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## Lewis Carroll and Robert Frost : The Fixing of Talk in Print

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## Lewis Carroll and Robert Frost: The Fixing of Talk in Print

Mark Scott

Robert Frost thought of himself as a man of no nonsense—a man of ideas who thought things through for himself and made his own remarks. That he called what he did “play,” “fun,” and “fooling” for fifty years is hard to explain, but he never called it “nonsense.”

There’s no fooling in Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty, White Knight, Queens, King, or Cheshire Cat (maybe a little there): they all take themselves seriously. They don’t exaggerate innocently. There’s no melodrama in the *Alice* books. There’s no irony. It’s all straight, simple; but to get it that way, Carroll had “multiplied through by negative 1,” to borrow a phrase from the economist Charles L. Kindleberger:

On one occasion in the 1950s when a prominent professor died of a heart attack, the Medical Department at MIT thought it useful to test the faculty for stress and included in the annual physical check-up a half-hour’s interview with the psychiatrist. This produced one sentence in the ultimate evaluation. Mine read, “You are high strung but adjusted to it.” I found this amusing and repeated it to my colleagues. With characteristic wit, Robert Solow multiplied through by  $-1$  and said, “That’s better than being low strung and unable to stand it.”<sup>1</sup>

Frost wasn’t interested in nonsense except as the obvious opposite of *sense*,

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1 Charles P. Kindleberger, “My Working Philosophy,” in *Eminent Economists: Their Life Philosophies*, ed. Michael Szenberg (Cambridge UP, 1992/3), 168.

which for him meant the “good sense” of Alexander Pope, who gave Frost the idea for his first locution in “Mending Wall”:

Something there is more needful than expense,  
And something previous ev’n to taste—’tis sense:  
Good sense, which only is the gift of Heav’n,  
And though no science, fairly worth the sev’n:  
A light, which in yourself you must perceive;  
Jones and Le Notre have it not to give. (“Epistles to Several Persons,”  
IV)

When Frost first wrote of “the sound of sense” to John Bartlett, a former student, on July 4, 1913, he could have built his case on the second of the two parentheses that follow. He didn’t, and he never, it seems, brought up “Alice in Wonderland” again<sup>2</sup>:

Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in Alice in Wonderland which makes anything but dull reading).<sup>3</sup>

For Carroll, nonsense, like sense, *means* it, as Alice *means* it. As soon as we say “nonsense,” we make sense, but as soon as we say “sense” we don’t

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2 In 1952, at a writers’ conference, when asked “How much objective thought should be applied to the dawning of an idea?” Frost answered: “There must be the idea. I have two Latin words that express it well: *mens* and *animus*, that is, thought and spirit. “The thoughts of my heart”—I don’t see how you can make poems about anything else. The good words come from this, not just from the thoughts of my mind. Marvell’s “Coy Mistress” is loaded with ideas. . . . I can’t remember any poems that don’t have ideas in them, except some nonsense poems—“You are old Father William”; that’s good.” In Reginald Cook, *Verbatim* (unpublished).

3 *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 664. CPPP.

make “nonsense.” Nonsense isn’t nonsensical or senseless. It is sensible and makes sense. As nonsense *and* as sense. It isn’t meaningless.

For Frost, the problem with nonsense was that it had no content. It had no ideas. And since a poem was, in one of Frost’s many definitions, “the act of having an idea, and how it feels to have an idea,” nonsense couldn’t count as poetry.<sup>4</sup> It was inane. Poetry was serious business, “the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another” (“Education by Poetry”).

Carroll is one answer to Frost’s “all the fun’s in how you say a thing.” Yeah, no, all the fun’s not in how you say a thing. A little is. And a little more is in what you say, and in who you are, and in when you say it, and in where you are, and in who you’re with, and in what you’re doing. And in why. But it would be hard to isolate one factor in any given situation. Frost knew that: the context of “all the fun’s in how you say a thing” in the “The Mountain” (1914) and his Preface to “A Way Out” (1929) show that he did.

What Frost was talking about had been a feature of children’s literature for 200 years, and had featured in literature, or the written record, especially in all kinds of poetry, going back more than 2000 years. *New England Eclogues*, one possible title for *North of Boston* (1914), had Greek (Theocritus, Hesiod) and Roman (Horace, Virgil) models.

At times, Frost’s descriptive theory of “the sound of sense” meant no more in practice than deleting descriptions of the tone and situation of voice. It meant cutting “stage directions,” as Mark Twain called them near the end of his 1906 *Atlantic Monthly* essay on “William Dean Howells”:

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4 *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*. ed. Robert Faggen. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 54. *N.*

There is another thing which is contentingly noticeable in Mr. Howells's books. That is his "stage directions" — those artifices which authors employ to throw a kind of human naturalness around a scene and a conversation, and help the reader to see the one and get at meanings in the other which might not be perceived if entrusted unexplained to the bare words of the talk. . . . But I am friendly to Mr. Howells's stage directions; more friendly to them than to any one else's, I think. They are done with a competent and discriminating art, and are faithful to the requirements of a stage direction's proper and lawful office, which is to inform.

Carroll kept stage directions out of the dialogue between Alice and the Caterpillar, and kept them to a contenting minimum throughout.

Why has Frost never struck anyone else as a nerd? He was self-possessed, brainy, logical, fastidious, slightly dyslexic. Like Carroll in his fascination with letters and numbers,<sup>5</sup> he was what Simon Baron-Cohen has called a "pattern seeker," a "hyper-systematizer."<sup>6</sup> He was technical. He was absorbed. He thought, *I am sharp*. His letters, poems, talks, and notebooks offer proof of another trait: *stimming*, the talk-trancing in which he held and repeated three or four "ideas" and their Latin-square variations, as in his formula, "famous with his classes" at Pinkerton Academy (1906-1910), for the "kinds of matter used for literary purposes":

uncommon in experience — uncommon in writing

common in experience — common in writing

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5 "A B C is letters. One Two Three is numbers — mathematica. What marks verse off from prose is that it talks letters in numbers. Numbers is a nickname for poetry." *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2007, 168. See also 165. *CPRF*.

6 Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Pattern Seekers: How Autism Drives Human Invention*, Basic Books, 2020.

uncommon in experience — common in writing  
common in experience — uncommon in writing<sup>7</sup>

There was also this 2x2 matrix: in 1958, having been read by people for sixty-four years and sold some 500,000 copies of his books, Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer:

People who read me seem to be divided into four groups. Twenty-five percent like me for the right reasons; twenty-five percent like me for the wrong reasons; twenty-five percent hate me for the wrong reasons; twenty-five percent hate me for the right reasons. It's that last twenty-five percent that worries me.<sup>8</sup>

William Empson, who wrote a celebrated essay on Lewis Carroll, never devoted an essay to Robert Frost or reviewed one of his books. Stephen Spender, in a 1951 *Kenyon Review* essay “On the Function of Criticism,” wondered why that might be:

It is assumed that poems should be complex in meaning, that technique should be involved and language ambiguous. In a word, poetry, to be criticizable, has to be clever, because unless it is clever there is very little to say about it. Yet the fact that a critic can say a great deal about a poem by Pound and Empson and very little about one by de la Mare, does not necessarily make Pound and Empson better poets than de la Mare. It may even mean (though I do not suggest that this is the case) that Pound's and Empson's poems contain more ideological material extraneous to poetry than de la Mare's. Contemporary critics have written reams about Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden. They have written almost

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7 As reported to Gorham Munson by John Bartlett, in Munson, *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense* (New York, George H. Duran, 1927), 48.

8 *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, 1963), 376.

nothing about Edward Thomas, Walter de la Mare and W. H. Davies; and almost nothing, to any purpose that I have seen, about Robert Frost.

The poet Randall Jarrell (1953), followed by the critics Lionel Trilling (1959) and Richard Poirier (1977, 1982), among others, soon began to fill that vacuum, ignoring the numerous attempts that had been made in Frost's behalf before them, beginning with reviews of *North of Boston* by Louis Untermeyer and Amy Lowell in 1915.

*North of Boston* was Frost acting himself out in what he called "people." Who knows how many of the things "said" to be "said" in that book were things people said to him. In letters, talks, and interviews, Frost often made himself a character who said things to other people and made up the things said by that character. When the things were questions, the situation he invented in his anecdote—of which he was the narrator—made him the man getting to the heart of a matter. He never took a side, he liked to say. He was the thinker; he saw the one phrase that could resolve the superficiality, illogic, immodesty, or confusion in the others addressing it. He had seen just a little further, thought just a little more deeply, than those whose speeches he'd invented for his purpose.

In 1951, Frost published a selection of entries from his notebooks, going back to 1906, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, under the title (not his) "Poetry and School":

We were enjoined of old to learn to write now while young so that if we ever had anything to say later we would know how to say it. All there is to learning to write or talk is learning how to have something to say.

Our object is to say something that *is* something. One teacher once said that it was something at once valid and sensational with the accent on both. (CPRF 167)

That “one teacher” was Frost: “something that *is* something” was “something at once valid and sensational with the accent on both.” That’s all there was to “the sound of sense,” to the “sentence sound.” What counted as “valid” and “sensational”? Frost used related terms in a 1919 letter: “concrete and experiential.” But none of that “something that *is* something” talk helped Frost or his audience in saying or interpreting his poems. Nor did his emphasis on the *sound* of sense or sentences change the way he or any other native speaker of English talked in visual terms when *writing* about thinking or understanding.

Frost actually cultivated mind-sight analogies in his talk and letters. He would “look over” a book, he would “look in on” someone. He would write “Watch me” or “watch out for me” when he was going to write or say something. In *regard* to authors he didn’t like, he would say and write that he couldn’t “see” them—not “hear,” not “listen to,” not “read,” not “make sense of” them. He used Twain’s phrase from “Political Economy”: “run your eye over the page.” Frost talked himself into *seeing* poetry as talk-sound. A number of his early reviewers thought of him as a frustrated storyteller and an inept versifier. They might have added, a playwright *manque*. (He published one one-act, “A Way Out,” and wrote two longer plays.) Frost was impersonating the “woman” in “A Servant to Servants”: he *acted himself out* in “her.” He liked saying that phrase when he spoke of his poems “in character.”

All the characters in Carroll’s *Alice* books have learned how to have something to say. They’re all competent, and almost all of them perform, too, when they speak; that is, they “act up to” what they’re saying, in the



locution Thomas Hughes used in *Tom Brown's School-Days* (1857),<sup>9</sup> a novel that, by his own report, Frost couldn't get enough of hearing his mother read to him. (There is no independent corroboration for this story, nor for other stories Frost told about his life before 1900 that bear on his reading and writing.) This is true also when their affect seems to Alice not to match what they're saying, when there's incongruity between their words and their feelings. Frost noted this in 1896, in one of the very few remarks he made in print (at least, in the record we have) that has anything to do with his later theory:

I verily believe there is such a thing as not knowing whether you have opened your lips or not. Speech is a strange thing and however little thought preceeds [sic] it, it is still distinct from thought and the proof is that the one may be utterly at variance with the other and the thought be no less definite. (LRF 1: 39)

Frost's focus was always "speech," not writing: writing wasn't strange to him, but speech was, and writing interested him only as a drawing of speech, the live sound of talk. I am tempted to say, against that: Frost's focus was always writing, not "speech": speech wasn't strange to him, but writing was, and speech interested him only as a drafting of writing, the fixing of talk in print.

When Frost arrived in England in 1912, he was "a sophisticated fellow, you might say," to quote the poet Donald Hall.<sup>10</sup> He had thirty years of daily reading and reading aloud of literature in him, and more than twenty years of writing prose and verse. He bought Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, just published, and, in between meeting half a dozen of

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9 Chapter VIII. See also *Interviews with Robert Frost*, 201.

10 Donald Hall, interviewed by Peter Stitt, *The Paris Review*, 120, 1991.

the poets in its last 200 pages, wrote his “sound-of-sense” letters while reading it in 1913 and 1914. He could have, should have, been in those pages, near Howells, Pound, and Yeats. By 1915, Frost had condensed from the “cloud of all the other poets he ever read” into “his difference” (CPRF 116). By 1930, he could give the law of his difference: “Almost by resolution not to be poetical at all that you come to anything newly poetical. Same with philosophical” (N 274).

In 1961, Louis Untermeyer sent Frost a letter asking him to write a book using a 250-word vocabulary for children six to eight years old. He enclosed a list of the prescribed words. He knew that Frost had “had never written anything to order and never would,” but, he said, “you are the greatest player with words that our century has produced, and it is on this basis that I hope to interest you in a project I have undertaken.” Frost answered:

You cruel thing, to order of me the kind of book you know I could never write for love or money. . . . You want a book by me for children with a vocabulary of twenty five words beginning with the nouns ‘cat’ and ‘dog’ and the verbs ‘scratch’ and ‘bite’ or ‘meow’ or ‘bow-wow.’ The form is as strict as a limerick. The sonnet is the strictest form I have behaved in, and that mainly by pretending it wasn’t a sonnet. . . . You didn’t see the picture of me in the hospital, did you? I told the reporters I had my ear operated on to start a new era.<sup>11</sup>

What possessed Untermeyer to make that request of the 86-year-old, recently hospitalized Frost? He knew Frost liked a word game and could “behave” in one, but he also knew that Frost’s vocabulary already suited readers of “Beginner Books,” as the often-quoted end of “The Pauper Witch of

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11 Lawrence Thompson and R. H. Winnick. *Robert Frost: The Later Years, 1938-1963* (NY: Holt, 1976), 294-95.

Grafton” does:

You can come down from everything to nothing.  
All is, if I'd a known when I was young  
And full of it that this would be the end,  
It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage  
To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.  
I might have but it doesn't seem as if.

In 1889, Lewis Carroll assigned himself the task of rewriting *AAIW* for children aged “nought to five.” It begins:

Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Alice: and she had a very curious dream.

Would you like to hear what it was that she dreamed about?

Well, this was the first thing that happened. A White Rabbit came running by, in a great hurry; and, just as it passed Alice, it stopped, and took its watch out of its pocket.

Wasn't that a funny thing? Did you ever see a Rabbit that had a watch, and a pocket to put it in? Of course, when a Rabbit has a watch, it must have a pocket to put it in: it would never do to carry it about in its mouth—and it wants its hands sometimes, to run about with.

Hasn't it got pretty pink eyes (I think all White Rabbits have pink eyes); and pink ears; and a nice brown coat; and you can just see its red pocket-handkerchief peeping out of its coat pocket: and, what with its blue neck-tie and its yellow waistcoat, it really is very nicely dressed.

All of that is “the sound of sense”—it is the *ad absurdum* of Frost's theory. By the same token, Frost's theory isn't nonsense if and only if it applies to reading aloud and to talking about writing, both of which Frost did a lot

of.<sup>12</sup>

When he announced his “descriptive theory” of “the sound of sense” in writing a letter on July 4, 1913, Frost skirted several questions: whether it had been in literature before, and, if so, where and how and by whom it got there. He said that his principle was easy to “get” in the “abstract” when you hear voices from another room but can’t make out the words. What you hear “behind a door that cuts off the words” are “tones of meaning”: Frost wasn’t going to call them anything as common as “tones of voice.” He could have said that everyone who had been read to as a child by their mother, as he had been, had heard the sound of sense. He wrote in a notebook: “Anyone would read poetry or prose the slower for having been accustomed by having it read aloud to give it the life of spoken sentences” (N 141). And he could have emphasized, to this former student who had heard him in the classroom give the poetry or prose he was reading “the life of spoken sentences,” that he was talking about (the act of) reading, not (the act of) writing. “Mr. Frost read aloud, or we talked,” Sidney Cox wrote about his time with Frost in 1911 and 1912. “I suppose two of my favorite plays will always be *Arms and the Man* by Shaw and the *Playboy of the Western World* by Synge because of hearing Mr. Frost read them. I don’t know anyone who can do the Irish so well.”

The *Alice* books have none of the tones “that suggest grandeur and sweetness,” the “poetical” tones that poetry was full of and that Frost wasn’t alone in being tired of in 1913. He said that there were “boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones” and “forty eleven other tones” that hadn’t “been brought to book” (SL 191). But they had all been written by Lewis Carroll, in prose and verse, in at least two best-selling books. And by

12 Reports by Sidney Cox and John Bartlett about Frost reading Synge, Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, Lardner’s preface to *How to Tell Short Stories*, and others can be found in Munson (1927, 54) and in Cox’s *A Swinger of Birches* (1957).

thousands of other authors, too. Frost could have named some of them, from Chaucer in the 14th century to Richard Edwardes in the 16th, Sheridan in the 18th, and Howells last week. Between *AAIW* and *TTLG*, Carroll wrote and published *Phantasmagoria*, his longest poem, in 1869. In Canto IV, called “Hys Nouryture,” he did the experiments with “the newest thing in tone” that Frost would later claim he had done. The whole poem is an inquiry into, and an execution of, sound and sense. For seven cantos of five-line stanzas, Carroll kept up natural talk, straight syntax, and easy idiom, like this:

“It’s quite old-fashioned now to groan  
    When you begin to speak:  
This is the newest thing in tone—”  
And here (it chilled me to the bone)  
    He gave an awful squeak.

“Perhaps,” he added, “to your ear  
    That sounds an easy thing?  
Try it yourself, my little dear!  
It took me something like a year,  
    With constant practising.

“And when you’ve learned to squeak, my man,  
    And caught the double sob,  
You’re pretty much where you began:  
Just try and gibber if you can!  
    That’s something like a job!

“I’ve tried it, and can only say  
    I’m sure you couldn’t do it, e-  
ven if you practised night and day,

Unless you have a turn that way,  
And natural ingenuity.<sup>13</sup>

Frost knew that his “forty eleven” other tones had not only been published before but had been “regarded as poetical,” and not unusually, to “judge from the practice of other poets,” like Wordsworth and Browning, and by critics, like De Quincey, Landor, Arnold, Holmes, Lowell – all of whom had said, in their own ways, with Frost: “All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that haven’t been brought to book” (SL 191). Frost knew all of this – and yet he wrote those “sound of sense” letters. He knew, because his mother had given written sentences from those authors and others the life of spoken sentences, and then so had he, and so had his wife. Frost himself had pored over a hip-pocket book of Shakespeare’s plays and found “the life of spoken sentences” in “the speaking passages,” as he called the dialogues between minor characters. He’d read those “tones of meaning” in poultry papers, newspapers, journals, and magazines; he’d read them in children’s literature, in philosophy, in history, in humorous sketches, in Mother Goose, in ballads, in Milton, in nonsense.<sup>14</sup> The forty-eleven tones were common in commercial journalism, which is where Dickens had put them, and in the stories published by Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. E. A. Robinson, to whom Frost wrote in 1915, had been publishing the sound of sense in blank and rhymed verse since 1896:

Don’t think I have been all this time trying to decide what your play is if it isn’t a comedy. I have read it twice over but in no perplexity. It is good writing, or better than that, good speaking caught alive – every sentence of it. The speaking tones are all there on the printed page,

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13 Lewis Carroll, *Complete Works* (London: Nonesuch, 1939, 1973), 754.

14 Another line for “sentence sounds” or “voice postures” goes from Laurence Sterne to Heinrich Heine to William Dean Howells and Henry James, from Letitia Barbauld and Jane Austen to Willa Cather and Muriel Spark.

nothing is left for the actor but to recognize and give them. And the action is in the speech where it should be, and not along beside it in antics for the body to perform. I wonder if you agree with me that the best sentences are those that convey their own tone — that haven't to be described in italics. (LRF 1: 316-17)

Writers in England had been putting their “speaking tones” “on the printed page” since Chaucer, and writers in the United States since Ben Franklin. All Frost did was contract them into a span and make them run in meter and rhyme — as if he could make them the “all” of verse, and so make the reading of verse “anything but dull reading.” Again, he knew better — as when he wrote in a notebook, “The poem must have as good a point as an anecdote or joke. It is the more effective if it has something analogous to the practical joke — an action” (N 35). Not a word there about “vocal images.”

All of Frost's theory depends on an assumption that what is on a page of print represents what has been, could be, or is, *said*. In other words, Frost in his theory was only reiterating Plato's contention in the *Phaedrus* that even the best writing is only a “memorandum” of speech; that writing is only notation for, memory and repetition of, speech.<sup>15</sup> It is from talk and for talk. In 1923, Wilfred Davison, a professor at Middlebury College, spent a day with Frost and his family at their house. He said:

Mr. Frost kept up a steady stream of comment and anecdote. How he does like to talk! There were things I wanted to say, but there was little opportunity. I asked a few questions, answered a few, and listened. And such talk! It makes an average person despair (YOT 260).

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15 After Derrida's argument in “White Mythology,” and together with Skinner's argument in *Verbal Behavior* (1957), the passage I wrote can be reversed or inverted — or corrected: even the best speech is only a “memorandum” of writing; that is, speech is only notation for, memory and repetition of, writing.

Galway Kinnell began his poem “For Robert Frost”: “Why do you talk so much / Robert Frost?” Not only did Frost talk so much – but he talked so much Robert Frost. Why did Robert Frost talk so much? In order to write so little, I want to say, or I find myself saying, because the precedent pattern of antithesis is in me from having read literature for forty years.

Why do the *Alice* books make “anything but dull reading” “without sense” while other writing “passes muster” but is dull? Why did Frost think that most reading was dull? And after writing “Now it is possible to,” why didn’t Frost write that that “Now” was a trivial instance of the very thing he was saying writing needed more of? Why was he trying to find a method to introduce “variety” into his writing when he had been doing it for twenty years already in just the way he did it in this letter – which was just the way that hundreds of authors had been introducing variety into their writing for 600 years?

On Frost’s theory, the *Alice* books (which he never seems to have talked about with anyone) have all the sense there is. They are anything but dull reading because Carroll’s writing behaves according to Frost’s theory. Frost’s verse seldom adheres to it as well as the *Alice* books or as well as his own prose. In 1894, for example, in a letter to an editor who had accepted his first poem for publication, Frost said six things, each of which, it seems to me, is something:

Yes, I think sound is an element of poetry, one but for which imagination would become reason. I justify the use of dialect in this way; it contributes to the illusion (perhaps) and gives the artist the courage of his imaginings. Kipling says nearly all he says under the influence of sound. I am so fond of sound that I was wishing the other day he would write some more poetry. Listen to that! – when we generally read



poetry because we are in the business and it is written. (SL 25)

In his sound of sense letters, Frost didn't take up a single one of those things. I haven't found that he ever revisited anything he said there, and I'm still not sure what that Yeatsian "but" does in the first. The last sentence is effectively the premise of behaviorism as B. F. Skinner applied it in *Verbal Behavior* (1957). But the whole passage demonstrates that Frost never could write a sentence without listening to himself *act* under the influence of sound and without saying both what he was about to say and what he had no idea he was going to say. Something like that. I haven't come across a similar passage in Carroll's work. I go looking for a similar passage in any writer's work.

Frost made a career of doing in serious adult male verse what women and men had been doing deliberately in print for at least 200 years: writing a lot of vigorous dialogue, narrative, and description they could *act up in* while reading to their children. What Frost worried over and theorized about, Carroll had accomplished — without fuss, or theory. "Perhaps the hardest thing in all literature," Carroll wrote in his "Preface" to *Sylvie and Bruno*,

— at least I have found it so: by no voluntary effort can I accomplish it: I have to take it as it comes — is to write anything *original*. And perhaps the easiest is, when once an *original* line has been struck out, to follow it up, and to write any amount more to the same tune.