

The Dymorphic Bodies of *Alice in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll, aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, wrote evocatively in later life of the little girl Alice Liddell, who inspired his story, *Alice in Wonderland*:

Still she haunts me, phantomwise
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes¹

In Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) the little girl Alice is the protagonist in a narrative of fantastic adventures, and it is these adventures which are the driving narrative device of the book.

Issues of gender are central to this book and even the author's pseudonym contravenes gender taxonomies by being apparently neither fully inscribed in the 'masculine' or 'feminine' sphere of language. Carroll's pen name itself was developed through a careful exploration of the (logical) 'rules' of language and is drawn from his own interests in systems and their limitations. His name is a kind of anagram and Latinised version of his real name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.

The book is written from the point of view of the little girl: in effect Carroll transvestisises his voice into that of the young girl on the verge of adolescence. The coalescence between the adult male and the role of the little girl creates uneasy tensions about identity and sexuality primarily through systems of apparent non-logic. Indeed other theorists have noted the assimilation of girl/man in this book suggesting that:

It is the child Alice who validates and preserves Dodgson-Carroll's being [...] he not only loved little girls, he wanted to be a little girl, as the choice of his pen name goes to show.²

Alice has been seen to rep: the iconic image of Victorian middle class girlhood.

However this fails to deal with the interesting paradox of the Carroll/Alice identity crisis. *Alice in Wonderland* essentially asks if we are fully integrated

¹ Quoted in M. Stonyk, *Nineteenth Century English Literature*, p. 201

² Polhemus, R. *Comic Faith* p.252.

'individuals' or if we exist only in relation to the (unstable and disconcertingly shifting) structures around us.

Alice's identity in the story becomes a focus in her search for validity, which also becomes the search for Carroll's own sense of integrated self, rather than the affirmation of an inherent or exclusive female nature. In a departure from the dominant Victorian paradigms of empirically reinforced concepts of rational order and logical reason, Carroll expresses concerns with the transitory and arbitrary nature of the 'self'.

The focus on a pre-adolescent child marks a nostalgia for a golden past, where, from a Lacanian perspective, gender difference, adult sexuality and the conventions of language/culture of the symbolic order do not yet exist as concrete conditions. His wistful poem/dedication at the beginning of the book pivots on a dreamlike fantasy of innocent childhood:

Alice! A childish story take,
And with a gentle hand
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined
In Memory's mystic band
Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers
Pluck'd in a far-off land³

It can be seen as an attempt by the author to contain and preserve time; a form of regression:

Regression means a going or coming back; it can be defined as reverting to earlier behaviour patterns so as to change or escape from unpleasant situations. It is both radical and conservative: radical in rejecting the present and in juxtaposing material from both our conscious and unconscious minds; conservative in holding on to time past [...] regression can thus be a means of seeing 'the world anew'.⁴

Carroll had a conventional middle class education at Rugby and Christ Church, Oxford and became a lecturer in mathematics at Christ Church in 1855. He was a lifelong bachelor who adored little girls. He was ordained deacon in 1861, but never proceeded to the priesthood. It has been suggested that male authors of children's fiction are motivated by erotic

³ L. Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, p.2

⁴ Polhemus, R., *Comic Faith*, p.248.

attraction towards children. This is certainly borne out by Carroll's other passion: photography of young (and preferably naked) girls. In his diaries and prolific letters, he states that:

To me [boys] are not an attractive race of beings [and]... if I had the loveliest child in the world to draw or photograph, and found she had a modest shrinking (however slight, however easily overcome) from being taken nude, I should feel it was a solemn duty owed to God to drop the request *altogether*.⁵

It is difficult today to view Carroll's obsession with little girls, and with Alice Liddell in particular, as motivated entirely by artistic criteria, however there is much academic debate on this area, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this further.

The story takes place in a dream or parallel world, framed by a contemporary setting, based, according to many accounts on a real life riverside picnic with Lewis Carroll and the three daughters of Dean Liddell.

Alice begins and ends with a framing device – the dream, but the first part of the 'real' story begins with a birth metaphor; the embodiment of female function. Alice falls down a rabbit hole, a long, dark tunnel which parallels the journey of a baby from foetal symbiotic state of plenitude with the mother's body, to isolated individualism in the external world. It is interesting to note that amongst the huge body of academic research and debate into this book that this episode is almost always discussed in terms of death or resurrection jokes (Alice falls a long way, but is not hurt: rather she is 're-born' into a fragmented state). The passage appears to assimilate elements of both birth and death, with the common link of sexuality circumscribing the configuration of life/death itself. The dream setting functions as an analogy of states of being, the ontology of conscious awareness of a 'self', and anticipates the narcissistic engagement of self discovery which follows.

⁵ National Theatre *Guide to Alice's Adventures Underground*, p.7

the text between the identity of the male author, and his female creation, and the point of departure of the gender roles ordained for them by Victorian society. When Alice does find a lock which fits the key, she has become too large to get into 'the loveliest garden you ever saw' (p.6). The birth metaphor is still resonant here, as Alice:

Could not even get her head through the doorway: 'and even if my head would go through' thought poor Alice, 'it would be of very little use without my shoulders'. (p.6)

In the process of giving birth, significantly referred to as 'confinement' in the 19th century, the baby's head can only descend through the cervix when it is dilated to approximately 10 centimetres: the stage at which the head and shoulders can safely pass through. The description of the labour process is strikingly similar to Alice's concern with getting her head and shoulders through the doorway which leads enticingly to a beautiful garden, and its promise of pre-sin paradise. Carroll's relating of Alice to Eve in the state of innocence is interesting. The promise of a heavenly state symbolised in the unobtainable garden is subverted by Carroll, as it becomes instead a parody of power and tyranny, and bureaucratic institutions, dominated by the psychotic Queen of Hearts, whose sadistic desires are expressed in her repeated cry of 'off with his head'.

It is also significant that the only two adult women which feature in *Alice in Wonderland*, the Queen and the Duchess, are both violent, irrational and intimidating figures. It is my contention that these represent one of Carroll's most deep-seated anxieties – mature, sexually demanding, or even menopausal women. The metamorphosis from his assumed 'innocent' pre-pubescent stage of the female into the raging monsters of adult women is conspicuous in its extremity. The distorted form of mature womanhood in these two characters is hard to read as anything other than deeply entrenched misogyny. The Duchess is encountered by Alice in her kitchen – the Victorian ideal of the domestic sphere offering respite for the family, and the focal point

of the domain of the 'angel in the house'.⁶ Here, as in earlier examples of the destabilising of the parallel dream world, the ordinary expectations of middle class bourgeois society becomes extraordinary. The Duchess is holding a baby who 'sneezed occasionally; and the baby was sneezing and howling alternately' (p.51). The cook throws a variety of pots and pans at the Duchess and baby, as Alice looks on in amazement. One of the first sentences she addresses to Alice is 'talking of axes ... chop off her head!' (p.52). Carroll's warped characterisation of motherhood is far removed from the Victorian chaste Madonna ideal: the Duchess sings a lullaby to the baby, but gives it 'a violent shake at the end of every line' (p.53) and eventually flings the baby at Alice, where it subsequently changes into a pig. It is clear that Carroll's view of adult females is very different to his idealisation of pre-adolescent girls. Once those girls whom he considered to be friends had reached puberty, they symbolically died to him. Carroll himself wrote that:

About nine out of ten, I think, of my child-friendships get ship-wrecked at the critical point, 'where the stream and the river meet' [i.e. the transition from child to sexually mature woman] and the child-friends, once so affectionate, become uninteresting acquaintances, whom I have no wish to set eyes on again.⁷

By focusing on a child, Carroll can discard the contemporary perceptions of female 'nature' and use only the elements he was attracted to, or could impose (innocence, curiosity, non-threatening sexuality) onto his own vision of an ideal female. Carroll's exploration is an introspective process of confrontations about the unity of the self, where his own repressed sexual fears return as distorted fantasy animal figures, such as the White Rabbit and the Cheshire Cat. Reynolds and Humble suggest that underlying the ostensible playfulness of *Alice* is 'an atmosphere of amoral chaos, lurking beneath the familiar furniture of Victorian bourgeois life'.⁸

The disturbing violence is, in psychoanalytic terms, the driving force of the id and sexual libido. The emphasis on constructing female traits may also be

⁶ See J. Marsh 'Doves and Mothers' in *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, pp.61-77, and S. Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives*.

⁷ National Theatre's Guide *Ibid.*, p.7

⁸ K. Reynolds & N. Humble, *Victorian Heroines* p. 129

seen as displaced castration anxiety, or the repressed, or latent homosexuality of artist or writer.⁹

Carroll avoids emotional excess: Alice is always restrained and logical, continually trying to re-assert the social framework of 'reality' onto these strange situations in order to make sense of them. Meanings are destabilised, the threat of chaos is always imminent. When Alice asks the Cheshire Cat which direction she ought to take to get '*somewhere*', the cat suggests she visit the March hare and the Hatter: **Show ohp of cat's head/smile**

'Visit either if you like: they're both mad'.

'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked.

'Oh you can't help that,' said the Cat:

'We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.

'You must be,' said the Cat. 'Or you wouldn't have come here.' (p.55)

The 'logic' which the cat employs is an axiom which Alice is unable to contradict or refute, a reminder of the instability of fantasy which threatens to disrupt the real world of rational, scientific explanation. The Cat represents this chaos very strikingly: it appears as a head only, and disappears slowly, with its smile being the last thing to vanish. The very concept of a unified identity contained within an organic body is overturned by Carroll: Alice's 'self' is manifested only as an incoherent and intangible set of spiritual and physical dislocations and encounters, in which alienation from her dysmorphic body is one result: **show ohp drawing of neck**

All she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of the sea of green leaves that lay far below her.

[...] 'Where *have* my shoulders got to? And, oh, my poor hands, how is it that I can't see you?' She was moving them about as she spoke, but no result seemed to follow.. (p.45)

⁹ T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p.152

This disconcerting event is paralleled by Alice's actual alienation from all the creatures inhabiting Wonderland where her changing size and shape makes her always the Other to those she meets, and culminates in her disavowal of them at the end of the story. These characteristics of irrationality, rapid change and fragmentation are precisely the traits which patriarchy has traditionally ascribed to females as negative qualities, yet in *Alice in Wonderland* they are used as disruptive and radical strategies to challenge the boundaries of the everyday. In Lacanian terms, there is:

No authenticating point of origin in a 'real' unitary self; it begins in a fantasy or mirage. Self is simply *a continuous deferral of identity* enacted by the displacement of desire from one social ideal to another. The Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' has been replaced by Lacan with the notion 'I think I am where I am not' (My italics)¹⁰

This concept of subjectivity defined by the dysmorphic body and the fractured 'consciousness' of the self effectively describes the narrative of *Alice in Wonderland* and the notion 'I think I am where I am not' could surely have been written by Carroll himself.

Eating, drinking and looking are central to the narrative. Freud describes the oral fixation of the infant in the eroticised pleasure of feeding. Food and drink therefore become central in adult relationships, offering promises of mother child plenitude. The fetishisation of food and drinks are drawn from the metonymic potential of instant gratification and the (short term) filling of the void or lack created by the mother/child physical and mental separation enacted through Lacan's mirror stage. Furthermore, for females in particular, food and physical size become part of the discourses regulating female life, and more importantly defining what it means to be (successfully) female, where according to feminist theorists patriarchy dictates an 'ideal' size and space for the female form to occupy.¹¹ Eating disorders may be considered a recent concern, but it is interesting to compare Lorraine Gamman's critique of the way females are confronted by patriarchal prescriptions of body imagery, with the imagery evoked by Carroll one hundred and fifty years earlier:

¹⁰ P. Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, p.116

¹¹ L. Gamman & M. Makinen, *Female Fetishism: A New Look*, see pp.145-167

During their lifetimes many Western women experience a variety of body sizes, and become accustomed to imagining themselves in the sort of transitions reflected in 'before' and 'after' diet pictures. This experience relates not only to pregnancy and ageing, but also to the long-term effects of dieting [...] such unrealistic body perceptions result in many women feeling they never attain their 'true' body size, but are always 'en route'.¹²

As with her 21st century counterpart, the emphasis on food and drink for Alice has a direct correlation to her shape and size, and quite literally dictates her entry into social structures, such as the Eden-like garden. Her size also encodes her female identity as subject to external, patriarchal forces which dominate her very existence and problematise her self-perception. When Alice declares 'Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope!' (p.6) it is realised when she drinks from a bottle marked 'DRINK ME', and she shrinks to only 10 inches high, whereupon: 'Her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through the little door into that lovely garden' (p.7). Later in the story, Alice eats a cake, deciding: 'If it makes me larger, I can reach the key: and if it makes me smaller, I can creep under the door, so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!' (p.9)

So drinking here is equated with diminishing size, and eating, especially 'forbidden' treats such as cakes, results in rapid growth. Either way, Alice must suppress or re-order her physical shape and size, or remain marginal, or worse still, excluded from entry into the social order and achieving recognisable status as a 'woman'. Typical of the 19th century and more recent media images of women, these contradictory codes of acceptable 'femininity' are embodied in the popular Pygmalion story, which was:

Revived in the 19th century [with] the artist as sexually dominant creator: man – the artist – fashioning from inert matter an ideal erotic object for himself, a woman cut to the very pattern of his desires.¹³

¹² Ibid., p.157

¹³ L. Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power*, p.143

This drive towards unattainable perfection facilitates a split between mind and body. As Lacan develops in his seminar notes on 'The Mirror Stage', the key moment of recognition in the mirror in the infant:

Manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of the spatial identity, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality (1288)

The mirror image, then, precipitates a split subjectivity, in which we both (mis)recognise the inverted/reflected organic unity to be 'ourselves', but which comes at the price of the separation from the maternal body and loss of the Real and plenitude. (Maybe Carroll as author concept of shifting identities as a manifestation of his own disconnection from maternal body? Much made by scholars about the devastating impact of the death of Carroll's mother on the rest of his life).

Lacan uses the term *meconnaissance* to describe this moment, and, as Bennett point out, in Alan Sheridan's translation of Lacan's text, leaves the word untranslated. The French means both 'failure to recognise' and 'misconstruction'¹⁴ For Alice, like many women with body dysmorphia, the moment of *meconnaissance* and its concomitant feelings of lack, fragmentation and abandonment are re-enacted through specularisation – reflected bodies, and produces this very 'failure to recognise' or to 'misconstruct' their body shape and size. This can be seen in both cultural terms, with the bombardment of idealised body shape images and diets which pervade all our lives, and also in terms of the ways in which we are interpellated, hailed into being, into social spaces in which the structures around us literally reflect back to us the way in which we view ourselves.

This sense of dislocation raises broader concerns of being altogether. After shrinking to a small size, Alice fears that she may be 'going out altogether, like a candle' and asks herself 'I wonder what I should be like then?' (p.8).

Carter, in his study of Lewis Carroll, suggests that:

The state of Nothingness, or Not Being, which at the very least is death and at its worst something more frightening, lies just around the corner in both Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass; and it is this that

¹⁴ B. Bennett 'Misrecognizing Film Studies', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 4, no.5, February 2000

gives the books a driving purpose, even a sense of desperate urgency.¹⁵

This fundamental question of ontology, and self-awareness, underpins the narrative. Alice asks both the creatures around her, and then herself:

'Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!' [...] 'I am sure I'm not Ada [...] her hair goes in such long ringlets [...] and I'm sure I can't be Mabel [...] Besides *she's* she, and *I'm* I, and – Oh dear, how puzzling it all is'. (p.11)

In her attempts to define herself, through the ongoing encounters with the creatures in the narrative, Alice becomes increasingly perplexed; she tries to apply the system of language as if it may yield fixed truths. Like language itself, can only see herself in terms of difference to others (Mabel, Ada), rather than perceiving herself as a fixed, organic whole. This then corresponds to Lacan's assertion that identity is 'a series of displacements of desire to reunite with an imaginary narcissistic Ego-ideal'.¹⁶ Meanings of the self, as well as language, as Derrida shows, are never reached, but always deferred.

If Alice is not an autonomous individual, she is still bound by being a female, part of a collective experience of female oppressions. The White Rabbit who 'scurried away from her' (p.11) when she was larger than he, later on stops to address her when she is tiny; 'why, Mary Ann, [he assumes she is a servant] what *are* you doing out here?' (p.26). Alice was 'so much frightened she ran off at once in the direction it pointed to!' (p.26). The Rabbit, no longer intimidated by Alice's size, automatically reasserts his patriarchal role by assuming that as a female, she should obey and respect his orders. Another creature who emphasises the lack of status of the female body is the Caterpillar, who demands to know of her: **SHOW IMAGE OF CATERPILLAR**

'Who are *you*?'

[Alice replies] 'I – I hardly know sir, just at present [...] I can't explain *myself*, sir' said Alice, 'because I am not myself you see'. (pp.36-37).

Ultimately, Alice has no fixed, integrated identity, as nothing of her remains the same. Only the Cheshire Cat is in control of its existence; 'This time it

¹⁵ H. Carter, *Secret Gardens*, pp.60-61

¹⁶ P. Morris, *ibid.*, p.103

vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest had gone' (p.56). As if inhabiting Lacan's ideal state of the Real, the Cat is able to appear and disappear at will, to be both corporeal and immaterial simultaneously.

At the Hatter's Tea-Party, a later addition to Carroll's original 1864 manuscript, the concept of time, like identity, is subverted to become unrecognisable and alien. Carroll may well have been influenced by the eccentricities of 'Oxford Time' (clocks set five minutes ahead of GMT). Alice notices that the Hatter's watch 'tells the time of the month, and doesn't tell what o'clock it is!' (p.59). Time is an ongoing theme in Wonderland, suggesting again and again Carroll's desire to arrest the effects of time (maturation). Before Alice's fall into the tunnel, the White Rabbit initiates the narrative, as he runs by and 'took a watch out of his waist-coat pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on' (p.3). At the bottom of the tunnel, Alice reaches the centre of the earth, where there is no rotation, and therefore no solar time at all.¹⁷ The Hatter's watch is set to Lunar time, which in the 19th century had been attributed to the female reproductive cycle, and the matrix of life and death itself:

Even science had found justification for the link between woman and the moon. Havelock Ellis, in his *Man and Woman* (1894) pointed out that the 'curious resemblance' of a woman's menstrual cycle 'to the lunar cycle was long ago noticed. Most recently Darwin had suggested that the connection between the physiological periodicity and the moon was directly formed at a very remote period of zoological evolution, and that the periodicity then impressed upon the organism has survived until the present day.' In a sense, then, woman was a natural child of the moon, of Diana.¹⁸

Carroll's curious transposition into Alice echoes the narrative structure of a dream, in which sophisticated wordplay, and the metamorphosis of spectacular creatures and situations, all signal the shifting of meanings from

¹⁷ S. Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, pp.132-133

¹⁸ B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p.122

perspective to perspective, from subjectivity to object, culminating in the very collapse of that society when Alice (grown to giant proportions here) finally disavows the fantasy world as she exclaims: 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!' (p.102).

Carroll structures Alice as the pivotal protagonist in a story about unstable identities, and shifting boundaries. The monstrous and spectacular metamorphoses of Alice/Carroll produce a profoundly disturbing dystopia. In mediating and indeed fetishising the point of view of pre-adolescent young girl, Carroll effectively ventriloquises Alice's identity. But Carroll does more than this: the character of Alice serves as a repository for male anxieties about female sexuality and latent desire actually inscribed upon the transforming body. Carroll's fascination with young girls and abhorrence of sexually mature women (the Duchess, and the Queen) reveal complex responses to contemporary gender constructions which converge in a narrative framework of pastoral nostalgia. The encounters which Alice has with the fabulous and grotesque creatures in the narrative serve only to heighten the sense of unease which cannot be resolved even through the literary device of a framing 'dream' structure, as, I hope I have shown, it emanates from the shifting, threatening, destabilised entity of 'Alice' herself.