a phase for preparing students only for examinations--without other knowledge--followed by a phase of rewarding students for each good answer in class with a coin; finally, the Heads of Colleges would meet the trains of students coming to the University and chase down and capture the good students for their individual Colleges. Later, Mein Herr mentions examinations for scholars at the end of thirty or forty years instead at the end of three or four years at the University. He also discusses the application of the British Theory of Political Dichotomy (this is the British Principle mentioned above) to his country's government, agriculture, commerce, and military, reducing three of them to impotence and being dropped in the other area (commerce).

What is a reader to make of all these? Some of them, like the revolving dinner table, are impractical but not necessarily nonsense. (One thinks of the emphasis on the circulation of guests at some cocktail parties.) Several of them, such as the breeding for lightness or the large maps are procedures (selective breeding) or ideas (detailed maps) extended to absurdity. The discussions of university affairs and of political parties have more of a satiric edge. Carroll's treatment of methods of teaching going through phases may be exaggerated, but not extremely ("...something tells me we are further on than you in the eternal cycle of change--and that many a theory we have tried and found to fail, you also will try, with a wilder enthusiasm: you also will find to fail, with a bitterer despair!"); the exaggeration is for entertainment, but a generally valid point remains. And the recruitment of the better students by top universities--and sometimes the recruitment of any students by average universities--may not have reached the level of the Cub-Hunts at the train stations which Mein Herr describes; but certainly they are more intense with brochures and other mailings--and with scholarships--than what seems to be Carroll's ideal: "...the Colleges competed against each other, and the boys let themselves out to the highest bidder! What geese we were! Why, they were bound to come to the University somehow. We needn't have paid 'em!" The ruination of the country from the introduction of a two-party system throughout says something about Carroll's view of British politics in his day: each party was more interested in the frustration of the other's programs than it was in the good of the country (Mein Herr quotes some British newspaper clippings to back this up). Carroll projects this attitude into other areas, but with the implication that by seeing the impotence there, one will see Britain's political impotence more clearly. Here, most obviously, is the old tradition of the Lunar society used for satire.

Is there any final estimation of Lewis Carroll's science fiction which a reader may make? Certainly, as the earlier and later parallels in this paper have suggested, it is within the SF tradition; but is there any more general point to be made? Perhaps a comparison to the

science fiction by C. S. Lewis is the best way to end this paper. Both wrote SF poems (C. S. Lewis's "Science-Fiction Cradlesong," for example). Both wrote a clear-cut SF short story apiece (C. S. Lewis's "Ministering Angel"). If Lewis did not write a paragraph of geometric science fiction, none the less he occasionally borrowed from Flatland to illustrate points in his expository works. Lewis's two borrowings from an SF story for The Great Divorce (the second footnoted in the English edition, not the American) may, for our purposes, be equated with Carroll's A Tangled Tale. And both wrote novel sequences which, among other elements, contain SF, perhaps the Ransom Trilogy more than the Sylvie and Bruno duo; both novel sequences use SF at times for satire, and both are conservative works within the genre.¹⁴ But the main point is not that these are parallel science-fictional careers so much as that these two Oxford authors were primarily writers of fantasy--of the two Alice books, of the Narnian heptalogy and Till We Have Faces. Their science fiction is an interesting part of their work, but--even for Lewis, perhaps; clearly for Dodgson--it is not the most important part. Dodgson's SF is interesting in the nineteenth century--so much so that one wishes an academic anthology would pick the Mein Herr conversations out of Sylvie and Bruno Concluded to draw attention to his contribution--but, if all his science fiction were lost, Dodgson would still be immortal as Lewis Carroll, author of Alice's Adventures.

Notes

¹¹A dislike of science, or some aspects of science, is not a necessary limitation in an SF writer, as is shown in the early work of Ray Bradbury and C. S. Lewis's views of scientism. A work which raises basic questions about the value of technology and which has a high repute within the SF field is A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959), by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

¹²Marjorie Hope Nicholson's Voyages to the Moon (1948) surveys the English works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although she does not mention Blake--perhaps because his work is not a voyage but just set (in theory) on the Moon. In Nicholls' The Science Fiction Encyclopedia, under "The Moon" listing, there are a number of works mentioned, including some of the nineteenth and many of the twentieth century (Blake is still omitted). Nicholson spots the use of Mein Herr by Carroll (although she attributes him to Sylvie and Bruno, not the second volume), but Nicholls (actually Brian Stableford, who wrote that listing) misses him (as does John Clute, who wrote the "Lewis Carroll" listing). This omission in The Science Fiction Encyclopedia suggests that Carroll's SF is not generally known in the SF community.

¹³Nicholson (cited in footnote 12) says that this excuse of language difficulties is typical of the early SF tradition.

¹⁴The conservatism of Lewis has not been illustrated, but some aspects of his use of past works are mentioned by Nicholson in her "Epilogue."

¹⁵Logically, this paper should have a second part which discusses the use science-fiction writers have made of Dodgson's works, primarily the Alice books. But I do not know enough to do more than suggest in this footnote a few beginning place. There are a number of works I have not read. For example, Kate Wilhelm's "With Thimbles, with Forks and Hope" (1981) takes its title from The Hunting of the Snark (1876), but I know nothing of its content. Titles are sometimes misleading. Henry Kuttner's "The Voice of the Lobster" (1950) has nothing Carolingian. On the other hand, Evan H. Appelman's "'Twas Brillig" (1951) has a functional title in terms of meaning, but without allusion to Carroll's works.

Henry Kuttner wrote at least two stories with Carolingian content. In "The Fairy Chessmen" (1946, as by Lewis Padgett), there are at least an allusion each to Carroll and to Through the Looking-glass--although Kuttner incorrectly has a character think that Lewis Carroll had "a thoroughly elastic mind, one not bound by conventional values." Kuttner's more famous Carolingian story, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" (1943, as by Lewis Padgett)--in which Dodgson appears briefly as "Uncle Charles"--also has a flaw: it assumes that the introductory stanza of "Jabberwocky" was told Dodgson by some young pre-Alice "in the latter half of the nineteenth century"; actually, it was written in 1855 (which barely fits the allotted time) at Croft, Yorkshire (where Dodgson's father was parish priest from 1843 until his death in 1868). Dodgson was about 23 when he wrote that stanza, and there is no reason to think he was, as yet, cultivating the friendships of little girls. Since Dodgson started keeping a diary in 1854, this is fairly certain. (The diary had not been published when Kuttner wrote his story, of course.) I should add, to be strictly correct, that Dodgson had an eye for girls' beauty and character even then--cf. the entries in his diary for 21 August, 27 August, 4 September, and 11 September. The use of "Uncle Charles" probably only occurs later; Dodgson certainly signed a letter to Isa Bowman that way on 4 April 1889.

The mention of a proto-Alice reminds me that Alice Liddell is revived from death in Philip José Farmer's Riverworld Tetralogy--To Your Scattered Bodies Go (1971), The Fabulous Riverboat (1971), The Dark Design (1977), and The Magic Labyrinth (1980); perhaps a fictional version of Alice's non-fictional self is worth mentioning. And the appearance of Dodgson in "Mimsy Were the Borogoves" is a suitable enough reason to mention his appearance in the thirty-fourth chapter of Robert A. Heinlein's The Number of the Beast (1980)--Don Sherwin has a review of this chapter in Jabberwocky, 10:2/46 (Spring 1981), 50-51 (he does not comment on Dodgson's lack of a stutter when talking with strange adults--something I wondered about--nor has he noted how Heinlein condenses Dodgson's career, combining the episode of tale-telling to the Liddell sisters, 1862, and an interest in sorites--Dodgson's interest in logic began later, I believe, and one finds his discussion of "sorites" in The Game of Logic, 1887).

Perhaps as an associational item from the SF field, Pawn to Infinity (1982) is an anthology edited by Fred Saberhagen, with Joan Saber-

hagen. I do not think any of the science-fictional chess stories mention Carroll, but the final item in the book is an essay on the chess moves in Through the Looking-glass.

And then there are the ones which got away. There was a paperback called Alice's World perhaps ten years ago; I ordered it after a late review suggested its connection with Alice's Adventures, but it had gone out of print. I no longer have the author's name (I think he was European), although I could start looking through the Cumulative Book Index. Also, I am haunted by the memory of a story (in the later days of Astounding or the early days of Analog, I think) which began "The Slithy Toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe"--it was a spaceship coming out of hyperspace.

Mythopoesis,

continued from page 27

Smaug, as an example of favorable derivation, has a fairly obvious line of literary pregenitors. The dragon in Heinlein's Glory Road is equally derivative, but unfavorably so. The difference lies with the imaginations of the authors. Tolkien said "I desired dragons." One cannot hear Heinlein saying that. The desire for such things, in and of themselves, justifies its presence in the tale. The use of such things, because they traditionally appear in that kind of story, only makes its presence in the tale sound hollow.

Who would accuse C.S. Lewis of "using" Christ in forming Aslan? The writer obviously had deep feelings for the Original and its derivative, a feeling which made Aslan native to Narnia. The links the writer's imagination desires to make should not be denied, should not be condemned. A surprising (to the writer) connection between two previously separate, though enjoyed, ideas should be encouraged for the fruit it may bear. Who could imagine Middle-earth without hobbits? Yet Tolkien originally meant them to be two different things. His affection for both refused to acknowledge the barrier, and he suddenly found his comfortable, homey hobbits dropped into High Matters dear to his heart.

An individual's progress in mythopoesis is not and should not be predictable. If it were, we would never have had, let alone be able to love Frodo the Ringbearer. The surprises of derivation in the process of mythopoesis are the Creator's gift of delight to the Sub-Creator.

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