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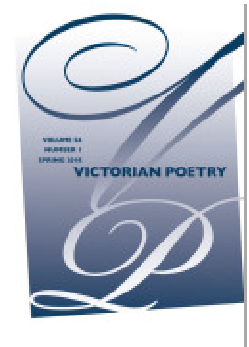

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“All about fishes”? The Riddle of Humpty Dumpty’s Song and Recursive Understanding in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*[1]

ANGELIKA ZIRKER

At the conclusion of Alice’s adventures in the country behind the looking-glass, she comments, “I had such a quantity of poetry said to me, all about fishes” (p. 243);[2] she thus repeats an earlier utterance from chapter 9: “I’ve had such a quantity of poetry repeated to me today, . . . and it’s a very curious thing, I think—every poem was about fishes in some way. Do you know why they’re so fond of fishes, all about here?” (p. 235). The statement that “*every* poem was about fishes” is not quite true: There are no “fishes” mentioned either in the White Knight’s Song or in the nursery rhymes.[3] Nevertheless, Alice makes this statement, which leads to the *impression* that all poems she listened to in the country behind the mirror were “about fishes”; and, indeed, her statement immediately follows upon the White Queen’s riddle during the banquet in chapter 9, “a lovely riddle—all in poetry—*all about fishes*” (p. 235; emphasis added):

> “First, the fish must be caught.”
> That is easy: a baby, I think, could have caught it.
> “Next, the fish must be bought.”
> That is easy: a penny, I think, would have bought it.
>
> “Now cook me the fish!”
> That is easy, and will not take more than a minute.

"Let it lie in a dish!"
That is easy, because it is already in it.

"Bring it here! Let me sup!"
It is easy to set such a dish on the table.
"Take the dish-cover up!"
Ah, *that* is so hard that I fear I'm unable!

For it holds it like glue—
Holds the lid to the dish, while it lies in the middle:
Which is easiest to do,
Un-dish-cover the fish, or dishcover the riddle? (p. 236)

The answer to this riddle is "oyster."[4] The oyster is the fish that can be easily caught, easily bought, prepared, and served. The only difficulty lies in the opening of the oyster, and the last lines of the poem refer to this problem. The top of the oyster is "glue[d]" to the shell, and the poem therefore ends on the (slightly ironic) question of whether it might not be easier, eventually, to solve the riddle than to open the oyster. This last of the poems "about fishes," with its neatly suggested answer to the riddle it presents, invites us to go back to the earlier ones that do not give up their secret quite so easily.

Many of the poems in *Through the Looking-Glass* resemble a riddle or leave Alice "puzzled" (p. 189), which hints at the setup of the book as a (jigsaw) puzzle and a riddle: the various elements have to be sorted and put together to make sense. Against this background, the following analysis sets out to solve the riddle that is most prominent in the course of Alice's adventures: Humpty Dumpty's Song ("In winter, when the fields are white") in chapter 6 of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*.

This song has been regarded as nonsensical, that is, without meaning, and has therefore been largely ignored by critics.[5] The problems of understanding and interpreting Humpty Dumpty's poem are manifold: there are aposiopeses, stanzas close on a pause, it is not clear whom the pronouns "I" and "he" refer to, and the poem ends on an incomplete sentence so that the action is neither resolved nor concluded. Humpty Dumpty's Song has therefore been evaluated as "the worst poem in the *Alice* books."[6] Because of its unsatisfactory ending, there even was a competition by the *Spectator* to write a final stanza.[7] As it stands, the poem apparently turns out to be another "riddle without an answer" (such as the one in the first part of the *Alice* books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, during the "Mad Tea Party" in chapter 7). But it is not: Humpty

Dumpty's Song begins to make sense if read in the context of the whole book and Alice's statement about the poetry recited to her; moreover, it should be regarded as one of the games that Carroll likes to play and that are meant to involve the reader.

The worlds within the *Alice* books are structured around play and games: Alice encounters playing cards in *Wonderland* and is invited to join a party of croquet; in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the whole action revolves around a game of chess. By means of language games, readers are invited to join in, and in the case of riddles, they are asked to look for answers as well. Humpty Dumpty's Song, therefore, may be considered to contain such an invitation. To unravel its meaning, it will be read in the context of the "fishes" poems. The first of those is "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Although this poem, on the level of content, appears to be rather easily understandable, it is nonetheless, as it turns out, linked to the idea of a riddle.

1. "The Walrus and the Carpenter"

The poem in chapter 4 starts with a nonsensical combination of contrary and mutually exclusive concepts:[8]

> The sun was shining on the sea,
>   Shining with all his might:
> He did his very best to make
>   The billows smooth and bright—
> And this was odd, because it was
>   The middle of the night.
> . . . .
> The sea was wet as wet could be,
>   The sands were dry as dry.
> You could not see a cloud, because
>   No cloud was in the sky:
> No birds were flying overhead—
>   There were no birds to fly. (p. 162, ll. 1–6, 13–18)

The tautological statements are void of content and contribute to the overall nonsense of the poem rather than an intelligible plot or argument. In this setting, the reader encounters the Walrus and the Carpenter, who take a walk on the beach: they are unhappy about the "quantities of sand" and "wept like anything,"[9] followed by the wish to clear away the sand. Up to this point in the poem, nothing of consequence has happened, and the first three stanzas

can be regarded as something like an introduction that establishes a mock-romantic and nonsensical atmosphere. From stanza 4 onward, then, the action proper starts, and this is where the "fishes," that is, the oysters, come into play:

"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head—
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.

But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat—
And this is odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet. (p. 163, ll. 31–48)

More oysters follow,[10] but the eldest oyster refuses to leave the "oyster-bed": he keeps his distance from the Walrus and the Carpenter and neither metaphorically nor literally "opens up"; he only winks and shakes his head to communicate his decision. This behavior hints at his superior knowledge and wisdom: were he to speak, he would fall prey to the Walrus and the Carpenter. The younger oysters, however, are less careful and follow them on the beach. Walrus and Carpenter, in the meantime, are thinking of food:

"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,
"Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed—
Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed."

"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
"After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!"
"The night is fine," the Walrus said.
"Do you admire the view?"

"It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!"
The Carpenter said nothing but
"Cut us another slice.
I wish you were not quite so deaf—
I've had to ask you twice!" (pp. 164–165, ll. 73–90)

It is here that Walrus and Carpenter reveal their intention: they only wanted to lure the oysters to the beach in order to eat them. Although they acknowledge the unfairness of tricking the oysters in such a manner—"'It seems a shame,' the Walrus said, / 'To play them such a trick'" (p. 165, ll. 91–92)—Walrus and Carpenter are not really scrupulous when it comes to eating them.

"I weep for you," the Walrus said:
"I deeply sympathize."
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.

"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,
"You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?"
But answer came there none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one. (p. 166, ll. 97–108)

The poem ends on the tears of the Walrus, but his tears are worthy of a crocodile, especially so as he sorts out the largest oysters while weeping. After the mock-romantic beginning of the poem, it ends on a sort of punch line that is almost cynical: the Carpenter should know that no answer can be expected from the oysters that he himself has eaten.

But what is the significance of this scene in the wider context of *Through the Looking-Glass* and its poetry? I suggest that the answer may be found by becoming aware of the intertextual game Carroll plays. Carroll wrote in a letter to his uncle that the poem *was not* a parody:[11] "In writing 'The Walrus and the Carpenter,' I had no particular poem in my mind. The meter is a common one, and I don't think 'Eugene Aram' [by Thomas Hood] suggested it more than the many other poems I have read in the same metre [sic]" (*Letters*, 1:177). This very refutation, however, contains a valuable clue, as the poem is indeed related to Hood's text, and that not only on the level of meter. In both poems, the day is at its end. Aram in his dream lures an old man out to a field so that he can murder him in the moonshine.[12] Similarly, the Walrus and the Carpenter lure the oysters to the beach to eat them, and the texts share a common motif, namely, "the discovery of an unexpected murder" (Clark, p. 68). Carroll's poem may indeed be called a parody of Hood's, as it alleviates its seriousness by its playful character; we are not really meant to be shocked by the death of the oysters.[13] Lewis Carroll, that is, Charles L. Dodgson, grew up with ten younger siblings and, early in his life, published family magazines containing his own poetry. If one looks, for instance, at a poem such as "Sister, sister, go to bed," which ends on the injunction "Never stew your sister,"[14] the seeming cruelty of Walrus and Carpenter in eating the oysters may appear in a slightly different light, namely, that of play and absurdity.[15] While Hood's poem tells an awful tale that frightens children, the eaten oysters in Carroll are primarily meant to entertain the reader. It appears not unlikely that the very beginning of "Eugene Aram" provided Carroll with the hint to replace the murder of the old man with the killing of the oysters:

'T was in the prime of summer time,
    An evening calm and cool,
And four-and-twenty happy boys
    Came bounding out of school:
There were some that ran and some that leap'd,
    Like troutlets in a pool.

Away they sped with gamesome minds,
    And souls untouch'd by sin;
. . . .

Like sportive deer they cours'd about,
    And shouted as they ran,

Turning to mirth all things of earth,
As only boyhood can. (ll. 1–8, 13–16)

The boys, described in contrast to Eugene Aram at the beginning of the poem, are playful like young fish ("troutlets"), marked by an "unchecked exuberance of spirits"—in short, they are "boisterous."[16] In removing the "shell" from this word, an "oyster" is left. This "secret" word game,[17] which is typical of Carroll and reminiscent of his *portmanteau words*, gives us a cue why Carroll has his two characters lure oysters to the beach and eat them.

The transformation of seriousness into playfulness agrees with another possible candidate that has been suggested as a point of reference to this poem: William Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which ends on the following (nonsensical) lines:

And thus, to Betty's question, he
Made answer, like a traveller bold,
(His very words I give to you,)
"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold!"—
Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel's story.[18]

The sun shining cold is as plausible as its shining in the middle of the night at the beginning of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Lewis Carroll surely sympathized with the notion of childhood expressed in each of the poems he parodied: Hood emphasizes the "souls untouch'd by sin" and the ability of "Turning to mirth all things of earth, / As only boyhood can," and Wordsworth speaks of the "glory" of the boy. Carroll takes up Hood's hint and turns the serious content into play, making this change quite plausible by the context: Alice is told the poem by two characters that originate from a nursery rhyme and thus themselves represent a form of play.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" establishes the oyster reference that will later provide the answer to the riddle of the White Queen. Whereas the latter presents us with a riddle to which the answer is "oysters," the former presents us with oysters that are riddling, not just because of the intertextual games Carroll plays. They also offer a riddle in ethical terms since Alice as a listener cannot invest her sympathies on moral grounds, as she may have used to do with the poetry she knows. When Tweedledum and Tweedledee have finished reciting the poem to Alice, she comments, "I like the Walrus

best . . . because he was a *little* sorry for the poor oysters" (p. 166). Tweedledee then confronts her with a moral dilemma as he points out to her that the Walrus ate more oysters than the Carpenter did, while the latter, however, also ate as many as he could get. "This was a puzzler," thinks Alice, and she concludes, "They were *both* very unpleasant characters—" (p. 167). But no matter whether we go forward from "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to the White Queen's riddle or go backward from the latter to the former, we will come across another poem on "fishes," which is elucidated by both of them.

2. Humpty Dumpty's Song

Alice meets Humpty Dumpty in chapter 6, that is, two chapters after her encounter with Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Humpty Dumpty talks about his abilities in the field of poetry: "*I* can repeat poetry as well as other folk" (p. 193) and begins to recite a poem that was, or so he says, written entirely for Alice's amusement. When he finishes, Alice remarks, "of all the unsatisfactory people I *ever* met" (p. 197). What seems to be particularly "unsatisfactory" during their conversation is the poem: Humpty Dumpty's Song is full of aposiopeses and lacks an introductory context—which results in Alice's (and the reader's) inability to understand it. This incomprehensibility is a topic throughout the entire encounter with Humpty Dumpty. Earlier in their conversation, he had explained to Alice his theory of meaning ("When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less" [p. 190], and she consequently was "too much puzzled to make any other remark" [p. 191]). Humpty Dumpty's linguistic explications and his theory of meaning are thus embedded in a context of misunderstanding, of being "puzzled," and the whole chapter is influenced by this. At one point, Alice simply states, "He talks about it [language] as if it was a game!" (p. 188). And this is exactly how language is being treated, not only in this chapter but in the whole world behind the looking-glass. But it is a serious game, insofar as it makes us aware of the problem of understanding itself.

When Humpty Dumpty presents his poem to Alice, he is to be regarded as a poet confronted with the reproach of producing nothing but *non*sense and puzzlement, which is, in fact, deemed a characteristic of his calling:

> *Alcibiades*. . . . To my mind it [the poet's saying] has nothing to do with the point.

> *Socrates*. It is very much to the point: but he, good sir, like almost every other poet, speaks in riddles. For poetry as a whole is by nature inclined to riddling, and it is not every man who can apprehend it.[19]

Socrates's remark on the riddling nature of poetry is taken literally by Lewis Carroll and becomes manifest in the character of Humpty Dumpty. If this is the case, however, his song, riddling as it may be, is not merely an example of nonsense in the sense of "making no sense"; at least parts of it can be understood, although not immediately and only in the context of the backward and forward movement indicated earlier.

The song begins with four self-referential rhyming couplets: within the four seasons, the poem, "this song," is supposed to be recited; after that, its meaning shall be explained and understood; and eventually the song shall be written down:

> In winter, when the fields are white,
> I sing this song for your delight—
>
> In spring, when woods are getting green,
> I'll try and tell you what I mean:
>
> In summer, when the days are long,
> Perhaps you'll understand the song:
>
> In autumn, when the leaves are brown,
> Take pen and ink, and write it down. (p. 194)

The production and reception of text is assigned to the four seasons and thus evokes a recursive pattern, a process whose circularity is stressed because it does not, as one might expect, begin in spring. While the four seasons point to completeness,[20] the unusual beginning disrupts such a notion. Furthermore, this introductory part of the poem seems unrelated to the story that follows and therefore encourages us to reflect on the nature of their relationship.

Again, part of the game is an intertextual one, since the introductory verses allude to the poem "Summer Days" by Wathen Marks Wilks Call, who is now widely forgotten but whose poems were immensely popular in the nineteenth century and published in many anthologies.[21] The poem by Call begins with the line, "In summer, when the days were long," which recurs as a refrain at the beginning and the ending of every other stanza. After six stanzas altogether,

in which the speaker thinks back to past summers, the past tense "were" is replaced by the present "are": "In summer, when the days are long." In the concluding three stanzas, his memories are transformed into the present:

> In summer, when the days are long,
> I love her as I loved of old;
> My heart is light, my step is strong,
> For love brings back those hours of gold,
> In summer, when the days are long. (ll. 41–45)

Humpty Dumpty directly refers to Call when he quotes the line "In summer, when the days are long"; at the same time, this is also a reference to the introductory poems of both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, where the speaker mentions a "golden afternoon" (p. 3) and "happy summer days" (p. 116), which is also a quotation from the concluding passage of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days" (p. 111). The desire to go back and recall the golden hours of the past, however, is replaced in Humpty Dumpty's Song with a half-serious description of the formation of poetic tradition.

The description of the stages involved is directed at Alice, who is cast in the role of an audience: she listens to the text and is supposed to be given an explanation of it, to understand it, and to write it down. The rest of the poem can be seen as the failure of that process, feared by Alice herself as she wonders if she "can remember it so long" (p. 194): the poem that follows is incomplete, and she is therefore unable to grasp its meaning. We must assume that the poem as she hears it from Humpty Dumpty is the result of such a problematic recursive process of production, understanding, and transmission, especially since Humpty Dumpty himself twice says that he "repeat[s]" it (p. 193). Even the announced explication never follows: Humpty Dumpty suddenly ends the conversation and, shortly after that, falls from the wall (completing the action described in the nursery rhyme about him). The reader is, together with Alice, left in the dark as to the meaning of the poem, an idea that seems to have intrigued Lewis Carroll as he, following Plato, expressed himself in his poem "Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur":

> Mention no places, names, or dates,
> And evermore be sure
> Throughout the poem to be found
> Consistently obscure.[22]

This obscurity is the purpose and content of the part of Humpty Dumpty's Song that follows the self-referential stanzas:

> "I sent a message to the fish:
> I told them 'This is what I wish.'
> The little fishes of the sea,
> They sent an answer back to me.
> The little fishes' answer was
> 'We cannot do it, Sir, because—'" (p. 194)

At the beginning, the speaker addresses the fish, but it remains indefinite what it is that he wishes: "this" is without a referent, and there is no context that might help explain the message and the wish or the motivation behind the action. The decoding of the poem is rendered even more difficult through the aposiopeses, which prevent our learning why or under which condition something might happen (but does not). At the same time, they are not formally disruptive as they follow a regular rhyme scheme, which means that the rhyming word is not left out but the aposiopeses end on a rhyme.[23] Furthermore, they are syntactically linked to conjunctions, "because," "if," and "but"—that is, a causal, a conditional, and an adversative relation is established in each of the sentences; but those are not pursued any further, and thus a coherent understanding of the text is impossible.

Alice's objection after the first stanzas of the poem, "I'm afraid I don't quite understand" (p. 194), is followed by Humpty Dumpty's promise, "It gets easier further on." And this really is true: the poem is a riddle that asks for a solution, and the further one goes on within the text, the more obvious is the answer. What Humpty Dumpty does not tell Alice, however, is that the text of the poem alone does not help in solving the riddle: it is the double movement of going forward (from "The Walrus and the Carpenter") and going backward (from the White Queen's riddle) that is required—in fact, the very movement that characterizes the world behind the looking-glass.

Alice continues to be confused and puzzled as the poem goes on:

> "I sent to them again to say
> 'It will be better to obey.'
>
> The fishes answered, with a grin,
> 'Why, what a temper you are in!'

I told them once, I told them twice:
They would not listen to advice.

I took a kettle large and new
Fit for the deed I had to do.

My heart went hop, my heart went thump:
I filled the kettle at the pump.

Then some one came to me and said
'The little fishes are in bed.'

I said to him, I said it plain,
'Then you must wake them up again.'

I said it very loud and clear:
I went and shouted in his ear." (pp. 194–195)

The fish, particularly in combination with a kettle, call to mind at least two contexts: the first is the proverb "a pretty kettle of fish," which already points to the solution of the riddle since what the poem is about (fish to be put into a kettle) is what the meaning of the poem appears to be (a muddle).[24] The second context is one of George MacDonald's fairy tales: "The Golden Key."[25] The function and character of the fish, however, is different in MacDonald: there the fish are messengers (very similar to the fish-footman in "Pig and Pepper") and obey every command of the grandmother in the text. Their obedience is rewarded: if they fulfill their task, which consists in guiding the children to the grandmother's hut, they are allowed to go "straight to the pot, and into the boiling water" (p. 259). It is their destiny and fulfillment, "their ambition to be eaten by the people; for that is their highest end in that condition" (p. 266). The fish sacrifice themselves in order to be able to go to heaven; from the pot subsequently appears "a lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings" (p. 267).[26]

Humpty Dumpty, in contrast, has to warn the fish, "It will be better to obey"; and if they do not, he will fetch the kettle, "Fit for the deed [he] had to do."[27] The kettle thus figures as a means of punishment of disobedience: if the fish do not obey, they will be cooked. But the literal representation of the metaphorical and proverbial kettle of fish evokes yet another context, as it can be read as an allusion (or at least a parallel) to John Keats's "A Song about Myself," which he sent to his sister, Fanny, in a letter:[28]

There was a naughty boy,
  And a naughty boy was he,
He kept little fishes
  In washing tubs three.
    In spite
    Of the might
    Of the maid,
    Nor afraid
    Of his granny-good—
    He often would
    Hurly burly
    Get up early
    And go,
    By hook or crook,
    To the brook
    And bring home
    Miller's thumb,
    Tittlebat
    Not over fat,
    Minnows small
    As the stall
    Of a glove,
    Not above
    The size
    Of a nice
    Little baby's
    Little finger—
    Oh, he made
    ('Twas his trade)
  Of fish a pretty kettle—
    A kettle,
    A kettle,
  Of fish a pretty kettle,
    A kettle! (p. 361, ll. 60–93)

In Keats's poem, it is a "naughty" boy who goes and catches the fish; in Humpty Dumpty's Song, it is the fishes who are naughty.

The prevalence of language games in Keats is remarkable: the sequence of words is determined by rhyme and not by logical coherence. This

impression is emphasized through the use of aposiopeses that are, as in Humpty Dumpty's Song, based on rhyme. The analogy becomes most striking at the end of the stanza, when the boy produces "a pretty kettle" of fish. Keats plays with the proverb in that he has the boy indeed play with fish. The scenario in Humpty Dumpty's Song is very similar: in the course of events, the speaker sees himself confronted with a "[pretty] kettle of fish" in the metaphorical sense, as he never achieves it literally. The whole poem is a very kettle of fish even though (or because) the speaker never gets his hoped-for kettle of fish. The speaker's heart does not exactly leap up when he beholds the fish (which he never does), but, he says, "My heart went hop, my heart went thump," as he believes to have eventually found a solution to his problem (p. 195).

But now "some one" arrives and tells him that the "little fishes are in bed." When the speaker asks him to "wake them up," he does not react—he is as disobedient as are the fish and thus is not a helper but turns out to be yet another obstacle in completing the action of the poem:

> "But he was very stiff and proud:
> He said: 'You needn't shout so loud!'
>
> And he was very proud and stiff:
> He said 'I'd go and wake them, if—'
>
> I took a corkscrew from the shelf:
> I went to wake them up myself.
>
> And when I found the door was locked,
> I pulled and pushed and kicked and knocked.
>
> And when I found the door was shut,
> I tried to turn the handle, but—" (p. 196)

The chiastic repetition of "stiff" and "proud" suggests that these are the prevalent characteristics of the messenger, and the quality of stiffness is linked to disobedience. The faculty of being obedient is furthermore linked to the ability to hear.[29] The speaker in Humpty Dumpty's Song eventually even shouts to be heard, but without success: "some one" merely tells him that there is no reason to "shout so loud" and that he would obey the speaker's order, "if—." He expresses a condition that is, however, never spoken out and refrains from taking action. The speaker hence does not get any help and becomes the main

agent again toward the end of the poem. His action, though, is never concluded, as the poem ends abruptly. The preceding sequence is episodic through the anaphoric repetition "And when . . . / And when. . . ." The speaker first takes a "corkscrew from the shelf"[30] and tries eventually to open the door: he "pulled and pushed and kicked and knocked." But his knocking is in vain.

The speaker never achieves what he was aiming at, the reader never learns what this actually was, and the fish refuse to fulfill his wish. Thus, the poem remains without a conclusion and without an ending: "I tried to turn the handle, but—" (p. 196). Alice perceives this to be most unsatisfactory and asks, "Is that all?" The ending of the poem reflects her encounter with Humpty Dumpty, which likewise ends suddenly. In this very denial of getting at the fish and at the meaning of the song, however, lies the answer to the riddle.

3. Recursive Understanding

The answer is where going forward and going backward will take us. The poems dealing with "fishes" in *Through the Looking-Glass*, that is, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" and the White Queen's riddle, turn out to be about oysters.[31] And so does Humpty Dumpty's Song: if one reads the "fishes" as oysters, the poem suddenly makes sense. The oysters do indeed lie in a bed—which is mentioned by the "eldest Oyster" in Tweedledee's poem; "he did not choose / To leave his oyster-bed"; oysters cannot be easily opened, for they "hold . . . like glue," as the White Queen remarks in her riddle, and even a corkscrew will not do the trick. As the oyster consists of two shells that stick to each other, Humpty Dumpty's pulling and pushing and kicking and knocking does not help. The oysters in his song are more intelligent than those who meet the Walrus and the Carpenter and follow them to be eaten. In Humpty Dumpty's case, the oysters refuse to follow and obey, and this is why they remain untouched. Humpty Dumpty even takes the "corkscrew" from the "shelf," which reads like an abridged version of "shellfish"; this is exactly what oysters are, fish in a shell, shellfish.[32] Accordingly, the speaker in Humpty Dumpty's Song continuously speaks of "fishes"; and oysters are indeed called fish.[33]

By having readers go both forward and backward in arriving at a meaning of the song, Lewis Carroll makes them adopt the double movement characteristic of the world in which Alice progresses but in which there is also a notion of "living backwards" (p. 175). This is mentioned explicitly by the White Queen in chapter 5 of *Through the Looking-Glass* and is part of the reversals in the world behind the mirror.[34] It begins with Alice's having to walk backward in order to move forward toward the garden (in chapter 2) and goes

on to her cutting the cake, which she has to "hand . . . round first, and cut it afterwards" (p. 207). Accordingly, besides advancing from "The Walrus and the Carpenter" and being primed by its many references to oysters, one has to read the text backward and return from the ending, that is, from Alice's statement that "every poem was about fishes" to the riddle in chapter 9 and to the oyster poem in chapter 4 in order to arrive at a meaning of the enigmatic poem in chapter 6, Humpty Dumpty's Song.[35] The movement is also backward from the White Queen's riddle to the explicit reference to the wanted object earlier in the text.

Oysters are a very special key to the meaning of Humpty Dumpty's Song, as they are mysterious: they are closed, not easily opened, and hence perfect for riddles. The pearl, the valuable inner part of the oyster, is protected by the shell, hidden, and locked away.[36] Likewise, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the "real" meaning is hidden; the riddle has to be solved, the mysterious inner part, the inside, opened up. The *Alice* books read throughout like puzzles and riddles that have to be solved in a playful manner. The oysters that figure in the riddles and poems in *Through the Looking-Glass* are symbolic of this overall concept. But if the oyster is also the answer to the riddle, understanding becomes recursive: the answer is the riddle itself. This is what is openly hidden in the middle of the three oyster poems in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

The four self-reflexive couplets at the beginning of Humpty Dumpty's Song exactly fit into the circular pattern in which the riddle is the answer to the riddle (or the problem of understanding is the result of a process of understanding): it both suggests a hermeneutic progress, that is, the explanation, understanding, and transmission of a poetic text, and a circular movement, hermeneutic as well as "just" playful, in which you go back to the beginning. The three aposiopeses in the song represent this recursive process iconically: the progress of the sentence breaks off at a point where what should follow is indicated to be the cause or condition of what the main clause is about, that is, logically goes before it. When the "little fishes" answer, "We cannot do it, Sir, because—" (p. 194), the reason omitted may well be an expected future action by the speaker (e.g., his eating them), but as a reason for not doing what they are told to do, it precedes their decision. Similarly, the "stiff and proud" person saying, "I'd go and wake them, if—" (p. 196), omits the condition that must be fulfilled before he is willing to do what he is asked to do, and in the last line, "I tried to turn the handle, but—" (p. 196), we learn enough of the omission to know that it must be the reason why the speaker's attempt is thwarted. We fail to get the meaning of these utterances because we lack the knowledge of that on which they are based, just as in the speaker's initial message to the

fish, "This is what I wish" (p. 194), we never learn what "this" refers to. In this way, Humpty Dumpty's Song makes us aware of the conditions of understanding itself. And as if to signal to us that this reflection on what is needed to understand what someone says is not restricted to the song itself, the chapter in which Humpty Dumpty repeats it ends on Alice's aposiopesis: "'of all the unsatisfactory people I *ever* met—' She never finished the sentence, for at this moment a heavy crash shook the forest from end to end" (p. 197). Egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty himself is an appropriate symbol of the recursive and endlessly regressive process of understanding. Not only is his name a substitute of the word searched for within the riddle "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall" but also is he himself, an egg, the embodiment of one of the oldest riddles ever, namely, the question of origin, which again points backward: what was there first, the hen, or the egg?[37] But while Lewis Carroll stresses that successful understanding will only take us to the point from which we departed and confront us with further problems of meaning, the very notion of recursiveness is linked, in the *Alice* books, to the idea that readers must choose a backward movement toward childhood and to a world of origins from which they are to progress if they are to come to any understanding at all.[38]

Notes

1 This essay is an elaboration of part of my doctoral thesis, published in German as *Der Pilger als Kind: Spiel, Sprache und Erlösung in Lewis Carrolls* Alice-*Büchern* (Muenster, Ger.: LIT, 2010). All quotations follow the Oxford edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998). *Through the Looking-Glass* is abbreviated as *LG* throughout.

2 "Not only is there thematic continuity between verse and prose, via fishes, . . . but the physical integration of the two has also increased in *Looking-Glass*"; Beverly Lyon Clark, "Carroll's Well-Versed Narrative: *Through the Looking-Glass*," *ELN* 20, no. 2 (1982): 65–76, 72.

3 Hugh Haughton, in the Penguin Classics edition, notes, "There's something fishy about Alice's recollection of the poetry she's heard. . . . [T]hough the White Knight's ballad is mysteriously named 'Haddock's Eyes,' it isn't 'about fishes' in any obvious sense and neither are 'Jabberwocky' nor the final drinking-song 'Queen Alice.'" Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed., introduction, and notes by Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 354n2.

4 See Gardner's note in Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed., introduction, and notes by Martin Gardner (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 267n16.

5 One of the few readings is by Edward Wakeling, who merely states that the poem ends after twenty stanzas, which he considers to be a hint at the fact that one stanza is missing. His interpretation originates in the speculations around the number forty-two: another stanza would have made the poem complete, as it would then have been forty-two lines long: "[Humpty Dumpty] proceeded to recite exactly 40 lines. As everyone knows, he didn't finish the poem—he left out the last two lines making a total of 42 lines!"; Wakeling, "What I Tell You Forty-Two Times Is True," *Jabberwocky* 6, no. 4 (1977): 103.

6 Richard Kelly, *Lewis Carroll* (New York: Twayne, 1977), p. 71. Kelly comments, "The language is flat and prosaic, the frustrated story line is without interest, the couplets are uninspired and fail to surprise or delight, and there are almost no true elements of nonsense present, other than in the unstated wish of the narrator and the lack of a conclusion to the work."

7 See Gardner's note in Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 230n17.

8 For a detailed study of elements that create nonsense, see, e.g., Elizabeth Sewell, "Nonsense Verse and the Child," *Lion and the Unicorn* 4, no. 2 (1980–1981): 30–48, esp. 37–38.

9 Rose H. Lovell-Smith sees an allusion to Margaret Gatty's *Parables* in this passage, namely, to "Whereunto," a parable about a starfish who talks about his fate and becomes more and more pathetic; Lovell-Smith, "'The Walrus and the Carpenter': Lewis Carroll, Margaret Gatty, and Natural History for Children," *Australasian Victorian Studies Journal* 10 (2004): 58. John Goldthwaite regards La Fontaine's fable "The Oyster and Its Claimants" as another possible source and infers Carroll's didactic intentions in the *Alice* books from this; Goldthwaite, "Do You Admire the View? The Critics Go Looking for Nonsense," *Signal: Approaches to Children's Books* 67 (1992): 63.

10 "Four other Oysters followed them, / And yet another four; / And thick and fast they came at last, / And more, and more, and more— / All hopping through the frothy waves, / And scrambling to the shore" (p. 164, ll. 49–54).

11 Parodies are not exceptional in *LG*. One prime example is the White Knight's Song in chapter 8, which goes back to William Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." Carroll wrote in a letter to his uncle Hassard Dodgson on May 14, 1872, "'Sitting on a Gate' *is* a parody, though not as to style or metre [sic]—but its plot is borrowed from Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence,' a poem that has always amused me a good deal (though it is by no means a comic poem) by the absurd way in which the poet goes on questioning the poor old leech-gatherer, making him tell his history over and over again, and never attending to what he says. Wordsworth ends with a moral—an example I have *not* followed"; Carroll, *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Morton N. Cohen, 2 volumes, (London: Macmillan, 1979), 1: 177. Further parodies in the book include the flowers in chapter 2, which are based on Sir Alfred Tennyson's *Maud*, and an allusion to Sir Walter Scott's "Bonny Dundee" in the song sung in Alice's honor in chapter 9; cf. Gardner's note in Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, pp. 273–274n13. In those parodies, Carroll makes fun of the originals and frees them in particular from their sentimental tone.

12 "A feeble man and old: / I led him to a lonely field; / The moon shone clear and cold: / Now here, said I, this man shall die"; Thomas Hood, "The Dream of Eugene Aram," in *A Victorian Anthology, 1837–1895*, ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman (New York: Greenwood, 1969), pp. 113–115, ll. 80–83.

13 Laura White, in *The Alice Books and the Contested Ground of the Natural World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), points out that Victorian (child) readers "laugh[ed] at the relish with which the child-oysters are polished off," feeling much less sympathy for them than will be expected from modern readers (p. 218).

14 The poem was published in Carroll, *Useful and Instructive Poetry* (1845) (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954); see Gillian Beer, introduction to *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense: Collected Poems*, by Lewis Carroll (London: Penguin, 2013), p. xiii. Beer in the context of Lewis Carroll's juvenilia also points to a poem by his brother Wilfred, "Blood," published in the family magazine *Mischmasch* (1855–1862) and describes it as "a rip-roaring and unironic celebration of violence" (p. xiv). One might hence argue that a "realistic" representation of childhood has to include violence as well—which is true for the *Alice* books. See also Beer, introduction to *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense*, p. xx.

15 In this, Carroll's poem resembles Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (*Slovenly Peter*; published in English in 1848) as well as Edward Lear's limericks: the brutality contained in them is not really disturbing because it is embedded in play.

16 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "boisterous, *adj*." 9.c.

17 On the technique, see Matthias Bauer, "Secret Wordplay and What It May Tell Us" in *Wordplay and Metalinguistic/Metadiscursive Reflection: Authors, Contexts, Techniques, and Meta-Reflection*, ed. Angelika Zirker and Esme Winter-Froemel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 269–288.

18 William Wordsworth, "The Idiot Boy," in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (Harlow, U.K.: Longman, 1992), pp. 157–169, ll. 457–463. See Haughton's note in Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*: "The opening of Carroll's poem may also recall the nonsensical close of Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). . . . 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' is also a lyrical ballad"; p. 339n4. On Carroll parodying Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" in his White Knight's Song, see note 11 above. See also Beer, introduction to *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense*, p. xxi.

19 *Plato, with an English Translation*, ed. Harold North Fowler, vol. 12, *Alcibiades II*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (London: Heinemann, 1964), 147b.

20 The number four stands for completion and universality, which is reflected in the idea of the completion of the song; cf. Heinz Meyer and Rudolf Suntrup, "Vier," in *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen* (Munich: Fink, 1987), p. 342.

21 Wathen Marks Wilks Call, "Summer Days," appeared first in his *Golden Histories* (London: Smith, Elder, 1871), pp. 160–161; see also Gardner's note in Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 228n15.

22 Lewis Carroll, *The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll* (Hertfordshire, U.K.: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), pp. 790–793, stanza 12.

23 As these aposiopeses conform with the rhyme, they are different from the one in chapter 10 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. There Alice wants to recite Isaac Watts's poem "The Sluggard," which, in her version, turns into "uncommon nonsense" (p. 93). The last stanza concludes on "When the pie was all finished, the Owl, as a boon, / Was kindly permitted to pocket the spoon: / While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl, / And concluded the banquet by—" (p. 94). The last line is incomplete—but unlike the lines in Humpty Dumpty's Song, it is also incomplete metrically; and it is this very metrical incompleteness that allows for filling the gap, namely, "eating the owl"; see also Clark, "Carroll's Well-Versed Narrative," p. 74. In the opera version by Saville Clark, the rhyme was completed accordingly and the line ended on these words (see Gardner's note in Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 111n9).

24 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. s.v. "fish, *n*." I.1.c; *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, "Kettle of fish," p. 421.

25 George MacDonald, "The Golden Key," *Dealings with the Fairies* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1867), pp. 248–308. This fairy tale is relevant also in the context of Alice's finding of a golden key at the beginning of her adventures in Wonderland; cf. Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), p. 4. Gardner furthermore refers to the popularity of the "gold key that unlocked mysterious doors" in nineteenth-century literature (Carroll, *Annotated Alice*, p. 15n6).

26 MacDonald calls these beings "aëranth": "The fish (a sign of the early Christian church [and of Christ] acquires a form better suited to its role of good angel"; George MacDonald, "The Golden Key," in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1999), p. 349n9. An allegorical reading of this passage points to Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for humanity and was resurrected. In the context of language games, the fish as an acronym of "Jesus" is central.

27 The fish comment on his behavior by saying, "Why, what a temper you are in!" Shortly before this, Humpty Dumpty observed that words have "a temper, some of them—particularly verbs; they're the proudest" (p. 190). Now that he is in a temper, this refers to his very existence and form of being: Humpty Dumpty, in the first place, exists as a word; see also Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 252; and Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 164: "He . . . has a 'speaking name,' a riddle in itself."

28 Keats embedded his "Song about Myself" in a context of nonsense that he sent to his sister, Fanny, in a letter from July 3, 1818: "My dear Fanny I am ashamed of writing you such stuff, nor would I if it were not for being tired after my day's walking, . . . so fatigued that when I am asleep you might sew my nose to my great toe and trundle me round the town like a Hoop without waking me"; John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), p. 362n118. Although the poem was first published in the edition of Keats's *Poetical Works and Other Writing*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1883), it is not

unlikely that, given Keats's immense popularity, Carroll saw the autograph in the British Museum (of which he was a frequent visitor; see also his reference to the Lewis Chessmen [Zirker, *Der Pilger als Kind*, p. 76n95]).

29 To listen/hear and to obey are etymologically linked through the Latin origin of "obey": in Simon Pelegromius's *Synonymorum Sylva* (London, 1603), the first entry to English "Obedient" is Latin "Audiens," to hear. This is based on the etymology of "obedient," which is linked through *obaudire* with *auris*, the ear.

30 This is not the only occasion that a corkscrew is mentioned in *Through the Looking-Glass*. At the beginning, Alice compares the path to a "corkscrew" (p. 137), and when Humpty Dumpty describes "toves" in "Jabberwocky," he says, "'*toves*' are something like badgers—they're something like lizards—and they're something like corkscrews" (p. 192). The White Queen later on mentions Humpty Dumpty with the corkscrew (p. 229). The form of the helix seems to have been fascinating for Carroll, especially behind a mirror. Both the helix and the egg, i.e., Humpty Dumpty's shape, are spherical.

31 There is one other instance in which oysters are mentioned: they occur in the description of Hatta's stay in prison, where he ate only "oyster-shells" (p. 203). See John Docherty, *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll–George MacDonald Friendship* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1995), p. 296.

32 The combination of oysters and a corkscrew, which is being associated with wine, can be read as an allusion to yet another proverb: "Oysters are ungodly, because they are eaten without grace; uncharitable because we leave nought but shells; and unprofitable because they must swim *in wine*"; *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, p. 605. Walrus and Carpenter eat the oysters "without grace." See also "The Oyster is a gentle thing, and will not come unless you sing"; *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, p. 605. Humpty Dumpty's behavior leads to the conclusion that he is not aware of the gentleness of the oysters. For further references to oysters (and the difficulty to open them), see Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (chap. 44).

33 See also the proverb, "The gravest *fish* is an *oyster*; the gravest bird's an owl; the gravest beast's an ass; and the gravest man's a fool"; *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, p. 332 (emphasis added).

34 "That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first—."

"Living backwards!" Alice repeated in great astonishment. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"—but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways."

"I'm sure mine only works one way," Alice remarked. "I ca'n't remember things before they happen."

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

"What sort of things do you remember best?" Alice ventured to ask.

"Oh, things that happened the week after next," the Queen replied in a careless tone. "For instance, now," she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger as she spoke, "there's the King's Messenger. He's in prison now, being

punished: and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all." (p. 175)

35 Matthew Oakes Berger's claim that "[w]hen the Tweedles . . . tell the story of the walrus and the carpenter, there is no reason why these acts will necessarily have any effect on the rest of the events or characters in this work" hence becomes a matter of debate: read in the overall context of the work, their story does indeed have an effect; Berger, "Between Nonsense and Reality in the *Alice* Texts," *The Carrollian* 20 (Autumn 2007): 21.

36 Shakespeare describes the pearl as "[t]he treasure of an oyster"; Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders, Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson, 1995), 1.5.46. The pearl is traditionally regarded as a sign of wisdom and compared to the kingdom of heaven in Matt. 13:45–46, as reflected on by George Herbert in "The Pearl. Matth. 13"; Michael Ferber, ed., *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), p. 152; George Herbert, *The English Poems*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 322–323. Plato compares man with an oyster: the shell is like man's body, a cover that protects the soul: "we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell"; *Plato, with an English Translation*, ed. Harold North Fowler, vol. 1, *Phaedrus II*, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: Heinemann, 1966), 250c.

37 Roy Sorensen calls this question the "oldest recorded paradox" and refers to Anaximander's paradox about the origin, which consists in the assumption that not every thing can have a point of origin: "Anything which has a beginning owes its existence to another thing that existed before it. Therefore, there is something that lacks an origin"; Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox: Philosophy and the Labyrinths of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 10. Paradoxes, according to Sorensen, are a "species of riddle" (p. 3).

38 Carroll evokes the notion of becoming a child again and plays with it in the context of "living backwards": the metaphorical "going backwards" is being literalized—and taking things literally is typical for children. See, e.g., Alice's literal understanding of rowing vocabulary in chapter 5 (p. 180). On Carroll's playful transformation of the serious injunction to return to childhood (as in Matt. 18:3), see Zirker, *Der Pilger als Kind*, pp. 88–92; see also pp. 165–122 (chapter 4.1) on how Carroll repeatedly reflects on the origins of language and meaning in the *Alice* books.