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THE MUSHROOM AND THE EGG:
LEWIS CARROLL'S ALICE AS
AN OTHERWORLDLY
INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS*

"Alicious, twinstreams twinestraines, through alluring
glass, or alas in jumboland?"
Finnegans Wake

There is no longer anything revolutionary in the suggestion
that Lewis Carroll (pseud. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) is a semi-	onician, and that his humorous children's literature betrays a
preoccupation with the signifying systems of logic, language,
and symbolic notation that he elsewhere treated more system-
atically and professionally.1 Indeed, as one critic has

* This essay was originally written for Professor Thomas G. Winner when the
author, as his graduate student, was inspired by Professor Winner's use of
Humpty Dumpty to explain Saussurian principles in a lecture on semiotic theory.
All quotations from Alice are taken from Lewis Carroll, The Annotated Alice:
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass (New York:

1. Two monographs devoted solely to this topic are Daniel Kirk, Charles
Dodgson, Semiotician (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1962) and Robert
Sutherland, Language and Lewis Carroll (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). The logical
and epistemological aspects of Carroll's humor have been extensively analyzed.
See, for example Peter Alexander, "Logic and the Humour of Lewis Carroll,"
Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society 6 (May 1951), 551-66;
Roger Holmes, "The Philosopher's Alice in Wonderland," The Antioch Review 19
(1959), 133-49.

Lewis Carroll (the pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) was Lecturer of
Mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford, from 1855 to 1881. His professional
writings in mathematics and symbolic logic took the form of undergraduate
textbooks and study aids. His other works were devised as teaching aids for the
young ladies of Oxford, whom he treated to "tea and logic," this being one of his
favorite pastimes. His interest in symbolic notation appears in his Formulae of
Plane Trigonometry where he suggested a new system of symbolic notation to
minimize the ambiguities of the current system. His Game of Logic is a
transferral of syllogistic operations into a different sign system (i.e., verbal
commented: "[Wonderland] . . . is not a universe of things but of words and ways of using them . . . . In [Wonderland] all the world is paper and all the seas are ink."2 It requires little effort to view Alice in Wonderland and Alice Through the Looking Glass (hereafter, Alice) as illustrative texts, like the logic games "Lewd's carol" (as Joyce dubbed him) taught his nymphets at tea-time. They may be read as introductory logic textbooks, offering comprehensive (and humorous) illustrations of the basic features of semiotic principles. Carroll's concerns extend beyond the explication of communication functions to probe the provocative semiotic question argued by Humpty Dumpty: "who is to be master?" we over the signs we manipulate, or the signs over us through the subtle pressures exerted by convention and conditioning? In Carroll's universe, the "masters" of signification are poets, logicians, and madmen. Through his use of imagery and parable to illustrate his humorous expose of the problems of semiosis, Carroll reveals a profound concern with underlying epistemological issues which anticipate neo-Kantian and Saussurian approaches to that branch of science known as "semiotic."

Carroll's humorous gaming with language in Alice reflects a more serious interest in the nature and function of language as a signifying system as has been thoroughly documented elsewhere. Nonetheless, a brief review of some examples would not be out of place here, in order to establish the range and sophistication of Carroll's understanding of semiotic principles. The games and puzzles in Alice and the numerous examples of communication failure articulate the three primary areas of semiotic investigation: paradigmatics, or the nature of signs and referentiality; syntagmatics, or the manner in which signs combine to produce utterances; and pragmatics, or the relationships between sign systems and the users of sign systems. Carroll reveals a grasp of the triadic character of signs later developed by Peirce (icon, index, symbol); the Saussurian definition of language as a hierarchical sign system structured on the principles of binary

expressions are transformed into visual counters). His publications include: The Formulae of Plane Trigonometry (1861); An Elementary Treatise on Determinants (1867); Algebraical Formulae and Rules and Arithmetical Formulae and Rules, (1870); The Game of Logic (1887); Curiosa Mathematica, Part I: A New Theory of Parallels (1888); A Logical Paradox (1894); Symbolic Logic, Part I: Elementary (1896).