

The New Criterion

Books

October 2006

Snark watch

by [X.J. Kennedy](#)

A review of "The Annotated Hunting of the Snark."

Lewis Carroll

The Annotated Hunting of the Snark,
edited by Martin Gardner.

W.W. Norton, 192 pages, \$27.95

reviewed by X. J. Kennedy

Nonsense may well be the most misunderstood of literary genres. Many have mistaken it for mere loony and meandering piffle—fun, but chaotic stuff. Yet, as the novelist and critic Elizabeth Sewell discovered in her insightful study *The Field of Nonsense*, a well-made nonsense world is strictly regulated. It resembles a game whose moves are ordained: they can't go in just any direction. Guests at the Mad Tea-Party have to keep moving on to the next seat; indeed, the plot of *Through the Looking-Glass* follows the sequence of a game of chess. Sewell sees nonsense as a logical construct which, unlike poetry, excludes deep emotion. If she is right, the phrase "nonsense poem" seems an oxymoron.

Fond of arbitrary order, nonsense has no truck with lunacy, with which it has sometimes been confounded. Whenever madness intrudes on a Carroll-designed world, this disturbing element must soon be ejected. Alice quits the Mad Tea-Party in disgust, and when, in *The Hunting of the Snark*, a character known only as the Banker starts chanting words "whose utter inanity proved his insanity," his fellow travelers react in horror and abandon him. True, the limericks of Edward Lear are peopled with mental cases like the Old Man of Whitehaven who danced a quadrille with a raven, but we glimpse each of them for only five lines, and clearly we are to think them pretty silly.

In nonsense, it seems clear, a fussy, orderly mind goes out to play, fully aware that it is kidding. Moreover, reading the Alice books and Carroll's verse, one begins to suspect the author of playfully trying on the mantle of the Almighty. His creations are self-contained, little worlds made cunningly. This may be the very insight James Joyce had when, in *Finnegans Wake*, he likens Lewis Carroll to the Trinity: "Dodgfather, Dodgson, & Coo." Certainly there's a curious streak of impiety in the Reverend Mr. Dodgson. In the Alice books, parodies poke fun at poems of moral uplift and the hymns of Isaac Watts. "'Tis the voice of the sluggard" becomes "'Tis the voice of the lobster," and Watts's "busy bee" turns into a "little crocodile."

In *The Hunting of the Snark*, Carroll's verse narrative of 1876, abstract ideas are deflated to the level of objects in everyday use:

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope,
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.

Ever the mathematician, Carroll assumes that numbers are trustworthy things to be clung to like the Old Rugged Cross. Alice, even as she falls down the rabbit-hole, is calculating the radius of the earth. In *The Hunting of the Snark*, the Bellman, leader of the hunt, asserts, “What I tell you three times is true”—which declaration sets off his companion the Butcher on an involved calculation to demonstrate that $2+1=3$.

Understandably, *The Hunting of the Snark, An Agony in Eight Fits* has been much less harried by critics than the earlier, vastly more popular Alice books. But as Martin Gardner records in his extensive bibliography, it has inspired two operas, an operetta, a couple of musicals, and some websites; among its many translations are two in Latin and others in Japanese, Hebrew, Russian, and Faroese. The tale is a sort of nonsensical *Moby-Dick*. In a hundred and forty-one bouncy quatrains, it tells how an expedition sails away to follow a blank chart, on a ship manned by a captain and crew all of whose names alliterate: a Bellman, a Butcher, a Baker, a Banker, a Broker, a Barrister, a Boots, a Bonnet-maker, a Billiard-marker, and a Beaver. They seek the mysterious Snark—we don’t know why—on a quest that looks hopeless from the word go. According to the Baker, should the Snark prove to be a Boojum (whatever that is), then “You will softly and suddenly vanish away,/ And never be met with again.” I trust it isn’t to spoil any surprise to note that that is exactly what happens in the end: “For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see.”

For the reader who cares to explore this curious work, Gardner’s painstakingly annotated edition will be a reliable guide. It reproduces the original illustrations by Henry Holiday, including one that the author objected to because it depicted the Boojum, a creature that Carroll wanted left to the reader’s imagination. For the most part, Holiday’s work seems realistic, except that all the human characters have swollen heads like Humpty Dumpties.

Helpfully, Gardner packs in some ancillary material of interest mainly to the devout Snarkophile: Holiday’s recollections of working with Dodgson (the artist’s job expanded as the author added fits); a mock-serious commentary by the philosopher F. C. S. Schiller; an additional fit by that masterful versifier J. A. Lindon; and a tract that the author inserted in each copy of the first edition, “An Easter Greeting to Every Child Who Loves Alice,” perhaps to counter his story’s final tone of bleak despair.

Well might he have worried about his effect on the little ones. As a child once myself, I found the Alice books terrifying. Empathizing with Alice, I thought her position as the helpless pawn of arbitrary forces, at the mercy of whimsical and imperious adults like the Red Queen and the King and Queen of Hearts, was a picture of childhood too real to take lightly. I recall being surprised that my teacher, whom I had trusted, was pushing these unsettling books on me; I suspected her of conspiring to make children feel powerless. It is true that Carroll’s heroine maintains a remarkably English upper lip throughout her disturbing adventures, and yet in the end of each book she suddenly turns into a giant among pygmies, jerked out of a menacing dream world and rocketed back to reality. It is hard not to heave a sigh of relief.

At the conclusion of the *Snark*, there is no such rescue operation. An ultimately despairing work, it seems too alarming to deserve a PG rating. I wouldn’t want to venture into it again if I didn’t have Martin Gardner by my side. At the age of ninety-two, with more than a hundred volumes to his credit, Gardner has long been one of our most useful deflators of flaky New Age fads in pseudoscience, an expert on mathematical and other puzzles, and an erudite annotator of classics,

among them *Alice*. Had Gardner been around at the time, he might have spared Dante Gabriel Rossetti the pain of mistaking the *Snark* for a veiled attack on himself.

The book is particularly valuable for its patient and extensive notes and for Gardner's preface, in which he sets forth various interpretations of Carroll's fictive hunt. Critics haven't been able to resist reading the story as symbolism or allegory, and Gardner's own guess is that its story of a failed quest brings us to "the end of all searching ... final, absolute extinction"—that dreaded return to nothingness with which the human race continues to flirt. Carroll said that when he wrote it he didn't have any deep meanings in mind, but that, if people insisted, they could take the hunt "as an allegory for the pursuit of happiness." Fair enough, although the *Snark* seems a kind of Rorschach test that lets us read it however we like: an account of any difficult and uncertain quest that comes to naught. Still, that it's such fun along the way ought to insure that this guessing game will go on indefinitely. And surely Martin Gardner's conscientious job of explication shouldn't need reattempting for a good long while.

X.J. Kennedy is **X. J. Kennedy's** new and selected poems were published in Spring 2007 by Johns Hopkins.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 25 October 2006, on page 69

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Snark-watch-2482>