The award-winning edition designed and illustrated by Barry Moser—
"A dream unto itself" (Village Voice)

Lewis Carroll's Alice

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

A Harvest/HBJ Book

LEWIS CARROLL'S

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

James R. Kincaid. Text edited by Selwyn H. Goodacre.

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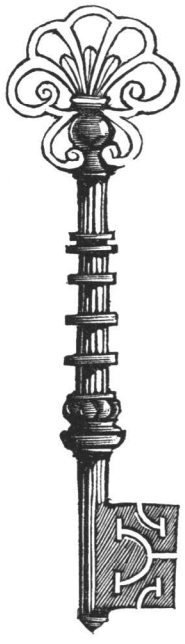
PREFACE



There is a quaint and pristine Victorian phrase that describes with precision *Alice in Wonderland* and its relation to our culture: "We don't know where to have it." How do we locate this work, hold it still? Do we have it for adults, for children, for psychoanalysts, for mathematicians, for logicians, for linguists, for philosophers, for literary critics, for tea? Perhaps the last suggestion is most appropriate, since Alice and her readers are entering a world in which, as no less an authority than the Mad Hatter announces, "It's always tea-time!": a perpetual party for receptive children.

But children, receptive or dull, are not so clearly the work's only, or even major, audience. Carroll originally wanted as a title, *Alice's Golden Hours*, suggestive of such a restricted readership and of a fawning sentimentality the book, happily, seldom achieves. He preferred *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, he said, because it is "sensational." One might also add that the second title is cooler, less committed to the heroine and to the closed world of children's literature. In any event, the work clearly takes sensational risks, issuing attacks and invitations in all directions. Most of us find the means to desensitize ourselves to literary attacks and to exaggerate our capacities to fit the terms of the invitations. Still, *Alice in Wonderland* is, in this regard, an uncommonly capacious book.

How is it that this apparently innocent children's story is so hospitable, seeming to welcome a nearly unlimited number of approaches and explanations? The amount of commentary is considerable but less striking than its wild variety (the variety less striking than the wildness): the directly contradictory force of separate, by-themselves-perfectly-plausible analyses. No wizard could make all these readings cohere or arrange them as searchlights shining from different angles on the same work. Most often, the searchlights are beamed straight at one another. It makes one wonder where the work is—whether there is only one work or many—or none. Carroll himself provided a suggestive commentary on this phenomenon. When asked what one of his works meant, he would answer either that he had no idea or else give a fuller version of what is, after all, the same response: "Words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant." In a book like *Alice in Wonderland*, which defies ordinary reading conventions, the fluidity Carroll talks of becomes a torrent. The book opens itself to all sorts of models: it is a satire, a novel, a mathematical-political-logical-theological allegory, a dream vision, and an elegy all at

once; both a comedy and an irony; a work with rich and directed meaning and one without any whatever. Again, Carroll gives the best and most sophisticated explanation: "*Do* we decide questions at all? We decide *answers*, no doubt, but surely the questions decide *us*." Questions not only precede answers; questions determine answers. More to the point, "questions decide *us*." We are what we ask.

No work is directed more relentlessly or with more subtlety to the questions we habitually ask, the models we use to structure, understand, and make bearable our world and our lives. Carroll applies continuous pressure to the forms and models we use to think about such things as space, time, logic, language, meaning, authority, and death. Under such pressure, these structures explode, their naturalness disappears, and only the paltry skin remains. Without the desperate puffing which inflates them, the models are not there. Nor are they wanted. The anarchic creatures in equally anarchic Wonderland seem not to share our need for these props, the ones we are, incidentally, so very eager to thrust upon children.

Alice, interestingly, is distinctly uncomfortable without these supports. Early on, when she finds herself so disoriented by the fall down the rabbit-hole that she forgets who she is, she tries to regain her identity by reconstructing her above-ground culture and placing herself in it. One of her strategies involves the effort to recite moralistic and didactic poems in an attempt to recapture official cultural statements, adult versions of what is going on and adult instructions on how to behave and think. In this case, she goes after a particularly grisly example, Isaac Watts's "Against Idleness and Mischief" ("How doth the little busy bee"). Bees are held up to children as a behavioral and epistemological model, a model of unremitting labor that had better be followed unblinkingly, since "Satan finds some mischief still / For idle hands to do." Spending one's life avoiding idleness will pay off in the end, when one will be able to "give for every day / Some good account at last" to the great Bookkeeper in the skies. In Wonderland, however, such notions are so alien – one is reminded of Harold Skimpole's witty protest against the dratted bees (*Bleak House*, ch.8) – that Alice finds herself, against her will, exploding with a wonderful and subversive parody where the industrious bees are replaced by the indolent but remarkably successful crocodile.

Watts's poem offers a highly ordered and highly sentimental view in which Man and Nature – bees, at least – are joined harmoniously through God's plan. The animal kingdom is a benign example for

us all; and the ruling principles of this kingdom are gentleness, love, and coherence–all supported by hard work. Also, the bee-like children are asked to understand and measure everything linearly, in terms of endings, judgment, death. The Darwinian crocodile, however, is simply there, outside of time, order, and sentimentality. Wonderland pressures expose adult, above-ground ordering structures as vicious lies.

But Alice, here and elsewhere, very much wants those lies. She is unable to comprehend a world where things do not end–"It's always tea-time!"–, where there are no predatory systems, where logical causality does not hold–"They never executes nobody, you know"–, where, finally, "*Everybody* has won, and *all* must have prizes." Alice seems unable to abandon habits of mind based on logical ordering and linear completion. She insists on progress–"I thought of the future, whatever I did"–a structure which leads her straight to the trial scene, a central parody of above-ground lunacy. Significantly, she finds herself most at home in a courtroom, the epitome of the above-ground passion for ordering, for imagining that everything, even death, is under reasonable control, that only the guilty and the bad die and that we, the virtuous, can ward off all that with our systems. Most centrally, she needs to imagine that the world is significant, full of meanings. Like the Duchess, she believes "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it." Alice's search for meaning is endless. When she finds nothing, she does not reject her postulate; she simply rejects the entire adventure and the implications of her dream: "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" She is understandably resistant to the terrors of anarchy. Ironically, she is also resistant to the liberation that anarchy offers, unable to enter into a world of free-play. She is, in this sense, ineducable.

She is, at heart, resistant to childhood as it is imaged in this work. Unhappily, she carries with her the destructive adult perceptions the book is so busy attacking. She is, thus, a mini-adult, treated ambiguously, alternately fawned over and hacked at. Alice is both a loving "dream-child" and a "serpent."

I do not mean to suggest that Carroll had it in for Alice Liddell in particular. He later said that the Alice in the book was "my dream-child," a phrase that can be taken to indicate that the fictional Alice is some composite of child-friends, partly idealized but also resented, insofar as she is strangely reluctant to play out the wish-fulfillment dream. She reenacts, by growing up, the pattern of commitment and abandonment experienced by Carroll over and

over with little girls. Just as Alice refuses to succumb to the lure of Wonderland and abruptly leaves it, so did almost all of the child-friends eventually drift away from the extraordinary play and affection offered to them by Carroll.

The story of Carroll's love for little girls – and his detestation of boys: "I think they are a mistake" – is well-known. Armed with safety pins to fasten skirts for wading and with various attractive games and puzzles, he would find ways to meet children at the sea-side; he sought (with success) acquaintance of parents (of the proper class) with attractive daughters so as to take the children on various excursions, ordinarily to the theatre, entertain them in his rooms at Christ Church, or photograph them in costumes or in the nude. The intensity with which he pursued this love was matched only by his passionate insistence on its innocence. While letters reveal that a few (surprisingly very few) parents found something amiss in these dealings and while there clearly was gossip enough to cause Carroll's sister Mary to express concern, there can be little question but that the dealings with children were technically innocent. There can also be no question but that they were charged with great erotic force. This is not, of course, to suggest that Carroll in any way harmed the children or intruded on them an unaccepted or unreciprocated energy. Rather, there appears to have been a match of sexual needs and forces, as well as considerable gentleness and tenderness. The reminiscences written later by these child-friends suggest, by their warmth and remarkable recall of detail, an experience not only acceptable but joyous and nurturing.

Carroll's own feelings about these affairs were more complex. The pleasure he derived from them is obvious: "Ah, happy he who owns that tendrest joy,/ The heart-love of a child!" The problem was that he could never fully own the joy or the heart-love – at least not for long. As a consequence, there is some inevitable edginess present, even in the correspondence. Carroll is constantly hectoring his child-friends about their forms of epistolary closing, chiding them with uneasy jokes when any slip from "Yours affectionately" (or better, "Your loving") is noted. And all *are* noted. A diary entry records the receipt of two notes from girls: "Both begin 'my dear' (instead of 'dearest') and are 'affectionate' (instead of ('loving'). The love of children is a fleeting thing." He could, in fact, become bitterly cynical about his predictably disloyal friends: "Sorrowful experience has taught me that the affection of most *children*

is in exact proportion to the amount of pleasure they receive, or expect, from anybody: it is in fact identical with self-interest."

Calculation and dissimulation were, however, minor problems in comparison with the truly destructive characteristic of these children: their insistence on growing up: "About 9 out of 10, I think, of my child-friendships get shipwrecked at the critical point 'where the stream and river meet'." He perceives the natural process of growth as distinctly unnatural, a rejection of freedom and play and a nearly idiotic acceptance of the world of the governesses. More pointedly, it is a rejection of Carroll and the love he is so eager to give.

Alice in Wonderland is, from this point of view, a special and seductive invitation to the dream-Alice to remain a child, to stay within the magic circle Carroll created and then lost with virtually every child he knew. The work ends with the wistful and poignant hope that Alice will retain through her adult years "the simple and loving heart of her childhood," a heart fixed with Carroll. Like the commercials that remind us of time's swift flight and advise us to freeze our children in film before it is too late, this book reveals a desire for a marble-like stasis. But there is also present a recognition, often expressed in self-pitying or angry terms, that the child will grow – will grow *away* – and that, as the prefatory poem to *Through the Looking-Glass* says so bluntly, "No thought of me shall find a place / In thy young life's hereafter."

Alice, sadly, is never really tempted to accept the Wonderland invitation. For her it is all only an adventure that passes without consequence. She moves with disastrous ease into the prison-house of adulthood, abandoning her old, tender lover. Unhappy, even bitter, but retaining nonetheless the gentleness and the after-traces of love, Carroll is left with a memory only, a dream inhabited by a dream-child. As Carroll knew all too well, the child will wake and run off. Only he remained – and remained faithful to the melancholy, glorious dream.

JAMES R. KINCAID.
Boulder, Colorado, June, 1981.

CHRISTMAS-GREETINGS

[FROM A FAIRY TO A CHILD.]

LADY dear, if Fairies may
For a moment lay aside
Cunning tricks and elfish play,
'Tis at happy Christmas-tide.

We have heard the children say—
Gentle children, whom we love—
Long ago, on Christmas-Day,
Came a message from above.

Still, as Christmas-tide comes round,
They remember it again—
Echo still the joyful sound
"Peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Yet the hearts must child-like be
Where such heavenly guests abide;
Unto children, in their glee,
All the year is Christmas-tide!

Thus, forgetting tricks and play
For a moment, Lady dear,
We would wish you, if we may,
Merry Christmas, glad New Year!

LEWIS CARROLL.
Christmas, 1867.