CHAPTER THREE

ANACENTRIC ARCHITECTONICS

PART I: REVERSAL AND DISPLACEMENT

No text is fully deconstructed or deconstructing

(Spivak lxxviii)

Before I plunge into a study of the Nonsense works of Lear and Carroll as a
deconstructor, it is essential that I clarify my stance. In this chapter I shall briefly survey the
history of Linguistic Structuralism and Poststructuralism and then summarise the tenets of
Deconstruction, its reasons, effects, triumphs and failings. In the latter sections of the chapter
I shall attempt to analyse Nonsense works with the eyes of a deconstructor. However, in this
case, I shall demonstrate how these texts confound all efforts at deconstruction, simply
because the Nonsense texts of Lear and Carroll seem to deconstruct themselves.

Structuralism and After

Between 1907 and 1911, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught at the
University of Geneva. After his death, notes from his lectures were compiled and published
as the Cours de Linguistique Générale. This compilation by his students and colleagues
revolutionized ways of looking at and studying language and proved deep and widespread in
its influence on modern and postmodern thought.

Saussure showed the world that a language is not just a set of words that people have
‘naturally’ assigned to the ‘things’ of the world and the universe, but a system of signs. He
called the basic unit of meaning, the sign – an entity that is constituted by a signifier (acoustic
image) and a signified (a mental concept). The system of signs that constitutes a language is,
according to Saussure, constantly changing. The rules, codes, or conventions that govern his
system of signs, and the structure of the system itself, he called the *Langue*, while the actual speech act, an utterance, he called the *Parole*. Another distinction that Saussure made was between the synchronic and the diachronic aspects of a language. The synchronic is the structural aspect of language at any given moment, while the diachronic refers to the history of a language, all the changes in its codes and conventions, over time.

The sign is by nature arbitrary, which means that there is no necessary connection between a signifier (for example, 'table') and a signified (for example, the mental concept of the table). There is nothing 'natural' about linguistic signification. In Saussure's words, "A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas" (Rice 14). The identity of a sign was based on its relationship with other signs and the entire system of language functioned on the bases of difference and binary oppositions. The Saussurean model of language is the paradigm on which structuralism is based. In its purest form, structuralism tries to do for culture and society what grammar does for languages: to identify and define the patterns, rules and constraints within which, and by virtue of which, meaning is generated and communicated. Claude Levi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, analysed cultural phenomena such as mythology, kinship relations and modes of preparing food, on the basis of Saussure's linguistic model, in works such as *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969) and *The Savage Mind* (1962).

By the mid-1970s, post-structuralists had emerged. They were Structuralists who had begun to expose the loopholes in the theories they had been working with. Post-structuralists, under the influence of Freudian and post-Freudian theories, had begun to question Saussure's opinion that a signifier and a signified came together to form a unified whole, a positive unit. Saussure contradicted himself, moreover, in indicating that there was a natural tendency for a signified to seek out its own signifier. Post-structuralists like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan further revolutionized western thought with their theories.
But the man who virtually created a whole new critical idiom and movement, was Derrida. Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) pursued some of the most radical aspects of Saussurean theory to their logical conclusions and launched a systematic attack on the foundations of Western Philosophy or Metaphysics. He outlined the theory and practice of “deconstruction” as a means to escape the pitfalls inherent in Western thought, and in language itself. All of Western Philosophy, including the structuralists’ notion of a structure, had based its notions and concepts on the presupposition that all these have a centre of some kind. This desire for a centre, Derrida called ‘logocentrism’, which is also the desire for presence. ‘Logos’, in Greek, means ‘word’, and also the ‘word’ of the New Testament, that is, the Gospel, or Jesus Christ or Godhead. Derrida further pointed out that of all the structural binary oppositions that constitute the edifice of Western thought, one side of each opposition has always been more positively valued than the other.

These hierarchical constructs seem to have emerged from a desperate need to preserve ‘presence’, leading to an all-pervading logocentrism. Some of these centric oppositions, when treated as ‘obvious’, can have – and have had – far reaching political ramifications which have not been questioned simply because the preferred side was considered ‘naturally’ superior. One such example is the binary opposition man/woman. Derrida further accuses metaphysics of being ‘Phonocentric’. Phonocentrism lies behind most of Western Philosophy. While the written word has always been given less importance, speech, or the spoken word, has been considered to be closer to the speaker’s ‘thought’ and immediately emerging from the speaker himself.

Derrida created two fundamental notions to question logocentrism: différence and the supplement. Differance is an intentionally ambiguous word that means both to defer/postpone and to differ from. Derrida’s use of the word sums up what Saussure said about the sign: that a particular signifier and its signified can only be associated once we
assert the fact that they are distinct and different from every other signifier or signified (thus, difféance in the sense of ‘difference’). Derrida stresses the non-logocentric nature of difféance, by referring to it as the “non-full, non-unitary origin” of differences. Besides, it is evidently not phonocentrically prejudiced, because in the French language, both ‘difference’ and difféance are homophones – only the written forms distinguish the two.

The supplement is another key term that is as useful for Derrida (and as slippery) as the term difféance. All textuality is governed by sets of binary oppositions which are hierarchical constructs. Derrida took to its most radical conclusion Saussure’s assertion that every sign, in order to mean, must be differentiated from its binary opposite. Hence, in the opposition speech/writing, the signifier ‘speech’ needs its opposite, ‘writing’, in order to make complete sense – thus implying that it is inherently incomplete. Writing supplements speech. According to Rousseau (qtd. in Selden 86), the eighteenth-century French philosopher, “Writing serves only as a ‘supplement’ to speech” (using ‘supplement’ in its common, normal, semi-negative sense of the word). Derrida showed how the French word suppléer also means ‘to substitute’. A supplement not only adds to the thing being supplemented, but also replaces it. In the above case, the attempt to uphold ‘speech’ as full presence fails because it has an absence that can only be filled by its supplement, and opposite, ‘writing’. Derrida further stressed that all the activities of humankind involve this supplementarity – which is an addition-substitution.

Having successfully undermined the legitimacy of the assumed hierarchies of all textuality and every text, Derrida proposed the activity of deconstruction in order to try and reveal the logic that propels the language of a text, rather than try and connect a text with the logic of what the author claims to have said/written. Deconstruction is, then, a process of active questioning rather than passive reflection. A deconstructive reading of a text, therefore, takes the logocentric oppositions that work in a text and reverses them, showing the ‘other’ to
be as ‘present’ or ‘absent’ — or as significant — as the favoured ‘one’. But merely to reverse the
opposition would be to succumb to another hierarchy. The next step of deconstruction therefore is to ‘neutralize’ the opposition by displacing the dominant entity from its position of authority.

The ‘reversal and displacement’ technique of deconstruction stems from the Derridean concepts of ‘trace’ and ‘erasure’. Meaning, as we have seen, is never graspable. Signification is endlessly deferred, having to depend only on other signifiers and signifieds to differentiate from the one in focus. What we are left with is only a ‘trace’ — that is, a sort of footprint — as evidence of a presence, but never the presence itself. Each signifier leaves a trace, not a tangible entity but proof that something was once there. The study of a text, therefore, according to Derrida, must be made with the full knowledge that the sign is always already ‘erased’; all signification hinges on ‘signs’ that are other than the sign in focus. Therefore, ‘meaning’ is only a series of signs ‘under erasure’, only a series of traces and nothing else. “The sign must be studied ‘under erasure’, always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such.” (Spivak, xxxix)

In effect, deconstruction begins when we trace the moment when a text goes against the very rules it seems to have laid down for itself. As Selden puts it, “Deconstruction can begin when we locate the moment when a text transgresses the laws it appears to set up for itself” (87). It is the activity of ‘reading between the lines’ and tracking down the unspoken assumptions that power a text from within; and of, then, proceeding to show how what the text claims to ‘say’ goes against what the text itself implies. “The deconstructive reader exposes the grammatological structure of the text that its ‘origin’ and its ‘end’ are given over to language in general . . ., by locating the moment in the text which harbors the unbalancing of the equation” (Spivak xlix).
The moment of triumph for the deconstructive reader is the location of the abyss into which the text and its entire assumed signification falls. It is not an activity of destruction but a healthy and participative awareness of the weak links in a structure, whether it is a literary text or otherwise. Deconstruction is, thus, anti-hierarchical, anti-institutional and liberating and just. If all structures are hierarchical and all hierarchies are biased, deconstructionists would much rather do away with all structures altogether, to bring about a temporary semblance of equality and justice.

But deconstruction, as a theory as well as practice, is not without its own gaps and fallacies. Post-structuralism suffers from an “inability to sustain its liberating promise. By calling all into question, it calls itself into question, giving itself no ground upon which to base its own challenges and to develop constructive possibilities” (Tredell 91). In opposing totalitarian hierarchies, poststructuralists like Barthes and Derrida make the most total claims: “the Author is dead” writes Barthes, implying that all authors are dead, all texts are without anchor, etc., leaving no room for exceptions. “Writing is under erasure,” writes Derrida, implying that absolutely no text has the capacity to communicate.

However, the key poststructuralist terms used to counter the Western tradition of Metaphysics – terms like gaps, silences, contradictions – are Cartesian and rationalist ones (Tredell 36). Deconstruction, thus, in its attempt to dismantle all structures, creates a new phenomenon, the deconstructor who is addicted to the power he has with his new-found awareness; who is drunk on his “arrogance of the present” (Tredell 98) and full of his superior complacence in the knowledge that no new literary text can surprise him any more.

Like all ideologies, the ideology of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist is self-preserving. “As ‘science’, post-structuralism and deconstruction suffer a similar problem of validation to psychoanalysis, with which they clearly have close links: it is debatable whether
they could ever be proved wrong, since apparently contradictory evidence can always be reinterpreted with sufficient ingenuity, as concealed confirmation” (Tredell 97). The deconstructing critic finds his or her ‘jouissance’ in the moment when he/she identifies the point where the author slips on the ‘peel’ unwittingly placed in the text by the author himself/herself. It is a moment of heady power. But it is precisely this moment of heady power that eludes the symptomatic reader, hunting for gaps in the Alice books or in the Nonsense works of Edward Lear. As if in prophetic anticipation of the Derridean mode of reading, they escape the clutches of the deconstructionist critic, in unique and myriad ways; these ways and means, however, warrant a detailed discussion which I shall present in the following sections of this chapter.

Making Sense/Unmaking Nonsense

In this chapter and the next, I shall focus on how Lewis Carroll (in the Alice books, specifically) and Edward Lear, have created texts that are fully deconstructed. In fact, their kind of Nonsense is too completely deconstructed for the deconstructive reader to offer a symptomatic reading or even attempt a partial deconstruction. The deconstructionist project is undermined by the fact that the texts have already been deconstructed by the authors themselves. If the deconstructing critic is devoured by the flaws in her own theory, the deconstructing author is not. The self-aware author de-creates her text as fast as she creates it. Carroll and Lear are among the few authors whose texts constantly laugh at themselves, decentre their own hierarchies, write and erase themselves.

Carroll works with an uncanny intuition in the Alice books, with the Derridean concepts of reversal and displacement, erasure and trace. The Alice books pre-empt all critical activities of deconstruction because they are simultaneously structured and deestructured by the author himself. They are also, however, strong evidence in favour of the theory of
deconstruction. Their immeasurable popularity for over a century now, seems to indicate that there always was a hint of a suspicion that language and metaphysics survived only by ignoring their own gaps and flaws. If Barthes declared the author dead, Carroll killed himself in the writing of these books, both literally and symbolically. He never publicly acknowledged, during his lifetime, that he was the source of these texts, and never guaranteed any answers or meanings to questions that readers had about the books. Lewis Carroll seems to have not only anticipated the foremost complaints of the deconstructive movement, but also prophesied, in practice, their solutions.

Spivak points out three possible ways in which one may deconstruct language. The first would be to “deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are merely accomplices of each other” (Spivak xxviii).

Reversal

Carroll uses linguistic and situational reversals to generate nonsensical references. Although the books are full of examples, I present two below to show how Carroll consciously inverts ways of thinking or seeing the world:

“I think I'll go and meet her,” said Alice, for though the flowers were interesting enough, she felt that it would be far grander to have a talk with a real Queen.

“You can't possibly do that,” said the Rose: “I should advise you to walk the other way.” (TTLG 205)

In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, there is a reversal of linguistic and social hierarchies in the final scene. The courtroom, a site of judicial authority and legal sanctity, is transformed into a place where nobody really seems to know what is going on.
“Nothing whatever,” said Alice.

“That’s very important,” the King said, turning to the Jury. They were just beginning to write this down on their slates, when the White Rabbit interrupted:

“Unimportant, your Majesty means of course,” he said in a very respectful tone, but frowning and making faces at him as he spoke.

“Unimportant, of course, I meant,” the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, “important - unimportant - unimportant – important - ” as if he were trying which word sounded best.

“Some of the jury wrote it down “important” and some “unimportant”. Alice could see this, as she was near enough to look over their slates; “but it doesn’t matter a bit,” she thought to herself. (AA 155–56)

While words are not things, they are definitely not absent entities. They have a unique ‘thinginess’ of their own. The paradox of Alice’s statement that she has “nothing whatever” to say is that she is saying the word “nothing”, which is ultimately something. The King of Hearts thereby has a justification when he tells the jury to write it down, because it is a testimony of sorts after all. The King is however, politely bullied by the White Rabbit into changing “important” to “unimportant”, reversing simultaneously, the King-page hierarchy, as well as the ‘important-unimportant’ hierarchy. Language can never be separated from interpretation.

Lear’s reversals are, in the first place, structural. The Limerick form is such that the last line of every verse goes back to the first. Any of his limericks could be taken as an example but I present one of my favourites below:
There was an Old Derry down Derry,
Who loved to see little folks merry;
So he made them a Book, and with laughter they shook,
At the fun of that Derry down Derry! (Lear 71)

In structure, this verse is quite characteristic of all of Lear’s limericks. The typical vase-shaped form of the verse arises from the long first two lines (usually about eight to ten syllables) followed by two shorter ones (usually five or six syllables) and finally, another longer line which ends with the same last words as the first one. A cyclical movement is instrumental in reducing the entropic value of the rhyme, satisfying the reader’s desire for the familiar by the repetition of the first line at the end. Like a chorus in a song, the first line being repeated (in part, at least) functions as a form of closure, rounding off the content of the limerick in a secure shell. However, it is the content that seems out of place. The reversal of Lear’s limericks is more discomfiting than comforting since they enclose a restless kernel. In a large majority of his limericks, the central lines (and the first half of the final line) depict strange and outlandish actions, ideas or events that bounce off as anomalies from the secure walls of the first and last lines. Semantic incongruity and formal consistency work together to produce an unsettling effect, forcing the reader to become unusually aware of the way in which the verses are written, making her conscious of the poet’s craft and the nature of language. In the process, Lear’s limericks bounce the reader between the Nonsense of the meaning and the sense of the form, leading to an infinite series of reversals until we let the verse go and move on to the next one.

56 According to John Fiske, every act of communication has a redundant (familiar, expected) component and an entropic (unpredictable, surprising) element (12). The more familiar the message, the more comfortable it makes the receiver. On the other hand, the more entropic it is, the greater its shock value and therefore its chances of rejection by the receiver.
There was an old person of Sidon,
Who bought a small pony to ride on;
But he found him too small to leap over a wall,
So he walked, that old person of Sidon. (Lear 113)

In limericks like this one, the whole point that is presented in the sensible central lines is overturned, deflated, and rendered pointless: the old person from Sidon who purchases a pony to ride on finds himself forced to get off the pony and walk. Reversal in content, therefore, is also a most common feature of Lear's rhymes. One old person paints his carriage green but it is useless since it doesn’t move:

There was an old person of Sheen
Whose carriage was painted pea=green;
But once in the snow the horse would not go,
Which disgusted that person of Sheen. (Lear 119)

The reversal is particularly bothersome when the final line of the limerick fails to present a conclusion to the subject. Nonsense limericks are even more nonsensical when they refuse to wrap up the sequence of events that they present. Here again, the form of the limerick misleads us. Although the final line appears to be conclusive, it simply repeats the first line with an irrelevant adjective thrown in to complete the number of syllables required:

There was an Old Person of Chili,
Whose conduct was painful and silly;
He sate on the stairs, eating apples and pears,
That imprudent Old Person of Chili. (Lear 160)
There was an Old Man of New York,
Who murdered himself with a fork;
But nobody cried though he very soon died,
For that silly Old Man of New York. (Lear 100)

Nothing is explained. The ‘ands’ and ‘buts’ seem to be used more for convention and grammatical function than for semantic necessity. A Young Lady sets her soup to boil using oil but we do not know if her outlandish solution works:

There was a Young Lady of Poole,
Whose soup was excessively cool;
So she put it to boil by the aid of some oil,
That ingenious Young Lady of Poole. (Lear 99)

Secondly, he resorts to an open-endedness – or to ambiguous closures – to make the content reverse, almost turn upon itself, serving more to confuse than to satisfy the reader. The problem of the length of the legs, for example, finds no solution in the poem *The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly*. Although Daddy Long-legs rues that his legs are too long to sing a song and the Fly regrets that his legs are so long that he cannot go to court, at the end of the poem, all that they do is go off to a far away place and play games for ever.

And off they sailed among the waves,
Far, and far away.
They sailed across the silent main,
And reached the great Gromboolian plain;
And there they play for evermore
At battlecock and shuttledore. (Lear 248)
Lear seems, in the final line, to be more interested in the words 'battledore' and 'shuttlecock', and the interchange of their parts, than in the resolution of Daddy Long-legs' problems.

The characters of his poems and tales often have bizarre ideas and no assurances work to convince them, thus defeating the reader's desire for closure at the end of each.

There was an old Man of th' Abruzzi,
So blind that he couldn't his foot see;
When they said, "That's your toe," He replied, "Is it so?"
That doubtful old Man of th' Abruzzi. (Lear 79)

The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World (220–232) ends with the four children returning home with their plans unfinished and with an irrelevant conclusion about a rhinoceros that has very little connection with the rest of the narrative:

As for the Rhinoceros, in token of their grateful adherence, they had him killed and stuffed directly, and then set him up outside the door of their father's house as a Diaphanous Doorscraper. (Lear 232)

In Mr and Mrs Discobbolos, the poem begins with the couple wondering what should happen if they fall down from the wall they are on. It ends, however, with them concluding that "Here we will pass the rest of life," completely ignoring the question that was put forward initially.

Lear uses illustrations that contradict the text, using the image to reverse the textual effect. As Pendlebury points out, "the nonsense brought out in the disparity between word and image is characteristic of Lear's work and produces the wealth of implication that gives his limericks in particular their force and paradox" (13–14). But Pendlebury fails to see how
Lear eventually deconstructs his own texts with his illustrations, throwing the reader into a quandary – whether to take the text seriously and therefore ignore the humorous element in the illustration, or to take the humour in the visual seriously and therefore to conclude that the sorrow in the lines is just so much pseudo-sentimental burlesque. The clearest evidence of this is in the poem *Miss Maniac* – one of the few completely serious poems that he ever wrote. The poem narrates how a lovelorn and forsaken woman gradually goes deranged with an illustration accompanying every line. However, instead of supporting the tragic theme of the lines, Lear seems to have deliberately sketched images that deflate the textual intention. The poem itself is quite dark, unlike several of the supportive sketches. “The illustrations are really remarkable, since they are cartoons drawn fully in the style of caricaturists then fashionable” but the text is disturbing because its realistic portrayal of a woman on the brink of derangement “expresses a fear of madness which must surely be genuine” (Levi 22). At the peak of its pathos, Miss Maniac bemoans her lot:

> Or hast thou in the stream of life, 'mid scenes and forms more sweet,
> Forgot these tears that madd'ning mourn, my guilt and thy deceit? (Lear 30–31)

The visual that goes along with the last line makes a mockery of the sadness in the plight of Miss Maniac and shows that the poet does not take his own work too seriously. The sketch is one of a Victorian woman with dishevelled hair, sitting at a table and crying a downpour of tear drops. This alone would not be strange, were it not for the fact that all the tears are dropping into a cup on the table which is almost full to the brim. Earlier in the poem, the woman’s ‘home of bliss’ is depicted as a dilapidated, tilted and cracked half-cottage with no sense of symmetry or architecture and when she narrates how her “bubble pleasure burst” (34), she is drawn blowing soap bubble from a pipe.
Plurality

Another possible way of escaping the linguistic trap is a 'plural style', for, according to Spivak, "if there is style, it must be plural...the confounding of opposites with the attendant switching of perspectives might be an example of that plural style." (xxix)

Lewis Carroll seems to do just this. In the courtroom scene, 'important' is immediately replaced with 'unimportant', thus shifting to an opposed perspective of Alice's statement that she has "nothing whatever" to say. But the jury writes both words, and Alice quite clearly can see that "...it doesn't matter a bit," thus confounding the opposites.

"Now I growl when I'm pleased and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad."

"I call it purring, not growling," said Alice.

"Call it what you like," said the cat. (AA 89)

Throughout the two books, Alice is repeatedly reminded, that it doesn't matter what you call something, implying that language is arbitrary and non-fixed. Much is said about names and naming, for instance.

The Gnat . . . remarked "I suppose you don't want to lose your name?"

"No, indeed," Alice said, a little anxiously "And yet I don't know," the Gnat went on in a careless tone: "only think how convenient it would be if you could manage to go home without it! For instance, if the governess wanted to call you to your lessons, she would call out "Come here," and there she would have to leave off, because there wouldn't be any name for her to call, and of course, you wouldn't have to go, you know." (TTLG, 224)
Children’s names are instruments of power used on them by others. Carroll shows remarkable insight into a child’s plight when it comes to her relationship with herself and her name, her master signifier. The name creates the subject and maintains her in existence, a vital necessity that enables her to function in society. However, it also controls the human subject by the way in which it is called out, interpellating her and fixing her in a particular expected pattern of response, “for the name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers” (McLuhan 35). As Judith Butler points out, a name functions as an insult, a prior power:

The insult, however, assumes its specific proportion in time. To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language. (Butler 2)

It is the other who wields this prior power and Alice finds herself at the receiving end because of her name:

“... but tell me your name and business.” “My name is Alice, but –”

“It’s a stupid name enough!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatient. “What does it mean?”

“Must a name mean something?” Alice asked doubtfully. (TTLG 263)

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57 Louis Althusser (1918-1990), the French Marxist philosopher observed how ideology tends to fix people into social hierarchies simply by addressing them in a particular way – a process he called “interpellation”:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individual into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ (Althusser 60)
Lear too showed a remarkable degree of insight into names and how they operate. One of his favourite ways of introducing himself was a long name which was "a long nonsense name, compounded of all the languages he knew, and with which he was always quite pat" (Noakes *Wanderer* 215). His convoluted, multilingual names for himself were a sign that he understood the significance of a name. The fact that he used it to introduce himself to children reflects that he understood that a child's predicament is one of growing up in a sea of meaningless signifiers (which include names of people) which she is supposed to take very seriously even though they have no indexical connections to the people they refer to. Lear realised that one of the best ways to disarm a child was to introduce himself by a name that she could not possibly call or recall him, letting her know that, at least with him, it was all right if she did not take signifiers seriously.

To an adult, however, a name that does not mean anything is inherently threatening to the linguistic surface because it exposes the sliding nature of signification. Alice shows an amazing degree of wisdom when she innocently questions the necessity of meaning. Incidentally, Derrida's elusive coinage, 'differance', itself, is a name that does not really mean – but actually only serves as an indicator. "The namelessness of differance does not consist in being an unnameable being but in pointing to the differential matrix which generates names and concepts, in which they are produced as effects" (Silverman 26).

Carroll, through Alice's conversation with Humpty Dumpty, brings to the fore differance as the organising principle of language.

In the *Alice* books, even the sacrosanct 'signature' of modern times holds only as much value as a perspective would assign to it:

58 The two names that Lear liked to surprise little children with were "Mr Abebika Kratoponoko Prizzikalo Kattefello Ablegorabalus Ableborinto phashyph" and "Chakonoton the Cozovex Dossi Fossi Sini Tomentilla Coronilla Polentilla Battledore & Shuttlecock Derry down Derry Dump" (Pendlebury 20-21).
“Please, your Majesty,” said the Knave, “I didn't write it, and they can't prove that I did: there's no name signed at the end.”

“If you didn't sign it,” said the King, “that only makes the matter worse. You must have meant some mischief, or else you'd have signed your name like an honest man.”

(AA 157)

According to Derrida, the signature does not exist unless there is an addressee to receive and recognise it as such. In effect, a signature denotes the death of the one who signs, because it is entirely dependent on the other for its existence, taking birth after the event, as it were. “Here, then, is the uncanny, ghostly logic of deferred action or après coup as inscribed by ‘death': a proper name and a signature carry death; the meaning of a text (or of a teaching) comes later, from the other.” (Royle 66)

In the case of the Knave, the other is the King of Hearts and he refuses to acknowledge the signature of the Knave as a legal symbol of his authorship. On the contrary, the King identifies the absence of his signature as proof of his authorship. This now leads to a piece of complicated syllogistic reasoning. If a signature carries the death of the one who signs, the Knave has ensured his immortality by not putting a signature at all. The King, however, reverses this inferential argument and turns it on its head. He declares that the absence of a signature is proof of authorship. In a classic act of deconstruction, then, Carroll, through the apparently bizarre logic of the King of Hearts, demonstrates to us that the absence of a signifier is itself a trace. The signature that isn’t there, is all the more conspicuous by its absence. After all, it’s about who is to be master – and in this case it is the King. He decides what to make a word mean – and if there is no word at all it makes the one in power all the more potent, allowing him to take advantage of an unclear referentiality and attach any signified he wishes. We are submerged in language and thus, even silence is made to mean
something. Through this piece of logical nonsense, Carroll has shown us that even though meanings may emerge by virtue of binary oppositions, open-ended (or even absent) signifiers are deeply threatening to the hegemonic force of language. A signifier that isn’t there must be made to signify something. Once that is done, the illusion that meanings are universal and signification is ubiquitous is maintained and the world returns to a false sense of equilibrium. Ironically, though, the Knave, who would have symbolised his own death by his signature, is liable to be sentenced to a real death precisely because he hasn’t signed.

Confusion and misinterpretation of the meanings of words abound: The Cheshire cat’s head is visible, but the body isn’t, and this sparks off an argument: “The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing. The King’s argument was that anything that had a head could be beheaded and that you weren’t to talk nonsense.” (AA 116–117)

Lear, too, dabbled in signatures. In his typical signature style, he often chose to sign his letters by the nonsense word “Slushypipp”, even to his adult friends (Wullschlager 71). Unlike the King, he found no need to attach any relevance to the signature. The letter was voice enough for his friends to recognise him. Unlike the Knave, he could not be accused of deliberately not putting his signature to his letter because he did sign his letter, even if with a nonsense name59. In an age when the signature had the legal value of a DNA fingerprint, it took a significant degree of objectivity to play purposefully with one’s own.

59 I shall discuss the use of alternative names with reference to both Lear and Carroll in the next chapter.
The third possible solution is Nietzsche’s ‘will-to-ignorance’ – the ability to rejoice in uncertainty – the calm joy in the face of unreason; in short, the ability to constantly – play (Spivak 29–30).

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.” (TTLG 269)

But no one is really master: neither author, nor characters; neither language, nor readers; neither text, nor illustrations. There is a flux that emerges from the interplay among these, and within this flux is the experience of the Alice books.

Carroll plays incessantly. An entire poem is meaningless - and then made to mean – but in no familiar system of signification – a private and arbitrary language in the Jabberwocky.

T’was brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe. (TTLG 191)

As Martin Gardner says, “Although the strange words have no precise meaning, they chime with subtle overtones” (TTLG 192). This is exactly what makes nonsense attractive and unsettling at once: it sounds familiar yet makes no sense. Play is fraught with threat. But
the reader is saved by the few recognizable elements in the books, the text and, in particular, this poem. For example, while *brillig* and *slithy toves* are strange words, *t'was* and *and the* are sufficient to put them in a grammatical function: *Brillig* and *slithy* are obviously adjectives while *toves* is a noun; *gyre* and *gimble* are obviously verbs (because they follow *did*).

Almost every concept is deflated. An entire verse is devoted to the sun shining over the sea and then we find a sudden, paradoxical ending:

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The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright—
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night. (TTLG 233)
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The third stanza of this nonsense poem is an ideal example of how Carroll proposes and then disposes of, inflates and then deflates, a concept. He does so by picking on the assumptions that enter the mind of a reader while reading a common sentence. The verse is given below:

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The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead
There were no birds to fly, (TTLG 233–234)
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Usually a comparison is made between two different things to emphasize a poetical quality. But Carroll compares the wetness of the sea with "as wet could be"; similarly, the sands were not dry as a desert etc., but simply "dry as dry". In the same way, we expect another reason for not being able to see a cloud in the sky, or a bird flying overhead, but the reasons are too obvious to be considered reasons at all.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Duchess is full of morals but none of them are really relevant. *(AA 120–122)*

"The game's going on rather better now," she said by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

"'Tis so," said the Duchess: "and the moral of that is - 'Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!'"

"Somebody said," Alice whispered, "that it's done by everybody minding their own business!"

"Ah, well! It means much the same thing," said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice's shoulder as she added, "and the moral of that is - 'Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.'" *(AA 120 – 122)*

Alice can never be sure what reaction to expect of any of the characters and creatures she meets. Yet, she accepts it all as simply something different, and carries on through her dreams. Her confusion is never so extreme as to overpower her sense. The only times she really cries are in Chapters IV and V of *Through The Looking Glass*. In the fifth chapter her tears are not tears of confusion but of loneliness. The White Queen is trying to teach her the 'backward’ laws of the Looking-Glass world:
“You must be very happy, living in the wood, and being glad whenever you like!”

“Only it is so very lonely here!” Alice said in a melancholy voice; and at the thought of her loneliness, two large tears came rolling down her cheeks. *(TTLG 250).*

But Alice is promptly prepared to laugh at the nonsensical logic of the White Queen and the world behind the mirror; she is comfortable in the uncertainty of every new situation, though she often brings up ‘real-life’ comparisons to locate the absurdity she encounters.

“Oh don't go on like that!” cried the poor Queen, wringing her hands in despair.

“Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come today.
Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry!”

Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the midst of her tears.

“Can you keep from crying by considering things?” she asked. *(TTLG 250)*

And again,

Alice laughed. “There's no use trying,” she said: “one can't believe impossible things.” *(TTLG 251)*

Alice puts her awkward experiences into sentences to help herself accept the strangeness of what she encounters:

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things – but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

“Things flow about so here!” she said at last in a plaintive tone . . . *(TTLG 253).*
Like the Orange Marmalade jar on the way down to Wonderland (27) which turns out to be empty, Alice’s desire to grasp something concrete is disappointed. Like meaning in language, things are always elsewhere and if Alice reaches for them, they just slip away, “as quietly as possible.” I doubt if there is a more lucid example of the sliding nature of signification in all of English Literature.

Alice often identifies what she encounters as ridiculous. “What dreadful nonsense we are talking!” (TTLG 321) she says, showing that she has noticed the strangeness of her dream worlds. She realises the unearthliness of a smiling cat and talks about it too:

“I didn't know that Cheshire cats always grinned; in fact, I didn't know that cats could grin.”

“They all can,” said the Duchess; “and most of ‘em do.”

“I don't know of any that do,” Alice said very politely, . . . (AA 83)

But Alice’s reality-testing ends there. She always finds it more discreet not to push an argument too far, thus deciding to accept the confusing and bewildering situations or statements she is confronted with and carry on.

“I don't know of any that do,” Alice said very politely, feeling quite pleased to have got into a conversation.

“You don't know much,” said the Duchess; “and that's a fact.”

Alice did not at all like the tone of this remark, and thought it would be as well to introduce some other subject of conversation. (AA 83)

Alice even readily concludes with no apparent distress that to fix an identity on herself is impossible. In fact she is quite calm when she confesses to the caterpillar that she doesn't
know who she really is. It is the participation within the uncertainty and a participation in the 'playing' that leaves her so equanimous even while admitting such an earthshaking truth:

“Who are You?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “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 been 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.”(AA 67)

Lear’s plural style and his playfulness are most visible in his Nonsense Botany (251–253, 383–385, 417–419). Basing his nomenclature on the typical codes of Linnaeus’ taxonomy, he creates bizarre plant life with deadpan and realistic illustrations to support them, almost as in a textbook of Botany. All of these (including his Nonsense Trees) are truly hilarious. The humour emerges from a plurality of levels – our minds identify the typical patterns of botanical classification but find the terms confusing on reading them for the first time (Pollybirdia Singularis, Plumbunnia Nutritiosa, Piggiawiggia Pyramidalis, Manypeelia Upsidownia, Smalltoothcombia Domestica). But on seeing Lear’s drawings, we soon realise that parts of the ‘scientific names’ must be taken literally. Manypeelia Upsidownia is a plant with a lot of little people (all dressed up) growing out of a stalk hanging upside down like droopy flowers. Piggiawiggia Pyramidalis is a straight stem out of which pigs bloom in a pyramidal fashion. Bottlephorkia Spoonifolia is a plant with a bottle for a flower and forks as its petals, while the leaves are spoons. Washtubbia Circularis is a tub in full bloom. The botanical and the literal must co-exist in our minds if we wish to catch the humour in the juxtaposition – or understand the terms at all (see page 136). Lear’s Nonsense Trees are
sketches accompanied by sincere explanations of their height, usefulness and “omsquombious-ness” (440). The Clothes-Brush Tree, for example, produces clothes brushes which he calls an “extraordinary vegetable.” The Fork Tree is another bizarre variety which “never grows above four hundred and sixty-three feet in height – nor has any specimen hitherto produced above forty thousand silver forks at one time.” (Lear 441) The Biscuit Tree is a unique form of plant life that grows “remarkable vegetables” (biscuits) and Lear makes it a point to tell us that “If the Biscuits grow in pairs, they do not grow single, and if they ever fall off, they cannot be said to remain on.” (Lear 439) His plants and trees are a part of the plurality and the play that are hallmarks of postmodernist works today – an interplay between image and text in which neither image nor text bear any significance – the referentiality of the one being undermined by the other, each rendering the other superfluous, encouraging us to take neither seriously.

These examples that follow demonstrate the amazing manner in which Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear have deconstructed their own texts in ways that Derrida theorized almost a century later. They use the three principal techniques that a deconstructionist or a self-conscious writer may use to escape the tyranny of language: firstly, they deliberately reverse perspectives, in the process, undoing them; secondly, they use a plural style, indicating several meanings at once, but allowing none of them to take precedence over the others; and thirdly, they constantly play with and within language. They twist and twin the English language to construct/deconstruct their narratives, without a theory or philosophy to prompt them, without a line of post-structuralist critique to point to the pitfalls of language, and all the ridiculous assumptions on the basis of which every text works.
Fig. 3.1. Some examples of Lear’s Nonsense Botany from Edward Lear, *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense* (London: Penguin, 2000; print; 251–252)
Principal among these assumptions is the notion that the illusory systems and structures set up by man are real. This assumption sustains us through existence. Lewis Carroll positions both his works in dreams, marginalizing the waking, illusory world to the first and last chapters. He therefore creates “fiction within fiction”, a “dream within a dream”, in a way dramatizing the Nietzschean dance, that “... I must go on dreaming lest I perish...” (Spivak 30) and reinforcing the play that is recommended to the knowing philosopher as a solution to combat the snares of language and social structures. One striking aspect of both Alice texts is that Alice enters into the dream worlds – down the tunnel and to the other side of the looking glass – consciously making an action towards them, but never really falling asleep, before she does. Each of the fantasies commences with conscious actions that are described as really happening but not as the beginning of dreams. “In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again” (AA 26).

“...Let’s pretend there’s a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why it’s turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It’ll be easy enough to get through – ” She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt way, just like a bright silvery mist. (TTLG 184)

These imperceptible transitions from the waking world to the dream appear almost a deliberate blurring, so as to mislead the reader. The obvious effect of this movement is that the events which follow appear more ‘real’ and are later ‘reasoned’ out as parts of a dream at the end of both works; it sort of stretches the ‘virtuality’ of ‘real’ life to the limits of all
fantasy and then allows the reader to settle back into the safety of “Oh, it was just a dream.” This closure of the narratives seems a reluctant retreat from a prolonged battle; a protest against the systems of the world and their tyrannies; and finally, a weak quenching of the logocentric thirst of the reader. Wonderland disappears in a rain of cards:

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face.

“Wake up, Alice dear!” said her sister, “Why, what a long sleep you've had!”

“Ah, I've had such a curious dream!” (AA 161–162)

She awakes from the Looking-glass world with a shake. Chapter X, titled ‘Shaking’ is barely a few lines and runs on into the next one:

CHAPTER X

SHAKING

She took her off the table as she spoke, and shook her backwards and forwards with all her might.

The Red Queen made no resistance whatever: Only her face grew very small and her eyes hot large and green: and still, as Alice went on shaking her, she kept on growing shorter - and fatter - and softer – and rounder – and –

CHAPTER XI

WAKING

– and it really was a kitten, after all. (TTLG 337–339)
The awakening in the second book is even more ambiguous, because Alice finds that her kitten is as unpredictable as the characters in her dreams:

It is a very inconvenient habit of kittens (Alice had once made the remark) that, whatever you say to them, they always purr. “If they would only purr for ‘yes’ and mew for ‘no’ or any rule of that sort,” she had said, “so that one could keep up conversation! But how can you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?”

On this occasion, the kitten only purred: and it was impossible to guess whether it meant ‘yes’ or ‘no’. (TTLG 341)

Carroll may also seem to be recommending to us Derrida’s (and Nietzsche’s) ‘active forgetfulness’; the active forgetfulness of the Alice books is the oubliance of the deconstructor who, in spite of knowing the difficulties of signification, must temporarily suspend such awareness, in order to communicate through her essay or speech. Carroll is, in fact, doing just that: participating in signification by compulsion, but playing with signification by exercising his own control; showing the gaps and the absurdities of the English language, yet all the while, being forced to use it and therefore temporarily suspending his disbelief in its effectiveness; using his skills to create an implosion in the war of words and their associations. Since the knowledge of the futility and meaninglessness of language would entail a complete inability to use language at all, Carroll encourages us to choose forgetfulness for a while, take a linguistic holiday, fly above the structural workings of language and laugh at our own illusions in the safety of the dream within a dream of the other – the other’s dream which is itself being dreamt by another.

This is perhaps one of the reasons that the Alice books appeal to adults and children alike. They are fantasies of fun for both kinds of minds; they are escapes from the logical and reasoned world for children who have begun to face the first frustrations of the
meaninglessness of ‘meaning’, the insignificance of signification; they are creations of a ‘secondary world’, a ‘secondary reality’ for the adult who has been already assimilated into the hierarchies of language and society. Children, who are in the process of learning to adapt into all sorts of orders of signification, are particularly attracted by the play of language and a-structural solutions to disturbing situations, such as the dissolution of all the crises of Alice in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass by the realization that these have simply been parts of dreams.

Both, adults and children, resort to active forgetfulness: participating in the shelving of structure, the nose-thumbing at authority, the breaking of the limits of time and space, and the final return to the insecure safety of the symbolic order and all its many ramifications. Children revel in the subversion of relationships of power. Adults are amused by the quaint play but with the full knowledge that the comic relief is a comic interlude and there still exists a world outside where such games are taboo. After all they are acclaimed classics of fantasy literature.

Fantasy in no way conflicts with the exercise of man’s reason. As Tolkien asserts:

It (fantasy) certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make... For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.

(Tolkien qtd. in Swinfen 6)

Besides, "... a paradox lies in fact at the heart of fantasy: that is, that to create an imaginative and imaginary world it is necessary to observe faithfully the rules of logic and
inner consistency " within the fantasy itself (Swinfen 3). Every fantasy has its own rules. And those must be followed consistently. Thus, in the Looking-Glass world everything must work backward. In Wonderland, all semantics must be upside down/ illogical/ irrelevant. But they refuse to become general rules. Carroll creates the rules for his fantasy and continues to change them and break them whenever he deems necessary.

The novels can be conceptualized as a-structural pictures of the symbolic universe firmly fitted into the cultural and linguistic picture frames. These fantasies, bordered by (a dubious) reality throw up the central opposition: waking/dreaming. But this distinction is completely and deliberately blurred in *Through the Looking Glass*. Alice sees the Red King sleeping on the grass “fit to snore his head off!” and becomes a bit concerned:

"I'm afraid he'll catch cold with lying on the damp grass," said Alice, who was a very thoughtful little girl.

"He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about?"

Alice said "Nobody can guess that."

"Why, about you!" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly.

"And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?" "Where I am now, of course," said Alice.

"Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

"If that there King was to wake," added Tweedledum, "You'd go out— bang!— just like a candle!" (*AA* 238)
Thus Alice's reality is not real, and neither is the King's. Alice tries to reassert her realness:

"If I wasn't real," Alice said... "I shouldn't be able to cry." "I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt. (AA 239)

An odd sort of infinite regress is involved here in the parallel dreams of Alice and the Red King. Alice dreams of the King, who is dreaming of Alice, who is dreaming of the King and so on, like two mirrors facing each other (Gardner TTLG 239).

This 'dream-within-a-dream' motif is thus as ineffectively graspable as the reflection of a reflection. By putting the King in Alice's dream, and Alice, in turn, in the King's dream, Carroll has dismissed reality altogether; he has put all existence into question; he has put into practice the Derridean thesis of the 'trace' by making the dreamer a part of the dream of another character in her dream. An endless cycle of reflections fails to determine which was the original object – simply because there is none. There is never an original; always, only a trace. On February 9, 1856, Carroll made a note in his diary: “Query: When we are dreaming, and as often happens, have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do things which in waking life would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life? We often dream without the least suspicion of unreality: ‘sleep hath its own world,’ and it is often as lifelike as the other.” (qtd. in Gardner AA 90)

What we dream is a manifestation of hopes and fears that are either socially censured or simply inexpressible in waking hours. However, the reaction against signification and all its hierarchical autocracy is ironically only made possible in the language of the waking life – the symbols and signifiers one uses or battles with when conscious. Thus, in the waking-dreaming opposition, language is the only tool of communication available to both; this again mires the text in a helpless freefall of priorities and biases. Dreaming can therefore be said to
be not very different from waking as it is caught in the same structures of signification. Only the tools of sense can be used to battle sense. Only the instruments of the waking world can be used in a dream. ‘Reality’ as we know it is as unpredictable as a dream; in both we are equally helpless. Indeed, to wake is as dreamy as to sleep; and while we are in the dream, it is as real as the perceptions of waking hours. Carroll presents the binary opposition between waking and dreaming and then reverses the two terms by showing that they are in fact not very different from each other. He then disposes of the couple entirely by putting them both in an endless uncertainty of ‘dream within a dream’ or ‘reflection of a reflection’. The *Alice* tales are therefore narrative representations of Carroll's fundamental doubts of the truth and accuracy of all human perception.

But perceive we must. And in order to perceive we must have a system of symbols or signs that can express our perceptions. We are nothing without a language, and yet, language further complicates and destabilizes all attempts at communication. Carroll and Lear try to highlight this troublesome predicament through their texts. They do so by the use of Nonsense as the genre of expression – by, simply, playing.