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“Mystic, Awful Was the Process”

Changing Meanings of Victorian Child Photography in Lewis Carroll’s Darkroom and Bright Text

*First the flood of chemicals:
guncotton, ether, silver
nitrate. Then forty-five long seconds
of stillness--and she only three
and quick...*
(Stephanie Bolster, “Aperture, 1856”)

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson’s Alice-tales (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* [1865], *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* [1871]) authored under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll earned lasting literary fame as timeless children’s classics canonically acclaimed for paying an amusingly bright, non-didactic homage to the creative potentials of infantile imagination.¹ Both Wonderland and Looking Glass Realm belong to the mythicized girl child heroine’s fictitious dreams which abound in ambiguous meanings serving a fertile ground for the nonsense fairy-tale fantasy genre itself. The genesis of the Alice-tales came to be in an idealized manner. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (henceforward *AAW*) is often commemorated as an “extempore romance” (Brooker 2005, 10; Cohen 1995, 91) improvised on a bright summer day’s idyllic boating trip to delight the author’s favorite companion, the beloved muse and child-friend, Alice Liddell, fictionalized as the tales’ protagonist. Yet another significant field of Carroll’s artistic oeuvre, photography has been unjustly demonized by posterity.

The retrospective focus falls on girl child nudes that symbolized for Victorians pre-lapsarian innocence and pure imaginativeness granting sublime spiritual

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elevation through sophisticated aesthetic delights, but later became misjudged as physical evidence of the onlooker-photographer's pathological carnal desires. This misjudgment was heavily influenced by the Freudian psychoanalytical theorization of minors as polymorphously perverse, inherently sexual beings and by post/modernist malicious myths of child-loving, as *Lolita* by Nabokov, the Russian translator of Alice, who mockingly called the author Carroll Carroll, a mirror-image of his paedophile antihero Humbert Humbert (Prioleau 1975, 428), not to mention the related recent trend of "Lolitalization," a hideously sexist and ageist mechanism of contemporary mass mediatised fashion industry promoting the sexualization of the underage girlie look. David O'Kane's recent digital photoshop collage simulates a secret kiss exchanged between Carroll and Alice to mock precisely this postmodern insistence at demythologizing the purity of a children's classic by remythologizing its authors dark desires for prepubescents. (Figure 1)

Feminist critics like Carol Mavor strongly warn against simplificatory readings of the photos as mere historical documents of the pure Victorian worship of unaffected innocence and unspoiled beauty. They urge to challenge the idealistic attitude codified along the lines of Morton Cohen's interpretation on his first publishing Carroll's long-lost child-nudes. Although I fully accept and appreciate Mavor's point, I argue that the Carrollian girl child('s representation) cannot be evaluated along the lines of innocence vs. impurity. The verbal/visual narratives about her resemble the era of transition in which they were created: abundant, perhaps normally, with ambiguous meanings. We have to be aware of the fact that late nineteenth-century (industrial, economical, socio-political, scientific,) epistemological changes altered the conception of the child from small, imperfect adult to cherished, junior family member increasingly safe-guarded by social reforms such as the legislation of the age of consent that aimed at protecting purity from sexuality while also acknowledging the potential for contaminating innocence. The epoch was apparently pervaded by an anxious preoccupation with *desiring children* in both senses of the phrase: an excitement equally caused by violators of innocence, and by innocence's being prone to corruption. (No wonder that in the era's contemporary representations—fuelled by a complex sexual dynamics—the child is just as much an icon of a purity lost to adults as an embodiment of a rebellion against its essentialized virtue.) Perhaps Carroll himself understood the ambiguous, potentially compromising significations of his child-

nudes when he insisted on asking for maternal consent² for his underage sitters, when he destroyed some of the plates and kept only a few photographs in his possession, or when he eventually gave up the 'black art'³ in 1880.⁴ However, to judge as suspicious even the artist's demands for maternal consent certainly does not do justice to Carroll; and to see merely perversion, prudishness, repression or denial where there is perhaps—besides a number of clashing contradictory sense and sensations—a psychic purity⁵ inconceivable by contemporary post-Freudian, postwar, post-postmodernist standards results in the misreading of an entire era.

Surely, it is an impossible project to attempt to make sense of the photos and decide whether they are pure or pathological, for "the analysand is silent." (Nickel 2002, 13) But critics should by all means keep in mind that Carroll's child-nudes reflect a Victorian cultural norm (whereby purity and perversion are mutually interdependent terms). The most posterity can do is "try to acknowledge agency of child-models without regarding their bodies as blank screens upon which we project our oppressive desires and our anxieties about sexuality versus innocence" (Mavor 1995, 11) while attempting to understand the impressive richness of Carroll's photographic, imaginative work.

Ironically, it was the first MoMa exhibition intent on rehabilitating Carroll's photography in 1950 that delimited his artistic significance to the status of the child-photographer. Gernsheim's somewhat saccharine introduction in the exhibition catalogue grounded the reductive categorization that determined the recep-

2 Although the age of consent in Victorian Britain was raised from 12 to 13 in 1875, and then, following an investigative exposé into prostitution, to 16 in 1885 – only a few years after the publication of the *Alice* books (1865, 1872) and the making of his controversial "The Beggar Maid" photograph (1858) –, the anxieties surrounding the girl-child's eroticizable body have prevailed previously.

3 Photography was called Black Art because the chemicals, namely blackening silver stained the hands of photographers who wore by means of protection white gloves and pocketwatches to measure the time of exposure, just like the White Rabbit of Wonderland did.

4 Others argue that Carroll abandoned the hobby in 1880 when gelatin dry-plate processes, which he did not favour, came into general use.

5 The posthumous mythologization of 'Saint Carroll' was initially crafted by his first official biographer, his nephew Stuart Dodgson Collingwood with the intention to protect the purity of the famous artist relative as a token of the untarnished reputation he established as a children's writer amongst Victorian audiences, to "circulate an orthodox appraisal of his life and work." (Frigerio 140) But the same myth – centered on the modest and devout eccentric, Carroll's 'safe' intimacy with the angelic infantile as a major source of inspiration – came to be regarded as suspicious by modern critical eyes troubled by the retrospectively constructed image of the shy, stuttering, socially maladroit, unmarried clergyman and scholar with an exquisite "fondness" of whom he called "child friends." (Collingwood 416)

tion of the oeuvre in the succeeding decades: “The bouquet of lovely photographs of children in this collection enriches our appreciation of the unique quality of Lewis Carroll’s finely sensitized understanding of children.” (Nickel 2002, 32) Although Carroll’s amateur photographic work certainly included pioneering gambits of his times and was regarded by himself as his prioritized artform for more than two decades, for a long time—basically throughout the twentieth century—it failed to be considered in its complexity. Posterity paid a selective and reductive attention to just a handful of images—on the whole just six remaining child nudes (of Evelyn and Beatrice Hatch, and Annie and Frances Henderson)—from an extremely rich photographic oeuvre comprising some 3000 items catalogued in Dodgson’s journals ranging from landscapes, still lifes, and tableaux vivants to 232 unique portrait images requiring hundreds of separate sittings—an achievement Hollingsworth believes to be bordering on the miraculous. (Hollingsworth 2009, 93) Only recent projects of recanonization—groundbreaking albums published in 2002, edited by Nickel and by Taylor and Wakeling, respectively⁶—managed to challenge the fossilized status of “Carroll child-photographer” by convincingly revealing that his visual artistic output “must not be prejudged as keep-sake by-products of a writer’s hobby, but serious expressions of an innovator committed to his medium and the world of pictures.” (Nickel 2002, 12)

My aim in the following is to challenge the erroneously established radical differentiation between Carroll’s bright, intellectually sophisticated, philosophically illuminating literary text and his darkroom presumably developing photographic records of sinful carnality. It is indeed easy to argue for the intricate interconnections of the two media, since artistic photography and literary writing mutually inspire each other in Carroll’s artistic gambits. Photographic technology recurs as a symbolical leitmotif and a conceptual framework in his narratives, and his portraits very often show models immersed in their reading, but the most important common denominator is undoubtedly the figure of the child who embodies creative-imaginative empowerment in image and text alike.

⁶ Douglas R. Nickel curator of photography at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art authored the catalogue of an exhibition on Carroll’s photographs he organized in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Houston. Roger Taylor and Edward Wakeling published a comprehensive and carefully annotated reproduction of Princeton University Library’s albums from the Parrish collection with some 400 images offering an unprecedentedly wide understanding of Carroll’s photographic oeuvre. Both books were published in 2002. For the talk given at various venues after the publication of the second book see Wakeling 2003.

Intermedial Interplay. Rival fantasies of the girl child

In the following I shall examine the intermedial interplay associated with Carroll's art as a ground for rival fantasies about the (alternatively eroticized and empowered) girl child. The most obvious evidence for the significance of intermediality is that the Alice-books have been conceived from the very beginning as picture-books, first illustrated by Carroll's own grotesque sketches, then by Punch-cartoonist John Tenniel's more elaborate drawings that became decisive of Wonderland's iconography and integral constituents of the narrative. The conceptual overlap of different realms of representation is manifested in an actual physical overlap of manuscript and photography on the last page of the *Alice's Adventures Underground* gift-book crafted for Alice in 1864: after the last lines of his tale Carroll drew a portrait of the recipient based on a photo he took of her in Deanery Garden of Christ Church Oxford four years earlier (Figure 2), but dissatisfied with his sketch he eventually covered it with the photo itself. Therefore, Alice's ultimate portrait is literally palimpsestic and multimedial, hiding and revealing "rival fantasies" which equally undermine each other's mimetic qualities. (see Monteiro 2009, 101)

In fact, some instances of this intermedial interplay—between in/visible and un/speakable—might even seem ironic. I shall just cite two examples here. The first is the critical argument that the comparison of the girl child's malicious, adventurous agency in the Alice-novels with the docile femininity depicted in the photographs provides enough evidence for the need to question the 'pure' significations of the Carrollian oeuvre's visual products. (Mavor 1995, 8) The second is a marginal autobiographical data telling of the artist's own self-fashioning: a look at the journals demonstrates that the activities preceding and succeeding the mythified boating trip on the bright summer's day marking the textual genesis of Wonderland all relate to preoccupations with photography (discussions with future models and the sharing of photo-albums) which were neatly recorded in Carroll's diaries, whereas the impromptu storytelling session that brought him literary fame got no mention at all in the diary entry of that very day.

The black art of photography played a prominent role in Carroll's life and considerably influenced his literary writings. The "programmatic wondermaking" (Hollingsworth 2009, 89) of photography resurfaces in the calculated cacophony of literary nonsense. The experimental photographic montage technique can be traced in the fairy-tale fantasies' loosely episodic, dream-like structure. (see

Hollingsworth 2009, 85–101) Photographic technology metaphorically lurks all over his books (the dis/appearing Cheshire Cat recalls the developing print in the darkroom, the playing card royalties fashionable *cartes de visite*, and the death jokes postmortem photographs, see Monteiro 2009; Meier 2009). The dynamics between nonexistence and presence permeating the tales might be references to photographic attempts at capturing past moments in the presence (the March Hare offers Alice invisible wine, and the White King compliments her on having good enough eyesight to see nobody at a great distance down the road, Gardner in Carroll 2001, 182). However, the most exciting photographic hints revolve around Alice, the girl child's curiously fetishized bodily being.

The Alice-tales embrace the romantic idealization of the pure-hearted childhood fashionable in Carroll's times, but, interestingly, the photographic symbolism adopted throughout the description of the girl child's metamorphic bodily changes also metafictionally and parodically discloses the adult artist's vain and twisted desire to keep the child still and small. This grotesque wish founds the very basis of the nonsensical Wonderland and Looking Glass Land where Alice must drink and swim in strange potions similar to the photographer's developing bath, squeeze into claustrophobic spaces reminiscent of the darkroom, learn patience and fight time like a good model, all in a topsy-turvy mirrored world as seen through the photographer's eyes,⁷ while, most importantly, her shrinking preserves her miniaturized for eternity just like a photograph. The absurdity of this photographic fetishistic miniaturization is reflected in Humpty Dumpty's request to Alice to "leave off at (age) seven" and not to grow older further on (something one cannot help doing, but two can with proper assistance, as he claims). Even the Red Queen's hysteric shout "Off with her head!" might allude to the accidental photographic decapitation of the subject who grows too tall to fit the photos, a fear Carroll mockingly expresses in a letter to child friend Xie Kitchin. (Meier 2009, 139)

Carroll has literary writings more explicitly focusing on the theme of photography. These record a hilarious critique and pragmatic demystification of idealistic representations of children. The 1857 poem "Hiawatha's Photographing"—a parody of Longfellow's poem about the mighty native American warrior—tells

7 As Marina Warner notes, in Looking Glass Country the world functions "according to the optics of reflections, obeying the catoptrics of the dark plate inside the camera, and the developing process, with its inversions of up and down, light and dark, and its contractions and distortions of scale." (Warner 2006, 207)

the photographer's mock heroic struggle with irritating models, including a young girl grimacing to repeat the mimics of the so-called passive beauty-ideal, and a restlessly fidgeting schoolboy who demystify the photographic process as an awful experience with pictures turned an utter failure. The 1860 short story, "A Photographer's Day Out," presents an even more straightforward parody of childhood innocence and bourgeois pretentiousness, as the family's grouping into a "domestic allegorical" living picture that would have been the greatest artistic triumph of the amateur photographer's day goes fully chaotic: instead of the intended group-portrait with "Victory transferring her great laurel crown to Innocence (with) Faith, Hope, and Charity looking on," the baby impersonating Innocence has a tantrum-fit, the mother (Victory) squeezes the baby into a ball, while two girls (Faith and Hope) begin strangling the third (Charity) who tears at their hair. (As a bonus, by the end of the day the photographer gets beaten up during the making of a bucolic landscape portrait of an ideal young lady—with cows in the background—by two farmers who believe he is trespassing on their land.) "Photography Extraordinary" published in *The Comic Times* in 1855 is a speculative fictional piece inspired by a sensational revisiting of the issue of intermediality: it describes a futuristic device apt to establish a mesmeric rapport between the model-patient's mind and the photographic apparatus, so that the temperament and dynamics of thought take shape in mental images which gain verbal poetic form by means of parodies of different literary writing styles (such as the "milk and water school of novels," the strong-minded matter of fact school, or the spasmodic German school) neatly recorded on pictures producing visual stimuli. Yet another mock-Gothic ghost-story pokes fun of how fantasies of immortality and invisibility are associated with the feminine photographic subject (especially Victorian era's favorite spirit-photography). In "The Ladye's History" (1858) it takes so long to produce a portrait that both model and artist die of exhaustion and turn into specters by the end of the tale.

Although Carroll never writes any serious aesthetic critical piece about photography, the above humorous sketches and the allusions in the Alice-tales are telling of his relation to the black art: his concerns are just as much technological (adequate operation of camera to reach a good composition) as philosophical (picturing ideas) and sensual/sentimental (how to capture [the feelings of/for] the cherished child).

Fragile Fetish

As Carol Mavor convincingly argued in her influential *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Bereavement in Victorian Photography* (1995), the increasing advancement of the newly invented artistic medium of photography coincided with and contributed to the modernist cultural construction of the concept of the Child as an idealized and endangered “fragile fetish.” The fetishistic commodification and a veritable “cult” of childhood and photography took place simultaneously: bourgeois salons became decorated with a surprising range of private and public photographic portraits of family members, monarchs, and freak show celebrities, side by side with cribs, swings, perambulators, toys and storybooks. All were mass-produced, widely circulated and communally cherished for their capacity to preserve a nostalgically resuscitated past, reflecting the desire to grasp the fleeting moment, the sentimentally idealized golden age of innocence.

Photographs of children enjoyed a special status, in my view, as they constituted the fetish *par excellence* on accounts of combining the technological and the philosophical/aesthetical framings of utopian ideals. In the fetish a mystical significance, a spiritual devotion, and an unappeasable yearning are attributed to an object or a phenomenon that usually conjoins the experience of a radical absence and a substitutive presence.⁸ As a result, the photograph of the little girl (Alice) becomes, in Mavor’s witty Freudian wording, a “pocket phallus,” a “keep-sake of sexual indifference” (Mavor 1995, 34) that both records and wards off fears of sexuality, a charm to fight impotence, castration, vulnerability, forgetfulness, and death. Thus, the photograph necessarily conjoins metaphorical, poetic, make-believe meanings with the referential realism of the genre.

For the Victorians the image of the child and especially representations of the physical body of the little girl (see Robson 2001) provided an ideal imaginative terrain for escapist fantasies about the inspirational, pure-hearted, pre-lapsarian, innocent, imaginative state of human being. Reliving childhood and practicing photography equally offered means to fight against time, forgetting, and death, an attempt to stay young forever, to reclaim absence/loss for presence, while be-

8 The classic Freudian theory relates fetishization to the compulsive compensation for the repressed primary memory of the missing maternal phallus and a succeeding erotic fixation with a substitutive object. The fetish simultaneously signifies symbolic castration and a soothing protection against that loss. It engages in a complex dynamics of traumatic amnesia, the resurfacing of memory traces, and residual misremembering.

ing melancholically aware that the past moment's artistic "preservation in ink and emulsion" and in child-icons cannot be but a fictitiously registered simulation when we "perform, through acts of remembrance, the missing referent" that is no longer there. (Mavor 1995, 6) This "recharming of the past," the infantilization of prehistory/happiness, fetishistic miniaturization, and the heroic struggle against mortality's meaninglessness peak on early photographs of children (including/especially child nudes).

Just how much these connotations prevail in post/modernism is attested by the fact that throughout Roland Barthes' systematic semiotic analysis of the photographic image in his seminal book *Camera Obscura* (1981) the most crucial, central image is a childhood portrait of his long-dead mother, a missing picture that never gets to be shown in the illustrated volume, but perfectly embodies the essence of the Barthesian photographic punctum, that personal piercing feel experienced upon facing what has mattered the most but ceased to be and yet is still present on the photo—albeit in its absence, through an awareness of it *having-been-there*. Mavor's claim about Victorian photography is still valid here: "Both photo and child [image] accept their shape and poignancy from death." (Mavor 1995, 6)

Mavor goes on beautifully describing photographs in terms of a "haunting community" guaranteed by a "visual caress" between artist and model, as well as between past subjects and present viewers who are all touched by the same light so neatly transported and seized by the photographic medium. Unlike his fellow Victorian photographers (O. G. Rejlander or H. P. Robinson) who were more interested in photo-technological experimentation (e.g. composite pictures), Carroll embarked on spiritist, sensual time-travels, striving to capture moments of being, embodying the secret essence of childhood, transcending time, negating the daily toil of reality, preserving pleasures for posterity. (Mavor 1995, 28)

The memoirs of child models record how the photographer Dodgson strategically used what has become known as Carrollian 'storytelling as a means of enchantment,' to make them sit still in their fancy-dress costumes or *sans habille* while he captured their "likeness" for eternity. The legendary Alice Liddell's reminiscences of these photographic sessions deserve to be quoted in full as they neatly disclose intricate interconnections involved in the Carrollian oeuvre: the masterful maneuvers multimedially mixing/melting storytelling, drawing, photography, and even mathematics; the conjoining of dream states, pretense play, and waking-life reality; of fixed actuality and infinite possibilities; of singular

originality and iterable revisionary potentials; of symbolic significations, the struggle with meaninglessness, and the apotheosis of nonsense.

When we were thoroughly happy and amused at his stories he used to pose us, and expose the plates before the right mood had passed. He seemed to have an endless store of these fantastical tales, which he made up as he told them, drawing busily on a large sheet of paper all the time. They were not always entirely new, sometimes they were new versions of old stories, sometimes they started on the old basis, but grew into new tales owing to the frequent interruptions which opened up fresh and undreamed of possibilities. In this way the stories, slowly enunciated in his quite voice with its curious stutter were perfected. Occasionally he pretended to fall asleep, to our great dismay. Sometimes he said “That is all till next time,” only to resume on being told that it is already next time. Being photographed was therefore a joy to us and not a penance as it is to most children. We looked forward to the happy hours in the mathematical tutor’s room. (Hargreaves 1992, 274–275)

These words attest that the pictures record not so much the sexual objectification of minors but rather the intimate bond between sitter and photographer, a mutual cooperation of friends committed to the same purpose of joyously dwelling in fantasy lands, making up, acting out, make-believing stories—visually and narratively alike.⁹

As opposed to the stiff and stilted, formal and false photos of his times, it is this special bond between photographer and model – besides the slow-pace of the long exposure time, the cultural-ritualistic value Victorians attributed to having their pictures taken, and the efficient physical effort of freeze-framing fleeting moments—which lend to outstanding early photography, like Carroll’s work, its might, allowing it to emanate what philosopher Walter Benjamin calls the *aura*: the feel of an unreproducible aesthetic authenticity, “a spark of contin-

⁹ Jenny Lynn Bouilly’s term, the *nympholept*, seems a particularly relevant denomination to Carroll here. The *nympholept* does not so much aim at the sexual possession of the minor but rather desires to entrap the girl child in enchanting *stories* inspired by her, so that sublimated into the work of art she can escape masculine objectification and be preserved metaphorically for good in her own right (see Bouilly 2011).

gency" (1972, 5), a singular encounter of human beings, and a touching of opposites through time enfolding in two directions at once (past and future, presence and absence, child- and adulthood). As Nickel puts it, Carroll's photos are like a dream, a stage, "an external reflection of what we were like before we all grew older and learned how not to trust." (2002, 67)

Naughty Girl Power in Living Pictures

Carroll's photographs always provide an excitingly heterogeneous view of children that goes way beyond romantic idealization: the little girl's natural, angelic being appears as the product of a meticulously staged performance, located within a socially coded/decodable web of cultural meanings, which is nevertheless mockingly deconstructed by imaginative pretense play highlighting the elusiveness of childish presence. One of Carroll's favorite genres when it comes to photographing children is the *tableau vivant* or the living picture, based on a popular parlour game of the Victorian era, a sort of improvisatory amateur theatrical performance still, whereby players enacted in fancy-dress well-known mythological, historical scenes, literary characters, ethnic types, and abstract qualities. (Gubar 2010, 102; Smith 1998, 95) Carroll's *tableau vivant* child-photography is a fascinating genre because of the paradoxical ambiguities it fuses on numerous layers as if to debilitate simplifying interpretations.

1. The picture's educational quality, the fact that a certain cultural knowledge is required on the part of the spectator for the recognition of the impersonated figure posits the child-models as cultivated, socialized beings who nevertheless often enact precisely the Other(ed)s, haunting on the margins of the hegemonic culture they belong to. They impersonate racial, ethnic, class, sexual others, dressed up/undressed as Chinese, Turks, Indians, Beggar Girls, and Feral Wild Children—with carefully arranged undone hair, bare feet, and ragged clothes, celebrating a strange "scripted spontaneity" of the child-model.
2. The literary, referential, material meaning of the fleshly presence of the denuded child's body, the fetishizable flashes of the skin revealed in the *poses plastiques* are clearly contrasted with the metaphorical meanings they embody both through their role-playing and as (mock)-icons of In-

nocence whose nakedness is a sign of their pre-lapsarian purity and their freedom from corrupting and constraining cultural pre/inscriptions.

3. The child models represent abstract ideas and hence point towards what is ungraspable for the naked eye, embarking on rendering visible the thoughts (fears, desires) of a collective unconscious, but all of them have their names precisely indicated in the title of the photographs to commemorate their individual artistic contribution. Underage female co-authorship gets celebrated even more spectacularly elsewhere in Carroll's art when Irene MacDonald signs her photographic portrait with her school-girlish handwriting, introducing her own voice into his image-text, or Evelyn Hatch undertakes the editorial work of the letters written by Carroll to his child-friends. (see Hatch 1933)
4. Bodily exposure normally objectifies the model to the male gaze, but Carroll's models tend to look back at the viewer, with cold and curious "outward stares" (Gubar 2010, 104) violating the frames of their representation. Hence they are granted a visual empowerment scarcely available for underage subjects.
5. The intermedial interplays involved in their tableaux, the literary subtexts suggest that there are further stories to tell beyond the confines of their image. Moreover, characteristically of Victorian portrait photography, the visual representation of the literal clashes with the verbal representation of the visual: genre photos depend on "a strong fictional story line, usually with a moral, and executed in a formal, composed, painterly manner," while the titles given to the photos provide discursive clues to the story pictured and hence paratextually invest the photo with a "narrative" quality. (Vallone 2005, 193)
6. The amateur, rudimentary theatrical props—often too obviously displayed, left unconcealed, as if "baring the device" in the Russian formalist sense of the term—are both disenchanting by revealing the scene's artificial constructedness and enchanting by stripping away the veil of familiarity from mundane objects. An example is the *tableau vivant* called *St. George and the Dragon* (Figure 3) where Xie Kitchin, as captive princess, rides a rocking-horse steed, the dragon's knightly victim collapses on his card-board shield, and the monster itself is only half-concealed with a worn leopard skin thrown across and about to slip off a little boy. The curious effect suggests simultaneous stagedness and spontaneity, leaving

enough space for imagination on accounts of a "sophistication [by simple means yet] of an unfamiliar order." (Nickel 2002, 44)

7. Transforming original photography into paintographs through applying paint to the image-surface so as to imitate "the fluid grace of the oil medium"—a technique we could call with a mock-Carrollian pun, "phainting"—augments the antagonism between different representational modes and meanings (mimetic vs metaphorical).

A great example for how the Carrollian *tableau vivant* portrays the girl child as the empowered Other resisting idealistic, marginalizing, and mimetic/referential representational and interpretive practices alike, while transgressing medial boundaries is a photograph of Tennyson's, the poet laureate's niece animating the Grimm Brothers' tale in "Agnes Weld as Little Red Riding Hood" (1857). (Figure 4) It is not by chance that Carroll chooses this particular figure. Little Red Riding Hood, this wayward girl straying off the safe path, is perhaps the fairy-tale character most prone to be associated with illicit sexual contents. From Charles Perrault's eighteenth-century rhyming fables composed to amusingly educate the French nobility's moral sensibilities to NBC channel's recent (2011-) *Grimm*, a supernatural detective series in which bedtime stories become nightmarish crime cases, Little Red has frequently been portrayed as an innocent prey to the sexual predator impersonated by the bestial wolf. On Carroll's photo, she poses as an "ingenious, determined child who keeps moving forward despite the dangers she faces in doing so," who "fights back against the encroachment on her liberty" (Gubar 2010, 108–109), and whose eyes are those "of the wolf that has presumably just eaten her grandmother, [making us] wonder whether she has eaten the wolf, and whether she is about ready to eat us up," too. (Mavor 1995, 29) Although Carroll's own poem "Little Red Riding Hood" apparently portrays a very different, ideal child who vanquishes the wolf with her innocent confidence, the clandestine allusions "to the first canto of Dante's *Inferno* in which the poet enters the dark wood and meets a she-wolf" turn the happy little girl into "a fallen traveler and allegorical heroine folktale character and muse" in one. (Vallone 2005, 196)

A similar, carefully staged natural ambiguity emerges in the unjustly criticized 1879 paintograph of Evelyn Hatch *sans habillement*. (Figure 5) The reclining nude of the child-woman equally embodies the "modern little Venus of Oxford," Titian's painting of the Greek Goddess of Love (Mavor 1995, 12), a "beautiful little [Orientalized] odalisque" (Auerbach 1986, 168), and a grotesque little beast,

a child of nature unashamed of her carnal potentials, staring at her observers with elfishly glittering, oil-painted gaze. As Nina Auerbach puts it, she strangely stages the closeness of the two Victorian female stereotypes, the Angel and the Whore, as she performs “both animal and dreamer, pig and pure little girl,” an “amalgamation of fallen woman and unfallen child” whose creative imaginative powers spring from her innocence and fall alike, so that she can create an enchanting world, a Wonderland where she is equally slave and Queen, creator and destroyer, victim and victimizer (Auerbach 1986, 168), a bewitched spellbinder in one. In Carol Mavor’s view, Evelyn Hatch’s nude (and the sublime sight of her half-hidden sex) stages an *in-between* spectacle with “nothing to show and nothing to hide,” both a personification and an emblem of nature, provoking an odd fusion of fascination and horror in one (Mavor 1995, 18), while Marina Warner associates her with the *intermediate* state of angels, an angelically fleshless acorporeality, and a “dreamed absence of fallen human sex” projected upon the child’s body. (Warner 2006, 215) Evelyn’s pudendum as “the carnalized ethereal” constitutes an authentic oxymoron, challenging semantic and representational/interpretive boundaries by fusing incompatible dichotomies in paint and light, a fragile fleshly embodiment of the Carrollian “portmanteau.” (see Mavor 1995, 32)

Carroll’s photographic *tableau vivant* of Alice Liddell as “The Beggar Maid” (1858) (Figure 6) carries maybe even more complex connotations. Alice appears barefoot, in rags, her arms outstretched as if asking for alms, her chest half-uncovered allusive of a child prostitute. She enacts the Victorian archetype of the poor orphan girl, an innocent sacrificial victim of her social circumstances—like Andersen’s Little Matchgirl or an underage female Christ-figure. In her middle-class contemporaries she likely aroused sentimental, religious reactions of pious compassion reminding them of “obligations toward the less fortunate” (Susina 2010, 102), but the strange fusion of the Enlightenment idea of child as born innocent of sin with the more traditional religious idea of child born into sin also staged a troubling epistemological crisis of her era. Contrariwise, today’s politically correct viewers might criticize the inadequacy of the subversive intents on account of the ludic filter to the social sentiment, the safeness of the ‘unendangered,’ cherished, bourgeois girl’s pose, and the beggar child’s being reduced to a mere stereotype.

However, I believe that Alice’s clenched fist on her hip, apparently ready to punch, and her defiant gaze—challenging the focus of the original, eponymous Tennyson poem on male voyeuristic pleasures—convincingly hint at the rebellious resistance accompanying the vulnerability of the Victorian street urchin.

These bodily indices of empowerment do not only mark the lurking animalistic aggressiveness of an untamed Street Arab (as street children were called at the time) but the inventiveness of the *orphan ingénue* surviving and seeking happiness against all odds (a character later on emerging in the tragicomic corpus of Chaplin's burlesque movies, more specifically *The Kid*). There is a social-critical, political intent in the childish pretense-play's blurring of class distinctions. The bourgeois girl posing as a beggar repeats and reverses the rags-to-riches scenario of classic fairy tales like Cinderella. Yet here Alice goes from riches to rags and then back to riches again from rags, and as she moves on and off the photograph, dressing up and down, toying with her fancy-dresses, the performativity of class (gender/racial) identity are exposed along with the disruptive powers of social mobility. Especially so, since the image initially belonged to a diptych photographed on the same day at the Deanery: on one Alice poses as a proper girl in her finest dress, on the other she is presented as a ragged pauper in a "kind of before-and-after reversal of social roles romanticized by the Victorians." (Nickel 2002, 62) Moreover, Alice's fancy-dressed theatrical pose on the *tableau vivant* vindicates ludic joys as universal rights for all children regardless of class belonging, but also sheds light on play as work for some, hence offering a visual record of Carroll's "campaign on behalf of performing child(actors) to prevent their financial and sexual exploitation." (Warner 2006, 214)

"The Beggar Maid's" class-subversion is coupled with gender-bender, as Alice's undressing has no feminine secrets to reveal; she confronts spectators with bodily markers of an overall tomboyishness—flat chest, short bob-cut hair, defiant gaze—which resist her subjection to conventional eroticization. Feminist analyses highlight the potential of a female spectatorship, and related narcissistic, lesbian desires. Mavor and Auerbach call attention to the Carrollian girl child model's self-awareness of her own "sexuality without parameters" (Mavor 1995, 42), while Hacking regards the child nude as a means to address or acknowledge the sexuality of respectable adult women who could have imaginatively substituted themselves for the eroticized child, suggesting that the disturbing complicity the viewer is involved in might relate to a more mature sexual dynamics. (Hacking 2009, 102)¹⁰

10 Juliet Hacking's analysis concentrates on one of Carroll's contemporaries, Camille Silvy's *deshabillé* photographs of Mrs Holford's Daughter (cc. 1860) coming to the rather shocking (and fully speculative) conclusion that these *cartes de visite* might have been advertising images of Victorian sex-traffickers. Hence the woman accompanying the underdressed little girl on the photo might

Nevertheless, the most real, authentic bodily momentum on the artificially staged photo—in my sense its Barthesian *punctum* (Barthes 1981)—is Alice's balancing on her bent toes, as if she was about to turn around and run away, change her clothes and dress back to her real self, or flee away to play undocumented, hiding in disguise as another. Already a shadow of her absence falls on her presence, she is there while almost not there, daydreaming herself into fictional elsewhere, on a photo attesting the elusiveness of the child as a fundamentally mobile, metamorphic being who cannot be freeze-framed as an idealized icon of innocence. It is my contention that if the portrait is fetishizable, it is not because of the disheveled costume's erotic implications, rather, the spectators's yearning is evoked by Alice's ungraspably distant closeness induced by make-believing as an intermedial, intergenerational creative collaboration between the visual storyteller and the child in his focus.

Picturing reading children

An intimate bond of imaginative co-productivity captured by Carroll on many photographs is that of the child-reader and the book invested with meanings she calls to life with her fantasizing. Being lost in a good book stages another mode of absence from mundane material reality (that is compensated for by the corporeal reactions and empathic responses incited by the reading/imaginative activity, ranging from laughing out with joy, shuddering with excitement, sweating from fear, or crying out of sorrow). The double portraits of the two child-readers sharing the same book depict just as much the communal joy of collectively dwelling in make-believe realms as well as the fictitious doubling of the self through the identificatory processes involved in the reading process. In undisciplined poses of comfortable rest these closely-seated child-readers touch, recline, and hold on each other just like image and text do. The book in the photo always implies an intricate inter/meta-medial interplay because the visual narrative centers on the enchantment by a written text that remains practically undecipherable for us, would-be reader spectators.

My favorite is the photo of sister-readers Ethel and Liliane Brodie (Figure 7) that prefigures the *Wonderland* novel's opening scene where Alice, bored by her sis-

have been actually “a brothel-keeper who wished to derive a financial gain from the sale or distribution of photographs of her pretended daughter.” (2009, 97)

ter's reading, rebels against pictureless books, so that the photograph's original staging of visuality engulfing textuality (with the sight of an illegible book) is turned inside out into the fear of words devouring images. (Gordon and Guiliano 1982) Either way, the image of the child absorbed in her reading experience fascinates because it lets us see the little girls "as themselves" pondering, playing, and fantasizing "with all the intense earnestness of youth at a time when (...) the wall between dream and reality is thin, and one can pass readily between them". (Leal 2007, 9)

Much in line with this, the cover of *Nursery Alice* (an abridged, coloured 1890 edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for younger children) (Figure 8) is illustrated by a picture of Alice lying asleep next to a half-opened copy of the *Wonderland* book—it is hard to tell whether the grotesque *Wonderland* creatures hopping on the clouds above her head emanate from the printed text, its colorful illustration, or Alice's creative mind. The girl child represented by Carroll is never completely passive, even when portrayed asleep, she is just enacting the dreamer, and the emphasis is always on her self-initiated journey to another fantasy worlds where she plays an active part in the fairy story. (This vital presence completely contradicts the ghostly fading of girls in Julia Margaret Cameron's photography.)

Focusing on limes-experience, balancing between dream and waking life, mimesis and metaphor, child and adulthood, photographic image and literary text—what unites Carroll's/Dodgson's heterogeneous artistic corpus is his stubborn willingness to believe in the powers of enchantment against all odds. As Nickel points out, his art is neither about realism, nor about idealization, but rather about story-telling and hence about the clash of two distinct representational orders: "the phenomenological verification of aspects of the material world" versus the abstract, "immaterial, virtual realm of imagination." (2002, 35)

Stephanie Bolster's poem "Aperture, 1865" published in her collection *White Stone. The Alice Poems* (1998) in honor of Carroll's child photography continues the lines I quoted as the introductory motto to this paper with an open-ended poetic question that beautifully encapsulates the enchanting essence of the creative partnership between artist and muse: "Did they meet because of a raising of eyebrows, curiouiser about each other than about anyone else in the garden?" The poem's closure offers a tentative answer, allowing the emerging photographic image to take the place of the transverbal unspeakable: "Spring everywhere threatening to open them both: tense in that unfurling garden, during the long exposure." (Bolster 1998, 15)

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