

"Review of Daniel F. Kirk's *Charles Dodgson, Semeiotician*," (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Monographs, Humanities, No. 11 [Fall, 1962]), University of Florida Press, 1963, 81pp.; review published in *Philological Quarterly*, XLIII (July, 1964), 429–431

In the preface to his monograph Mr. Kirk argues that the personality of Charles Dodgson ("Lewis Carroll") is typically misunderstood, that his books are not read in the proper spirit, and that—worst of all—they are not read enough. Kirk calls his monograph a "contribution toward reintroducing Dodgson and *Alice* to the public." Since he feels that the two *Alice* books taken together constitute "a masterpiece of the first rank," he is disturbed at their being shelved in the nursery and largely ignored by scholars and critics. He would like to see *Alice* widely read by adults, made required reading for college students, and subjected to "intense literary evaluation." Kirk has attempted to provide a foundation for further serious study by examining the "concern for language—the technical language of mathematics and symbolic logic, and the common ordinary English language" which he finds "ubiquitous" in Dodgson's writings. He feels that since Dodgson was "practically unique" in being "attracted to language in almost all of its aspects," a word of limited denotation such as "poet," "grammarian," or "mathematician" is inadequate to describe him. He prefers the broad term "semeiotician" to classify Dodgson as a man interested in almost all of the facets of language.

Kirk feels that the best way to understand Dodgson's "uncommon mind" is to examine the "semeiotic interest" which characterizes his writings, both technical and literary. He hopes that such an approach will point out the essential integrity of Dodgson's mind and serve as a corrective to the psychological analysis which persists in viewing Dodgson as two personalities co-existing in uneasy union—one, a stuffy pedantic Oxford don; the other, a childlike poet of fantasy and nonsense. Such a corrective is necessary, for the notion that Dodgson/Carroll was a split personality is still prevalent among readers and critics. Kirk's study provides the needed corrective. By pointing out that a preoccupation with various types of language-systems characterizes Dodgson's writings, he has demonstrated that the technical and literary works have much in common and are the products of an internally consistent mind. "Mathematician" and "poet" are merely aspects of Charles Dodgson as a student of language (in Kirk's term, "semeiotician"). Indeed, certain of Dodgson's works seem to fall into an intermediate position between the purely technical and purely literary. Works like *A Tangled Tale* and *Euclid and His Modern Rivals*, which deal with mathematical matter in a "literary" context, and the Oxford satires, which parody mathematical operations, further refute the notion of a split personality.

In his second and third chapters Kirk has a descriptive survey of Dodgson's publications in mathematics and logic: a valuable survey, for it describes a significant portion of Dodgson's work with which the reader of "Lewis Carroll" is largely unfamiliar. There is, as Kirk asserts, in all of these technical publications—whether formal treatises, study aids for undergraduates, or papers in symbolic logic—an awareness of the disadvantages of introducing new mathematical symbols into established systems, and a concern with precision in formulating definitions and conducting proofs. Kirk's estimate of Dodgson as professional mathematician and logician concurs with those expressed at various times by such men as R. B. Braithwaite, D. B. Eperson, Eric Temple Bell, and Bertrand Russell: that he was a clever, talented, yet superficial specialist who occupied himself with elementary and often trivial topics, did not keep up with new developments, was extremely conservative with regard to innovations in mathematical education, and—with the exception of two logical paradoxes involving hypotheticals which he published near the end of his life—made no significant or lasting contribution either to mathematics or logic.

In his fourth chapter Kirk gives brief attention to the "semeiotic interest" revealed in some of Dodgson's minor pieces—such as "Eternal Punishment" and the Oxford Satires—and in the numerous puzzles, games, and riddles which he invented throughout his life. Mr. Kirk treats all of this in a dozen pages, approximately two-thirds of them taken up by illustrative quotations, expository transitions between examples, and Kirk's summaries of the contexts from which the examples are drawn. The remaining one-third is devoted to general comments on the works and just enough specific analysis to tantalize the reader into wanting more. The same criticism may be applied to his fifth chapter, a ten-page discussion of Dodgson's play with language in his early short stories, his parodies of other poets, and his imitations of archaic diction and regional dialects. Here, however, direct quotation and the establishing of contexts take up only about half the available space. The remainder is given over to biographical comment, to an interesting though brief discussion of Dodgson's practice as parodist, and to the development of Kirk's observation that "Dodgson's semeiotic ideas, detached from their expression in his poems, short stories, and the *Alice* books, seem elusive and pale. But, contrariwise, the poems and short stories are as nothing without the ideas that Charles Dodgson, semeiotician, put into them" (p. 41).

In his sixth chapter Kirk discusses the "semeiotic" implications of selected passages from the *Alice* books and asserts that in several instances Dodgson anticipated the speculations of twentieth-century students of language. He has made a judicious selection of examples to demonstrate the range of Dodgson's linguistic interest: his preoccupation with names and with the denotation and connotation of labels (the empty jar labeled

ORANGE MARMALADE; the fact that the Fawn is not frightened until it realizes that Alice is a "little girl"); his interest in the cognitive significance of statements that cannot be verified ("Do cats eat bats?") and in the substantive use of words denoting a null class ("I see Nobody on the road"); his concern with the import of statements as a function of their logical structure ("I say what I mean" is not the same thing as "I mean what I say"); and his "strong intuitive feeling for the distinction between 'structural' and 'lexical' meaning in language" (the first stanza of "Jabberwocky," though devoid of lexical content, imparts an illusion of sense by virtue of its structural components). Kirk relates the theoretical implications of many of these passages to the work of modern linguists and logicians. This chapter, by presenting an analysis of specific examples of Dodgson's linguistic play, is the most useful for providing an understanding of Dodgson's insight into the logic of English structure and usage, and his anticipation of many aspects of twentieth-century semeiotic. This chapter could be read profitably by any serious student of Lewis Carroll.

In his final chapter Kirk develops the thesis that, from the viewpoint of modern semeioticians, *Alice* is essentially "realistic" because it makes us "aware of the importance of the structure of language" (p. 72). In a world of "linguistic relativity" it is only a language-system's consistency and completeness, its suitability for a given task, that counts. Since whatever language-system he is using stands between him and "physical reality" and conditions his view of it, the modern semeiotician is concerned primarily with the "reality of the linguistic system, not what lies beyond it. . . . The man on the street may be sure of 'how things are,' but the semeiotician is only sure about language—and he will not claim to be surely sure about even that" (p. 71). The peculiar value of the *Alice* books is that they point out aspects of semeiotic reality for their readers. Dodgson's puns, for example, "shake up our minds and liberate us from the bondage of the one-word-one-meaning attitude which holds each of us from time to time in mental check. Like so much of Dodgson's work, they teach while they entertain" (p. 72).

In this final chapter Kirk hints at ideas which could well have been the central focus of his monograph. But he has chosen not to analyze the nature of Dodgson's concern with language: he has chosen merely to demonstrate that such a concern existed. By failing to investigate the basic assumptions that underlie Dodgson's practice of semeiotic principles, Kirk has severely limited the potential significance of his study. Many of these underlying principles are quite sophisticated, particularly those dealing with obstacles presented to communication by the nature of language itself, with the arbitrary nature of signs, with the function of proper names, and with the illogicality of conventional usage. Kirk does not examine them, nor does he attempt a detailed examination of any of Dodgson's major works except

Alice (and his treatment of this is far from exhaustive). There is no thorough discussion of the Oxford satires (rich in puns, parody, and mathematical wit), *The Hunting of the Snark*, or *Sylvie and Bruno*. In view of these striking omissions, one questions Mr. Kirk's confident assertion at the end of his essay that he has "explored the verbal side" of Dodgson's mind (p. 75). For the most part, Kirk's study remains on the level of superficial description; as a whole, it is far from being as comprehensive as the title would imply.

If more could have been done in a study entitled *Charles Dodgson, Semeiotician* than Mr. Kirk attempted, he has, within the limits he set for himself, written an interesting and enlightening essay. The book achieves the purposes stated at the outset: to reintroduce *Alice* to the public, to demonstrate the consistency and "unity" of Dodgson's personality as it is revealed in his many different kinds of writings, and—by indicating the scope and seriousness of his concern with language—to stimulate further study of Charles Dodgson.

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