Sanity, Madness and Alice

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ONE of the most interesting characters in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the Cheshire Cat. Unlike most of the creatures, the Cheshire Cat is sufficiently detached from his environment to be able to comment, in a fast, facetious sort of way, on the characters who share Wonderland with him, and one of his more challenging comments in particular deserves attention.

He tells Alice that everybody in Wonderland is mad. The exchange occurs after Alice has left the Duchess's kitchen and has had her dream-like wrestle with the pig-baby. She sees the Cheshire Cat on the bough of a tree and asks it what sort of people live around here:

> "In that direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad."
>
> "But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.
>
> "Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."[1]

Leaving aside for the moment the unlikely question of whether Alice is mad, the problem is to know how far the Cat is justified in attributing insanity to Wonderland creatures. As a group, the creatures do strike us as a pretty odd crew (although very immediate to us and ultimately likeable because childish) but is it really correct to call them mad? The Cat's remark seems to be too sweeping to be helpful, and yet its very breadth is tantalising too. Even if Carroll could not have justified it in precise philosophical terms (that is now my task), he must have

written it in response to some positive sense he had of his creatures. I believe that the Cat is actually right and that a good deal of the charming, and strangely worrying, quality of *Alice* is due to the fact that some of the utterances of some of the creatures are, from a certain standpoint, insane. But insanity is a dubious notion nowadays, in view of the arguments of R. D. Laing and others for its abolition, so it will be as well for me to start by making clear what that standpoint is.

In the beginning of Mark Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* Wilson makes a remark whose style and reception are intriguing. He has just arrived at the little township of Dawson's Landing and made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when there is an interruption:

> . . . an invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and howl and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud —
>
> "I wish I owned half of that dog."
>
> "Why?" somebody asked.
>
> "Because I would kill my half."
>
> The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as from something uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him.[2]

Two things seem to need elucidation here: first, the peculiar character of Wilson's actual statement, "I wish I owned half of that dog, because I would kill my half," and second, the disturbed response of the citizens to it.

The words and concepts which go into the making of the statement, the concepts of "owning," "half," "dog" and "kill," are all perfectly well understood concepts, and they are strung together by Wilson with perfect grammatical propriety, and yet there is something strange about it nevertheless. We want to echo Alice's feelings at the Tea-Party when she is confused by a remark of the Hatter's: "Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was

certainly English" (p. 68). Wilson's remark too is certainly English but it appears, in some respects, to have no sort of meaning in it, to be nonsensical, and I think we can locate the nonsensicality quite quickly. Wilson says he wishes to own half the dog, but that is impossible. It is possible, perhaps, to own a half share in a dog, but impossible to own half of it, for where would you divide it? While it lives a dog would seem to be indivisible. Similarly, to talk about killing half a dog is too difficult an idea. To kill half is automatically to kill the whole. So it would seem that what Wilson is doing here is applying the concept of *half* to the concepts of owning a dog and killing it quite inappropriately. And, of course, unnecessarily. All he need have said was, "I wish I owned that dog, because I would kill it," which would be rough justice, but at least it would have fitted the circumstances.

So the remark can be called nonsensical, but why does it disturb the citizens of Dawson's Landing so? In the first place, it refuses to be tamed. It won't fit into their accustomed patterns of thinking. So they search Wilson's face for some sort of clue as to what he meant by it and are made even more anxious when they cannot find one. His expression is unreadable, and this seems to be the point. Wilson utters a nonsensical statement and yet, as far as the citizens can judge from his face, he himself is unaware of this fact. Or if he is aware of it he is giving nothing away. His *motive,* in other words, for making the statement is obscure, and when we cannot understand the motivation of others we are angry or anxious or hysterically amused.

What sort of motivation might Wilson have had? He might have been wishing to make a joke. This is the usual reason in our culture for making nonsensical statements. The jokester takes liberties with meaning under cover of the comic, exploiting contradiction for cathartic effect. Recognizing his pose we may safely laugh. The person who uses nonsense structures (of which I take Wilson's

remark about the dog to be one) can be assimilated into our understanding because he is aware of two standards, but the person who is *unaware* of using nonsense structures cannot be so assimilated. Aware only of one standard, his own, such a man may seem to be mad. The difference between the jokester and the madman in this respect is that the jokester can step out of his joking role at will, whereas the madman cannot. We shall see presently that Wonderland creatures rarely fall into the category of the jokester. As people they are strangely serious, and since they deploy nonsensical statements of one kind or another doubts arise as to their sanity. But where does Wilson stand? He is clearly not joking (the citizens can find no sort of expression in his face which would have given them permission to laugh). Is he then insane? The citizens partly think so for they go on to label him "Pudd'nhead," a gentle form of "idiot" or "fool"; and this is their way of defending themselves from the threat presented by his apparently motiveless use of the irrational.

It seems to be the case that those who use language in a sufficiently nonconformist fashion in any society are ostracised, whether in the friendly manner of Pudd'nhead Wilson or more ferociously as lunatics. The absent-minded professor is isolated by suspicion masquerading as tolerance. Shakespeare's fools are *called* fools and (for the most part) rigidly confined by their superiors within the limits of the jester role in order that their insights may cut less ice. Society cannot tolerate more than a minimum of nonconformity in the matter of language as in everything else and this is not surprising, for a base of semantic conformity is a prerequisite for meaningful communication between people. If nonsense were the norm (a contradiction in terms) and no motivation for statements expected or required, then the result would be the loss of standardization in meaning, that is, in the last resort, a kind of collective insanity (another contradiction in terms).

In any particular interpersonal situation, if we are going to feel safe with our interlocutor, we need to be able to believe that he had a motive for uttering. In most cases this is self-evident. But if his statement was markedly unconventional (like Wilson's) then we need to be able to believe that he was making a joke or a mistake or that he had some other acceptable motive for speaking as he did. If we cannot discover a motive we lose contact with our interlocutor who may come, as a result, to appear insane. The attribution of insanity is clearly a relative one and says more, perhaps, about the relationship between me and my interlocutor (namely that contact has been lost) than about him alone, but it may still have its uses.

Let us now turn to *Alice* and consider some of the characters in the light of this relation between motive and sanity. First, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon. In the famous virtuoso section from "The Lobster-Quadrille" in which the two of them converse with Alice about life under the sea they employ a succession of puns (or quasi-puns) and what is fascinating about their use of this device is the impossibility of it. They tell Alice about a fish called the whiting and the Gryphon asks her:

> "Do you know why it's called a whiting?"
>
> "I never thought about it," said Alice. "Why?"
>
> "*It does the boots and shoes,*" the Gryphon replied very solemnly.
>
> Alice was thoroughly puzzled. "Does the boots and shoes!" she repeated in a wondering tone.
>
> "Why, what are *your* shoes done with?" said the Gryphon. "I mean, what makes them so shiny?"
>
> Alice looked down at them, and considered a little before she gave her answer. "They're done with blacking, I believe."
>
> "Boots and shoes under the sea," the Gryphon went on in a deep voice, "are done with whiting. Now you know."
>
> "And what are they made of?" Alice asked in a tone of great curiosity.
>
> "Soles and eels, of course," the Gryphon replied, rather impatiently: "any shrimp could have told you that" (pp. 96-97).

It is clear that the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon have no conception of what a pun is and yet their punning ability is superb. Alice goes on to refer to a song about a whiting which the Mock Turtle has sung a little while back (a song with a porpoise in it) and this provides the Mock Turtle with food for more punning:

> "If I'd been the whiting," said Alice, whose thoughts were still running on the song, "I'd have said to the porpoise, 'Keep back, please! We don't want *you* with us!'"
>
> "They were obliged to have him with them," the Mock Turtle said. "No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise."
>
> "Wouldn't it, really?" said Alice, in a tone of great surprise.
>
> "Of course not," said the Mock Turtle. "Why, if a fish came to *me*, and told me he was going a journey, I should say 'With what porpoise?'"
>
> "Don't you mean 'purpose'?" said Alice.
>
> "I mean what I say," the Mock Turtle replied, in an offended tone (p. 97).

That "in an offended tone" indicates that the Mock Turtle genuinely does not make in his own mind the distinction implied by a pun. He takes it for granted that Alice will know what he means by the words he uses and is impatient when she does not. There is no question of his deliberately trying to confuse Alice — he is a very serious-minded old gentleman — nor of his using puns as a joke or by mistake, any of which motivations would reassure us that he had the same semantic standards as we have. No, we are confronted instead with the extraordinary phenomenon of a character able to use puns yet unaware of the aberrative nature of puns. The reader in this situation is unable to identify the thought processes which govern his speech for those processes are literally inconceivable, and he is, as a result, both charmed and perplexed. In the context of *Alice* the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon may safely excite laughter, but in the real world the man who used puns without realising that he did so would disturb us deeply, so much so that we might be

tempted to label him insane, or a prodigy . . . but then we would never meet him.

The Hare and the Hatter present similar problems. They welcome Alice to the Tea-Party with the cry, "No room!" though there is, in fact, all the room in the world, on the face of it a strange thing to do. The context is familiar. Alice comes upon a table set out under a tree at which the March Hare and the Hatter are having tea with the Dormouse between them.

> The table was a large one, but the three were crowded together at one corner of it. "No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw Alice coming. "There's plenty of room!" said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table (p. 66).

Alice exposes the literal untruth of their statement by sitting down, but this may be to miss the point. Why did they say "No room!"? No reason is suggested or even, I think, implied. And it is this, not the facts or otherwise of the case, which intrigues. As with Wilson's remark about the dog, their remark is impossible to reconcile with the reality to which it is supposed to refer, a largely empty table; it lacks a rationale, and a mystery is thereby located in the minds of the Hare and the Hatter, just as a mystery was located in the minds of the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon as a result of their impossible use of puns. Essentially it is, again, a question of motive, or the lack of it. Without the assumption of motive in speech, meaning is in jeopardy, just as without the assumption of motive in morals, responsibility ceases to exist and justice disappears. Sanity is dependent on an orthodoxy of motive and in this case the Hare and the Hatter flout it with fine unconcern. They go on to offer Alice wine when there is none and to ask her riddles which have no answer, and yet they see nothing odd in either of these behaviours. I do not believe we have cause to attribute to them a joking motive or a mistaken one, or even an aggressive one, consequently, on the definition I am touting, they are insane.

As, of course, is the Caterpillar. The Caterpillar is an ill-mannered, petulant character who, from the safety of his perch on the mushroom, treats Alice with notable disdain. He terminates the interview without warning and, as he's walking off through the grass, throws over his shoulder the remark, "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter" (p. 52). He refers, of course, to the mushroom. But mushrooms don't have sides, they are round, so this confuses. The Caterpillar's advice seems not to match the reality to which it is supposed to refer, and the interesting thing about this mismatch is that it does not, as far as we can judge, interest the Caterpillar. We cannot, therefore, know why he said what he did say, consequently we are mystified, perhaps to the point of laughter. Evidently in Carroll's Wonderland the creatures do not always have discernible motives for making unconventional statements so that we are cast adrift.

Consider the Tea-Party again. The Dormouse tells a story, in between bouts of sleeping, about three little girls at the bottom of a treacle well. They drew all manner of things, says the Dormouse, everything that begins with an M: " 'Why with an M?' said Alice. 'Why not?' said the March Hare. Alice was silent" (p. 73). And well she might be. The March Hare's "Why Not?" actually recommends contingency and there is no easy answer to such a recommendation. Contingency is fine in theory but awkward in practice. If it were universal nothing would hold and the distinction between sanity and madness (among others) would disappear. Insanity is only meaningful in the context of sanity, just as nonsensical statements are only remarkable in a society which habitually speaks sense. But there is excitement in playing with insanity in a basically sane context, and that is partly what *Alice* is doing. The context *is* sane. The book is in English and written in such a way that most of it invites our understanding on one plane or another. If we don't actually think of Won-

derland creatures as lunatics, despite the insane language habits which I have isolated, it is because so much of their affective and intellectual behaviour makes acceptably good sense. Even, ultimately, their "insane" utterances. There may be no obvious motive for the kind of statement we have been looking at but in the larger perspective the key to all such anti-communicative behaviour is fear. At bottom, Wonderland creatures are afraid of Alice and the one meaningful explanation it is possible to give for a context-antagonistic utterance like "No room!" is that the Hare and the Hatter cannot face the reality of Alice's approach. Alice is a real live girl-child, dedicated (though she wouldn't put it thus) to the exposure of humbug, open, direct and largely unafraid, and for the insecure adult figures who people Wonderland these qualities represent a major threat. Who knows but Alice might see through them! They remain solitary because their mode is the defensive mode. One can almost discern a conspiracy operating to prevent Alice getting onto their wavelength, and it is certainly successful for contact is never established and Alice has no compunction about dismissing everybody at the end. There is pathos in this failure, sustained throughout the book, for Alice represents a once-for-all opportunity for Victorian adulthood to renew itself, an opportunity which it cannot, dare not, grasp.

The idea of fear (and fear is at the root of insanity) provides a general context within which to interpret the solipsistic speech habits of the creatures in *Alice,* but there are no guidelines in the field. Alice, down among the almost-madmen, has a genuine communication problem on which, it could be said, her life depends, but because she sees no problem she is unaffected. Indeed, her incorruptible good sense acts as a buffer both for herself and for us against the illicit language habits of Wonderland creatures. If Alice's linguistic and philosophical rectitude diminish her as a person, they nevertheless provide the necessary foil to the dangerous aberrations of the creatures. A

less fixed personality-type would have run the risk of entering, and sharing in, the mad mind of Wonderland. As it is, Alice saves it for us.

NOTES

[1]Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Signet, 1960), p. 63. Subsequent references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

[2]Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (London: The Zodiac Press, 1967), p. 37.