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This thesis was submitted by its author to the School of English and American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. It was found to be among the best theses submitted in 2021, therefore it was decorated with the School's Outstanding Thesis Award. As such it is published in the form it was submitted in **overSEAS 2021** (<http://seas3.elte.hu/overseas/2021.html>)

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ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*A fantasztikus és feminin fenséges Lewis Carroll Alice
Csodaországban című művében*

*The Fantastic and the Feminine Sublime of Carroll's Alice's
Adventures in Wonderland*

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2021

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Abstract

The thesis will attempt to perform a close analysis of the immersive yet disorienting textual space of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) structured by "the faerial illogic of dreams, delusions, free associations, and nonsense" (Kérchy, "Ambiguous Alice" 104) to explore its sublime aesthetics. As a piece of portal fantasy (Mendlesohn), the work enables the readers' entrance into the transcendent sphere of uncontrolled imagination via the adventures of the prophetic Dream Child, eliciting what Sandner defined as both the reformulation and extension of the Romantic sublime, the fantastic sublime (4). Gaining admittance to the otherwise impenetrable fairy-tale realm underground is perceived as liberating, suggesting the accessibility of the metaphysical through the Romantic child's visionary powers. The essay aims to question the legitimacy of the figure of the Romantic child on account of its constructed quality.

Further examination of the text with a primary focus on its nonsense qualities reveals its tendencies to destabilize the meaning-making process and engender "ever-proliferating, self-deconstructing meaning-events" (Kérchy, "Ambiguous Alice" 104). Lecercle detects a paradox in the very heart of nonsense literature due to its simultaneous adherence to and subversion of the systems of language (2); additionally, there appears to be a semantic void in the works of literary nonsense which is the place of either "no creativity or of maximal creativity", demonstrating "the plasticity of meaning, the impossibility to limit it, to fix it" (67). Such concepts beyond grasp may induce the Kantian mathematical sublime as described in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The experience of the mathematical sublime is evoked by a "futile striving of the imagination to infinity", a clash between the faculty of reason and imagination as a result of reason's claim for totality (Doran 229).

While reason attains dominance over the sublime object in Kant's description, Freeman outlines the notion of feminine sublime which "does not attempt to master its objects of rapture" (3); contrariwise, "the subject enters into relation with an otherness (...) that is excessive and unrepresentable" instead of exclusion and control (2). This conceptualization of the sublime could be applicable not only to Alice's (and possibly the readers') attitude towards the Wonderland world but also to the discussed elusiveness of meaning in the text. Freeman's feminine sublime is established as the site of "encounters with the gendered mechanisms of power" (2) which could easily be discerned in the workings of language. Thus, stimulated by the feminine sublime, one could abandon the "disciplined, referential/denotative, phallogocentric symbolization fixated on making sense" and revel in Carrollian nonsense and its promise of a return to the pre-Symbolic linguistic playfulness of rhymes and sounds (Kérchy, "Alice's Eroticized Adventures" 62).

Introduction

The aesthetic category of the sublime has never ceased to attract interdisciplinary academic attention regardless of the innumerable judgements passed on its flawed formulation, dismissing the concept as overly vague, outdated (Brady 1) or as outright impossible (Forsey 385). Despite the intense scrutiny, one may detect a relatively neglected area of research, investigating the sublime moment in children's literature; however, it would be misguided to proceed without mentioning Vránková's studies on the subject included in the comprehensive monograph *Metamorphoses of the Sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Anglo-American Children's Literature* (2019). It is reasonable to pronounce that a revival of interest in the sublime may be stimulated in the current state of affairs as the contemporary relevance of unthinkable phenomena, feelings of uncertainty and terror is hardly disputable.

This thesis wishes to serve as a kind of Baedeker to Carroll's Wonderland realm of uncontrolled imagination and semiotic disarray, perceived as a potential locus of the sublime. The study's intention is twofold; firstly, it inspects *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a portal fantasy (Mendlesohn), providing access to the underground world where a release from the constraints of signification becomes attainable. The feasibility of a glance past the conceivable may stir up the Kantian sublime, when "a discontinuity opens between what can be grasped and what is felt to be meaningful" (Weiskel 21). In this context, a re-examination of Sandner's fantastic sublime is due. Based on Weiskel's text about the romantic sublime, Sandner introduces a parallel between fantasy and a spiritual rebirth or conversion, embracing the possibility of a beyond which the imagination endeavours to reach with the assistance of a mediator, the Dream-Child (51). However, Weiskel himself adopts a sceptical stance towards Kantian metaphysics and seeks to "deidealize" the notion of the sublime; an idea which shall be developed in further detail with respect to Carroll's classic (28). Secondly, focusing on the piece's status as nonsense literature, I would venture to state that Freeman's feminine sublime

is likewise applicable here and perhaps more fitting. Freeman rejects the hostile treatment of excess and otherness, framed as factors hindering the sublime, and advocates a more accepting, unprejudiced attitude towards these qualities.

The first part of the essay surveys the critical history of the sublime and its most prominent theorists, followed by the appraisal of Sandner's fantastic sublime and the professed epitome of the Romantic Child. The exploration of the feminine sublime in the third chapter is succeeded by an effort in the fourth part to juxtapose the two designs, concentrating on the recurrent theme of return.

1. Theories of the sublime in the writings of Longinus, Burke and Kant

For the comprehension of the essence of the sublime, one might want to start the investigation with the etymology of the word. A careful dissection of the Latin word *sublimis* reveals the parts “sub” and “limen”, denoting “up to” and “top piece of a door” respectively (Shaw 1). Consulting an etymological dictionary, one is likely to discover a link between the various definitions of the concept offered by theorists and the 16th-century usage, referring to style or language which is “lofty, exalted” (“Sublime” 469). However arduous a task it may seem to summarise the numerous approaches to the sublime in one statement, Weiskel succeeded in elucidating the phenomenon concisely. He contends that the sublime is, at its most basic level, a step across the threshold of the limiting human condition and hence its transcendence, a rising towards the unreachable (3). Although obscurity is ostensibly a common denominator of most definitions, there are adjectives frequently associated with sublime objects such as grandiose, majestic, awe-inspiring, and impressing.

1.1. Longinus

The conveniently entitled *On the Sublime (Peri Hypsous)* is regarded as the earliest critical writing on the sublime; though of uncertain authorship, the work is traditionally ascribed to Longinus, a Greek rhetorician (Shaw 12). The treatise had remained largely overlooked until Nicolas Boileau’s 1674 French translation, which is responsible for the considerable influence the text exerted over succeeding theories of the sublime (Doran 29). Significantly, the idea of achieving a state of propinquity to the divine as a result of the sublime event originates from Longinus’s discussion (40). *Hypsous* emanates from excellence in eloquence and is most forcefully evoked by the exhibition of “genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of ‘fine madness’ and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of god” (Longinus 14-15). The reader or orator of a sublime piece drifts into an ecstatic condition, surpassing the confines

of selfhood by the unification with the writer/speaker and the text itself, experiencing awe and amazement (Doran 44). In depicting the occurrence of the sublime as a moment of “fine madness”, accompanied by a mood of exaltation and the temporary loss of self, Longinus echoes Philo’s view of ecstasy being “the soul’s temporary possession by God” (ibid).

Examples of sublime literature are presented by Longinus to give guidance to those who may choose to cultivate their style of expression; besides, a collection of rhetorical devices is supplied for the same end. However, from the five sources of the sublime, namely the “grandeur of thought”, “power of moving the passions”, “figures of speech” “graceful expression”, and “dignity and elevation of structure”, the first two are accredited to natural ability and not to *techné* (Longinus 12-13). Doran highlights the relation between Longinus’s reflection on the poetry of Sappho and the terror at the core of Burke’s sublime (74); a turmoil of contradictory emotions is generated as “she freezes, she burns, she raves, she reasons, and all at the same instant” (Longinus 23).

1.2. Burke

Edmund Burke’s chief concern in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was not with the prowess of the producers of sublime texts so much as with the profound emotional response of the readers/spectators. As Burke famously writes, the sublime may be elicited by “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible” (36). A seemingly conflicting statement follows after merely a few pages: “Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime” (47). Indeed, when the terrible and dangerous scene unfolds at a safe distance from the beholder, the most intense feeling of dread is aroused yet the individual exults in the prospect of “self-preservation” (ibid). Such apprehension of the sublime incident’s mechanics is particularly pertinent to the analysis of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* since nonsense could be viewed

as a “flirtation with the limits of sense-making” where a potential disintegration of sense is both terrifying and delightful (Shires 267). In this case, the pleasure may be attributable to the readers’ position of detachment from the disruption that arises.

What the intellect can gain solely of mental impressions and not empirical knowledge is found truly sublime by Burke (Shaw 51). Only conceptually grasped are entities akin to “God, angels, devils, heaven and hell” (Burke 158). Power exceeding ours is sublime owing to its intimidating nature; confronted with the omnipotence of God, we have no choice but to “rejoice with trembling” (63). Another vital source of the sublime is obscurity, fuelled by the incogitability of darkness and unearthly creatures like ghosts and goblins (54). Additionally, criticism revolving around the sensation of horror issuing from a discerned supernatural presence and nightmarish atmosphere in Gothic fiction is rooted in Burke’s foundational text (Mishra 71).

1.3. Kant

With Kant, a change occurred in the theorization of the sublime on two fronts. Firstly, Kant set out to assess the moral implications of the rapturous experience. Secondly, and most importantly, there appears to be a movement from the evaluation of the sublime as an intrinsic quality of the object to its presentation in the mind (Kant 86). Seeking to accommodate the opposing views of rationalist and empirical philosophers in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant specifies how “one can have no *knowledge* of supersensible (noumenal) entities or ideas (God, freedom, immortality), though we can still *think* them in logically suitable ways” (Doran 185). Initially, the faculty of imagination may be compelled to admit defeat as the world above the senses is unfathomable; nevertheless, these entities undergo a negative presentation in the mind and thus reason triumphs (Kant 104). The mind presents its incapacity to present the sublime object; moreover, the supremacy of the faculty of reason causes the imagination to feel

untied and capable of conceiving of infinitude and shapelessness in reasonable terms. Subsequent to the distress brought about by the insufficiency of imagination, there is comfort in the recognition of our aptitude for comprehension via rationality, resulting in a flux of emotions (78). Kant argues that infinity and other concepts which are “great beyond all comparison even with the faculty of mathematical estimation” could inspire the mathematical sublime (86), while the dynamical sublime may be enkindled by startling natural phenomena, reflecting the “might” of nature (90). The unknowable dreamscape of Wonderland and the apparently unlimited fluctuation of meaning may be appropriate illustrations of encounters with the mathematical sublime, as it will be postulated in the succeeding chapters.

2. The Fantastic Sublime

Positioning nineteenth-century children's literature against the backdrop of the lingering Romantic sentiments in the era, Sandner identifies a fantastic sublime awakened by the creative power of language (59). Most salient is fantasy's relative independence from the sensory world, whereas the Romantic sublime requires Nature as a springboard for the elevation to the spiritual realm. Fantasy, on the other hand, relies upon the "daring performance of words" forming imaginary spheres (62). It must be mentioned that the pivotal role of imagination and loss of identity are characteristic of both models. Sandner observes how the Romantic Child, the "mighty prophet" in Wordsworth's words (line 114) or the "dream-child" in Carroll's (4), assumes the role of a visionary guide back to childhood innocence and boundless imagination instead of being subject to indoctrination and moralizing (8). He describes the way "nineteenth-century children's fantasy literature, presided over by the divine child, moves outward on a visionary journey and return, on a quest toward the transcendent and spiritual" (55). Of course, the problematic aspects of the constructed Romantic Child should not go unremarked.

The term Romanticism signifies "the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, proportion, and objectivity" ("Romanticism" 872). Even though Carroll's novel is undoubtedly imbued by these qualities, this is not to say that Romantic poetry per se influenced the work most substantially. Sandner stresses the marked effect that the rediscovery of folklore and cultural tradition had on writing for children in the period, paying special attention to the prominence of fairy tales (5). The primacy of imagination in the epoch is underpinned by a shift, reformulating the Lockean "tabula rasa" attitude to the mind; rather than assigning a passive role to the mind in the process of experiencing the sensible world, Romantic thought champions active involvement and even contribution (Abrams 57). Fancy or imagination is found to be able to illuminate the existence of a "profounder, spiritual reality

transcending nature, time, and space”, showing a connection between “the individual mind and the mind of the absolute” or the divine mind (Day 58-59). What a sublime work of art can accomplish, according to Schelling, is lifting the curtain between the sensible world and this spiritual domain, allowing for a narrow aperture through which one can glimpse. To use a rather apt metaphor, the situation bears resemblance to the opening of a little door, similarly hidden behind a curtain, to find the most enchanting garden on the other side which ultimately cannot be reached. Schelling continues to explain how “the land of phantasy toward which we aspire gleams through the world of sense only as through a half-transparent mist, only *as meaning does through words*” (qtd. in Shaw 91, emphasis added).

The central part of Sandner’s project is the reappraisal of the Romantic sublime vis-à-vis Victorian children’s fiction. Words constructing fantastic worlds supplement the natural setting of mountains, riverbanks, gardens, or forests as catalysts for the sublime, retaining the theme of gesturing towards supernatural spheres available exclusively through them (56-57). Sandner considers Weiskel’s acclaimed *Romantic Sublime* (1976) a key text for his theory. For Weiskel, the sublime is “the moment when the relation between the signifier and signified breaks down and is replaced by an indeterminate relationship” (qtd. in Sandner 51), thus enacting the trials of signification themselves (Weiskel 26). The fanciful creatures residing in Wonderland and their bizarre customs surely have a destabilizing effect on Alice and the reader alike; an additional layer to the analysis suggested by this thesis is to explore the correlation between the disintegration of meaning in nonsense literature and Weiskel’s structuralist framework.

2.1. The Weiskelian and Fantastic Sublime in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Revealing may the observation be that Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole coincides with three states of the sublime proposed by Weiskel. During the first phase, the mind merely

contemplates the given object, sustaining a neutral relationship with it (26). Initially, Alice is not perplexed by the sight of the White Rabbit, her first encounter with the inexplicability of Wonderland, hence the undisturbed link between signifier and signified:

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, 'Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!' (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural). (Carroll 6)

In the second phase, the sublime is blocked due to the ambiguity and instability of meaning, "excess on the plane of either the signifier or the signified" (Weiskel 26). If the signifiers are in excess, Weiskel writes, the source of the breakdown reveals itself to be that of the Kantian mathematical sublime, outlining imagination's inability to comprehend the object in its totality and so pushing to its limits. The signifiers "overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream" (ibid). On the other hand, signifieds may also be superfluous, in which case an inconceivable plenitude and overdetermination transpire, represented by the abyss (27).

It is crucial to note that both types of disruption characterise nonsense literature; Lecerle recognizes a semantic gap in nonsense works where everything is simultaneously "entirely meaningless and infinitely meaningful" (67-68). Wandering through Wonderland, the circumstances that Alice faces become "curiouser and curiouser", and sense gradually surrenders to fancy and whimsy (Carroll 13). Common sense, however, is never totally abandoned. Being self-reflexive, a "discourse about discoursing", nonsense literature subverts the processes constituting sense-making (Stewart 88-89). Shires touches on the roles of parody and the numerous misunderstandings Alice had with the inhabitants of Wonderland as these instances precipitate a chasm between signifier and signified. Furthermore, they are seen as

reminders of the arbitrariness of rules and language (273). The seemingly illogical etiquette is observed by the guests of the Mad Tea-Party without raising any objections; additionally, a riddle devoid of a solution is just as unsurprising as cards painting roses in a garden. The creatures' complete unawareness of these ludicrous conditions produces a humorous effect; during one of these misunderstandings, originating from the confusion of the homophonous pairs tail-tale and not-knot, the Mouse announces that it is Alice who insults him by talking nonsense (Carroll 25). Because of the excess in signification and fluidity of meaning, nonsense here is a negative force, a barrier to sublimity.

Following Lacan, we could ponder whether this second state endangers one's sense of identity as it is constructed through signification, through language (Shires 273). The multiple occasions on which Alice's size changes in the novel grants her more than enough opportunities to entertain this very idea. She is addressed as Mary Ann (Carroll 27), a serpent (42), mad (52); being praised for "a clear way you have of putting things" (73) and called a simpleton (78) variably. No wonder she has trouble identifying herself upon the Caterpillar's request:

"Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar.

(...) "I...I hardly know, sir, just at present ... at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then."

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!"

"I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir" said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."

(Carroll 35)

Alice takes the Caterpillar's words literally and attempts identification instead of elaborating on the meaning of her utterance. Her confusion of selfhood and the spoken words implies the abovementioned interconnectedness of the two. Unable to explain her *self*, Alice's identity is

under threat, and her exchange with the Caterpillar would have regressed to the opening question infinitely, had she not begun to interrogate the Caterpillar on the same matter.

The vanishing of the self is indispensable for the entrée into the world of fantasy in the second phase of the Romantic and fantastic sublime because it gives rise to “a revelation of sudden remembrance, the dropping of an amnesia, the return of something lost” (Sandner 52). Self-loss engenders reconnection with the metaphysical world and the regaining of a childlike power of imagination. The yearned recapturing of the golden afternoons of youth from which one is alienated as a result of maturation is a sensation prevalent in Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations and Immortality”, Sandner asserts (*ibid.*). Wordsworth is nostalgic about childhood as a time when memories of our immortal souls’ pre-existence have not yet faded away wholly. The uncontaminated Romantic Child, accredited with visionary powers, is the one “On whom those truths do rest / Which we are toiling all our lives to find” (lines 115-116). Experienced adults keep hold of just fragments of the intuitions that children have in their innocence.

The third phase of the Weiskelien sublime brings restoration, a reconciliation of mind and nature, a joyous unity of things (Sandner 57). The mind reconstitutes the relation between signifier and signified with the help of reason. Overcoming the anxiety provoked by opacity is consoling and uplifting as it underscores the individual’s mental competence. The novel closes with Alice’s dismissal of the Queen of Hearts and her court as “nothing but a pack of cards” and with her return, perhaps as a consequence, to the familiar surroundings of the frame narrative and self-knowledge (Carroll 100). Alice manages to conceptualize what her imagination was unable to present in the form of a “curious dream”, supporting the Kantian perspective on the superiority of rationality. Having established that Alice upholds her claims for explanation and meaning, a reconsideration of her status as a Romantic Child is worthwhile.

2.2. Alice: The Romantic or the Rational Child?

Conventionally, histories of children's literature are written in a way to emphasize a movement from didactic pieces informed by Enlightenment rationality to the liberation of imagination, corresponding to the Romantic disposition. Rudd, in contrast, warns readers that "such 'grand narratives' about the area's development are only that" (29). Nonetheless, it is easy to recognize in the Carrollian heroine the child reader of these texts and the recipient of education and initiation into society, complying with their principles. In order to find a fixed point of reference amidst the more and more preposterous sequences of happenings, Alice turns to the poems preaching at children she was made to memorize. The air of condescension permeating the original compositions is substituted by disinterested witticisms in the light-hearted parodies, hinting at the fact that the intended message had not reached the young audiences in the first place and they remember just the "hollow" rhymes. Best known are the parodies of Isaac Watts' "Against Idleness and Mischief" from his *Divine Songs for Children* (1715) and Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" (Carroll, "Annotated Alice"). An unmistakably Alice-like position is the clutching of hands behind the back which appears multiple times in the illustrations of both Alice books, most memorably in the portrayal of Alice's meeting with the Cheshire Cat. Goodacre declares that this was the exact body language expected from children who had to demonstrate their knowledge of the material they acquired via rote-learning (qtd in Carroll, "Annotated Alice"). The Watts parody "How doth the little crocodile..." is recited in a similar position; now the hands are crossed on her lap, "as if she were saying lessons" (Carroll 16).

The option of not ageing ever again in Wonderland is alluring as long as it does not entail the continuation of obligatory lessons forever, even the idea of which Alice understandably despises. Trapped in the White Rabbit's house, Alice indulges in these musings but she monitors and challenges her own implausible thoughts:

“Oh, you foolish Alice!” she answered herself. “How can you learn lessons in here? Why, there’s hardly room for you, and no room at all for any lesson-books!” (Carroll 29)

Alice’s struggles with her boundedness by such regulations and societal expectations are clearly visible throughout the story as Shires also points out (272). Running away to pursue the enigmatic White Rabbit with “burning curiosity” is evidently a transgressive act (Carroll 6), yet she consistently applies the guidelines and behavioural patterns she was compelled to learn in situations when they are plainly unsuitable. At one point, she rebukes herself just like an adult would scold a child for taking some ideas too far which are thought of as outlandish: “Oh dear, what nonsense I’m talking!” (13). Fundamentally, Alice lacks the purely rebellious spirit she is often given credit for, albeit she really is inquisitive and daring.

The episodes of Alice’s adventures fail to reinforce the instructions she received from the adults and their moral tales, the unstimulating books “without pictures or conversation” (6); instead, the codes of behaviour and values these works promote are undermined and her already gained knowledge proves to be useless. Alice aims to estimate the distance she fell and her precise location relying on the notions of latitude and longitude and is anxious to read the label on the bottle to avoid taking poison. She was taught to do so by the “little histories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts” since “they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them” (Carroll 11). The work is in a dialogic relationship with these “little histories” which spare no effort to lecture children on how to conduct themselves properly. The narrative voice both undercuts and parodies the authoritative tone employed in these texts; for instance, it informs the reader that Alice’s knowledge of the geographical coordinates is solely superficial for she only remembers the words and nothing else of their function. The farcicality of Alice’s insistence on remaining courteous and ladylike while falling down is accentuated as the readers are addressed thus: “...fancy curtseying as

you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?" (8). Moreover, Alice is worried that she will be judged and labelled as an "ignorant little girl" if she puts a query to someone concerning her whereabouts because she believes she should already know the answer. The figure of the Duchess tirelessly looking for morals in everything and finding irrelevant and nonsensical ones alone is a mockery of the similar ambitions that adults writing for children may have (72).

Alice's experimentation with participation in eccentric games and conversations signal increasing willingness to question categories accepted as indubitable; notwithstanding, she chooses to return to the safeguard of reasoning to avoid complete semiotic confusion and madness. She strives to utilize generally approved ways of reasoning under the unlikely circumstances when they are not welcome. Adherence to familiar conceptual classifications and the ignorance of the idiosyncratic logic at work in Wonderland prevents play and enjoyment of nonsense. Therefore, one could contest Sandner's description of the "sweet, unflappable" Alice as the perfect Romantic child (10), a "redeemer" of corrupted adults, the guardian or bearer of "sacred innocence and imagination of childhood" (6). Her reactions and the oscillation between the merriment emerging from meaninglessness and the demand for rules and reason more closely mirrors the position of readers not quite ready for full assimilation into the nonsensical universe of Carroll.

3. The Feminine Sublime

If excess is evaluated in less antagonistic terms, reason's necessary domination over the sublime object may be disputed. Freeman states that theorists of the sublime are inclined to think of excess as the "blocking agent": frightening and, most importantly, feminine (22). She proclaims that the feminine sublime's major preoccupation is with reactions to what lies on the boundaries of language (3). Contrary to the "masculinist sublime that seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other", Freeman calls for a feminine sublime which adopts "a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" and involves "receptivity and constant attention to that which makes meaning infinitely open and ungovernable" (11). Here, feminine has mainly to do with the distrust of fixed structures and binary oppositions; more generally, the feminine sublime deals with what cannot be expressed in the sanctioned systems of thought (9-10). Once one can refrain from envisioning the sublime as a manner of transgression, the boundaries themselves will become refutable (26). Reviewing the principal theoretical texts, Freeman arrives at the conclusion that authors use gendered language in their studies and usually equate disorder and proliferation with the feminine by using metaphors traditionally associated with femininity.

3.1. Freeman's Commentary on the Critical Tradition of the Sublime

One of the facets of *Peri Hypsous* that Freeman foregrounds in her discussion is Longinus' imprecise and reductive interpretation of the poetry of Sappho. Rather than painting love by synthesizing its diverse elements and entrapping its intensity in the poem, Sappho desires to be consumed by these passions; in other words, she craves self-loss and does not try to escape the threatening event (19). A popular symbol for the sublime in critical writing is the paralysing immensity of the sea or ocean, typically deemed to be female (23). Burke, for

example, applauds its effectiveness in conjuring up amazement and disquietude because of its endless expansion on the horizon (53-54).

An inquiry into Weiskel's influential schema uncovers that he is far from being innocent of the same charges. Weiskel peruses Kant through the lens of psychoanalysis and dramatizes the way in which the sublime shift from immeasurable to self-assertion with the aid of reason may be analogous to the transition from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal, taking the sublime "safely back home to the father" (25). The subjugation of feminine superfluity is hypothesized to be a requisite for the masculine affirmation of identity and the obtaining of culture.

3.2. The Feminine Sublime of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Unlike the Romantic and fantastic sublime that encourages the overpowering of nonsense, Freeman's feminine sublime permits the concurrence of the otherwise incompatible lack of meaning and overabundance of meaning. Excess and nonsense, then, does not block but spark off the feminine sublime, which challenges the expected unification and fortification of the self in Weiskel's third phase. The appreciation of the infinitely playful land of wonders leads to the dissolution of self without ensuing restoration. The evaporation of identity is seen in this case as a positive eventuality since it fuses the self and the "other", the excessive. In contrast with the remoteness from the terrible entity put forward by Burke, the feminine sublime establishes a rapport between the subject and object. What may inhibit the creation of this attachment is identical to what frustrates the engagement with the absurdity of Wonderland: the devotedness to a rigid system of rules and definite meanings, which children come to regard as the norm, growing up on moral and cautionary tales.

Alice is, quite literally, nearly drowned by her emotions, something a "great girl" like her is normally not allowed to do (Carroll 13). Although she reproaches herself again, this time she remains unaffected by the internalized adult voice and loses control over her sentiments.

This outpour or, rather, “overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth, “Preface” 508) facilitates her immersion in the nonsense fantasy world. At first, Alice is convinced that the situation in which she finds herself is nothing but the punishment for her oversensitivity that she rightly deserves when, in fact, being in a flood of tears creates the first opportunity for her to interact with the inhabitants of Wonderland. Boundaries are blurred between the self and other as Alice swims next to the various animals in her own tears. Alice’s reaction to a fictitious plea coming from above highlights the freeing fluidity of identity discernible underground: “Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I’ll come up; if not, I’ll stay down here till I’m somebody else” (Carroll 16).

Getting out of the pool, Alice realizes how naturally she can communicate with the birds and other beasts, “as if she had known them all her life” (20). The Caucus Race seals her bond with the Wonderland residents, in the course of which she decides to play along even though she can appreciate the absurdity of the competition where everybody wins prizes (22). Whilst Alice’s hesitation is maintained until the end of her stay in Wonderland, there are occasions when the two contrasting mindsets, namely the support of reason on grounds of averting the fearful chaos and the readiness to join in the nonsense games, can coexist.

4. A Common Motif: The Promise of Return

Noteworthy is the shared element of return that both the fantastic and the feminine sublime may bring forth. Embarking on a comparison of the distinct outlooks on the ravishing confrontation with otherness and meaning in profusion, one can ascertain the paramount differences between the two paradigms. Given that the fantastic sublime culminates in a reinstatement of connections, the liberated self's homecoming to the creative power of childhood can only be temporary. It is solely a flash of inspiration that dies out as reality and logical thought plunges the individual back to reality. The feminine sublime, by contrast, evades the recovery of such hierarchies and in doing so, enables a sort of return that may motivate a reassessment of how the structures of language and understanding operate. An inspection of the points at issue may also benefit from a brief look at the status of the prospective readers.

4.1. The Fantastic Return to Childhood Imagination

From the breaking apart of coherent self-image springs an ephemeral reconquering of childhood fancy, as amplified in preceding chapters. This stage of the sublime necessitates the unadulterated insight of the child who is promoted to the rank of the mentor (Sandner 8). After little Alice departs from the riverbank to have tea in a presumably less hectic fashion than she did back in Wonderland, her older sister is slowly captivated by the same "wonderful dream" (Carroll 100). She is overjoyed by this state of sitting "with closed eyes" as she "half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality" (102). Parts of her daydream would fade into the components of the rural, Romantic landscape around her, summoning up even Wordsworth's "happy shepherd-boy" (line 35):

...the rattling of teacups would change to tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen's shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy...and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the

Gryphon, and all other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard. (Carroll 102)

The sister believes that Alice would retain “the simple and loving heart of her childhood” even as a grown-up; through retelling her adventures to the next generations, she would recall “her own child-life, and the happy summer days”.

The anticipated sunny days are clouded by the somewhat controversial features of Alice’s depiction as a Romantic or Dream-Child. Inasmuch as she persists in conforming to the conventional modes of thinking, she cannot display the type of organic imagination celebrated by Romanticism. In addition, the inherent problems with constructing childhood from a hierarchically superior position as a time when innate gifts are possessed due to inexperience are unassailable. The justification behind Rose’s attestation to the impossibility of children’s literature stems from a trope of childhood that adults fabricate “for their own purposes (desires, in fact), as a site of plenitude to conceal the fractures that trouble us all: concerns over a lack of coherent subjectivity, over the instabilities of language and, ultimately, existence itself” (Rudd 30).

4.2. The Possibility of Ideal Readership

The most befitting reader of fantastic literature is determined to be one who is capable of “bringing longing and a shaping spirit of imagination” to the text (Sandner 57). To refer back to a previously employed analogy, solely those who are prepared to take the passage and unlock the door that opens into the garden can locate the sublime in the magical tale. Kérchy’s ideal reader is of kindred qualities; she insists that “intellectual pleasure is not all-prevailing, and is likely to be complemented, even predominated by a sheer pleasure of sounds, vocality, a transverbal musicality, or a joy of imagination soaring into unknowns and impossibles” (“Ambiguous Alice” 116).

The indefiniteness of meaning is conducive to a multitude of mimetic readings, many of which revolve around the sociohistorical and biographical dimensions of the novel. These interpretations, dependent on reasonable claims about the era of creation and the author, are judged to be inferior to a playful engagement with the text, centred on rhythm and associations. In Kérchy's proposition may lie a preference for the feminine sublime, indicating a tendency to terminate the perpetual fixation on decoding the narrative and simply relishing it instead. The research carried out by *Contrariwise* scholars and especially the seminal study *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: The Myth and Reality of Lewis Carroll* (2015) by Karoline Leach are testimony to the fact that Dodgson's character may elude biographers just as easily as meanings manage to escape from being confined throughout his oeuvre.

4.3. The Feminine Return to the Pre-Symbolic

Kérchy posits that an openness to the unbridled play and the mutable practices of signification could instigate an abandonment of the "disciplined, referential/denotative, phallogocentric symbolization fixated on making sense" ("Alice's Eroticized Adventures" 62). Inferred from her premise could be the feminine sublime's potentiality to foster a return to the pre-Symbolic linguistic playfulness of rhymes and unrestrained associations. The welcome release from the Lacanian Symbolic institution of language achieved by virtue of nonsense empowers the individual to become conscious of the system's arbitrary nature.

Situated on the intersection of deconstructionism and feminist reader-response criticism is the matter of how women readers tackle male-written and male-centred texts. Drawing on the studies of numerous feminist researchers, Culler recapitulates the fashion in which women readers are socialised into reading as men: identifying with a male point of view and favouring rationality (58). According to Culler, reading as a woman would incorporate an active criticism of phallogocentrism, "an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of

origin” (61). In western epistemologies where the point of reference is unequivocally male, women occupy the subordinate part of hierarchies like “self/other, presence/absence, law/chaos” (Jones 81). The patriarchal privileging of *logos* or presence makes the absence or disturbance of meaning alarming. Since Carroll’s nonsense provides “linguistic/narrative zones of comfort and pleasure beyond the paranoid, restrictive, literal-minded patriarchal discourse” (Kérchy, “Alice’s Eroticized Adventures” 70), the novel would harmonize with a feminine mode of reading; nevertheless, such a reading should be considered separate from the actual sex of the reader.

Wonderland is also perceived as a place of “Julia Kristeva’s blissful-bodily semiotic register that precedes symbolic language-acquisition and socializing Oedipalization’s repressions” (Kérchy 62). The aftermath of Lacan’s mirror-stage, the split between self and other, is the admission into the Symbolic order and hence to language and social conventions. The Symbolic is presided by the Name-of-the-Father, ergo “the patronym, patriarchal law, patrilineal identity, language as our own inscription into patriarchy (qtd. in Furman 71). On the other hand, the pre-Symbolic belongs to the feminine, the mother. Reading nonsense poetry and Alice’s absurd adventures could yield the recuperation of this setting:

Instinctual sounds and rhythms which resist meaning stand in opposition to the symbolic order, and they unsettle and subvert the expected normative forms of discourse codified by our linguistic practices. (Furman 73)

Yet the Symbolic could never be fully escaped; just as sense is essential for making nonsense, rules of grammar, syntax, and phonetics form the basis of the semantic game (Lecerle 34). Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic, resting on “infants’ pre-oedipal fusion with their mothers, from the polymorphous bodily pleasures and the rhythmic play of mother-infant communication”, competes with the Symbolic but can only give way to a partial flight from its

oppressive order (Jones 86). The reciprocity between the two arrangements calls to mind the feminine sublime's propensity to attune discordant properties.

Conclusion

The present thesis sought to pinpoint the sublime aspects of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and examine its subversive undertones. The sublime dwells in the fantastic and nonsensical province of Wonderland, where the surplus of signifiers and signifieds urges the softening of borders and the marvelling of extremities. Stripped of all expendable protocols, language and identities are destabilized. It is arguable that Sandner's fantastic sublime offers interim freedom from the arrest of the imagination typical of adulthood, while Freeman's formative feminine sublime enables one to look at otherness in a different light and never to leave Wonderland behind entirely.

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