

Re/researching leadership: A critique in two agonies and nine fits

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Abstract

Since the 19th century, much academic effort has been expended researching leadership. Bodies of theory have risen to dominance, proved unsatisfactory and been replaced by another generation of ultimately disappointing leadership thought. This repetitive pattern continues, so we ask what motivates this continuing, seemingly fruitless search? Focusing on researchers and not leadership per se, our analysis is inspired by two surprisingly complementary sources: psychoanalytical theory and Lewis Carroll's epic nonsense poem, *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*. Together they lead to a theory that re/research is motivated by unconscious desires to experience the transformational object—an ultimately unachievable search but one that unconsciously sustains the ever-growing field of leadership research. In contributing a new psychoanalytical theory of unconscious motivations that inspire our research, we also demonstrate the inspiration poetry may offer organizational researchers. We conclude by offering a ninth fit, which leaps into the void of future thought and finds that the leadership Snark was, in fact, a Boojum.

Keywords

Christopher Bollas, critical leadership, Jessica Benjamin, leadership theories, Lewis Carroll, object relations, psychoanalysis

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Introduction

This article asks why, after 150 years of a seemingly fruitless search for ever more theories of leadership, the hunt continues. Huge numbers of texts on leadership are published annually (Shinagel, 2013), suggesting little evidence of any waning of interest. Researchers seem undeterred by the elusiveness of leaders and leadership, their interest undiminished by the difficulty of grasping objects and practices that remain tenuous and always out of reach (Ford et al., 2008), that may indeed be mythical (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Islam, 2014), a negative ontology (Kelly, 2014) or a 'secular religion' (Spoelstra et al., 2021). Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2003: 359) warning that 'thinking critically about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon' has gone unheeded. Academic leadership theorists appear highly resilient to such critical arguments, refuse to acknowledge the pursuit may be fruitless and are reluctant to seek elsewhere for causes, other than leadership, of organizational effectiveness.

This passion for finding the truth about leadership can be traced to the emergence of scientific studies of leadership in the mid-late 19th century, tied to Thomas Carlyle's Great Man theories (Spector, 2016; Wilson, 2019). These were to form the roots of the trait approach that emerged in the early 20th century, which hypothesized that leaders possessed certain innate personal attributes discoverable through research. After this search proved fruitless (Fulop et al., 2004; Grint, 1997, 2000; Stogdill, 1948), attention turned away from traits to behaviours. Again, 'great men' were studied, but now the focus was upon personalities rather than behaviours.

When arguments regarding the futility of analysing leaders in isolation from their context proved irresistible, contingency approaches were developed. These examined the situational variables that moderate the effectiveness of different types of leadership (Fulop et al., 2004). Criticisms of the contingency approach, including poor research design, saw it eventually ceding its dominance towards the end of the 1970s to what was to become the globally 'new paradigm' that proposed transformational, charismatic and visionary approaches to leadership. MacGregor Burns's ideas provoked interest in how leaders' effectiveness could be explained in terms of their influence on followers (Delaney and Spoelstra, 2019; Wilson, 2019). 'Guru' or heroic theories of leadership also became popular in the 1980s and 1990s; they allocated to leaders a central, heroic status as organizational redeemers (Huczynski, 1993). Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) became successful globally, but the potential for unethical practices, voiced first in Bass's own critique of his earlier work (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), instigated an efflorescence of theories of authentic leadership. Concurrently, post-heroic leadership theories, emerging in the 1990s, flourish in the 21st century (Graham, 1991; Huey, 1994). Arguing that everyone working in an organization should be regarded as a leader, post-heroic theories have become merged into a body of approaches organized loosely under the umbrella of 'collective' leadership (Contractor et al., 2012; Ospina, 2017; Ospina et al., 2020; Raelin, 2016), which is arguably the fastest growing and most influential contemporary leadership theory, to the extent that it is referred to by some as a 'movement' (Ospina et al., 2020).

In many ways, leadership theory has come a long way in its evolution from Great Man theories to the notion that leadership occurs everywhere in organizations. It has developed

the canon of major theories summarized above, whose history is of a teleological journey in which one body of theory rises to dominance and is eventually superseded by another that promises to better encapsulate leaders and leadership (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016; Taylor, 2018). This is a history of futility: each successive body of theory emerges to much acclaim, much time and energy is invested in its development and refinement, but then it fades after proving unable to live up to its initial promise.

There has of course been a growing critical interest in leadership, such that we have seen the emergence of a critical leadership studies field (Collinson, 2005, 2011; Dar et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2008; Grint, 2005; Liu, 2021; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). This field of study is underpinned largely by critical theory, feminist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and social constructionist traditions. It takes aim at the romanticization of leadership studies and the positivism at its heart (Spoelstra et al., 2021: 301), subjecting the field to a broader range of sociological and philosophical analyses (Collinson, 2011). These contributions highlight the need to question leadership as a ‘normalizing template’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 369), with a particular focus on exploring ‘what is neglected, absent or deficient in mainstream leadership research’ (Collinson, 2011: 181). Such critical leadership studies not only provide a challenge to the assumed importance of leadership and the neglect of power asymmetries (Ford, 2019; Liu, 2021)¹, but also propose understandings of leadership that recognize it as a co-produced, indeterminate and discursive process that is embedded in context and culture (Ford, 2010; Learmonth and Morrell, 2017, 2019; Sutherland, 2018). Critical leadership studies scholars also examine organizational and academic preferences for ‘leaders’ and the connections between leadership and the rise of neoliberalism. Here, it is argued that as an individual-centred ideology and rhetoric, the neoliberalism milieu neatly aligns with the language of leadership, such that the two have become mutually reinforcing (Learmonth and Morrell, 2021).

In addition to the examination of the constitution of leadership, critical leadership studies has also highlighted the challenges posed to those within its ranks who engage in leadership consulting, leader development and education in the name of ‘critical performativity’ and the pursuit of ‘relevance’ to external audiences and organizations (Butler et al., 2015, 2018). However, the mainstream of leadership scholarship remains largely untouched by this emerging body of more critical leadership study, most especially in the USA (Tourish, 2015, 2020; Wilson, 2016). Further, work in this vein has not directly addressed the academics who develop the body of work that it critiques. With some rare exceptions, including Gemmill and Oakley (1992) and Smircich and Morgan (1982), whose work we discuss later, it has not asked why the relentless research continues.

The search for new theories of leadership appears unremitting: the lessons of history are ignored, and the search continues. This leads to the questions we explore in this article: why does the search for new theories of leadership continue despite 150 years of failure to discover a workable theory, and what can explain the failure to find that elusive theory?

Our search for answers requires that we depart radically from the traditional ways of studying leadership. First, we do not examine putative leaders but focus on the people studying those leaders: academics in business and management schools. Second, we utilize two modes of thinking that are not prominent within leadership studies, psychoanalytical object relations theory (although for exceptions see Ford and Harding, 2018; Ford et al., 2017; Obholzer, 1996; Vince and Mazen, 2014; Vince and Pedler, 2018) and

poetics. Our more unexpected influence is Lewis Carroll's epic nonsense poem, *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* (hereafter '*The Snark*'), published in 1876.² We were led to *The Snark* because, although ostensibly a 'nonsense' poem, it is a deeply political text by an author interested in and concerned about a logic that justified the accumulation of scientific knowledge at any cost (Mayer, 2009). That is, it instructs readers in questioning and challenging a power and authority that dictates what can be regarded as scientific or non-scientific, academic or non-academic, rational or irrational, sense or non-sense.

In looking to Lewis Carroll for inspiration, we join researchers in organization studies who have increasingly sought to connect poetics³ and organizational analysis to provide an 'intertextual terrain' within which new theories of organizations can emerge and come to life (Rhodes and Brown, 2005: 470). While fictional narratives have been incorporated into organizational research as a source of data to be theorized and as a means of understanding organizations and working life, they can also help us access non-rational and unconscious phenomena in organizations (Sliwa et al., 2013). This has the power to destabilize and disrupt taken-for-granted aspects of a familiar, everyday academic experience such as the search for new theories of leadership. This subversion is enhanced when refracted through psychoanalytic lenses. Indeed, psychoanalysis also draws upon poetics and a range of literary sources, with key ideas in the discipline being inspired and developed by literary texts.

Poetry, and literature more generally, provide inspiration for seeing beyond taken-for-granted assumptions, facilitating new insights and new ways of seeing and thinking that would have otherwise remained unseen and unthought. This proved immeasurably useful for us in our attempt to understand why the search for leadership theories continues. We used each of *The Snark's* verses, or Fits, to ask: what does this infer about this pursuit of leadership? Object relations theory added the depth of analysis required to think through the answers that presented themselves.

Lewis Carroll was the pen-name of the Oxford University mathematician Charles Dodgson (1832–1898). He and Freud (1856–1939), although not exact contemporaries, were both alive at a time when the streams of thought that informed Freudian theory may perhaps have also influenced Carroll. Carroll understood something of psychosis and 'mental derangement' (Henkle, 1973: 112), if not emergent psychoanalytical thought, through his close relationship with an uncle, Skeffington Lutwidge, a Lunacy Commission inspector of asylums in England (Torrey and Miller, 2014). Carroll displays a keen understanding of how people can set off on an all-consuming quest for an elusive, hybrid 'something', for reasons perhaps barely known to themselves. In turn, Freud was often inspired by a range of literary texts when developing his theories, as famously seen in his ideas of the Oedipus Complex (Freud, 1900/1999) and his use of ETA Hoffmann's short story, *The Sandman*, in his account of the uncanny (Freud, 1919: 218–256).

Christopher Bollas's development of object relations theory explores and explains the search for an elusive object, an object he argues has the unconscious allure of promising transformation. This can be seen in his fascinated return to the shadowy but evocative object of the whale in Herman Melville's (1851/2003) *Moby Dick* (Bollas, 1987, 1995, 2009). Jessica Benjamin's feminist object relations approach illuminates how passionately attached one can become to that object and, like Bollas, she also draws upon a

literary text—that of *The Story of O* (Reage, 1954/1994)—when developing her ideas concerning domination and submission (Benjamin, 1988).

In drawing upon Carroll's poem, we therefore follow a long line of influential thinking inspired by literary texts. We found Carroll's nonsense poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*, particularly insightful because, where object relations theorists analyse this pursuit of objects as an unconscious process, Carroll provides a succinct map of how the conscious mind pursues that elusive, desired entity. Not only does *The Snark* presciently encapsulate many aspects of object relations theory, but it also provides a structure for describing with concision the ways in which the conscious mind pursues unconscious motivations. Therefore, although *The Snark*, a study of poetics and object relations theory, may appear to originate in almost-incompatible genres they draw inspiration, complement and expand upon each other.

Our analysis leads us to develop a theory of the search for new theories of leadership as an irrational search motivated by unconscious desires rather than the rational pursuit of knowledge. That is, our focus is not on leadership per se, but on *those who study leadership* (including ourselves). The unconscious dictates that the next theory of leadership will always prove to be a disappointment because it is the wrong object. Indeed, our analysis suggests that leadership theory is doomed to frustrate because of its normotic tendencies; that is, it is, by and large, impervious to the inner lives of 'leaders' and 'followers' (Bollas, 2018). Further, it involves the pursuit of answers to questions that have not been formulated, so failure is integral to this pursuit. In questioning the 'sterile preoccupations' (Tourish, 2015: 137, 2020) of an academic field that expends so much time and effort in an inadequate if not imaginary concept, we offer a novel conclusion where we jump into the void with the Baker and refuse a traditional conclusion that would offer an alternative to the relentless pursuit of the next theory of leadership. We do not want to replace one elusive object with another.

In what follows, our pursuit of answers to the questions of, why, despite 150 years of failure, the search for new theories of leadership continues, and what can explain the failure to find that elusive theory, our focus on researchers rather than leaders/leadership takes us through a two-part progression structured according to the Fits of Carroll's poem. We illuminate how *The Snark* is mimetic of leadership studies and use psychoanalytical object relations theory to explain the stages of the hunt. First, we briefly introduce *The Snark* and object relations theory, but expand upon both as we progress through the Fits.

Theoretical framing in brief: *The Snark* and the psychoanalyst

The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits, popularly described as a nonsense poem for children, as noted above has serious political intent: a critique of the futility of much science. Throughout this article we will summarize the poem, largely through paraphrasing, and quotation marks will show when we quote directly from it. The poem is now freely available online⁴ and is a delight to read. It describes 10 characters who gather to seek the elusive and indescribable creature, the Snark. Along the way they encounter other fantastical creatures, all of which are the inventions of Carroll's

imagination. They are neither defined nor described; he leaves it to the work of our own imaginations to give them shape and substance. One of the hunters, seemingly successful in finding this elusive creature, shouts 'It's a Snark', but then came 'the ominous words "It's a Boo-". He then 'softly and suddenly vanished away—For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.' That is, *The Snark* warns that something that is ardently sought may prove, ultimately, to be problematic. If so, then the ongoing pursuit of new theories of leadership may lead to at best a distraction (the Snark) and possibly something worse (the Boojum).

Our interest in *The Snark* was provoked by its encapsulating a trope familiar in psychoanalytical theory: the search for the transformational object, the thing that is (unconsciously) imagined will fulfil the self, taking it to a new plane of experience. This contemporary conceptualization of objects is associated with the work of Christopher Bollas, one of the most significant object relations theorists whose work is increasingly influential in organization studies (see Ford et al., 2017; Sievers, 2013; Vince, 2018; Vince and Mazen, 2014). Jessica Benjamin, another major object relations theorist whose work also informs this article, brings a feminist lens to object relations theory (Ford and Harding, 2011).

We will expand upon Bollas's and Benjamin's perspectives in the discussion that follows, in which *The Snark's* 'Agony in Eight Fits', slightly adapted, gives structure to our object relations approach. Our revision has two overlapping sections or 'Agonies, Parts One and Two'. The first explores reasons for the continuing search for new theories of leadership. It draws on the Fits that describe the coming together of the Crew, the emergence of the (hapless) leader and the blank map that guides them in their search for the Snark. Via Bollas, we position the next theory of leadership as a transformational object pursued unconsciously. The second Agony, that draws more upon Benjamin's work, contributes to insights about why the search for new theories leads, eventually, to disenchantment. That is, the history of leadership thought is underpinned by assumptions that leaders are uniformly good and well intentioned and deviance a rare aberration. Lewis Carroll and object relations theory both suggest otherwise. The Crew hunting the Snark is led by a weak and immoral leader, and the crew members have normal human failings. This points towards the need for more nuanced understanding of the subjects who take up leadership positions. Both the Bandersnatch, who drives the Banker insane in Fit the Seventh, and the scream of the Jubjub, warn of the continuing frustrations caused by theories that ignore the complexities of the human actor. We turn our arguments back upon ourselves in Fit the Seventh, arguing that we, like leadership theorists more generally, have become 'preoccupied unto death' with an object that distracts us from the challenges of more meaningful work. Fit the Eighth inspires our summary and conclusion.

The Agony Part One: Or the hunt for an answer to the question of why so many people over such a long period of history pursue the next theory of leadership

We start with our summary of the first part of *The Hunting of the Snark*, in which we focus on three of the first four Fits. Carroll does not define what he means by his use of

the word 'Fit', but the contemporary medical definition seems to hint at why he may have chosen this particular word. That is, it is a seizure, or convulsion, when a sudden burst of electrical activity in the brain interferes with normal messaging processes.⁵ The hunters in *The Snark* are convulsed by their ardour for the riches that may follow on their finding the Snark:

Three of the eight Fits in the Agony of the Hunt for the Snark are concerned with the assembling of the Crew under the leadership of the Bellman. In other words, an organization comes into existence in front of our eyes as we read about their gathering together and their preparations. In the first Fit, the Crew assembles—but who is to do the work? There is a Bellman or captain (of course), a Barrister, a Banker, a Boots, a maker of Bonnets and Hoods, a Billiard-Marker, a very absent-minded Baker and a Beaver who lives in fear of the last member of the Crew, a Butcher. This new organization has a leader, The Bellman, who proves to be utterly unequal to the task. He is a bully who has a map that shows nothing, but the Crew seem unconcerned in their desire to follow him. That is, in Fit the second, the Bellman makes a speech, waving his map of the ocean that shows nothing but water—how grand, the Crew all cry. He cannot steer, he cannot sail, he cannot govern a ship, but somehow they reach land. The Bellman describes the Snark—a fantastical creature. Deferring our discussion of Fit the Third until Agony Part Two, we explore Fit the Fourth's depiction of the preparations made for the hunting. The Bellman exemplifies dire leadership—he is skilled only at blaming others for his failures. Preparations proceed apace for the hunting of the Snark, but each person focuses on his own skill, none of which is suited for the pursuit of the Snark, let alone the Boojum.

Carroll's epic thus directs our attention towards leader and followers. What is left opaque is the rationale for hunting the Snark: what has impelled the Crew to gather under the Bellman's leadership and to launch themselves onto a mapless sea? In terms of new theories of leadership, what motivates a similar search? Carroll's tale gives no direct answer but is prescient of contemporary object relations theory through which we find answers.

Fundamental to Bollas's (1987, 1993, 2009) account is the understanding of a drive to fashion one's life that is fulfilled through encounters with objects. Objects invoke conscious thoughts, of course, but it is their unconscious absorption via free associations into the internal texture of the self that is fundamental to the establishment and articulation of one's personal idiom (or individuality). The mother is the first transformational object ever experienced (Bollas, 1987); traces of that symbiotic relationship are experienced as 'enviro-somatic caring, identified with metamorphoses of the self' (1987: 14). This pre-verbal experience informs object-seeking throughout life. In adulthood, this becomes a 'quest not to possess the object; rather the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self' (1987: 14). Transformational objects 'evoke [that] psychosomatic sense of fusion' experienced in the first months of life, that is 'never cognitively apprehended but existentially known' (1987: 16). That is, 'transformational-object-seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that resides in the past' (1987: 40). The object sought is a psychic key to unconsciously intense experiences (Bollas, 1993: 17) that promises 'powerful metamorphoses of being' (Bollas, 1987: 17). We all consciously and unconsciously seek and select objects that may transform the self. This is not a pursuit free of trauma, for Bollas (1987: 27) warns that 'There is something impersonal and ruthless about the search for . . . all objects nominated as

transformational. . . . the subject's relation to the object can become fanatical.' Further, transformation 'does not mean gratification' (1987: 29), implying that because gratification (finding and surrendering to the object) only partially promotes growth, the search is never-ending. New theories of leadership, we propose, are (immaterial) objects whose allure, felt unconsciously, is the possibility of their being those elusive psychic keys to transforming the self.

In other words, new theories of leadership and Snark are equivalent, the latter providing an intellectual structuring device for a hermeneutic reading of the unconscious's work in pursuing these particular transformational objects.

The beginning of the Agony, *Fit the First*, in organizing an incongruent list of characters into a single category, *The Crew*, is akin to the work done by the leadership canon; that is, it defines what becomes understood as the major contributions in a field—such as the 'Great Man', contingency, heroic and other theories outlined above. Pollock (1999) illuminates how the canon, in *ordering* theories, establishes the very thing it claims to be ordering (here, influential leadership theories that become an object to be sought), just as the gathering of the Bellman et al. establishes 'the Crew'. An immaterial object, the transformational/authentic/collective/etc. leader of theory, emerges as 'real' in theory although not, the history of failure suggests, in practice. But it is the theory, or its next incarnation, that is the object that is sought.

Bollas's work demonstrates this object's potential to be transformational. Sought objects may have agentive transformational capacities (Bollas, 1987), although because transformational objects act on those who encounter them in individualistic, unspecific and diverse ways, the form the transformation takes is unpredictable. Just as the elusive Snark is such an object in Carroll's epic, so also are new interpretations of leadership for leadership theorists. That is, it is an object whose outlines are vague, that is tantalizingly just out of reach, residing somewhere in the near future, for researchers whose very selves will be fashioned and transformed by its successful discovery.⁶ Hence, the importance of finding the next theory.

The evanescent form the transformational object takes, for it is known only in the unconscious, appears consciously in the shape of a body of theory that cannot locate its object. That is, Carroll's *Snark*, and each crew member's focusing on his/her own skill in *Fit the Second* reminds us of the difficulty of definitively defining leadership. Stogdill's (1950) definition of leadership as a process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts towards goal setting and goal achievement disguises a continuing history of fruitless searching for a meaningful definition. For example, surveying the already extensive literature on leadership Bennis (1959: 259) noted that:

Always it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So, we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it . . . and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.

By 1974, Stogdill had reviewed more than 5000 published works on leadership but could do no more than concur with Bennis's conclusion. In the next decades, Bennis and Nanus (1985: 4) concluded that: 'Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership. Literally thousands of empirical investigations of leaders have

been conducted in the last 75 years alone, but no clear and unequivocal understanding exists as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders, and, perhaps more importantly, what distinguishes effective leaders from ineffective leaders', while Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf (2000: 28) explored how leadership was defined in use and found multiple definitions of this 'woolly concept' circulating in organizations.

Object relations theory sees nothing unusual in such apparent failure to arrive at a shared understanding, because individuals follow their own idiosyncratic path in searching for their transformational object and, importantly, the psyche influences what is 'seen'. Bollas understands that each person is, at every moment, influenced by their entire history. Encounters with objects evoke intensities leading to trains of thought, each triggering memories of individual experiences, and then we are 'off in a thousand different directions, until the next such psychic intensity' (Bollas, 2002: 199). Thoughts of objects form countless ideational routes (Bollas, 1995: 55). Each person exploring leadership will be used by this term that launches them on idiosyncratic journeys. Each will be 'substantially metamorphosed' by movements in the unconscious triggered by their individual responses; these then inform their own approach to leadership theory. It is unsurprising there are so many variants, as each theorist will fashion their own definitive version, their potentially transformational object, the Snark they have been pursuing consciously, spurred on by unconscious motivations. Each individual theorist will therefore develop a theory of leadership that is unique to them.

It follows there can be no map to aid finding of this/these transformational objects; the next theory of leadership is an individualized search using maps as blank as the Bellman's.

We return to the Crew, preparing their weapons for hunting the Snark under the incapable leadership of the Bellman and to theorists whose unconscious identifies the next theory of leadership as their elusive transformational object.

In Bollas's account there is no difference between material and non-material evocative objects: 'both are equally capable of putting the self through a complex inner experience' (Bollas, 2009: 79). We have noted how object relations theory advises that there can be no unitary thing, a singular theory of leadership, but a multitude of forms each unique to individual theorists. These, if gathered together through the taxonomizing imperative of academia and given a label, such as 'collective leadership' (Denis et al., 2012), may enter the canon. Researchers venturing into the field in search of such theories are analogous to the Crew members setting out on the hunt: because previous studies show how elusive are sightings of 'leaders' and 'leadership' both in theory (Kelly, 2014) and empirically (Harding et al., 2011). For research *participants*, leadership may be a non-existent object, alive neither in the conscious nor the unconscious; not evoked and not evocative. However, the researcher will have immersed herself in the literature, gone to seek leadership in practice and can impose leadership as an explanatory factor upon the interactions she observes. For her, leadership is both conscious and unconscious object, one unique to the self that she brings with her to the fieldwork, a non-material object that will, through a mental metamorphosis (Bollas, 2009: 89), consciously configure not only the theories, papers and teaching materials, but also unconsciously the very self of the researcher.

That is, leadership, just like the Snark, can exist and not-exist at the same time. It exists for researchers convinced of its existence (albeit that it will take perhaps as many

forms as there are researchers) but not necessarily for others. To research leadership is thus to follow an illusory map, like the Bellman's 'nothing but water', but still getting its researchers to a site, perhaps any site, where they can visualize leadership, even though others do not see it, know of it or experience it.

To summarize: our argument in this first part of the Agony challenges the logic of seeking new theories of leadership. The highly elusive theory, we have argued, offers the potential to be a transformational object for researchers for whom it holds out the lure of transforming the self. It is sought using a map that is concerned more with academia and academics than organizations generally. In many ways this is unproblematic: all individuals are involved in the pursuit of their own transformational objects. However, although leadership theories may have no material existence outside the pages of academic journals, the strong desire to see it, leadership, in action, can result in its being 'seen'; that is, performativity theories demonstrate how language produces that which it cites (Ford et al., 2017).

This takes us to the Agony Part Two, which warns that what may be invoked through speech may be very different from what was anticipated: it may be malign rather than benign, Boojum rather than Snark. The second part of the Agony forces engagement with the puzzle of why leadership theory appears so reluctant to acknowledge leadership's negative possibilities, and thus responds to our second question of explaining the failure to find the elusive theory. The answer, we suggest, lies in the inadequate theory of the person that underpins leadership theory. This leads to another question: why haven't better theories been used? Bollas would answer that investing too much passion in an object may 'restrict the individual from developing a more multifaceted personality' (Bollas, 1993: 89), or, for current purposes, a more multifaceted theory of leaders and followers. We begin with a description of how the temporary organization, that is the Crew, falls apart when finding itself in disquieting circumstances under the inadequate leadership of the Bellman.

The Agony Part Two: Or the elusiveness of the transformational object

The sub-title of *The Snark*, 'An agony in eight fits' can be understood as 'a story with eight sub-sections'. Carroll's choice of words that signify pain and discomfort, used in a way that renders them nonsensical, suggests, in our interpretation, the value of taking the everyday mundanity of experience and trying to understand why it is mundane (a story) rather than extraordinary (an agony). This required we ask of our study: what is happening here that appears ordinary and everyday but needs to be interrogated, because something profound may hide beneath its very ordinariness? We next summarize four more of *The Snark's* eight Agonies.

In Fit the Third, the Bellman bullies the Baker, constantly interrupting him as he tries to tell a story, and when the Baker speaks of his uncle's warning that anyone who meets a Boojum will 'softly and suddenly vanish away', the Bellman warns that some Snarks are Boojums, causing the Baker to faint in fear. In response to the Baker's swoon, strong leadership would appear to be needed—especially when in Fit the Fifth, the Beaver's lesson, we see how threatening is the

island on which the Crew find themselves. The Butcher and Beaver walk into a dark valley, each trying not to notice the other. They hear a scream—the Butcher says it is the Jubjub (another entity that is never defined or described). He makes lots of calculations, instructs the Beaver about the Jubjub, then they abandon the hunt and return hand-in-hand to the camp. The character of other members of the Crew is questioned in *Fit the Sixth*, in which the Barrister falls asleep and dreams that the Snark is a barrister who, defending a pig on the charge of deserting its sty, proves wonderfully adept at this role. *Fit the Seventh*, the Banker's fate, introduces another threatening creature, the Bandersnatch. The Banker, newly brave, rushes ahead of the others, but is grabbed in the beak of a Bandersnatch that has frumious jaws. The Bandersnatch retreats as the others approach, but the Banker's experience has rendered him insane.⁷

This second Agony of *The Hunting of the Snark* includes some fine studies of human frailties, starting with the Bellman who is a weak, manipulative and destructive leader who subordinates his social inferior, the working-class Baker. The Bellman, read through psychoanalytical object relations theory, symbolizes the negativity that is inherent not only to particular (rare) individuals, but also that is present in everyone. Leadership theory in general ignores this; it is underpinned by a reductionist, somewhat Manichean conception of the human, that presumes those in leadership roles are good, and often exceptional, human beings.

All leadership theories are concerned, explicitly and implicitly, with interactions between people, leaders and followers. Even the most immaterial of leadership theories, such as those developed in collective leadership approaches that presume leadership is an emergent concept hovering separately and distinctively from staff gathered together (e.g. Crevani, 2018), presume a collective of at least two people. These people remain unexplored, their psychic influence on each other ignored, yet it is well established that interpersonal interactions in organizations are embedded within and imbricated by power relations that influence participants in often unexpected ways. There are examples of this in studies of toxic leadership, and history shows the worst that such people can do when in positions of authority (Sereny, 1974). But there is a tendency to assume such dysfunctional, even cruel, leaders are exceptions, the source of their malign behaviours located within themselves, as in research into 'the dark triad' (Buchholz et al., 2019; Jonason et al., 2013; Matthieu et al., 2014), or in case studies of unethical, controlling leaders (Espedal et al., 2013; Tourish, 2015). There is a need for leadership theory to acknowledge that organizational power and pressures, interacting with individual desires and struggles for identity, can produce petty tyrants (such as the Bellman) who feature in studies of organizational bullying (Einarsen et al., 2011). But each person has the capacity to become a Bellman: object relations theory, read with and through *The Snark*, shows *everyone*, with very rare exceptions, has the capacity to be destructive, obstructive, unhelpful and off-putting. That is, negativity is normal.

This has two consequences for the continuing search for new theories of leadership. First, the assumption that people's capacity for ill is limited to only a few exceptional deviants inhibits understanding of how leaders can unleash a whirlwind (the Snark could be a Boojum). Better theory should help identify ways of avoiding the destructive influence each of us may bring to bear when in leadership roles. Second, the long-standing failure to incorporate more comprehensive or sophisticated theories of the leader-subject

may be the cause of the cycle of disappointing leadership theories, but a cause that cannot be acknowledged. As Clancy et al.'s (2012) psychoanalytical study of disappointment suggests, disappointment may be part of a 'common fantasy of control and coherence, where organizational members [in our case academics] behave *as if* organizations [or theories in our study] are the stable containers of rational decision-making and problem-solving' (Clancy et al., 2012: 519, emphasis in original). That is, disappointment at the failure of a body of theory may, counter-intuitively, inhibit recognition of the causes of failure. The 'imagined stability' of a body of theory in continual search of its object will, despite those failures, buttress a continuing search. Leadership researchers are therefore invested, unconsciously, in *not* finding the theory they are pursuing.

We here introduce Jessica Benjamin's (1988) explanation of how the negative aspects of the psyche are readied to intervene in leadership interactions. Inspired by Freud's theory of how domination and aggression are an inevitable part of the unconscious, in *The Bonds of Love* (1988) she analyses how structures of control and submission infuse all relationships, how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated and dominator and dominated may switch roles. We translate Benjamin's focus on gender hierarchies to organizational hierarchies that, with few exceptions, overtly employ structures of domination (masculine/manager/leader) and subordination (feminine/worker/follower). Organizations encourage a fantasy of domination in the more powerful that requires the collusion of the less powerful in their own psychic destruction, in a dynamic in which 'one is always up and the other down, one is doer and the other done-to' (Benjamin, 1988: 220). *Contra* the desire in contemporary leadership theories to dismantle the subject/object dichotomy (Uhl-Bien, 2006):

. . . the structure of subject and object thoroughly permeates our social relations, our ways of knowing, our efforts to transform and control the world; and it is this . . . logic which ultimately forecloses on the intersubjective realm [that is suffused with] the reversible relationship of domination. (Benjamin, 1988: 220)

In conducive conditions, this negativity that is inherent within the self is released (see also Bollas's theory of the authoritarian state of mind, below). Power's inter-twining with the negative aspects of the psyche can invoke dire effects, so it is vital to guard against such possibilities. In assuming that leaders are inherently good, leadership theories offer no understanding of or modes of resistance to domination/control: followers are required to follow. The Bellman's bullying of the Baker encapsulates the dangers of ignoring the negativity that is inherent to the human condition: leadership can foster unanticipated and destructive dynamics—the Boojum may be released.

The positive predisposition of the numerous theories within the canon of leadership theory are mimetic of Carroll's description of Butcher and Beaver halted in their tracks by the cry of the Jubjub. For us, the Jubjub represents what is obvious when we look around at the organizations in which we, as leadership theorists, work, or indeed when we look in the mirror. We are surrounded by people who have good days and bad days, who are sometimes brusque and critical and sometimes caring and kind, who can be powerful in some situations and unable to cope in others. That is, observing our everyday quotidian, as demonstrated powerfully by Stewart (2007), is an indispensable accessory in the

researcher's methodological toolbox but is largely absent from leadership researchers' thought. The Jubjub's scream warns that leadership theory requires more sophisticated understanding of leaders as subjects experiencing emotions and conscious and unconscious desires (Vince and Mazen, 2014). Such acts of disregarding can become 'violently innocent' (Bollas, 1993: 168). Violent innocence involves doing wrong and, wishing to be innocent of the guilt of our actions, finding someone else to take the blame for our sin (Bollas, 1993), all the while pleading our own innocence. Violent innocence arises, in part, from an individual's need to be free of unwanted feelings, troubling recognitions, fears and anxieties, and of others' expectations, both real and imagined. As observed by Vince and Mazen (2014: 191), such denials might involve the refusal to validate negative perceptions, thus providing opportunities to blame or provoke others, to disturb or distress them, without having to be blamed, provoked, disturbed or distressed oneself. Leadership theories' violent innocence resides in such conditions: of ignoring power's complexities, and how domination, neglect, cruelty and other aspects of organizations and organizational actors may be integral to leadership and may, indeed, flourish.

Leadership studies swears its innocence by means of a series of denials of the complex humanity of people in organizations. First, labelling some individuals as 'followers' is a power move that elevates some as superior and others as inferior (Benjamin, 1988). Denying that this is a strategy of power may 'stir up distress, ideational density, and emotional turbulence' (Bollas, 1993: 169) in those required to acknowledge their inferior position. Second, in presuming harmony, leadership theories ignore organizational realities that are often hostile rather than inspiring, as work on the politics of organizations shows and that Benjamin (1988) explains. That is, relationships of dependence and domination are inherent within the sociality of the workplace. In denying this possibility, leadership theories are violently innocent—the causes of deviation from the theory are argued to be practitioners, rather than inadequate theories. An example here is debates about transformational and authentic leadership; leaders who do not practise authentically are argued by scholars who instigated theories of authentic leadership to be a small, inauthentic minority who disguise their negativity behind a mask of authenticity (Gardner et al., 2011; for a critique see Ford and Harding, 2007, 2011; Ladkin and Spiller, 2013). That is, it is presumed it is not the theory that is wrong; rather it is the negative people who do not share what are presumed to be the altruistic characteristics of the vast majority.

Further, influential contemporary theories of collective leadership that seek to harness the efforts of everyone in an organization not only ignore the drudgery of many jobs that inspire little motivation to take on the extra role of temporary leader, but they also ignore the repercussions on staff who refuse to participate: would they be punished? Finally, there is no analysis of operations of power, resistance and domination; no recognition that organizational lives may be beset by contradictions, bullying and misunderstandings; and leaders (and indeed 'followers') may be narcissistic or violent. New theories of leadership, like the trail of leadership theories that emerged in the last 150 years, can be argued to be fundamentally violent if they achieve greater control over staff, and violently innocent in laying the blame for organizational inadequacies elsewhere (e.g. in derided 'management'). Disturbing truths that could be materialized were new theories of leadership to be enacted in organizations remain unexplored. Leadership theories' rhetoric of positivity denies the reality of being human at work in contemporary organizations and leaves it

deaf to the screaming Jubjub. Leadership theorists, in promulgating such flawed theories, ensure the desired transformational object will never be found, as we explore next.

The Butcher and the Beaver eventually heed the Jubjub's cries. Back at the camp, the Barrister, weary of his disputes with the Beaver, falls asleep.

A successful leadership theory, we have suggested, requires more sophisticated understanding of the human, something a century of research has made available. That is, leadership theory's long cycle of disappointment at the failure of each successive new theory arises because it has not drawn upon the insights into the human that have developed in other disciplines over the past century. Leadership theorists have failed to draw upon that work, and the reason for that failure, we are arguing, lies in the unconscious. The Barrister's dream helps explain this. Attempts to translate theories into practice inevitably fail when abstract theory meets an organizational reality in which leaders and followers are complex, unpredictable subjects rather than the somewhat reductionist objects in successive leadership theories. The repeated, even insistent, use of such an inadequate account of the human suggests, as Clancy et al. (2012) have argued, that the work of the unconscious means that disappointment reinforces researchers' identification with flawed theories.

Psychoanalytical theory, famously, focuses on dreams, the 'royal route to the unconscious' (Freud, 1900/1999: 122) as a way of exploring aspects of the unconscious that emerge within and through them. We cannot of course lay Carroll's fictitious Barrister on the psychoanalyst's couch and explore with him his dream's meaning, but we have sufficient detail to suggest, first, that the Snark in the dream is the transformational object that will transform the Barrister into his ego ideal, or ideal self (Freud, 1914, in Benjamin, 1988). His ego ideal is a supremely able barrister, but the case itself is ridiculous, suggesting an ego ideal free of any scruples or morals: winning is all that counts. Benjamin's (1988, 1995, 2018) analysis of the unconscious desire to be both controller and controlled is complemented by Bollas's (1993: 196) discussion of the bully that is in each of us, encapsulated in Carroll's Bellman. Freud recognized that individuals are an 'endless series of compromise solutions between the parts of the self' (in Bollas, 1993: 194); one such part, as observed above, is the psyche's destructive side. It is important in what follows to remember, first, that the internalized tyrant (which we all have) is in the unconscious, although it can break through to govern conscious actions. It therefore means that it is possible to occupy two unconscious positions simultaneously: being both a liberal who believes in democracy but also capable of developing a totalitarian frame of mind (Bollas, 1993: 197). This frame of mind is 'ordinary' and everyday. The influence of an ideology, belief or conviction enables use of mental mechanisms to eliminate opposition to that ideology, both internal (the psychic killing of parts of the self) and external (through dominating others). Doubt cannot be tolerated. The Barrister's ego ideal, ethics-free, desires to impose its will on others. In other words, the Snark at this point indicates the struggle within the unconscious of leadership theorists who are consciously seeking better theories of leadership but render their attempts futile through an unconscious motivation to cling to the inadequate theory of the subject they use.

Bollas (1993: 200) argues that the core element in this state of mind, be it held by the individual or within the group, 'is the presence of an ideology [or belief or conviction] that maintains its certainty through the operation of specific mental mechanisms

aimed at eliminating all opposition'. When doubt and self-interrogation are banished, and total belief in the crowning idea takes their place, a seed that can germinate into consciously experienced authoritarianism receives water and warmth. Benjamin (1998: 85–86) similarly warns of the exclusion from the notion of the rational person the 'violence and horror of which we are capable'. Psychoanalytically, she writes, violence is associated with omnipotence or a mental state of undifferentiation: 'In this state we are unable to take in that the other person does not want what we want, [or to] do what we say.' Violence is thus:

. . . the outer perimeter of the less dramatic tendency of the subject to force the other to either be or want what it wants, to assimilate the other to itself or make it a threat. It is the extension of reducing difference to sameness. (1998: 86)

In this case, the struggle is not between two people but between the two aspects of the self, the conscious and the unconscious.

Now, we are *not* arguing that leadership theories are necessarily infused with autocracy and bullying, but that there is a radical distinction, a battle even, between the unconscious and conscious desires of those pursuing new theories of leadership (including ourselves). We cannot know what takes place in the unconscious of leadership theorists, we can only speculate that, following Clancy et al. (2012) there is fear of bringing the search to a halt through finding what could prove to be the ultimate theory of leadership; that is, one's motivation, one's drive to succeed in academia, one's sense of one's self as a coherent subject, would collapse without the unconscious belief in the existence of this elusive object and its ability to transform.

The Butcher and the Beaver have returned to the camp and the Barrister has awoken from his rapacious dream. This second Agony explores the denial in the assumptions underpinning leadership studies of any motivations other than benevolence. We laid Carroll's Barrister on the psychiatric couch where Benjamin and Bollas between them identified how he demonstrates what is an uncomfortable truth for many: in every individual there is an authoritarian that may be more or less controlled, more or less denied, but always capable of erupting into conscious actions. This allowed us to illuminate the inadequacy of the theory of the subject that informs the search for new theories of leadership, and we suggested the refusal to incorporate more persuasive approaches into the search for new theories of leadership can be accounted for by elusive, unconscious motivations rather than logical, conscious aspirations.

What now of the Banker, rendered insane after being caught in the fruminous jaws of a Bandersnatch? We confess that we ourselves found ourselves in the position of the Banker, caught in the fruminous jaws of a body of theory whose potential consequences are cause for concern.

Caught reflexively in the Agony of the Fits

Bollas (1995: 71) describes how an obsession with an object can become what he calls 'preoccupation unto Death'. Our discussion in this article, in which we address an issue that has long bothered us, suggests the canon of leadership theory and the never-ending

search for new theories of leadership have led us, the authors of this article, into a preoccupation unto Death from which we must extricate ourselves.

For Bollas (1995: 74–75), the unconscious is involved in a ‘rhythm of unconscious creativity’ that informs and feeds the conscious self’s movement through life. This rhythmic movement is halted when focus is fixed on a terminal rather than transitional object. Transitional objects facilitate the ‘natural forward movement of those departing trains of thought’ that, in Bollasian theory, constitute the self; terminal objects prevent that movement. Preoccupation with a terminal object conjures a mental space that holds only one object and excludes all others—blocking rhythms of unconscious creativity. That potential space that is key to mutual recognition, receptivity, self-expression and collaboration (Benjamin, 1988: 126–127) closes. Bollas (1995: 101), usefully for us, draws an analogy between scientist and the unconscious work of the self. The self not trapped within a terminal object will experiment with different psychical objects, operating in trial and error much as scientists do, developing and rejecting many hypotheses about objects encountered. Benjamin (1988) agrees. The scientist’s work, located in this transitional, intersubjective space, permits creative play that is simultaneously bounded and full of unlimited possibilities, but only when the object is a generative one.

Bollas’s analogy shows that our critique of leadership theorists’ search for new theories of leadership has become a terminal object for us, the authors of this article. We have become so absorbed in critique that it prevents us from moving forward, leaving us as trapped as other leadership theorists within the narrow confines of a body of theory that, our analysis shows, fulfils the desires of theorists but goes no further. Our focus, on other leadership theorists, became not a transformational but a terminal object that inhibits the creative engagement that would have led us to more productive thinking.

We have now looked each other in the eyes and vowed to break free of this terminal object. We next summarize our arguments against the search for leadership theorists’ seemingly compulsive search for new theories of leadership, identify one final shortcoming and use that to allow us (and in our fantasies other leadership theorists) to move forward.

Summary and discussion: Also known as Fit the Eighth

The Vanishing. It is growing dark. The Beaver bounds along in front of the others. They see the Baker, on the top of a neighbouring crag, erect and sublime, for one moment of time. But then he plunged into a chasm and all that was heard was ‘It’s a Boo. . .’. There is nothing left of the Baker ‘For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.’

This article brings together three strands of thinking that emerged within just a few decades of each other in the 19th century and continue to resonate with each other: theories of leadership, Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Carroll’s development of the nonsense poem as a form of scathing critique. *The Hunting of the Snark* provided inspiration for interpretation and a structure through which we could apply a psychoanalytical reading to the repetitive search for new theories of leadership. Carroll’s insight was that human actors engage in searching for an elusive but much desired something that, although assiduously sought, may turn out to be better avoided. Object relations theory illuminated the impossibility of merging with or finding the desired transformational object. It may not be a Snark but a Boojum.

At the start of the article, we set out to answer two questions: why does the search for new theories of leadership continue despite 150 years of failure, and what can explain the inability to find that elusive theory? The first arose from our bemusement at how so many academics continue in the pursuit of new theories of leadership when history—150 years of theorizing—suggests the object sought is extremely elusive, unfindable it seems, so the hunt is futile. In the first Agony, we argued that new theories of leadership appeal to the unconscious as potential transformational objects that are sought throughout life for their promise of transforming the self. Each person will follow their own idiosyncratic path to finding the transformational object, so each theorist will have their own subjective definition and understanding of leadership. We argued that leadership's amorphous, immaterial shape would allow researchers to see it wherever they looked, they may seek insights that take forward existing theories or they may seek something totally new. Our crucial argument here is that leadership studies is concerned more with academic desires than with organizational practitioners or wider global challenges.

The second question posed queried why the search for new theories always results in disappointment. Analysis through our Snarkian-psychoanalytical lens pointed to the fact that leadership theories rest on an inadequate theory of the subject, but there are unconscious motivations that inhibit theorists from using better-informed accounts. Both Carroll and psychoanalytical theory show that human subjects tend to be neither saints nor sinners, but complex mixtures of both. We suggested, first, leadership theories cannot translate successfully into practice so long as they fail to incorporate developments in understanding of human subjects that have evolved over the course of leadership studies' long history. Second, we proposed that leadership theorists are unconsciously motivated not to use more adequate theories of the subject because were they to develop *the* theory of leadership that would end the unconscious search for the elusive transformational object, something that cannot be (unconsciously) borne.

Our arguments thus contribute a new psychoanalytical theory of leadership research, that argues the theorist's unconscious influences not only what is regarded as the object of knowledge and how it shall be understood, but also determines that the knowledge desired consciously may, because of the workings of the unconscious, remain always tenuous, always just out of reach.

Finally, the article took a reflexive turn, and we applied our Snarkian psychoanalytical lens to ourselves. We cannot know what our own transformational objects might be—they lie hidden inaccessibly within the psyche—but we admitted we had become preoccupied unto death with this critique of other theorists' work. Our analysis suggests the futility of searching for new theories of leadership because we are trapped within cycles of disappointment. Our own position as critical leadership theorists position us as part of, and not outside, that futile pursuit. The search for new theories of leadership, and our readiness to jump in to critique each new theory as it emerges, means we, ourselves, go round and round in theoretical circles, locked within theory/ideology/critique, developing little that is new. Leadership theory becomes a terminal object for critics and proponents alike. It is neither Boojum nor Snark, for in this position where stasis rules and there is no forward movement we remain caught in the fruminous jaws of the Bandersnatch.

Conclusion: Fit the Ninth, in which we escape the Bandersnatch and embrace the void

Have we reached a dead-end, destined to be caught forever in the Bandersnatch's frumious jaws? The reviewers of an earlier draft of this article suggested that that was indeed our fate, because our wanderings with Carroll, Bollas and Benjamin were taking us around in the circles of an endless critique of leadership with no way out. We needed, they recommended, to push our ideas into territory as yet unexplored, to think what has not yet been thought about leadership. We should, in the words of the editor, 'derive more implications and perspectives for future studies' in a time when, if our arguments were to be heeded, the search for the next theory of leadership will have become *passé*. At the same time, as Reviewer One pointed out, there is a danger in trying to achieve that objective through a new theory, because it would contradict our article's entire arguments.

We must, it seems, add a further Fit to Carroll's eight.

Our Fit the Ninth starts with the dilemma of how to make a leap that allows us to think the unknown. We used the comments of the editor and reviewers of the earlier version of this article as a map. Reviewer Two provided the stepping off point, in the form of some early critical approaches to leadership research, specifically Gemmill and Oakley (1992) and, relatedly, Smircich and Morgan (1982). Gemmill and Oakley (1992: 114) argued that leadership theory represented 'a serious sign of social pathology, that it is a special case of an iatrogenic social myth that induces massive, learned helplessness among members of a social system', evidenced in an inability of followers or other members of an organization to imagine or perceive viable options, along with accompanying feelings of despair and a resistance to initiating any form of action. Thus, as social hopelessness and helplessness deepen, the search for a saviour (leader) or miraculous rescue (leadership) also begins to accelerate. This childlike dependency basis of the leader myth is supported in Smircich and Morgan's (1982) writing, in which leadership is perceived as a process whereby followers give up their mindfulness to a leader or to leadership. As they state (Smircich and Morgan, 1982: 257), 'leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others'. Leadership is thereby reified and through its reification it is accepted and adopted without much question as a central feature of organizational life. It thereby takes on an objective existence that serves to make it beyond challenge. From this perspective, leadership might be seen as a social fiction that has been assimilated unconsciously through social programming or as a defence against anxiety. Because researchers and practitioners assume that as there is a word 'leader' (or 'leadership') there must be an independent objective reality it describes or denotes.

In other words, reflecting those arguments back on ourselves, our own long experience as leadership researchers rendered us helpless in trying to think the beyond of leadership theory. That helplessness led us in the earlier version of this article, as Reviewer One pointed out, to repeat the very thing we had warned against: we offered another theory.

But a route to a way beyond theorising was there in front of us, in the poem *The Snark*. Poetry, the philosopher William Dilthey thought, is interlinked with philosophy and has the capacity to guide our imagination in several directions at once (Makkreel and Rodi,

1985). Heidegger argued similarly, writing that poetry shares with great art the power of truth-revealing capabilities (Pell, 2012). A third philosopher, Mary Midgley (2001: 34), arguing powerfully for the value of reading poetry and science through each other, supported Percy Bysshe Shelley's argument that poets and imaginative prose writers

... are prophets, not in the sense of foretelling things, but of generating forceful visions. They express not just feelings but crucial ideas in a direct, concentrated form that precedes and makes possible their later articulation by the intellect and their influence on our actions.

The poet's observations are not trivial, she continues, but are 'of the first importance in our lives' (2001: 34). Poetry, philosophers thus tell us, can open the way to thinking the as yet unthought, or what Bollas (1987) refers to as 'the unthought known'; that is, that which is unconsciously recognized but not cognitively known. Good reviewers also do that: they push us to bring out the potential we would not otherwise have seen in our work. We therefore return to Lewis Carroll's poem, but this time in the company of an inspirational editor and three reviewers.

The key to thinking the unthought was there in *The Snark*, but it took a comment by Reviewer Three to reveal it. S/he invited us to look into the abyss threatened by the Boojum, not to find a 'solution' to the issues we have outlined in the article, but to open up the possibility for creation. Answering this invitation required that we creep past Carroll's timorous bunch of hunters, climb to the top of the crag and throw ourselves into the embrace of the Boojum and thus into that void where future thought might lie. Scrabbling around in the void of future thought meant that we could not offer the traditional conclusions to this article: putting forward a new direction to leadership research—suggesting an array of methodological approaches and assessing their value as well as their shortcomings. Instead, following the example set by many poets and psychoanalysts, we will give ourselves up to dreaming and explore the free associations that arise. Instead of a search for the next theory of leadership or yet another critique of contemporary leadership theory and theorists, we will be the flâneurs of our dreamscapes: moving through our own object world seeking evocative objects that force us to think and to think again (Bollas, 2009)—both about the object itself as well as the experiences of them. Inner mental life and lived experience are obviously inseparable but wandering within the real—moving from thing to thing—can in itself be a form of reverie that constitutes thinking. In this way, the void becomes a third area (Winnicott, 1971), the place for creative play. We hope other leadership theorists will wish to join us in this leap into the abyss, leaving behind out-dated thought and experimenting with what rises from that void.

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Notes

- 1 In this text, Liu provides a stringent critique of the role of the business school in perpetuating imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal ideologies. She argues that a reimagining of leadership theorizing and education is required; one that recognizes the interlocking nature of oppression and begins by including non-western perspectives and values in the curriculum.
- 2 We are using the edition published on the internet by Tigertail Associates (2004). See <https://victorianpersistence.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/lewis-carroll-the-hunting-of-the-snark.pdf> (accessed 22 November 2020).
- 3 We are adopting a broad definition of poetics that goes beyond a dictionary definition that sees it pertaining to the art of writing poetry and the nature, forms and laws of a specific genre. Following Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and his work on narrative, we view poetics as involved with the ways by which literary texts embody ‘non-literary’ phenomena such as leadership or organizations.
- 4 The full poem is accessible at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43909/the-hunting-of-the-snark> (accessed 28 July 2021).
- 5 <https://firstaidforlife.org.uk/fitting-seizures-and-convulsions/> (accessed 6 August 2021).
- 6 Parker (2018) states that there are 13,000 business schools world-wide most of which, if not all, will employ staff who specialize in leadership research and teaching and who will deliver a range of leadership modules at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. In turn, there is now a proliferation of accrediting bodies who will assess university programmes in leadership highlighting a mutually beneficial relationship between these bodies in terms of professional status, the enhanced ability to recruit students and thereby secure a stable, lucrative income stream. This provides a relatively secure career for academics on the leadership path. Our analysis, however suggests, that job security is not the only motivation for the continued pursuit of new theories of leadership.
- 7 It is of interest that ‘blander’ was perhaps an ‘archaic word for a leader, suggesting that a “bandersnatch” might be an animal that hunts [or snatches] the leader of a group’ (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jabberwocky>) (accessed 1 December 2020). If so, then Carroll’s poem has more relevance for understanding leadership than would, at first sight, have been thought.

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