

Alice and Anarchy

by Terry Eagleton

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There are two fairly commonplace facts about games which seem relevant to a discussion of *Alice in Wonderland*. First, games are rule-governed, and so orderly; but playing a game involves a creative *application* of the rules, as Wittgenstein reminds us in *Philosophical Investigations*, and thus allows for freedom: rules are fixed, but moves are to some extent unpredictable. Seen in this way, a game might appear as a paradigmatic fusion of order and liberty—one, perhaps, of some relevance to society. Second, games involve a means/ends rationality, but aren't in themselves functional: they are played as ends in themselves and in that sense transcend considerations of sheer utility. From this viewpoint, games raise interesting questions about the relations between rational and 'irrational' for ms of activity, and indeed this issue is touched on at the very beginning of *Alice*: the White Rabbit appears just as Alice is wondering 'whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies', pondering the relations between utilitarian effort and creative play. This, too, has a wider social application which the book brings out.

Alice in Wonderland abounds in games; indeed, most of the central scenes—the Caucus Race, the tea-party, the croquet match, the lobster quadrille, even the trial—are games of a more or less direct kind. But, of course, these games are, by normal standards, very peculiar. The croquet game, for instance, is completely chaotic, since the players ignore the rules and the equipment won't stay in place. Alice has to hit a rolled-up hedgehog through the arch of a doubled-up soldier with a flamingo, but the hedgehog keeps unfurling, the flamingo won't keep still and the soldiers continually get up and stroll away at the crucial moment.

The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, 'Off with his head!' or 'Off with her head!' about once in a minute. . . .

'I don't think they play at all fairly', Alice began, in rather a complaining tone, 'and they all quarrel so dreadfully one can't hear oneself speak—and they don't seem to have any rules in particular; at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you've no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive; for instance, there's the arch I've got to go through next walking about at the other end of the ground. . . .

All this is strongly reminiscent of the race arranged by the Dodo earlier in the book:

First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle ('the exact shape doesn't matter', it said), and then all the party were

placed along the course, here and there. There was no 'One, two, three, and away', but they began running when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out, 'The race is over!' and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking, 'But who has won?'

This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him) while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said, '*Everyone* has won, and all must have prizes'.

Wittgenstein allows for the possibility of games in which the rules are made up or altered as one goes along,¹ but he surely had nothing like this in mind. The point is that rules in Wonderland aren't really rules at all: they are improvised existentially or invented after the fact to provide spurious rationalizations for what has occurred. During the trial of the Knave of Hearts the King thinks up a rule 42 ('All persons more than a mile high to leave the court') as a way of disposing of Alice, and blandly maintains that 'It's the oldest rule in the book' in response to Alice's indignant accusation that 'that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now'. Purportedly public, consistent criteria are, in fact, merely the projections of private whim; the flagrant opportunism of the Dodo's arbitration of the race recalls the shameless off-the-cuff inventions of the Dormouse when telling his story of the children who lived on treacle at the bottom of a well:

Alice . . . repeated her question, 'Why did they live at the bottom of a well?'

The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, 'It was a treacle-well.'

Rules, like stories, are invented *ambulando*; like words, they can be twisted in any direction one chooses for the sake of a local victory, a flourish of gamesmanship. Rules of a kind are suspected to exist, since sanctions do, but they are desperately obscure;

Alice thought she might as well go back and see how the game was going on, as she heard the Queen's voice in the distance, screaming with passion. She had already heard her sentence three of the players to be executed for having missed their turns, and she did not like the look of things at all, as the game was in such confusion that she never knew whether it was her turn or not.

The frightening contradiction of Wonderland is that one is expected to make rational calculations according to rules which are themselves fickle and arbitrary, and the price of failure is thought to be death. The only way of knowing that one has infringed a vital rule is by being told so by the Queen, who controls the game; yet it's also

¹The Dodo's casualness about the exact shape of the course is also a nicely Wittgensteinian touch: Wittgenstein argues that the concept of a rough or inexact boundary is perfectly valid (*Philosophical Investigations*, translated G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, 1963, p. 41, para. 88).

obvious that the Queen's 'control', like the Dodo's, consists merely in a set of whimsical private decisions externalized as public and absolute. Part of what Carroll is exploring here, in fact, is the absurdity of a 'private rule'—the notion that there can be a rule which is uncheckable by publicly institutionalized criteria. Such criteria, in fact, existed for Alice in her pre-Wonderland life, where rules were fixed, consistent and reliable. When she is considering how to get through the small door into the garden, she half-hopes to come across 'a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes'; she then prudently hesitates before drinking from the bottle she discovers, as it could easily be poison:

... she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt and eaten up by wild beasts and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison', it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

Alice's rule-bound behaviour fits with her *penchant* for planning her actions in advance: she works out an excellently neat and simple plan for getting into the garden, but simply hasn't 'the smallest idea how to set about it'. Planning of this kind goes against the grain of Wonderland, where conceptualization and action are simultaneous rather than consecutive: 'Why', said the Dodo, 'the best way to explain (a Caucas-race) is to do it'.¹ The pre-Wonderland world is a rule-governed place in which induction and prediction are possible, and danger thus reduced to a minimum. In Wonderland, however, induction doesn't work: the Duchess tries to subsume bits of empirical experience to general maxims but fails absurdly:

'The game's going on rather better now' (Alice) said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

'Tis so', said the Duchess: 'and the moral of that is—"Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!"'

This absence of reliable rules makes Wonderland a physically dangerous place to live in. Danger and anarchy, playfulness and violence, are blended in most of the games: the lobster quadrille, for example, has an obvious undertone of gleefully suppressed sadism beneath its elaborately sportive ritual, and at one point in the story the diminutive Alice is assailed by a frisky puppy and expects it to trample on her like a cart-horse.

Alice's previous life, however, is more complicated in this respect than a simple, sedate rule-boundness would imply; for her solitary fantasy-life has led her into habits closely relevant to the notion of a private rule.

¹Cf. Wittgenstein: 'The grammar of the word "knows" is evidently closely related to that of "can", "is able to". But also closely related to that of "understands" ("Mastery" of a technique)' (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 59, para. 150).

Why can't my right hand give my left hand money?—My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt.—But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, etc., we shall ask: 'Well, and what of it?' And the same could be asked if a person had given himself a private definition of a word. . .¹

Purely private practices of this kind are at once errantly individualist and emptily ceremonial ('what of it?')—a conjunction, as we shall see, which has a particular relevance to Wonderland society. A man can't sensibly be said to give himself money; but Alice contemplates sending presents to her right foot, regularly gives herself advice or a scolding, 'and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself'. The croquet reference suggests the essential connection between Alice's private games and the public chaos of Wonderland: the latter is merely a collective version of the former. Alice ignores public criteria for the self-enclosed, ritualized absurdity of a 'private rule', and one notable instance of this occurs when she eats a cake which might either shrink or expand her. She 'said anxiously to herself, "Which way? which way?"' holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing'. Feeling the top of your head won't, of course, tell you whether you are growing or shrinking: Alice's mistake is precisely that made by the character in *Philosophical Investigations* who exclaims, 'But I know how tall I am!' and lays his hand on top of his head to prove it.² Both fail to grasp the point that height is assessable only by reference to settled public criteria. (There is an oblique relation between this point and the Caterpillar's angrily absolutist insistence, in debate with Alice, that three inches is 'a very good height indeed', just because it happens to be his own.)

Alice's anxiety to perform the right moves in the croquet game reflects to some degree the functional, means/ends aspect of Wonderland: 'right' goals and answers sometimes seem to exist and must be arrived at, under pain of execution or irritable contradiction. The White Rabbit is a neurotic, time-dominated creature, socially conformist and obsequious, worried about getting to his appointment with the Duchess in time; the Queen in the trial scene is brutally intent on sweeping aside both evidence and verdict and arriving swiftly at the desired end, the sentence. The competitors in the Dodo's race are similarly obsessed with conclusions, querulously intent on finding out who has won and obtaining the prizes. Yet the trial and the race, like the tea-party, are also vacuously circular ceremonies (the race and tea-party literally so), enclosing what functional rationality they have within a general pointlessness. At the tea-party Alice seeks to play by rules which the others accept as long

¹Wittgenstein, p. 94, para. 268.

²*Ibid.*, p. 96, para. 279.

as it suits them and then dismiss; meanings shift around to avoid finality, as the creatures move around the table as the plates get used up. Words, like the soldiers in the croquet game, get up and move about to throw Alice off-stroke. In Wonderland there are no determinate ends (it is difficult to know when the race is over), and so no determinate directions: what we see instead is an uncontrolled randomness of ends within a society given over to precise logic-chopping. Ends exist—if you walk far enough, as the Cheshire Cat remarks, you're bound to get *somewhere*—but they are in constant fluctuation; it isn't merely a matter of flexibly adapting means to specifiable ends but of struggling to gear unpredictable means to volatile ends, using a turbulent flamingo to aim a shot through straying hoops. Alice has mused, early in the book, about whether cats eat bats or bats eat cats, but 'as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it', She is constantly trying to adjust her size to her situation, but situations are as variable as sizes. Wonderland is in ceaseless flux, but it is change without dialectic: Alice finds it very difficult to embark on a conversation, and instead continually encounters deadlock. For all its volatility, Wonderland is fundamentally static: it is symbolized as much by the Dormouse's torpor as by the White Rabbit's fussy neurosis, and much of the movement, as with the word-play or the Cheshire Cat's experiments with different modes of disappearing, is mere showy technique. For all that, however, the flux can be giddy enough: trying to act purposefully within it is like trying to curtsy as one is falling through the air, as Alice does on her entry into Wonderland. (That long tunnel through which she falls is another image of the disjunction between means and ends: it seems to be a 'means'—an entry to a place below—but turns out to be a kind of place in itself, furnished with cupboards and bookshelves, and Alice falls slowly enough to examine them and so reinforce this impression.)

But it would be wrong to see Wonderland merely as a world of indeterminate, dangerously whimsical, shiftily improvised rules, a game which changes elusively in the act of being played. For the point about the place, just as much, is its authoritarian, snappishly dogmatic character, its remorseless absolutism. It's an anarchic society but also a stifflingly oppressive one, and this combination constitutes its peculiarly menacing quality. The irrationalism of private rules is coupled with an irrationalism of arbitrarily dogmatic judgment: 'she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, "I am older than you, and must know better"', and this Alice would not allow without knowing how old it was, and as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said'. 'Everybody says "come on!" here', thought Alice I never was so ordered about before, in all my life, never!' Wonderland seems a realm of infinite possibility

(‘so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that few things indeed were really impossible’), but this unshackling makes for the exact opposite of genuine liberation. The anarchy is a form of oppression, as the creatures take liberties with rules and words in order to dominate each other more efficiently. ‘“It was much pleasanter at home”, thought poor Alice, “when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits”.’ It’s in that sentence’s close juxtaposition of randomness and autocracy that the true, contradictory character of the society is revealed—just as, in a sentence like ‘The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small’, the final phrase reminds us inevitably of Alice’s variable size, and suggests a relation between the blurring of objective discriminations involved in that, and the different kind of indiscriminations entailed in the Queen’s rigidly consistent application of a single rule (‘off with his head!’) to all cases. Dogmatic rigidity and pragmatic opportunism become mirror-images of one another. Ruthless consistency is obviously as much an obstacle to genuine communication as total inconsistency: the Duchess seems consistently to agree with everything Alice says, which forestalls significant conversation as effectively as the Caterpillar’s consistent contradiction. To agree with everything comes to the same thing as agreeing with nothing; if everyone has won the Dodo’s race, nobody has.

Traditional forms of authority in Wonderland, however, have clearly crumbled; rank has been eroded by anarchy. The Duchess sits in a kitchen and is assaulted by the cook; the King is timidly ineffectual, the Queen blusteringly so. (Her orders for execution are in fact never carried out: her rule (‘off with their heads!’) is simply cancelled by the King’s (‘you are all pardoned’), in what is presumably an endlessly circular process.) Authority remains, but it has become an idle ritual in a society where the young Crab can irritably tell his mother to hold her tongue; it is reduced to the mutual bowing of a couple of bewigged footmen. Alice finds this absurd: when the footmen get their wigs entangled she laughs so much that she has to run away; but the futile ceremony which still frames the savage lawlessness of the croquet game is taken very seriously by Wonderland itself, as it was, of course, by Victorian England. The prize-giving after the Caucus race is a similar case in point. Alice finds this particularly ludicrous, since the Dodo takes her thimble and returns it to her as a prize in a parody of real donation which parallels Alice’s putative bestowing of gifts on herself; but all the animals ‘looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh’.

Order and freedom, paradigmatically fused in the idea of the game, have in fact fallen apart, lost touch with each other and twisted into extreme self-caricatures; order declines into pointless ritual, freedom becomes possessive individualism. The Duchess’s bourgeois

ethic ('If everybody minded their own business . . . the world would go round a good deal faster than it does')¹ is effectively realized in the behaviour of the animals at the tea-party, who privately appropriate the whole table on Alice's approach, and later talk of privately appropriating time itself ('if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock'). Violence is, of course, a notable characteristic of the society; a baby is beaten, an inoffensive guinea-pig bundled into a sack and ejected from court. In a world where 'public' reality can be improvised, distorted or denied to suit a private whim, all relationship is fraught with a casually fickle callousness.

At the beginning of the book, Alice misnames the Antipodes 'The Antipathies', and is 'rather glad there *was* no one listening this time, as it didn't sound at all the right word'. The relationship between words and what they denote, signifiers and signifieds, is an arbitrary (or, in Roland Barthes's parlance, 'unmotivated') one, in the sense that there's no necessary relation between the sound or shape of the word and what it signifies. But words, although in this sense at a sort of 'distance' from what they signify, aren't just gratuitous: they can still be 'right' or 'wrong', depending on the consensus of meaning within which they are used. Hence Alice's relief that no one has overhead her mistake, which means that it doesn't matter.

In Wonderland, however, the relation between words and things is either quite gratuitous or absurdly close. From one viewpoint, words don't matter: "I call it purring, not growling", said Alice. "Call it what you like", said the Cat.' Words are symbols which stand at a weakly ineffectual distance from the real world: the Queen's word of command doesn't in fact modify reality as drastically as she believes, any more than the Mouse's dry speech actually can dry off Alice when she is soaked to the skin. Language is just a self-enclosed game with a hauntingly intimated but finally illusory relation to the world; it appears this way in the poem read out at the trial, in which the King claims falteringly to discern some meaning but which Alice curtly dismisses as nonsense. Language can be mere euphemism which cloaks and mystifies the facts; Alice has read of applause being 'suppressed' in court and discovers that the word conceals the reality of a guinea-pig being tied up and sat upon.

On the other hand, language and reality are elsewhere in the book effectively conflated, as is obvious enough in the Mock Turtle's punning, where the word has a ludicrously direct relation to what it signifies: 'We called him Tortoise because he taught us.' Language and the world can, indeed, become so intertwined that all that can happen in language becomes possible in life; sheerly verbal possi-

¹Her remark is true in a sense she doesn't intend: the more selfish people in Wonderland get, the more chaotic events become. It's significant, incidentally, that it is the Duchess who later implies that words are commodities: 'I make you a present of everything I've said as yet'.

bilities, such as 'a grin without a cat' or 'muchness', become actualized in the real world. But although language could be said in this sense to dominate and determine reality, its power is in the end illusory. For language sucks and assimilates reality into itself, devalues it to merely verbal status, and so confronts a kind of vacuum; it can't control reality because it has effectively abolished it. In the end, language is only endlessly adjusting and regulating itself, having absorbed and neutralized the world. Conversations which Alice takes to *refer* are for her interlocutors merely verbal exercises, tolerable ways of passing the time. Language conceals an emptiness, as the jar on which ORANGE MARMALADE is assertively written is in fact empty, the label literally pasted over a void. Despite Humpty Dumpty's claim to the contrary in *Through the Looking Glass*, language, the servant of man, has become the master, as Alice is ordered about by the inferior creation; but its authority, like the Queen's, is fundamentally bankrupt. Because it has cancelled and neutralized reality, it has deprived itself of external criteria by which its meanings may be tested, and is thus reduced to total indeterminacy: the King during the trial can only decide whether he means 'important' or 'unimportant' by murmuring the words to see which one sounds better, but Alice sees that 'it doesn't matter a bit'.

If words are empty but portentous symbols, so is the Queen of Hearts. At the centre of this world of chance, randomness and irrationality is, appropriately, a playing card; the Queen of Hearts, officially one of Wonderland's awesome rulers, in fact merely epitomizes the crude reality of a society in which all life is a series of risky, unplannable gambles. Playing cards hold absolute sway in Wonderland, but the contradiction implicit in that, precisely, is that playing cards are an incarnate negation of authority, a token of arbitrary and evasive forces. In so far as they symbolize those forces, the cards are powerful; but in themselves, like words, they are impotent. They are just bits of animated two-dimensional cardboard,¹ and Alice ends by recognizing this truth, in a moment of mature self-liberation from the grip of false consciousness: 'Who cares for you?' said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'

It would be unnecessarily evasive to end without saying, explicitly, that by 'anarchic forces' I mean, in part at least, *market* forces. I don't think the book can be *reduced* to such an analysis, any more than to a Freudian one. But *Alice* does dramatize a society in which rational steps need to be taken to irrational and indeterminate ends, and in which ends and means are therefore worryingly disjunct; and its portrait of oppressive anarchy is very shrewd. In a market economy, one changes the given rules in the very act of

¹One of the most indeterminate boundaries in the book is that between the animate and inanimate, as one would expect of a society where animated playing cards dispose of living creatures as bits of sporting equipment.

'playing' according to them, and much of the book—the croquet scene especially—seems to press towards this insight. Even so, there is nothing in *Alice* quite as explicitly ideological as the Red Queen's famous comment in *Through the Looking Glass* that in this country you had to run very hard just to stay where you were. Carroll's children readers no doubt thought this a delightful piece of nonsense, but to a Victorian manufacturer it surely read like plain common sense.

By Law Established

The Beginnings of the English Nation and Church

by J. P. Brown

When I was a youth in England, a favourite anti-Protestant argument ran: 'We were here first.' 'We' meant St Augustine of Canterbury. When I came to Wales, this would not do, for as Bede tells us, there were Christians here before St Augustine, and, when he met them, they rejected his authority. To the argument that these Christians were obviously not Roman Catholics, we used to reply: 'Yes, they were, but cut off by barbarian Saxon invaders of England, they were unaware of Roman liturgical changes and were so attached to old Roman ways that they quarrelled with Augustine.'

I began to study the validity of this reply and hence, twenty years later, this article.¹ My amateur thesis is based on the work of the late Rev. A. W. Wade-Evans,² complemented by that of three *Blackfriars* contributors: Mr Donald Nicholl,³ Professor Finberg⁴ and, especially, Mr Eric John.⁵

'Gildas' as we have it

That barbarian Saxon invaders cut off Wales from the Continent rests entirely on the story of the Loss of Britain, which forms part of a work⁶ ascribed to the Welshman⁷ Gildas. Bede made important

¹Which is an unsolicited prologue to a solicited article on Christianity in Wales.

²*The Emergence of England and Wales*, 2nd edition (EEW), Heffer and Sons, 1959. The eccentric and polemical style may be the reason why many historians have treated the argument of the book with scorn or silence (cf. D. P. Kirby, *Bulletin*, Board of Celtic Studies, 23, 1968-70, pp. 37-59). Mrs N. K. Chadwick (e.g. in *Angles and Britons*, University of Wales, 1963, pp. 120-121) is an exception.

³'Celts, Romans and Saxons' in *Studies*, Autumn 1958, pp. 298-304.

⁴*Lucerna*, Macmillan, 1964.

⁵*Orbis Britanniae*, Leicester, 1966 (OB). These last three authors have also helped me personally, but are not, of course, accountable for errors in this article.

⁶Text and translation: Cymmrodorion Record Series, No. 3, 1899 (G).

⁷I shall use 'Saxon' as Romans and Welsh used it; to denote all Germanic peoples in Britain, and 'Welsh' as those Saxons came to use it; to denote the Welsh-speakers of modern Wales, Cornwall and Southern Scotland. But they first used 'Welsh' to mean 'Roman'.