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Soumission et agentivité, ou le rôle du lecteur des premières éditions d'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) et Through the Looking-Glass (1871) de Lewis Carroll

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Submission and Agency, or the Role of the Reader in the First Editions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871)

Soumission et agentivité, ou le rôle du lecteur des premières éditions d'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) et Through the Looking-Glass (1871) de Lewis Carroll

Virginie Iché

... what can one poor voice avail
Against three tongues together?

—Prefatory poem, Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

- 1 Lewis Carroll's nephew, Stuart D. Collingwood, was the first to document his uncle's predilection for games (19–20) and his capacity to invent card games, board games, word games, and games of logic (431–32, 436–37, 439–40, 442–43). Carroll's fascination for rules is probably as well known as his tendency to subvert them in his fiction—the most famous example certainly being the prefatory chess problem in *Through the Looking-Glass*, where '[t]he alternation of Red and White is perhaps not so strictly observed as it might be' (*Complete Works* 126) to quote Carroll himself. As I have argued elsewhere, a tension between rules and freedom characterizes the *Alice* books; the virtual reader's participation in the Carrollian text is extremely constrained, as she is implicitly expected to fill in very limited textual 'blanks', as defined by Umberto Eco—that is to say, to make the 'already said' that has been erased reappear (see Iché 210–18). Nevertheless, the real reader, as interpellated by the *Alice* texts and their Author, can take on the role of what I called (after Jean-Jacques Lecercle's theory of interpellation)¹ an Imposter Reader. Such an Imposter Reader, while never able to reject completely the textual structure that

interpellates and thus captures her at a certain place, can all the same counter-interpellate this structure and become, through this process of subjectification, an active reader (Iché 219–37). This article takes up the role of the reader of the *Alice* books by examining the layout of the first editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. I will argue that, although Carroll did minutely plan the reader's interventions, he also wished her, at times, to play a more active role. Exploring the layout of the original editions of the *Alice* books will show that though they sometimes require the reader's submission to their ploys, they also not infrequently empower her.

- 2 The preface to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* gives its reader a taste of what lies in store. Not only does it relate the legendary origins of the tale of Wonderland, but it also subtly introduces the role of the reader in the *Alice* books. The preface presents what Martin Gardner calls the 'rowing expedition up the Thames' (7), upon which Lewis Carroll and his friend, the Reverend Robinson Duckworth, took the Liddell sisters. The boat trip can, however, be otherwise interpreted as a metaphor for the author's reluctance to direct the narrative (Iché 175). As is made clear by the two verbs in rhyming positions in the first stanza, the point is not to 'guide' but to 'glide.' The boat/narrative drifts away, since the author's persona repeatedly denies his authority over the text and lays emphasis on his weakness ('one poor voice') and limited role in the outcome of the tale, as indicated by the passive form in the sixth stanza: 'its quaint events were hammered out.' While, in the first stanza, the repetition of the word 'little' and the focus on body parts ('arms', 'hands') seemingly disconnected from their owners' bodies imply that the three passengers are too frail to influence the course of the boat/narrative, the rest of the poem stresses the girls' crucial role in ultimately determining it. The anonymous passengers are suddenly given Latin names in the third stanza (Prima, Secunda, and Tertia) and are interpellated as a commanding entity ('Ah, cruel Three!'). They subsequently use their rhetorical power to issue orders and determine the course of the tale. The tone is set in this programmatic piece: the narratees of the tale of Wonderland, far from being merely passive and meek listeners, are portrayed as active participants in its construction, while the author seems to be no more than the recipient of the narratees' injunctions. This authorial, or autographic, preface, as Gérard Genette would call it (178), belongs, therefore, to a category that defies the already diverse categories laid out by the French critic. It can be said to be 'authentic' (179) in the sense that the attribution of the preface to a real author² is confirmed by the other paratextual signs (in this case, the title page), but it is more difficult to determine whether the preface is 'assumptive' or 'disavowing.' In a 'disavowing' preface, Genette explains, 'the real author claims—here again without really inviting us to believe him—not to be the author of the text' (185). This is not exactly the case here, since Carroll does not pretend that someone else actually wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Nor, as we have just seen, does he completely assume responsibility for the text he wrote, as should be the case in an 'assumptive' preface (Genette 184). It is crucial, however, not to take this assumptive-disavowing preface at face value, as this rhetorical prowess may ultimately conceal Carroll's wish to assert his authority over his text and trick its recipient into thinking that she is not subjected to its structure.
- 3 Two elements of the publication history of the *Alice* books in particular suggest how important it was for Carroll to maintain a large degree of control over his productions. First, Carroll decided to publish his various *Alice* books on commission (Cohen 36–37). According to Simon Eliot, this was one of the four main ways of getting a book published

in the Victorian period (55–56). The author paid the publisher ‘as an agent to organize production and publication; he or she also paid all the printing, binding and other costs’ (Eliot 56). While this way of publishing a book was not rare, by no means was it the most widespread; as Eliot points out, ‘half-profits and outright sale were the most common arrangement between publishers and novelists’ (56). Publishing on commission meant that Carroll paid all the expenses—and stood to gain the bulk of the profit, as his books turned out to be successful—but, more importantly, he also ‘perform[ed] the roles and made the decisions usually played and made by the publisher’ (Cohen 36): ‘he was to determine the size of the book, the quality of the paper, the size and style of the type; he would select the binding, engage the printer, the engraver, the illustrator; he would decide what price was to be charged for the book and the extent of the advertising’ (Cohen 36–37). Carroll’s choosing to publish his books on commission, then, ensured that he could strictly supervise every step of the process of the production of his *Alice* books. Secondly, Carroll was an extremely exacting author who accepted nothing short of perfection and never truly relinquished control of his work, even after its publication. Morton N. Cohen explains how adamant a yet-unknown Carroll was that the first edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* be reprinted because Tenniel had deemed the printing of the illustrations inadequate; how Carroll found another printer, Richard Clay, for his *Alice* book; how he later had the first ten thousand copies of *The Nursery Alice* disposed of because he thought the illustrations were too ‘gaudy’; and how he finally asked Macmillan to suppress an 1893 edition of *Through the Looking-Glass* because, once again, he was not satisfied with the printing of the illustrations (Cohen 31). Similarly, as Zoe Jaques and Eugene Giddens remind us (96–106), Carroll continued to edit his texts even after their publication, changing the odd comma, adding prefatory elements, and making other minor alterations, so much so that Selwyn H. Goodacre and other critics deplore the absence of any definitive text. These changes, Jaques and Giddens surmise, could be seen as a way for Carroll to keep the *Alice* books in flux, a strategy that ‘seems to be in keeping with his overall attempts to maintain substantial authorial control over his textual property’ (105).

- 4 Carroll controlled not only the letterpress but also the layout of every page. In his preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*, he confesses to his occasional ‘padding’ in order to coordinate the text and its illustrations: ‘sometimes, in order to bring a picture into its proper place, it has been necessary to eke out a page with two or three extra lines’ (*Complete Works* 256). Such a confession will come as no surprise to those who have had the opportunity to peruse the original editions of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*,³ in which, as Michael Hancher in particular has shown, the text and Tenniel’s illustrations are perfectly synchronized (118–33). Such facts suggest that nothing was left to chance, no detail overlooked by the meticulous author.
- 5 As a result, readers seem to have no choice but to submit to the ploys of the *Alice* books’ flawless design. First, as Mou-Lan Wong has established (see 139–40), the design encourages readers to think of some of the illustrations as visual narratives comparable to the text, while the illustrations actually merge two different episodes. Wong makes this point by analyzing the section of the fourth chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (in which a gigantic Alice prevents the White Rabbit from entering the house she is in by spreading out her hand) as well as its corresponding illustration. As he puts it,

the illustration yokes together two distinct moments in the narrative: one when Alice spreads her giant hand and the other when the White Rabbit falls into the frame. . . Yet through the proximate placement of the words to their counterparts

in the illustration,⁴ Carroll persuades his readers that the illustration is a continuous visual narrative comparable to the text. (Wong 140)

- 6 The perfect matching of the words and the illustration might potentially lead the reader to ignore the discrepancy between the two. A similar technique is used in the first chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when Alice eventually sees 'a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it . . . a little door about fifteen inches high' (8): the fact that Alice holds a key in her hand at the same moment that she draws the curtain has the potential to trick the reader into thinking she actually saw Alice put the key in the lock, as is related by the narrator in the letterpress next to the illustration.
- 7 Secondly, the letterpress sometimes constructs two types of readers, with potentially diverging behaviours, while the layout simultaneously contradicts this dual construction and prompts every single reader to behave similarly. This is the case on page 138 of the original edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where the narrator, as if in an afterthought, urges the child(-like) reader, who still has a great deal to learn, to look at the picture of the Gryphon: '(If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture)' (138). The layout of this page makes this advice completely redundant, however, as the Gryphon has already been presented to the reader twice: first, in the illustration at the top of page 138, and then in the caption-like sentence beneath it that reads: 'They very soon came upon a Gryphon, lying fast asleep in the sun' (138). The narrator pretends to be helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with such a creature, but a close examination of the original layout of the page reveals that, by the time she reads that sentence, every reader, whether child or adult, would already be familiar with the Gryphon and would certainly overlook the narrator's parenthetical aside.⁵
- 8 Thirdly, the text seemingly invites the reader to participate in its construction while actually constraining her participation. This paradox is very clearly evident at the end of the third chapter of the original edition of *Through the Looking-Glass*, which ends with the following unfinished sentence: 'So she wandered on, talking to herself as she went, till, on turning a sharp corner, she came upon two fat little men, so suddenly that she could not help starting back, but in another moment she recovered herself, feeling sure that they must be' (65). The deliberate omission of a period at the end of the sentence, along with the blank space at the bottom of the page, encourages the reader to guess who these 'two fat little men' might be before turning the page to have access to the next chapter and to the solution to that riddle-like sentence. It could thus be contended that Carroll was so aware of the potentialities of the book as object that he exploited the reader's page-turning gesture in order for her to have time to think about the end of the sentence before actually reading it. However, as Ronald Reichertz has noted, the prose conclusion to this chapter 'takes metrical shape and becomes the first line of an absolutely regular seven-syllable, four-beat trochaic couplet' (56), helping the reader fill in the blank with the right words, that is to say 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee'. Finally, a closer look at the left co-text reveals that not only is the answer hinted at by these metrical clues, but it is given in advance by the narrator and in the correct order to boot: 'wherever the road divided, there were sure to be two finger-posts pointing the same way, one marked "TO TWEEDLEDUM'S HOUSE", and the other "TO THE HOUSE OF TWEEDLEDEE"' (65). The reader's supposed participation thus consists only in remembering what she has just read.
- 9 Yet the page-turning mechanism is exploited in extremely diverse ways in the *Alice* books, and I would like to argue that the page layout of the original editions of *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland and *Through the Looking-Glass* also regularly empowers the reader, who has kinesthetic experiences while reading the books and, consequently, takes an active part in some of their most dramatic episodes. The *Alice* books are scattered with episodes relating or revolving around sudden appearances or their opposite, disappearances. What is particularly striking in the original editions is that the object or person who appears or disappears does so on the verso, while the episode in question is introduced at the very bottom of the recto side of the page. In other words, the reader of the original *Alice* editions makes, in effect, the object or the person(s) appear or disappear when she turns the page. In the original edition of *Through the Looking-Glass*, the first page of chapter seven ends with the following passage: 'She thought that in all her life she had never seen soldiers so uncertain on their feet: they were always tripping over something or other, and whenever one went down, several more always fell over him, so that the ground was soon covered with little heaps of men' (137). When the reader turns the page, she can see on the verso a very large illustration, which fills almost the entire page, packed with soldiers, some marching, some already on the ground, and some tripping over the soldiers on the ground. Her turning the page thus conjures up the 'little heaps of men' that the narrator has just mentioned. Later, in the same chapter, a puzzled Alice wonders how a cake, a dish, and a carving knife can come out of Haigha's bag: 'It was just like a conjuring-trick, she thought' (152). The appearance of the cake is indeed very much like a conjuring trick, which the reader takes part in when turning the page, as page 151 ends with the narrator's explaining how Haigha took the cake out of the bag, and the verso (page 152) displays the illustration of the little Alice holding the cake. Similarly, the reader participates in Alice's rather unexpected crowning in the original edition of *Through the Looking-Glass*. While page 183 of the eighth chapter ends with the comment 'Oh, how glad I am to get here! And what is this on my head?' the top-left part of the verso (page 184) reveals a picture of Alice with her golden crown on her head. The text introduces the object without naming it, and the reader makes it appear, so to speak, when she turns the page. The case of the Cheshire Cat's gradual disappearance in the sixth chapter of the original edition of *Alice's Adventures of Wonderland* is slightly different, but, as Isabelle Nières posits, the reader is, as in the other instances discussed so far, partly responsible for what she calls the cat's metamorphosis as well (21). The two illustrations concerned, the first featuring Alice and the Cheshire Cat on the tree branch and the second the Cheshire Cat on the point of vanishing into thin air, both appear on recto pages. The page-turning event is nonetheless also clearly exploited here, as the two illustrations are, in effect, superimposed. When turning the page, the reader not only witnesses but also partakes in this elaborate optical illusion: as Wong argues, 'the reader is able to flip the page back and forth and... mak[e] the Cat disappear and reappear' (145).

- 10 Carroll's *Alice* books regularly call for hands-on interactions and encourage the reader to get involved in some of their episodes. Not only does the reader take a hand in making a person or an object appear or disappear, but her actions also trigger movements that are supposed to be initiated by Alice. The exploitation of the page-turning experience thus helps the reader identify with the main protagonist and truly engage with the fictive worlds Alice goes through. In the fourth chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the gigantic Alice blocks anyone who tries to enter the White Rabbit's house, first by pushing the Rabbit with her hand, as we have already seen, then by kicking Bill the lizard out of the chimney. Bill's dramatic expulsion is not, however, the consequence of Alice's intervention alone. Page 50 ends with Alice hinting at her refusal to let the lizard go down

the chimney, while its verso (page 51) features Bill shooting out of it: the reader both witnesses Bill's exit and propels him out of the chimney while turning the page. The layout gives a similar impression of movement at the end of both *Alice* books when Alice finally expresses her anger at and rejection of the Wonderland and Looking-glass characters. Indeed, in both books, Alice voices her rage or the narrator explains how exasperated the little girl is at the bottom of the recto, while an illustration giving prominence to the destruction of the parallel worlds appears on the verso. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, page 187 ends with Alice uttering the well-known cue 'Who cares for you? . . . You're nothing but a pack of cards!' and the reader virtually sets the pack of cards in motion by turning the page, as they fly at Alice's (and the reader's) face at the top of the verso (page 188). Likewise, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, page 211 ends with the narrator suggesting that time has come for Alice to put an end to the increasingly bewildering banquet: 'There was not a moment to be lost. Already several of the guests were lying down in the dishes, and the soup-ladle was walking up the table towards Alice's chair, and beckoning to her impatiently to get out of its way'. Page 212, the verso, then displays the image of Alice pulling the tablecloth, which creates a different kind of confusion: as some fruit, dishes, and guests come crashing down on the floor, three pawns with plates by way of wings start flying in the air, and the candles (which, according to the narrator, are supposed to come crashing down on the floor alongside the dishes and some guests) shoot up as if they were fireworks. The reader's act of turning the page of the first edition, because it is juxtaposed with Alice's gesture, is rendered very similar to it and makes the reader Alice's partner in crime.

- 11 Last but not least, as Hancher (see 130) and Wong (see 143–44) have noticed, Alice's crossing the mirror in the first edition of *Through the Looking-Glass* is probably one of the finest examples of Carroll's ingenious exploitation of the potentialities of the book and of the physical experience of reading a book. Hancher was the first to note that 'the first picture of Alice passing through the mirror appears at the top of a right-hand page, captioned by the lines that describe the dissolving of the mirror and Alice's passing "through" it,' and that the reader just has to turn the page to 'discover on the left what is largely a mirror-image of the illustration that he has just been looking at, now presented as a view, from the *other* side of the looking-glass, of Alice's passing through it' (130). Carroll and Tenniel devised pages 11 and 12 of the original edition of *Through the Looking-Glass* with the utmost care, as Hancher perceptively indicates:

Even the monogram of the artist fills the same space on the different sides of the leaf; and so does the signature of the engraver. Tenniel thoughtfully reversed his monogram left-to-right, so that in the second illustration it is seen as if through the leaf. The Dalziel signature, unfortunately, defies reversal on the other side of the looking-glass; commercial interests, unlike artistic ones, resist imaginative transformation. (Hancher 130)

- 12 Not only does the reader help Alice cross the looking glass when she turns the page, but, as Wong puts it, 'the reader is propelled through his or her own action into Carroll's nonsense world' (144). While the reader is interpellated, captured at a specific place by the layout of the original editions of the *Alice* books, she is nonetheless not the mere spectator of Alice's adventures. Carroll's exploitation of the page-turning mechanism empowers readers, challenging their otherwise passive stance.
- 13 The reader of the original *Alice* books is caught up, then, between two contradictory positions: submission versus agency. This paradox can, arguably, be explained. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has often been described as a turning point in children's

literature because it is thought to depart from the moralizing tone of its predecessors to offer 'hours of pleasure' to its young readers (Knowles and Malmkjaer 18). However, as it is doubtful that there is such a thing as a clean break with a long-standing tradition, some critics have contended that the *Alice* books entertain an ambiguous relationship with the didacticism of the previous age. Lecercle, in particular, has shown that Nonsense is 'a pedagogic genre' (*Le dictionnaire* 302; my translation): exploring and playing with the limits of the English language, as in the *Alice* books, implies recognizing its underlying rules and, ultimately, advocating them. The tension between submission and agency that the reader experiences when reading the original editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* could be explained by the ongoing shift from the early didacticism of children's books to the modern genre of children's literature: the reader of the *Alice* books is simultaneously urged to follow the rules that are brought to her attention and invited to discard the passive role traditionally ascribed to her, thereby becoming a more active reader whose agency enhances her emotional, and probably aesthetic, response to the books she reads. Although the narrator in the preface to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* appears to be very different from Lewis Carroll, whose taste for perfection led him to choose to publish his books on commission so as to better control their production and publication, the little girls depicted in the prefatory poem are, in effect, the perfect representation of the reader, who is both a passenger of the boat/narrative in which she has no choice but to drift away and a sailor that can potentially take over its helm.

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NOTES

1. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler probes Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation (according to which every individual is interpellated by the law and cannot escape the famous call that 'initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject' [121] as Butler puts it) and argues that the subject can launch a subversive resignification of the law. In *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle shows how the language game of interpretation (in particular of, but not restricted to, literature) can be seen as a variant of the language game of interpellation (167) and forges the concept of the ALTER structure in order to argue that although the Reader is captured at a specific place by the Author and the Text, via the Encyclopaedia and Language, she can, in turn, capture the Author, via the Text, the Encyclopaedia, and Language (88). This inversion of the active-passive polarity relies, for Lecercle, on a fruitful form of imposture and is a way to counter-interpellate the initiating call.
2. One could discuss further this assumption given that the author of the *Alice* books is 'Lewis Carroll' and wonder, to use Genette's terms (47–48), whether Charles Lutwidge Dodgson imagined an author and attributed this work to this imagined author without giving any information about him except his name (in which case the preface would not be authentic, but fictive) or simply 'signed' his work with a name that was not (exactly) his legal name. It could be argued that Dodgson's choosing a pseudonym suggests that he attributed his fictional work to a fictionalized version of his self. Nonetheless, he included the real circumstances of the original telling of the

tale of Wonderland (though altering the names of the little girls and maybe the weather, as related by Martin Gardner [9–10]) and repeatedly emphasized in his letters his wish to disentangle his public from his private life (as is clear, for instance, in his 1885 letter to Mrs. F. S. Rix, in which he says, ‘I will drop my *nom de plume*, only asking you *not* to make my name known to your ordinary acquaintances. The fewer strangers there are, who know my real name, the more comfortable for me: I *hate* all personal publicity’ [Carroll, *Selected Letters* 142]). These elements then point to a clear-cut case of a real author merely signing his work with a different name.

3. The immense majority of the later editions were unfortunately not published with the same care.

4. As Hancher had noted before Wong, ‘the references to “a snatch in the air” and “a crash of broken glass” in what might be “a cucumber frame”, run in parallel with the depiction of those things’ (126).

5. The page layout is different in *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, where the picture of the Gryphon appears after the narrator’s comment between parentheses. It could accordingly be argued that the narrator’s comment can trigger here two types of behaviour, as the educated reader could decide not to cast a glance at Carroll’s illustration while the child reader will certainly look at it. However, as Carroll’s Gryphon ‘resembles a rat with a bird’s beak and talons more than it does the traditional figure from mythology’ (Kelly 71), it is probable that the educated reader will overlook the narrator’s aside and look at the picture anyway. The two different page layouts of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice’s Adventures Underground* then paradoxically lead to the same effect: both types of readers will, in all likelihood, behave similarly, whether they are educated or young learners, contrary to what the text implies.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes the role of the reader of the first editions of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Exploring the layout of the original editions shows that, though they sometimes require the reader’s submission to their ploys, they also not infrequently empower her. The reader of the original *Alice* books is caught up, then, between two contradictory positions: submission and agency. This tension could be explained by the nineteenth-century shift from the early didacticism of children’s books to the modern genre of children’s literature.

Cet article analyse le rôle du lecteur des premières éditions des *Aventures d’Alice au pays des merveilles* et *De l’autre côté du miroir* de Lewis Carroll. L’étude de la mise en page des éditions originales révèle que, bien qu’elles exigent parfois du lecteur une soumission complète à ses stratégies, elles mettent également fréquemment en valeur son rôle-clé. Le rôle du lecteur des éditions originales des *Alice* est donc caractérisé par une tension entre deux positions contradictoires, soumission et agentivité, ce qui pourrait s’expliquer par l’évolution au XIX^e siècle de la littérature de jeunesse, qui s’éloigne progressivement du didactisme des premiers livres pour enfants.

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Mots-clés: Carroll (Lewis), Alice, théorie des effets esthétiques, premières éditions, soumission, agentivité

Keywords: Carroll (Lewis), Alice books, reader-response criticism, first editions, submission, agency

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