

Mirror, Mirror on the Fence? Reflections on and in Alain Robbe-Grillet and Lewis Carroll

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Alain Robbe-Grillet, the twentieth-century French creator of new novels and cineast in his own right, and Lewis Carroll, in reality the almost Reverend Charles Ludwidge Dodgson seem superficially to have little in common. Robbe-Grillet, particularly in his films, presents a world which is aggressively modern and adult, dealing with the ever-present questions posed by sexuality, drugs, and modern technology. Carroll on the other hand spent nearly thirty years of his life in the seclusion of Christ Church College, Oxford, shunning the society of most of his peers and, in his relationships with his child friends, dreading, at least on a conscious plane, the possible criticisms of the establishment. While therefore the two authors are seemingly generations and cultures apart, they nevertheless exhibit certain striking similarities and hold in common certain concepts and themes which a study of the *Alice* books and the latest Robbe-Grillet novel *Djinn* (1981) will reveal.

Both Carroll and Robbe-Grillet, by implication and personal statement, claim their books "mean" nothing, but do not at the same time deny that the text may carry a signification not obvious at first even to the author. This meaning could be described in surrealistic terms, its connections and relationships existing on a plane above, or in the case of the text below, the surface. As the real intersects with the surreal, the apparently logical with the nonsensical, or the dogmatic with the paradoxical in the works of both authors, so the reader discovers that embedded in their texts are numerical principles, arithmetical concepts, and linguistic transformations that provide a seemingly endless round of mental games for the reader to manipulate and through which the author manipulates the reader. The two writers, who were interested in science in general, were also practitioners of the more exacting sciences of mathematics and its extended field of logic in the case of Carroll, agronomy or mathematics realized into topography in the case of Robbe-Grillet. Manipulation of the logic of time and of space or topography is therefore a common feature. This manipulation of the everyday and its transformation into a world of the fantastic can be seen in both the *Alice* books and throughout all the works of the French writer, but more particularly in the latter's case in *Djinn* which by its very title implies another universe arising, like the genie from the bottle, from the everyday. *Djinn* goes even further by making use of the fantastic to question the assumptions of the reading public about the temporal and logical structure of existence. While the atmosphere of *Djinn* may seem at first reading more sinister than that of the *Alice* stories, it proves on closer examination to arise from a form of black humor, a trait which Robbe-Grillet and Carroll share and which both use to unsettle their reader. Similarly, the reader's assumptions about cause and effect, before and after, beginning and ending are undermined in the case of the two writers by the dislocations in the temporal sequence of the actions.

The motives which might explain the choice of the fantastic mode by Carroll and Robbe-Grillet are a matter for conjecture. Carroll's published *Diaries* rarely reveal anything of a personal or introspective nature; they are principally a record of his public activities and an aide-mémoire. In spite of the lack of support from

reliable documents, Carroll's choice of fantasy-in-the-mirror could be interpreted as an attempt to come to grips with the problem of sexuality and identity which was exacerbated by his enforced celibacy. The fantastic aspects in particular of his original creations with their sometimes overtly Freudian symbolism were precisely the ones which he edited extensively before presenting them to a genuine audience of children. On the other hand, many of the fantastic passages in *Through the Looking Glass* focus on the philosophical problem of becoming, one which had not concerned philosophers since the pre-Socratics, though it continues to be at the root of many logical conundra. The brainteasers that Tweedledum and Tweedledee pose, the comments on time and direction that are the staple of the White Queen's pronouncements, challenge the mid-nineteenth century assumptions of identity and progress. And for the hidebound society of middle-class Victorian England, Alice's outspoken behavior is perhaps the most fantastic and disquieting aspect of all.

Robbe-Grillet's private reflections, if indeed he does maintain a personal journal, have not been brought to light. Perversely in his writings other than the fictional, and in private and public conferences, he delights in confusing his audience. His awareness of the difficult position of the creative writer is obvious. Robbe-Grillet's problematical situation seems to stem from the impasse he and other contemporary writers face; each attempt to reform the current system results in a distortion of the intention and an absorption of the effort expended. The most effective means available to the opponent of the establishment are therefore the most radical and, in many cases, the most violent. Robbe-Grillet's destruction of fundamental assumptions about existence—identity, temporal structure and the nature of reality—provides a manner of opposition to the established view which does not implicitly undermine itself. In addition to exploiting the distortions of perspective, the logical and psychological ramifications of doubles and time reversals, Carroll and Robbe-Grillet like many other artists are intrigued by the opportunities afforded by the mirror figure to explore the limits of the known and the knowable, tying the fantasy world to the one in which they exist. And by renewing the renaissance concept of the mirror as a moral example, they make clear that the "voyage imaginaire" of the novel is indeed a voyage of self-discovery, and self-renewal.

Robbe-Grillet's and Lewis Carroll's interest in photography—another example of the mirror figure—may also be examined from the same point of view. The book Robbe-Grillet recently produced in collaboration with Irena Ionesco, *Temple au Miroir* (1979),¹ is reminiscent of the Carrollian studies of the prepubescent female child. *Temple au Miroir* is so constructed that opposite each photograph is a plain, black page whose shiny surface reflects, in a negative fashion, the image captured in the original. Given the subjects of Irena Ionesco's photographs, and the deliberate attempt to recapture the surface textures of nineteenth century photography, the negative reflections could be looked on as a moral commentary on the contemporary resurgence of the phenomenon of child pornography.² As with the photographic image, the physical limit of the object described in Robbe-Grillet's novels is not in reality a limitation, a logical dividing line between subject and object. It is rather a revelation of personality at the surface of the object and is also indirectly related, as in the case with Lewis Carroll, to a criticism of a whole society through a particular viewpoint.

Thus it can be seen that two major elements appear as keys in both authors' texts, keys in the textual, thematic and stylistic senses: the androgynous young girl—seemingly pure, innocent, and too often a victim attracting to herself all the

¹*Temple au Miroir* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979).

²The photographs also bear a striking similarity of pose and subject to the ones that Carroll himself took. It is regrettable that all his photographs, including the nude studies, have not been published.

evils of society; and the mirror—already referred to, but here as a symbol of imitation and awakening consciousness. As the child can be assumed to reflect the adult without the adult's depth or maturity, so too the mirror contains the world within its flat two-dimensional surface. The illusion of the other world is present in both but reversed, and paradoxically permits of unlimited outer and inner speculation and reflection through a physically limited object. On this side of the mirror, the Newtonian world of terrestrial science is governed by laws which to all intents and purposes are immutable. Time in particular does not follow the rules of Chronos—past preceding future—but those of Aion whose present may be infinitely divided and for whom past and future have no meaning. It is a magic land where time and weather follow laws different from those of the real world, in which flowers may speak. And no matter how fast you run, Zeno's paradox holds because you can never reach your destination.

In this way mirrors, like dreams, are open to interpretation, offering various angles and insights depending literally and figuratively on the viewer/analyst's point of view. Likewise in the works of Carroll and Robbe-Grillet, through the naive child's/reader's eyes is revealed the observer's paranoia, together with that of both Victorian society and of the latter half of the twentieth century. For images of violence are a constant in Carroll and Robbe-Grillet and are treated by both artists as a tool for remedial play, a playing reminiscent of nursery rhymes such as "Ring-a-ring-a-rosy" which will ward off evil as the rhyme wards off and warns of the encroaching plague.

The doubling of images, reality/dreams, innocence and corruption is also reflected in a schizophrenic paranoia apparent in both the child Alice and the other Carrollian characters and disturbingly obvious in all Robbe-Grillet's protagonists. In both authors, the elements of time and space are not only played with but deliberately distorted, as they are also distorted in cases of severe schizophrenia, to indicate the paranoia of the protagonist and the possibility of a new interpretation of reality through the destruction of the dictates of the established reality. The distinction between dream and reality in both Carroll and Robbe-Grillet is precisely nothing. There is no gap, no demarcation line. The surface of the mirror is merely a convention separating real from reflected; and no recognizable boundary, conventional or otherwise, divides the waking world from that of the dream. Looking-Glass World for Carroll, and Djinn's world for Robbe-Grillet challenge the complacently accepted ideas of their societies by presenting distorting mirrors which invite the reader to play.

Language too is a tool for play and invention while simultaneously serving as a commentary on rigidity and obsession, a textual generator for both reader and author. Both writers create a language which is at the same time cognitive and intuitive, referential and poetic. Carroll, for example, employs many word-games, especially the pun, mostly because that figure of speech relies on the exact repetition of sound, while maintaining the dual meaning. Other doubles and paratextual references—Hatta/Hatter, Haigha/Hare—point to the reflection in *Through the Looking Glass of Alice in Wonderland*. In Robbe-Grillet's *Djinn*, reflections are embedded in the text in a less prominent fashion but nonetheless serve to disconcert the reader. At the outset of the novel the image of Jean/Djinn as a blind man wearing dark glasses is repeated or reflected in the disguise affected by the narrator who then assumes the identity of the disguised. Robbe-Grillet too includes intertextual references, reflecting images of his own work as well as that of other prominent writers such as Hugo and Proust. Most striking in the context of the comparison between Robbe-Grillet and Carroll is the extent to which a reading of *Djinn* is enriched by the juxtaposition of *Through the Looking Glass*. Mirror images and the language of speculation and reflection offer both these writers the possibility of turning a critical

look towards society, offering a picture whose moral imperatives are embedded in the mirror structure itself. Neither, however, could be classed as revolutionaries in the purely political sense. Rather in their imagery and their language they present a mirror which, like Humpty Dumpty on his wall, maintains a delicate balance which protects the individual writer from a final commitment.