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## Lewis Carroll and the Little Girl: The Art of Self-Effacement

What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning?

(Lewis Carroll, "Through the Looking Glass")

WHEN I first read Lewis Carroll's late and unloved work *Sylvie and Bruno*, I was searching for material that might help to bring the Oxford don's two main forms of creative expression, fiction and photography, into relation with his favorite subject in each genre, the little girl. Carroll studies have generally employed one particular girl to do this work for them: Alice Liddell, Carroll's most inspirational muse in both media, is used as a kind of revolving doorway, allowing critics to move effortlessly from one art form to the other.<sup>1</sup> The following passage appears, at first sight, to offer an alternative and less-trodden route to my desired nexus:

There are some things one *says* in life—as well as things one *does*—which come automatically, by *reflex action*, as the physiologists say (meaning, no doubt, action *without* reflection, just as *lucus* is said to be derived "*a non lucendo*"). Closing one's eyelids, when something seems to be flying into the eye, is one of those actions, and saying "May I carry the little girl up the stairs?" was another. It wasn't that any thought of offering help occurred to me, and that *then* I spoke: the first intimation I had, of being likely to make that offer, was the sound of my own voice, and the discovery that the offer had been made. (398)

The narrator of *Sylvie and Bruno*, a weary seventy-year-old man, is here explaining how he finds himself carrying an unknown crippled child out of a railway station. (A couple of pages later it will transpire that this child is not a real child at all, but a phantasm who swiftly transforms herself into the eponymous Sylvie, a metamorphosis that comes as no surprise in a work that habitually switches between realism and fantasy.) Here, in the middle of a story that presents the pairing of the old man and the little girl as the most natural thing in the world, the narrator provides an instance of the immediate and irresistible attraction between

the two figures, and claims that when he offered assistance to the child, he was necessarily operating under the dictate of a spontaneous, rather than a reasoned, response.

This episode is of interest not only for the narrative strategy that facilitates physical contact between these two particular categories of bodies, but for the analogy deployed as a preemptive justification of the act. After a tortuous consideration of paradoxical etymologies, the narrator prepares the ground for the explanation of his instinctive utterance by citing, as a parallel case, one of the most familiar examples of a reflex: “Closing one’s eyelids, when something seems to be flying into the eye, is one of those actions.” Here is a connection, albeit a challengingly complex one, between Carroll, fiction, little girls, and the realm of the camera: offering to hold the girl is made equivalent to the way in which potential optical damage is averted by the involuntary blink. In one arena, pleasure is gained, and in the other, pain is avoided: both scenarios effect the capture of an image, either in the arms, or behind momentarily closed eyelids that shut the dangers of the world out of the picture. In both cases, the action is presented as transcending personal choice.

And yet there is a major flaw in this chimerical vision of Carrollian coherence. The fact that the blinking of an eye actually demonstrates the opposite action to a camera exposure—the eye closes for an instant; the shutter opens—is far less troublesome to any projected constructions than the recollection that the equipment used by the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson<sup>2</sup> throughout his twenty-four years of photographic practice did not “blink” to capture images. On the contrary, taking pictures with his chosen medium, the collodion or wet-plate process, demanded what now seem to us extraordinarily long exposure times. “I took a first-rate photograph only a week ago, but then the sitter (a little girl of ten) had to sit for a minute and a half, the light is so weak now,” Carroll mentioned in a letter of December 1877;<sup>3</sup> even in the summer months, which constituted the true sunlit photographic season, a small, fidgety, and impatient child might be required to remain stock-still for sixty seconds or more. While Carroll’s mock-medieval legend, “The Ladye’s History,” claims that the “merveillous machine . . . took manie pictures, each yn a single stroke of Tyme” (1003), the actual facts of the matter are more honestly laid out in the Longfellowian meter of his “Hiawatha’s Photographing”: pictures had to be taken “With the calm deliberation / The intense deliberation / Of a photographic artist”—or not at all (772).

This faulty analogy between the blink of an eye and photography encapsulates in grosser form one of the major problems that the critic Lindsay Smith has exposed.<sup>4</sup> Forgetting, or otherwise neglecting, both the technical and philosophical circumstances of nineteenth-century photography has been, Smith claims, a besetting tendency of twentieth-century discussions of the form. Writers have either occluded photography's history, or assumed that its beginnings are resolutely uncomplicated—that it offers a single point of origin in normative realism that will only later be challenged and questioned by avant-garde experimentation in the 1920s. To Smith, even the much cherished and clearly indispensable *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes's lyrical and poignantly beautiful meditation upon the medium, is predicated on an entirely essentialist view of photography.<sup>5</sup> It is Smith's mission to problematize and complicate this view, to reveal that material choices and complex questioning did indeed accompany photography from its very inception.<sup>6</sup> Our dehistoricized camera-click must be corrected, therefore, and we need to find a more properly historical way to connect this chapter's special topic of Carroll, little girls, writing, and photography to the general project of revealing the nineteenth-century fantasy of original femininity.

If we must give up the click and the blink when thinking about Victorian photography, we can still, it seems, keep a close hold on the child. Smith's work, in common with Carol Mavor's *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*, is fascinated by the fact that seeing the history of photography and the history of the child through the same viewfinder is not only possible, but inevitable. As Mavor puts it, "The child and the photograph were commodified, fetishized, developed alongside each other: they were laminated and framed as one."<sup>7</sup> Certainly the dates fit rather nicely. Although, as we have already investigated, interest in the idea of the child and all that might pertain to it had been steadily growing from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, it is still fair to say that the Victorian era constitutes the concept's heyday. Photography is even more of a quintessentially Victorian invention. Just after Britain's young queen came to the throne, two Frenchmen, Niepce and Daguerre, had finally discovered how to make permanent the images of the camera obscura.<sup>8</sup> Daguerre's patented process, which employed iodized silver plates, was made public in Paris in 1839, while over in England William Henry Fox Talbot registered his own "calotype" process in 1841: the first phase of photography had begun. The 1850s witnessed a number of scientific and legal developments that

enabled the new invention to reach a much wider constituency: not only did Daguerre and Fox Talbot's patents expire in 1855, but a new and patent-free process had been introduced in 1851 by Frederick Scott Archer. This was the collodion, or wet-plate, method, which, although messy, complicated, expensive, and time-consuming, was to garner a new crop of enthusiastic amateur practitioners, including Carroll, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Lady Clementina Hawarden. Professional photography also grew by leaps and bounds: the "Carte de visite" format, first patented in France in 1854, and then introduced to Great Britain three years later, encouraged a vogue for portrait photography and the establishment of photographic studios all over the country. Further important developments occurred toward the end of the century. In 1873 Colonel Wortley greatly simplified the collodion process by offering manufactured dry plates for sale; Kodak appeared on the scene in 1888 with the first reasonably prized and technically manageable cameras. This new technological art form, then, was born at the beginning of Victoria's reign, and by its close had reached a position of ubiquitous popularity.

If photography and the concept of the child share the distinction of being properly Victorian obsessions, they are also linked in other important ways. For one thing, photography was frequently imaged in contemporary writing as a radically "new child" abroad in the world: to Wiertz in 1855, the daguerrotype was an "infant prodigy" who one day would find Genius seizing it "by the scruff of the neck and shout[ing]: Come with me, you are mine now! We shall work together!"<sup>9</sup> In similar fashion, a reviewer of the 1856–57 Photographic Exhibition in London presented photography as "Art's youngest and fairest child; no rival of the old family, no struggler for wornout birthrights, but heir to a new heaven and a new earth."<sup>10</sup> More significantly, the connection between photography and the child was solidified by the fact that this "infant" apparatus was very frequently pointed at real children. Although the earliest daguerrotypes and talbotypes tended to feature landscapes, architecture, and botanical specimens, the second wave of photography, both amateur and commercial, became much more interested in the portrait genre, of which child portraiture formed an important subsidiary. From the mid-1850s onwards, photographs of children constituted a significant proportion of the output of practitioners specializing in what we might call "art photography": the highly familiar images of Carroll and Cameron may spring to mind first, but many other artists, including Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, regularly composed child studies. In the growing world of commercial photography, children of all ages were escorted to

professional studios, propped against pillars, wedged into chairs and sofas, and screwed into neck braces to secure the necessary immobility for their own photographic portraits, or pinioned in the embrace of their loving parents for the perfect family group. Once Kodak brought “snapshot” photography within the reach of any moderately comfortably-off individual, the camera was pointed with ever-increasing insistency at the children of the family. Such fervor, of course, continues unabated into our own historical period, in which it is estimated by the major photographic companies that over 70 percent of film stock is exclusively devoted to this particular subject.

The origins of the evident love affair between photography and the child have only recently begun to receive the full attention they deserve. At the vanguard of this scrutiny, Smith focuses her investigation by making strategic returns to the two most cited essays in photographic theory—namely Walter Benjamin’s “Small History of Photography” and Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*.<sup>11</sup> At the heart of each essay lies a photograph that seems to encapsulate for the writer the essential beauty, magic, and mystery of the medium. Benjamin’s photograph is a picture of a very young Franz Kafka—“There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight children’s suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of conservatory landscape”<sup>12</sup>—while Barthes eventually finds what he has been looking for in a photograph of his mother, taken when she was five years old. Posed with her seven-year-old brother, the little girl is seen “at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days.”<sup>13</sup> While Smith is rightly attentive to both critics’ own theorizations of why these images have such power to move, yoking the two exemplary photographs together forces us to consider a more historically specific question: why should it be that these two seminal twentieth-century discussions are grounded in two nineteenth-century photographs of children?<sup>14</sup> Smith’s various answers to this question are fascinating and wide-ranging, encompassing a number of psychoanalytical and historical explanations with equal flair. For my own purposes, I wish to consider the numerous different ways in which photography, in its founding decades, coincides not just with a general notion of “the child,” but with the highly specific historical version thereof that we have been examining. The next section of this chapter argues that photography and the child, as imagined at the midpoint of the nineteenth century, are caught up in exactly the same complex web of constructions. Various challenging the divisions between past and present, fantasy and reality, imagination and materiality, self and other, and, as we shall see

when we come to examine the case of Lewis Carroll more particularly, masculinity and femininity, photography and the Victorian child are each other's perfect complements.

That *Camera Lucida* should neglect to provide a thoroughgoing historical account of photography's evolution is not, after all, very surprising. Put simply, the single most startling fact about the medium is as evident in yesterday's casual snapshot as in the very first daguerrotype, even if the former's exposure time is a fraction of the latter's: any and every photograph captures, in an indexical form, an absolute image of a real moment of time and thus automatically excerpts an actual instance of presentness from the temporal flow and consigns it to the past.<sup>15</sup> The moment of past reality is made material, transferred onto a piece of card that we can gaze at and hold in the present tense. For Barthes, any photograph, from the nineteenth or the twentieth century, is "reality in a past state: at once the past and real." The important change comes not within the medium over the years, then, but to the world that first witnesses its abilities:

Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth. The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance; henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we can touch. It is the advent of Photography, and not, as has been said, of the cinema, which divides the history of the world.<sup>16</sup>

For Barthes, photography not only introduces a new era, but has "some historical relation with what Edgar Morin calls the 'crisis of death' beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>17</sup> After all, each and every photograph contains within it the possibility of reminding us of our own existence within the temporal flow, and thus of our own mortality. The death of time in the photograph images in little the real death that awaits us all. In chapter 2 we considered the combination of the luminous beauty of four young girls and the shriveled leaves of a dying season, captured in the last light of the declining day, in Millais's *Autumn Leaves*, which provokes a meditation upon the passage of time, on the evanescence of the moment and the inevitability of decay. Millais creates these thoughts through his choice of theme, and through the artistic vision and painterly skill, not to mention the sheer time and effort, that he expends to make his idea both accessible and powerful to the viewer. What Millais accomplishes through conscious desire in *Autumn Leaves* is achieved unconsciously by even the most banal of photographic prints: through the

simple mechanics of its technological process, the photograph automatically makes a profound statement about the nature of time.

If every photograph is thus invested with an inherent ability to promote thoughts about the past and the present, and about life and death, certain photographs, by virtue of their subject matter, are capable of intensifying this effect to an almost painful degree. While we may identify abstractly with the notions of temporality that inform all photographs, we are likely to have stronger feelings when confronted by an image that in some way reminds us of ourselves. Photographs of human beings thus have the potential to speak more directly to our sense of mortality: the normal movement of a breathing body like our own is reduced to deathlike stillness; a moment of real existence is captured to tell us, ever after, that that moment of human life existed, and exists no more. When the camera is pointed at a child, these messages become still more insistent. Depending on the associations carried by the figure of the child in any given historical and cultural period, such effects, as will be seen, may be more or less pronounced, but a number of features appear to transcend such specificity, at least within photography's relatively short history to date. For one thing, the experience of identification is harder to avoid: all adult viewers of a photograph of a child have themselves been children. Moreover, the relationship between the child subject and the image of death that is inescapably carried by its photograph is that much more jarring, because, as Smith notices, in the normal course of human lives, the child is further away from its real death than any depicted adult.<sup>18</sup> Finally, although there is inevitably some degree of cultural construction in the division between child and adult, the rapid changes of growth within childhood's brief estate (ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen years?) make it seem far more evanescent to us than adulthood, with its long, less-differentiated stretches: consequently photography's ability to make still a being who is hurtling toward its next stage of development is all the more marked. "Only the camera can keep up with the velocity of children," remarks Mavor, reminding us of J. M. Barrie's poignant observation about his beloved and much-photographed Llewelyn-Davies boys: "They had a long summer day, and I turned round twice and now they are off to school."<sup>19</sup>

Photographs of children, then, for us as much as for the Victorians, have the potential to double the inherent signifying powers of the medium. Our nineteenth-century predecessors, however, were in a position to appreciate a still more compelling synergy between their ways of looking at children and the productions of their newest technological enthusiasm. For at least the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the child

was predominantly perceived in a retrospective and feminized, rather than an anticipatory and masculinized, mode. Consequently, the child tended *not* to be seen in relation to his own adulthood—a perspective that would have viewed him as an incipient adult, the germ, the potential of what is to come, and thereby associated with vigor; vitality; the promise or danger of the future. If the child had been imagined thus as an active figure of forward movement, no real “fit” between this construction and the new photographic medium would have emerged. As events transpired, however, the formal properties of the Victorian invention brought it, coincidentally, into exact register with a philosophically congruent perception of the child. Although our ideas about childhood have shifted over time, enough of this original sympathy persists to make the ensuing working partnership of the child and the photograph continue to seem natural and inevitable. Back in the nineteenth century, though, the similarities between figure and medium, and more especially, the way in which an adult might look at one or the other, were much more pronounced.

The photograph, I maintain, participates in the same fantasy that informs the response to the girl investigated in this study. To recap: in this period, ideal childhood is generally imagined as a wholly separate estate from adulthood, a pitifully brief era of bliss and innocence, which is lost forever at the onset of maturity. The child itself is viewed from the perspective of an adult looking backwards and is therefore an essentially nostalgic construction, associated with the past, often with stasis and sealed perfection, and very frequently with death. As in the case of Little Nell, the child is perceived as existing within her childhood not for her own pleasure or purposes, but as a service to surrounding adults. Simply through their presence, children offer the best possible opportunity for adults to reconnect to their imaginary pasts, to the fantasy era of their own idyllic childhoods. A girl, furthermore, radically distant from an adult male by virtue of her physical difference, more perfectly represents the safe, feminized, time of the nursery from which he has been irrevocably banished.

The myth of original femininity thus involves a willed belief in that which is both untrue and impossible. Single-exposure photography, on the other hand, is a medium that records that which actually happened.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, within these parallel realms of fantasy and reality the little girl and the photograph play exactly the same role: in their material physicality, both substantiate the past while simultaneously declaring that it is resolutely over and done with. In Barthes’s words, the two presences show us “what has been.”<sup>21</sup> When the photograph carries the figure of a girl,

the retrospective mode is invoked twice over: looking at the picture, the Victorian gentleman sees both a real representation of his imaginary former self and a true image of the impossibility of returning to the sealed idyll of that girlish childhood. Simultaneously supplying and denying connections, the photograph of the girl combines fantasy and reality, past and present, self and other, femininity and masculinity. For Lewis Carroll, the most celebrated nineteenth-century photographer of little girls, the combination is practically mesmerizing.

The reasons why Carroll should be a principal subject not only of a chapter on nineteenth-century photography but of this study as a whole seem almost too obvious to mention. In the race for the title of the Victorian era's most famous (or infamous) girl lover, Carroll pips Ruskin at the post: although both men's fascination with little girls is well known, Carroll's predilection has been more firmly fixed in the public mind because of the simple fact that he also created one of the most fascinating little girls of all time.<sup>22</sup> In all her different and associated forms—underground and through the looking glass, textual and visual, drawn or photographed, as Carroll's brunette or Tenniel's blonde or Disney's prim miss, as the real Alice Liddell, the dean's daughter, or imaginary beggar, in novel, poem, satire, play, film, cartoon, newspaper, magazine, album cover, or song—Alice is the ultimate cultural icon, available for any and every form of manipulation, and as ubiquitous today as in the era of her first appearance.

Carroll's famous literary creation is of course a no less popular focus in the field of critical analysis. The inescapably connected topic of Carroll's relationships with real little girls has also generated a comparable amount of scrutiny. For those who wish to map the contours of the don's desires, both his public, and more especially his voluminous private, writings provide acres and acres of relevant territory. Letter after letter, journal upon journal, dedicatory poem and book inscription bear witness to Carroll's ceaseless pursuit of juvenile feminine company. Matching Carroll's tenacity are the considerable numbers of critical and biographical commentators who worry over the manifold evidence of obsession and pose the same circular questions—Is it innocent? Is it sexual? Is it sexually innocent? Is it innocently sexual? The answers proposed to these inquiries range from outraged denials of any impropriety even in the private recesses of Carroll's fantasies,<sup>23</sup> to a gleefully malicious accusation of criminal behavior: apparently relishing his own imaginary daring in dispersing “the odour of sanctity” around the “honoured author,” one critic com-

ments decisively, “Today, . . . [Carroll] would find himself in Wormwood Scrubs,”<sup>24</sup> one of London’s major prisons. Because it will never be possible to pin down exactly either what Carroll may have done, or what he may, consciously or unconsciously, have wanted to do, the interpretive dance has no reason ever to come to an end.<sup>25</sup>

All in all, then, Carroll is evidently at the heart of the matter when we think about girls in the nineteenth century, and he is just as much there when we think, more anxiously, about men and girls in the nineteenth century. He is, of course, there as well in my title’s allusion to Wonderland, a place that provides a highly convenient hook upon which to hang this investigation. But Carroll turns out to be the most recalcitrant and unaccommodating of figures. He seems to demand star billing within this book, but his resolute avoidance of reconstructive autobiography makes it hard to turn him into its exemplary case study. Unlike De Quincey or Ruskin, Carroll eschews the kind of self-fashioning that speculates on the relationship between the child and the man. But if Carroll produced no avowed autobiography, he undoubtedly left a staggering amount of other personal writings. Unsurprisingly, these materials have been frequently explored and augmented by memoirists and biographers, who, on the whole, have been keen to construct a life story that seems in sympathy with the general patterns explored in this book.<sup>26</sup> A crude schematic plan of the usual versions of Carroll’s life—an idyllic childhood, followed by a painful adolescence, and an unfulfilled maturity, enlivened only by connections to little girls—certainly appears to provide fertile ground for the growth of a regressive fantasy.

Traditional Carrollian biography runs as follows. Bountifully provided with sisters (seven in all), the young Charles Dodgson was the beloved eldest son of an adored mother and a revered clerical father, and his earliest days in the family garden are depicted as exceptionally happy and filled with imaginative games. The subsequent expulsion from this Edenic period into the horrors of the exclusively male and abusive world of a public school seems to have been even more distressing for Carroll than it had been for De Quincey: to support this view, biographers generally cite a revealing comment Carroll made to his diary in 1857. Remarking with approval on another public school’s provision of a “snug little bedroom” for each pupil, Carroll then apparently offers a rare and troubling glimpse of the unhappiness of his own teenaged years: “From my own experience of school life at Rugby I can say that if I could have been thus secure from annoyance at night, the hardships of the daily life would have been comparative trifles to bear.”<sup>27</sup> Christ Church, Oxford, which

he joined as an undergraduate, and where he subsequently became a sublibrarian and then a mathematics don and an ordained clergyman, is generally seen as a much safer bolt-hole: Carroll never married, and the college served as his primary home until his death. This ostensibly tranquil existence, however, is complicated for the biographers by the fact that Carroll's diary entries persistently record feelings of dissatisfaction, guilt about his lack of progress, and the fear of unworthiness.

In the accepted accounts of Carroll's life, his true periods of adult happiness are imagined to have been generated by the company, or the inspiration, of girls. It is easy to make the case that his experience with real girls was closely tied to his imaginary girl both at her inception and ever after. The public response to *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and then to *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) created tremendous excitement within the don's life: biographers are fond of claiming that although in some ways he rigorously policed the division between his two identities, he frequently used his fame as Lewis Carroll to further Charles Dodgson's attempts to befriend little girls. At the very center of the famous Lewis Carroll story lie the days spent with Alice Liddell, but numerous biographers are keen to demonstrate that once she passed out of his life and into adolescence, the "Dream-child" was replaced by other little girls. The comic letters, the teasing exchanges, and the hours with the photographic equipment continued unabated; days at the seaside and trips to the theater stood in for the immortalized rowing expedition up the river to Godstow. In the context of an otherwise sedate and uneventful adulthood, it is Carroll's relationships with girls, both real and fictional, that apparently created the true energy of his life.

If we accept this version of Carroll's life, then it is no great stretch to hypothesize that this child-chasing don was on an impossible quest to catch the child he himself had once been: in such a vision, Carroll's immersion in croquet games on the deanery lawn with Lorina, Alice, and Edith Liddell can then be diagnosed as an attempt to recapture the happiness of the lost parsonage garden of his own childhood.<sup>28</sup> From this point onwards, it is admittedly hard to make a straightforward case that Carroll regards his former self as feminine, but we could nevertheless move some distance toward this conclusion by devious routes. For instance, we can focus on the following conundrum: Carroll's writings simultaneously display a longing for a return to childhood, and a violent rejection of all children who happen to be male. A stanza he wrote when only twenty-one years old was included in a volume of poetry he published nearly forty years later:

I'd give all wealth that years have piled  
 The slow result of Life's decay  
 To be once more a little child  
 For one bright summer day.

(861)<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of Wordsworth's mighty *Ode*, such sentiments are entirely conventional in this period, but they nevertheless sit awkwardly alongside Carroll's other, assertively unromantic, references to the "little child" he actually had been. To be sure, when Carroll declares that "as a little boy, I was simply detestable,"<sup>30</sup> he is simply adding to the litany of boy abuse that forms a regular feature of his published texts and his private correspondence alike.<sup>31</sup> With lispng Bruno practically the only exception to his self-imposed rule, boys in Carroll's oeuvre are, in his own words, "a mistake," and certainly "not an attractive race of beings."<sup>32</sup> The unfortunate boy baby who turns into a pig in Alice's arms<sup>33</sup> (all to the good, she thinks, as "it would have made a dreadfully ugly child" [64]) reappears in much more hideous form in *Sylvie and Bruno*'s boy-cum-porcupine, the vile and vilely named Uggugg. But what are we to think when we place Carroll's apparent rejection of his *own* boy self next to that desire to recapture "vanish'd summer glory" which pervades much of his poetry, not least the prefatory verses to the two *Alices*? If we take the poet's longing to regress seriously, can we then conclude that he wishes to return not to a distastefully porcine boyhood, but to an entirely phantasmal girlhood?

The past few paragraphs show what can be stitched together, in the absence of the whole cloth of a thoroughgoing autobiography, to connect Carroll to the male fantasy of original femininity. But is it possible to think of Carroll's lack of interest in the conventional form of self-commemoration as something other than a frustrating gap to be inadequately filled by critical speculation, biographical and otherwise? Could there be more productive ways to think about his resistance to the genre? The remainder of this chapter asks whether the work of autobiography—which is to say, the act of imagining the present self in relation to the former self—is effectively performed by other means within Carroll's oeuvre. As has already been discussed, the photographic form has an inherent ability to present a relationship between that which is and that which has been: Carroll's photographs of little girls, at their most effective, not only invoke this duality but also have the power to combine any number of others, especially the key oppositions of adult and child, self

and other. On one notable occasion Carroll was also able to achieve this effect in his other chosen medium of expression: the central portions of *Alice in Wonderland* present an omnifaceted juvenile feminine lead, a little girl who is everything and its opposite, and who breaks down the division between old and young, big and little, powerful and powerless. By way of contrast, I turn in conclusion to a series of tableaux in Carroll's fiction that display a much more obvious and conventional relationship between youth and age. Despite the fact that these moments are presented in a quasi-photographic mode, the absence of photography's tacit ability to invoke two temporalities is sorely felt: adult and child alike are fixed in rigid and conventional positions and denied the complex play that energizes Carroll's best work. While De Quincey and Ruskin constructed personal narratives that linked the mature male writer to the fantasized feminine self of childhood, Carroll chose quite a different form of commemoration: for this Victorian gentleman, the precious relationship between the old man and the little girl is most successfully represented when the former individual is utterly effaced and excluded from the picture.

To illustrate the photographed girl's signifying power, any one of Carroll's stack of girl studies would serve the purpose: the image of the lovely girl, fully real yet fully lost, makes manifest the fantasized and feminized perfection of the former self. In the vast majority of cases, Carroll's relationship to the image is everywhere and nowhere.<sup>34</sup> As the photographer, he creates the picture, and as its subsequent owner, he has the ability to look at it whenever he wishes, but there is no explicit representation of his controlling presence within the photograph. For Carroll, the effacement of the adult male appears to allow him to invoke the liberating fantasy of the little girl's power<sup>35</sup>—to create a little girl, we might say, who not only has the ability to confound temporality by bringing the past self vividly and magnificently into the present, but who can also challenge any other imaginable opposition.

Figures 8, 9, and 10—*Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood* (1857), *Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child* (c. 1858–59) and *Portrait of Evelyn Hatch* (c. 1878–79)—are three highly familiar images in the worlds of Victorian studies and art history and have been subject to numerous intelligent and interesting critical analyses.<sup>36</sup> The earlier two pictures are the evident result of the photographer's fondness for dressing-up games and "make-believe," while the late study is the most infamous example of the little girl in her "favourite state of nothing-on," to quote Carroll's self-protective (or self-deluding?) periphrasis.<sup>37</sup> Despite this difference, the

photographs share a range of significant characteristics. Looking directly at the lens, all three girls confront the viewer by appearing to making deliberate eye contact. Any preconceived notion of the submissive docility of the diminutive Victorian miss is thus thrown into question: Agnes, Alice, and Evelyn are evidently little girls who don't behave as little girls should. In each case, the pictured girl further complicates the photograph's inherent ability to question dualities.

Emerging out of the dense ivy of the photograph's background, Agnes is a disturbingly hypnotic figure. While the proffered basket seems to suggest openness and solicitation, the withholding Napoleonic right hand, and more definitively, the girl's expression (the ominously hooded eyes, down-turned mouth, and creased forehead) signal a ferocious denial of reciprocity, even as we are held in thrall by that gaze. Mavor comments succinctly on the ways in which the photograph of Agnes attacks any straightforward apprehension of the narrative in which she is ostensibly placed: "Hers are the eyes of the wolf that has presumably just eaten her grandmother; we wonder whether she has eaten the wolf, and whether she is about ready to eat us up."<sup>38</sup> This is a Little Red Riding Hood who has no need of the assistance of any ax-toting woodcutter. Despite her evident childishness (notice those daintily placed button-boots), Agnes exudes a mysterious power that is both adult and feral.

The photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar repeats some of the dynamics of the earlier picture. This time, the act of solicitation is made overt: pretending to be begging, Alice and her cupped right hand appear to ask for our charity. Once again, however, the gesture of supplication is defiantly undercut, not only by the child's cockily assertive stance (that left hand resting on the hip), but more obviously by the arrogant confidence of Alice's coolly appraising gaze. While Agnes disrupts the familiar narrative of a folktale, Alice works to destabilize the massive divisions and inequities of Victorian society: an evidently well-fed, clean, and glossy-haired child of the upper middle classes puts on artfully disordered rags and pretends to occupy the lowest stratum of all. Making an ugly social reality visually seductive (for Tennyson, this was the most beautiful photograph he had ever seen), the joint playacting of photographer and subject also disturbs any number of other binaries. Not the least of these for late-twentieth-century commentators was the question of the photograph's simultaneous relation to constructions of both innocence and sexuality.<sup>39</sup> Alice's revealed flesh, and, much more disturbingly, the knowingness of her appeal to the viewer, have made it very difficult for most critics to see this simply as a lovely photograph of a seven-year-old girl.



FIGURE 8. Lewis Carroll, *Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood* (1857). (Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.)

This difficulty has been considerably heightened since Morton N. Cohen brought to light four nude studies of little girls, apparently the only remaining examples of Carroll's extensive work in this mode.<sup>40</sup> Of the four photographs, all of which were colored in and given fanciful painted backgrounds, only the *Portrait of Evelyn Hatch* is arresting: here a very young girl takes on the erotic pose of an odalisque, of a courtesan, and, through the overlaid oil paint, meets our gaze with calm self-possession. As in the photograph of Alice, adult sexuality is signaled even as the immaturity of the child's body seems to deny the possibility of such a message. Child and adult, innocence and experience, however, are not the only oppositions called into question by this photograph. Evelyn also seems to straddle the boundary between animal and human, between reality and the dream, and nature and artifice.<sup>41</sup>

All three photographs, then, share the ability to confound distinctions: the little girl is made mesmerizingly enigmatic by her ability to be both a thing and its opposite. Although the pictures are obviously the result of an unequal partnership between Carroll and his models, it will never be possible to say exactly how wide that inequity may have been on any given occasion: did the photographer stage-manage the whole show, or was something always intrinsically of the girl's own making? Such questions may be unanswerable, but it certainly appears that Carroll had no wish to represent within these photographs any trace of his own dominant role. In consequence, because she herself lays claim to adult power, the little girl is never diminished, or otherwise defined, by a relationship to an adult presence that stands outside of her. In Carroll's photographs of girls, the form's technical ability to combine past and present within a single image is complemented by the subject's simultaneous existence within the realms of childhood and adulthood.

The photographic medium, then, offered Carroll both satisfaction and the freedom of self-effacement: the relationship of the adult male and the little girl could be captured without the necessity of bringing the man into frame. Only once in his career did Carroll manage to achieve a parallel feat within the genre of creative fiction. *Alice in Wonderland* presents us with a little girl of most remarkable abilities. In chapter 1 we learn that "this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people" (21); certainly, as the story progresses, Alice gets the opportunity to play an astounding variety of roles. Just as the photographs of Agnes, Alice, and Evelyn invoke and defy conventional stereotypes of demure Victorian maidens, the Alice of Carroll's first fantasy narrative rarely signifies only one thing: sometimes huge, sometimes tiny, powerful then powerless, pa-



FIGURE 9. Lewis Carroll, *Alice Liddell as a Beggar-Child* (c. 1858–59). (Gilman Paper Company Collection, New York.)

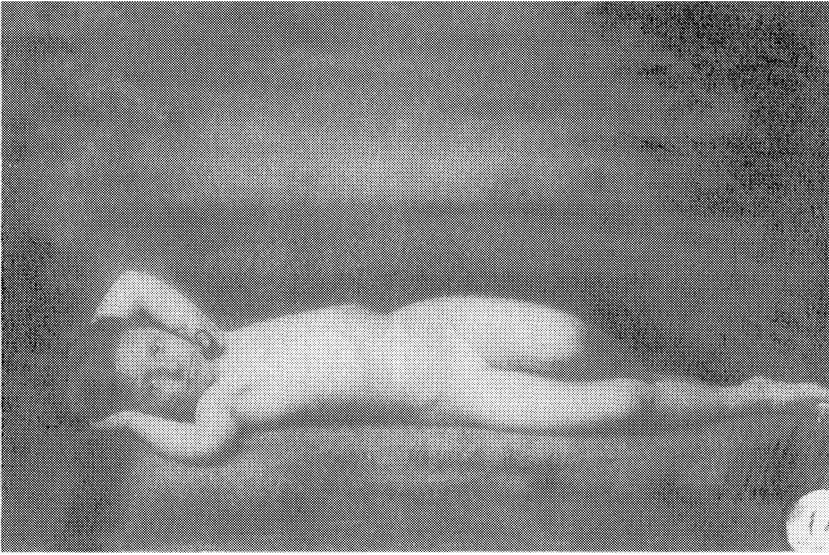


FIGURE 10. Lewis Carroll, *Portrait of Evelyn Hatch* (c. 1878–79). (The Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, and A.P. Watt Ltd. on behalf of the Trustees of the C.L. Dodgson Estate.)

tronizing then patronized, she constitutes, at different times, both terms of any given opposition.

Most particularly, thanks to the dizzying shifts in her experiences, the Alice of the central portion of the tale never occupies for very long a state we could confidently designate as the child's position.<sup>42</sup> Thus we find no stable representation of the relationship between little girl and mature man that has so frequently engrossed our attention in this study: Wonderland is no country for old men. Although Alice has a series of encounters with figures whom one could try to force into the older male role (the White Rabbit, the Dodo, the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, the March Hare, the Hatter, the King of Hearts, the Gryphon, and the Mock Turtle, to name the likeliest suspects), the balance of power is never weighted with any certainty or for any length of time in their favor. Alice's frequent comments about eating remind us that a little girl is just as likely to devour as to be devoured, while her equally frequent changes in size destroy the conventional arrangement in which an older male can be sure of being bigger than a young female. Indeed, the conception of age's relation to youth is literally inverted in the story's prime representation of an old man, which appears in Alice's idiosyncratic rendition of "You are old, Father William":

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said  
 And your hair has become very white;  
 And yet you incessantly stand on your head—  
 Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

(50)

Parodying the very idea of the august dignity of enfeebled old age, the verses reveal that not only is Father William in the habit of performing headstands, but also of turning somersaults, munching down a goose, bones, beak, and all, and balancing an eel upon his nose. And while elderliness is not marked by regretful weariness, neither is Alice's youth venerated for its appealing sweetness, at least not during her adventures underground. Because the relationship between the heroine and Wonderland's supposedly “adult” figures is constantly changing, the idea of Alice as a child promotes neither nostalgia nor sentimentality within the story itself.

It is undeniably true, however, that a very different note is struck both in the prefatory poem and the tale's denouement.<sup>43</sup> The poem, which apparently commemorates that first telling of the story to Alice, Lorina, and Edith Liddell, quite deliberately casts the “golden afternoon” into a long-lost past, so that childhood is seen from an adult's vantage point.<sup>44</sup> Alice Liddell, apparently no longer a child, is exhorted to take the “childish story”:

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 land.

(12)

A similar movement occurs at the very end of the story proper. Narrative attention switches to Alice's ploddingly pedestrian sister, who dismisses our heroine with the words, “It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly; but now run in to your tea: it's getting late” (118). First dreaming, in a remarkably unsonorous fashion, of a seductively childish Alice with “tiny hands,” “eager eyes,” and “that queer little toss of her head to keep the wandering hair that *would* always get into her eyes” (119), the sister then proceeds to find tediously plausible “explanations” for each of the wild and wonderful emanations of the little girl's story. Then, in the same way that the poem splits Alice Liddell into the remembering adult and the remembered child, the sister's closing thoughts create a grown-up Alice looking back:

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Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (119)

This is one of the moments of anticlimactic conventionality in *Wonderland's* final pages; the sister's saccharine celebration of Alice's "simple and loving heart" certainly rings false to those of us who have enjoyed our heroine's various displays of curiosity, timorousness, tactlessness, snobbery, petulance, self-aggrandizement, and downright bad temper in the preceding twelve chapters. Only in Wonderland's frame, constricted by either the real presence of her elder sister or the imagined presence of her own adult self, is Alice limited to the performance of an alternatively coquettishly adorable or angelically innocent childishness.<sup>45</sup>

In the context of our examination of the inherent signifying powers of the photographic medium, extremely interesting issues are raised by the narrative's closing with the sister's "*pictur[ing]* to herself" a grown-up Alice surrounded by little children. In subsequent prose works Carroll becomes increasingly fond of creating still scenes that seem to mimic the photograph, or at least the way in which a photograph allows us to gaze steadily at the little girl in repose: *Through the Looking Glass* and *Sylvie and Bruno* contain numerous tableaux constructed along these lines. In these instances, however, Carroll always includes, in one way or another, a version of an adult presence, with the result that the child becomes fixed in the position of the child and loses the flexibility of the most successful of his photographs and the first Alice. Carroll's fantasy literature becomes progressively less daring and interesting over the course of his writing career: it is his attempt to reproduce photography's ability to capture both the lost and the present self, both child and adult, that allows a disabling sentimentality and nostalgia to flood in.

When Alice makes her second trip to a realm of fantasy, the conditions of her contract have been significantly diminished: the radical potential of Wonderland all but disappears in the Looking Glass world. Now she is a mere pawn in the game of chess that forms the story's governing conceit, maintaining little-girl stature and demeanor throughout her travels, even when she gains the crown of a queen in the final square. One of

the primary reasons this happens is that the tendency to delimit childhood, so evident in the frame but not the experience of Wonderland, creeps into the center of this later story. Once again, this occurs when the child is placed in diametric opposition to an adult: Alice is circumscribed twice over when she is put in relation both to her grown-up self and to an older male.

At first glance, *Through the Looking Glass* appears to repeat *Wonderland's* tendency to turn the gravitas of the older male on its head: Humpty Dumpty's massively overdetermined fall inevitably follows his overweening pride, while the White Knight seems constitutionally unable to keep himself, or his belongings, upright. "The more head-downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things," he tells Alice, who is singularly unimpressed by his upside-down sandwich box (223). The White Knight's song—the "name" of which is "The Aged Aged Man"—once again inverts conventional reverence for the old, this time by guying Wordsworth's lament for the ancient Leech Gatherer, "Resolution and Independence." But the tableau of the older man and the little girl that is composed when Alice stops to listen to the White Knight is the point of entry for a very particular brand of sentimental nostalgia.<sup>46</sup> The simple progressive temporality of Alice's experience in the Looking Glass world is suddenly disrupted, and we are transported into her future life:

Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterward she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday—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—the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet—and the black shadows of the forest behind—all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she leant against a tree, watching the strange pair, and listening, in a half-dream, to the melancholy music of the song. (224–25)

The moment's immediacy is transformed into a Wordsworthian spot of time: we are given a double vision of the child watching the adult Knight, and the adult Alice who is remembering. Making allowance for the slight movements of the horse, and the blue of the Knight's eyes, we could be glancing with her at a black-and-white photograph from long ago. When we return to the present tense of the tale, Alice is resolutely unmoved—she listens to the ballad "very attentively, but no tears came into her eyes"

(225)—but we can no longer look at our heroine in quite the same way again. As in *Wonderland's* framing materials, Alice has been diminished by the appearance of that imagined adult self, but this scene pushes her delimitation still further. Sentiment pours in at the precise moment when Alice is brought into relation with a nostalgic older man: feeble and foolish though he seems, the White Knight stands as an early representative of a conception of melancholy adulthood that comes to dominate Carroll's writing, and that forms the counterpoint to an equally engrossing obsession with angelic feminine childhood. Only the Alice seen from the distance of adulthood is encrusted with a cloying sweetness, but it is this sugary avatar of the little girl who eventually wins top billing as the heroine of *Sylvie and Bruno*; shaved of his more ludicrous eccentricities, the White Knight returns to play the role of that work's weary narrator.

The split between childhood and adulthood, or, more concretely, between little girls and old men, that inveigles its way into Alice's world finds full representation in Carroll's last long works, *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893).<sup>47</sup> Dwarfed by the gigantic reputation of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, this two-part fantasy novel has largely been neglected, or, if examined at all, castigated for its sickly sentimentality, its confusing shifts between the fairy-tale countries of Outland and Elfland and the more conventionally novelistic world of Elveston, the noxious baby talk of the boy Bruno and the feeble conventionality of its eponymous heroine.<sup>48</sup> Within this present study, however, *Sylvie and Bruno* finds a natural home. This is the one text of Carroll's that persistently presents the pairing of man and girl, and that participates fully in the paradigm we have examined most recently in Ruskin's *Ethics of the Dust*: once again the old man is associated with the troubled and enervated world of the present day, while the little girl is just as firmly linked with the jewel-like perfection and purity of long ago. Furthermore, it is a work that uses the vision, or the transfiguring sight, as a narrative trope.

Inasmuch as they reproduce familiar patterns, *Sylvie and Bruno's* constructions of the opposite but complementary figures, the old man and the little girl, can be sketched fairly briefly. Carroll heightens the difference between the two parties by making his narrator excessively aged and enfeebled—not only is the old gentleman afflicted by “[t]hree score years and ten, baldness and spectacles” (291), but he is also a demoralized invalid. It is no act of chance that he is reading a book entitled *Diseases of the Heart* when we first meet him on his journey down to the country to stay with a doctor friend, for the narrator is essentially heartsick in both a

medical and an emotional sense. “Life and its pleasures,” he says wearily, “seem like a mine that is nearly worked out” (426). Certainly the real world in which the narrator exists shares this general air of lassitude and depression: in the vision of contemporary life that *Sylvie and Bruno* takes surprising pains to represent, England is riven by unequal distribution of income, and the impoverished working classes are plagued by drunkenness, cruelty, and disease. In complete contrast stands Sylvie, who is not only a young, fresh, and beautiful creature from the novel’s other realm of fairyland, but is also connected to the pure and noble world of earlier times. And just as Ruskin’s girls in *The Ethics of the Dust* are crystals, so is Sylvie represented by a flawless precious stone—in this case, the blue and red, heart-shaped gems of twin lockets, inscribed with the words “All-will-love-Sylvie” and “Sylvie-will-love-all,” which turn out in the end to be one and “the *same* Jewel all the time” (674). The jewel’s message of the reciprocity of loving and being loved is Sylvie’s own, and she alone possesses the power, through her affectionate heart and simple faith, to cure the narrator’s heart.

In the course of *Sylvie and Bruno*’s general quest to demonstrate the power of love, Carroll uses the device of the vision in various different ways: sometimes it functions to transport the narrator between the work’s two domains, and at others to strengthen the links between the characters of these paired realms. In one of the early instances of this latter phenomenon, the narrator is sitting on a train, trying to “think the veil away”—which is to say, to discover by the power of thinking whether the concealed face of the young woman opposite to him is “pretty” or “plain” (272). For a while, we learn, “the dimly-seen oval remained as provokingly blank as ever,” but eventually “there *was* a result: ever and anon, the veil seemed to vanish, in a sudden flash of light: but, before I could fully realize the face, all was dark again. In each such glimpse, the face seemed to grow more childish and innocent: and, when I had at last *thought* the veil entirely away, it was, unmistakably, the sweet face of little Sylvie!” (272). At another juncture, the narrator attempts to explain how intense a feeling he is experiencing by comparing it to the effect of a powerful vision: “I had felt such a pang only once before in my life, and it had been from *seeing* what, at the moment, realized one’s idea of perfect beauty—it was in a London exhibition, where, in making my way through a crowd, I suddenly met, face to face, a child of quite unearthly beauty” (624–25).

In *Sylvie and Bruno* the ultimate sight is always that of the beautiful little girl, yet because of the dominant presence of our old-man narrator, we never see her without also being aware of his gaze. Consequently, it is

perhaps not surprising that the work's primal scene, the moment when both the narrator and the reader see Sylvie for the first time, doubles this look: the mature man is both inside and outside the frame:

The Warden, a tall and dignified man with a grave but very pleasant face, was seated before a writing table, which was covered with papers, and holding on his knee one of the sweetest and loveliest little maidens which it has ever been my lot to see. She looked four or five years older than Bruno, but she had the same rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, and the same wealth of curly brown hair. Her eager smiling face was turned upwards towards her father's and it was a pretty sight to see the mutual love with which the two faces—one in the Spring of Life, the other in its late Autumn—were gazing on each other. (267)

Although initially it might seem as if the father-and-daughter relationship will provide the key to understanding the meaning of the work's man-and-girl tableaux, the language of paternity tends to be conspicuous in its absence from subsequent repetitions of this embrace.<sup>49</sup> This “pretty sight” instead establishes that in *Sylvie and Bruno* the “mutual love” of spring-time females and late-autumnal males is indeed the highest form of love. Right up until the very last moments of the story, when the “vision” of Sylvie is “fast slipping from [the narrator's] eager gaze” (674), we continually see the little girl either through the eyes of an old man, or in the arms of an old man, or both simultaneously. If Carroll's photographs for the most part exclude any figure who could conceivably stand for his adult self, this late work takes exactly the opposite tack. *Sylvie and Bruno* seems entirely unable to look at a little girl without also showing us the old man to whom she is unbearably precious.

Lewis Carroll's participation in the fantasy of lost girlhood reveals that the act of representing the relationship between past and present selves can be achieved in forms other than conventional autobiography. In claiming that the photograph of the little girl allowed the male viewer to see both that little girl *and* his former self, I have been arguing that one of the reasons for Carroll's fascination with this new medium was its ability to represent this doubleness in one person: he could thus be present without being present. When Carroll separates out the elements of the fantasy into its constituent parts and gives written descriptions of the little girl in relation to the older man, the effect is radically different. The

ambiguities of Carroll's single figures are infinitely superior to the fixity of his adult-and-child tableaux: the former shimmer with tantalizing complexity, while the latter founder in the worst kind of cloying sentimentality. In this light, Carroll's decision to avoid autobiography becomes at the very least an aesthetically wise choice: his is an art that thrives on self-effacement.