Storming the Castle of the Enemy: Discourses of the Carnivalesque in Children's Literature

> Cook's answer was to slam the door in his face and lock it. The thirty guests were slightly disconcerted, but not for long.
> "Come on!" shouted William excitedly. "She's the enemy. Let's storm her ole castle."
>
> *Just William*[1]

The carnivalistic discourse is one in which authority is overthrown, hierarchies are overturned, disorder triumphs over order, and all social convention is set at nought[2]. Such licence abounds in children's literature where there is often the added attraction that the order being challenged is adult order and constraint. Adults are the enemy, and their castles of propriety are ripe for storming. In the following discussion I have somewhat arbitrarily divided my examples into four categories: anarchic narratives, trickster narratives, naughty children narratives, and narratives where any attempt to find coherence of social expectation is doomed to failure and nothing makes any sense at all.

Anarchy

In this category I am including narratives where the discourse of the carnivalesque arises spontaneously out of the situation with little or no human agency. One such example can be found in the first chapter of Beverly Cleary's *Henry Huggins*[3]. We have already met Henry in the Robinsonade chapter as he grappled with his ever increasing tribe of guppies – a little carnivalesque narrative all of its own as it happens – but just to remind the reader, he is a third grade (= 8 – 9 yr. old) boy of cheerful disposition and generous impulses, and the book charts his various escapades of one sort of another, with a chapter devoted to each one. In the first chapter[4] he acquires a dog, though it would be truer to say that the dog acquires him. The circumstances are these. Henry is innocently returning from swimming, eating an ice cream, when he meets a dog. The dog is pretty clearly a stray, is thin and underfed, and in need of a sympathetic owner; and when Henry shares his ice cream with him he knows that he has found one. Henry christens him Ribsy on account of his being so thin his ribs are showing. That Ribsy is a force for disorder is already clear on their initial encounter. The dog watches Henry eating his ice-cream, and it is not long before he has broken the order of Henry's universe, in which ice creams are for boys not dogs,

> "Hello you old dog," Henry said. "You can't have my ice cream cone."
> Swish, swish, swish went the tail. "Just one bite," the dog's brown eyes seemed to say.
> "Go away," ordered Henry.

The dog doesn't, and . .

> The ice cream cone disappeared in one gulp.

Henry decides to take him home. He rings his mother to see if he can and Ribsy, who is in the phone booth with him, has a contribution of his own to add.

> Ribs began to scratch. Thump, thump, thump. Inside the telephone booth the thumps sounded loud and hollow.
> "For goodness sake, Henry, what's that noise?" his mother demanded. Ribs began to whimper then to howl. "Henry," Mrs. Huggins shouted, "are you all right?"

His mother acquiesces, but Henry will have to come home on the bus. Ribsy's genius for creating chaos is rapidly unleashed. It takes three tries to get Ribsy onto a bus in the first place. The driver of the first one won't let Ribsy on at all: '"No animal can ride on a bus unless it's inside a box."' On the second try, with Ribsy now in a box, Henry discovers that, with his hands full he can't get at the dime in his pocket to pay the fare. On the third go he does get on with Ribsy now in a shopping bag, from which he rapidly escapes. We follow the escalating chaos that follows with glee.

> "E-e-ek! A dog!" squealed the lady with the bag of apples. "Go away, doggie, go away!
> Ribsy was scared. He tried to run and crashed into the lady's bag of apples. The bag tipped over and the apples began to roll toward the back of the bus, which was grinding up a steep hill. The apples rolled around the feet of the people who were standing. Passengers began to slip and slide. They dropped their packages and grabbed one another.
> Crash! A high school girl dropped an armload of books.
> Rattle! Bang! Crash! A lady dropped a big paper bag. The bag broke open and pots and pans rolled out.
> Thud! A man dropped a coil of garden hose. The hose unrolled and the passengers found it wound round their legs.
> People were sitting on the floor. They were sitting on books and apples. They were even sitting on other people's laps. Some of them had their hats over their faces and their feet in the air.

I'm a bit tempted to say I rest my case. Who needs the dogs of war when you've got Ribsy! Ribsy is as pure an example of the carnivalesque as you could ever wish to find. He invades Henry's routine world of ice cream after swimming. He complicates phoning home and turns getting onto a bus into a major undertaking, and finally brings escalating mayhem to the passengers within it returning from an afternoon's shopping. Every element of good order, first that of Henry himself, then that of the adults around him, destroyed at a stroke. Chaos rules.

Tricksters

Henry Huggins himself is no trickster figure, indeed he is desperately trying to contain the chaos that is being wrought by Ribsy who is the trickster of the tale, albeit an inadvertent one. There is however nothing inadvertent about Richmal Crompton's William, though, like Ribsy, he's a

force of nature if ever there was one. My example is taken from *Just William*, the first in the series. Like *Henry Huggins* the book consists of a series of self-contained escapades, with a chapter devoted to each. As will be seen, William's main aim in life is to use his wiles to circumvent and otherwise subvert, undermine, and even directly challenge any form of order that, from his point of view, restricts his freedom to do whatever he wants, '"The sort of things I want to do they don't want me to do an' the sort of things I don' want to do they want me to do."'[5] The forces of restraint in this case are his parents and his older brother and sister, Robert and Ethel. In Ch. VI, entitled *A Question of Grammar*[6], he subverts the very use of language itself to further his own agenda. It is raining, and we open as his family attempt to channel his energies into some peaceful indoor occupation.

> "What can I do? He demanded of his father for the tenth time.
> "*Nothing!*" said his father fiercely from behind his newspaper.

He asks his mother the same question, who suggests that he sits quietly, and when that won't suffice, that he read or draw: '"No, that's lessons. That's not doin' anything!"' Unwisely she offers to teach him to knit: 'With one crushing glance William left her.' He goes to the drawing room, interrupting a conversation between his sister and a friend, and discovers that, by following his father's instruction to the letter – to sit and do 'nothing' – sitting and doing 'nothing' can itself be used to disruptive effect.

> "What are you doing, William?" said the friend sweetly.
> "Nothin'," said William with a scowl.
> "Shut the door after you when you go out, won't you, William?"
> said Ethel, equally sweetly.

And when he interrupts his brother and a friend in the library Robert is blunt, "Oh, get out!" Returning to the kitchen he interrupts his mother to ask if he can have some friends in but she tells him it's too late, so he asks when he *can* have friends in and she tells him:

> "Any time, if you ask. . .
> "Can I have lots?"
> "Oh, go and ask your father."

Which he does:

> "Father, when you're all away on Saturday, can I have a party?"
> "No, of course not."

Finally the rain stops, and his father thankfully orders him out. Going out after recent rain has its own possibilities. Puddles can be splashed through, mud can be squelched through, full ditches can be jumped over and fallen into, all to generally deleterious effect. Coming home 'wet and cheerful', he reiterates his request about the party, trying to couch the question more circuitously,

> "Did you say I could have a party, Father?" he said casually.
> "*No,* I did *not*," said Mr Brown firmly.

However next day, in his English Grammar lesson, he learns from his teacher, Miss Jones, that two negatives make a positive, and she provides an example:

> "If you said 'There's not no money in the box' you mean there is."

. . and a light dawns in William's head as he recalls his father's double negatives from the previous day: '"*No,* of course *not*"' and '"*No,* I did *not*"'. They should, according to the rules of grammar vouchsafed to him by his teacher, be interpreted as positives, respectively meaning *Yes, of course* and *Yes, I did* and so, despite the prickings of his conscience, 'that curious organ', he invites the entire class to the aforementioned party, telling them that his father had given him permission, and telling his mother, as she departs with the rest of the family on Saturday morning, that he will only do things his parents have said 'yes' to. They leave the house in the charge of the cook whose peace is shattered when she sees William marching up the road with the rest of the class behind him.

> He was bringing them joyfully home with him. Clean and starched and prim they issued from their homes, but they had grown hilarious under William's benign influence. . . . They were happy crowd. William headed them with a trumpet.

Cook challenges them and William tells her they've come to tea. '"That they've *not*!"' is the cook's unsurprising repost, but William disingenuously tells her his father had said 'Yes'

> ". . 'cause of English grammar and wot Miss Jones said."
> Cook's answer was to slam the door in his face and lock it. The thirty guests were disconcerted, but not for long.
> "Come on!" shouted William excitedly. "She's the enemy. Let's storm her ole castle."
> The guests' spirits rose. This promised to be infinitely superior to the usual party.

There follows a gleeful description of the battle that ensues. Cook goes round the house shutting all the windows and locking all the doors, and the children mount their attack arming themselves with, amongst other things, the raspberry canes . .

> . . . whose careful placing was the result of a whole day's work of William's father. . . . The air was full of their defiant war-whoops. They filled the front garden, trampling on all the rose beds
> . . .
> The stone with which William broke the drawing room window fell upon a small occasional table, scattering Mrs. Brown's cherished silver far and wide.

Now ‘drunk with the thrill of battle’ they scramble through the window and William, ‘with a loud yell of triumph’ locks the cook in the coal cellar where she was closing a final window. They proceed to play hide and seek.

> At other parties they played “Hide and Seek” – with smiling but firm mothers and aunts and sisters stationed at intervals with damping effects upon one’s spirits with, “not in the bedrooms, dear,” and “mind the umbrella stand,” and “certainly not in the drawing room,” and “don’t shout so loud, darling.” But this was Hide and Seek from the realm of perfection. Up the stairs and down the stairs, in all the bedrooms, sliding down the balusters, in and out of the drawing room, leaving trails of muddied boots and shattered ornaments as they went!

By the time they have finished rampaging around the house, shouting and yelling as they go, there is mud in the beds, the dining room curtains have been pulled down, and the door handle has come off the drawing-room door. ‘It was bliss undiluted.’ Teatime arrives and they forage in the larder. A jar of cream, a gooseberry pie and a current cake are rapidly consumed:

> They ate two bowls of cold vegetables, a joint of cold beef, two pots of honey, three dozen oranges, three loaves and two pots of dripping. They experimented upon lard, onions, and raw sausages. They left the larder a place of gaping emptiness.

Finally, when the maid, Jane, who has been out all afternoon, returns, they pelt her with anything that comes to hand: lumps of lard, showers of onions, a ham bone, potatoes.[7] Things are only finally brought to a close when a cab containing his family turns in at the front gate. Unsurprisingly ‘William grew pale.’

All the elements of the carnivalesque are there. The children are noisy, they shout and yell, they are messy and muddy, in direct opposition to adult requirements that they should play quietly and be ‘clean and starched and prim’. But they go further, attacking property itself, smashing the drawing room window, destroying curtains, pulling doorknobs off, shattering ornaments, and both literally and metaphorically scattering the family silver. It is a battle, a war, accompanied by defiant war-whoops, by loud yells of triumph, involving the storming of castles and the imprisonment of the occupants and the attacking of any potential relief force, and in a final celebration consuming the contents of the larder in an orgy of greed. And over and above everything, it is fun: the children are a ‘happy crowd’, ‘joyful’, ‘they had grown hilarious under William’s benign influence’, they are ‘drunk with the thrill of battle’: all summed up in the two words, ‘bliss undiluted’. And at the kernel of it all is William’s taking of one of the rules of grammar – that set of rules designed to keep the relationship between language and meaning under strict control – and finding a way to use that rule to destroy that very control, that very relationship.

In the William books William himself is the trickster, the agent of disruption, but a more thoroughgoing example can be found in R.L. Stine’s horror story, *Let’s Get Invisible*[8], one of

Scholastic's 'Goosebumps' series. In it the trickster discourse and the discourse that is inherent in the horror genre itself, a discourse that is also about hidden forces that have the destructive power to shatter the seemingly unproblematic normalcy of everyday life, are inextricably intertwined. In this particular example five kids discover a mirror hidden behind a secret door in an attic which, when the light at the top of it is switched on, makes them invisible, and threatens to, and in one case succeeds in, turning them into their reflections, a reversal of their 'true' selves. The kids are first person narrator12 yr. old Max, his best friend Zack, two girls called Erin and April, and his younger brother, Lefty – so called as much because he is always metaphorically coming out of left field as for the fact that he is left handed. The mirror aside, Lefty is the trickster figure, a disruptive force, challenging adult authority and all attempts by his older brother to control him. His role generally is to fool around, playing tricks on the other characters, jumping out at them whenever he has the opportunity to scare them, etc. As Max is to tell us, 'My brother was a Joker. He's always been a joker.'[9]

We get a hint of the reversal theme on the very first page of the story when we learn that the black haired family dog is called Whitey, and other reversals of expectation rapidly occur as we move into the account of Max's birthday party that opens the book. Lefty plays true to form, telling the girls when they arrive that they've come on the wrong day, and his guests themselves bring presents that also, in one way or another defy expectation. Zack brings him a pack of used comics – one might have expected new ones – April brings a birthday present wrapped inappropriately in Christmas wrapping paper – '"Merry Christmas to you, too," I joked.'; and as for Erin,

> "I forgot your present," Erin said.
> "What is it?" I asked, following the girls into the living room.
> "I don't know. I haven't bought it yet."

This last example of course acts at two levels. First of all she hasn't brought a present, which she should have done, then her use of the word forgot implies that she already has one, which in fact she doesn't, thereby, like William, totally undermining the relationship between the conventions of language use and meaning.

At the end of the party only Erin and April are left and they and Max go up to the attic where they discover the mirror, which starts as it means to go on when Max screams, having misinterpreted his reflection and taken it to be someone walking towards him in the gloom. They speculate about it and Lefty specifically invokes the carnival discourse,

> "Maybe it was a carnival mirror . . . You know. One of those funhouse mirrors that makes your body look as if it's shaped like an egg."[10]

And later both Zack and April severally introduce explicitly the notion that the mirror has some form of trickster function, Zack asking, '"Is this some kind of a trick mirror or something?"' and April suggesting, '"It's a trick mirror."'[11] In this first encounter Max becomes invisible when he switches on a light , much to the surprise and alarm of the girls and of his brother, and thereafter the central narrative strand is focussed around the kids' successive encounters with it. They start

to experiment with being invisible, intending to turn it to their own advantage and to play some tricks of their own. Lefty uses it to amplify his own powers of trickery on several occasions, coming down to the lunch table and moving the crockery around while invisible, and later getting into Max's bedroom and invisibly moving his clothes around; and an invisible Zack goes into the neighbour's garden and juggles with tomatoes, much to the alarm of the neighbour and to the amusement of the kids. In the meantime the game has become more dangerous as the kids dare each other to stay in for a longer and longer time, and in the process discover that the longer they stay in the longer it takes for them to become visible again; and none of them quite know what the consequences might be. 'What if I never came back?' Max wonders to himself,[12] and later he speculates even further,

> So what did the light do? Did it cover you up somehow? Did the light form some kind of blanket? A covering that hid you from yourself and everyone else?[13]

By this point the main theme of the novel is beginning to emerge which is about the nature of identity itself – and I say this in all seriousness too, despite the fact that the book is nothing if not a quota quickie in what can only be described as pulp horror for kids, but even pulp horror has to be about *something* otherwise it wouldn't work, nor incidentally would it sell, but I digress – and in this case the central instrument in the articulation of that theme is the mirror itself, raising the question of the ways in which one's reflection in a mirror confirms one's very existence.[14] Though a discussion of that theme could be very interesting, I do not intend to pursue it here. My focus is rather with the way that that theme is articulated through the carnivalesque discourse of trickery, and the way that the mirror itself is an agent in that discourse. As the story continues we discover that its major trick is to draw the characters completely into itself so that if they stay in too long, passing a point where they are briefly out of contact with the others, it is not they who are returned into the 'real' world, it is their mirror reversed reflections. The first inkling we have of this is when Lefty stays in too long, and when he returns, 'Something about him looked different.'[15] When Erin tries it, staying in for 12 minutes, she too looks somehow different when she comes out; and when Zack does it suspicion turns to certainty. He has an idiosyncratic hair style, having shaved one side of his head and left his hair long on the other side, and when he re-emerges the side has changed.

> "Was your hair like that before? . . . Shaved really short on the right hand and then combed long on the left? Wasn't it the other way round?"[16]

Finally the others dare Max to go in even longer, which he does, and is pulled right into the mirror where he meets his own reflection and indeed has a conversation with it.

> "You!" I managed to scream.
> He stopped centimetres away from me.
> I stared at him in disbelief.
> I was staring at myself. . . .
> "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm your reflection."[17]

He tells Max that he is his other side, his dark side (as I say the book is nothing if not thematically interesting) and that the Erin and the Zack in the 'real' world are not their 'real' selves either, they are their reflections. They smash the mirror, Max escapes, Erin's and Zack's reflections are drawn back in and their real selves are returned, but Lefty wasn't in the attic at the time and his reflection is not drawn back in, a fact which we discover in a nice dot, dot, dot last line of the story when Max is playing catch with him later:

> I could only stare in horror.
> My brother was throwing *right-handed*.

The mirror has played its final trick. As we have seen, there are two strands to the trickster discourse in *Let's Get Invisible*, a human one and a para-normal one. Lefty is the major figure in the human one, always undermining and destabilising his older brother's world, though it is not just Lefty; in the juggling tomatoes incident it is Zack, and his target is the adult world. In the para-normal strand it is the carnivalesque mirror that is the agent, and here it is the very stability of identity itself that is undermined, a theme which I shall return to later.

Naughty Children

While at first glance it may not be thought that naughtiness is carnivalesque, a brief glimpse at the discourse of naughtiness will show that it too is about the destabilisation of the adult world. Let's face it, William himself is only one degree away from being naughty, but in my next example, Magdalen Nabb's *Josie Smith at the Market*, the naughtiness is overt, with the children well aware that what they are doing is naughty, and their naughtiness does nothing if not subvert adult order and control. There are three separate stories in the book, the first of which is *Josie Smith and Eileen's Baby*[18] which is the one I want to look at. In it Josie, who is I guess five or six years old or so, goes and plays with her friend Eileen next door when their respective mothers go shopping together. They are left in the charge of Eileen's dad who works nights, and consequently spends much of the day asleep in the chair in the front room. They are given plentiful instructions about how they are to behave and what they shouldn't do, but the constraint occurs even before Josie has got next door, when she asks her mother if she can wear lipstick like she does: '"No," said Josie's mum.' Once next door Eileen tells Josie that they have to play upstairs for fear of waking the baby up, and as she leaves, Eileen's mum shouts her instructions up to them.

> "Now mind you behave yourselves, do you hear?"
> "We are behaving ourselves!" shouted Eileen, and she stuck her tongue out.
> "Well see that you do! And don't do anything – *anything* – without asking your dad first!"[19]

Eileen's attitude to adult authority is already clear, and once their mothers are out of the way the mischief starts. They want to jump on the bed, so in line with their instructions Eileen calls down to her dad.

> "Dad? Can we jump on the bed?"

> Downstairs, Eileen's dad said. "Wah?" and did a little jump in his chair. "I'm not asleep." He said. Then he went "Hoink – hoink – hoink – Sssss." And he was.[20]

.. and that is to be his response every time, a response that Eileen chooses to interpret as giving them permission to do whatever they want. They bounce on the bed and mess it up. Next they dress up in Eileen's mother's clothes and jewellery. Josie is pretty sure they're doing something wrong but Eileen is unstoppable, indeed one might even say that she is wilful.

> "A-aw!" whispered Josie Smith. "Those are not dressing up clothes. You'll get shouted out."
> "I never get shouted at," Eileen said, "and I can dress up in anything I want.
> . . . . .
> "That's a best frock!" Josie Smith said. "You can't!"
> "I can if I want," said Eileen.[21]

Next it's the forbidden lipstick, and perfume, and nail varnish, some of which Josie spills on the green skirt she is wearing and some of which gets spilt on the dressing table. Then, despite Eileen's mother's instructions, they go downstairs to have a tea party. They make a pretend cake, pouring soap powder, scouring powder and washing up liquid into a bowl, Eileen's mum's best bowl at that, and set about it with a whisk. They whisk away with a will and a way until all the mixture has gone.

> "A lot of it splashed on us," said Josie Smith, "so perhaps a bit splashed somewhere else as well." She climbed off the chair and looked around.
> It *had* splashed somewhere else as well. It had splashed across the curtains and the kitchen window and then across the wallpaper. It had splashed across the dark red hood of Eileen's baby's pram and the back door and then across some more wallpaper and the fireplace. Then it went across Eileen's front and then the sink unit and a bit more wallpaper and then the window and all the way round again.
> "It's gone round in a big circle," said Josie Smith. "We'll get smacked."[22]

They chase soap bubbles around the kitchen smashing the best bowl in the process, and have in addition woken the baby up. They feed him and sing to him, and in the end decide they will have to take him for a walk. Up to now Eileen has stoutly maintained that what they are doing is all perfectly ok, but she gives herself away when she tells Josie that they can't take him out the front way: '"If we take him out the front way my dad'll see us."' They take the baby up the street, further damaging their dressing up clothes, but then see their mums coming.

> "Run for it!" shouted Eileen as their mums came up the slope from the main road. "Don't let her see you! That's her best frock you've got on!"[23]

As we have seen, from the very beginning Josie herself has been pretty certain that they are doing something wrong, but has each time been overruled by Eileen's encouragement, but by the time we get to the end it is absolutely clear that Eileen herself has known all along that they are being naughty, as her response to the appearance of their Mums demonstrates. But in between, misrule has triumphed. They have destroyed or ruined that which is deemed valuable in the adult scheme of things – best bowls and best frocks, and made a glorious mess in the kitchen, gleefully chasing bubbles the while. And just as William 'has done no wrong' when he uses the strict rules of grammar to turn meaning to his own ends, so Eileen has followed to the letter her mother's strict instructions to ask her father's permission, but has deliberately asked him in such a way as to not get an answer. Naughtiness rules, carnival wins.

Nonsense

Finally I want to examine a text, or strictly speaking two texts, in which all normal expectations of how the world is and of how one should behave in it are overthrown; and indeed at various points the very functioning of the relationship between words and what they signify is challenged. I refer (I am a bit tempted to say of course) to the two *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll,[24] regarded by many as *the* breakthrough books that finally released children's literature from the constraints of the moral tale and allowed it to emerge as entertainment in its own right, a proposition with which I tend to agree, so I am going to assume, for once, that the reader is familiar with these seminal texts (so if you haven't read them, now's your chance!) The two books are not the same, *Alice in Wonderland* is the more anarchic, though both contain passages where all attempts to use words to make sense is impossible. Non/sense indeed.

The attack upon sense works at a number of levels, the outermost being when the fantasy world, first intrudes upon Alice's consciousness. Fantasy worlds in children's literature are worlds where animals and birds and insects and nursery toys and even flowers, never mind the nursery rhyme characters that populate *Through the Looking-Glass* such as Humpty Dumpty, and Tweedledum and Tweedledee, are sentient beings and can talk. Normally they exist sui generis, to be taken as given by the characters, but Alice's first encounter with the world of *Wonderland*, which is when she sees the White Rabbit taking take a watch out of his waistcoat pocket to consult it and realises 'that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat pocket, or a watch to take out of it'[25], already challenges her sense of the way things should be. Then, at the first level in there is the somewhat disconcerting dream logic that structures the narrative of both books and which we are first aware of the moment that Alice starts falling down the well in *Wonderland*, 'Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her.[26]'

The next level in is the level at which the central narrative operates and around which the central drama of the books unfolds, the drama of Alice's conflict with all the anarchic characters that she comes across and of her battle to control them. The problem for Alice is that all the characters she meets are very disputatious, always telling her what to do – effectively they are all adults trying to control her – and their main weapon is the play with language itself, tying Alice up in

verbal puzzles, logical knots, conundrums and non-sequiturs until she has no idea where she is. Alice has to fight this linguistic disorder, becoming herself the adult and reducing the other characters to the role of unruly children in order to fight back. [27] An early example can be found at Alice's first encounter with the Cheshire Cat, an encounter which provides a neat example of Alice getting trapped in a logical non sequitur as he 'proves' that Alice is mad.[28]

> ".. we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
> "How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
> "You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."
> Alice didn't think that proved it at all. However, she went on: "And how do you know that you're mad?"
> "To begin with," said the Cat, "a dog's not mad. You grant that?"
> "I suppose so," said Alice
> "Well then," the Cat went on, "you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now *I* growl when I'm pleased and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad."[29]

And before Alice can challenge the Cat's logical inconsistency he changes the subject. She gets even more entangled and nonplussed when she meets the Mad Hatter, the March Hare and the Dormouse at the Mad Hatter's tea party. She finds them seated at a large table with a number of empty spaces. Taking charge for once, Alice promptly commandeers a place: "No room! No Room!" they cry; "There's *plenty* of room!", she replies, and down she sits[30]. Once she's settled the Hatter asks his well-known 'Why is a Raven like a writing desk?' riddle, and when she responds the Hare and the Hatter immediately set upon her, tying her up in her use of language.

> "I believe I can guess that," (she says)
> "Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?" said the March Hare.
> "Exactly so," said Alice.
> "Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.
> "I do," Alice hastily replied, "at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."
> "Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!"
> "You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same as 'I get what I like'!"

Logic again, though this time the logical analysis does hold water, and it is their relentless pursuit of it that floors Alice. As for the answer to the riddle, there isn't one, and Alice complains:

> "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers."

There follows a discussion of time itself in which the pair personify it as 'Time', in order to explain why their failure to control it means that it is always tea time in their particular world. This too would merit close analysis, but with *Alice* you could go on unpeeling it for ever, so I will skip a bit and move on to a section where relentless punning is pushed to the point where what is said no longer makes any sense at all, as happens when they wake the Dormouse up and get him to tell them a story. He tells them of three sisters who lived at the bottom of a well. I shall just quote the bare bones of the exchange in order to make my point. Alice asks what they lived on.

> "They lived on treacle," said the Dormouse . . .
> "They couldn't have done that, you know," Alice gently remarked. "They'd have been ill."
> "So they were," said the Dormouse, "*very* ill."
> . . .
> "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."
> . . . .
> "And so these three little sisters – they were learning to draw, you know – "
> "What did they draw?"
> "Treacle."
> . . . .
> "But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?"
> "You can draw water out of a water well," said the Hatter; "so I should think you can draw treacle out of a treacle well – eh stupid."
> "But they were *in* the well." . . .
> "Of course they were," said the Dormouse: "well in."

The puns on 'draw' and 'well', which include changing the latter from a noun into an adverb, added to the Dormouse's improvisations to avoid having to answer any of Alice's interventions, have totally undermined any attempt to get coherent meaning out of the story and Alice is beaten.

If we turn to *Looking Glass* we will find the White Knight further demonstrating the problems of attaching words to what they are supposed to signify. He is telling Alice about the song he is going to sing to her.

> "The name of the song is called '*Haddocks' Eyes*' "
> "Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?" Alice said, trying to feel interested.
> "No, you don't understand," the Knight said, looking a little vexed. "That's what the name is *called*. The name really *is 'The Aged Aged Man*.' "
> "Then I ought to have said 'That's what the *song* is called'?" Alice corrected herself.

> "No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The *song* is called '*Ways and Means*': but that's only what it's *called* you know!"
> "Well, what *is* the song, then? Said Alice, who by this time was completely bewildered.
> "I was coming to that," the Knight said. "The song really *is 'A-sitting On A Gate'. . .* [31]

Again we find that the more Alice tries to tie down the relationship between a word and what it is referring to, between the name of an object and the object itself, the more it eludes her.[32] It is then but a small jump from the White Knight's exposition of the problem to the point at which questions of identity itself start to be raised. [33] There are a number of occasions in both books where Alice has problems with identity. '"Who in the world am I?"' she asks herself early on in *Wonderland*[34] and speculates that she might have become one of the girls that she knows in the real world. '"I'm sure I'm not Ada / I'm sure I can't be Mabel."', and a bit later when the Caterpillar asks her who she is she can't answer, '"I hardly know Sir, just at present"' and when the Caterpillar asks her to explain herself she can't.

> "I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."[35]

For the most profound example we must turn to the third chapter of *Looking Glass* where Alice finds herself in a wood where things have no names at all, and thus lose their identity entirely. The moment she steps into the wood she is unable to name it as a wood, nor is she able to name the trees as trees. Here she is talking to herself, pleased to get into the cool shade.

> "Well at any rate it's a great comfort," she said as she stepped under the trees, "after being so hot, to get into the – into the – into *what*?"
> . . . (and) putting her hand on the trunk of the tree. "What does it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it's got no name – why to be sure it hasn't."[36]

Again she has problems with her name: "And now who am I?", and after a great deal of puzzling decides that it must begin with an L, "L. I *know* it begins with an L!" Then a Fawn appears. It asks Alice what she calls herself.

> "I wish I knew," thought poor Alice. She answered, rather sadly, "Nothing, just now."

She asks the Fawn what *it* calls *itself*, but it too can't remember what it's called, and they walk on with Alice lovingly clasping her arms around its neck. They emerge from the wood and their respective identities return.

> .. the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And dear me you're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came

> into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.

Without names the Fawn does not know that human beings are a danger to it. It is only when he can actually name Alice as a human child that he becomes alarmed, and not only does he rediscover her identity as such, he also rediscovers the relationship between human beings and fawns. The post-modern followers of discourse theory would feel very much at home here: we only understand the world through the language that we use to describe it, and if we don't have the word for it to all intents and purposes it doesn't exist.

The readings of the *Alice* books are legion, but here I am interested in their capacity to undermine our understandings and expectations of how the world is and how it should be. As I hope I have shown, *Alice* operates at a number of levels. Alice first of all has to cope with finding herself in a fantasy world where the normal assumptions of the 'real' world, a world that does not have talking animals etc, have to be set aside. And once the dream logic kicks in she is even more puzzled. But it is at the linguistic level that the biggest challenge to normality functions. The Cheshire Cat's non sequiturs and Hatter's and the Hare's chop logic both challenge the normal assumptions of shared understanding necessary for any coherent discussion; and the puns of the Dormouse's story turn them into pure nonsense. The White Knight's exposition goes to further explain the problems of attaching meaning to language, and Alice's encounter with the fawn demonstrates the implications of that for the notion of identity itself.

To sum up. As I have suggested, a couple of my examples, *Just William* and *Josie Smith at the Market*, could have fitted just as well into my chapter about relationships between adults and children as they fit into this one, particularly so far as naughtiness is concerned. It is after all, adults who decide what naughtiness *is*; William's behaviour is about as close to naughtiness as you can get, and Josie and her friend Eileen's behaviour is indisputably, and knowingly, naughty, and in both cases that naughtiness is a direct challenge to adult order and control. But in neither case can the characters resist the shear carnivalistic fun that can be got out of the situation. William is in addition a trickster figure, as is Lefty in *Let's Get Invisible*, both deliberately undermining the order of those around them, and Eileen, in *Josie Smith at the Market* uses trickster strategies to avoid waking her father up. The Mad Hatter and the March Hare are also to a degree trickster figures, deliberately destroying Alice's attempts to keep her linguistic world in order, and I have also suggested that there are trickster *devices*, the mirror in *Let's Get Invisible* and the wood where things have no names in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, which serve the same narrative function. William's target is adult order, as is Eileen's in *Josie Smith* but in other examples it is the child's own order that is challenged; in *Henry Huggins* the disruptive element is Ribsy whom Henry has to battle to control, though Ribsy himself also brings chaos into the lives of the adults who have the misfortune to end up on the bus with him. Alice's case is more complicated since her battle is with characters who are essentially adults in their own right and who attempt to exercise an absurd and arbitrary authority which Alice must struggle to understand and control. (It is perhaps, as many have suggested, the very condition of childhood itself that is being described, but that's another reading for another occasion.) I have also suggested that the deliberate perversion of language use, both in terms of meaning itself, and

in terms of the conventionally shared understandings of intentionality and context that underlie normal communication, also functions at a carnivalesque level to attack social convention, to turn sense into nonsense, and to generally create chaos. So William uses the strict application of the rules of prescriptive grammar to circumvent his father's prohibitions; in *Let's Get Invisible* Erin subverts the generally agreed conventions of language use when she tells Max the has 'forgotten' his present; and the *Alice* books are replete with characters who essentially also pull William's trick, dissecting Alice's use of language, demonstrating its logical inconsistencies or using non sequiturs and puns to attack the presumptions and understandings of normal conversational exchange until she is completely entangled in a world of nonsense, bewildered and stymied at every turn when she attempts normal communication, and with, as the White Knight demonstrates, all attempts to attach meanings to words doomed to failure. Finally, and perhaps at the deepest level of all, the carnivalistic discourse can serve to undermine the very notion of identity itself: in *Let's Get Invisible* when the characters are taken over by their reflections, and in Alice's case, perhaps at the deepest level of all philosophically speaking, when identity is shown to be an entirely linguistic concept, fortuitous and arbitrary, the product only of the play of language itself.

[1] Crompton 1922 p.125

[2] Nothing original here: see for example Bakhtin (1965) who is the source of my particular understandings.

[3] Cleary, 1950

[4] ibid. Ch.1 pp. 1 - 28

[5] ibid. p.121

[6] ibid. cit. All the quotes are taken from Ch VI, pp. 117 – 131.

[7] By way of a footnote it should, of course, be added that the book is set in the heart of the pre second world war middle class, generally the setting for children's literature of the time, in homes with drawing rooms and libraries and live-in cooks and maids. And class difference allows William to behave appallingly with the latter. He would never have dared to lock his parents in the cellar nor to pelt them with vegetables. But that, as they say, is another story.

[8] Stine 1993

[9] ibid. p.166

[10] ibid. This, and the following few quotes pp.156 et seq

[11] ibid. p. 186 & 195

[12] ibid. p.189

[13] ibid. p. 210

[14] The followers of Lacan would doubtless have a field day with this, but I, alas, am no Lacanian so I am not in a position to pursue it. In any case it is not my purpose here.

[15] ibid. p.241

[16] ibid. p.263

[17] ibid. p.272

[18] Nabb 1995 pp. 7-47

[19] ibid. p.12

[20] ibid. p.13

[21] ibid. p.14/15

[22] ibid. p.24/25

[23] ibid. p.37

[24] *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Carroll 1865 & 1871 respectively. I should perhaps at that there is a myriad of interpretive readings of these texts, as many as there are readers I suspect, but I am no Carroll scholar and I make no claims for the originality of my reading here. I was just interested to see how they fitted in to my central interest in this chapter, that of the carnivalesque in children's literature.

[25] Carroll 1865 p.26

[26] ibid p.26

[27] *cf* Nodelman 2008

[28] ibid p.89

[29] ibid. p.89

[30] ibid. All the following quotes come from the chapter entitled 'A Mad Tea-Party' pp.93-104

[31] Carroll 1871 p.306

[32] And before I go any further, is it worth pointing out that the very titles of the two *Alice* books are a further illustration of what the White Knight is talking about? They are universally known as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, yet their 'real' titles are *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, and just to complicate matters even further, I have upon occasion referred to them simply as *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass,* or even collectively as *Alice*. It all adds to the fun!

[33] I am here, and in the following discussion, very much following in the footsteps of Martin Gardner who, in *The Annotated Alice*, which is the version I am working from, makes exactly the same points in his marginal note: ibid p.227

[34] Op.cit p.37

[35] ibid. p.67

[36] This, and the following few quotes, Op.cit pp.225 – 227