"ALICE IN HYSTERIALAND": WAR AS A TRAVESTY OF NONSENSE IN PAT BARKER'S *THE GHOST ROAD**

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A gallery of historical figures play key roles in Pat Barker's so-called *Regeneration* trilogy. To name a few: the war-poets Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, the anthropologist cum psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers, and so on. Reviewers have duly remarked on the meaning of their inclusion, but a curious fact is that few have so far commented on the significance of the Rev. Charles Dodgson's appearance in the trilogy.

Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, appears in the three books mostly in relation to another historical figure, Dr. Rivers, or, to be precise, in relation to Rivers' recollection of his boyhood. In *Regeneration* (1991) we see Rivers remembering Dodgson's visits to his Knowles Bank home around 1876, when he was twelve years old. Distinct in his memory is Dodgson's well-known dislike for boys: "While the boys [Rivers and his brother Charles] were there, the Reverend Charles Dodgson stayed away. Mr. Dodgson didn't like boys" (154).

The purpose of Dodgson's visit there was to cure his stammer. The biography of W.H.R. Rivers by Richard Slobodin, which Barker includes in her bibliography at the end of the last volume of the trilogy, *The Ghost Road* (1995), tells us that Dr. James Hunt, a renowned specialist in curing speech impediments, was Rivers' uncle-in-law, and that Dodgson was one of Hunt's patients for several years. After Hunt's death in 1870, Rivers' father "took up Hunt's practice" and "Dodgson's diaries mention about twenty visits to the Rivers family at Tunbridge or to Rivers alone in London between 1872 and 1877" (6). Slobodin also cites the memoir by Rivers' sister Katharine and reveals: "Her brothers . . . were 'rather upset' by Dodgson's characteristic preference for the company of the girls" (7). So

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the episode above has a basis in historical fact.

The second volume of the trilogy does not directly mention Dodgson, but we can find one reference to a Carrollian book in *The Eye in the Door* (1993). In 1918 Rivers is working at Westminster Empire Hospital in London, tackling the desperate task of curing casualties of mental and nervous disorders, known as "shell-shock," just as he had to at Craiglockhart War Hospital in the earlier years of the war. Barker describes the interior of the Empire Hospital: "The hospital had been built as a children's hospital; the top floor had been the nursery and the walls were decorated with Baa-baa Black Sheep, Little Bo Peep, Red Riding Hood, Humpty-Dumpty" (150). However, this inclusion of "Humpty-Dumpty" does not trigger any of Rivers' memories of Dodgson; here the reference seems a fleeting one.

One the other hand, when it comes to *The Ghost Road*, Dodgson and his nonsense books are regular points of reference. We see again the same interior of the Empire Hospital, but this time the reference to the Alice books dominates the description:

> Crude copies of Tenniel's drawings from *Alice in Wonderland* decorated one end of Ward Seven, for in peacetime this had been a children's hospital. Alice, tiny enough to swim in a sea of her own tears; Alice, unfolding like a telescope till she was nine feet tall; Alice, grown so large her arm protruded from the window; and, most strikingly, Alice with the serpent's neck, undulating above the trees. (18)

These metamorphoses of Alice prefigure the agonised or mutilated apparitions that haunt Rivers' patients day and night.[1] Rivers, himself compared to the White Rabbit (25), contemplates the drawings and finds them "cruelly, savagely appropriate" to the place, thinking to himself: "Alice in Hysterialand" (24). This returns him to his Knowles Bank days and the recollection of Dodgson's visits which has been already mentioned in *Regeneration*. However, in *The Ghost Road* the recollection of Dodgson's

[1] In reality, Tenniel never did the "most striking" drawing of "Alice with a serpent's neck, undulating above the trees," though Dodgson himself did provide such a drawing to the handwritten prototype of *Alice in Wonderland* called *Alice's Adventures under Ground* (1864). This confusion about the author of the drawing may be another example of Barker's lack of careful research, which Ben Shephard in his *TLS* review has severely criticised. But it does evidence Barker's keen interest in the motif of "the head apart from the body," which can be seen in line with the "head-cutting" imagery.

"characteristic preference for the company of the girls" is represented far more pungently, as we will see shortly.

There are a considerable number of direct references to Dodgson and the Alice books in *The Ghost Road*. We find implicit ones as well, and both contribute to the novel in fundamental ways. In fact, most of the leitmotifs and images in the book can be meaningfully united in the light of Carrollian nonsense.

All the boys that appear in *The Ghost Road* are cruelly bullied without exception. British Boys, duped by the war-campaign, are unwittingly forced to join the army. If the boys fail to enter the service, they are made to feel "goaded by the irrational shame of having escaped" (46), so that even a fourteen-year-old boy lies about his age in hopes of being recruited. A young officer, Hallet, naively volunteers to be drafted and has half of his head blown off by a shell at the Western Front. At his deathbed, his fourteen-year-old brother is obliged to perform the impossible task of holding back his tears dumbly "in front of some merciless tribunal in his own mind" (266). Rivers at the age of eight or nine is not allowed to wince at the sight of the sanguinary battle painting at the top of the stairs. A red-haired boy in Amiens is made into a prostitute for both German soldiers and Billy Prior, just as Prior himself was for Father Mackenzie some ten years before. A four-year-old Melanesian boy is abducted from his home-town Ysabel and compelled to live in a hut full of human skulls in an alien village.

Boy-bullying is not incongruous with the Carrollian books. Indeed, we find a "litany of boy abuse that forms a regular feature of [Carroll's] published texts and his private correspondence alike" (Robson 140). The baby boy whom the Duchess in Wonderland and her cook relentlessly nurture keeps crying furiously, but all they do in response is throw at him "a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes," or give him a violent shake. The Duchess' lullaby "Speak roughly to your little boy,/And beat him when he sneezes" (Carroll 62) "embodies Carroll's hostility towards boys" (Kelly 53). In *The Ghost Road*, Dodgson expresses it in a single biting sentence, "*Boys are a mistake*" (26),[2] which the twelve-year-old Rivers resents

[2] The phrase truly belongs to Dodgson, though in a different context. He wrote a sentence to that effect in a letter to a headmaster Dr. G. C. Bell (qtd. in Hudson 260).

vehemently: "Mr Dodgson was the first adult he'd met who stammered as badly as he did himself, and the rejection hurt" (27).

Curiously, when boys in *The Ghost Road* are assailed, in many cases it is their heads and buttocks that receive the attacks. Boys' buttocks in *The Ghost Road* — from the slapped buttocks of the little boy on the first page of the novel to the sodomised arses of Prior and the Amiens boy — symbolize vulnerability. Prior says he shies away from shooting a German soldier relieving himself in a trench "because there's something about the vulnerability of that bare arse" (256). More fatal are the attacks on the head, or the skull, and references to skulls abound in the book. Before the war, one of Rivers' anthropological interests was the life of the Melanesian head-hunters. Rivers often indulges in the memories of his research years, and from time to time Barker presents Rivers' anamneses parallel with his present-day concerns, as he tries to concentrate on Prior, Hallet and the other casualties of war. Accordingly, a medley of skull images runs through the narrative: Vao's custom of killing a bastard boy instead of a sacrificial pig by crushing his skull with a club (103–04); the head-hunting practices of the Melanesians; their skull houses; the skull of the deceased chief Ngea of the Narovo village in the Solomon Islands; "the severed head, torso and limbs of a dismembered body hurtling towards him out of the darkness" and "a face bending over him, the lips, nose and eyelids eaten away as if by leprosy" that appears in Harrington's shell-shocked "hypnagogic hallucinations" (227). A less straightforward reference appears in chapter 6, where Rivers remembers having his hair cut when very young. Young Rivers felt as if "[b]its of him were being cut off" (95), for in his mind this experience was mingled with the aforementioned battle painting he was forced to look at by his father. The painting depicted his great-uncle Lt. Will Rivers having his leg amputated on a battlefield. This traumatic experience revolted Rivers, sending him "howling his head off" (95) in the barber's shop. Barker's careful wording significantly connects this episode with the skull imagery that pervades the whole book.

"Off with his/her head!" is the notorious command the Queen of Wonderland indiscriminately issues about everyone that gets in her way. A very similar nonsensical order seems to prevail in the world of *The Ghost Road*. Not surprisingly, the head-hunting society of Eddystone Island (now Simbo Island) is governed by the "off-with-his-head" principle, but the head-hunting in Eddystone is not necessarily nonsensical. Head-hunting is

a kind of labour of love — "the most tremendous *fun*" (207) — and "without it life los[es] all its zest" (207). Moreover, it serves systematically to accommodate discordance between the two tribes at the smallest expense. The beheaded skulls bring peace to the feuding tribes, if only temporarily, and afterwards they are reverently stored in skull houses, whether they were fellows or enemies.

The significance of Eddystone head-hunting makes a stark contrast with the meaninglessness of WWI head-losing. Rivers remembers his research in the Solomon Islands while he is looking at an X-ray of Hallet's smashed head. He places the photo on the screen, and "[a] skull stared out at him" (230). Rivers remembers being taken to a skull house under repair by his Melanesian mentor-friend, the witch-doctor Njiru. Njiru held one skull out to Rivers, and Rivers "took the skull, aware of the immense honour that was being done to him" (238). In comparison, Hallet is sent down perfunctorily to Rivers with just a medical note that coldly describes the casualty's physical condition. Hallet's damaged "skull" is handled by the War Office with no deference at all. The Western boys' heads are cut or smashed with no particular cause or effect.

Tweedledee in *Through the Looking-Glass* gives a warning before commencing battle over an old rattle with his twin brother Tweedledum: "it's one of the most serious things that can possibly happen to one in a battle — to get one's head cut off" (Carroll 176).[3] In a way, the consequence that Tweedledee fears happens to Hallet. And the boys' "cut" heads do not have the slightest influence upon the ongoing warfare. Discounting the losses, the tragedies of Passchendaele and the Somme are repeated, and, in the end, Prior and most of "the 2nd Manchesters" are killed during an impossible and "insane" (*Ghost* 252) operation of building a pontoon bridge over the Sambre-Oise Canal with the enemy's machine-guns right above them. The penultimate section of the last chapter depicts their dead bodies lying barrenly along the canal edge, with the bridge instantly destroyed by a single shell. The final tableau of meaninglessness. No boy seems to be able to survive the tyranny of decapitation order, and every head is laid waste. As Alice puts it, "They're dreadfully fond of beheading

[3] Robert Polhemus points out that, in the Tweedle episode, Carroll "treats comically and succinctly the most momentous subjects and the most terrible problems of humanity," which are "war and its perpetrators" (368).

people here: the great wonder is, that there's any one left alive!" (Carroll 83).[4]

The fate of the boys serving in the war in Barker's trilogy is that they are falsely ordained to go through meaningless, wanton carnage. The Mouse in *Alice in Wonderland* tells a sad tale about a lawsuit between a dog, Fury, and a mouse, in which Fury monopolises everything except the part of the accused: "I'll be judge, I'll be jury, ... I'll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death" (35). After deciding to allow Sassoon to go back to the battlefield, Rivers feels "that he was having to appeal against conviction in a courtroom where he himself had been both judge and jury" (*Regeneration* 239). It is the great swindle of war.

Some boys are completely ignorant of the deceit, but some are quite conscious of it. Prior belongs to the latter group. When he converses with Hallet on board the ship to France, he gets just fed up with Hallet's naïveté about the meaning of the war: "Full of idealism. I'd rather have had the Walrus and the Carpenter" (*Ghost* 113).

This is the first mention of the Alice books Prior has made. "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is often considered to be a nonsensical rendering of a pecuniary or political swindle. While the Carpenter is a simply greedy exploiter, the Walrus is a cunning hypocrite only pretending sympathy for the lost lives. Anyway, the Oysters are to be lured out and preyed upon by both of them.

The Melanesians as well are put in the role of the Oysters. The tribes on Eddystone fall prey to the two types of Westerners: 1) the likes of "blackbirder" Brennan, who is openly greedy and whose way of conducting business is to "[m]ake friends with them, invite them on board ship, get them drunk and Bob's your Uncle. By the time they come round they're out at sea and there's bugger all they can do about it" (123); 2) the British Commissioner who rules the island and bans head-hunting, missionaries like Father Michael, and the anthropologists, including Rivers and Hocart. Type 1) corresponds to the Carpenter; Type 2) to the Walrus. True, the anthropologists are far less rapacious than the "blackbirders," and more

[4] Barker may have wanted to use the "head" image exclusively for alluding to Carrollian nonsense of "Off with his head." Perhaps she has excluded Rivers' close friend Henry Head from *The Ghost Road*, whose presence has had considerable weight both in *Regeneration* and *The Eye in the Door*, in order to avoid an unnecessary confusion the name "Head" may have caused.

sincerely concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Eddystone people than the British government, but still they are intruders to the Melanesians, as Njiru's occasional hostility towards Rivers shows.

Rivers is as gentle as any Walrus can ever be, but Prior and his fellow men are faced with the most vicious of the Carpenter-Walrus teams. As mentioned above, about a week after Prior is sent to France, Hallet gets involved in a hot debate with Potts about what they are fighting for. While Hallet believes that "[w]e *are* fighting for the legitimate interests of our own country. We *are* fighting in defence of Belgian neutrality. We *are* fighting for French independence" (144), Potts retorts that the war is "being fought to safeguard access to the oil-wells of Mesopotamia" (143). Prior's opinion is wryer but more to the point: "I think things are actually much worse than you [Potts] think because there isn't any kind of rational justification left. It's become a self-perpetuating system. Nobody benefits. Nobody's in control. Nobody knows how to stop" (144). On 16 October, 1918, Prior writes in his diary about the effect of a welcome rumour of the Germans having agreed to peace talks: "Nobody here sees the point of going on now" (221–22). But October 18 sees an extremely poignant two-sentence entry: "But others do. We leave here today, going back into the line" (222). Whether those "others" are hypocrites or exploiters, they have turned into mere cogs in one hypnotic vicious circle. They do not know nor control what they are doing.

This may remind us of the Caucus-race in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which the participants "began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over" (Carroll 33) and, after everybody has had enough, the race just dissolves and everybody is considered as a winner. Wilfred Owen thinks that "we fight because men lost their bearings in the night" (*Ghost* 144). We have already seen Prior comment on the war as "a self-perpetuating system" on the same page of the novel. These statements are appropriate descriptions of the Caucus-race and nonsense in general. Susan Stewart maintains: "Nonsense makes nonsense and is thus in this sense a closed and self-generating field. While the work of the discourse of everyday life is a set of purposes at hand, the work of nonsense is reflection and self-perpetuation" (119). War is even more nonsensical than the Caucus-race, for nobody knows how to stop and nobody actually stops. Paradoxically (and nonsensically), boys are forced to volunteer willingly to serve the army and be sacrificed for no

"purposes at hand," thus constantly providing fuel for the self-perpetuating system.

When Rivers hears from Prior of his intention of returning to the frontline, he recalls the Vao custom of the chieftain crushing the skull of his stepson for sacrifice. This memory immediately leads Rivers to the recollection of his father's church, where there was a stained-glass window of "Abraham with his knife raised to slay his son" (*Ghost* 104). In the Biblical episode, "in the second scenario the voice of God is about to forbid the sacrifice, and will be heeded" (104). But to the Christian boys serving in World War I, no such voice descends. And the war just goes on.

The Abraham-Isaac episode draws our attention to the relationship between the sacrificed son and the bullying father. As Haruko Yamada rightly points out, "the author repeatedly relies on the image of a 'sacrificial son' so as to symbolize the fate of the young men who volunteered to serve in the war" (108, translation mine). Robert Graves in his autobiography recalls: "We no longer saw the war as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder" (255).

Troubled with the hostile relationship with his own father Harry, Prior unconsciously searches for a surrogate father figure.[5] He adopts Rivers. In chapter 6 of *The Ghost Road*, in which Rivers sees the last of Prior before he leaves London, Rivers gets disconcerted as a doctor, for he knows that curing Billy Prior of shell-shock — mutism, insomnia with haunting nightmare, memory lapse and split personality — only enables him to go back to the Western Front (see *Regeneration* 238).[6] But what makes Rivers all the more discomfited is the feeling that Prior sees him as a father figure: "Rivers was more than usually aware of the strong father-son element in his relationship with Prior" (*Ghost* 98). This explains why Rivers, when he remembers the Abraham-Isaac scene just after Prior leaves him, wishes "this particular memory had chosen another moment to surface" (104). Rivers is guiltily averse to being connected with the image of the father sacrificing his son.

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[5] For the causes of the hostility between Billy and Harry Prior, see *Regeneration* 56 and *The Eye in the Door* 187–89, 240–41.

[6] If we remember that Rivers was once compared to the White Rabbit (25), this situation can be expressed by a chapter-heading of *Alice in Wonderland*: "The Rabbit Sends In a Little Bill."

The name "Billy" also makes us conscious of the parallel relation between Rivers and Prior. Will Rivers is a psychiatrist, Billy Prior the patient, but often these two Williams intentionally or unwittingly switch their roles, often enough to make Rivers uneasy about consultations which tend to turn into "confrontation[s]" (97).[7] Rivers feels he has become a father figure for Prior, but as the healer-patient relationship reverses ("Rivers"-es?), so does the father-son relation. Rivers himself had tried to see Dodgson as a kind of father figure, and in his Melanesian days saw his ideal father figure in Njiru. Thus, both Prior and Rivers are "sons" trying to find spiritual surrogate fathers. Thus the Rivers-Prior parallelism is heavily coloured by father-son images.

Dr. Will Rivers and Njiru are by no means the only father figures in the novel. There is Rivers' own father, and, in addition, his great-uncle Lt. William Rivers. As we have seen in the discussion of the head-cutting imagery, Rivers' father gives his son a traumatic experience by forcing him not to flinch at an atrocious picture. The picture is of Lt. William Rivers having his leg amputated "[w]ithout an anaesthetic" (*Ghost* 94). Rivers remembers that "being shown the picture was a lesson" — "you don't behave like *that*, you behave like *this*. '*He* didn't cry,' his father had said, holding him up. '*He didn't make a sound.*' . . . The same name . . . being told not to cry . . . . Had he [Will Rivers] perhaps looked at the picture and concluded that this was what happened to you if your name was William Rivers?" (95). This experience triggers Rivers' life-long stammer and loss of visual memory. The former reminds us of one of the symptoms that the shell-shocked Prior suffers, while the latter is reminiscent of Billy's unswerving effort to avert his eyes from his quarrelling parents, "fix[ing] his eyes on the barometer and blot[ting] everything out" (*Eye* 241). In both Rivers' and Prior's cases, the inflictor of the traumatic assaults, or the "boy-bully," is the father (figure).[8]

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[7] That Prior takes up the role of the questioner to Rivers may be seen as a subtle allusion to the nonsensical verse in *Alice in Wonderland*, "You are old, Father William," in which the inquisitive young man pesters Father William with questions concerning his silly deeds unbecoming his age, and irritates the old man. Also note the significance that the name "William" may carry.

[8] Dodgson himself was always uneasy in the relationship with his father, a very strict and talented preacher. In his biography of Carroll, Morton N. Cohen explicates how Carroll's inferiority complex led him to not only make Wonderland "overpopulated with downright tyrants, heartless figures of authority," but to put "harsh, nonsensical words" into the mouth of Father William, who is a "genial, soft-spoken, religious gentleman" in the original Southey poem (335–36).

The motif of "the father (figure) sending off the son to a battlefield" can be found in Carroll's books. In the famous nonsense verse "Jabberwocky," a father sends his son to fight the mysterious monster Jabberwock. The "beamish boy" succeeds in slaying the monster and "with its head/He went galumphing back" (Carroll 142) to his father. Another example is *The Hunting of the Snark*, and this is more tragic. The Baker joins the crew that aims to hunt Snarks, unidentified and unidentifiable monsters, under the instruction of "A dear uncle of mine (after whom I was named)" (686). The uncle warns his "beamish nephew" to "beware of the day, / If your Snark be a Boojum! For then / You will softly and suddenly vanish away, / And never to be met with again!" (686–87). And in the end, the Baker fulfils his uncle's ominous prediction.

By the same token, Hallet is sent to the frontline by his father Major Hallet, who has no doubt whatsoever about the meaningfulness of warfare. Prior's real father would rather not see his son serving the army "unlike many fathers" (*Ghost* 6), but Prior has Rivers instead. Prior is allowed to go back in war service on account of the diagnosis by his spiritual father Rivers, though Rivers is far from naïve, unlike Hallet senior. And, if we agree with Florence Becker Lennon in considering that the son in "Jabberwocky" and the Baker are the same person (Lennon 103), we can say that Prior survives the first ordeal (although it is not the Jabberwock but he that "loses his head"), but not the second, like the "beamish boy."

In chapter 7 of *The Ghost Road*, Prior remarks on "the general insanity" of warfare, thinking self-derisively, "We're all mad here" (16). This is the very idea that the Cheshire Cat tries to drive home to Alice. When she complains, "I don't want to go among mad people," the Cat replies, "Oh, you ca'n't (sic) help that, . . . we're all mad here." Alice challenges, "How do you know I'm mad?" but the Cat's answer is: "You must be, . . . or you wouldn't have come here" (Carroll 65).

According to Florence Becker Lennon, the Cheshire Cat is the "ectoplasm" of the cat Alice keeps at home, Dinah (111). Dinah is Alice's lifeline in the nonsensical, insane world; the mention of Dinah can chase away the hostile, mad animals and characters, as can be seen in the scene of the pool of tears. After Alice ceases alluding to Dinah, a surrogate cat called the Cheshire Cat makes its ghost-like appearance and becomes her only friend in Wonderland. The Cheshire Cat "seems sane enough, so detached from

the frenetic proceedings" (Levin 219). Alice has the cats to help her get through the fear and uneasiness of being in a strange, threatening world.

Just as Alice has the cats, Prior has his fiancée Sarah, who haunts Prior's mind at the front: "Having said I daren't think about Sarah, I think about her all the time" (256). Sarah is the lifeline indispensable for Prior's sanity. *The Eye in the Door*, in which Prior's memory lapses and split personality relentlessly go from bad to worse, sees the couple in bed: "coiled round her, he kissed all along her spine, gently, so as not to wake her, his lips moving from one vertebra to the next. Stepping stones to sanity" (191).

Likewise, Hallet has his fiancée Susan. But, tragically, neither Sarah nor Susan is powerful enough. The facts that Rivers' sister Katharine is nicknamed the Cheshire Cat, and that Katharine is compared to Emele at "*Tongo polo*" (*Ghost* 183) are significant here. Emele, the widow of the Eddystonian chieftain Ngea, is confined in a stone coffin, performing ritual immolation after her husband's death. In Rivers' feverish reminiscence, Emele, "curled up in the prescribed position" (183), is identified with his sister Katharine on her sickbed.[9] Njiru's explanation that "[t]he widow of a chief can be freed only by the taking of a head" (170) emphasizes the relationship between Emele-Katharine and the Cheshire Cat in an ironical way, for the Cat, being a head without body, can defend itself with perfect ease against the Queen's ordinance of decapitation. The powerless image of imprisoned women is what the unrestrained Cheshire Cat has come to in the numbing world of *The Ghost Road*.

As soon as he leaves London, Prior begins keeping a diary. This is another lifeline for his mental health. And Prior is not the only diary-keeper; by the time the Second Battalion of Manchester arrives, everybody in Prior's platoon has taken to writing something. Prior thinks "it's a way of claiming immunity. First-person narrators can't die, so as long as we keep telling the story of our own lives we're safe" (115). Although he typically jeers at their (and his own) pitiful self-deceit with "Ha bloody fucking Ha," still it is not a pointless act. The soldiers are in crying need of something to hold on to so that they can maintain their individual sane

[9] The posture of Emele is a thinly disguised reproduction of the illustration of "Alice, grown so large her arm protruded from the window" of the house she is entrapped in. Needless to say, it is also reminiscent of Prior and other soldiers in the trenches: "Cramped in holes in the ground" (172).

identities,[10] and the diaries and private letters allow lavish use of the first-person pronoun, thus providing each soldier with the reference mark of his identity and sense of bearings.

However, words keep on losing meaning. By chapter 13, Prior's narrative is permeated with resentment against the inefficiency of the current language system — "if the war went on for a hundred years another language would evolve, one that was capable of describing the sound of a bombardment or the buzzing of flies on a hot August day on the Somme" (198). He detests idle war-slogans and declamatory war-talk: "Patriotism honour courage vomit vomit vomit" (257). Thanks to the flood of insane orders for the insane operation, even the word "sane" has lost its original denotation. Prior writes in a letter to Rivers: "My nerves are in perfect working order. By which I mean that in my present situation the only sane thing to do is to run away, and I will not do it" (254). Language consisting of words stripped of sense, the signifier without the signified (to use Saussurean terminology), or empty indices.

However, there seems to be a kind of word immune to the general loss of meaning: pronouns. After the briefing for the last desperate operation, Prior comes to "realize there's another group of words that still mean something. Little words that trip through sentences unregarded: us, them, we, they, here, there. These are the words of power, and long after we're gone, they'll lie about in the language, like the unexploded grenades in these fields" (257).

The first-person pronoun can function as a secure index of identity. On the other hand, pronouns and words like 'here' and 'there' do not have any fixed, substantial signified. They are signifiers that can accommodate various pieces of the signified. Gilles Deleuze ventriloquises in Lewis Carroll's mouth:

> Carroll asks: how could names have a "respondent"? What does it mean for something to respond to its name? And if things do not respond to their name, what is it that prevents them from losing it? What is it then that would remain, save arbitrariness of denotations to which nothing responds, and the emptiness of indexicals or formal designators of the "that" type — both being stripped of sense? (17).

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[10] Harry Levin rightly argues that Alice undergoes in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* "what modern psychologists would term an identity crisis" (224).

A relevant example comes from the twelfth chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*. The White Rabbit reads out a verse which the court considers to be evidence of the Knave of Heart's theft of the Queen's tarts. The verse carries a hoard of pronouns, but at no moment does it specify to whom or what each pronoun refers. As Harry Levin points out: "The distinction between sense and nonsense . . . is obliterated by the omission of proper names. As a result, the reader gropes from relative pronoun to relative pronoun in a game of grammatical blindman's buff" (236). The result is semantic chaos. Alice can but declare, "*I* don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it" (Carroll 115).

But Prior is well aware of the existence of the people who can give meanings to these pronouns as they please. They are the heads of the states, the COs, the authorities — in short, those in power. They claim the privilege of meaning-givers like Humpty Dumpty. With power in hand, they can authoritatively decide that "we" means the British and that the Germans should be designated as enemies — "they" and "them" — just as the King of Wonderland assertively matches each pronoun in the testimonial verse with any reference he chooses: "'*We know it to be true*' — that's the jury, of course — '*If she should push the matter on*' — that must be the Queen —" (116). In Amiens, the red-haired prostitute-boy speaks to Prior in German. To the French villagers the British are no different from the Germans. But the British authorities draw the "them-and-us" distinction by describing the "very disciplined" Germans as "the brutal and lascivious Hun" (244). Naïve Hallet parrots what he has been told by the War Office and his father: "*We* aren't in Germany. They *are* in France. . . . This is still a just war" (144).[11] The powerful can give meanings and referents to neutral words arbitrarily; or rather, it is the privilege of doing so that is evidence of their power. Thus, pronouns can be "words of power."

The dissociation between, and the arbitrary matching of, the signifier and the signified in Carroll's books is as uncanny as that in *The Ghost Road*, but in *Alice in Wonderland*, the heroine can put an end to the linguistically anarchic Wonderland by defying the power person's "Off with her head!" with a single utterance "Nonsense!" and by calling a spade a spade: "You're

[11] This is not unlike the dangerously simplistic and authoritative logic we have heard quite recently: "Every nation, in every religion, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

nothing but a pack of cards!," thus bringing the right substance to the name of a thing. She triumphs over both the semantic anarchy and the hierarch's tyranny. Alice's words are words of sanity, substantial words that defies the empty, meaningless words. Prior's dying words include "*Bloody mad*" (273). This utterance, devoid of his usual sardonic bluff, is supposed to function as Alice's denunciation. However, Prior's words just fall on stony ground.

Rivers also ruminates over the signification of language, though from a different angle. He broods over the word-power of Njiru, his Dinah. This reverend shaman cum spiritual leader on Eddystone not only reveals to Rivers the tribe's greatest ritual secrets and takes him to its most sacred cave, but even teaches him the magic words to exorcise the evil spirit Ave, "the destroyer of peoples" (268). Those words used to communicate with ghosts are the very basis of Njiru's shamanic power.

Communication with ghosts is one of the fundamental motifs of *The Ghost Road.* The novel assiduously repeats the ghost-talk motif: the séance, or "the spuggies," which Ada Lumb attends; its Melanesian counterpart performed by Kundaite, who is allegedly able to converse in the language of ghosts, or "*talk blong tomate*"; and of course the spirits that Njiru "knows," or has at his command. The motif becomes most pungent when it takes the form of the ghosts of soldiers that appear in the nightmares and hallucinations of Harrington, Wansbeck, Sassoon, Prior and the other casualties. And most of these hallucinatory ghosts try to communicate with the living.

In chapter 16 Rivers persistently asks Wansbeck what language the apparition in his nightmare speaks. Two things inspire Rivers to ask Wansbeck about the possibility of conversation with his ghost: one is the case of Harrington at Craiglockhart; the other is the experience of Kundaite's séance. In his hallucination, Harrington saw a bodiless head and dismembered body parts gradually reassemble, and he had '[l]ong conversations' (228) with the ghost. And the talks helped cure Harrington. The ghost words, the "*talk blong tomate*," are the key to surviving an anarchic, nightmarish world. Through Kundaite's séance, Rivers has learned that "the questions the ghosts had asked had all been questions the living people wanted answered" (211): "The ghosts were not an attempt at evasion . . . either by Siegfried or by the islanders. Rather, the questions

became more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead" (212).

And the mouths of the dying. After being taken back to his platoon's trench by Prior, Hallet loses speech for a while. But in his dying hours in the Empire Hospital, Hallet starts to utter "*Shotvarfet.*" Rivers and Hallet's family just cannot make out his agonized utterance. But, curiously, the other patients — other "ghosts in the making" (46) — in the ward gradually come into line with Hallet: "now the other patients were growing restless. A buzz of protest not against the cry, but in support of it, a wordless murmur from damaged brains and drooping mouths" (274).

Hallet's "*Shotvarfet*" sounds nonsensical. When Alice puzzles over the text of "Jabberwocky" in Looking-Glass Land, she complains, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas — only I don't exactly know what they are!" (Carroll 142). The word "*Shotvarfet*" is represented as a word, but nobody at this stage can decipher the meaning. It is meaningless sound, but it certainly fills the fellow patients' heads with ideas and causes them to murmur protests, which are also sound without apparent sense. Words as sound without meaning or substantial receiver of reference (the signifier without the signified) are quite appropriate for nonsense, and for the language of ghosts as well. They are the words of ghosts, but at the same time, they are "ghosts of words" looking for some medium or spiritualist to convey what they mean. They are empty, insubstantial words, though they belong to a different category from those Prior encounters.

And "*Shotvarfet*" invites interpretation and sympathy. First, fellow patients — "virtual ghosts" — meet the challenge and sense the inexpressible or unexpressed "reference" (the signified) of the word "*Shotvarfet.*" Then Rivers answers the invitation and deciphers this nonsensical "word of a ghost" or "ghost of a word." He interprets the word for Hallet's family: "He's saying, 'It's not worth it'" (274).[12] Rivers is well qualified for the task, being versed in '*talk blong tomate*,' thanks to Njiru. Rivers is the mediator of the living and the dead (or the dying), like Njiru. And Rivers is the go-between of sense and senselessness as well.

[12] Although Rivers is giving meaning to an empty word here, his attitude is completely different from that of those with authoritative power. In his Eddystone survey, Rivers' method is described as follows: "No bearded elderly white looked down on them [the Melanesians], endorsing one set of values and condemning the other" (*Ghost* 119–20).

Hallet's "*Shotvarfet*" is intended to have effects somewhat similar to Alice's defiant and sensible reply to the Queen's decapitation command: "Nonsense!" In the nonsensical world of *The Ghost Road*, where almost everybody is mad or masochistically conditioned to plunge into suicidal acts, only the dead and dying can bring the sane and sober truth. Hallet's pathetic denunciation uncovers the fact that the war is a humbug version of the Caucus-race. "*Shotvarfet*," although it looks like a nonsensical coinage, is actually a statement of sense and sensibility directed towards a nonsensical Hysterialand. And Rivers helps the message get through.

Hallet's ghost-word "*Shotvarfet*," however, proves powerless. The vicious circle of the war-system is invincible against one soldier's dying words. Though completely devoid of malice, Major Hallet's answer to his son — "Oh, it is worth it, it *is*" (274) — only emphasizes the senseless brutality of the father spellbinding his son to believe in the significance of warfare, which the father himself blindly accepts. And so the war goes on.

On the last page of the novel we find words of Melanesian exorcism. Exhausted after seeing Hallet through to his agonized death, Rivers is struggling hard to stay awake. "On the edge of sleep he hears Njiru's voice, repeating the words of the exorcism of Ave" and then, suddenly, Rivers sees the apparition of Njiru coming down the ward of the Empire Hospital, chanting his exorcism. Again the spell does not seem to have been effective at all: Hallet is dead; Prior is dead; most of the "2nd Manchesters" are lying dead in heaps. Njiru himself just "fade[s] into the light of the daytime ward" (276). Already ten years before, Njiru suspected the emptiness of his "*talk blong tomate*":

> . . . the government that forbade the taking of heads though the people lived for it, the traders who cheated them, the plantation bosses who exploited them, and, most of all, the missionaries who destroyed their faith. If you can't prevent such things happening, what is the actual value of your knowledge? (235)

What fills the last page of the book is a bleak sense of defeat and resignation. In the Western world of the Great War Njiru's "*talk blong tomate*," like Hallet's "*Shotvarfet*" and Prior's "*Bloody mad*," is far less effective than Alice's powerful sober retort.

In 1962, W. H. Auden wrote an essay called "Today's 'Wonder-World'

Needs Alice." At the end, he poses a rhetorical question about "the validity of [Carroll's] heroine" and asks whether Alice should be seen as "an adequate symbol for what every human being should try to be like." Auden answers in the affirmative: "one cannot meet a girl or boy of this kind without feeling that what she or he is — by luck and momentarily — is what, after many years and countless follies and errors, one would like, in the end, to become" (39). Elizabeth Sewell sees nonsense as a "game" which "must be rigidly limited in field and methods . . . in order to protect its freedom and function" which ensures the player's "sense of safety" (65–66). Then *The Ghost Road* presents a travesty, a failed rendering of nonsense: nonsense without the sense of security, more nonsensical than nonsense. In warfare, the most meaningless of all follies, there can be no Alice. All that Barker can provide is Prior and Rivers, would-be Alices in Hysteria-land. Prior is killed in his boots. At the end of the novel, Rivers, like Alice, wakes up from a nap, but he does not discover that he has been in 'a curious dream' (Carroll 117): he is still in the middle of nightmarish wartime as before.

All we can do is listen to the ghost-words Barker has left in the book, with the aid of our mediators, Njiru and Rivers. The novel itself, comprising a gallery of historical people, consists of the utterances of the now deceased, or talking ghosts, speaking words rendered "more insistent, more powerful, for being projected into the mouths of the dead." Listen carefully, and we may be able to catch the sobering words of the partly-hidden guardian ghost, heroic Alice, faintly echoing in Barker's book.

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