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Lewis Carroll, scientifictionist

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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

Joe R. Christopher

In a science-fiction novel published in England in 1945, probably written in 1943, and laid in the future--in the post-World War II years--and involving such science-fictional topics as the keeping alive of heads of dead persons, unlimited vivisectional experiments, a report of life under the surface of the Moon, a discussion of "scientific" objectivity, the process of establishing a dictatorship in England under the guise of establishing a scientific institute, a scientific creation of God, and a visit to earth by interplanetary personages--in short, in That Hideous Strength--a sociologist named Mark Gainsby Studdock comments, upon being asked to write some newspaper reports of a riot which, as yet, has not taken place, "Well, I admit I had a faint prejudice for [waiting for a thing to happen before I tell the story of it], not living in Mr. Dunne's sort of time nor in looking-glass land."¹ This minor allusion to Alice's Adventures is both appropriate and inappropriate for this paper. It is appropriate in that it establishes a relationship between Lewis Carroll's writings and science fiction, but it is inappropriate in so far as it involves a fantasy by Lewis Carroll--a dream vision, technically--not a science-fiction work. Instead, this paper deals with Carroll himself as a writer of science fiction, as a forerunner (in a general way) of C. S. Lewis and other twentieth-century SF writers.²

On this sesquicentenary of Lewis Carroll's birth, it seems appropriate to celebrate his being something as up-to-date as a science-fiction writer, but it must be admitted that his earliest work in this mode is not very accurate in its science, confusing planets and stars. I refer to a poem, "Facts," which appears in Useful and Instructive Poetry (ms., 1845; pub., 1954), written when Carroll was thirteen and intended as entertainment for a younger brother and sister. This, of course, was before Charles Lutwidge Dodgson had reversed his first two names in 1856 and made his pseudonym out of them. The poem may be taken to be a forerunner of today's unmanned rocket probes:

Were I to take an iron gun,
And fire it off towards the sun;
I grant 'twould reach its mark at last,
But not till many years had passed.

But should that bullet change its force,
And to the planets take its course;
'Twould never reach the nearest star,
Because it is so very far.

Besides the confusion of planets and stars, the time in the poem needed for the missile to reach the sun seems dubious (unless Dodgson decided the earth's gravity would slow it down, without quite stopping it), and the word force seems more for rhyme than accuracy. Obviously, a bullet from "an iron gun" in the nineteenth century was not really going to escape the

earth's gravity, but it is useful to remember that Jules Verne, in From the Earth to the Moon (De la terre à la lune, 1865), twenty years later, was still firing rockets from the equivalent of cannons.

Carroll produced other household "magazines" like Useful and Instructive Poetry, later bound as books (and only published as books after Carroll's death), but there is little in them that fits the limits of this paper. The next one, The Rectory Magazine (ms., late 1845; pub., 1975), has a poem "Terrors" by B.B. (one of Dodgson's pseudonyms in the magazine) which has some planets which speak in the first quatrain, but the poem is about a train drawing near, not about interplanetary communication. The Comet, The Rosebud, The Star, and The Will-o'-the-Wisp were subsequent Dodgson household magazines, but they have not been published and perhaps no longer survive. (It is interesting that two of their titles involve astronomy.) In The Rectory Umbrella (ms., 1849-50; pub., 1932) appear such factual materials as an essay--"Difficulties, No. 1"--on where on the globe the day changes its date--a legitimate problem in those days before the international date line; and some non-factual essays, such as the "Zoological Papers" on "The Lory" (No. 2), "Fishes" (No. 3), and "The One-Winged Dove" (No. 4). But these essays are not science fiction.

Mischmasch (ms. 1855-62; pub., 1932) was the last of these works; however, it turned into a scrapbook of Dodgson's writings, rather than a manuscript magazine. In it is pasted a copy of "Photography Extraordinary," originally published in The Comic Times, on 3 November 1855, about a year after Dodgson received his Bachelor of Arts at Oxford and the same year as he became the Mathematical Lecturer of Christ Church College. "Photography Extraordinary" is Dodgson's first piece of real SF, and (so far as I know) it is the only one of his writings which has been reprinted in an SF magazine--The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, October 1957. Anthony Boucher, the editor, wrote of "this little-known science-fictional sketch, in which the mathematician-creator of Wonderland uses a surprising sort of Victorian electroencephalogram to satirize the novels of his (and every) era."³ Dodgson's interest in photography is well known--Helmut Gernsheim calls him the "outstanding photographer of children in the nineteenth century" and, after Julia Margaret Cameron, "probably the most distinguished amateur portraitist of the mid-Victorian era."⁴ Dodgson wrote this story at the beginning of his photographic career, and it involves a mild young man whose mind is connected by "a mesmeric rapport" with the glass plate in the camera. (Poe also had a tendency to do unlikely things with mesmerism--hypnotism--in his stories slightly earlier in the century.) The plate is developed three times, each time with stronger chemicals. The first time, the young

man's thoughts produce an anecdote (not a picture, as one would expect) in what is called "the Milk-and-Water School of Novels"--all three times, the anecdote is about a man who has just had his proposal of marriage refused. The second time, the same episode is handled in "the strong-minded or Matter-of-Fact School"; the third, the same sequence appears in "the Spasmodic or German School." Dodgson is, of course, using SF for satiric purposes; if his novelistic satire seems mild to his reader (as it probably will), none the less it is within the tradition of, for example, The Space Merchants (1953), by C. M. Kornbluth and Frederik Pohl, with its satire of advertising.

Although The Dynamics of a Parti-cle (pamphlet, 1865) is the first of his works considered which follows Dodgson's adoption of his pseudonym, it is one of his anonymously issued works which satirizes Oxford situations. What interests me in it, however, is not the comments on the political struggle for the university Parliamentary seat, but the first paragraph, which is supposed to be quoted from another work:

It was a lovely Autumn evening, and the glorious effects of chromatic aberration were beginning to show themselves in the atmosphere as the earth revolved away from the great western luminary, when two lines might have been observed wending their weary way across a plane superficies. The elder of the two had by long practice acquired the art, so painful to young and impulsive loci, of lying evenly between his extreme points; but the younger, in her girlish impetuosity, was ever longing to diverge and become an hyperbola or some such romantic and boundless curve. They had lived and loved: fate and the intervening superficies had hitherto kept them asunder, but this was no longer to be: a line had intersected them, making the two interior angles together less than two right angles. It was a moment never to be forgotten, and, as they journeyed on, a whisper thrilled along the superficies in isochronous waves of sound, 'Yes! We shall at length meet if continually produced!' (Jacobi's Course of Mathematics, Chap. I)

I am not certain how to reconcile the globe of the earth established in the third clause of the first sentence and the plane on which non-parallel lines may be extended until they meet which is the setting of the main episode; but, with that quibble aside, this paragraph seems to be a forerunner of Edwin A. Abbott's Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (originally under the pseudonym of A. Square, 1884).⁵ This work is usually considered one of the minor but enduring pieces of SF--it is listed in both Neil Barron's Anatomy of Wonder: Science Fiction (1976) and Peter Nicholls' The Science Fiction Encyclopedia (1979), for example. It is true that C. S. Lewis once asked, "Would you describe Abbott's Flatland as science fiction?"--a question which was not answered in that transcribed conversation; but he also said of his copy, "The original manuscript of the Iliad could not be more precious."⁶ At least, if

Flatland is SF, so is Dodgson's paragraph. Perhaps it is safe to say that both authors extrapolate life on another plane of existence. (The Dynamics of a Parti-cle, by the way, appeared in the same year as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.)

Finally we reach a "Lewis Carroll" book proper--A Tangled Tale (1885). This is an episodic fiction, originally published in The Monthly Packet in ten installments between 1880 and 1885, with each of the ten chapters containing one or more problems (usually mathematical) for the original readers to solve. (The solutions are at the back of the book version.) Perhaps I should argue that since this is fiction embodying science (mathematics), then this is science fiction. In that case, I could also make a case for Euclid and His Modern Rivals (by C. L. Dodgson, 1879, rev. 1885), which has some witty dialogues about geometry in it. But there is one passage in A Tangled Tale which goes beyond mathematical puzzles amusingly presented into some type of extrapolation.

'Take your places on the spring-boards!' shouted a porter.

'What are they for?' Clara asked in a terrified whisper.

'Merely to help us into the trains.' The elder lady spoke with the nonchalance of one quite used to the process. 'Very few people can get into a carriage without help in less than three seconds, and the trains only stop for one second.' At this moment the whistle was heard, and two trains rushed into the station. A moment's pause, and they were gone again; but in that brief interval several hundred passengers had been shot into them, each flying straight to his place with the accuracy of a Minie bullet--while an equal number were showered out upon the side-platform.⁹

Since the rest of the book is not laid in the future, this can hardly be a depiction of train boardings-to-come. Presumably, it is merely a satiric exaggeration of the short stopping of some trains in Carroll's day--not "If This Goes On" so much as "It's Almost This Bad." As a technological extrapolation, however, surely this brief episode must be called science fiction.

After these snippets from The Dynamics of a Parti-cle and A Tangled Tale, it is a relief to turn to Carroll's last major work, his two volumes to Sylvie and Bruno (1889) and Sylvie and Bruno Concluded (1893). This is a complicated fiction, combining a real-life Victorian romance, a fantasy-world adventure of the titular children, and a few episodes of science fiction (but some true episodes, not just a paragraph here and there). This combination of an adult romance, fantasy, and science fiction may sound like That Hideous Strength, but Carroll's sentimentality, love of verbal quibbles, and diminutive fairies, on the one hand, and Lewis's comprehension of evil, superior sense of fictional structure, and use of the Arthurian mythos, on the other, make for ulti-

mately very different works.

Four science-fictional elements, two from Sylvie and Bruno and two from Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, will be discussed here (with two minor matters stuffed into a footnote); this will, I believe, exhaust Lewis Carroll's SF. The first and briefest of these four is a conversation at a tea table about the experience of no gravity, of free fall. This forerunner of the situation of today's spacemen is not dramatized, just discussed, so this may not qualify as SF, but certainly it shows a scientific imagination. Some excerpts:

'One can easily imagine a situation,' said Arthur, 'where things would necessarily have no weight, relatively to each other, though each would have its usual weight, looked at by itself.'

.....

'Well, suppose this house, just as it is, placed a few billion miles above a planet, and with nothing else near enough to disturb it: of course it falls to the planet?'

The Earl nodded. 'Of course--though it might take some centuries to do it.'

'And is five-o'clock tea to be going on all the while?' said Lady Muriel.

'That, and other things,' said Arthur. 'The inhabitants would live their lives, grow up and die, and still the house would be falling, falling, falling! ...'

Arthur clarifies that all objects in the house would be falling at the same rate, thus fulfilling his original situation. The conversation goes on:

'There is a more curious idea yet,' I ventured to say. 'Suppose a cord fastened to the house, from below, and pulled down by some one on the planet. Then of course the house goes faster than its natural rate of falling: but the furniture--with our noble selves--would go on falling at their old pace, and would therefore be left behind.'

'Practically, we should rise to the ceiling,' said the Earl. 'The inevitable result of which would be concussion of brain.'

'To avoid that,' said Arthur, 'let us have the furniture fixed to the floor, and ourselves tied down to the furniture. Then the five-o'clock-tea could go on in peace.'

'With one little drawback!' Lady Muriel gaily interrupted. 'We should take the cups down with us: but what about the tea?'

'I had forgotten the tea,' Arthur confessed. 'That, no doubt, would rise to the ceiling--unless you chose to drink it on the way!' [S&B, Ch. 8, "A Ride on

a Lion"]

It seems odd (at least to modern, more experienced imaginations) that no one suggests moving the tea things to the ceiling and making it the ad hoc floor.⁹

The second science-fictional element in Sylvie and Bruno is not a conversation but a pocket watch. This is not what is considered today "hard-core science fiction" (as in the Known Space series of Larry Nivens) but science-fantasy. In short, the watch is magical, brought to England from Outland (a country fairly near to Fairyland); but its effect is like science-fictional time travel: as the possessor turns the hands back, he moves back in time.¹⁰ It is "a square gold watch, with six or eight hands" (S&B, Ch. 21, "Through the Ivory Door"). Its attributes: (a) it cannot be turned forward, into the future; (b) it can be turned as much as a month into the past; (c) if it is turned to the past, it can then be brought back to the moment when it was first moved; (d) it has a "Reversal Peg" which, if pushed, makes an hour's events happen in reverse order. There are two powers about which there seems to be some uncertainty. The Professor (a character from Outland), when he loans the watch to the narrator, says the Reversal Peg makes "the events of the next hour happen in reverse order" (my stress), but when the narrator tries it, he causes the events of the previous period to happen that way (S&B, Ch. 23, "An Outlandish Watch"). Likewise, the Professor, in speaking of living over the events of the previous month (or less) again, says, "And then you have the events all over again--with any alterations experience may suggest." Although this does not say the alterations are permanent, it certainly seems to imply it. But when the narrator tries it, the alterations are impermanent: he sees a bicyclist fall, with his head hitting against the wheel of a wagon. He resets the watch, removes the box the bicyclist was trying to avoid hitting, and watches him pedal around the corner and on down the street--but when the time gets back to the moment of reversal, there is the cyclist with his bloody head again. Perhaps the narrator does not understand all the details of the resetting procedure. (I have sometimes wondered if John Fowles was influenced by this watch when, in the final chapter of The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969), the authorial figure resets his watch to provide for the second meeting of Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff.)

Perhaps the most interesting of the passages with the Outlandish watch is that set up by the Reversal Peg:

When the needle-work had been unfolded, and they [three daughters of a family] were all ready to begin, their mother said 'Come, that's done, at last! You may fold up your work, girls.' But the children took no notice whatever of the remark; on the contrary, they set to work at once sewing--if that is the proper word to describe an operation such as I had never before witnessed. Each of them threaded her needle with a short end of thread attached

to the work, which was instantly pulled by an invisible force through the stuff, dragging the needle after it: the nimble fingers of the little sempstress caught it at the other side, but only to lose it again the next moment. And so the work went on, steadily undoing itself, and the neatly-stitched little dresses, or whatever they were, steadily falling to pieces. Now and then one of the children would pause, as the recovered thread became inconveniently long, wind it on a bobbin, and start again with another short end.

At last all the work was picked to pieces and put away, and the lady led the way into the next room, walking backwards, and making the insane remark 'Not yet, dear: we must get some sewing done first.' After which, I was not surprised to see the children skipping backwards after her, exclaiming 'Oh, mother, it is such a lovely day for a walk!' [S&B, Ch. 23]

Of course, the speeches in a literal experience of reversed time would be pronounced backwards also, but within the communication limits of popular fiction (that is, a work which could be read aloud to a family in those days before TV), this is nicely done. And, despite its domestic setting, this may be taken as a forerunner of the delightful passage in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (a semi-science-fictional novel, itself) in which Billy Pilgrim sees, from his perspective of being unstuck in time, a war movie backwards: he sees bombs being sucked up by planes which take them to an airfield, after which the bombs are shipped back to the U.S. and carefully dismantled; the ores at last are hidden away in the ground.

NOTES

¹That Hideous Strength, ch. 6, sec. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1946, p. 145; New York: Macmillan Paperbacks Ed., 1965, p. 130).

²The title's "scientifictionist" is an adaptation of C. S. Lewis's preferred form of scientifiction for science fiction; Lewis got it from Hugo Gernsbach's early SF magazines. Despite it being a twentieth century term, I thought it had a nineteenth-century ring. A historically accurate term for a last-century writer of SF is "scientific romancer"; but Carroll is much more of an anatomist than a romancer (to use Northrop Frye's classifications), so I decided on Lewis's term.

³F&SF, 13:4 (October 1957), 83. Please forgive the egotism, but I would like to point out that Boucher, in his introduction, thanks me for drawing his attention to the story.

⁴Helmut Gernsheim, Lewis Carroll: Photographer (1950); quoted in Derek Hudson, Lewis Carroll: An Illustrated Biography (1977), p. 86.

⁵I find it odd that in the five biographies of Carroll I have on my shelves, none mentions (in its index) Abbott's name (or his pseudonym, for that matter). Of course, neither Edward

Lear nor Lewis Carroll mention each other; but most biographers point out that they do not.

⁶Both quotations are from "Unreal Estates," Of Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper (1966), pp. 92, 96. The interview was originally published in 1964. In answering Lewis's question, one should note that he includes Flatland in the works discussed in his essay "On Science Fiction" (OOW, p. 69).

⁷This is essentially Robert A. Heinlein's position in his essay "Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults and Virtues" (lecture, 1957; collected in The Science Fiction Novel, intro. Basil Davenport, 1959)--an SF story has to show an awareness of science, its bases, accumulated knowledge, and effects. Heinlein cites Sinclair Lewis's Arrowsmith (1925) as an SF novel.

⁸A Tangled Tale, Knot Three, "Mad Mathesis." This third chapter was, however, the second installment in The Monthly Packet, 30 (July 1880), 76-78. Four paragraphs later in this chapter, the springboards are used again; but the second description adds nothing to the first. By the way, in Knot Ten, "Chelsea Buns," Carroll has another version of "Difficulties, No. 1" from The Rectory Umbrella; it is not solved in the notes in the back of the book.

⁹This conversation is briefly referred to later (S&BC, Ch. 19, "A Fairy-Duet"). The reference to this as an example of the scientific imagination may be a legitimate way to bring in two other passages. In the first, at the first of Chapter Eighteen of Sylvie and Bruno ("Queer Street, Number Forty"), the narrator thinks in terms of "the true Scientific Method": "First accumulate a mass of Facts: and then construct a Theory." He also refers to "a Working Hypothesis." Of course, all of this is used to explain the cause of the dejection of another character, but that he (or Carroll as the author) phrases it in terms of the Scientific Method of inductive reasoning is interesting in itself. This fits part of Heinlein's full definition of science fiction in the essay cited in footnote 7, by the way. The second passage is one sentence out of a later scene: "Mathematics ... seems to possess an endless interest: one can't imagine any form of Life, or any race of intelligent beings, where Mathematical truth would lose its meaning" (S&BC, Ch. 16, "Beyond These Voices"). In context, this is a conversation about what saved souls will do in the afterlife (medicine is no longer an interest), but the way it is phrased seems deliberately to allow for application to Martians (say) as well as Angels and Human Spirits.

¹⁰Lin Carter, in "Have Time, Will Travel!", Fantastic Universe, 7 (January 1960), p. 99, has a discussion of the time travel aspects of Sylvie and Bruno, pointing out that it precedes H. G. Wells' The Time Machine (1895). I have not seen Carter's essay, but it is cited in Ruth Berman's Patterns of Unification in "Sylvie and Bruno" (1974), pp. 18, 23. Actually, Carter is inaccurate on Wells (if Berman summarizes him correctly): the first version of The Time Machine was published as "The Chronic

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"Leaf by Niggle," and "Smith of Wooton Major," in which Tolkien explores the Platonic and Christian premises which are the source of the beauty of the power of his masterpieces of fantasy.

Patrick Wynne

Fosston, MN

I'm currently reading Vergil's *Aeneid* for the first time and am fascinated by the similarity between certain of its plot elements and those in Tolkien's works. Looking through the Subject Index in ML 31, I found an article called "The Influence of Vergil's *Aeneid* on *The Lord of the Rings*..." Actually, I've noticed more similarities between Vergil and *The Silmarillion* than *LotR*. Aeneas' escape from the fall of Troy with his divinely-destined son Ascanius bears a strong resemblance to Tuor's escape from the fall of Gondolin with his divinely-destined son Earendil, and the burning of the Trojans' ships at Sicily reminded me of Feanor's burning of the ships at Losgar. Some of the names are similar too: Vergil's Agenor and Ucalegon to Tolkien's Aegnor and Ancalagon.

This reminds me of another interesting Roman/Tolkien similarity. In some of the names of the royal houses of the Noldor, the element *fin* 'hair' was used in a non-literal sense to emphasize one's lineage. In the names Fingolfin and Finarfin *fin* is used as a prefix to emphasize the fact that these two sons of Finwe were descended from the fair-haired Vanya Indis rather than Miriel. Both Fingolfin and Finarfin in turn gave their first-born sons names beginning with *fin* to mark them as their heirs; hence Fingon = 'Commander, Heir of the House of Fingolfin,' and Finrod = 'Champion, Heir of the House of Finarfin.' This makes more sense to me than taking the names literally as 'Hair-Commander' and 'Hair-Champion.' Anyway, what this has to do with Rome is that Caesar, originally the family name of the first Roman emperors, and later used as a title by all Roman emperors, meant 'a head of hair.' A hair-raising coincidence indeed...

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PREVIEW

of The Next Issue

Issue 34 will feature "The Childlike Hobbit" by Tisa Ho, "Co-inherence in Lewis and Williams" by Nancy Hanger, "Norse Mythological Elements in *The Hobbit*" by Mitzi Brunsdale, "Lewis Carroll, *scientifictionist*" (part II) by Joe Christopher, all the regular features, and if space permits, other articles.

LEWIS CARROLL continued from page 28

Argonauts" in *Science Schools Journal* in 1888. This beats *Sylvie and Bruno* by one year. (The article on "Time Travel" in Nicholls' *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* credits *The Time Machine*, not "The Chronic Argonauts" and not *Sylvie and Bruno*, with the first controlled trips in time.) Perhaps it is fairer to say that the idea of time travel was "in the air" about 1890.

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the "organic sanctity of meaning." He says "The meaning sanctifies the form, and the form the meaning, lifting the whole experience beyond pleasing instruction to belief. It is here that Lewis achieves the enviable result of making the reader feel the Joy, the sublimely undefineable exaltation of the spirit, which he sought throughout his life." (p. 143)

Glover has stated clearly what Lewis achieves and has even attempted to give the result a name. One might add that despite his useful literary criticism he has not prepared a manual on the art of enchantment. Writers hoping to emulate Lewis in merging "theme and form," or, as Lewis put it, *Poema* and *Logos*, will find that it is one thing to call the art by name. It is another to be able to achieve it!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

CAVALIER TREATMENT continued from page 39

by black magic. "As the incidents leading to Miss Fornario's death did not take place until some eighteen months after Moïna's own, the charge is scarcely worth refuting. Even if the latter had been living, the scratches found on the corpse are less likely to have resulted from an attack by Moïna in the form of a monster cat than from running naked in the dark over rough country, which Miss Fornario had done immediately before her collapse."

They gathered in secret, they wove formulae, they initiated each other and conferred degrees; there is depressingly little evidence that anyone came away happy. But some people of literary talent were affected by the association and among these Colquhoun lists Charles Williams, with critical reflections upon him. This aspect of her book is worth considering. [To be continued.]