

Forbidden Words: Language Control and Victorian Political Correctness in Dickens and Carroll

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Abstract This article examines Charles Dickens's and Lewis Carroll's representations of mechanisms of control over people's – especially young people's – language, imagination, and minds. Moralistic on the one hand, political on the other hand, Victorian patterns of censorship and self-censorship are reflected, critiqued, and satirised by Dickens in various stages of his career, and are related in his work to artistic creativity, language and the imagination. He attacks the utilitarian resistance to fairy tale and especially Maria Edgeworth's manifesto on the usefulness and uselessness of various genres of children's literature, and criticizes George Cruikshank's revisionist project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous fairy tales. Much of this preoccupation is followed up in Carroll's Alice books. For both, I argue, these didactic revisions are related to patterns of language control, banned words, and euphemisms that they repeatedly probe and parody in their fiction. My essay will examine the representation of language control, self-censorship and verbal training in terms of an early, Victorian-era politically-correct discourse; I will ask what, if at all, Dickens and Carroll's treatment of these issues may contribute to the current debate surrounding our own politically-correct culture.

Keywords Charles Dickens. Lewis Carroll. Politically correct. Censorship. Offence. Hard Times. Alice in Wonderland. Through the Looking Glass.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Dickens: Utilitarianism, Industrialism, Censorship. – 3 Carroll: Offence, Jokes, Communication. – 4 Purification, Self-Silencing, and Creating a Better Society.



Peer review

Submitted	2021-05-01
Accepted	2021-12-01
Published	2022-03-16

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Citation Benziman, G. (2021). "Forbidden Words: Language Control and Victorian Political Correctness in Dickens and Carroll". *English Literature*, 8, 135-150.

Newspeak is the only language in the world whose
vocabulary gets smaller every year
(George Orwell, 1984)¹

1 Introduction

Mechanisms of control over people's – especially young people's – language, imagination, and minds in Victorian discourse receive an extensive, and often satirical, treatment in the work of Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. For both authors, motifs of linguistic censorship and self-silencing serve to delineate what we may refer to as early discursive regimes of political correctness. The effort not to give offence, in an endless conscious attempt not to hurt anybody's feelings or allude to unwelcome facts and ideas, sterilises communication, as the very choice of words is shown to become flawed, artificial, and restricted. Dickens and Carroll both show how such caution turns all relationships perilously fragile. A close look at this motif in *Hard Times* (1854) and the *Alice* books (1865; 1871) reveals how Victorian culture anticipates certain aspects of what has been referred to in recent decades as a politically-correct culture. Some of these novels' concerns about the constricting Victorian discourse reverberated 150 years later in the contemporary debate about the impact of political correctness on academia, art, and the educational environment at large.

Moralistic on the one hand, political on the other hand, patterns of censorship and self-censorship appear in Victorian fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. One clarification is needed at this point: this essay will not discuss the moralistic censorship of sexuality as examined, for instance, in Michel Foucault's "We Other Victorians" (1976). By censorship, I do not refer to the famous Victorian priggishness and its manipulation of taste by the dictates of the circulating libraries, nor will I dwell on moral restrictions placed on so-called obscene literature, fearing the corruption of young female minds. Instead, I explore the censorship of other kinds of conversational expressions and the ideas behind them.

Cultural theory sometimes tends to offer a totalising view of censorship, regarding it as an omnipresent structural necessity of any given society. Such a view might blind us to the more subtle operation of linguistic training of the kind this essay sets out to describe. Any critique of political correctness or identity politics that dictate a restricting discourse is bound to clash with the idea that freedom of speech is an illusion to begin with, as suggested in the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, or Judith Butler, for whom any culture "produces an effect of censorship" (Butler 1997, 130), and for

¹ The epigraph is from Orwell's *1984* (p. 49).

whom censorship is always at work as the “implicit operation of power that rules out what will remain unspeakable” (Bourdieu 1991, 172). If there can be no freedom of speech in any culture, then it cannot be taken away. Yet the linguistic training observed in the Victorian texts cited in this essay, mediated through Dickens and Carroll’s merciless satire, show how free speech can be, and is, gradually and quietly, almost voluntarily, taken away piece by piece, flattened, and narrowed down.

Dickens and Carroll are probably the two Victorian authors whose fiction offers the most consistent satire on verbal manipulation. Patterns of linguistic control and twisted discourse are among the chief targets of Dickens’s satire at various stages of his literary and journalistic career, particularly in *Hard Times*. Dickens both relates and contrasts linguistic restrictions to his concern about artistic creativity, freedom of imagination, and communication transparency. His preoccupation with silencing mechanisms in language is inseparable from his attack on other forms of cultural censorship, e.g. Maria Edgeworth’s utilitarian resistance to fairy tales or George Cruikshank’s revisionist project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous stories for children. A similar probe of this theme is taken up by Carroll, in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. For both authors, didactic revisionism is related to strategies of language control, banned words, and euphemisms, which they study closely and parody time after time. A sub-section of this censorship which they also explore in their writing is related to food and appetites: intriguingly, all texts examined in this essay reveal a recurrence of figurative associations between verbal control and dietary restrictions. Food prohibition repeatedly carries an ethical component and surfaces as an ingredient of cultural correctness. In this respect, too, the Victorian study of political correctness anticipates our own era.

2 Dickens: Utilitarianism, Industrialism, Censorship

Languages constantly grow; vocabularies expand. Yet, as the epigraph from George Orwell appended to this essay suggests, in some cases, the opposite dynamic might occur whereby society’s range of speech, thought, and agency is narrowed down, and language is impoverished. Such discursive diminution happens when specific modes of expression, related to certain patterns of thought, lose their legitimacy.

In examining Dickens’s critical take on such linguistic and cultural restrictions, a good place to start would be his discomfort with the narrowing down of literary forms. One target of his satire is the famous utilitarian resistance to fairy tales. In her “Preface, Addressed to Parents” that precedes *The Parent’s Assistant*, a collection of sto-

ries for children published in 1796, Maria Edgeworth includes a famous diatribe against the useless, hence damaging, non-realistic genres of children's literature. Her declared goal is to write for the pleasure and instruction of young readers, seemingly adopting the Horatian idea of instructing and delighting. Yet, in her case, the second objective, to delight, is clearly sacrificed for the first. Regardless of her young readers' pleasure, Edgeworth opts for realism. She would wish to see all writers – especially for children – staying away from fantasy, romance, or melodrama and declares that in her own stories, “care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination, or exciting a restless spirit of adventure, by exhibiting false views of life” (x-xi). Edgeworth disputes Dr Johnson's opinion that children should “have their imaginations raised by tales of giants and fairies, and castles and enchantments [*sic*]” (xi). Succumbing to this wish, she says, would be a grave educational mistake:

supposing that [young readers] do prefer such tales, is this a reason why they should be indulged in reading them? [...] why should the mind be filled with fantastic visions, instead of useful knowledge? Why should so much valuable time be lost? Why should we vitiate their taste, and spoil their appetite, by suffering them to feed upon sweetmeats? (xi)

Edgeworth wishes to harness literature to create a better society, as so many champions of censorship tend to do. Her utilitarian goals are better served by didactic realism, which she employs in the series of tales that follow her preface. In one story after another, we encounter industrious, practical-minded, and self-reliant children who never complain, and they serve as the model her readers should emulate.

Intriguingly, Edgeworth's expurgation of fanciful fiction involves a gustatory metaphor. For some reason, she associates romances and fairy tales with “sweetmeats”. Such figurative associations recur in other texts: time and again, food prohibition illustrates and is somehow coupled with the impulse to ban words, genres, and ideas. The critique of unethical or unhealthy food choices has been, and still is, an ingredient of cultural correctness, as appetite, like ideas and words, might become tinged with immorality. For Edgeworth, only a neglectful parent would allow one's children candy, as much as it is harmful to read to them a bedtime story about enchanted castles.

Maria Edgeworth and others of her stripe are the targets of Charles Dickens's satire in his 1853 essay “Frauds on the Fairies”. Yet, the immediate trigger for writing the piece was George Cruikshank's didactic project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous fairy tales. “Frauds on the Fairies” is part of a war Dickens is waging against the suppression of artistic freedom for allegedly correct goals:

In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected. [...] To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact. Whosoever alters them to suit his own opinions, whatever they are, is guilty, to our thinking, of an act of presumption, and appropriates to himself what does not belong to him. (97)

Rhetorically, when he talks about “actual facts” and “usefulness”, Dickens uses the jargon of the enemy camp. Yet his opposition to the utilitarian regime of censorship, which he regards as a threat to artistic freedom, is unquestionable. “The world is too much with us”, he concludes the essay with a quote from Wordsworth’s famous poem: “early and late. Leave this precious old escape from it, alone” (100).

Dickens’s resistance to moralistic censorship is fully developed in *Hard Times*, the novel he was working on while writing “Frauds on the Fairies”. Published one year later (1854), the novel depicts a hermetic Fact-based utilitarian world from which fantasy, fancy, and the fairies were banished – as Edgeworth would have liked to banish poets and other non-useful liars from her envisioned Republic. Part of the dystopian vision of Dickens’s novel concerns what looks like the triumph of Edgeworth’s doctrine, which seems to have prevailed in the industrial city of Coketown with its regime of Fact. The children in Coketown are not allowed to daydream, listen to fairy tales, or watch the circus. They cannot even have painted flowers on the carpet because such flowers would not be real.

Dickens’s novel delineates the way in which the regime of Fact prevails. Its dominant mechanism is a sophisticated and subtle language control, mainly manifested in the education of children but also at work in the mental oppression of factory operatives. As a rehearsal of Orwellian Newspeak, the two chief linguistic devices employed in Coketown are banned words and euphemisms. Concealing the truth, the regime of Fact is ironically shown to refute its own ideology. Its banned words and euphemisms distort and eliminate certain facts – those facts that would fail to serve the privileged elite.

The pupils at Thomas Gradgrind’s school are informed by their masters: “You are to be in all things regulated and governed [...] by fact. [...] You *must discard the word* Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it” (9; emphasis added). Excising “the word” should do the trick: if an object or concept – in this case, Fancy – is never named, it will not be evoked, nor even desired. As in Orwell’s dystopia, vocabulary shrinks, and so does thought.

The re-education of Sissy Jupe, the circus girl headmaster Thomas Gradgrind takes in and adopts, is founded on censorship. She must learn which words she may use and which are never to be mentioned. As Gradgrind is questioning Sissy – in the presence of his own young

daughter Louisa – about her past life with her widowed father, the circus clown, the dialogue emphasises the volatile potential of certain kinds of discourses and genres, bringing to mind Edgeworth's concern about stories of giants and enchanted castles:

'I understand you to have been in the habit of reading to your father?'

'O, yes, sir, thousands of times. They were the happiest—O, of all the happy times we had together, sir!'

It was only now, when her sorrow broke out, that Louisa looked at her.

'And what,' asked Mr. Gradgrind, in a still lower voice, 'did you read to your father, Jupe?'

'About the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies,' she sobbed out; 'and about —'

'Hush!' said Mr. Gradgrind, 'that is enough. Never breathe a word of such destructive nonsense any more. Bounderby, this is a case for rigid training.' [...]

So, Mr. Gradgrind and his daughter took Cecilia Jupe off with them to Stone Lodge, and on the way Louisa never spoke one word, good or bad. (40-1)

We should observe the side-effect of this exchange on the young Louisa Gradgrind. Though a mere witness to the beginning of Sissy's education in silencing, Louisa too turns dumb at once and "never [speaks] one word" on the way home. We may read this opinionated girl's silence as a protest against her father's tyranny. Still, as she grows up, we see again and again that Louisa's silence, while possibly expressive of her passive resistance to patriarchy, is deeply ingrained. When she does speak her mind, at last, years later, she accuses her father of inflicting on her a crippling inability to articulate her emotions.

Self-censorship is the ultimate success of any regime monitoring words and ideas, as it turns what begins as downright coercion into a seemingly voluntary suppression of undesirable thoughts. Devoid of self-knowledge, Louisa grows up only to find herself trapped in a loveless marriage to which she is pushed by her family, involved in a futile, undesirable, and unconsummated extramarital affair, and mixed in other kinds of self-negating situations, where she seems to be blind to her feelings and to lack a voice of her own. Her inner void is the result of the constant restriction of speech imposed on her since childhood, as shown, for example, in the following dialogue with her father when Louisa is still very young:

'I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time,' said Louisa.

'Tired? Of what?' asked the astonished father.

'I don't know of what – of everything I think.'

‘Say not another word,’ returned Mr. Gradgrind. ‘You are childish. I will hear no more.’ (14)

The Gradgrind silencing regime has an unmistakable political dimension. It installs fear: not just the fear of being reprimanded but also the anxiety of being in the wrong. When one is constantly apprehensive of using improper words or expressing incorrect ideas, the result is self-censorship. Thus, as Louisa is questioning Sissy about her previous life at the circus with her father, Sissy is very cautious, already implementing the new restrictive rules of discourse she encounters at the Gradgrind household:

‘Did your father know so much himself, that he wished you to be well taught too, Sissy?’

Sissy hesitated before replying, and so plainly showed her sense that they were entering on forbidden ground, that Louisa added, ‘No one hears us.’ [...]

‘Tell me more about him,’ said Louisa, ‘I will never ask you again. Where did you live?’

‘We travelled about the country, and had no fixed place to live in. Father’s a;’ Sissy whispered the awful word, ‘a clown.’ (48-9)

Mr. Gradgrind’s doctrine of Fact emerges from this conversation as a discourse that is not genuinely interested in facts. The plain truth is that Sissy’s father is a clown, yet certain things must never be called by their name. Laughs, circuses, a sense of fun – everything that clowns stand for – are inconsistent with Gradgrind’s austere, utilitarian ideology, so the word ‘clown’ must be expunged. Society’s vocabulary becomes smaller.

Young Louisa is prone to indulge in daydreaming. This is yet another transgression in her utilitarian household, so she takes care not to be detected by the authorities. However, like any totalitarian regime, the Gradgrind system breeds spies, self-appointed agents of the patriarch. In the domestic arena, we have the mother, Mrs. Gradgrind, spying on her children and acting as a voluntary proxy of her husband with the occasional assistance of Tom, Louisa’s brother:

‘Wondering again!’ said Tom.

‘I have such unmanageable thoughts,’ returned his sister, ‘that they *will* wonder.’

‘Then I beg of you, Louisa,’ said Mrs. Gradgrind, who had opened the door without being heard, ‘to do nothing of that description, for goodness’ sake you inconsiderate girl, or I shall never hear the last of it from your father’. (45; emphasis in the original)

Language control has another political function besides checking the imagination: it aims to quell resistance. The economic elite uses its power over the discourse to foster a softened or inoffensive conversation that is meant to conceal and even falsify social reality, its wrongs, and its injustices. Bounderby, the powerful industrialist who owns Coketown's bank and factories, shares his friend Gradgrind's ideology of Fact yet uses words dishonestly to manipulate facts time and again. On the pretence of sticking to facts, he employs a euphemistic discourse to shirk responsibility:

'Now, you have heard a lot of talk about the work in our mills, no doubt. You have? Very good. I'll state the fact of it to you. It's the pleasantest work there is, and it's the lightest work there is, and it's the best paid work there is. More than that, we couldn't improve the mills themselves, unless we laid down Turkey carpets on the floors. Which we're not a-going to do'. (97-8)

It is intriguing that in Dickens, as in Edgeworth, food prohibition is part and parcel of the censorship of discourse. This is the case in both "Frauds on the Fairies" and *Hard Times*. In the 1853 essay, Dickens anticipates a revision of classic works of literature according to various fashionable mores, including culinary ones. He envisions, for example, an absurd vegetarian rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, among a few other ideological twists to Defoe's narrative:

Imagine a Total abstinence edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, with the rum left out. Imagine a Peace edition, with the gunpowder left out, and the rum left in. Imagine a Vegetarian edition, with the goat's flesh left out. Imagine a Kentucky edition, to introduce a flogging of that 'tarnal old nigger Friday, twice a week. Imagine an Aborigines Protection Society edition, to deny the cannibalism and make Robinson embrace the amiable savages whenever they landed. *Robinson Crusoe* would be 'edited' out of his island in a hundred years, and the island would be swallowed up in the editorial ocean. (97-8)

In *Hard Times*, too, verbal dietary restrictions that block undesirable ideas and gloss over economic injustice are associated with forbidden food. The labourers - or Hands, as they are referred to in the novel - are thus suspected of insurrection via their alleged desire to gain upper-class food:

'There's not a Hand in this town, sir, man, woman, or child, but has one ultimate object in life. That object is, to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. Now, they're not a-going - none of 'em - ever to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon'. (98)

Culinary delicacies for the working class might harm millocratic digestion and foster unrealistic and dangerous aspirations among the 'Hands'. Like Edgeworth's warning about the unwelcome provision of sweetmeats and fairy tales to children, the factory operatives of Coketown must abide by a strict dietary dictum as much as they should avoid unbound speech and free thought.

3 Carroll: Offence, Jokes, Communication

The culture of censorship is one of Dickens's primary targets of attack in *Hard Times*, no less than industrialism and utilitarianism. Besides Dickens, the most ferocious Victorian satire on verbal manipulation and control is probably to be found in Lewis Carroll's work. Language has many uses in the *Alice* books; not least among them is its efficacy as an instrument of mental and social control. Carroll derides the attempt to train children's minds by regulating their speech. Thus, constantly fearful of being in the wrong, Alice withdraws to self-silence almost as soon as she starts falling down the Rabbit hole at the very beginning of her adventures:

'I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The Antipathies, I think -' (she was rather glad there *was* no one listening, this time, as it didn't sound at all the right word) '- but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know. Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?' (and she tried to curtsy as she spoke - fancy, curtsying as you're falling through the air! [...]) 'And what an ignorant little girl she'll think me for asking! No, it'll never do to ask: perhaps I shall see it written up somewhere'. (27-8; emphases in the original)

Constantly mindful of the errors in what she is saying, Alice prefers not to speak at all.

However, as she arrives in Wonderland and starts meeting her curious interlocutors, she summons sufficient courage to ask many questions - only to be rebuffed as stupid or rude. Much of what Alice says turns out to be wrong, and the other characters gain a position of mastery over her by pointing that out. Saying the wrong thing repeatedly, she finds it hard to socialise as she keeps offending the other creatures' feelings. She is thus driven to shed what is considered offensive terms and sanitise her discourse. We see this process already when she encounters the Mouse and engages in her first dialogue in Wonderland. As soon as she opens her mouth, Alice commits one blunder after another. First, mistaking it for a French Mouse, she addresses the creature with the first sentence from her

French lesson book:

‘Où est ma chatte?’ [...] The Mouse gave a sudden leap out of the water, and seemed to quiver all over with fright. ‘Oh, I beg your pardon!’ cried Alice hastily, afraid that she had hurt the poor animal’s feelings. ‘I quite forgot you didn’t like cats’.

‘Not like cats!’ cried the Mouse, in a shrill, passionate voice. ‘Would you like cats if you were me?’ (42; emphasis in the original)

Having offended the Mouse’s feelings, the regretful Alice practices self-censorship once they are reconciled in the next chapter. He has promised to tell her his sad history and explain why he dislikes cats and dogs. Now she reminds him of his promise:

‘You promised to tell me your history, you know,’ said Alice, ‘and why it is you hate – C and D,’ she added in a whisper, half afraid that it would be offended again. (50)

Like Sissy’s whisper of the awful word ‘clown’, Alice is afraid that uttering the words ‘cats’ and ‘dogs’ aloud might give offence. Her over-cautiousness is detrimental to the relationship; it precludes reciprocity or symmetry between two equal parties. Once things are not called by their name, communication becomes flawed and ultimately impossible. Offence sensitivity turns any potential relationship hopelessly fragile. Indeed, soon enough, Alice again says the wrong thing (innocently confusing ‘not’ with a ‘knot’). The Mouse is so offended that he indignantly walks out:

‘I didn’t mean it!’ pleaded poor Alice. ‘But you’re so easily offended, you know!’

The Mouse only growled in reply.

‘Please come back, and finish your story!’ Alice called after it. And the others all joined in chorus ‘Yes, please do!’ But the Mouse only shook its head impatiently, and walked a little quicker. (52)

A culture based on over-sensitivity, as shown in this exchange, becomes sterile. Conversations are pointless and brought to a halt when things cannot be called by their name and when anything one says seems to cause offence.

In *That’s Offensive! Criticism, Identity, Respect*, Stefan Collini argues that when criticising other people’s ideas becomes offensive, the urge to show respect to the ‘offended’ party turns them into someone who has the right not to be criticised. When we accept the unwritten rules of identity politics and avoid criticising people or expressing our opinions freely because they might be offended, our sensitivity, masked as respect, becomes a form of condescension (Collini 2010, 27). To ex-

empt certain people or groups from criticism because they might be offended is to assume that they are too weak to respond adequately to challenges or controversy. This condescension is reflected in the asymmetrical relationship between the ever-guilty, overly-cautious Alice and the easily-offended Mouse. The discursive self-restraint Alice imposes on herself in her dealings with the Mouse is not unlike Sissy's prudence over articulating the word 'clown'. Any violation of the unwritten rule not to call certain things by their name becomes immoral, an offence to propriety, good order, and respect toward others.

As Slavoj Žižek observes in his critique of contemporary political correctness, public language that sheds offensive terms in order to avoid offending others produces a sanitised discourse and serves to conceal the very operation of injustice and oppression it hopes to resist. The pressure to commit self-censorship and maintain caution about certain expressions and ideas, Žižek claims, is patronising. The fear that certain jokes might give offence is condescending; it fosters cold relationships and precludes real contact. Rather than dealing with racial hatred, prejudice, or oppression, pretty language only conceals existing tensions and makes it impossible to oppose them.²

The *Alice* books demonstrate this mechanism perfectly. Offence sensitivity creates a discourse that masks genuine intention and balks communication, as we see in the comic conversation with the Mouse. In an intellectual or academic setting, when we are too cautious about entering a dispute so as not to give offence, we sacrifice intellectual integrity, without which there is no free criticism, and so the discussion becomes sterile.

In Carroll, as in the earlier writers, speaking and eating are parts of the same moralistic regime. Always saying the wrong thing, Alice finds herself time and again also eating the wrong thing. Discourse sensitivity and food prohibition are entangled. In a famous passage, Alice is forbidden to eat a leg of mutton and pudding because she has just been introduced to these dishes by the Red Queen. And clearly, as the Red Queen lectures her, "it isn't etiquette to cut any one you've been introduced to". (331) Her eating habits always make Alice feel guilty. Earlier on, when a pigeon takes her for a serpent due to her long neck, Alice is indicted based on her culinary preferences:

'But I'm *not* a serpent, I tell you!' said Alice. 'I'm a - I'm a -'

'Well! *What* are you?' said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something! [...] No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!'

² <https://qz.com/398723/slavoj-zizek-thinks-political-correctness-is-exactly-what-perpetuates-prejudice-and-racism/>.

'I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,' said Alice, who was a very truthful child; 'but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'

'I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon; 'but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say'. (76; emphases in the original)

In her encounter with the Mock Turtle, Alice's self-censorship reveals her shame over her eating habits as well as her concern about giving offence. When the Mock Turtle says, "'perhaps you were never even introduced to a lobster'", Alice begins to say "'I once tasted -' but check[s] herself hastily, and [says] 'No, never'" (131). Soon, in the same conversation, she makes another *faux pas*:

'Thank you, it's a very interesting dance to watch,' said Alice, feeling very glad that it was over at last: 'and I do so like that curious song about the whiting!'

'Oh, as to the whiting,' said the Mock Turtle, 'they - you've seen them, of course?'

'Yes,' said Alice, 'I've often seen them at dinn-' she checked herself hastily.

'I don't know where Dinn may be,' said the Mock Turtle, 'but if you've seen them so often, of course you know what they're like?'

'I believe so,' Alice replied thoughtfully. 'They have their tails in their mouths - and they're all over crumbs'. (135-6)

Eating the wrong thing is bad enough; talking about it is even worse. When everyone around is easily hurt, self-censorship is a necessary instinct. But does the avoidance of unpleasant truths undo the real problems that cause the unpleasantness to begin with? Not in Wonderland. Throughout the *Alice* books, there is an amazing and ludicrous contrast between the demand that Alice show over-sensitivity to others, and the brutal aggression, cutting verbal abuse, and physical violence of many of the other characters directed towards her or against each other. Language is either fiercely hostile or timidly, overly polite - and it is this gap that allows Carroll to show how artificial and dishonest the pleasant or 'correct' discourse is.

The underlying structure of the linguistic training of child characters such as Sissy Jupe, Louisa Gradgrind, or Alice is the same as any broader cultural ban on certain words (or foods) that are labelled as immoral. Its chief and invisible mechanism of control is its ability to make one feel constantly apologetic for what one might say, or consume, which might give offence.

4 Purification, Self-Silencing, and Creating a Better Society

The totalising view of censorship as an omnipresent structural necessity, as suggested in the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, and others, precludes any critique of political correctness or identity politics that dictate a restricting discourse. If, as these theorists presume, freedom of speech is an illusion, to begin with, and censorship is always at work, then such liberty cannot be taken away. Yet, Dickens' and Carroll's satire illustrates how free speech is almost voluntarily taken away piece by piece under an ethical command to purify thought and discourse.

The purpose of political correctness is highly commendable: to curtail offensive speech and enhance respect towards underprivileged or ostracised individuals and groups. An educated person living in the twenty-first century is expected not to follow rude impulses but rather cultivate an inoffensive, respectful discourse. So where is the danger, exactly? Part of it lies in the failure to distinguish between politeness and self-censorship, but that is only part of the story. Perhaps our primary concern should be what John Stuart Mill termed "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion" and our willingness to abide by it (2003, 11). Beyond the personal injury to the individual whose speech has been curtailed, Mill underlines the damage to the intellectual discussion at large:

the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. (87)

And he adds: "All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility" (88) - those who silence others assume they are always right. Limiting speech, even for a seemingly good cause, is bound to impoverish any conversation. When there is no disagreement, our intellect and critical engagement are anesthetised.

In *How Words Make Things Happen*, David Bromwich recounts historical cases of political censorship, which, he points out, were always justified by the need to "effect improvement" in society (2019, 83). Bromwich compares that to our contemporary culture, where speech codes and rules of politeness, sensitivity, and moderation, especially in the academic milieu, which aim to "soften the impact of unpleasant ideas", preclude genuine debate. The benefits

obtainable through censorship turn out to be delusive once we recognise that [...] censorship cannot make us better. [...] Any law devised to winnow out the noxious materials can only weaken the very people it protects. (98-9)

The moralistic retelling of fairy tales is a case in point. Bearing in mind Dickens's critique of Cruikshank's mid-Victorian revision of such stories for didactic purposes could also apply to late-twentieth-century and more recent revisions of classic tales, which intend to make them fit contemporary egalitarian and feminist agendas. According to a large-scale survey held in 2018, as reported in *The Independent* on 11 May 2018, many parents frequently change the fairy tales they read to their children out of their concern that the stories are too scary, inappropriate, or politically incorrect. For instance, parents found it disturbing that Cinderella was forced to do all of the cleaning and household chores; that Sleeping Beauty was kissed without her consent; or that *The Ugly Duckling's* emphasis on unattractive appearance encouraged body shaming and discrimination.³ Schools and curricula often follow similar guidelines. According to Diane Ravitch, many people believe that almost "everything written before 1970 was either gender biased or racially biased" (Ravitch 2006, 287). Instead of using classic stories to increase knowledge and foster a debate about changing values and the history of social structures, schools are often asked to ban such texts altogether, thereby impoverishing learning and curtailing intellectual discussion.

When we talk about the constraints on free speech, we usually think of illiberal powers at work; but the case might be the reverse. Žižek regards political correctness as a tacit form of totalitarianism, an act of coercion built upon the totalitarian premise that "I know better than you what you really want".⁴ As Alexey Ulko maintains, it would be wrong to assume that the conflict always involves the left-wing or liberal discourse as threatened and the conservative culture as dominant. "Sides are easily switched when the contemporary politically correct and 'progressive' discourse is challenged", and left-wing critics might impose their own censorship on art or ideas they deem incorrect (2018, 131). This view echoes Orwell, who, in his 1946 essay "Politics vs. Literature", observes that there is a totalitarian tendency even among anarchist or pacifist groups because of the "tremendous urge to conformity" in human beings, especially when their views are grounded in peace, harmony, and love. When humans are governed by prohibition ("thou shalt not"),

³ See <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/fairytales-parents-change-plot-politically-incorrect-children-reading-red-riding-hood-cinderella-a8346966.html>.

According to *The Independent* report of May 2018, almost one in four parents think it is inappropriate to tell children the story of Cinderella, and another 27% feel the same about Robin Hood - "a man who stole from others". *Pinocchio* leaves 27% of parents "worrying as the story tells the tale of a boy who runs away from home and lies to people".

⁴ <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2019/03/04/slavoj-zizek-political-correctness-form-of-totalitarianism/>.

the individual can practise a certain amount of eccentricity: [but] when they are supposedly governed by 'love', he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else. (241-2)

Despite its unquestionable value in defending the dignity of disadvantaged groups, the inevitable downside of a politically correct discourse is the curtailing of free speech; or perhaps it would be more accurate to talk about 'breadth of speech.' In assessing such curtailing, we should think about the extent to which contemporary liberal academic culture is heir to Victorian moralistic tyranny. A reading of Victorian satires such as *Hard Times* or the *Alice* books illustrates how the project of sterilising language by too many prohibitions works to stifle contact, artistic creativity, and critical thought. Offence sensitivity is likewise liable to impoverish speech. When Alice cautiously asks the Mouse about 'C and D' or tells the Mock Turtle that she has seen his friends the whiting at 'dinn', her fear of uttering the words 'Cat', 'Dog', and 'Dinner' renders her speech not only mute but absurdly unintelligible. Conversation, Carroll shows us, cannot carry on or mean anything when things are not called by their names. The repeated figurative association established in this essay between food prohibition and the impulse to ban words and ideas may illuminate how the critique of unethical or unhealthy food choices since the Victorian era has been, and still is, an ingredient of cultural correctness.

A final thought concerns the extent to which our current academic conversation is dominated by such restrictions. We might regard the intellectual atmosphere we live in as dominated by a new hermeneutics of suspicion. In the debate between the hermeneutics of suspicion (based on Paul Ricoeur) and the hermeneutics of trust, I propose that this is not the alternatives we are currently facing. Rather, the dominant hermeneutics of today is one of indictment. Suspicion is a productive stance because it is a condition of uncertainty, and for a good reader or a skilful critic, uncertainty is crucial. As long as we are suspicious, we may notice the ambiguities and complexities of the text we are reading or the conversation we are having. The problem with suspicion hermeneutics in literary criticism is that often, instead of suspicion, we have conviction. When the guilt of the text is assumed in advance, our analysis turns into dogma. As the Queen of Hearts would put it, "Sentence first - verdict afterwards" (Carroll 1970, 161): the hermeneutic of indictment means that we would like to feel morally superior to the text and know what is right, while placing ourselves beyond suspicion.

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