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Wonderland in Jeanette Winterson's Gut Symmetries
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Visual pragmatics of intertextuality: ghosts from Wonderland in Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* (1997)

Though intertextual allusions can be very legible and empirically verifiable, they more often elicit elusive flickers of recognition that we struggle to find a use for when interpreting texts. This uncertainty in the working of literary allusion has been crucial to theories of intertextuality, from attempts at narrowing down and classifying references, to studies that conversely widen their scope, identifying intertextuality as an iterative principle fundamental to textuality itself. This paper explores the doubt inherent in textual interplay: considering intertextuality as a form of haunting, it focuses on fleeting references that make readers see the ghosts of characters and words past hovering between the lines. It does so by analysing Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* (1997), a novel fascinated with the spectral quality of the universe described by contemporary physics, and the resonance between the paradoxes of quantum reality and the whimsical logic of Carroll's wonderlands. From the protagonist's name, Alice, to ontologically challenged rabbits and cats, the Carrollian intertext signals a paradigmatic change in our attempts at making sense. In their visual liminality and stubborn reluctance to signify, intertextual creatures remind us that meaning is not within the sign, waiting to be discovered, but emerges in the provisional, possibly infelicitous interaction between linguistic entities. This emphasis on the pragmatics of verbal and visual encounter between texts and readers calls for another theory of interpretation: one which considers the fragility of recognition, not as an obstacle to 'proper' practices of reading, but as the very condition through which meaning can emerge.

Keywords: intertextuality; pragmatics; hauntology; interpellation; interpretation; Jeanette Winterson; Lewis Carroll

Introduction. Towards a hauntology of reading

At first glance the plot of Winterson's 1997 novel *Gut Symmetries*¹ seems to rely on a well-worn motif of romance, a classic love triangle. Jove, Stella, Alice: the man, the wife, the mistress. Yet in a narrative so permeated by the concepts of contemporary physics entanglements are always more complex than we first imagined: in an unexpected turn of events, Alice and Stella meet and fall in love. This playful relation to the literary tradition extends beyond the novel's twist on a generic formula, to former voices: the narrative interlacing of individual lives reflects an entanglement of literary destinies, as embodied by the protagonists themselves. Jove is Don Giovanni, a man whose insatiable libido constitutes the first catalyst of the story. His ambition to win Stella back from his mistress sends the couple on an ill-advised sailing expedition, and man and wife have been lost at sea for some days when the novel opens. Stella's late father, a kabbalist with a pronounced taste for hopeless voyages across the seas, is Alice's main ally in her quest to find the couple who seduced her, then sailed out while she remained behind to attend her own father's funeral. When he introduces himself to her his voice resonates with the first sentence of *Moby Dick*: 'Call me Ishmael' (*GS*, p. 203). Finally, Alice's literary homonym might be the first to spring to mind—yet her connection to Carroll's heroine is but a nickname. From birth, she is 'Alluvia,' 'That which is deposited by the river' (*GS*, p. 117). Brought to us by the constant ebb and flow of words and stories, she embodies intertextuality itself.

In the encounter between Ishmael's ghost and Alice, a connection is made between the workings of intertextuality and spectrality within literary writing. To the contemporary critic, this cannot but suggest a resonance between the novel and the theoretical context in which it was published—that of the 90s and their 'spectral turn'—and evoke the figure whose work first inspired forays into spectrality as a conceptual

tool. Parting with traditional ontologies' insistence on the solidity of presence, Derrida's *Spectres de Marx*² makes the case for a 'hauntological' approach to reality—which would consider those who, though not present, return from the past and interpellate us. In its insistent absent-presence, the spectre is both an apparition and a figure of discourse—a product of discourse which produces more discourse. Hauntological thinking, therefore, is productive for the literary critic in that it connects with literature's history *qua* intertextuality.³ From this viewpoint literature appears as an anthology—and in French the *h* is a ghost of a letter, which links 'anthologie' to its spectral homophone, 'hantologie'. Literary creation produces a hauntology of texts constantly reworked and repurposed.

Although the idea of a conjunction of intertextuality and spectrality is made compelling by the notion of a literary (h)ant(h)ologie, it seems that it should be apprehended with caution. This is especially the case in that those critical tools have been said to present similar dangers for practices of interpretation. In each case, the effectiveness of the concept brought it to a stage where its exponential use within theory threatened to dilute its critical power.⁴ Once intertextuality and spectrality are presented as essential to textuality itself, we are hard pressed to justify their particular relevance to cases in which the ghostly voices of past texts and characters significantly intrude on the present of reading. Warning against the temptation of a discourse detached from the specificity of its own object, oblivious to the very encounters that the notions stemmed from, critics noted the paradoxical discrepancy between such developments and the tenets of the theory in which they originated. In his critical assessment of the 'spectral turn' Roger Luckhurst characterised this divorce from topicality as 'a curious product of a thinker so often insistent on singularity and a resistant residue of untranslatability in every event'.⁵

This ‘resistant residue,’ and the singularity of events through which linguistic agencies are brought together, is what we ambition to preserve as we envisage intertextuality as the haunting of text by other texts. This will be made possible by considering the economy of spectral intertextuality, or intertextual haunting, through the lens of a pragmatics of discourse. Pragmatics conceptualises verbal encounters as the loci from which meaning emerges. As such, it provides an appropriate angle under which to consider the connection of intertextuality and spectrality within Derrida’s own writing. In approaching literary texts, hauntology sets us on a course that deviates from semiotics, and theories of meaning as reference, to venture into pragmatics.⁶ To a pragmaticist meaning does not precede its performance within speech acts, but depends on the encounter of linguistic agencies. Meaning emerges between texts—between *Gut Symmetries* and the books that its onomastics refers us to, between the Alice books and pre-existing nursery rhymes, treatises on logic and natural history, and contemporary schoolbooks.⁷ It emerges between the text and a reader who is also a flawed, approximative anthology of all the books she ever encountered.⁸

A pragmatic approach to the text guarantees our sustained attention to the singular way in which the ghosts of texts and characters past interpellate us. The first sign of this lies in the fact that our apprehension of intertextuality as haunting does not stem from a theoretical interest in the compatibility of both approaches, so much as it is imposed by Ishmael himself. In the way he manifests himself, and the typical ghostly demeanour he adopts—he is described by Alice as an ‘upright figure of insistence’ (*GS*, p. 203)—the character embodies the encounter of the spectral and the textual. And turning to the other party involved in his sudden appearance, it appears as no coincidence that the ghost from *Moby Dick* addresses Alice. She not only shares his palimpsestuous nature, but crystallises the novel’s particular interest in spectrality—one

that is anchored in science. As a theoretical physicist, Alice researches ‘a new model of the cosmos... ghost universes, symmetrical with ours’ (*GS*, p. 15): she challenges the logic of a scientific tradition grounded in empirical observation. This departure from common sense explains her nickname. Most crucially, it points towards the particular aspect of Victorian spectrality that informs the novel.

The world of *Gut Symmetries* connects with the Victorian era as the moment in which physics transitioned from an understanding of solid matter to a science of spectrality. In the years when Alice’s adventures in Wonderland⁹ and through the looking-glass¹⁰ were published, new theories pointed towards the insistent powers of the invisible over observable phenomena.¹¹ In the emerging fields of thermodynamics and electromagnetism, the Victorians faced the notion that invisible energy was accountable for the world as they saw it. The narrative of *Gut Symmetries* focuses on developments which prolonged this sea change in the status of the visible.¹² In referring to the revolution induced by the theory of relativity and the development of quantum mechanics,¹³ Winterson seizes the paradoxical moment when light becomes crucial to our understanding of matter, just as it stops being a vehicle for seeing.¹⁴ It is in this context that Alice asks us to consider the hauntological quality of the reality we live in, and of the stories we tell: ‘Can anyone deny that we are haunted? What is it that crouches under the myths we have made? Always the physical presence of something split off’ (*GS*, p. 4).

In calling out to us, Winterson’s protagonist reminds us of a final aspect of our pragmatic attention to encounters as they unfold from the text. Besides apprehending the ways in which the novel brings together intertextuality and spectrality, and connects contemporary times with Carroll’s era, this article aims to say something of the singular encounter that makes a reading—and shaped this one. Pragmatics focuses on the verbal

dynamics of discursive exchange and (mis)communication. Winterson's insistence on the paradoxical visibility of our world suggests that books depend not only on our understanding them, but quite literally on our *seeing* what they mean. In looking, not for a meaning embedded in the text, but for the layers of meaning to be discovered when the linguistic and aesthetic history of a novel and its reader are brought together, I realised that my contemporary readings of *Gut Symmetries* were haunted by Carroll's wonderlands. From within the book, Victorian ghosts pointed out connections between scientific and literary understandings of the spectral and the invisible across centuries. In the way they beckoned to me, they stressed the role played by the visual, from the aspect of the written sign to the ghostly presence of previous books and characters, in the pragmatics of reading.

1. Intertextuality as haunting

At the end of *Gut Symmetries* when Alice meets Ishmael and asks who he is, he answers: 'Look in the mirror, Alice, who are you? What table rappers we are, summoning each other across ethers of common sense' (*GS*, p. 212). And indeed to us the characters are like revenants conjured up by mediumistic practice—not only, in the case of Ishmael, because they have been dead for some years, but because they evoke faint echoes and visions of past readings. *Gut Symmetries* opens up spaces in which the 'common sense' of empirical experience does not have pride of place. Here the mirror no longer works as a locus of visual self-identification: instead of producing a spitting image of the self it conjures up the ghosts of fictional worlds that lie beyond the bounds of common sense—among which Carroll's worlds of nonsense. Let's stage our own séance, and see how in the close reading of one page such a summons may be performed.

Here is Alice's account of her formative years, which seem to bear little resemblance to the childhood world described by Lewis Carroll:

When I was ten I heard my headmaster tell my father, 'She'll never be top drawer.'

I looked at the pockets of their tweed coats, their knitted pullovers and knitted ties ... I felt myself caught between two metal plates, crushing me ... I wanted to say 'Wait' but I was so low down that they could not possibly hear me. I lived in a world below their belts, not an adult nor a child, smaller than small at the indeterminate age. The plates ground together and my father started to talk about the cricket.

We got home, my father and I, ... and while he poured himself a sherry, I went into my parents' room where they kept their chest of drawers.

There were two top drawers. My mother's held her jewellery and scent. My father's stored his handkerchiefs. His hobby was magic tricks.

... I had long believed ... that my father had at least two hundred handkerchiefs and that he had handkerchiefs as kings have treasure. Silk, spotted, plain, embroidered, cotton, paisley, patterned, striped, linen, raw, spun, dyed, lace like a periwig for his evening clothes. When he put one in his top pocket he sometimes gave it rabbit ears.

'Alice?'

And I followed him through corridors of make-believe and love.

Right at the back of the drawer was his gold watch; a full hunter that chimed every fifteen minutes. Essential for a man whose time was measured in quarter hours.

Is this what I would not be? Solid, reliable, valuable, conspicuous, extravagant, rare?

I scattered the handkerchiefs like soft jewels. Is this what I would not be? Fancy, impudent, useful, beautiful, multiple, various, witty, gay?

In what was left of the afternoon light I opened the lower drawers.

Underwear, talcum powder, balled up socks.

'Do you have to work so hard?' said my father, when I was anorexic and hollow eyed.

I got a scholarship to Cambridge to read physics and I started eating again. Of sleep I remained suspicious.

When I sleep I dream and when I dream I fall back into my fears. The gold watch is there, ticking time away, and I have often tried to climb inside it and jam the mechanism with my body. If I succeed, I go to sleep within my sleep, only to wake up violently because the watch is no longer ticking but I am.

I told this dream to my father who advised me to slow down. ...

There was a small mirror in my room. When I looked into it I did not see Alice, I saw underwear, talcum powder, balled up socks. (*GS*, pp. 20-22)

Presenting us with imaginary passages into nonsense—such are dreams and mirrors—the page calls on our visual memory and superimposes layers of meaning. Scattered images and words fall into patterns of juxtaposition and articulation, and point to Carroll's wonderland as a 'ghost universe' for Alice's childhood home and school on the Mersey. The rabbit is our first clue, in its proximity to her name and to the verb 'follow.' In its doubly virtual quality the rabbit points to Carroll's imaginative *mise en abyme*, as the little protagonist dreams of creatures who might be dreaming her.¹⁵ Here the image in Alice's memory is a pair of ears attached to no rabbit at all, a fragment signalling the whole just as the smile signalled the Cheshire cat, in one of the most powerful afterimages¹⁶ to be found in Wonderland: 'this time [the Cat] vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat!"' (*AW*, p. 53). The sense of recognition elicited by those ghost-like images is confirmed by the presence of the hunter watch, which reminds us of Wonderland watches—the one that tells the rabbit he is late,¹⁷ but also the Hatter's watch, the mechanism of which is jammed with bread crumbs following butter-based overhauls.¹⁸

The presence of Wonderland creatures and objects in turn informs our perception of the encounter between Alice's headmaster and father. The rhetoric of their conversation is evocative of Carroll's visual imagination: they make use of images which, if interpreted literally, could be life-threatening for the little girl. Here Alice's misreading of the metaphorical adjective 'top-drawer' conjures up an image of balled-up socks, which still prevents her from assuming her own frame in the mirror years later. Similarly, her disappearance between the two metal plates, and the disproportion she feels in the presence of adults discussing her from such a distance that they cannot hear her, effectively bring about her elimination—from the scene, as the plates grind together, and from the conversation, as a different topic is chosen. The child's helplessness echoes the anxiety that permeates Carroll's world of unpredictable physical transformations, for instance when a shrinking Alice fears she might '[go] out altogether like a candle' (AW, p. 12).

In nonsense lands, as in the world of *Gut Symmetries*, the violence inherent in images is proportionate to the power they hold. Images are vitally important in that the very constitution of the self depends on them: because Alice lost her sense of self while falling into the rabbit-hole or going through the mirror, she must rely on the creatures she meets to 'believe' in her. In the best cases her interlocutor agrees to lend her credibility, as does the conciliatory unicorn. In the worst configurations her very existence is negated: Tweedledum and Tweedledee maliciously suggest that she is but a figment of the Red King's dream.

In any interpellative process,¹⁹ the individual called into a subject is assigned a specific place within an ideological apparatus. One such apparatus is pervasive in the lands visited by Carroll's Alice, and plays a crucial part in this passage from *Gut Symmetries*: it is the education system. Wonderland creatures constantly test little Alice

on knowledge that she half recognises, but can no longer follow the logic of. Her contemporary homonym is defined negatively by the ideological state apparatus that is school: she only knows what she will *never* be. The agents of this discursive violence seem to wield all the performative power within language, just as they embody authority within the institution. Alice meanwhile is a figure twice minor—a girl who is neither a child nor an adult. Her being ‘smaller than small at the indeterminate age’ recalls Humpty Dumpty’s harsh judgement on the ‘uncomfortable age’²⁰ that is seven and a half. It would appear that the ‘belts’ and ‘ties’ of this male world of domination were not just descriptive details, but reminiscences of this character’s belt-cum-cravat, the proper identification of which causes Alice great distress in *Through the Looking-Glass*.²¹

Ultimately Alice is defined as a lack: a ghost-like entity, quite similar in that respect to the images summoned up by the intertext. The metaphorical interpellation identifies her as a negative quantity: the result of this process is to make her a ‘hollow-eyed’, ‘anorexic’ student. Interestingly, however, the reliance of intertextuality on negative images also opens up the possibility for the girl to turn those images inside out, and define herself in a movement of resistance to the interpellative power wielded by the male characters. The visual world produced between the contemporary text and its Victorian hypertext lends itself to forms of ‘counter-interpellation.’²² In Alice’s desperate comparison between top and bottom drawer, the violent process of negative predication begins with the present tense: ‘Is this what I would not be?’, which blurs the distinction between the moment of utterance and the moment referred to within the narrative. The confusion produced by the remark is conveyed by the lack of agreement between tenses (‘Was that what...’), which means that the presentative ‘this is’ intrudes on our present interaction with the narrator. Yet the series of adjectives ends with ‘gay’,

a word which is taken up and given another meaning later in the narrative. As Alice falls in love with Stella she goes *through* the looking-glass, beyond the tautological definition of herself through a mirrored reflection, as the initial narcissistic fascination²³ is shattered:

The reflecting image of a woman with a woman is seductive ... [yet] I did disturb the water and the perfect picture broke ...

Why ... did I trouble the surface?

It was not myself I fell in love with it was her. (*GS*, p. 119)

In going through the looking-glass, looking for the other rather than herself, Alice finds a powerful means of counter-interpellation. A similar process is at stake in her choice of career: in going for physics at Cambridge, Alice becomes a negative counterpart of Charles Dodgson, the Oxonian mathematician. Rather than clinging to Euclidean geometry, she grapples with ‘three spatial dimensions and the oddity of time’ (*GS*, p. 4), and this fourth, more elusive dimension is her primary focus: ‘I chose to study time in order to outwit it’ (*GS*, p. 20). Following in her footsteps, we acknowledge that meaning will not emerge within the confines of the book’s three-dimensional vehicle without a fourth—which only we as ‘other’ can bring to the table.

This insistence on looking for another, on working with unknown quantities, reflect the narrative’s politics of vision. *Gut Symmetries* presents us with characters who look for, rather than at, the world. Ishmael’s study of the Kabbalah echoes Alice’s research in that respect: never presupposing that facts are there to be discovered, both keep looking for connections between people, moments in time, and states of matter. This practice of observation ties in with another intertextual complex within the novel—one that sends us on a never-ending quest.

2. Interpretation as Snark hunting

Among the narrative motifs organised into a glossary in the first pages of *Gut Symmetries*, as a prologue to the story, one entry defines ‘The Ship of Fools’ as ‘A mediaeval conceit. Lunatics/saints sailing after that which cannot be found’ (*GS*, p. 6). This constitutes both a metaphor for the narrative and an emblem of the event that prompts it, as Alice seeks out the lovers she lost. Ishmael’s name associates the motif with *Moby Dick*; yet in some respects the novel comes closer to Carroll’s treatment of it in *The Hunting of the Snark*.²⁴ One immediate confirmation of this lies in the characterisation of Alice’s ‘crew.’ The announcement that sets us off on our narrative journey, ‘The Ship of Fools is sailing tonight and all of us are aboard’ (*AW*, p. 9) warns us of the mad endeavour we are embarking on. It echoes with the Cheshire Cat’s assessment of Alice’s mental state: “‘we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.” “How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice. “You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here”” (*AW*, p. 51). Just as it did for Alice, the use of the first person plural (‘all of us are...’) actualises our nagging sense that as readers we share in the madness—if we were perfectly sane we would not be there either. When protagonists from Wonderland invited themselves into the narrative, they turned Alice’s world into a palimpsest of two childhood classics. But the proximity of Winterson’s Ship of Fools with Carroll’s relies on a more tenuous experience of seeing, and more explicitly apprehends intertextual recognition as a potential fool’s errand. This is because the reference to Snark hunting goes beyond any cat’s observation that we are out of our senses: it identifies the insanity as the fuel of an impossible, never-ending quest.

Although the exact composition of Alice’s crew only comes later in *Gut Symmetries*, the first lines of the prologue suggest its proximity with the Snark hunting party. In Alice’s description of Paracelsus as a ‘bellicose, bellyaching, belching, belfry

of a man with a pelvis like a beldam' (*GS*, p. 1), the assonance elicits a strange sense of recognition, which is reinforced by the mention of the Ship of Fools a few pages later. The recurrence of the sound [b]—the 'mis-bodied *bel esprit*' from Basle also abides by the correspondence principle: 'as above, so below' (*GS*, pp. 1–2)—designates the alchemist as a good candidate to join Carroll's crew, which only admits trade names beginning in B, including a Bellman, a Boots, a Barrister, a Broker, a Billiard-marker, a Banker, a Beaver, a Baker specialized in Bride-cake, and a Butcher specialized in Beavers. Appearing as it does in the echo of a repeated sound, the allusion to the *Hunting* is barely recognisable: it has us wondering whether we might be 'seeing things,' as we say when we know that what we see is not actually *there*—that, like ghosts, it does not exist. Paradoxically, the reference to the poem becomes clearer with the intrusion of a creature that defies our powers of visual perception.

With its initial [b], the 'Boojum' version of the Snark connects the object of the quest with those looking for it. Conversely, it points to the ontological rift that prevents the search from ever coming to an end:

But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again! (*HS*, Fit the third, p. 225)

The Boojum cannot, by definition, be found: you disappear before you can establish that you saw it. It is what we might call a 'black hole'—the persisting assonance would have pleased Carroll's ear—: an object so powerfully invisible that coming into contact with it will make you vanish. This is what we 'see' at the end of the poem, when the Baker disappears:

... they found

Not a button, or feather, or mark,
By which they could tell that they stood on the ground
Where the Baker had met with the Snark.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away—
For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see. (*HS*, Fit the Eighth, p. 234).

In the expedition that the narrative represents in *Gut Symmetries*, the object of the fools' quest is likewise defined as 'that which cannot be found.' The phrase, which encapsulates Carroll's Snark in Boojum form, resurfaces at various points in the narrative, offering variations on the Ship of Fools motif. It appears within an allegorical tale which constitutes a *mise en abyme* of the novel, and echoes Carroll's poem:

*Once upon a time there were two friends who found a third ...
After three months they decided to go on a quest.
'What shall we seek?' they asked each other.
The first said, 'Gold.'
The second said, 'Wives.'
The third said, 'That which cannot be found.'
They all agreed that this last was the best and so they set out in fine array.*
(*GS*, p. 140)

After years sailing the seas, the travellers run into a mysterious man. When they tell him that they are looking for 'that which cannot be found,' he replies 'It has found you' (*GS*, 141), and they are never seen again.

Death will not let itself be found, yet it is the most compelling object—one which, eventually finding us, will bring all our travels to an end. Just like Death, Boojums cannot be discovered. Yet as we read we feel compelled to acknowledge their spectral presence, to answer their contradictory injunction of ghosts demanding to be seen. This might be the making of us as interpreters of the text, critics embarking on an

open-ended quest for meaning. It might also be our undoing, the moment when meaning is lost in interpretive delirium. In the quest that is her story, Winterson's Alice is not only looking for the embarcation on which Jove and Stella got lost at sea. She is also remembering David, the father she once followed like a white rabbit, and whose death was the reason she did not sail with her lovers. In her attempt at looking for the departed, she is assisted by her paternal grandmother. Associated with David by blood, the grandmother is a representative of nonsense whose presence also evokes the creatures of Wonderland. In her kitchen she keeps a jar with a baby rabbit preserved in formaldehyde, a present from her son. Attending the funeral with Alice, she reminisces with her about David's taste for conjuring tricks: he used to whip a tablecloth from the dinner table, flinging 'the scandalised cups and plates ... against gravity into a Madhatter's party' (*GS*, p. 159). What this passage in the narrative suggests, however, is that this character is more than just a medium for Carroll's creatures. She crucially embodies the contradictory gesture of visual interpellation inherent in the Boojum.

Sitting at the kitchen table after the burial, the grandmother asks Alice to look at her. The portrait that follows ties in with another descriptive passage, so that a dyptich emerges. Separated by a hundred pages, the two descriptions follow a pattern whereby an invitation to 'look' at the grandmother, extended to the protagonist, then to the reader, is followed by a list of assonant words:

'Look at me.' Yes, look at her, bunioned, bulbous, hair in bulrush rolls, butt-headed, butter-hearted and tenacious as a buckaroo... (*GS*, p. 64)

'Look at me,' said Grandmother. Yes look at her. Spiny as a jujube, sweet as a julep, ju-jitsu-minded with a heart like a jubilee. Energy, work and heat in the joule-force of her. A wryneck jynx... (*GS*, p. 157)

Brought together by our memory of earlier reading, in a dialectics of forgetting and (mis)remembering, the companion pieces work like those table rappers Ishmael later identifies with, and they present their subject as an unknown quantity. In the spectral echoes in [bu:] and [dzu:], ghostly sounds connecting in our memory of silent reading, we might not *see* a Boojum, but we certainly hear its name, and we are almost expecting Alice to conclude: ‘for my grandmother *was* a Boojum, you see.’ But we might simply be looking for what cannot be found—for we are mad, you see.

Though she might not actually be a Carrollian creature, the grandmother does bring out the pragmatics of a paradoxical injunction to see what cannot be seen. The imperative to ‘look’ at her reminds us that just a few pages earlier she was said to have aged into a ghost—a visually inverted, translucent version of herself: ‘her eyes had receded so far into her hollow skull that from the camouflage of her thin hair she should have been able to see backwards’ (*GS*, p. 149). The demand she expresses equates her with Ishmael. In both cases, the insistence that we see something that defies any empirical experience of vision connects with the gesture that closes the *Hunting of the Snark*. Turning to the reader for a guarantee of its narrative logic, the poetic persona puts the words ‘you see’ in pride of place, at the very end of the poem: ‘For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see.’ This playfully reminds us of our paradoxical place as readers: in one fell swoop we are asked to understand nonsense, and to see what is never to be seen.

In the quest for that which cannot be found, the pragmatics of conversation meets with the pragmatics of visual experience. The text calls on us in the hope that we will respond to it felicitously and ‘see’ or ‘recognize’ what is at stake in what we read. These are not ‘mere’ metaphors, for there is no such thing either in *Gut Symmetries* or in Carroll’s nonsense worlds. And in all cases the implications underlying those visual

encounters are shown to be vital. For us fools hunting the Snark, the recognition of what challenges our empirical sense of sight is a matter of life or death. On it hinge our capacity to make sense, and our ability to acknowledge the other's presence with love, when they depend on us to 'see' what they mean, or to 'look' at them. This makes the impossible nature of the requests all the more poignant. As we lend an ear and an eye to the text, we evoke ghosts, Death, Boojums—hauntological creatures that escaped the safe space of ontological visibility, and forbid us from ever stating that we 'see' them. The difficulty of our position as the second person, this 'you' who must answer the summons to 'see' but can never fully respond to it or put it to rest, reminds us that visual pragmatics rarely produce anything resembling a clear meaning, a true encounter, or a felicitous line of communication.

3. Pragmatics of intertextuality: seeing/being seen by the text

As the apostrophe at the end of the *Hunting* suggests, the metaphorical connection between seeing and understanding is at the core of the visual intersubjectivity inherent in the pragmatics of discourse. Verbal exchange is associated with visual reciprocity or lack thereof: its success relies on the observance of certain rules by both parties, on their seeing eye to eye. Bringing us together with a linguistic entity that belongs to our visual landscape, and speaks to us, but never confirms our response, reading tells us about pragmatics.²⁵ It speaks to the potential for miscomprehension or misrecognition inherent in visual and verbal encounters with alterity.

In considering the visual quality of intersubjective exchange as part of our interpretive effort when facing the text, we insist that the pragmatics of reading concern not only the way in which sentences move back and forth in (in)felicitous communication, but also the way we look at each other, and the recognition we look for

in doing so. Recognition is especially sought after where forms of intertextuality arise: when we recognise texts as readers of other texts, and books start reading us as palimpsests of books read and pictures seen before them. But as the reference to Carroll's poem suggests, recognition can be problematic when it relies on our supposed ability to answer a contradictory injunction to 'see.' Introducing 'you' into the pragmatics of poem right as it ended, *The Hunting* questioned and suspended its reader's ability to make sense of it. Similarly, *Gut Symmetries* makes playful use of the instruction to 'see,' and of its connection with referencing practices. In the initial glossary, a number of entries have us looking for words that are actually not referenced elsewhere in the list. When we look up 'River,' for instance, the definition offered, 'see Einstein, Heraclitus, the Mersey, the Hudson, Time' (*GS*, p. 7) doubly challenges the reference process that relies on the verb of perception: we are given no explanation, but only a list of associated words that do not appear in the glossary at all. Responding to the invitation to 'see' would be going on a fool's errand. In other instances, however, the narrative interpellates us as witnesses in a manner that is no longer tongue-in-cheek. The phrase 'you know' appears twice in the novel, significantly at the time when Alice falls in love with Stella: 'You see, I did want to kiss her ... You see, I could have rested there...' (*GS*, p. 119) As Alice goes through the looking-glass, we are not asked to comprehend what is happening, but to 'see' it: to make the imaginative effort of visualising an encounter that leaves space for alterity—something more than the seductive, mirrored images of two women.

The metaphorical use of the verb 'see' is crucial to visual pragmatics in that it lays the ground for potential mishaps in communication. This can be a source of comedy in the exploration of the bonds that tie texts to their readers—when the latter are challenged to see a story through to its nonsensical conclusion, or to acknowledge

the narrative itself as a fool's errand. But Winterson's use of the phrase, in the context of her protagonist's coming out, points to more serious implications underlying the pragmatic elaboration of meaning: miscommunication can also result from the participants' refusal to collaborate, their defiance of the rules presiding over felicitous exchanges.²⁶ As in *Gut Symmetries*, this ambiguity is at the heart of Carroll's exploration of the pragmatics of conversation. When, after a series of disturbing transformations, Alice tries to answer the Caterpillar's summons and introduce herself, she fumbles: 'I ca'n't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, ... because I'm not myself, you see,' to which her interlocutor's irritable answer is: 'I don't see' (AW, p. 35). The Caterpillar *will not* acknowledge the metaphorical framework which Alice uses in an attempt to settle her own confusion.

In considering such instances of failed recognition, the visual pragmatics at work in the practice of reference really show the risk inherent in our attempts at communication and interpretation. If there is always a chance that we might not recognise what is being presented to us, there is also a constant possibility that we might choose not to. The adventures of Carroll's Alice mainly consist of the protagonist's face-to-face encounters with nonsensical creatures, as anticipated by her assessment of a good read: "“what is the use of a book ... without pictures or conversations?”” (AW, p. 7). But as the logic of pragmatics reminds us, the structure of the conversation cannot guarantee felicitous communication or recognition. This finds an echo in *Gut Symmetries*, when Alice acknowledges the risk that her storytelling may find no one to 'see' it properly:

Am I vain enough to assume you will understand me? No. So I go on puzzling over new joints for words, hoping that this time, one piece will slide smooth against the next.

... Hand in hand through the nightmare of narrative, the neat sentences secret-nailed over meaning. Meaning mewed up like an anchorite, its vision in broken pieces behind the wall. And if we pull away the panelling, then what? Without the surface, what hope of contact, of conversation? ...

... [E]very story I begin to tell talks across a story I cannot tell. And if I were not telling this story to you but to someone else, would it be the same story?

... I cannot assume you will understand me. It is just as likely that as I invent what I want to say, you will invent what you want to hear. (*GS*, pp. 24–25)

Conversation is only made possible by a degree of dissimulation: it needs ‘the panelling,’ partly because any attempt at telling will be palimpsestuous. Stories ‘talk across,’ at cross-purposes: layers of discourse are superimposed, some visible, others hidden away, shifting shape from one interlocutor and one act of reading to the next. Though the image of a jigsaw apparently holds the promise of a meaning successfully pieced together, any hope for a complete image is undermined by the grammatical derivation of the noun into a verb—the practice of ‘puzzling’ indefinitely postpones any closure of signification. The success of our stories is as provisional as that of our conversations. Despite positive hopes for cooperative communication, language proves treacherous in that it is never univocal—behind one voice many voices lurk—, never reliable: its meaning only emerges within the distance that separates mine and another’s linguistic world, provided that we are willing and able to bridge the gap. We always run the risk of not making ourselves *clear* to others. As a visual and verbal entity meant to find a reader, the text remains aware of that risk. In the (mis)communicative situation outlined by the last sentence (‘I invent... you will invent’), the temptation to give up on constrictive and possibly ineffective rules of collaboration reminds us of Humpty Dumpty’s policy—‘When *I* use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less’ (*TLG*, p. 163)—, which wrapped him up in incommunicability. With this portrait of the reader as a potential Humpty Dumpty, *Gut Symmetries*

acknowledges the instability of a process of signifying that relies on the verbal and visual competence of others. The risk inherent in this reminds us that we are truly *entrusted* with the books we read, even as we know that part of them will always remain invisible, unrecognisable to us.

Conclusion. Outwitted by the invisible

In *Gut Symmetries*, as in the Alice books, the risks entailed by failed visual and verbal communication are at the core of comedy and tragedy: we laugh at nonsensical dialogues, but sympathize with both Alices' anguish when fellow conversationalists will not acknowledge their existence, or disappear altogether. In both cases, one problematically visible animal helps negotiate such responses—a creature whose use of wit questions ontology in moments of helpless doubt, when we might find ourselves without an explanation but also unwilling to lend ourselves to interpretation. At her father's funeral, Alice recalls her own Cheshire cat:

... my mind was repeating Schrödinger's Cat, Schrödinger's Cat.

The Schrödinger's Cat experiment. The new physics belch at the politely seated dinner table of common sense ... To observe the cat's fate we will have to open the box, but what is the state of the cat before we open the box? According to the mathematics of its wave function, it is neither alive nor dead ...

Absurd? Yes. Einstein, who could not refute the mathematics or deny the evidence of the experiments, hated the conclusion. What kind of a conclusion is it? The truth is, we don't know. As yet, the cat has outwitted us ... Mathematics and physics ... form a gateway into higher alternatives, a reality that can be apprehended but not perceived. A reality at odds with common sense. (*GS*, pp. 207–8)

Like the Cheshire cat, this nonsense Cat is grinning at us while still invisible to us—or precisely because it is invisible. Not seeing it, and being outwitted by it, are necessary conditions to making sense of the world, however unsatisfying this solution—here

Einstein's response recalls Wonderland creatures' judgement on any performance by Alice, and their insistence that speech follow rules and prescriptions, however nonsensical.

In acknowledging that we are always outwitted by the workings of the invisible within the visible, we make allowances for all that we will not see in what we read, and for all that we will see while others do not. In *Gut Symmetries* Stella reminds us of an artistic revolution that was attributed to its painters' impaired vision: 'this new art was ... [n]othing but a defect of vision. The painters were astigmatic; an abnormality of the retina that unfocuses rays of light. That was why they could not paint realistically. They could not see that a cat is a cat is a cat' (*GS*, p. 81). Just like those painters, we readers will never just see what is there to be seen. In the last sentence, the negation of a visual and semantic tautology is enhanced by the irruption, within the commonsensical assertion, of a well-known and well-worn reference to Gertrude Stein.²⁷ Unable to stick to the evidence of facts, we in turn might see that Rose is a cat is a rose, or that a cat is the Cheshire Cat is Schrödinger's Cat. Such is the power wielded by the ghosts of books and images past.

¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries* (London: Granta, 1997). Hereafter cited in text as *GS*.

² Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

³ On the relevance of Derrida's hauntology to reading, see Julian Wolfreys, *Occasional Deconstructions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); *Victorian Hauntings* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁴ Expansive approaches to intertextuality, and the interventions of critics warning against its dilution, came before the 'spectral turn' and subsequent responses to it, but the evolution of both concepts within theory is strikingly similar. The understanding of intertextuality as a principle of iterability crucial to textuality itself harks back to Julia Kristeva's *Séméiotikè* (Paris: Seuil, 1969). Some critics expressed a concern that the concept might be

overstretched. In ‘La stratégie de la forme,’ Laurent Jenny described intertextuality as an ubiquitous term in which meaning should be reinjected (*Poétique*, n° 27, 1976, p. 226). Still presenting intertextuality as the *modus operandi* of literature itself, later critics worked with a specific phenomenology of quotation: see Antoine Compagnon’s *La seconde main* (Paris: Seuil, 1979) and Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). In the case of spectrality, the expansive phase came in the 90s. Roger Luckhurst was the first to publish an illuminating examination of the risks inherent in a discourse of generalised spectrality, which let the specificity of locales and entities fade away (‘The contemporary London Gothic and the limits of the “spectral turn”,’ *Textual Practice* 16 no. 3, 2002, pp. 527–546). For a more recent survey of the field and its resonance within contemporary cultural theory, see María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren’s introduction to *The Spectralities Reader* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), which insists on preserving the ghost’s potential as ‘a figure of unruliness pointing to the tangibly ambiguous’ (p. 9).

⁵ Luckhurst, ‘The contemporary London Gothic and the limits of the “spectral turn”,’ p. 541.

⁶ See Paul Ricœur, ‘Signe et Sens’, (*Encyclopædia Universalis*, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/signe-et-sens/>, 23 May 2016) on the directions taken in the semantic critique of semiotics and structural linguistics. Derrida’s insistence on the materiality of writing, and his critique of Saussure’s idealist theory of language as voice in *De la grammatologie* (Paris, Minuit, 1967), associate him with the pragmaticist tradition: they deny the possibility for language to signify only in reference to itself, and highlight its contingent appearance within discursive situations.

⁷ See Jean-Jacques Lecercle, ‘The Polyphony of nonsense’ in *Philosophy of Nonsense* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 165–222.

⁸ For applications of pragmatics to literary reading, see Dominique Maingueneau, *Pragmatique pour le discours littéraire* (Paris: Dunod, 1990), Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (New-York: Macmillan, 1999), ‘Affects, Text, and Performativity’, ed. Alex Houen, a special issue of *Textual Practice* 25, no. 2 (2011).

⁹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, in Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 1–99 (hereafter cited in text as *AW*).

¹⁰ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, in Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 101–209 (hereafter cited in text as *TLG*).

¹¹ See Gillian Beer, ‘Authentic Tidings of Invisible Things,’ in *Vision in Context*, eds. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996): pp. 85–98, p. 85: ‘the performance of energies lay beyond the reach of eyesight... Vision was, in a quite new way, subordinate to the invisible.’

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- ¹² At a sub-atomic level, quantum mechanics states, the dichotomy between waves and particles no longer holds. This principle of uncertainty put an end to centuries of controversy that were brought to a head in the Victorian era, as the development of electromagnetic theories disproved the propagation of waves within an ether.
- ¹³ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962); John Gribbin, *Quantum Physics* (London: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2002).
- ¹⁴ A major development associated with the formalisation of electromagnetism was the discovery that what we called ‘light’ belonged to a spectrum of radiation that reached far beyond our visual perception.
- ¹⁵ See Carroll, *TLG*, p. 145.
- ¹⁶ In *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990) Jonathan Crary interprets the study of the afterimage by 19th century physiologists as a crucial step in the ‘internalisation’ of vision. As heirs to those scientific findings, we know that perception is created within the self and marked by the persistence of past experiences.
- ¹⁷ See Carroll, *AW*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ See Carroll, *AW*, pp. 55–56.
- ¹⁹ See Althusser, ‘Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’Etat’ in *Positions* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1976), pp. 67–125; Judith Butler, ‘Consciousness makes subjects of us all: Althusser’s Subjection’, chap. 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Pragmatics proves very useful to think about interpellative practices, which also rest on the implication that language has performative power—that it does not reflect but actually produces our world and the power relations within it. See Butler *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Lecercle’s *Interpretation as pragmatics*.
- ²⁰ See Carroll, *TLG*, p. 162.
- ²¹ See Carroll, *TLG*, p. 162.
- ²² See Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 6, 30; ‘On Linguistic Vulnerability,’ in *Excitable Speech*, pp. 1–42; Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, pp. 163–5.
- ²³ In this the narrative counters Freud’s interpretation of homosexuality as regressive narcissism. See Sigmund Freud, ‘Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia paranoides) (Schreber)’ and ‘The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,’ in *Case histories II: The ‘Rat Man’, Schreber, the ‘Wolf Man’, A Case of Female Homosexuality*, trans. Alix and James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), pp.129–224, 367–400.

²⁴ Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*, in Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 215–234.

Hereafter cited in text as *HS*, Fit reference, page.

²⁵ See Alex Houen, ‘Affecting words,’ in ‘Affects, Text, and Performativity’, ed. Houen (2011), pp. 215–232.

²⁶ Pointing out that verbal exchanges in nonsense worlds often hinge on power play, Lecercle suggests that ‘agon’ might sometimes rival the idea of collaboration within communication. See H. P. Grice, ‘Logic and conversation,’ in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22–40; Lecercle, ‘The Pragmatics of nonsense,’ in *Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994), pp. 69–111.

²⁷ The variation on Stein’s original quote reminds us of other instances in which it was recuperated by conservative-minded speakers, and used as a tautology legitimizing the status quo. The iterability of the sentence as quotation makes it vulnerable to misuse: its power escapes the intention of its author, a fact Winterson reminds us of as she submits a line of poetry to the formulation of an aggressively commonsensical maxim. In reading this we might remember John Lindsay’s non-committal ‘A parade is a parade is a parade’, in footage shot by William Klein during a parade in celebration of America’s role in Vietnam in 1967, and taken up by Chris Marker in *Loin du Vietnam* (1967). In this detour via Chris Marker’s oeuvre we catch a glimpse of another ghostly, smiling cat: the filmmaker’s documentary style linking wit and commitment, along with his fascination with cats, account for the translation of another title of his, *Le Fond de l’air est rouge*, into *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977).