MYSTERY AND COMMUNION IN LEWIS CARROLL

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Rezumat

Lucrarea prezinta principala tensiune din cele două lucrări de ficţiune ale lui Lewis Carroll arătând implicaţiile ei şi modul în care acestea apropie opera literară a lui Carroll de lucrări postmoderne similare.

Motto:

> I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one hides it. (Oscar Wilde 4)

Mystery lies in both the knowable but as yet unknown and in the unknowable. Mystery provokes questions and demands answers. Solution may come under the form of answers to those particular questions or under the form of an acceptance of mystery as an insoluble but integral part of our lives. As Basil Hallward suggests in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, mystery makes life 'delightful'. It is my intention to examine how secrecy works in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* in order to embelish life.

Victorian novels are full of morbid secrets and threatening discoveries. Unseen rooms, concealed doors, hidden boxes, masked faces, buried letters, all appear and disappear with striking regularity in the fiction of Victorian England. Many of these secret spaces contain children, and especially little girls in hidden spaces. The young Jane Eyre sits behind a curtain in the hidden window seat, escaping the vindictive anger of John Reed. Repulsed by her angry brother, Maggie Tulliver flees to the house attic, fantasizing that her family will fear that she has died. Little Dorrit withdraws from the common space of the Marshallsea into her private room above the prison, and Little Nell hides behind trees and walls, silently observing clandestine meetings. Finally the seven-year-old Alice falls down a rabbit-hole into a Wonderland, the dreamspace of her own psyche.

Of these images none is more embedded in our cultural imagination than the child Alice dropping into the subterranean well of Wonderland. Indeed, of the many celebrated scenes in the *Alice* narratives, the most memorable, most potent, most quoted is Alice's initial descent to the bottom of the rabbit-hole. Why? The answer to this question is not just the fact that the scene represents a child's metaphorical progress through the birth canal, and that this in turn symbolizes some kind of rite of passage, a movement toward deeper knowledge. For then how do we explain Alice's obvious lack of internal development in both stories? Indeed, for a narrative that thematizes motion, Alice's psychical growth remains disturbingly static. Throughout both narratives, Alice displays little emotional variation, for when she is not frustrated or anxious, she is, for the most part, vapid or expressionless. In fact, one is

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immediately struck by her coolness and indifference as she falls through the rabbit-hole. Thus, because scene changes in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* rarely betoken any emotional or intellectual modulations, Alice's falling into Wonderland signals no internal transition.

Alice's descent into Wonderland and her entrance into the Looking-Glass kingdom would seem like ripe metaphors for Carroll to explore the thoughts and phantasies of Alice's psyche. What could be more oneiric than an underground world or a secret realm behind a mirror? Further, the construction of the dream frame in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature usually signals an author's undertaking of psychological realism. Much has been written on the Freudian thematics of the *Alice* stories[1], but if, as many have argued, Alice falls down into the dreamland of her own unconscious, she meets there not identification and revelation but rather frustration and deferral. In both works Alice awakens not as from a wish fulfilled, but as from a desire thwarted. If Wonderland really represents the underground of her own psyche, it is a psyche not entirely her own, more different than mysterious, more foreign than obscure. This becomes most apparent when we realize that the emotional and the cognitive dissonance between Alice and her dream creatures reflects a larger disunion of energies that marks the narratives. Throughout both stories Carroll works hard to illustrate the incongruousness of sensibilities that estranges Alice from the other figures. The scene in *Looking-Glass* in which the Queen offers Alice a dry biscuit, unfittingly, to quench her thirst is a paradigm of the sharp discordance between characters. Inappropiate and irrelevant responses such as the Queen's fill both *Alice* stories and reveal an atmosphere depleted of psychical recognition and sympathetic reaction.

The dream frame does open up the possibility for psychological realism, but Carroll closes it off just as quickly. The inhabitants of Alice's dreamworld are hollow signifiers that repel interpretation, not layered symbols that lure penetration. When Alice asks him what happens when he has returned, full circle, to the head of the table, he has no answer and can only redirect the subject of their conversation. The Mad Hatter's inability to answer reflects a larger tendency in the narratives to skim surfaces and deflect inquiry. Throughout both stories, Alice continually asks "What will happen next?" but Carroll always accelerates his narrative and whisks us to a new scene before Alice's question can be answered.

In much Victorian fiction the movement into secret inclosures begins as a retreat from the urban world but develops, ultimately, into an act of self-exploration. But this is not true of Carroll's fiction. Indeed, the many instances in *Alice* stories of characters positioned with their heads facing downwards betokens repellence, not introspection.

The spatial imagery and objects that fill Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world are similarly misleading. Hidden doors, dark tunnels, ungraspable keys and dense woods all create an architecture crowded with secret spaces and hence suggest an atmosphere of concealment and discovery. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that Alice's dreamworlds and secrecy are strangely incompatible. This is a crucial insight for the *Alice* narratives lack precisely what other narratives must have in order to hatch a fictive world that has secrets.

Let us examine the terms of Wonderland's complex spatial dynamics. One notices immediately the fantastic elasticity of space and size that Alice experiences as she travels to the garden. Space is created as she moves through it and closes up behind her as she exits. It is as if space does not exist unless she inhabits it; the hole deepens as she falls through it; doors, keys, and corridors materialize as she needs them.

Suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass; there was nothing on it except a tiny golden key….However on the second time round, she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door….There seemed to

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be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table...this time she found a little bottle on it. (pp. 29-30)

This kind of ad-hoc spatiality differs radically from the spatial imperatives that we find in, say, Hardy, who continually reminds us that physical structures outlive their human makers. For instance, the amphitheater in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* has existed for centuries past and will remain long after Henchard dies. Similarly, Tess's fate at Stonehenge is but one moment in the long history of the ancient structure. Thus Hardy establishes a setting and then animates it with characters and events. In Carroll, however, place and character cannot be detached, for one immediately generates the other.

That space dissolves as Alice departs from it explains why there is no backward motion Wonderland, no possibility to return to an established place. Thus Alice must never climb back up the rabbit-hole in order to escape. If we say that there is no reverse motion or return in Wonderland then we have made a crucial discovery: there can be no secrecy or secret spaces in Wonderland for such secrecy demands stability, a constancy that permits return.

But location is not the only instability that disallows secrecy in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. If space and motion are irregular, so then is time. Carroll at once creates and undermines the continuous narrative trajectory of traditional fiction.

What we have been saying, essentially, is that secrecy demands contextualization, a surrounding set of variables towards which it can stand in relation and in which it can find a location. Secrecy and, more specifically, secret spaces are ensconced within a larger sphere—both spatial and temporal—that a narrative must create. This suggests, further, that autonomy deflects secrecy. Its essence, its status as independence, disconnectedness, disallows the incorporation that is requisite for secret spaces.

We can also see that what Carroll and his critics call the nonsense jargon of the *Alice* stories is a kind of autonomy of signifiers. For nonsense claims autonomy—detachment from any signifieds. How then can there be secrecy where there is no stable meaning and hence nothing to hide?

The *Alice* stories actually articulate a double message: on the one hand, they create the illusion of secrecy, they entice us with answerless riddles and imagery of hidden doors, unseen passages and ungraspable objects; on the other hand, however, they avert our scrutiny with the characters' nonsense jargon and absurd logic. There may be no secrecy but there is no straightforwardness either.

Evasiveness governs the semiotic structure of both narratives. Throughout the *Alice* stories, there is an implicit decorum to speak indirectly, to refer, not address, to allude, not define. We continually hear the characters use the demonstrative *that* instead of directly describing their subjects:

> "Why, because there's nobody with me!" cried Humpty Dumpty. "Did you think I didn't know the answer to that? Ask another." (p. 263)

To state unequivocally threatens the fictive spell. In *Wonderland*, Alice awakens from her dream at the moment when she unambiguously addresses and defines the King and Queen:

> "Who cares for you?" said Alice…"You're nothing but a pack of cards!"
> At this the whole pack rose up in the air, and came flying down on her: she gave a little scream…and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister….(pp. 161-62)

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> "What do you call yourself?" the Fawn said at last…

Similarly, in *Looking-Glass*, the fawn darts from Alice's embrace at the moment that it can precisely define her:

> "I wish I knew!" thought poor Alice. She answered rather sadly, "Nothing, just now."
>
> So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me! You're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed. (pp. 226-27)

Speech that defines subverts entrancement; it is essential to see that this endorsing of indirectness is evasion, not secrecy, and dispersal, not definition. The fawn's fear of capture can be seen as a metaphor for the narrative's rejection of definition, of linguistic capture. That is to say that Carroll's text prohibits the articulation of meaning, which it here metaphorizes as a kind of seizure. Just as the Fawn detaches from Alice's hold, so too the signified disconnects from the signifier. But secrecy, as we have seen, presumes stable meaning, a secure connection of signifier and signified. Thus by terminating the link between signifier and signified, Carroll terminates the possibility of secrecy. In other words, autonomy and secrecy are rival imperatives.

What, then, is the difference between these two conditions? Clearly both intimate a kind of solitude that is there deepest connection. But secrecy implies a pocket of solitude within a subsuming sphere; moreover, it implies, as its etymology makes clear, separation which, in turn, implies severed contact. To be secret is to have once been connected; contact, which, in turn, implies severed contact. Autonomy, however, suggests self-containment, not connection.

Secrecy and contact are almost entirely absent from Carroll's vision. Wonderland and Looking-Glass are worlds of cruel autonomy, symbolized most powerfully by the Cheshire cat's head that can live detached from its body, and still grin. Scenes of failed contact imbue both narratives. Alice follows the White Rabbit down the hole, but she can never fully reach him. In *Looking-Glass*, objects are similarly unattainable: the goat's beard "seemed to melt away as she touched it" (p. 221), and the rushes also "melted away almost like snow" (p. 257). The absence of physical touch here plainly represents the scarcity of emotional connection, and even love, in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. And whatever else we may say about the sophistication and humor of Carroll's nonsense jargon, the conversations that lead nowhere illustrate, at bottom, the hollowness of relationships in Alice's dreamworlds.

The failure of contact may be a kind of fear of contact deriving from what psychoanalysis has named Alice's oral aggression and what Nina Auerbach has called Alice's "subtly cannibalistic hunger."[2] In both narratives, Alice's presence portends potential danger. Can Alice really be so unwitting of Dinah's threat to the Wonderland animals? And in *Looking-Glass* when Alice threatens to pick the daisies, one begins to wonder whether her "curiosity" is not childhood innocence, but rather fallen aggression. One cannot help but notice a schism between Alice's popular image as an artless child of nature and her actual representation as a demure yet fearless little wanderer. But how, we must ask, did this myth of Alice emerge from Carroll's original portrayal of her as the dark-haired, bewitching-eyed child

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of *Alice's Adventures Underground*? The evolution of Carroll's dreamchild is a curious phenomenon indeed and it beckons our critical attention. When one reads the text of *Underground*, one notices a dramatic difference between Carroll's and Tenniel's illustrations. Alice's progression from the dark lady-child of *Underground* to the saccharine, blonde ingenue of *Wonderland* is visible even to the most cursory glance and is only one symptom of the larger transformation of the Alice myth. Carroll's representations of her, especially when she changes size, are more offbeat, somewhat surreal and certainly more disturbing. In a particularly vivid picture, Alice is portrayed as an oversized head, no neck or body, only feet and hands extending from beneath her chin. On the next page, she is depicted as a long neck, with a head on top, no body or feet below, like a human lollipop. This kind of excentricity is muted in Tenniel's drawings, which are, for the most part, flat and insipid. For instance, most of Tenniel's illustrations are single caricatures, departing far from Carroll's more populated and detailed sketches.

Tenniel's illustrations established a tendency, continuing even now, to imagine Alice as a paragon of childhood innocence. Films, cartoons, theater productions and modern illustrations all recreate, in some way, this idea of Alice as a symbol of unwitting purity and wide-eyed curiosity. Clearly Carroll's readers have revealed a desire to read the Alice stories according to Tenniel's illustrations.

Although Tenniel's interpretation diverges from Carroll's representation, there must be in Carroll's texts something, some moment, some scene or theme, to stimulate this popular construction of Alice. Surely our acceptance and affirmation of Tenniel's representation finds some provocation in Carroll's writing. Is there, beneath the texts' portrayal of Alice's predatory nature, a wish for childhood innocence—a longing for Alice to be what she plainly is not—an uncorruptible essence of humanity? Both narratives emit a subtle message saying just this: that solitude and autonomy are afflictions of the soul; and human contact and love, our most precious remedy. The deepest tension of the works is then the lure between perfect autonomy and human contact—a conflict which crystallizes the problem of secrecy in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*.

In his introduction to the Modern Critical Interpretations volume on Lewis Carroll, Harold Bloom intimates that Wordsworth is the precursor poet standing behind and shaping much of the *Alice* narratives. Locating Wordsworth's strongest presence in "The Whit-Knight's Ballad"—what he calls a "superb and loving parody of Wordsworth's great crisis-poem "Resolution and Independence"—Bloom argues that the White Night is Alice's/Carroll's Leech Gatherer—"a man from some far region sent,/ To give me human strength." The alternative to human contact for Wordsworth, Bloom further suggests, is misery and madness, but for Carroll it is Wonderland, that is, play and nonsense.

If the White Knight functions as a Wordsworthian solitary, awakening the dormant well of human sympathy, then Alice's soul must require arousal, inspiriting. And indeed it does, for Carroll twice reminds us that Alice does not cry in response to the White Knight's song. But her encounter with him does become her "memory recollected in tranquility," a significant moment, the remembering of which in theory brings her to a deeper sympathy with nature and the outer world. With a Wordsworthian sentimentality, Carroll describes Alice's experience:

> 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 afterwards 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

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> quite dazzled her—the horse quietly moving about, with the reigns 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. (p.307)

The absence of irony in this passage stands in sharp relief to the other scenes in the narrative, which are almost all governed by parody and satire. Carroll's sincerity here is striking, and the scene derives much of its power from this unique earnestness of tone. Indeed, the popular misrepresentation of Alice as an innocent dreamchild issues, in part, from our misremembering the tenor of the whole story to be similar in tone and content to this passage. Like Alice, we remember this scene as a representative moment, not as the anomaly that it is. Thus Carroll masterfully orchestrates layers of revisionary remembering, reconstructive imagining.

This impulse towards revisionary remembering too emanates from a Romantic sensibility. Throughout Wordsworth's poetry, human memory does not simply duplicate in thought the past, but it moreover emendates reality, reconstructs a vision that resembles, but does not perfectly reproduce, the original event.

The most relevant—to our discussion—way in which Alice's and the reader's revisionary remembering reflects a Wordsworthian consciousness is the avoidance of pain. Like Wordsworth's, Carroll's reconstructive imagination manifests itself primarily as an elision of conflict and tension. If Alice and the reader locate this scene as exemplative of her Wonderland and Looking-Glass experience, then memory has been acutely selective. As we have noted, Alice's primary emotion has been frustration and anxiety, not the love and entrancement she feels as the White Knight's song lulls her. The scene is an anomaly, not a representative moment. This tendency to delete pain Carroll confesses in the opening poem to *Looking-Glass*.

> And though the shadow of a sigh
> May tremble through the story,
> For "happy summer days" gone by,
> And vanished summer glory –
> It shall not touch, with breath of bale,
> The pleasance of our fairy-tale (p. 174)

We see this inclination to omit conflict throughout Wordsworth's poetry. In his narrative poem "Michael," for example, Wordsworth describes Luke's moral descent—the tragic event of the story—in only five and one-half lines (the poem is 491 lines in total). Notice the vagueness with which Wordsworth relates this core episode:

> Meantime Luke began
> To slacken in his duty, and at length
> He in dissolute city gave himself
> To evil courses: ignominy and shame
> Fell on him, so that he was driven at last
> To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas.

(II. 451-56)

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A hurried glance and nothing more for the tragic turn in Michael's life, the very impetus for narration. In a more stunning example of elision, "A slumber did my spirit seal," the poet expresses in two stanzas the shock of Lucy's premature death. In the first stanza, Lucy still lives and the poet his deluded disbelief of her mortality—the happy ignorance that is past. In the second stanza, Lucy has died and the poet imagines the difficult concept of nonexistence and a world that is absent of her being.

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears: She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees.

In less then fifty words the lyric speaks profusely and articulates succintly the human reaction to what always seems the suddenness of death. But between the two stanzas—between his love for her when she lived and his grief in the aftermath of her death—sits a blank space, an elision of the very moment of death itself. This absent stanza seems even more striking when we realize that Wordsworth was writing within an elegiac tradition that almost always recounts a death scene. As in "Michael," the poet excludes the very event that stimulated the act of writing.

For both Carroll and Wordsworth, then, the imaginative effort of writing is a kind of memory freed from pain. But memory for Wordsworth also heals pain and binds the human community. It is memory in this sense that bears most upon the Alice books and that will deliver us, ultimately, back to the subject of secrecy.

The ending of *Wonderland* bears an uncanny resemblance to the final fifty lines of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," in which the poet addresses his sister, who has stood by his side during his meditation that comprises the body of the poem. At the close of both texts, the authors momentarily rechannel the narratives through the consciousness of the protagonist's sister, and thus unfold an alternative vision on the scene—one that perceives from the vista of a different standpoint in time. Just as Wordsworth envisages his sister's impression of the landscape, Carroll imagines Alice's dreamscape as seen through the eyes of her older sister. In Wordsworth's poem, Dorothy's presence binds the rift between the poet's original visit to Tintern Abbey and that of his present one. Robert Langbaum explains: "Now he sees in her what he once was, and sees in the difference between them what he shall be. He has a transforming vision of her as a child of nature blessed in all the stage of her life; and by identifying her future memory of this visit with hs own and his present memory of his last visit, he sees in the different stages of their development along the same line of rhythm and harmony of things."[3]

For thou art with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! Yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once
May I behold in thee what I was once…

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This gesture of uniting fragments of time into a coherent formulation is, among other things, part of the process of narrativization, of transforming experience into story. Its position at the end affirms its formal significance. Further, Dorothy's function of uniting disparate moments of time diverges from the autonomous vignettes that construct the *Alice* books.

But time is not all that Wordsworth joins. By linking past, present, and future, he also bonds himself to Dorothy. Similarly, at the conclusion of *Wonderland*, Alice recalls her dream to her older sister, who functions much like Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey," mediating the central action of the poem—the fall down the rabbit-hole and the journey to the garden—through the lens of an alternate perspective, one that differs in age from the protagonist's.

Alice's memory of her dream generates a psychical intimacy between her and her sister that is expressly absent from the book's opening, where her attention quickly recedes from her sister's voice. The recollection of her dream, then, yokes Alice's and her sister's disconnected psyches.

If we say that memory cultivates human contact, then we begin to see shades of our subject raising back into view, for contact, as we have seen, is secrecy's most subtle distinction. To remember a person, an experience, a place is to reject autonomy, to reconnect to what once was. Memory thus merges autonomous subjects and also knits fragments of time into narrative. That is to say that memory repels dissociation, or in Carrollian terms, nonsense. As memory contextualizes, meaning emerges and nonsense dissolves into abstraction.

Because remembering broods a secrecy that Carroll disallows, we see in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, fittingly, the precarious status of memory. "Who in the world am I?…four times five is twelve…(pp. 37-38). Indeed, Alice is by no means amnestic, but her faculty of recollection is clearly compromised. After this scene, Alice almost never considers, even in passing, her waking life, her reflections on Dinah posing the only exception. Memory's deficiency signifies again, autonomy's supremacy and hence secrecy's absence.

Let us now return to the White Knight scene in *Looking-Glass*—the scene that most overtly figures memory as a mode of human connection. The scene moves on several planes: the knight's poem about his encounter with the "aged-aged man" alludes to Wordsworth confrontation wit the Leechgatherer which, in turn, parallels the White Night's meeting with Alice, which finally represents Dodgeson's relationship with Alice Liddell. By staging these multiple gestures of interaction, Carroll rejects, and reveals a disgust for, the autonomy and solitude he has thematized all along. It is as if Carroll renounces here his philosophy of nonsense in favor of a Wordsworthian faith in the human spirit. Like Wordsworth, Carroll affirms the redemptive force of love and sympathy.

Carroll's optimism, however, is a fleeting, momentary indulgence—an intellectual slip. The scene, like all of Carroll's, is a self-contained imaginative flash. Thus Alice's interaction with the White Night does not alter her or bring any deep knowledge. Although the scene does initiate her movement to the eighth square and hence her queening, Alice never changes internally. Her crowning, like so many of Carroll's metaphors, seems hollow of meaning, a symbol without a referent, a façade that conceals nothing.

The pull between the desire for memory and the compulsion towards autonomy represents tension of the *Alice* narratives—a tension neither resolved nor cathartically worked through, but rather left taut and unchanged. Despite that, Carroll's narratives represent one step forward toward postmodern mystery stories for children which have left their rational and order-restoring character and have moved toward unpredictable plots and rejected knowingness.

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Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979), p. 17. Barthes brilliantly argues that the Eiffel Tower's profound cultural significance emanates from its self sufficient status.

2. Nina Auerbach, "Alice in Wonderland: A Curious Child," *Victorian Studies* 18 (1973): 36; reprinted in *Lewis Carroll*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers,1987), pp. 31-44.

3. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 44.

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