PHILOSOPHY OF NONSENSE

Why are we, and, in particular, why are philosophers and linguists so fascinated by nonsense? Why do Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear appear in so many otherwise dull and dry academic books? In this amusing, yet rigorous new book, Jean-Jacques Lecercle shows how the genre of nonsense was constructed and why it has proved so enduring and enlightening for linguistics and philosophy.

Lecercle claims that nonsense makes sense, philosophically speaking. Nonsense texts reverse the usual positioning of text to theory by reading their theory in advance: they are the reflexive, active interface between literature, linguistics and philosophy of language. Nonsense texts, like all texts, must be read in the light of philosophical and linguistic concepts, but they turn the theory back upon itself to open up new ways of thinking and theorising about language. Philosophy of Nonsense examines the philosophical pillars which structure the nonsense text, but also explores the innovative philosophy which nonsense gives rise to. Lecercle asserts that this new philosophy is no less than a confrontational reappraisal of the analytic and continental traditions of the philosophy of language.

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PHILOSOPHY OF NONSENSE

The intuitions of Victorian nonsense literature

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

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For Edward
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There is a sense in which Alice is like Dracula. Not in outward appearance or feeding habits, but in the fact that she belongs to a text that has come to acquire the status of a myth. There are as many signs of this in the case of the Alice books as there are with Bram Stoker’s novel. First, versions of Alice have proliferated across the various media, from stage Alices to Kafkaesque film versions to, horresco referens, pornographic novels based on Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Second, the tales, in spite of the fact that they have been admitted into the canon of English Literature (in a minor capacity, it is true), have managed to keep remarkably alive, far beyond the range of the professional interest of academics. To the point that one could indulge in the usual game—ask the woman in the street what the name ‘Alice in Wonderland’ suggests to her, and elicit the same sort of response as in the case of ‘Frankenstein’ —the account would be reasonably accurate, except that the name of Walt Disney would have pride of place, over and above Lewis Carroll, even as Boris Karloff tends to overshadow Mary Shelley.

My aim in this book is to give an account of this mythical power, or force, which the Alice books, and beyond them the works of Victorian nonsense, possess to such a striking extent. I shall produce another symptom of this, which will be the centre of my enquiry. The books have proved to be an inexhaustible fund for quotation and allusion for linguists and philosophers alike. The average linguistics textbook, usually in the middle of the first chapter, offers an analysis of the coined words in ‘Jabberwocky’ (this book will be no exception). And philosophers, both Anglo-Saxon and continental, have always been fond of trying to solve the puzzles in which Carroll ensnares his readers, or of referring
to the *Alice* books for the purpose of serious, and sometimes jocular, illustration of their pet problems.

I shall set about answering the question raised by the existence of nonsense as a literary genre (which is another way of formulating my initial question: why have the texts retained such mythical power?) in two ways. I shall give a synchronic or rather anachronic, account of the genre, showing that the persistence of its mythical power is due to the quality of the intuitions, linguistic, pragmatic and philosophical, embedded in the text—there is a sense in which the works of Lewis Carroll anticipate the main aspects of the current philosophical debate, or the discoveries of generative grammar. And I shall give a diachronic account, showing that the emergence of the genre in the Victorian period is due to the fact, which accounts for their mythical force in the sense of Lévi-Strauss or Vernant,¹ that they attempt to solve by imaginary means a real contradiction in the historical conjuncture.

The anachronic account will deal with the intuitions of nonsense. My thesis, developed in *Chapters 1 to 3*, is that the negative prefix in 'nonsense' (in a sense the whole of this book is an analysis of the various senses of this negative prefix) is the mark of a process not merely of denial but also of reflexivity, that non-sense is also metasense. Nonsense texts are reflexive texts. This reflexion is embodied in the intuitions of the genre. Nonsense texts are not explicitly parodic, they turn parody into a theory of serious literature; Lewis Carroll's metalinguistic comments on points of grammar (the Duchess's unintelligible sentence, the Duck's comment on a cataphoric use of 'it', etc.) can be fully understood only in the light of Chomskyan linguistics—although Carroll was in no way a grammarian or a philologist himself, he was a century in advance of contemporary specialists; Edward Lear's omnipresent reference to an aggressive 'they' in his limericks is crying out for an existentialist or Heideggerian account.

In the course of the anachronic account, two subsidiary theses will be defended. The first concerns the characteristic style of nonsense, the linguistic and literary structures whereby such intuitions are made manifest. I am struck by the fact that nonsense is on the whole a conservative-revolutionary genre. It is conservative because deeply respectful of authority in all its forms: rules of grammar, maxims of conversation and of politeness, the
authority of the canonical author of the parodied text. This aspect, which I confess is not the most obvious or the most celebrated of the genre, nevertheless becomes apparent when the texts are read carefully and in detail. It is inextricably mixed with the opposite aspect, for which the genre is justly famous, the liberated, light-fantastic, nonsensical aspect of nonsense, where rules and maxims appear to be joyously subverted. My thesis is that the genre is structured by the contradiction, which I shall eventually formulate in terms of a dialectic, between over-structuring and destructuring, subversion and support. In other words, I shall seek to account for nonsense in the terms, familiar to contemporary French thought in the fields both of psychoanalysis and philosophy, of the dialectic of excess and lack. I have already formulated the linguistic version of this dialectic—of which nonsense is the best possible illustration—in the following terms: the speaker is always torn apart between the two poles of the contradiction of language, ‘language speaks’ (it is language, not I, that speaks, the words come out of my mouth ‘all wrong’) and ‘I speak language’ (I am in full control of my utterance, I say what I mean and mean what I say).²

The second subsidiary thesis seeks to account for this state of affairs. The strong perlocutionary effect of nonsense texts will be ascribed to a powerful affect, the need to understand what not only passes understanding but also forbids understanding by withdrawing sense. The deep-seated need for meaning, which nonsense texts deliberately frustrate in order to whet it, will be accounted for in terms of the non-transparency of language, of the incapacity of natural languages reasonably to fulfil their allotted task of expression and communication. Nonsense both supports the myth of an informative and communicative language and deeply subverts it—exposes it as a myth in the pejorative sense (thereby acquiring mythical force in the positive sense). The crux of this development will be the question of metaphor—of its centrality or marginality in language, and why nonsense texts carefully avoid it. We understand why nonsense is a reflexive genre better: if the thesis is correct, there is a close link between the practice of literary nonsense and the tradition of hermeneutics. Nonsense is the reflective image of our practice of interpretation, as philosophers or literary critics—it is interpretation gone wild, but also lucid, as clearly appears in the works of those extreme practitioners of (non)literary nonsense whom we call fous
The diachronic account will seek to explain the emergence of nonsense in the Victorian context, its function in a determinate historical conjuncture. The main thesis will be that nonsense as a genre is a by-product of the development of the institution of the school, that the texts provide an imaginary solution to the real contradiction between the urge to capture an ever wider proportion of the population for the purpose of elementary schooling, and the resistance, religious, political and psychological, that such a cultural upheaval inevitably arouses. There is an obvious link between this historical thesis and the second subsidiary thesis above. The school is the institution that develops the need for meaning and a reflexive attitude towards language, and channels them in socially acceptable ways. The school is the institution where not only rules of grammar, but also maxims of good behaviour, linguistic and otherwise, are learnt. Thus, nonsense will be seen to have a part to play in the acquisition of cultural capital, to speak like Bourdieu. Of course, such a thesis has a strongly paradoxical flavour, as it is immediately apparent that nonsense texts aim at (and choose their characters from) the type of child who has not yet been captured by the institution—children of nursery age in the case of Lear, little girls in the case of Carroll, who loved children ‘except boys’, that is except the part of the population who benefited from what Virginia Woolf enviously calls ‘Arthur’s education fund’. Alice does not go to school; but she has a governess at home, and the school as theme is present in nonsense texts, albeit usually in indirect fashion. We are back with the negative prefix of ‘nonsense’, which here appears as a mark of Freudian negation—nonsense reflects the changing state of schooling; it also phrases the resistance to this change.

A historical account of nonsense will also have to face another paradox. Any attempt to write a history of the genre is bound to

*littéraires* after Raymond Queneau or, after Michel Pierssens, ‘logophilsists’. The anachronic analysis of the genre will concentrate on these ‘meta’ characteristics, which account for the title of the book: there is an implicit philosophy in nonsense, a philosophy in act or *in nuce*; and nonsense texts reflect and comment on the practice of philosophers.
founder upon the paradox of the sudden emergence, which can be dated with considerable precision, of a genre that is offered complete with a long tradition of predecessors. Victorian nonsense has both no history—it is a Victorian creation, an event in the field of literature—and a long history, which dates back, according to the inventiveness and enthusiasm of the critic, to Chaucer, Shakespeare or Sterne. It has no direct ancestors (Carroll is nobody’s ‘ephebe’, to speak like Harold Bloom, unless he is the ephebe of his contemporary, Tennyson) and yet the genre is a repetition, in a vastly different conjuncture, of medieval French fatrasies, those absurd short poems which might, four centuries in advance, have been written by Edward Lear. The solution to this paradox is not hard to find. We shall duly denounce the retrospective, après coup, nature of the invention of such a tradition (literature is not the only field in which such invention is at work—see Hobsbawm on the royal family). But if we linger a few moments within the bounds of the paradox, perhaps a theory of what a literary genre is, and how a literary text, as a singularity of a specific kind, works, will emerge.

One word about my corpus, and its apparent lack of coherence. I have adopted the practice of anthologies of nonsense, i.e. I have chosen a variable corpus, with a centre and a periphery, as practised in what is known as prototype semantics. Anthologies of nonsense are all built around a hard core of texts by Carroll and Lear. Consequently, most, but not all, of my analyses will deal with the two masters. But the anthologies also include other members of the tradition they inevitably construct, both before and after Victorian nonsense. I shall, within strict limits, indulge in the same practice. All the more so as the first part of my account is a- or anachronic. This is a book about Lewis Carroll. It is also a book about the philosophy of language. Perhaps my main thesis is that the link between the two is unavoidable.

**NONSENSE READING: LEWIS CARROLL AND THE TALMUD**

My second subsidiary thesis states that nonsense is an a contrario reflexion on the tradition of hermeneutics. Nonsense texts, as is apparent in the emblematic figure of Humpty Dumpty, mimic the
activities of literary critics and philosophers, only in an excessive and subversive way. In so doing they express intuitions that often escape more serious practitioners of the art. They also, of course, fail to produce the same result—a coherent interpretation of the text being read: excess always compensates for lack.

The lack of results, of seriousness, can be seen as the necessary loss in order to gain new intuitions. In their nonsensicality or ‘madness’, nonsense texts are often more perceptive, or imaginative, or intuitive, than straightforward readings. This power of intuition may be extended to many fous littéraires. Beneath the delirium of Brisset or Wolfson, implicit or explicit views about the workings of language emerge, which are of the utmost interest to us. The detour through madness in which they engage for other reasons pays a dividend in terms not only of epiphanic revelation, but of truth as disclosure. There is intuition in their madness, to the same extent as there is madness in their method. Wolfson’s total translation is an impossible attempt, but it tells us important things about the speaker’s relationship to her mother tongue, and, on the rebound so to speak, about the nature of all translation. Brisset’s demented etymologies belong to the unrespectable tradition of speculative etymology, yet they offer intuitions about the part desire and the body play in ordinary linguistic exchange. That such discoveries are accompanied by a mixture of pain and elation, even jubilation, only goes to show that the fous littéraires are in possession of a form of gay science.

Through an account of the work of another fou littéraire, Abraham Ettelson, I shall try to show that a manifestly demented interpretative practice, founded on an equally demented revelation, because it is based on traditional techniques, produces textual effects that have something to do with truth and knowledge. Even as Brisset’s demented intuition, because it is based on the traditional techniques of grammarians (the analysis that yields paradigms, the synthesis that yields syntagmata), ends up producing linguistic knowledge of a sort. Nonsense or madness not only subvert, they also disclose and construct.

In 1966, an American Hasidic Jew, a medical doctor by profession, Abraham Ettelson, published—I suspect the publisher is what is known as a vanity press—an 80-page pamphlet entitled ‘Through the Looking-Glass’ Decoded. The paratext is rather complex, as the
text begins with a foreword by Rabbi Adam Neuberger, from Phoenix, Arizona, who celebrates the ‘tremendous research’ accomplished by the author and his ‘scholarly’ deductions, and informs us that he is a direct descendant of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. The text itself fulfils the expectations one may derive from the title, since it demonstrates that *Through the Looking-Glass* is a cryptogram for the Talmud, that the subtext of Carroll’s tale is made up of references, not even allegorical but cryptic, that are both literal and coded, to the Jewish ritual and what Ettelson calls ‘the Jewish way’. The text has a material appearance that will be familiar to anyone who has ever opened a Jewish biblical commentary, or read Derrida’s *Glas*. There are two columns of text on each page, the left-hand one being made up of quotations of or textual references to Carroll’s text, and the right-hand one being devoted to the deciphering and commentary. Chapter titles refer to the chapters of Carroll’s tale, whereas subtitles all refer to episodes of the Jewish ritual. The only exception to this arrangement is the deciphering of the poem ‘Jabberwocky’, where the commentary, which is longer and more detailed than usual, almost takes the form of a short critical essay. There is nothing unusual in this, since the same situation obtains in Martin Gardner’s *Annotated Alice*; the notes to Jabberwocky fill several pages and interrupt Carroll’s text. The following quotation will give a fair idea of the arrangement and contents of Ettelson’s text:

*Rosh Hashonah*  
(Jewish New Year)

Paragraph 9  
And I do so . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . means that Dodgson wishes it *would* be a Happy New Year for himself!  
On Rosh Hashonah Jews *wish* each other a Happy New Year. But Dodgson was *not* a happy man.  
After Yom Kippur (in the fall) comes winter: snow covers up the fields with a white quilt, and they sleep till summer; and wake up in the summer, then the Jewish High Holy Days roll around again in the autumn, when the leaves are turning brown.
As the quotation shows, Ettelson is not particularly respectful of Carroll’s text. So few constraints are imposed on this interpretation that I feel capable, by using the same interpretative technique, of proving that Carroll was a Corsican nationalist. This is, of course, where Ettelson’s interpretation is ‘demented’: since he allows himself every possible interpretative move, the only rule he follows is ‘anything goes’—because too much is allowed, the interpretation is null, or empty, like a definition that, being so wide as to encompass all the phenomena, would utterly fail to define the intended subpart. I mean, however, to go beyond this obvious reproach, which is so true as to be trivial. And the best way to progress is to try and understand what Ettelson is doing, for instance by reading the introduction to the pamphlet, where he gives an account of the origin of his intuition, which, we may imagine, must be linked to a moment of revelation, to an epiphany. Alas, we shall be disappointed, as the introduction is rather bizarre. Ettelson devotes one paragraph to an outline of Carroll’s life, and goes on to quote two pages from Derek Hudson’s biography. He regrets that paragraphs in *Through the Looking-Glass* are not numbered, like verses in the Bible, and in the last two paragraphs he suddenly reveals the contents of his intuition:

Strange as it may seem, the ‘Alice’ books are written in code, and this book is a decoding of one of them. In the decoding process, it was found by trial and error that a search had to be made for certain key words in each paragraph, in order to arrive at the hidden meaning, while some words had to be examined through a mirror and read backwards.

It will no doubt come as a surprise to the reader to learn that ‘Jabberwocky’ is the code name for the Baal Shem Tov of Medzhbish, in the Province of Kamenz Podolsh in the Ukraine, on the Bug River! He was also known as the Rov of Podolia. It may also come as a surprise to discover that the first stanza of the poem beginning with ‘Twas brillig, etc., etc.,’ is not ‘nonsense writing’ at all, but contains within it one-half of the Hebrew script alphabet.12

This text has a familiar Carrollian ring. It reminds us of the principle of inversion that provides a structure for *Through the Looking-Glass*. But it also provides an interpretation for this inversion: it is not only textual, involving the process of reading backwards, in a mirror; it is also Jewish. Inversion is the symbol
of the Jewish way, as made manifest by the inversion in the
direction of reading in English on the one hand, and in Yiddish
or Hebrew on the other. And what indeed is Yiddish, if not
German read through the looking-glass?

There is something missing in Ettelson’s introduction. It does
tell us about the intuition at the centre of his interpretation, and
about the end-product of his reading of Carroll. But it fails to say
anything about the moment of revelation. One of the reasons is
that the epiphanic moment is alluded to on the very first page of
the pamphlet, the dedication page. The text is ‘fondly dedicated’
to the author’s ‘own child-friend’ who, ‘one day in May’ let him
read her copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. Without this epiphanic
reading, his own book ‘would never have come to fruition’. On
the whole Ettelson is a rather shy and ascetic *fou littéraire*: he
alludes to the epiphany in the most discreet and indirect manner
(why, for instance, does he decode *Through the Looking-Glass*,
if the revelation came to him through a reading of both *Alice*
books?). I suspect that the reason for this is truly Carrollian. This
dedication is bound to remind the reader of the anecdote of the
little girl holding an orange in her left hand which, Carroll claims,
is the origin of *Through the Looking-Glass*. (The puzzle is: why
does the little girl hold an orange in her left hand, whereas her
mirror image holds it in her right hand?) This intertextual
reference, whether it is deliberate or not on Ettelson’s part, is
food for thought. It is clear that his intuition is not merely
demented, but also faithful to Carroll.

However, revelation and intuition are not enough. They have
to be materialised in the form of a device—a logophiliac is worth
what his device is worth. Had Brisset merely been a lover of frogs,
he would soon have disappeared in oblivion—as an etymologist,
of the most imaginative type, he still captures our attention. Without
his translation device, which uses *traducson*, or translation
according to sound, Wolfson would be just one more paranoiac.
Ettelson, too, is interesting because of his device. I should say his
devices, as he uses two, which I propose to call the *symbolic* and
the *rhetorical* devices. His *symbolic* device is typical of interpretative
excess—its main characteristic is the uncontrolled use of the copula,
‘*x is y*’, in order to mark relations of identification or equivalence.
Such unrestrained use of brutal assertion is the very emblem of
interpretative violence, what the French language calls a *coup de
force*. Thus, the phrase ‘eyes of flame’ in ‘Jabberwocky’ is glossed:
‘When Israel held the page before his eyes, his face became aflame, his eyes glowed as if they had pierced into the heart of the earth—Thus the “sword” (Book of Wisdom) had been passed to the Baal Shem Tov.’ The device works in three stages. An equivalence between signifiers (‘flame’/‘aflame’) is transferred to the level of the signified (Carroll’s tale/the Book of Wisdom), which is taken to be an allusion to the Baal Shem Tov’s life. This is indeed a copula in the etymological sense of the word: it links a word in Through the Looking-Glass to a word in the hypotext, the Talmud, the Jewish ritual or the life of the prophet. Sometimes this copulative relation even dispenses with the material link between signifiers. The ‘ball of worsted’ with which Alice’s kitten is playing becomes the wool from which the Tsitses is made (this is in no way irrational, as ‘worsted’ is the name of a twisted woollen thread—the Tsitses is a tassel of twisted cord worn by orthodox Jews at the corners of certain garments), and the association, which, even if not unmotivated, is far-fetched, to say the least, is followed upon, as the kitten ‘curled up in a corner’ evokes ‘the four corners of the Tsitses’. It is clear that the symbolic device imposes minimal constraints on interpretation. Such analysis, even if it is coherent, is closer to simile than to metaphor, at least if we follow Davidson’s theory of metaphor. Ettelson’s rhetorical device is more immediately interesting, if only because it is more varied. In the course of his commentary on ‘Jabberwocky’ he interprets the title of the poem by dividing the word into equal parts, ‘Jabber’ and ‘wocky’ and reading each in the mirror, which gives ‘Rebbaj Ykcow’, Rabbi Jacob, who, of course, is the Baal Shem Tov (we are on dangerous ground here, as the analysis seems to yield results which we can no longer dismiss as arbitrary with the same ease as before). The ‘Jubjub’ tree, when looked at in the mirror, yields ‘Judjud’, that is ‘Yude Yude’, Jew Jew. (Of course, Ettelson is cheating—all logophiliacs do—the word ‘jubjub’, when read in a mirror, does not yield any coherent word, or at most, if we decide to read the letter ‘j’ as symmetrical in certain scripts, ‘dudjud’, but certainly not ‘judjud’—Ettelson has in fact read only the letter ‘b’ in the mirror.) Lastly, Ettelson remarks, which is entirely correct, that the word ‘Bandersnatch’ contains an anagram of ‘Satan’. The interest of this
rhetorical device is clear. By playing on signifiers, on the material side of language, it imposes real constraints on the result of the interpretation, the constraints of language (that these effectively constrain is revealed by the temptation to cheat). This has two important consequences: (a) This device is substantially the same as the one Carroll himself, through Humpty Dumpty his creature, has adopted—it is a quasietymological device, reminiscent of Brisset: thus Ettelson reinterprets ‘frumious’, the adjective coined by Carroll, as a combination of Hebrew ‘frum’, meaning ‘orthodox Jew’, and English ‘pious’—this is what, since Humpty Dumpty first used the word, we have called a portmanteau-word; (b) Apart from clear cases of cheating, the analysis yields real results—what Ettelson finds is actually there, in the words where he finds it. We are no longer dealing with the facility of arbitrary pronouncements, as was the case with the symbolic device—the ‘Satan’ anagram is not hallucinated by Ettelson.

Naturally, being sceptical rationalists, we shall dismiss this under the name of coincidence or, more relevant still, by reducing it to a childish game one can always play with language. I am sure children’s magazines and pre-prandial television programmes are full of games where one has to find as many words as one can in a given word. I am sure that a scrabble enthusiast could do better with ‘Bandersnatch’ than Ettelson does: five letters is not a lot. The fact is that the result of the rhetorical analysis is pre-programmed, that Ettelson inevitably finds what he was looking for, and that his interpretation is deeply unfaithful to Carroll, who was a deacon of the Church of England and had strictly nothing to do with the Talmud and the ‘Jewish way’. The problem is that the device is also deeply faithful to Carroll’s own devices. Portmanteau-words, words read in a mirror, anagrams: Carroll is fond of all these games, and *Through the Looking-Glass* is the text where he most obviously practises them (which may account for Ettelson’s choice of this tale over its more illustrious predecessor). The cleverness and skill of the logophiliac are of the same order, and of the same degree, as that of his model, the canonical author. Parodying the famous slogan from the May ’68 events in France, we can only exclaim: ‘*Lewis Carroll, Humpty Dumpty, Ettelson, même combat!*’

To speak like Lyotard, in *Le Différend*, we have to acknowledge that there is such a thing as an ‘Ettelson-phrase’, a mode of
expression, a style of interpretation, which are both entirely coherent and in a specific relationship with their model, the ‘Carroll-phrase’. The Ettelson phrase has two variants, one symbolic, the other rhetorical, but its ‘regimen’ is not in doubt: it is a descriptive phrase, which phrases apodictic judgements. The next question, however, is that of linking, of the constraints on the phrases that follow the apodictic judgement—the question of the genre to which Ettelson’s text belongs. The question is open, as we could seek to understand (and absorb) Ettelson by inserting his text in different genres.

The simplest solution is to decide that Ettelson is indeed mad. His text, therefore belongs to the genre of the case history, a primary source for a psychiatric and/or Freudian-style analysis, where Ettelson is this author’s judge Schreber (the judge is, as we know, the author of Memories of my Mental Illness, and the object of one of Freud’s ‘five case studies’). The text is a classic instance of interpretative delirium, what Michel Thevoz calls ‘un texte brut’. This solution to the genre puzzle is interesting only in one of its complex versions: what we are dealing with is a demented intuition coupled with an interpretation machine that is paranoid, therefore methodical, therefore coherent, therefore lucid up to a point. Ettelson in this version is indeed worthy of judge Schreber. The problem with this interpretation is that it is merely a means to get rid of Ettelson, to ascribe a place to his text, to triangulate it as Deleuze and Guattari might say—unless we remember the last words of Freud’s analysis of the Schreber case: the delirious patient is also more keenly aware than the most imaginative of analysts.

Because my main interest lies in literature, I offer a second solution, which puts the first into perspective. Ettelson’s text seems to be a case history because it is a postmodern novel. We may remember that Wolfson, too, dreamt of writing the Great American Novel, that he wanted to emulate E.E.Doctorow, whom he had met at school, and that his second book, Ma Mère… is, in its own way, his version of the said novel. Ettelson has written the fiction of Carroll’s Talmud, as someone else has written the fiction of Flaubert’s parrot. He is using the banal post-modernist strategy which turns canonical texts into sources of new fiction, as in the case of Hunter Steele’s Lord Hamlet’s Castle. Nor are devices unknown to metafiction, witness the novels of Roussel, or Walter Abish’s Alphabetical Africa, where the first chapter
contains only words beginning with ‘a’, the second words
beginning with ‘a’ and ‘b’, and so on till Chapter 52, the
progression being inverted after the twenty-sixth chapter.
Ettelson’s device is hardly more bizarre than this.

Neither of my two solutions seems quite right. They are both
unjust to Ettelson, because they fail to capture the specificity of
the logophiliac text. Ettelson’s text claims to state the truth about
Lewis Carroll. It is situated in a universe where truth is opposed
to fiction as the serious to the non-serious. There is no attempt
at pastiche or humour in Ettelson. Unless, of course, the whole
exercise is a practical joke, of which the reader (this reader) is a
victim. Apart from the fact that, in imagining this, I am sailing
dangerously close to paranoia myself, I have a conviction (should
I say an intuition?) that such is not the case. Ettelson possesses
the most striking characteristic of the genuine logophiliac: his
exorbitant claim to truth is the price he has to pay for the indirect
expression of truth-bearing insights. There must be a third solution
to the problem of the genre of the text: there is a distinct
logophilist tradition (here I abandon the pejorative,
quasipsychiatric suffix ‘-iac’ for good), in which the logophilist-
phrase is defined through a dual relation to knowledge, the
established knowledge it draws upon, and the new knowledge
it anticipates. Ettelson belongs to the tradition of the ‘other’
Saussure, the ‘demented’ discoverer of anagrams: the very
madness of his intuition is a way of access to truth.

The science explicitly mentioned by Ettelson belongs to his
culture: it is the tradition of midrash. I shall briefly venture into
a domain which remains largely alien to me. For it is only too
obvious that Ettelson’s commentary of Carroll has the shape of
a Talmudic commentary. Following the collection of essays on
midrash and literature edited by Geoffrey Hartman, we can
see that four characterisics of the tradition also concern Ettelson’s
text: (1) The commented text is, both with the midrashists and
with Ettelson, cut off from the intention of meaning of its author,
of any will-to-say. This is particularly important in the case of
Carroll, who would have blushed when reading Ettelson; (2)
There is no remainder, nothing is left over, either in the text or
in the commentary. The object of the commentary is the whole
text, not only its meaning as derived from its words: the sounds,
the shape of the letters, the frequency of occurrence of the signs, the number of lines or pages are objects of equal interest to the hermeneutist. Even semicolons give rise to interpretation. Carroll would have liked such minute attention to detail: he had firm opinions on inverted commas and the position of apostrophes in the negative forms of the English auxiliary verbs;

(3) Midrash is another embodiment of the old paradox: how can we produce the new out of the old? In a sense, everything has already been said in the commented text and on it. Since the tradition is centuries old, the accumulated strata of commentary are extremely impressive. Yet each new commentary starts afresh, as if everything had to be reinvented. This is indeed what Ettelson is doing to Carroll: the critical violence of his intuition sweeps away the interpretative sediments that clutter the text, and starts anew. Yet, of course, his interpretative technique is no different from that of his predecessors;

(4) As a consequence of this, interpretations proliferate— they succeed, but do not cancel, each other, like the innumerable re-analyses of the same phrase according to Brisset’s device. Ettelson’s interpretation of Carroll claims to be the only true one, since Ettelson is the only one to have discovered that *Through the Looking-Glass* is a cryptogram of the Talmud. But, in order to do this, Ettelson uses other interpretations, by quoting, for instance, Hudson’s biography of Carroll (which was published in 1954), and by using Carroll’s own devices, which means that his own discovery is only one more stage in a cumulative progress towards knowledge.

It is nevertheless also obvious that as a midrashic commentator Ettelson is somewhat of an eccentric. If only because he inverts the direction of midrash. He no longer goes from an ancient text, the revealed text, which is the pre-text of a novel, and perhaps imaginative, commentary. On the contrary, he starts from a substitute text, modern rather than ancient, imaginative but not revealed, and uses it as a pre-text for the rediscovery of the ancient text. Such a reversal has important consequences: (a) Carroll’s text is placed in the position of a revealed text, which is perhaps no more than stating that Carroll’s tales now belong to the canon. Each culture has the revealed texts that it can have or wishes to have; (b) The existence of Ettelson’s commentary of Carroll induces an infinite sequence of commentaries. If Ettelson is right, the Talmud is the source of Carroll’s tale, which is the source of Ettelson’s
commentary. But since the second moment is a repetition of the first, there is no reason why the process of repetition should stop here. As a result, Ettelson’s text is the source of new commentary, mine for instance; (c) However, we are still within midrash here, within the sedimentation of interpretations. But there is another aspect to this perverse relationship that should now attract our attention. The Talmud is both Ettelson’s source and inspiration and the result of his discovery, the contents of his commentary (which, compared to Brisset’s, is not imaginative in the least—there is at least something strikingly new in Brisset’s theory about the origins of human language in the croaking of frogs). The proof of Ettelson’s talent does not lie in the contents of his discovery, which are poor, but in the path he follows in order to reach them. As a result, we have not only an infinite chain of commentaries, in which the first link is an arbitrary and violent origin, the word of God, and the last the beginning of an *en abyme* lineage (Ettelson is part of an infinite sequence of commentators), but also a closed circular structure, whereby the Talmud and *Through the Looking-Glass* are mirror-images of each other. Indeed, the best commentary of Ettelson is not my own, but the commentary only Pierre Ménard might give, which, starting from Ettelson’s Talmud, would reproduce *Through the Looking-Glass* word for word—Pierre Ménard’s Carroll, as Borges wrote ‘Pierre Ménard’s *Quixote*’.  This type of circularity is already present in Ettelson’s commentary. Thus, the ‘worsted’ in Carroll’s tale is assimilated to the ‘Tsitses’ in the Talmud; this Tsitses refers back to the word ‘corner’ in Carroll, which in turn evokes the corners of the Tsitses. The circularity, the *va et vient* of interpretation establishes a metonymic relationship between ‘worsted’ and ‘corner’ in *Through the Looking-Glass*, whereas they have only the most distant and tenuous syntagmatic relationship, as two unrelated words on the same page.

Ettelson’s ‘gay science’, even if hopelessly caught up in the circularity and closure of the Lacanian imaginary (I am attempting to give a slightly more precise meaning to Ettelson’s ‘madness’), produces effects, if only an effect of construction. An arrangement of interpretative utterances emerges, an interpretative machine that projects and structures a complex intertext. Such a construction also produces a truth effect—a form of implicit knowledge about the workings of language.