

DICKENS'S DAVID AND CARROLL'S ALICE: REPRESENTATIONS OF VICTORIAN LIMINALITY

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In the child's reverie, the image takes over everything else.
The reverie of childhood returns us to the first images.
—Gaston Bachelard

1

The word “remembering” can be used in the double sense of retrieving through time and reassembling pieces and personae. This is a paper about the remembering of childhood, as reverie and as nightmare in two classic Victorian narratives. Dickens's *David Copperfield* gives us the reverie of childhood filtered to the reader through the medium of nostalgia. Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* combine as the narrative of nightmare which stuns as a theatre of the absurd. Certainly each narrative contains elements of its counter-mode—there are haunting shadows of disjunction and disorientation in *David* and preludes of pastoral tranquility in *Alice*. However, the predominance of the mode of reverie in *David* and of nightmare in *Alice* allows these works to stand as opposing paradigms. Through the voice and memories of Dickens's David, we explore the paradigm of childhood idealised and repossessed through the powerful creative energy of nostalgia to soothe and safeguard the one who remembers. The adventures of Carroll's Alice show us the counter-side of that idyll—an unflinching expression of nightmarish unreason and anxiety, however distanced through absurdist humour. The reverie is always seeking to repair the psyche's sense of loss, while the absurdist nightmare allows for that loss to be expressed without acknowledging implications for the wounded psyche. Taken together, these narratives provide complementary representations of liminality—each using the trope of the child and his or her wondrous journey to penetrate and illuminate the margins of Victorian experience.

In chapter nine of *David Copperfield*, “I have a Memorable Birthday,” the oppressed but not unkindly Mrs Creakle breaks the news to David, just turned ten, that his mother is dead. “There was no real need to tell me so,” writes David as narrator. “I had already broken out into a desolate cry, and felt an orphan in the wide world” (176). The coincidence of David's birthday stresses the threshold crossed at this moment: with the death of his mother he is thrust into strange new life as a full-fledged Victorian orphan, that marginal yet representative figure, posed always just outside the circle of desired safety, identity, and inclusion. If the liminal figure of the orphan is accepted as the strikingly representative figure of Victorian fiction—and no more so of course than through the work of Dickens—it is because this character expresses key anxieties, opportunities, and disruptions of the time.¹ The orphan child lives out the era's fear of

¹ Jan B. Gordon links the orphan and social disruption: “If one had to choose the image most closely associated with the Victorian novel, the orphan would rank high on any list. . . . The orphan clearly came

being alone without protection; he reflects its pain of loss of faith, place, and home; out of desperate necessity he also struggles to rise to the challenge of sustaining the uprooted self and reattaching it to society. The happy ending of the orphan narrative is one in which life-sustaining connections are attained—Jane Eyre marrying Mr Rochester, David Copperfield finding his aunt, his profession, his angel in the house—even if what readers thrill to and remember are also the perils of endangered but resistant orphanhood. Conversely its unhappy ending is one in which connections fail; characters remain dismally orphaned and literally die of disconnection (poor Joe, the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House* who knows “nothink”; poor Jude the Obscure cursing another memorable birthday—the day he was born).

Here our focus is the depiction of orphanhood as a *remembered* condition. You are an orphan only when you are a child, but the poignancy of having been an orphan—or having imagined yourself one—lingers beyond childhood. Orphans grown up become, like the adult David Copperfield, something else—committed husbands, successful authors, retrospective narrators telling the mesmerising story of their passage from the orphaned condition. The pleasure of the orphan narrative can lie in the heroic initiatory pattern of survival and triumph. The Murdstones *are* defeated. But pleasure also lies in the recollection of intensity. For all its pain and misery the orphan narrative of *David Copperfield*, moving between childhood and adulthood, is imbued with Wordsworthian nostalgia for “the glory and the dream” of the felt experience of childhood. This perspective gives a distinctive hue to this most autobiographical of Dickens’s novels.

Indeed *David Copperfield* is Dickens’s most pastoral rendering of the theme of the orphaned child. In its temporal aspect the novel slips recurrently into pastoral retrospect; in its spatial aspect it features a persistently pastoral landscape from which mid-nineteenth-century capitalism and urban industrialism are largely banished. These may be hinted at in David’s sojourn at Murdstone and Grinby or in Betsey Trotwood’s reversals in the stock market. But Dickens’s London, so compelling an entity in *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit* or even *Oliver Twist*, with its innocent child moving uncontaminated through urban grime and poverty, is not ever a dynamic presence in this work. Even when David removes by choice to the city, he is always walking or riding out to still-countrified Highgate or Norwood or Putney. Numerous key scenes of the novel unfold in country and seaside settings or in suburban and provincial ones; many others occur in cottages and quiet houses more often than not adjoined by “lovely little gardens.”

Within these houses and gardens we encounter numerous orphans. Thus the pastoral is qualified; it is never untinged by loss. “You were an orphan, weren’t you?” (56) asks Betsey Trotwood of David’s mother in the first scene of the book. An orphan, and a governess too, it turns out. Dickens need say no more. Ham and Little Em’ly are

to symbolise all the discontinuities that faced the age. . . . One way of living one’s disconnectedness is to imagine existence itself as an alienated activity, and the child’s searching for foster parents is almost an exemplum of the psychic state” (98-99). Nina Auerbach on the other hand sees the nineteenth-century orphan as coming “to stand for something like pure selfhood. Being in the Wordsworthian sense. Coleridge’s ‘infinite I AM’” (67). A study specifically of Dickens’s representations of the orphan condition has recently been published by Baruch Hochman and Ilja Wachs.

orphans—on David's first visit to Yarmouth, he and Em'ly pass the time in comparing states of "orphanhood." She remarks differences in class; he notes that *his* father is buried in the churchyard while *hers* is lost at sea, and he of course at this point still has his mother. Yet another orphan who appears in passing (perhaps solely to be another orphan in the text) is the Micawbers' "dark-complexioned" young servant girl in London who informs David "before half an hour had expired" of his joining the Micawber household "that she was 'a Orfling' and came from St Lukes' workhouse" (212).

Though it is only with the death of his mother that he *feels* an orphan—a point to which we will return—posthumous David in fact is born one. Thus even with his mother still alive he can speak of himself as an orphan in his child-play talk with Little Em'ly. In David's fatherless condition he is mirrored by Steerforth, Uriah Heep and Mr Mell, other fatherless sons with intensely charged relations to their mothers. Meanwhile Agnes, Annie Strong, Rosa Dartle and Dora play out opposite-sex variants of the theme of the missing parent. Of these Agnes most closely parallels David—"Mama," she tells him, "has been dead ever since I was born" (286). But Dora too echoes David's experience in her tender grief at losing her beloved remaining parent and the subsequent protection of her benign aunts. Indeed the only family in *David Copperfield* to persist and propagate without the wound of parental loss, which is also a wound of sterility (the one-parent family cannot increase in number), is that of the ebullient and improvident Micawbers.

Yet sterility is the last word that comes to mind to characterise the world and texture of *David Copperfield*. From its opening page the novel works to soothe the traumas of loss through countervailing forces of love, respect, wonder and compassion. It is instructive to compare the initial view of the churchyard in *David Copperfield* with that in *Great Expectations*. Pip comes to consciousness shivering alongside the gravestones of his parents and five little brothers, while David, from inside his parlour "warm and bright with fire and candle," feels "indefinable compassion" for his father's white gravestone "lying out alone in the dark night" (50), against which the doors of the house are bolted. Whatever guilt David feels for the excluded father, in the next view of the gravestone his psyche has worked to dispel anxiety in the narrator's pastoral "earliest remembrances:" "There is nothing half so green that I know anywhere, as the green of that churchyard; nothing half so shady as its trees; nothing half-so-quiet as its tombstones. The sheep are feeding there, when I kneel up, early in the morning, in my little bed in a closet within my mother's room, to look out at it" (62).

David himself is soon expelled from this womb with a view—cast out from his room, house and green countryside by the detested Murdstones. But the habit of compassion remains, persisting for David as narrator as an efficacious means of tempering bitterness and recasting old pain as reverie. Even the pain of the time in London at Murdstone and Grinby, the only trauma of the past that the adult David declares himself reluctant to remember and on which he is relieved to again drop the curtain, calls into play the softening power of memory. Thinking how he made up stories about the debtors in Kings Prison, David reflects: "When my thoughts go back now to that slow agony of my youth. . . . when I tread the old ground, I do not wonder

that I seem to see and pity, going on before me. an innocent romantic boy, making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things!" (225).

Memory, which itself is a form of imagination, is David's gentle and compassionate friend working to soften his experience and to connect him to himself in the present and to others in the past.² It allows him to hold on to dear moments which then exist almost out of time—or one might think of them as Wordsworthian "spots of time." He never for example hears or reads the name of Yarmouth but is reminded of a certain Sunday morning on the beach—"the bells ringing for church, Little Em'ly leaning on my shoulder, Ham lazily dropping stones into the water" (91). He remembers the first evening home on holiday from Salem House with the Murdstones thankfully absent from the house. Sitting after dinner with his mother and Peggotty and his little brother he feels once more—in an instance of that protective trope of the female hair tent that appears so often in Victorian poetry—his mother's "beautiful hair drooping over me—like an angel's wing as I used to think, I recollect" (165). Or dreaming of his courtship of Dora he is moved to exclaim: "What an insubstantial, happy, foolish time! Of all the times of mine that Time has in his grip, there is none that in one retrospect I can smile at half so much and think of half so tenderly" (551). Memory both revivifies untroubled moments like these and time and time again softens past hardship. When for example on his walk to Dover he stops to sleep in a haystack behind the wall at the back of Salem Hall, David dreams not of smarting under Mr Creakle's ruler or feeling the shame of his placard, "Take care of him. He bites" (130), but "of lying on my old school-bed, talking to the boys in my room" (237). Here as so frequently in the text experience is filtered through a double layer of memory—David our narrator nostalgically remembers the ten-year-old boy who is already nostalgically remembering an earlier passage in his life. Through these filters, the rigours of draconian Salem Hall are transfigured into bedtime stories re-evoked in a pastoral haystack.

The walk to Dover leads David, as we know, to Betsey Trotwood, one of the many figures of David's youth who makes a dramatic reappearance in his story. The aunt who in Chapter One "walked out, and never came back" (60) *is* back—never to leave him again. She has come back to rescue and rebaptise the flexible protagonist, and to defang with her sharp and inexorable language those snakes in the pastoral garden, the Murdstones—just as later another reappearing character, Mr Micawber, unleashes the weapon of his speech to thwart serpentine Uriah Heep.

The plot device of coincidental reappearances has a long literary history, no doubt revealing universal psychic need for connection. It has particular resonance for writers in the Victorian period who tried through art to unify a world they experienced as urban and fragmented. But in *David Copperfield*, beyond even Dickens's especial fondness for this device, it has a particularly poignant psychic function. So many of the figures of David's childhood reappear in the course of his story, and so many, though not all, reappear to aid and abet him. Mr Micawber, whose hope is of something turning up, keeps turning up himself—in Canterbury, in London where Tommy Traddles moreover reappears as his lodger, and then once again in Canterbury for his heroic

² The classic studies on the role of memory in *David Copperfield* are those of Hillis Miller and Robin Gilmour. Recent treatments include those of Rosemary Mundhenk, and Kerry McSweeney.

unmasking of Heep. Steerforth is re-encountered—"My God," he exclaims, "It's little Copperfield!" (345)—when David is seventeen. The Murdstones re-enter the novel as Dora's "confidential friend" and Mr Spenlow's client respectively. Even Mr Chillip, looking "at that moment just as he might have looked when he sat in our parlour waiting for me to be born" (903), is re-encountered to give a final report of Mr Murdstone, while Mr Creakle ironically pops up as the warden of a model modern prison in which old enemies Uriah Heep and Littimer are incarcerated. Finally Mr Peggotty comes back from Australia to report not only on the émigrés we know are there but also to give us a glimpse of a thriving Mr Mell. When we add to this litany Little Em'ly, who was lost and then is found, we can see the extent to which the novel is concerned with the remembering of childhood in the two senses with which this paper began. Nothing is forgotten. The cast of characters of David's childhood is always being reassembled. The psyche is persistent in its efforts to repair itself.

Is this necessarily reassuring? The fact that Miss Murdstone returns to constrain another child wife, or that Mr Murdstone manages to marry another unsuspecting innocent young woman, or that Uriah and Littimer are clearly not permanently defeated, attests to the persistence of evil. Still these evil characters resurfacing are rendered peripheral, and we conclude that in the main the novel offers powerful reassurance through the theme of re-established connections. Furthermore if, in addition to the benign characters who reappear, we consider those who never leave or can always be found—Peggotty, Mr Omer, Agnes, Dr Strong, Mr Dick—we can see that David, however orphaned, is surrounded by those, to borrow Mrs Micawber's phrase, who will never desert him.

This being said, however, the fundamental condition of David's orphanhood remains. He has never known his father, and his pretty young mother dies, as do her surrogates Steerforth and Dora. How does the narrative deal with these losses? Immediately after his mother's death, in the interlude between her burial and his being sent off to the blacking warehouse in London, David is allowed to go with Peggotty to Yarmouth. Even though Peggotty has married Barkis she has established a little room in her new house for David—cozy and snug with the Crocodile book by the bed's head. This room, the narrator tells us, "was to be always mine, Peggotty said, and should always be kept for me in exactly the same state" (203). David stays here on subsequent visits to Yarmouth over the years. One might say that his loyalty to this enclave of childhood contributes to keeping him from adult knowledge: he fails to see and understand the sexual drama playing out between Steerforth and Emily. But if the preservation of the room functions in a sense to infantilise, it also heals: what has been lost, the Edenic room of childhood innocence, is replaced with a facsimile. Did ever orphan have so many little rooms that become his, so many surrogate parents and protectors as does David Copperfield? As Davy, Trotwood, Daisy, and Doady, he is compensated over and over for his loss, inhabiting new cottages and quiet houses. These, however, are inevitably threatened by menace and loss—even Peggotty's room contains the saurian crocodile. What David above all regains in these connections is the sense, despite all his re-namings, of his continuous identity and the vindication of his self-worth. When first sent to Murdstone and Grinby he expresses "surprise" that a child of "excellent abilities, and with strong powers of observation, quick, eager, delicate and

soon hurt bodily or mentally”—can have been “so easily thrown away” with nobody making “any sign” (208) on his behalf. But in fact the ensuing signs on his behalf suffuse the text. Even in his darkest hour David becomes the lodger of the Micawbers who care for and admire him.

Where proxy parenting leave off, memory takes up the task of self-restoration. Whatever his shadows of guilt and self-distrust, whatever his absolute losses, there is within David Copperfield a persistent core of unfallen self that rescues him from the orphan’s plight. He is a character over whom, through the recuperative power of remembrance, the angel’s wing always hovers. Remembrance counters the ravages of time, transfiguring the beloved: “From the moment of my knowing of the death of my mother, the idea of her as she had been of late vanished from me. I remembered her, from that instant, only as the young mother of my earliest impressions, who had been used to wind her bright curls round and round her finger” (186). It offers sustenance in times of hardship. On David’s walk to Dover his fanciful picture of his mother “always kept me company. It was there among the hops, when I lay down to sleep; it was with me on my waking in the morning; it went before me all day. I have associated it ever since with the sunny streets of Canterbury, dozing as it were in the hot light; and with the sight of its old houses and gateways, and the stately grey Cathedral, with the rooks sailing round the towers” (244). It challenges the very epistemology of loss:

Can I say of her face . . . that it is gone, when here it comes before me at this instant, as distinct as any face that I may choose to look on in a crowded street? Can I say of her innocent and girlish beauty, that it faded, and was no more, when its breath falls on my cheek now, as it fell that night? Can I say she ever changed, when my remembrance brings her back to life, thus only, and truer to its loving youth than I have been, or man ever is, still holds fast what it cherished then. (74)

In this last passage remembrance becomes an autonomous and independent entity separate from mortal and fallible man, recalling a timeless paradise. Is it any wonder that Steerforth, fearing his own fallen nature and the changes it might work, pleads to his friend, transformed into a flower: “‘Daisy, if anything should ever separate us, you must think of me at my best, old boy.’” David’s answer goes one better, removing Steerforth from all vicissitudes of best and worst: “‘You have no best to me, Steerforth,’ said I, ‘and no worst. You are always equally loved and cherished in my heart’” (498).

When we speak of the power of memory in *David Copperfield* we need to link it with the faculty of love. It is the loving remembrance of his mother, of Steerforth, of Dora, which restores them to David. It is the loving, compassionate remembrance of the past which reconstitutes it whole, with no best and worst. At one point when David is coming out of the theatre after seeing *Julius Caesar* he is filled with “the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show” (344). The play becomes “like a shining transparency, through which I saw my earlier life moving along” (345). This passage could be taken to describe the achievement of the novel. To revisit the past is not to deny its hardships but to deny “any severance of our love.” The past looms then through the creative force of remembrance like “a shining transparency.”

David is rewarded for the fidelity of his remembrance. He is one of those men, described early in the book, who are fortunate never to lose the childhood faculty of close and accurate observation, and thus never to suffer the loss of the potent, early self. At the same time David Copperfield does grow up. His pretty child-mother and child-wife die, but he matures into generative adulthood, becoming a man who authors his past, enjoys wedded bliss with Agnes and fathers a brood of children. The childhood power of observation becomes his novelist's gift—a gift that is all the surer and more expansive for being rooted, as Peter Coveney says of Wordsworth, in “the sense of the continuity between childhood and adult consciousness” (330). The last lines of the novel depict David writing far into the night. He imagines no longer his mother's but Agnes's angelic face beside him at the close of life. The pastoral vision is complete.

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Lewis Carroll's vision of the pastoral, generated by his intense longing for childhood, contains his defence against fears embedded in that yearning: fears of obliteration, of being devoured, of the felt self as invisible; fear of the child-dark and of chaos. At the heart of his fantasies lie hints of sexual danger intuited in the taboos of society. For Carroll the desire for childhood resided like a weight, a potential for paralysis—a fear that the lost moments of innocence would not be restored, that no higher innocence would emerge from experience. Expressed in his anti-pastoral is a primary ambivalence about childhood that contains the longing to remember, the desire to forget, and the need to re-imagine. Both *David Copperfield* and the *Alice* books exist in the liminal space somewhere between childhood and adulthood. They are about the behaviours, pleasures, and fears that are childlike and about how they've been made conscious and adult; they are the insights associated with childhood but which are recollected; part of a meditative state of mind located in adult consciousness.

Carroll relegates his nostalgia for childhood to poetic prefaces: “the golden afternoon,” “the dream-child moving through a land of wonders wild and new” (3), the “child of the pure unclouded brow” (103) precede the stories. But the stories themselves are darkly comic, ironic, cold, distanced. In their humour they radicalised the direction of children's literature. Instead of being didactic and moralistic, writing for children became characterised as entertaining. As a poet of childhood Carroll may be thought of as the voice of the shadow childhood, that which is hidden behind Victorian mores and expectations of innocence.

In a sense Alice is beyond “orphaned,” alienated from the other creatures, from herself, and from us. Her conversations with the other creatures are disjunctures, representations of crossed signals. She speaks in two voices, both to herself and about herself. Her body parts are similarly fragmented—neck too long, head too large. Her soliloquy to her feet satirises her dissociation: ““Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? . . . I shall be a great deal too far off to trouble myself about you . . . but I must be kind to them,’ thought Alice, ‘or perhaps they won't walk the way I want to go’” (14-15). Emotionally too she is detached, unmoved by her own tears which quickly become part of the grotesque landscape of objects. If she can swim in her own tears, if the proverbial wisdom of

“drowning in your tears” is transformed literally into a pool, how seriously can we take her feelings?

The childhood landscape here is unnatural, reflecting the world Alice sees and experiences. In *Wonderland* she keeps trying to get into the “lovely” garden she views through the keyhole, when she is too big to fit in after her “fall” (down the rabbit hole) from innocence; but once she is small enough to get inside she sees the gardeners painting the roses red. In *Looking Glass* when she addresses the flowers they are hostile: “O Tiger-lily” Alice says, “I wish you could talk,” and the Tiger-lily replies, “We can talk . . . when there’s anybody worth talking to” (120). In the *Wonderland* garden she is pecked at by the pigeon who claims, according to the laws of logic, that if she’s eaten eggs which little girls do quite as much as serpents, then little girls are “a kind of serpent.” And as serpent in the garden she is interrogator of the Victorian world even as she is its spokesperson—as children often are, serving as signifiers of those disparities between what we say we mean and what we really mean.

The *Alice* stories inhabit a liminal landscape. The characters other than Alice are not quite people and not quite things; they belong to some landscape of dreams, unconscious recollections and transformations of childhood. Alice herself is either too big or too small, herself and not herself. She is continuously frustrated by the inability of the creatures to connect with each other or with her. No matter how hard she tries she alienates herself: as when she talks about Dinah her cat to the mouse it flees in fear and anger: “Not like cats,” it says, “Would you like cats if you were me?” (19). The Caterpillar, who begins a dialogue with Alice with the defining question of *Wonderland*, “You, who are you?” remains utterly unyielding to Alice’s pleas: “I don’t know who I am sir, because I’m not myself, you see.” He retorts: “I don’t see,” and ends the dialogue having come full circle with “You, who are you?” (35-36). When she asks the Cheshire Cat, “which way ought I to go from here,” it ambiguously responds: “That way lives the March Hare and that way lives the Mad Hatter; go either way you like, we’re all mad here” (51).

The Cat is Carroll’s god figure positioned above the world, free to come and go, to disappear at will, and as such establishes Carroll’s dominant vision of chaos with its divine knowledge that whatever the direction, “we’re all mad here.” Alice’s attempts at order, established in the beginning chapters to locate herself in time and space—“I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen . . . that would be four thousand miles down I think” and “I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I’ve got to” [8]—and to position language so that it reflects logic and sequence—she wonders “Do cats eat bats’ and sometimes ‘Do bats eat cats’” [9]—are inverted again and again throughout her journeys. Everything she learned in school is revealed as uncertain; all is in flux, no connection sure and solid.

There is only one scene in which Alice actually has a moment of harmony with another creature and it takes place in *The Wood with No Names*. There she walks with her arms around a fawn until they reach the end of the wood, where they spring apart in remembrance of the alienating adult world of language: “You’re a fawn,” Alice says, and it replies, “And, oh dear, you’re a human child” (137). Perhaps Carroll is asserting here the paradoxical nature of language as he does in so many *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* scenes: the hilarious puns in the Mock Turtle’s Song, the creation of nonsense

language in "The Jabberwocky," Humpty Dumpty's attempt to control his words. Carroll suggests that by trusting language to define, identify, and connect us with the outside world we place ourselves in danger since words also indicate the discrete and separate nature of things. Further Carroll implies that like Alice, who uses the word "cat" to denote comfort while it means danger to the Mouse, we are limited by our own singular perceptions and experiences and doomed to a kind of absurd alienation. But here in the woods where things have no names Alice can enter that pre-oedipal Edenic state without boundaries, only to be severed from her connection with the fawn once language intervenes, and the things regain their borders.

In his famous early study *Some Versions of Pastoral* William Empson underscored the unsentimental lack of all "sense of glory" in the *Alice* stories (344). Even the White Knight, Carroll's most human character and potentially most evocative of nostalgia, fails to bring a tear to Alice's eye. He appears to us as well as to Alice as pedantic and annoying tediously insisting on the precision of his song's name (which prevents him ever naming it) and foolishly falling off his horse, like his chess-prototype, first to one side, then to the other. Although Carroll does suggest that "years afterwards" Alice would remember "the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight—the setting sun gleaming, through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her" (187)—as a child in the story she remains essentially unmoved. Reminiscence is adult, and the potential closeness between Alice and the White Knight is never actualised.

Carroll's Alice as child-challenger to Victorian culture further reveals that things have been valued more than people. This anti-pastoral landscape belongs to industrialised England where its instrument, the train, is more important than the humans it transports: the tickets are larger than Alice, and "the smoke alone is worth a thousand pounds a puff" (130). Alice further challenges what Victorian culture cherishes, a romantic notion of Motherhood. In *Wonderland* the hideous Duchess, joined in cacophony by the cook, shrieks: "'Speak roughly to your little boy and beat him when he sneezes'" (48), and with her constant moralising digs her sharp chin into Alice's shoulder. The image of Mother as chaste upholder of the values of hearth and home is further gothicised by the Queen's cries of "'Off with her head.'" Even for Alice, as she takes up the mantle of motherhood, the baby is essentially a pig; she warns: "'If you're going to turn into a pig, my dear . . . I'll have nothing more to do with you.'" She rationalises: "'If it had grown up . . . it would have made a dreadfully ugly child: but it makes rather a handsome pig, I think.' . . . And she began thinking over other children she knew, who might do very well as pigs . . . 'if she only knew the right way to change them'" (50).

When Alice does finally claim her right "to grow" during the Trial Scene, her defiant cry—"Who cares for you . . . you're nothing but a pack of cards" (97)—ends the *Wonderland* story of the child's identity in crisis. In *Looking Glass* the two Queens are equally impotent to serve in their proposed capacity as mothers (of the country or otherwise): Alice must pin together the clothing of the White Queen, the childish adult who lives "backwards," and remembers best "things that happened the week after next." She is mirrored by the equally inept Red Queen, who in response to Alice's question about losing her way claims, "'your way. . . . All the ways around here belong to me'"

(124), but must run twice as fast to stay in the same place. By the end of *Looking Glass* Alice is left with the two queens leaning on her “as first one round head, and then the other, rolled down from her shoulder, and lay like a heavy lump in her lap” (197)—the child-supporter of two mothers. If Alice’s body is stabilised in *Looking Glass*, it is the world of adults around her which is unsteady. Carroll suggests that as we grow into a more secure identity what we see reflected back to us is the shakiness of the world: the *unt*temporal queens, the perpetually unstable White Knight, and Humpty Dumpty’s irreparable fall, which underscores the untrustworthiness of language. Though as poet of “The Jabberwocky,” he proudly claims “When *I* use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (163), he belongs to the child’s world of the nursery rhyme which subverts meaning and positions sound over sense.

In his *Alice* books Carroll moves toward the ultimate absurdity: from “who am I?” to “am I?” His representation of the meaninglessness of the world is dramatically portrayed in Alice’s attempts to find certainty, more humorously in *Wonderland*, more seriously in *Looking Glass*. In *Wonderland* she begins her proof of her identity with her body—her physical self will establish her as Alice. Since her hair doesn’t go in curls like Ada’s, she can’t be Ada, she reasons. Obviously this doesn’t work by implication: (if she curled her hair, would she then be Ada?). Her mind, her thoughts, and her knowledge must distinguish her and secure her individuality. She says: “I know all sorts of things and she [Mabel] knows such a very little” (16). She begins a series of proofs—all of which fail—with the multiplication table: “Let me see: four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh, dear! I shall never get to twenty at that rate” (16). However wrong this appears Carroll as mathematician was aware that in another base system four times five *is* twelve, four times six *is* thirteen, and you can never reach twenty because in this system four times thirteen doesn’t equal twenty (Gardner 38n). Perplexed, Alice goes on to try geography. She comes up with London as the capital of Paris, and Paris as the capital of Rome, a confusion that suggests a basic truth about British ethnocentrism and about the association of Paris with debauchery and the Anglican view of the Pope. Alice goes on to recite poetry she learned in school as the last proof that she is indeed Alice, but unknowingly she transforms the sententious “How doth the little busy bee,” from Sir Isaac Watts’s *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*—an assertion of the Victorian work ethic which depicts the “busy bee” endlessly gathering honey to avoid “Satan find[ing] some mischief still / For idle hands to do”—into “How doth the little crocodile,” Carroll’s satiric verse in which the crocodile “cheerfully welcomes little fishes in, / With gently smiling jaws” (17)—a more accurate view of the world that governed Victorian culture. And although by this time Alice assumes she must have been changed for Mabel, we notice the authenticity of Carroll’s Darwinian representation of eroding Victorian certainty. So Alice cannot be certain that she is Alice, nor that she is not Alice—nor of anything really. What she is saying in her truthful parodies has a kind of coded, dream-like meaning. Though she does not know if her computations are correct, if one grasps the “relative certainty” of mathematics.

This construction, where first the body fails to establish identity, then the mind likewise fails, leaving only a prevailing sense of uncertainty, is also repeated in the sequencing of the Cheshire Cat’s disappearance. First his body disappears, then his head

follows, leaving only that grin—the objective correlative of the nonsense world, the best defense against the intolerable unknowingness we all must live with. This is further affirmed by the Cat's insistence that it is the converse of a dog, which wags its tail when it is pleased and growls when it is angry. “Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry,” it asserts. And when Alice declares “I call it purring, not growling,” the Cat, with ultimate ambiguity, concludes “Call it what you like” (51-52)—confirming only that the meaning of its grin is essentially unknowable. Again in *Through the Looking Glass* this pattern is extended so that the inscrutability of meaning in life is established and finalised. When Alice comes across the Red King who is dreaming Alice (though of course Alice is dreaming the Red King who is dreaming Alice *ad infinitum*), she attempts to prove that she exists independently outside of the Red King's dream by her tears, the physical manifestation of her feelings and thoughts. When Tweedledee remarks, “You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying,” Alice asserts, “If I wasn't real . . . I shouldn't be able to cry.” But when Tweedledum persists, “I hope you don't suppose those are *real* tears” (145) Alice is truly stymied. If Alice doesn't know who she is in *Wonderland*, in *Looking Glass* she doesn't know *if* she is. Is she real or only a thing in the Red King's dream, as Tweedledee and Tweedledum assert, likely to be extinguished if he awakes? And how will she know the difference? Here Carroll establishes a basic tenet of the absurdists: that in this world there is no certainty, that the world is essentially nonsensical.

Carroll must have been as obsessed by this tenuous and hollow vision of his culture as he was haunted by the imminence of the child's loss of innocence. Evident in his life's explorations of relationships with children are his own longings to return to a world he, like so many writers of children's literature and like so many of us, intensely desired but could not locate or could glimpse only fleetingly. For Alice there is no way out of *Wonderland* or of *Looking Glass* but to wake up and treat them as dreams. But Carroll must have known that the dreams themselves are representations of knowledge. We know from his letters and diaries how he suffered great shame over his unspecified temptations. As his biographer Morton Cohen admits:

Underscoring his faith and his philosophy was his belief that life is but a dream. But what were the dreams within that dream? Were they an escape from the larger dream into fantasy, where, like the unchaste knight, he took his imaginary pleasure? Were they infractions of his faith that led to self-contempt and the desperate prayers for change and renewal?” (225)

Even though the *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* dream worlds are apparently pre-sexual, as endless critics have noted they contain representations of repressed sexuality. More to the point here is that they are comprised of what was socially taboo for Carroll—at least the surface of cultural injunctions against knowledge whether it be about sex or the nature of other aspects of the Victorian world.

The predominant irony of Carroll's work is close to Blake's use of the child, when the child in its innocence, with its hopes and belief in the adult world to nurture it and to hold it to its breast, speaks against itself and takes the side of the very world

which will expel it from what it envisions as paradise. Not that any of us has really ever known paradise in any sustained way. But we may remember a rapture proffered to us as a lure by a parent, a teacher, the culture. And forever after we search for that recast imaginatively in terms of one object, one person, one image or another. Alice is attracted by the promise of pleasing authority (the parade of figures "in charge" of country, like the queens, duchess, kings, knights; of lessons, like those of the mock turtle, the caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, Humpty Dumpty); she continually looks for the right path until the paths disappear entirely, infused into chess board patterns so that there is no stability in space, or size, or time, or any of the objects and concepts upon which we base our sense of order. It takes her the entire *Wonderland* journey to assert her own vision, in contradistinction to everything else she has been told. But in *Looking Glass*, as in *Wonderland*, her subversive act—to pull the table cloth off at the banquet that disrupts that entire world—is deceptive. *Wonderland*, with its bossy, defensive, and incoherent adults, is reality for Carroll. Alice's self-affirmations may still be heroic, and I am sure children (as well as many critics) see her as a kind of conquering hero. But what Carroll knows is embedded in the text that follows Alice's awakening in both stories.

At the end of *Wonderland* when Alice awakes Carroll turns the dream *qua* dream upside down; Alice's sister dreams Alice's dream, so that "she too began dreaming . . . about little Alice herself . . . and . . . the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister's dream." As Alwin L. Baum has noted: "This is a supreme paradox which characterises the constant occlusion of boundaries between the two worlds [the waking and dream worlds]" (67). Carroll suggests here that there is no real waking from this dream; whether in or out of *Wonderland* Alice will sexually mature; even as rich and layered a dream world as *Wonderland* can't halt time. Alice's innocence protects her from the knowledge of her dreams, but in a sense she is a little like Hopkins's child Margaret who unconsciously mourns the inevitable passing of her youth and eventual death, allegorised in the falling leaves in his poem "Spring and Fall."

In *Looking Glass* this ontological questioning is extended from the reflexive Red King's dream to Alice's waking where she considers "'who it was that dreamt it all.'" Carroll further goes on to address the reader in his last prose sentence, "Which do *you* think it was" (208), calling our attention to the potential universality of the dream state, and the almost arbitrary identity of the dreamer (even of the dreamed). In his closing verse Carroll ends with "Life, what is it but a dream?" (209), suggesting, beyond the question's clichéd meaning (or reinvigorating the basic truth of the cliché) that the knowledge of both *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* is inescapable. There is an irony in the fact that Lewis Carroll established the field of children's literature as writing *for* children, discrete from adult writing about children. His work, although read by (and certainly dramatised for) children, is at least equally adult. Its depiction of childhood as dark renders it an adult or a marginalised view of childhood. As literature of the absurd the sensibility here, although close to the nonsense world of children, is also essentially adult. Carroll did write his stories for children, for a particular child, Alice Liddell, who was immortalised in his work. And although Carroll may not have envisioned a double audience, the adult reading over the shoulder of the child like Hans Christian Andersen did, what he created was a double world that would entice both the child and the adult.

responsive to different aspects or sensitive in different ways to the same elegiac mood implicit in pastoral and the fear behind it of the passing of all living things. The tragedy of Carroll's longing and of our own is the reality of this inherent loss, the darkness of "bedtime," the "voice of dread, / With bitter tidings laden" (103). Childhood is the ultimate metaphor for this loss, which is, as Hopkins said, "the blight man was born for," the "bedtime" Carroll dreaded.

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