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Objects of Nonsense, Anarchy, and Order: Romantic Theology in Lewis Carroll's and George MacDonald's Nonsense Literature

Adam Walker

I ntroduction

“Nonsense criticism, as it currently exists,” writes Josephine Gabelman in her new book *A Theology of Nonsense* (2016), “is essentially a secular enterprise. It is philosophical and psychoanalytical, philological and mathematical; it may be studied from a historical or cultural perspective, but apparently not a religious one” (162). Past scholarship has, in fact, not only avoided a serious consideration of theology regarding nonsense literature, but some scholars have gone so far as to insist that nonsense literature lacks any sense of the religious at all. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, when considering freedom in *Alice in Wonderland*, argues that nonsense grants her freedom from religiousness and, consequently, from “the stern God of Protestant extremism” (369), and, therefore, provides a means of escape from religion. Robert Polhemus similarly argues that considering theology in context with Carrollian nonsense would be inappropriate. Concerning the nonsense in *Through the Looking-Glass*, Polhemus writes, “The structure of the game and the plot, as well as the thought and humor of the book, reveal . . . Carroll winning out over the Reverend Mr. Dodgson, and a comic regression and reversal winning out over orthodox religion” (292). These approaches, where they have not been generally accepted, have at least gone unchallenged until recently. In *A Theology of Nonsense*, Gabelman explores the connections between nonsense literature and theology by challenging the arguments of Lecercle, Polhemus, and others by reevaluating theology’s role as an essential component in understanding nonsense literature.¹

Gabelman relies on Sir Edward Strachey’s essay “Nonsense as a Fine Art” (1888), the first serious study of nonsense literature, to establish how literary nonsense was understood as a theological process of reversal and disorder that ultimately results in the reunification of reality into a higher order. Strachey writes that nonsense is “not a mere putting forward of incongruities and absurdities but the bringing out a new and deeper harmony of life in and through its contradictions” (515). This process of bringing

“confusion into order by setting things upside down” not only reflects the aims of Christian orthodoxy, as Gabelman observes, but necessarily evokes the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s imagination introduced as a synthetic power that “dissolves, dissipates in order to recreate” and “struggles to idealize and unify” (Coleridge 118). I shall also argue that the confusion, which Gabelman argues is necessary in bringing about the higher order, is also reflected in the writings of the German Romantic poet Novalis (the pen name of Friedrich von Hardenberg), whose ideas about fairy tales were translated and introduced to England by George MacDonald.

Gabelman’s argument confronts nonsense literature as “an inversion of the sensible,” instead of nonsense functioning as an “absence of its destruction” (168). Beginning with this approach, she establishes the theological context of the “nonsensical imagination” as dealing with “paradox, anarchy, and the childlike, all which in their own way reverse common-sense assumptions” (168). Gabelman draws from G.K. Chesterton to establish the fall of humanity in Christian theology as a reversal of sense. Chesterton states that the paradoxical position taken by Christianity can be seen in its claim that “the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the normal itself is an abnormality. This is the inmost philosophy of the fall.” (191-2). Christianity, as Gabelman observes, “seems destined to defy common sense” (169) and aims to restore the sense through a process of paradox, anarchy, and chaos towards an eventual reunification, a resolution which J.R.R. Tolkien would later describe as the “eucatastrophe,” the satisfactory feeling of resolution and a deeper insight into Truth about the world.²

Furthering this assertion that the aims of nonsense literature are shared by and deeply connected to Christian theology, my argument seeks to examine George MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* stories as texts whose literary nonsense operates in accordance with the aims of Christian theology, namely, to bring out “a new and deeper harmony of life” (Strachey 515). The scope of Gabelman’s study is restricted to institutional theology, and she neglects consideration of the Romantics and their theology. This article will extend Gabelman’s argument by recognizing nonsense literature’s indebtedness to the Romantic theology of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Novalis. Thus, the literary nonsense of MacDonald and Carroll specifically relies on a theology distilled by their Romantic predecessors, particularly the Romantic understanding of the imagination and anarchy. I will also consider how the readers’ engagement with the nonsense literature

of MacDonald and Carroll requires a proper epistemological approach to understanding reality by normalizing the abnormal.

Objects of Nonsense in MacDonald's and Carroll's Texts

This section will address the use of symbols, namely the fire-opal in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and the looking-glass in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and their indebtedness to Coleridge's imagination. Both texts use what I will call "objects of nonsense" to convey truth and how truth is understood theologically through Romantic intuition. This use of nonsense is reflected in the Chestertonian notion of Christian sense, as we have seen, as "the unnaturalness of everything in light of the supernatural" (145). Gabelman insists that these inversions of the natural within nonsense literature introduce "a post-edenic, unnatural topsyturvydom," and, "in such a context, to speak of that which is 'natural' or 'the right way up,' it may thus be necessary to speak nonsensically" (174). Basing her idea of reversal on the theological notion of restoration, Gabelman relates Strachey's observations on nonsense literature, that it "bring[s] confusion into order by sitting things upside down," to the euchatastrophic elements of the Christian story through the death and resurrection of Christ. Let us apply this observation to MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* to better understand the role of the imagination through theological imagery.

The imagery of Grandmother Irene's gifts, such as the fire-opal ring and the thread, function as simulacra for Romantic intuition and Christian understanding of the paraclete (the Holy Spirit), neither exclusively symbolic nor entirely allegorical, but as interconnecting parts within the living organism of the fairy tale. I will soon return to the significance of the paraclete in MacDonald's works. Irene's guiding thread, which Irene can feel only forwards, never backwards, is spun by her grandmother and is characterized by its indescribability. In Chapter III, when Irene discovers her great-great-grandmother living at the top of the castle by wandering up hidden staircases and passageways, she is led to her chamber by the "low sweet humming sound" of her grandmother's spinning wheel (20). The humming of the wheel is almost undetectable "stopping" and "beginning again," yet difficult for the author to describe. MacDonald portrays it as "curious," "more gentle, even monotonous like the sound of rain," and "like the hum of a very happy bee that had found a rich well of honey in some globular flower" (20). Recognizing the limitations of similes, the narrator settles on this description, deciding that it is more like the humming of a

bee “than anything else I can think of at the moment” (20). This ineffable element lends a supernatural or supersensual meaning to the string and invites spiritual interpretation of its symbolism.

The voice of the narrator and Irene’s grandmother both insist Irene guess or intuit what the grandmother is spinning. We are introduced to the spinning wheel early in the story, but neither Irene nor the readers learn what she is spinning until much later. At the end of Chapter III, we are told that we must “guess” what she is spinning (30). In Chapter XI, when Irene returns to her grandmother’s room, she finds her spinning again, and she urges the princess to tell her what she is spinning. Irene replies, “I don’t know what you are spinning. Please, I thought you were a dream” (114). Again, the grandmother insists, “You haven’t told me what I am spinning” (116). This insistence, in part, is meant to engage the reader in an active participation with the story, as well as to emphasize the importance of Irene’s self-knowledge, or to awaken within her what Coleridge described as “the sacred power of self-intuition,” the essential faculty of the “philosophic imagination” (Coleridge 241-2). MacDonald would extend this further by connecting it with the “listening” to what he calls the “voice of the Spirit” (*Unspoken Sermons* 57).

For MacDonald, the imagination functions primarily as a means through which one can intuit the meaning behind the sacramental nature of creation and is strongly connected to his pneumatology, the understanding of the Holy Spirit as the indwelling and guiding member of the Trinity. Curiously, the paraclete in the Christian tradition is associated with nonsense and madness. The word *paraclete* comes from the Greek *parakletos*, which is translated in the Protestant Bible as “Counselor,” “Guide,” “Advocate” (See Isaiah 11:2; John 14:16, 15:26). The descending of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’s followers occurred on the Day of Pentecost and was given as a kind of token for guidance. It also enabled them to speak in various languages (Acts 2:8). Some, when they heard them, were filled with wonder while others believed they spoke nonsense or were drunk (Acts 2:13).

In his essay “The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture” MacDonald imagines how “God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle” (*Dish of Orts* 25). MacDonald scholars have established how the archetypal wise-woman or the grandmother of MacDonald’s stories is inspired by embodiment of Divine Sophia found in Kabbalah, Jakob Boehme,

and Novalis (Hayward 29), and, if we are to take the grandmother as a sophianic or, perhaps even a *theophanic* figure, the ring and the thread take on new theological significance.

In light of MacDonald's acknowledgement of the philosophical imagination, we may then come to see Irene's thread, which leads her through the world back to her grandmother, as a symbol for the relational imagination of humankind, which is nonsensical in its mode of operation. The ring's stone, a fire-opal, which is "of the same sort" as the stones in her grandmother's crown, "only not so good" and its circuitous thread not only present intuition as a human faculty derivative of God, but as a symbol for understanding through relational intuition beyond empirical stimulus (153). The thread, which the princess would follow into the door of the mountain, leads her to rescue Curdie and guides her back to its source. In this way, it represents MacDonald's own understanding of the imagination's circuitous and intuitive faculty. When read in context with the idea of reversal outlined by Gabelman, we can see how the fire opal ring and its thread are objects of nonsense, bringing about the great reversal necessary to correctly reset our rational sense.

There is a similar object in Carroll's sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* which resembles the fire opal ring and thread in both its circuitry and its role in providing the reversal. Gabelman identifies this within Carroll as the looking glass itself, the portal to the other world. Concerning the great reversal, Gabelman observes that "whereas literary nonsense is . . . a 180 degree turn about, within salvation history there is a double reversal at work—a 360 turn, in two halves. In other words, the fall makes things the wrong way round and salvation flips them back the right way" (176). She likens this turn around to "the visual paradox of the mirror, where the image in the glass is not an identical representation but the reversal of the original perspective" (176). For the purposes of Gabelman's argument, this is as far as she takes this connection, but I would like to pursue this comparison further in connection with Coleridge's Romantic function of the symbol of the mirror.

The Romantic understanding of poetry, or the effect upon the mind that poetry should ideally produce, should first be understood in relation to its Enlightenment predecessors. Coleridge's definition of the imagination in his *Biographia Literaria* rejects John Locke's understanding of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which experience impresses, though we find the empiricist view extending back to classical thought, as seen in Plato's

Theaetetus and Aristotle's *De Anima*. Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" describes the mind, not unlike a mirror, as a "white paper void of all characters, without any ideas," a passive slate void of agency or a priori knowledge until acted upon by the external world. Coleridge took issue with Locke's static conception of the mind and actually attributed the decline in English philosophy and theology to the popularity of such Enlightenment modes of thinking. Under Locke's view, the imagination can only be produced by a synthesis of what the individual has already seen and experienced.

However, Coleridge's use of the mirror in describing poetry is not resigned to static conceptions of the mind but, instead, relies heavily upon the Platonic notion of *mimesis* and uses the mirror as an object used to transform reality. In opposition to Locke's use of the mirror, which fixes the objects within its frame as a kind of fossilization, the Romantics used the mirror as an object which makes things come alive and represents an energetic, living world. William Wordsworth, too, would play with the symbols laden in the reflective and dynamic properties of the mirror. In his *Prelude*, he describes "a new world" governed by laws:

Which do both give it being and maintain
A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from without and from within;
The excellence, pure function, and best power
Both of the object seen, and eye that sees. (Wordsworth 589)

Coleridge would employ the use of other objects, such as lamps, streams, and growing plants to describe the living perceptions of the mind. Victorian authors sustained the Romantic flexibility concerning aesthetic symbols and their functions. Carroll took the mirror-object even further in *Through the Looking-Glass* by using the looking-glass as an agent of transformation.

In addition to the reversed representation of the world in the mirror, the mirror serves the purpose of re-inventing the external world by restoring not only the sense of wonder but the sense of beauty. Alice's experience of beauty in the looking-glass world is one that restores into proper place our relation to nature, namely its unattainability. "Why are all reflections lovelier than what we call reality?" MacDonald muses, "not so grand or so strong, it may be, but always lovelier? . . . All mirrors are magic mirrors. The commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass . . . There must be a truth involved in it, though we may but in part lay hold of the meaning" (*Phantastes* 155). Similarly, through a nonsensical inversion, Carroll's

looking-glass romanticizes and elicits a desire to see more: “Oh! I so wish I could see *that* bit!” and “Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if we could only get through into the Looking-glass House! I’m sure it’s got, oh! such beautiful things in it!” (108-9). The barrier of the looking-glass soon dissolves away in the same way Coleridge describes the imagination’s power to “dissolve and dissipate in order to recreate” (*BL* I 118). This necessary process of dissolution and dissipation in order to bring about a harmonious whole will be examined further in the next section in terms of Novalis’s understanding of anarchy. The importance of such objects is to reflect the “modes of inmost being” that cannot be conveyed “save in symbols of time and space” (*BL* II 120). However, the looking-glass, for Carroll, is something more than a portal. The title “Into the Looking-Glass” would have been more apposite, were the looking-glass only an access point. The choice of the preposition “through” bequeaths deeper meaning as the story unfolds. We find that the looking-glass is not only a door, but also a world of its own. The Romantic conception of poetic process, which is endowed with the theological function of allowing common things to be seen in proper light as new or enchanting, is correlative to the object of the looking-glass and Alice’s journey *through* the looking-glass, which transforms and enchants common places and objects.

Once within the world of the looking-glass, this enchantment acts upon common objects through beauty. From a theological viewpoint, beauty serves as a reminder for something beyond our world to apprehending an end, rather than an end to be apprehended as a thing in itself. Beauty invokes the longing for and recognition of something beyond our world.³ The objects of the bulrushes in Chapter V of *Through the Looking-Glass* operate as a correlative to unattainable beauty in the objects of the bulrushes. Carroll, too, seems to toy with this idea of unattainability in the chapter “Wool and Water,” in which Alice drifts along a stream in a little boat. Carroll writes, “—and for a while Alice forgot all about the Sheep and the knitting, as she bent over the side of the boat, with just the ends of her tangled hair dripping into the water—while with bright eager eyes she caught at one bunch after another of the darling scented rushes” (154).

The nonsensical world within the looking-glass acts as a signpost toward the true world beyond reach. Similarly, the beauty of the bulrushes in the looking-glass world invokes a similar response in Alice:

“Oh, what a lovely one! Only I couldn’t quite reach it.” And certainly it did seem a little provoking (“almost as if it happened on purpose,” she thought) that, though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful

rushes as the boat glided by, there was always a more lovely one that she couldn't reach.

"The prettiest are always further!" she said at last . . . (154)

Beauty is alluding, hinting at something beyond our reach. Beauty resists apprehension, and, eventually, the bulrushes themselves, shortly after being grasped, disappear:

What mattered it to her just then that the rushes had begun to fade, and to lose all their scent and beauty, from the very moment that she picked them? Even real scented rushes, you know, last only a very little while—and these, being dream-rushes, melted away almost like snow, as they lay in heaps at her feet . . . (154)

It seems nonsense that the bulrushes should disappear. We may wonder why Carroll writes this bizarre scene into his story at all. Perhaps this scene is rather arbitrary, though lovely, and only emphasizes the dream-like transitions between passages. However, let us entertain a potential theological implication of the disappearance of the bulrushes. In his own way, it seems Carroll is portraying a theological understanding of beauty that was reiterated by St. Augustine, who believed that the loveliness of the world was meant to incite a hunger for divine beauty, but not to satisfy it.⁴ Alice's apprehension of the bulrushes as things to be gathered and picked does not satisfy her desire for beauty, but only frustrates and enhances it. The mirror does not restore the world back into its pre-fallen, Edenic state, but, rather, awakens within a desire for the state, which, according to Christian theology, is not in this world, but the next. In this reading, the disappearance of the bulrushes is analogous to the experience of beauty in this world. Though Carroll notes their similarity to "real scented rushes" (which "last only a little while"), the dream bulrushes and their nonsensical disappearance reflect outwardly the more inward and immediate truth about experiencing beauty (154).

By examining how this nonsensical function of the mirror creates an inversion and reversal by means of reconnecting with distorted truth through fallen nature, we have seen how wonder, inspired by the normalization of the supernatural, is couched in the aims of theology to subvert the fallen mode of thinking. The anastrophic use of the imagination, derivative of Coleridge's theologically philosophical imagination, renders the encounters with other worlds (Wonderland, Fairy, etc.) as an experience aimed towards correcting the upside-down understanding of conventional rationality.

Nonsensical Anarchy and Restoration

Concerning the role of anarchy, or the sense of rebellion and lawlessness that is essential to nonsense literature, Polhemus argues that the overarching law of Carroll's worlds requires one to "consider things from the very opposite of the conventional point of view."⁵ Gabelman also devotes a chapter to the role of anarchy in nonsense literature, particularly regarding its parallels within Christian theology. Gabelman observes that "Carroll's stories require the reader to enter into an enchanted world, whose narrative authority is recurrently disrupted" (94). She posits that nonsense literature and anarchy intersect with religious faith through "the participant's capacity to think in terms that contradict a secular interpretation of the familiar world" (129). Conceding this correlation, this section will explore how the role of anarchy in nonsense literature is an idea distilled, once again, through a Romantic theological approach found in the writings of Novalis, who was first introduced into the context of fantasy writing by George MacDonald.

Concerning the anarchic subversion of reason in Alice's case, as Gabelman aptly observes, "it is not that she encounters an absence of authority figures, but rather that she finds those in the possession of power frequently have their authority undercut, mocked or deconstructed" (93). But let us examine anarchy's role in the nonsensical as a necessary step in achieving greater harmony. MacDonald explicitly relies on Novalis's idea of anarchy and its role in the fairy tale, or *Märchen*. MacDonald's citing of this passage, first published as an epigraph to *Phantastes* (1858), was the first text to introduce Novalis's Romantic conception of the fairy tale to Victorian England. An excerpt from Novalis's passage reads as follows:

A *Märchen* is like a dream-picture without rational connection—an ensemble of wonderful objects and happenings, for example a musical fantasy, the harmony of an aeolian harp, nature itself. In a true *Märchen* all must be wonderful, mysterious and coherent; everything crowded, each in a different way. All of nature must be wonderfully mixed with all of the spirit world; here enters the time of anarchy, of lawlessness, freedom, the natural state of nature, the time before the world . . . The world of the *Märchen* is that which is opposed to the world of truth, and thus is like it as chaos is like completed creation. (*Phantastes* 12) [my translation].

Novalis's advocacy for a "dream-picture without rational connection" in which anarchy, freedom, and lawlessness reign is an adumbration which stems from his larger ideas about anarchy's role within Christian cosmology

and corresponds with MacDonald's and Carroll's literary nonsense.

Let me first consider the role of anarchy as a subversion of authority before examining it as a sense of lawlessness. In his sermon "Truth," MacDonald elaborates upon the relational distinction between truth and fact. According to MacDonald, knowledge of facts is understood through the "laws of nature," through science and empirical observation (461); truth is the understanding of God's nature and is, opposed to objective facts, relational. To understand the facts of a thing is the way of science, but the understanding of the thing itself comes through the intuitive faculty of the imagination, which MacDonald describes as "the power to recognize this truth of a thing" (469) through the distinction between truth and facts. Truth can seem like a farce to those whose senses have not been set right by the great reversal. We see this instance take place when Irene tells her nurse about her grandmother in the attic:

'I've been up a long way to see my very great, huge, old grandmother,' said the princess.

'What do you mean by that?' asked the nurse, who thought she was making fun.

'I mean that I've been a long way up and up to see my GREAT grandmother. Ah, nursie, you don't know what a beautiful mother of grandmothers I've got upstairs. She is such an old lady, with such lovely white hair—as white as my silver cup. Now, when I think of it, I think her hair must be silver.'

'What nonsense you are talking, princess!' said the nurse.

'I'm not talking nonsense,' returned Irene, rather offended. (32)

This contrast between the sensible and the nonsensible, the natural and supernatural, asserts that the intuition and imagination of those having undergone the great reversal are granted a supernatural, epistemological approach that goes against the natural or sensible modes of knowing.

This contrast repeatedly becomes apparent throughout the text. When the princess rescues Curdie from the mountain, Curdie finds himself at the mercy of Irene's guiding thread, which operates beyond comprehension. When Irene asserts that she is being led by a higher power, her grandmother's thread, Curdie replies, "That's all nonsense. I don't know what you mean" (214). She replies, "Then if you don't know what I mean, what right have you to call it nonsense?" (215). Irene's admonishment echoes MacDonald's understanding of truth as something that has the power to exist outside of our immediate empirical modes of knowing and presents a mode of truth

that is seemingly at odds with sense. Irene's reply undermines the Curdie's conventional modes of navigating the mountain and exposes his implicit conceit by insisting that, simply because something lies beyond Curdie's knowledge, does not mean that it cannot exist. The rebellion of the rule of sense operates as an anarchical supplanting of privileged modes of thought in the same way apophatic theology insists that much of the spiritual must be beyond our understanding.⁶ As a similar form of nonsensical epistemology, apophatic theology asserts that spiritual, divine truths are so beyond our intelligence that they cannot be expressed in positive terms and, at best, can only be described negatively. This approach is more closely associated with forms of Christian mysticism as seen in that of Dionysius the Aeropagite, Maximus the Confessor, Jakob Boehme, and others. Knowledge is often found in the unknowing. Thus, MacDonald writes, "I am no logician. I only know when I don't know a thing . . . wisdom lies in that" (*The Flight of the Shadow* 109).

Carroll's Wonderland, for instance, is at once a place and a state of mind in which the suspension of rationality is the key to understanding its world. For the precocious Alice, endowed with both childlike amazement and adult-like common sense, the experience in Wonderland can be frightful and frustrating, especially when pitted against such "uncommon nonsense" and the anarchical laws of the world (Carroll 81). When the Gryphon orders Alice to repeat "'Tis the voice of the sluggard," she finds that her own words come out as nonsense because her head was "so full of Lobster-Quadrille" and, as a result, "she hardly knew what she was saying" (80). The nonsense of Wonderland apparently has a disorienting effect upon Alice's mind. The very words she speaks then suddenly become strange. Upon hearing Alice's discombobulated recitation, the Mock Turtle replies, "Well I never heard it before, but it sounds uncommon nonsense" (81).

There are two ways of reading the phrase "uncommon nonsense." If we take into consideration Carroll's affinity for logical formulas, the phrase, simplified through the cancellation of the double negatives, becomes "common sense," which, in a world where nonsense is sense, turns the very meaning of sense upon its head. The use of negatives here also echoes the long tradition of apophatic theology, which posits that negative statements concerning higher laws are inherently more accurate than affirmative or cataphatic statements. Under this reading, the cancellation of the double negatives does not grant an accurate interpretation of the phrase. Uncommon nonsense and common sense are, within context of apophatic discourse,

incongruent, since the former is epistemologically superior to the latter. The second possible interpretation is that “uncommon nonsense” implies that there exists *common* nonsense, which governs life in Wonderland the same way common sense governs Alice’s world. Under this reading, the world of Wonderland is a world opposed to the world of rationality as Alice knows it. Wonderland is potentially lawlessness, a status of anarchy which grants Carroll’s adherence to Novalis’s model of the anarchical Märchen.⁷ Alice finds herself without a law to invoke her agency. Completely irritated, Alice “sat down with her face in her hands, wondering if anything would *ever* happen in a natural way again” (81).

The chaos of lawlessness, however, is requisite in bringing about the “great reversal” or the eucatastrophe of Christian theology, which is founded upon the existence of other worlds governed by higher, unapparent laws.⁸ Having established the connection between Novalis and Victorian nonsense literature, let us examine Novalis’s idea of anarchy as “the natural state of nature,” a state which is pre-lapsarian if we contextualize anarchy within Novalis’s triadic, cosmological scheme. In his essay “Christenheit oder Europa” (“Christendom or Europe”), Novalis outlines his conception of history in the following way. First, there exists a primal nature in a state of harmony, or golden age. The golden age, depicted as a childlike state of innocence, is then disrupted by anarchy, the second state. The state of anarchy, writes Novalis, “is the breeding ground of religion” and leads to a restorative state of peace greater than what was experienced in the primal state of harmony (*Schriften* III 517). Novalis’s conception of history is essential to understanding the role of anarchy in his Märchen model, which resembles that of his triadic account of history, and places anarchy as the essential towards a higher resolution.

The resolution, for MacDonald, is imparted through the necessary and anarchical disruption of common sense, as well as the natural laws of the world. In his fairy tale *Phantastes*, the protagonists’ interaction within “Fairy Land” elicits almost immediately this same sense of wonder produced by Wonderland. Anodos, MacDonald’s protagonist and narrator, is puzzled by the order of Fairy Land and writes: “But it is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land; and one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes” (46). The narrator, who is writing his account after returning from Fairy Land, recounts with wisdom retrospectively garnered from his experience, which caused him to become “like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at

nothing” (47). Like Alice, MacDonald’s protagonist Anodos ends the story with a similar reflection of his experience:

I will end my story with the relation of an incident which befell me a few days ago. I had been with my reapers, and, when they ceased their work at noon, I had laid down under the shadow of a great, ancient beech tree, that stood on the edge of the field. As I lay, with my eyes closed, I began to listen to the sound of the leaves overhead. At first, they made sweet inarticulate music alone; but, by-and-by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually moulding itself into words; till, at last, I seemed able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones: ‘A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos’; and so over and over again. I fancied that the sound reminded me of the voice of the ancient woman, in the cottage that was four-square. I opened my eyes, and, for a moment, almost believed that I saw her face, with its many wrinkles and its young eyes, looking at me from between two hoary branches of the beech over-head. (319)

Anarchy plays a similar role in the resolution in Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice’s exasperation throughout the novel has been culminating towards the dissolution of the anarchy of Wonderland in the last chapter, in which Alice finally proclaims to the Queen of Hearts “Stuff and nonsense!” and “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (95). The result is the disenchantment of the entire dream and dissolution of the chaos. What appears to have been a frustratingly bad dream for Alice, suddenly becomes beautiful through the deeper harmony acquired by retrospective understanding, or in theological terms, something akin to restoration. Alice reflects upon “what a wonderful dream it had been” and, by relating the dream to her sister, imparts to her the sense of wonder which changes “dull reality” into magic (96). Left alone on the bank, “watching the sun setting,” Alice’s sister begins to dream about Alice and her adventures in Wonderland, and she imagines the world around her coming alive with the characters of Wonderland:

The White Rabbit hurried by—the frightened Mouse splashed his way through the neighboring pool—she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friends shared their never-ending meal, and the shrill voice of the Queen ordering off her unfortunate gusts to execution—once more the pig-baby was sneezing on the Duchess’s knee while plates and dishes crashed around it—once

more the shriek of the Gryphon, the squeaking of the Lizzard's slate-pencil, and the choking of the suppressed guinea-pigs, filled the air, mixed up with the distant sob of the miserable Mock Turtle. (96)

Thus, the uncomfortable and frustrating experience of nonsense curiously brings about a positive outlook upon the real world to which Alice returns. Retrospectively, the experience of the dream is positive, even edifying, not only for Alice, whom her sister suspects will become an adult story-teller, but also for those who listen to her stories as well.

These two endings portray magical worlds unified after undergoing the turmoil of chaos and anarchy through the disrupting use of nonsense and convey the eucatastrophic resolution. Nonsense, or the effects produced by an encounter and a forced engagement with it, brings about illumination, or as Strachey puts it, brings "out a new and deeper harmony of life" (515). In the same way that Novalis's *Märchen* world is inverted or opposed to the world of truth (the word used by Novalis is *entgegengesetzt*, meaning *reversed* or *opposed*), Christian theology, in opposition to purely empiricist or generally secular modes of knowing, is governed by alternative laws, which appear chaotic and anarchical when juxtaposed or imposed upon the "rational" mind. "Nonsense," writes Gabelman, "does not necessarily make a statement redundant or untrue, but calls for a different type of logic" (196). The same *inversion* or *opposition* between governing laws and epistemological approaches is essential to the nonsensical realities of MacDonald's and Carroll's texts. However, when considering the theology of Victorian children's authors such as MacDonald and Carroll, it is imperative to examine their debt to Romanticism, especially the movement's theological poets such as Coleridge and Novalis, to whom MacDonald and Carroll gravitated and read specifically because of their poetic—and sometimes unorthodox—theology.

Endnotes

1. In addition to Gabelman's research, others have also taken a recent scholarly interest in nonsense literature. See Elizabeth Sewall's *Field of Nonsense*. 1952. (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015); and Michael Holquist's "What Is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism" (*Yale French Studies*, no. 43, 1969, pp. 145-164). Another study worthy of note is Daniel Gabelman's *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity* (Baylor UP, 2013), which examines nonsense as theological and literary "playfulness."

2. Tolkien coined the word in his essay “On Fairy-Stories.” He elaborated on his concept of eucatastrophe in the following letter: “I coined the word ‘eucatastrophe’: the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives—if the story has literary ‘truth’ on the second plane . . . —that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made. And I concluded by saying that the Resurrection was the greatest ‘eucatastrophe’ possible in the greatest Fairy Story—and produces that essential emotion: Christian joy which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love.” See *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2014).
3. Most recently, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s has stated that theology should abandon the “extra-theological categories of worldly philosophical aesthetics” for a “theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself.” In keeping with the rich tradition of theological aesthetics that began with the writings of the early Christian Church, Balthasar argues that beauty must be understood as a means of understanding God, not as a thing to be apprehended. See von Balthasar’s *A Theological Aesthetics*, eds. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leivia-Merikakis, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, 3).
4. See, for example, St. Augustine’s *Confessions* chap. XXVII: “I sought Thee outside and . . . fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou were with me and I was not with Thee. I was kept from Thee by those things, yet had they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all.” C.S. Lewis, concerning the desire for an unattainable beauty, similarly draws from a long tradition of theological aesthetics when he writes: “The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the

thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited." See Lewis's "The Weight of Glory," first preached in University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1941, and published in *Theology* 43 (November 1941): 263-74.

5. See Polhemus's "Play, Nonsense, and Games," in *Alice and Wonderland*, Norton Critical Edition, 370.
6. Even within the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, there is a hint of that which cannot be cataphatically named. Derrida's deconstructionism is, essentially, attacking the logic of identity (put forth by Aristotle), which claims that all knowledge can be divided into categories. See, for example Derrida's essay "How To Avoid Speaking: Denials."
7. I do not presently argue that Carroll is in conscious or explicit conversation with the German Romantic discourse of the *Märchen*. Though Carroll would have likely been familiar with the writings of Novalis through MacDonald, it is uncertain, even perhaps unlikely, that Carroll has Novalis's ideal *Märchen* in mind when composing the *Alice* stories. For the purposes of my argument, I merely seek to examine how Novalis's necessitation of anarchy for the fairy tale is often demonstrated and fulfilled in Carroll's text.
8. In *The Gospel of John* (18:36), for instance, Christ tells Pontius Pilot "My kingdom is not of this world."

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