

Willy Wonka, Dahl's Chickens and Heavenly Visions

by David Rudd

With the centenary of Roald Dahl's birth just behind us, in 2017, it seems timely to return to his most popular book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), itself over half-a-century old. My motivation for this is partly external (see Acknowledgements) and partly internal, the latter arising from what seemed an outstanding paradox first articulated by Eleanor Cameron, one of Dahl's earliest and sternest detractors, who resented what she called the novel's "hypocrisy,"

epitomized in its moral – stuck like a marshmallow in a lump of fudge – that TV is horrible and hateful and time-wasting and that children should read good books instead, when in fact the book itself is like nothing so much as one of the more specious television shows. It reminds me of Cecil B. De Mille's [sic] Biblical spectacles, with plenty of blood and orgies and tortures to titillate the masses (1972, p. 440).

Forty years later, Jackie Stallcup would also note this contradiction in more general terms: that "Dahl and his readers can have their Wonka bars and eat them too: we get to revel in the kind of disgusting subversive humour . . . while, at the same time, we learn a 'good lesson' about the rewards of 'proper' behaviour" (Stallcup, 2012, p. 46). In her Introduction to the collection in which Stallcup's essay appears, Catherine Butler also notes this incongruity, how Wonka "both tempts the children and punishes them for their infractions," having earlier, like some "vindictive [...] Old Testament Nobodaddy sacked his workers, yet is still absolved at the end, "being beyond blame, a magical dispenser of rewards" (2012, p. 5). Whereas Cameron sees this duplicity as "hypocrisy," Butler suggests that the novel is more complex, merely being "deceptive in its apparent simplicity" (ibid.). However, there is still little attempt to unpack this complexity in order to make sense of Wonka's paradoxical behaviour.

It is this seeming inconsistency that provided the springboard for my own reading, which draws on some of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical insights in order to show not only the logic operating in Dahl's text, but also to use these insights to suggest a reason for Dahl's

particular approach to writing. Peter Hunt has termed this “the Dahl effect” (2012, p. 186), seeing Dahl as “part of a postmodernist movement that fostered an ironic self-awareness in even the youngest readers” (p. 178), thereby making “a major contribution to changing the nature of a generation’s response to fantasy,” resulting in its commodification (p. 178). While I think there is some truth in this, I will argue that Dahl was himself caught up in a shift in late capitalism from production to consumerism, which resulted in this more commodified style of writing.

Willy Wonka as Entrepreneur

Let me begin, though, by examining that contradictory figure, Willy Wonka. On the one hand, as noted, he seems to be a ruthless capitalist in the mould of his Victorian antecedents, as fictionalised in figures like Charles Dickens’s Josiah Bounderby or Paul Dombey. Wonka owns the biggest chocolate factory in the world (six times larger than any others), exports his bars “to *all* the four corners of the earth!” (Dahl, 1985/1964, p. 21) and uses not a local workforce but what amounts to third-world, slave labour. Wonka openly brags about it:

“...I shipped them all over here, every man, woman, and child in the Oompa-Loompa tribe. It was easy. I smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them.... They are wonderful workers. They all speak English now. They love dancing and music.” (p. 80)

Not only a successful businessman, Wonka also sounds much like other old-style imperialists, whose business practices were closely allied with their colonial activities in that they not only marketed chocolate but also owned the sugar and cocoa plantations, which were initially staffed by the local populace (in Mesoamerica, particularly), and later, supported by slave labour.

Certainly, the way the Oompa-Loompas, in their original incarnation, were depicted, is highly evocative, with their African roots as pygmies and their stereotypical “love [of] dancing and music” (p. 80). They also appear servile: “Mr Wonka turned around and clicked his fingers sharply, *click, click, click*, three times. Immediately, an Oompa-Loompa appeared, as if from nowhere, and stood beside him” (p. 85). The factory itself houses these workers, who do not seem to have citizenship rights in the outside world (they have been smuggled in) and who are certainly not considered capable of taking over the factory themselves; as Wonka puts it,

“*Someone’s* got to keep it [the Chocolate Factory] going – if only for the sake of the Oompa-Loompas” – who are then contrasted with the “thousands of clever men” who would willingly take things over (p. 157). Not only are the Oompa-Loompas excluded from management, but they are also expected to undertake all the dangerous jobs, like sucking an Everlasting Gobstopper for “nearly a year ... without stopping” (p. 98) or growing an endless beard (p. 100), or, worse still, joining the list of “twenty Oompa-Loompas” on whom Wonka has tested his new, complete-meal chewing gum, whence “every one ... finished up as a blueberry.” Wonka merely comments, “It’s most annoying” (pp. 107-8).

One wonders why they are “always laughing,” imagining “everything’s a colossal joke!” (p. 90), but then there is that cocoa-infused atmosphere and the presence of “BUTTERSCOTCH AND BUTTERGIN” (p. 117) that the Oompa-Loompas seem to be given:

“Glorious stuff!” said Mr Wonka. “The Oompa-Loompas all adore it. It makes them tiddy. You can hear them in there now, whooping it up.”

Shrieks of laughter and snatches of singing could be heard coming through the closed door.

“They’re drunk as lords,” said Mr Wonka. (p. 118)

In seeking to justify his intervention in the lives of these natives, Wonka offers a fairly standard colonial response, suggesting, in a crudely Darwinian manner, that the Oompa-Loompas would not have been able to fend for themselves properly, hence their subsistence “on green caterpillars” that “tasted revolting” (p. 78), while also being prey to “the most dangerous beasts in the world,” like whangdoodles, which “would eat ten Oompa-Loompas for breakfast and come galloping back for a second helping” (p. 78).

Not simply a capitalist, then, as labels like colonialist and racist also suggest themselves – and, indeed, given his blatantly phallic demeanour, we might want to accuse him of being a male chauvinist, too. There is that name, of course: his forename “Willy” is a standard slang term with which we are all familiar, which is then linked to his surname, “Wonka,” a word that, with a non-too-subtle transposition of vowels, becomes “wanker” (and would certainly have done so in the mouth of the BFG, for whom things are always a little “squiggly”). Wonka’s name not only *connotes* phallic power but, beyond that, it *expresses* it, such that many young readers might derive humorous satisfaction from its utterance; what, in Freudian

terms, is seen as a release of unacceptable material that escapes conscious censorship (cf. Rollin and West, pp. 91-96). However, as I shall elaborate below, Lacanian ideas provide a more sociological way of interpreting Freud's insights.

The alliterative doubling of Willy Wonka's provocative name, then, would seem to give him an excessive phallic presence that verges on parody, especially given the fact that he is also described as a little man, which aligns him more readily with children and, indeed, with the Oompa-Loompas. Moreover, his undersized appearance makes his phallic attributes even more evocative, with his "small, neat, pointed black beard – a goatee," his "black top hat on his head," his "tail coat" and his "fine gold-topped walking cane," which we later see him wagging "in the air" while "hopping up and down" (p. 81). Later we are also informed of a "vitamin Wonka" which makes your "toes grow out until they're as long as your fingers ..." (p. 145). And elsewhere, Wonka-Vite is depicted as "the great rejuvenator," making its taker "as frisky as a frogopper!" (Dahl, 1986/1973, p. 103). The way the Oompa-Loompas sing about it –

*"Let's take a dose of this delight!
This heavenly magic dynamite!"* (p. 105)

– makes Wonka sound suspiciously like a walking advert for Viagra, exhibiting what Lacan terms "superabundant vitality" (1997, p. 237). These various depictions are enhanced by the visual representations of Wonka's factory, with its thrusting chimneys.

However, although suggestive and in many ways apposite, bandying about such labels as "Sexist, Misogynistic, Heightist and Racist Corporatist" (Cohen, 2013) seems rather heavy-handed and inappropriate when applied to the chocolatier. The reason for this has been hinted above; namely, that Wonka's behaviour is simply too excessive for such epithets to have any traction: he seems a parody of such types. And yet the comedy does not arise from parodic elements, for he is a figure spoken of in awe, almost with reverence; in fact, his long-anticipated appearance in the book gives him a mystique that is as effective as Aslan's in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Grandpa Joe, who once worked for Wonka, actually hints at the chocolatier's godlike powers, which seem to place him beyond the realms of the human and the temporal: "Of course it's impossible! ... It's completely *absurd!* But Mr Willy Wonka has done it!" (p. 22).

This is not an isolated instance, either, for the whole realm of the factory appears to be a magical, impossible space, standing outside the normal coordinates of time and place, with its “most important rooms ... deep down below the surface!” (p. 71), its “ROCK-CANDY MINE – 10,000 FEET DEEP,” its “COKERNUT-ICE SKATING RINKS (sic, p. 129), its “great, craggy mountain made entirely of fudge, with Oompa-Loompas (all roped together for safety)” scaling it, its “lake of hot caramel with steam coming off it”; and, finally, that “village of Oompa-Loompas, with tiny houses and streets and hundreds of Oompa-Loompa children ...” (p. 132). It is a non-space that, once again, has godlike associations. The comment in the Gospel of John that “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John, 14:2) comes to mind.

There is also the fact that Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas, with their prescient songs, seem aware of the fate of the individual children in advance. Here is Augustus Gloop’s predicted destiny, for example:

*“How long could we allow this beast
To gorge and guzzle, feed and feast
On everything he wanted to?
...
....and so in haste
We chose a thing that, come what may
Would take the nasty taste away.
‘Come on!’ we cried. ‘The time is ripe
To send him shooting up the pipe!’”* (pp. 86-7)

And the way these children are tested is also reminiscent of God’s testing of Job.¹

The Oompa-Loompas are similarly given to phrasing events in religious terms, proclaiming that “*By grace/ A miracle has taken place!*” (p. 88) and, at one point, speak of the guilty children as “*sinners*” (p. 127). Beyond this, there is that curious ascension at the end of the

¹ I am not the first one to mention Biblical parallels in Dahl’s novel. See Bosmajian (1985) and Kachur (2012) for alternative readings.

novel, where three generations of males – not quite the father, son and holy ghost (but two of them, certainly) – rise heavenwards through the factory roof. And, as we might expect, the elevator includes a meek one who, as the Bible has foretold, will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). The whole story, in fact, can be seen to trace what is known as a katabatic narrative arc; that is, it involves an underground journey that finishes with an ascension into the light (as does Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, or Alice, in her Adventures in Wonderland).

Why, though, does this novel have such religious overtones when Dahl was certainly not a writer in the vein of C.S. Lewis? What Dahl wanted, it seems clear, was a figure who evoked a sense of the numinous, of the godlike, without committing readers to any religious faith. Wonka provides just that: he is a character who is seen not merely to flout the law but to stand above and beyond it; someone apparently omnipotent but who is, also, a more secular figure. Seen in this light, Wonka and his factory appear as a carnivalesque space, one where the traditional coordinates of religion are reversed, such that the sacrament here is ultimately nugatory, consisting only of candy and liquid chocolate.

“TRY ONE ... NOW!”: Dahl and Decaffeinated Enjoyment

The argument becomes quite dense here, as I bring some Lacanian ideas to the fore, so let me spell them out singly before linking them. As just suggested, Dahl seems to be depicting an all-powerful, godlike figure who stands beyond the law, which brings to mind Freud's notion of the primal father, a mythical, fantasmatic being whose behaviour was also unlicensed. In the myth, this figure functions in two ways: as both the embodiment of the law (the reason for its imposition) and as a feared and envied being who stands outside it (Freud, 1950/1913).² In Freud's model, this character's behaviour is mainly sexual but, as is usual in children's literature, more oral forms of gratification provide admirable substitutes, involving food and feasting. Even so, as already discussed, Dahl has still managed to give Wonka a more subversive edge by evoking other forms of transgression: his overt phallicism, racism, rapaciousness and generally imperious manner.

² He is a fantasmatic creation, seen to incarnate limitless power, much in the way that Lacan conceives the phallus itself: as something reputedly powerful but something that, in actuality, is always veiled, as there is nothing substantive behind it. In this way, phallic power for Lacan is always parodic to some extent.

The next point that needs making is that all transgressions are culturally constructed, so they will differ across societies, depending on that particular culture's prohibitions (e.g. against eating meat, consuming alcohol, or dancing). Moreover, as societies are themselves dynamic, views on transgression will change over time too, such that in Victorian England, where the Protestant ethic prevailed, frivolity was frowned upon and labour championed (captured in sayings like "keep your nose to the grindstone"). It was, therefore, far easier to transgress at this time than in more modern society where there has been a shift from production to consumption.

With this shift, views on enjoyment also changed, such that, as Todd McGowan declares in his book, *The End of Dissatisfaction?* (2003, p. 1) "the increasing proliferation of inducements (and commandments) to enjoy" has resulted in "a transformation in the social order as drastic as the emergence of modernity." McGowan gives a more Lacanian twist to a thesis advanced by Neil Postman in his provocatively entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), one of the first to draw close attention to the way that we were becoming addicted to a commodified form of enjoyment, such that there was an "obligation to enjoy" (Žižek, 1991, p. 237); or, to put it round the other way, non-enjoyment was no longer permissible.

At this point it is worth pausing to consider the word "enjoyment" more closely, for it has itself become diluted over time. For example, when C.S. Lewis uses the term in his title, *Surprised by Joy* (1955), and speaks about experiencing "stabs of joy" (p. 28), he is using the term in the sense of an intensely moving and sometimes painful emotion. This is why the French word, *jouissance*, is often preferred and, in Lacan's work, is left untranslated.³ A more appropriate synonym would be "bliss." The debasement of the word "joy" has resulted in what Slavoj Žižek (2016) aptly terms "decaffeinated enjoyment," wherein *jouissance* loses that transgressive element so crucial for its success and becomes exactly the opposite. What gives Wonka his appeal, his energy, is precisely the fact that the world of his factory does exhibit such transgressions, alongside smaller indiscretions *en passant*, as in the storeroom that contains "WHIPS – ALL SHAPES AND SIZES", which are used, predictably, to produce whipped creams (Dahl, 1985/1964, p. 94).

³ The verb *jouir* means "to come", so *jouissance* also carries a sexual connotation, like "orgasmic."

Enjoyment, then, cannot be mandated; it arrives indirectly, as a by-product, as captured in Lewis's phrase (taken from Wordsworth) "surprised by joy." Dahl has a good example in discussing the smile, contrasting the false hoisting of muscles (following the imperative, "smile") with, say, the genuine smile of Danny's father in *Danny, the Champion of the World*, noting how, with him, "you could actually see a tiny little golden spark dancing in the middle of each eye" (1977/1975, p. 13). Hence it is the injunction to smile, or enjoy, that can result in undermining that very activity. This is where the mechanisms of modern-day capitalism are most powerful and overt. But, also, perhaps, where happiness and satisfaction are most at risk, given the endless commands to "Eat" and "Try one," with their anticipated responses: it's "finger lickin' good" and "I'm loving it," which require continual reiteration in order to sustain any semblance of pleasure. Actual *jouissance* needs no consumer prompting: it is its own reward. One might consider the selfie at this point, which provides people with endless proof that their visible self, at least, is showing signs of enjoyment.

These imperatives, according to Lacan, emanate from the superego, a part of the mind that is often misunderstood in popular culture, being associated with an avuncular, Jiminy Cricket type of conscience. Freud did, however, also point to its darker underside, noting that it "is always close to the id and can act as its representative" (1984/1923, p. 390; see Rudd, 2014 for further discussion). The superego, then, although it is seen to uphold the law, often does so with a vengeance. It is best conceptualised by thinking of the "good cop/bad cop" scenario, wherein the law is defended, but in two, very distinct ways. Freud's primal father figure is similar, being both the law's instigator (good cop) and its wild, lawless antecedent (bad cop). In fact, the founding myths of most societies have this double-edged relationship to law and order. As Walter Benjamin elegantly expressed it, "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1973/1942, p. 258). The law, in other words, is always established on the back of what is seen as a prior lawlessness that had to be suppressed (as in the case of the primal father). So the law is itself always contaminated by a violence that has involved the suppression of indigenous cultures in bloody conflicts, which are subsequently justified by the victors (often colonisers) in the name of religion or another authority, such as king and country. The idea that a nation's truths are self-evident, then, with proclamations that all men are created equal, tends to conceal the seizure of native lands, wealth and, often, the forced migration and slavery of many victims in the process.

Wonka's factory, as previously mentioned, displays these contradictions of capitalism writ large. It is not just an Edenic funfair, an escapist, carnivalesque realm, for it is made clear that Wonka is adroitly tuned-in to the global economy. But being more successful than his competitors (his factory is six times as big), these contradictions become more visible and intense, as is clear in "The Television-Chocolate Room" chapter, where Wonka outlines how TV might help him manipulate consumers into becoming even more enslaved in their "enjoyment" of his chocolate by building in instant gratification:

"Just imagine ... when I start using this across the country ... you'll be sitting at home watching television and suddenly a commercial will flash on to the screen and a voice will say, 'EAT WONKA'S CHOCOLATES! THEY'RE THE BEST IN THE WORLD! ... TRY ONE FOR YOURSELF – NOW!' And you simply reach out and take one!" (Dahl, 1985/1964, p. 138)

Instant gratification is assured, just as it is in many of Wonka's other inventions. But this is where *jouissance* can easily falter. For, going back to my earlier comments, enjoyment cannot be mandated: it is a by-product, arriving indirectly, as a "surprise," like a genuine smile as opposed to a smiley.

This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Lacan's model to grasp, for it relates to the nature of human beings – or "speaking beings" as Lacan would prefer to call us, the key point being that we do not inhabit a world of immediate gratification: seeing a thing and mindlessly indulging ourselves. We might imagine that this was once the case: wanting sustenance, crying, and having milk delivered by an attentive mother. But, as speaking beings, we have moved away from such feral immediacy (the Real): language has intervened and mediates all we do. A gap has now opened up between what we want and satisfying that wish. Moreover, this is a gap that can never be closed, for language is the very thing that has opened this space in the first place. It is what Lacan terms the Symbolic Order, the order of law and of patriarchy, and it is, therefore, also that which was seen to curb the primal father's access to complete enjoyment. However, despite putting a brake on our *jouissance*, it is the Symbolic Order that also gives us a place in society (as "he," "she," "I," "we"; or as "son," "mother," "parent," etc.) and allows us to communicate our wishes and desires to others.

To put this in broader terms, although we are motivated by our desires, our continued existence in the Symbolic depends on these desires never being fulfilled: we must “mind the gap,” keeping it forever in place. Without this gap, we would return to brutishness, eating, drinking, copulating and so on, but without any awareness or differentiation between these activities, let alone their cultural transformation into exquisite fantasies of culinary excellence and sexual ecstasy; or, to be more in keeping with Dahl’s novel, fantasies of sweet candy, liquid chocolate and mouth-watering creams that have undergone a good whipping. Without such incompleteness, we are, quite precisely, meaning-less. This is what Lacan feared with modern capitalism, that its stress on mindless enjoyment and attempts at immediate gratification (“EATABLE MARSHMALLOW PILLOWS,” p. 113) would be to the detriment of our more individual and idiosyncratic desires. For much of what we value in the world comes as a result of careful crafting and shaping, in order that our desires can be staged, with that gap between ourselves and the staging itself (to continue the metaphor), being carefully maintained – which is precisely what stories do so successfully.

Augustus Gloop provides a particularly good example, seeking to regain an Edenic state almost literally as he kneels precipitately beside the Factory’s chocolate river (which itself invokes Genesis, 2: 10: “And a river went out of Eden ...”). His fall seems inevitable, and he ends up almost drowning in something far more deadly than any pool of tears: a viscous liquid – gloopy, we might say – clings to him; amniotic, perhaps, invoking that imagined feeling of wholeness experienced in the womb or, possibly, something darker, more cloacal. Whatever the case, Gloop has ruptured the distance between thing and its representation that the Symbolic inaugurates. He is confronted with the Real and, like some primeval beast, flounders in a gloopy mire.

This is the fate of four of the five prizewinning children, who seem addicted to mindless consumption, seeking to obliterate that essential gap and thereby rupturing their Symbolic coordinates. Augustus, basted in chocolate, ends up “thin as a straw!” (p. 154); Violet, a blueberry, is de-juiced but remains “purple in the face”; Veruca, a hollow-sounding, bad nut, is “covered with rubbish”; and Mike Teavee, initially belittled, is “overstretched” till he’s “about ten feet tall and thin as a wire!” (p. 155). Far from the cautious advice of a Jiminy Cricket (good cop), these children are like those on Pleasure Island (in Disney’s *Pinocchio*), seduced by that darker imperative to enjoy, and are consequently reduced to the equivalent of braying asses.

I'll consider the one exception, Charlie, shortly, but first it is necessary to heed the Oompa-Loompas' song about "*That nauseating, foul, unclean,/ Repulsive television screen,*" which they sing after Mike Teavee's belittlement. This denigration of TV ("*throw your TV set away,*" p. 148) and commendation of reading ("*A lovely bookshelf on the wall*", p. 148) is very effectively placed, given the intense emphasis on the former until this point, which makes reading itself seem like a transgressive activity (Dahl uses a similar ploy with Matilda in the Wormwood household, where TV and fast food are the norm). But beyond that, two significant points are being made about our desires.

First, that as speaking beings, our ontological state – our desires – can be articulated in language only, which emerges (with its many gaps) over a period of time. The Oompa-Loompas themselves contrast this, "*the slowly growing joy*" (p. 148) of reading, with the immediacy of TV. For images exhibit no gaps, always appearing holistic, complete, and can thereby be deceptive, appearing with no sense of mediation. Rather than letting us explore our more particular desires, then, they seduce us with a false sense of plenitude. As Postman laments in his critique of modern society, people "no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials" (pp. 92-3). A smiley, thereby, can replace a smile. But, as the Oompa-Loompas suggest, the written word is different, for it can help wean children off their attempts at instant gratification, such that "*each and every kid / Will love you more for what you did*" (p. 148).

This brings me to my second key point, for love is central to the complex nature of desire, reaching back to that mythical time when we felt at one with the mother, when each partner in that dyad seemed to fulfil the other. It is this mythical relationship that we continue to pursue in disguised and metonymic form; although, because it is masked, it is also easy to lose one's way in empty pleasures, mistaking them for what we really want: to be loved; to be desired by others.

This contrast is most clearly seen on Wonka's boat, where Veruca Salt's behaviour is set against Charlie's. The former issues nothing but an endless string of demands to her father: "Daddy ... I want a boat like this! I want you to buy me a big pink boiled-sweet boat exactly like Mr Wonka's! And I want lots of Oompa-Loompas to row me about, and I want a

chocolate river and I want ...I want ...” (p. 91). The quiet Charlie, in contrast, is approached by Wonka, who offers him chocolate, not in response to Charlie’s demands (his *desire* for chocolate), but because of his physical *need* for sustenance: “You look starved to death!” Wonka tells Charlie, also referring to Grandpa Joe as “a skeleton!” (p. 92). As suggested earlier, the chocolate, therefore, becomes something like a sacrament. Charlie, accordingly, despite his poverty, is not found “wanting”; for, unlike Veruca and the others, he is not caught up in a fruitless pursuit of happiness through consumerism. He is already the recipient of unconditional love from his family: not only his parents but his four grandparents, too; and he, likewise, confers his love on them.

Charlie’s surname is, therefore, an interesting choice, forming an obvious contrast with a name like Gloop. Initially, “Bucket” might be seen to fit with the notion that Charlie is an innocent, a “tabula rasa” who can thereby be moulded by Wonka, the latter explicitly dismissing the idea of a grown-up, with his own ideas (and it is a “he”), taking over his factory: “I don’t want a grown-up person at all. A grown-up won’t listen to me; he won’t learn. He will try to do things his own way and not mine. So I have to have a child” (p. 157). Once again, Biblical parallels are never far away: “Except ye ... become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18: 3), the meek, as ever, being the ones deemed worthy to inherit.

However, it would be a mistake to see Charlie Bucket in these terms, as an empty receptacle, rudderless. One might point out that a bucket is not necessarily empty, any more than a cup is half-empty rather than half-full; just so, a bucket, like a cup, might in fact “runneth over” (Psalms 23: 5). In line with the Lacanian approach outlined above, it can be seen that Charlie is the one child not enslaved by any “bucket-list” of wishes, who seems intuitively aware of how “decaffeinated” such enjoyment is. Charlie is, therefore, the only child who does not steal, the only one who can make a chocolate bar last for a month, and the only one who is prepared to share his rare chocolate treats with others. In fact, the whole Bucket family is shown to have an immunity from the “affluenza” that infects the others.⁴ Thus, when Grandpa Joe first sees the meadow in the Chocolate Room, although he proclaims, “I could eat the whole *field!* ... I could go around on all fours like a cow and eat every blade of grass

⁴ This voguish term was actually coined in the 1950s.

in the field!” (p. 75), unlike Augustus, who grabs it by the handful, Grandpa doesn’t actually indulge himself.⁵

The only other person who does not express greed in the Chocolate Factory (aside from the workers) is Wonka himself, who talks surprisingly little about his own appetite. When Mike Teavee asks him, scathingly, “Who eats fish and cabbage and potatoes in *this* factory, I’d like to know?”, it is Wonka who responds, “I do, of course” (pp. 123-4), inadvertently showing parallels with the Buckets and their diet of bread, cabbage and potatoes. I would, therefore, suggest a different interpretation of the book from that expressed by a number of critics, perhaps beginning with Cameron, who sees Charlie as enslaved by some “heavenly vision of being able to live eternally fed upon chocolate” (1972, p. 439). The message, in fact, seem to be the opposite: that the only person fit to take over a chocolate factory is someone who is not seduced by its wares.

The Dahl Effect: From Charles Dickens to Dahl’s Chickens

Having suggested a Lacanian reading of this book, responding to Butler’s remark that the novel is “deceptive in its apparent simplicity,” it now needs emphasising that I do not for one moment think that Dahl had any such psychoanalytical notions in mind (any more than someone suffering from dyspepsia should be expected to understand the intricacies of gastroesophageal reflux). However, I do think that he appreciated an overall shift in capitalism from production to consumerism, with the latter’s attendant emphasis on marketing and advertising, especially given that Dahl was living in America during the 1950s, the period in which this shift first became discernible. In fact, Donald Sturrock, Dahl’s official biographer, quotes Dahl’s negative reaction to this phenomenon, how he “despaired of the standards of American radio broadcasting, for example, describing the programmes as ‘all advertisements.’ Where every thirty seconds some ‘smooth-haired bastard’ interrupted even the most serious broadcasts to sing the praises of chewing gum, toothpaste or laxatives” (2010, p. 172). (In this statement, Dahl manages to mention at least two of the products featured in *Charlie*.)

⁵ Some might argue that this romanticises poverty (such that Cameron terms it “phony poverty” (1972, p. 439), but the trope is one that is long familiar from fairy tales, and is in keeping with the manner in which the “meek” and mutually loving Buckets become the deserving inheritors; see also my Conclusion.

Dahl's feelings about America were, therefore, mixed. He certainly delighted in America's more open, egalitarian qualities, as against the hidebound, class consciousness of Britain, representing the latter through the vicious and insular Aunts, Sponge and Spiker, in *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) where James and his motley band of "untouchables," like latter-day Pilgrim Fathers, travel via the Big Peach to the Big Apple. America, of course, turns James into a writer, just as it made Dahl one. But over time, the excesses of modern capitalism with its endless celebration of the ephemeral – whether in showbiz, in Hollywood (which Dahl was keenly aware of, not only through his own screenwriting but also through the acting of his wife, Patricia Neal) or, increasingly, in everyday life itself (on billboards, in the street, on radio and TV) – came to infuriate him.

This shift toward an emphasis on consumption is frivolously captured in one of Dahl's own later works, where the BFG spoonerises the name of Victorian literature's respected social commentator, Charles Dickens, wittily turning him into the ephemeral and fun-loving "Dahl's Chickens" (Dahl, 1984/1982, p. 113): someone who sounds suspiciously like the proprietor of a fast-food joint, serving finger lickin' good "food, glorious food"; or, as we might say in Dahl's case, purveying "fast fiction": visual, pacey, streetwise, iconoclastic. Dahl certainly used elements of American culture to his own advantage, especially in terms of its directness, so important for a short story writer, the form in which he found initial success. He might have been influenced by Ernest Hemingway in this regard (whom the eponymous Matilda also reads), but he also imbibed the qualities of advertising slogans, however irritating he found them, where attention is given to language's more oral features, frequently neglected by the literary world: phonological elements like assonance, alliteration, puns, and even volume, the latter being realised orthographically by using capitals, exclamation marks, italics, and so on (Rudd, 2012). Advertising and the newly popular TV had also brought visual forms of expression to the fore, most obviously in the use of illustration itself, but also in attempts to have language evoke visual and other sensory dimensions (touch, smell, taste – and, of course, sound). Lastly, humour was a key feature of this new world, where, as Postman caustically expressed it, people could amuse themselves to death.

Dahl tapped into this new way of writing at a time when most other children's writers were caught looking back, nostalgically, to more peaceful and settled times. The late 1940s and 1950s were the decades in which Enid Blyton's cosy notions of Englishness still ruled. And

even amongst those who rejected her safe, flat prose for more literary fare, the preferred classics were works like Lewis's "Narnia" books, Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight's Garden*, Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*, and, in America, E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, books that seemed to celebrate a previous age rather than addressing the new.

But Dahl would have to bide his time before his style would become the template to be emulated by others – what Hunt terms “the Dahl effect” – with Dahl himself freely able to criticise older writers, such that his child character, Matilda, can berate “Mr C.S. Lewis” for having “no funny bits in his books” (Dahl, 1989/1988, p. 80), a “failing” that she also levels at Tolkien (p. 81). Back in the 1960s, though, both the style and content of Dahl's writing were regarded, by British publishers especially, as improper and, to use Cameron's term, “most tasteless” (1972, p. 438). Hence Dahl found his first children's books being “turned down by practically every ... established publisher,” the exception being Allen and Unwin, thanks to the enthusiasm – often the case – of a child: Unwin's daughter (Treglown, 1994, p.192).

What I want to do in this section is to look in more detail at this shift in sensibility –the “Dahl effect” – for I would argue that, innovative though Dahl was, he himself was caught up in this shift toward – well, toward “Dahl's chickens.” I shall take Cameron's well-known criticism as my focus, for she captured this moment presciently, though perhaps in ways of which she was not fully aware.

Her first article on Dahl, “McLuhan, Youth, and Literature” (1972), is rather elliptical in its title, as though Cameron might have had an inkling that the real focus of her article might prove unruly if awakened. But the sleeping giant did indeed stir, with Dahl penning a stinging riposte to Cameron (less usual when “writing back” was not nearly so immediate). For me, this incident always evokes that famous scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) in which Allen's character and the eponymous Annie (Diane Keaton) are standing in a cinema queue when someone behind them loudly derides McLuhan's work. After a brief altercation with this individual, who turns out to be a media studies lecturer, Allen dramatically produces McLuhan himself from across the lobby. McLuhan then delivers his own blunt riposte to the lecturer: “You know nothing of my work How you ever got to teach a course in anything

is totally amazing!” Dahl’s “Reply” to Cameron was along similar lines, proclaiming that “[t]he lady is completely out of touch with reality” (1973, p. 77).

I do not want to engage with the details of Cameron’s criticism here, but to draw attention to the fact that, in foregrounding the work of McLuhan and, in a subsequent article, mentioning Anthony Burgess’s work, she was yoking together two other writers who seemed not only aware of a wind of change blowing – a wind that is quite explicit in Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) – but who were deploying such techniques in their own work.

In regard to Burgess, Cameron argues that Dahl’s *Charlie* “emphasizes all those Clockwork-Orange qualities which are actually destroying the society children are growing up in” (Cameron, 1976, p. 62). With hindsight, we can observe that these almost contemporary classics, *Charlie* (1964) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) have never been out of print, though each has been undoubtedly controversial. Dahl, in fact, even reviewed Burgess’s book, which he described as both “terrifying and marvellous” (International Anthony Burgess Foundation, 2017). It is also worth noting that both writers shared an antipathy to the establishment, Burgess as a result of his poor, working-class background and Dahl because of his Norwegian roots and lack of a conventional, university education. Both were, for much of their lives, expatriates too, displaced for one reason or another, and both, therefore, taught themselves how to “pass” in establishment circles, each learning to speak an acceptable R.P., or Received Pronunciation, but with the realisation that, ultimately, this was a pretense – or, to use a word that Cameron likes to apply to Dahl’s work, “phony.”

Moving beyond R.P. itself, the 1950s, when both these writers established their craft, was also the decade in which people were becoming more aware of language’s power, not only to discern one’s class position but to shape our very perception of the world, partly as a result of the developing Cold War and partly through the abhorrent and corrosive ideology of the Nazis, which, as Hannah Arendt made clear, was the more fearful in that it emanated neither from the “perverted nor sadistic” but the “terribly and terrifyingly normal” (1963, p. 276). But it was one thing to see people’s sense of reality being warped elsewhere, and quite another to find it lurking closer to home, as George Orwell’s totalitarian dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) suggested, with the insidiously restrictive language of Newspeak. This notion, then, that our perception of the world might be open to distortion, was an abiding concern of the 1950s, not only in factual works – *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, 1950) and

The Hidden Persuaders (Packard, 1957) – but also in fiction, in both books (e.g. Robert Heinlein’s *The Puppet Masters*, 1951) and films (e.g. Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956). All of these works queried our ability to distinguish the “phony” from the authentic. It is hardly surprising that the disciplines of sociolinguistics and grammatology also developed in this decade, the latter originally being associated not with Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction but with the Toronto School of Communication Theory, which included amongst its members a certain Marshall McLuhan.

Before discussing the latter’s work, though, it is important to note that all three of these writers – Dahl, Burgess and McLuhan – came to fame slightly later, in the 1960s, when the injunction to consume and “enjoy” had become more prevalent, such that their critiques of the distortions of communication were more playful, often engaging with the very deforming practices of which they were critical. They, therefore, drew attention, in a more mischievous way, to language’s lack of transparency, emphasising its obdurate material presence by foregrounding its sensory power: visually, phonically, and, often, in more visceral ways. Thus, in *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess draws on Orwell’s Newspeak for his own “Nadsat,” a teen argot based on Russian, Cockney rhyming slang and other sources for its effects, with coinages like “[a]ppy polly loggies” (apologies, p. 42), “skolliwoll” (school, p. 30), “pretty polly” (money, p. 142) and “oddy knocky” (on one’s own, p. 148), all of which could as readily be voiced by Dahl’s BFG.

In non-fictional work, such a playful yet critical approach to language was perhaps even more unusual at that time, though indulged increasingly by McLuhan through his interest in the wider ways in which our forms of communication shape and are shaped by culture and society. But it would be a mistake to see him as simply “all out for the ear and the senses as opposed to the reading eye and the reflective mind,” as does Cameron (1972, p. 436), claiming that “[e]lectronic waves are what turn McLuhan on.” For, though he understood the new electronic age, he also admitted “no liking for it,” regarding it with “complete personal distaste and dissatisfaction” (from a 1968 interview, McLuhan, 1997, p. 65). Having been a literary scholar studying under I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, McLuhan was certainly not against reading and reflection, for it was through these that he recognised this new shift in sensibility. As he expressed it in one of his most famous works, *Understanding Media*, “I don’t approve of the global village,” but “I say we live in it” (McLuhan, 1995/1964, p. 58). And he has proven remarkably prescient, recognising that, for instance, we would be brought

together in a plugged-in “global village,” and each would “use ... public space for ‘doing one’s thing’” (McLuhan, 1970, 12), as we do in chatting on our cell phones, listening to music and snapping selfies. Finally, to return to Cameron’s own, unattributed gloss on McLuhan, one cannot help but call social media to mind when she laments the time when “[t]he youth of the future ... will no longer want to read and meditate and check up on facts and ideas; they will want to see and feel and act immediately” (Cameron, 1972, p. 436).

Where Cameron, along with many others, seems misguided, is in seeing writers like Dahl, McLuhan and Burgess as championing this shift, rather than responding to it artistically, as grist to their respective mills. The point has already been made with regard to McLuhan, who adopted a style that he saw suited to the newer forms of communication, demonstrating how they might change our perceptions of the world and the way we related to it. *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) as his famous title expresses it. Burgess was also aware of such media power, presciently speaking of “worldcasts” (1996/1962, p. 36); yet he too had no love for the future he depicts. The “Clockwork-Orange qualities” that Cameron laments are, therefore, exactly those of which he is also critical, especially those coercive attempts to turn the young into mindless automata and take away their free will. As Alex, the hero of Burgess’s novel, proclaims at one point, “Am I just to be like a clockwork orange?” (p. 100), punning on the Malay word for orange, which means “person,” and conjuring the image of the young “being turned into machines” rather than being allowed their “natural growth like a fruit” (p. 124). This cannot help but call to mind Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, where we witness Augustus Gloop, fruitlike, being irrevocably sucked into Wonka’s factory’s workings, or Violet Beauregarde, who actually turns into a giant blueberry that needs squeezing. “Am I just to be like a giant blueberry?” she might as readily ask, especially given that Alex, at his story’s end, considers the young to be particularly susceptible to such mindless behaviour, especially under the influence of what he terms “old Bog himself” (p. 148); that is, a godlike figure winding-up his orange.⁶

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed a reading of Dahl’s *Charlie* that tries to make more sense of its seemingly paradoxical messages, or what Cameron terms its “hypocrisy.” I have suggested that Dahl was expressing some of the tensions, latent within capitalism itself, that came to

⁶ The final chapter of Burgess’s novel was, for a long time, omitted from US editions.

prominence in the decades following World War II in that general shift from production to consumption. With this swing came a relentless emphasis on amusement (Postman) and enjoyment (McGowan). In drawing on the work of other writers active at this time, specifically Burgess and McLuhan⁷ (the two alluded to by Cameron), I have intimated that this emphasis on consumerism influenced the way a number of writers expressed themselves: they responded to the heady advertising rhetoric of the time, deploying it in a critical, ironic manner. While Hunt has spoken of Dahl's innovative approach as "the Dahl effect," I have argued that this effect was the result of a more general shift in the *Zeitgeist*. Of course, this is not to downplay Dahl's major contribution.

Wonka, as a character, captures this shift impeccably, personifying the contradictions of capitalism. So, rather than see him as simply a "bloated capitalist" (the phrase actually appears in *Clockwork*, p. 43) I have suggested that he bears more resemblance to Freud's "primal father" figure, being both a godlike, lawless outsider and an arbiter of the law, particularly when backed by his Greek chorus of Oompa-Loompas. Wonka, then, is simultaneously bad cop and good cop; or in more Biblical terms, Old and New Testament God. Not only does he tempt his ticket winners with all the candy they can possibly ingest, but he then punishes them for being so "consumed" by their appetites, albeit he carefully lays the blame on society (and especially on parents and TV).

Accusations about *Charlie's* "hypocrisy," phoniness and "overtones of sadism" (Cameron, 1972, p. 440) are, as a consequence, understandable but hardly newsworthy, any more than it would be to challenge a certain soft-drink manufacturer's claim that its product is, indeed, "the real thing." As Butler put it, *Charlie* is "deceptive in its apparent simplicity" (2012, p. 5) and, at one point, Cameron seems to acknowledge this, referring to the book's possible use of "satiric portraits as in a cautionary tale" (1972, p. 438). However, she then promptly dismisses the notion, considering such a reading beyond children, whom, she asserts, "can react only" at "the level of pure story" (*ibid.*). Demeaning as this is to children, the remark is itself compromised by her earlier declaration that Jonathan Swift's notorious and indubitably adult satire, *Gulliver's Travels*, is one of her favourite children's books (p. 434). Her mention of Swift is salutary, though, given that his work has also been regarded as tasteless in ways similar to the accusations made against Dahl, Burgess and McLuhan. But, by refusing to

⁷ McLuhan's work also had a huge influence on Postman.

allow children any sophistication, Cameron can see Dahl offering only a “heavenly vision of being able to live eternally fed upon chocolate” (Cameron 1972, p. 439), whereas this is precisely the error that the other ticket winners make. “Dahl and his readers” do not, then, get to “have their Wonka bars and eat them too” (Stallcup, 2012, p. 46); rather, it is the vicarious pleasures of the imagination with which readers are rewarded. Moreover, Dahl rewards them in two ways: on the one hand through character and action and, on the other, through story and plot.

In terms of the former, readers are led to identify with a family that is severely deprived, which is then contrasted with others that are rich and spoiled. Thus we share Charlie and his Grandpa’s lack of sustenance while witnessing its surfeit all around them. Dahl adroitly taps into our desires (experienced vicariously through Charlie) while keeping them at a safe distance (minding that gap). We can thereby savour those delectable-sounding comestibles – like that “Whipple-Scrumptious Fudgemallow Delight!” (1985/1964, p. 39), whose very enunciation makes one salivate – but in a safer, cavity-free manner. Accordingly, we get to enjoy a tantalising feast of the senses without risk: drooling over those evocative-sounding names, that visual panorama of the Factory with its delectable tastes and smells. Everything, in fact, without the sugar and calories. Beyond that, we also get to enjoy the dastardly fates of those despicable characters who cannot restrain themselves; but, once again, we do so in safety.

Secondly, in terms of story and plot, we cannot help but simulate this experience of deferred gratification as we read, thereby delineating and nurturing our own feelings of desire. The Oompa-Loompas make this joy of reading explicit when they contrast it with watching TV, which, as they say, “*KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD*,” rendering fantasy incomprehensible (p. 146). In contrast to Veruca’s compulsive wants, then, our engagement is carefully staged as the enigmas of Wonka and his Chocolate Factory unfold: the secret workers, the locked doors, the lottery of the Golden Ticket invitations, and of Charlie’s gradual starvation. Even when all the winners have been identified, we still spend a considerable time outside those factory gates waiting to gain entry. In fact, we are almost halfway through the book before we enter the Chocolate Room. And even at the very last, Dahl keeps us in some suspense, for the book ends not in the Factory itself, indulging in that ersatz “heavenly vision of being able to live eternally fed upon chocolate” (Cameron, 1972, p. 439), but at a remove from it, keeping that crucial gap in place, and thereby keeping desire circulating. As the final words of the

novel declare, “Oh, you just wait and see!” (p. 160). In that glass elevator, we are literally left hovering in suspense as it climbs, perhaps, toward a more nebulous “heavenly vision”, one that features throughout Dahl’s writing, from his early, adult flying stories – reflecting his own days as an RAF pilot – and through his children’s books, from *James and the Giant Peach* right up to his final work, the picture book, *The Minpins* (1993/1991), in which, significantly, Dahl was to reject the zany illustrative style of Quentin Blake in favour of Patrick Benson’s quieter, more atmospheric pictures. In these moments, the need for “funny bits” (Dahl, 1989/1988, p. 80), or to “tantalize and titillate ... on every page” (Sturrock, 2010, p. 548) – something that Dahl found lacking in Lewis and Tolkien – became redundant. We are simply “surprised by joy.”

But let me finish with one more biographical observation. For, as noted earlier, Charlie and his grandfather’s reserve is seen to derive from their being a close-knit, loving family, which, in many ways, was similar to Dahl’s own. So, unlike the other ticket winners, Charlie does not experience their more empty desperation to satisfy fleeting desires (“I want ... I want”). He might have his own desperate needs (to assuage starvation, for example), but he does not suffer that sense of fruitless, unassuageable longing; for Charlie already belongs. His enjoyment, we might say, is already caffeinated, or cocoa’d. This Bucket, like the proverbial cup – and, indeed, like this article – already runneth over.

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