

“Alice’s Eroticized Adventures on the Other Side of the Looking-Glass.” *Tantalizing Alice. Approaches, Concepts, and Case Studies in Adaptations of a Classic*. Eds. Sissy Helff and Nadia Butt. Trier: Wissenschaftler Verlag Trier. 2016. 59-81.

Anna Kérchy. **Alice’s Eroticized Adventures on the Other Side of the Looking-Glass**

My article explores how the children’s classics *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) undergo a curious (yet nearly canonized) eroticization. I shall argue that while popular (mis)interpretations of the original oeuvre tend to over-sexualize Lewis Carroll’s authorial persona and, as a result, identify his literary nonsense with discursive perversion, a considerable number of (post)modern adaptations from the 1960s onward ‘reload’ Alice’s adventures with erotic (dis)contents by projecting upon the title-character, situated in an intensely intimate connection with storytelling, collective cultural fantasies of liberation from sexual and linguistic restraints.

Repressed paedophile or asexual recluse? The compulsive quest to decode the author’s desires

The sexualization of Carroll’s authorial figure is an outcome of his retrospective mythologization as a shy, stuttering, socially maladroit, unmarried clergyman and scholar with an exquisite “fondness” of what he called “child friends,” mostly little girls¹ (Collingwood 416), and especially one particular Alice Liddell – daughter of the dean of Christ Church where the Reverend Dodgson taught mathematics – for whom he improvised on a bright summer boating trip the famous tale, commonly regarded as a document of the author’s secret amorous infatuation with his underage muse. The speculations about Carroll’s guilty passions arise out of ‘biographical evidence,’ primarily his obsessive correspondence with little girls (full of ‘romantic’ lines like the ones he wrote for a 10-year-old: “Extra thanks and kisses for the lock of hair. I have kissed it several times – for want of having you to kiss, you know, even hair is better than nothing.” (Cohen 186)) and his artistic photographic work of prepubescent girl nudes, which posterity cannot regard but as paedophiliac, pornographic and perverted. Even the ‘gaps’ within Carroll’s biography, such as his missing diary pages, his vague allusions to the “inclinations of his sinful heart,” “unholy thoughts” (Collingwood 322) oddly confessed in his introduction to his *Curiosa Mathematica* II, and his sudden break with the Liddell family, are considered to be telling signs of hideous desires.

However, this paranoid, (post)modernist, post-Freudian compulsion to seek a subtext of sexual deviation² beneath the complex meanings of nonsense fantasies is thoroughly misleading. As Hugues Lebailly points out, it utterly decontextualizes Carroll’s work and life, detaching them from the Victorian frame of mind where the child was considered to be an embodiment of angelic innocence, of beauty in its pure, ideal form, and as such, a mediator towards aesthetic cultivation and spiritual elevation, so that child-loving earned respect instead of moral panic. (see Lebailly 1998) Practically, paedophilia was a meaningless, non-existent concept at the time of the publication of the Alice stories, as Krafft Ebbing introduced it as a psychopathological category only decades later in the 1880s.³

Yet, suspicions surrounding Carroll’s posthumously crafted fantasy figure became gradually fossilized as vague assumptions and hazy anecdotes gained canonical status. Karoline Leach primarily blames biographers such as Langford Reed who likely conferred his own virtuous Victorian child-worship, misogyny, and “unhappy difference” onto his

¹ As he once famously claimed in a letter to a child friend: “I am fond of children (except boys).” (Collingwood 416)

² For these see Januszczak and Self in Brooker 49-59, and the chapter “Freudian Interpretations” in Phillips 279-377.

³ If we consider Carroll’s child-loving as perversion, we must interpret it as a Victorian “mass perversion” that took epidemic proportions in late 19th century Britain. (Leach in Gubar 103)

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contemporary Carroll, and Anthony Goldschmidt whose psychoanalytical reading in the 1930s beget, possibly as a hoax, the modern idea of Carroll as repressed sexual deviant. Unfortunately, “the grotesque carnival mask of [t]his incredible superficial mythology” (Leach 78) came to fully define Carroll, and was further reinforced by the indeterminacies and allusive rhetoric of even the most prominent Carroll-authorities, as Morton L. Cohen writing about Carroll’s “hidden sexual force [...] effectively suppressed” (530) channelled into creative fiction, Hugh Haughton coining him “a Casanova of the Victorian nursery” whose diaries were a “roll-call of conquests” (xxvi), or Jackie Wullschlager portraying the artist by a supposedly telling anecdote about him regularly carrying to his seaside visits “a black bag full of toys and gifts to woo little girls, plus a supply of safety pins to hitch up the skirts of those who agreed to paddle in the surf” (36). Small wonder, Carroll’s speculative public image turned into common sense. Post/modern adaptations/reimaginings have indulged in sophisticated fictionalizations of the author’s alleged affections for his child muse, as in Robert Wilson and Tom Waits’s play *Alice*, Gavin Millar’s film *Dreamchild* (1985), Melanie Benjamin’s historical fiction *Alice I Have Been* (2010), or Katie Roiphe’s novel *Still She Haunts Me* (2001). In a much harsher vein, abusive countercultural products such as international child pornography networks called *Wonderland Club* or *Alice Club* brutally distorted Carrollian fantasies to their own ends (Brooker 51, 53).

More surprisingly, the sexualisation of the author prevails even in radical challenges to the Carroll-myth. Michael Fitzgerald uses a pseudo-objective medical scientific tone but becomes tangled up in a paradoxical logic when he diagnoses Carroll with high functioning autism cum Asperger’s syndrome to circumscribe his asexuality, his impairment in reciprocal social intimate interaction – compensated for by an excellence in creative, mathematical and spatio-visual abilities – in terms of a sexual(izing) pathology. The “undeniably” childish author obsessively cultivating children is “undoubtedly” a case of arrested development, with “possible scopophilia,” “echoes of the behaviour of a paedophile,” and “clearly a [case of] perversion” (174). Karoline Leach’s controversial argument in her book-length study *In the Shadow of the Dream Child* (1999) concerning Carroll’s vivid private affairs with mature, often married women, including artist Gertrude Thomson, writer Anna Thackeray, and Alice’s mother, Mrs. Liddell, relocates the desires of “the author as a serial sexual adulterer” conforming to the standards of a heteronormative sexual economy that deems sexual (hyper)activity to be a natural manly feature. Eroticization even permeates the language of literary criticism, as Kali Israel’s sensual wording suggests in connection with the profusion of *Alice* adaptations and reinterpretations: “But if no one can keep their hands of Alice, few can not wonder what it means to touch her.” (279)

Freudian (mis)readings

Besides biographers’s preoccupation with the presumably suspicious biographical circumstances of Carroll’s artistic productions, psychoanalytically inspired ‘literary pathologists’ embarked on a programmatic uncovering of the text’s repressed perversions and latent sexual contents. Ironically, the classic Freudian interpretive methodology mostly (mis)fits Alice, a solitary figure who fails to make friends or any real contacts with the creatures of Wonderland or behind the looking-glass, only in so far as it produces lonesome masturbatory fantasies, relying on biographical forgeries, legends, and half-truths parading as facts, instead of genuine critical dialogue. Freudian psychoanalytical interpretations sexualizing Alice abound in farfetched arguments regarding the fall down the rabbit hole as symbolizing sexual penetration, the doors surrounding the hallway representing female genitalia, and the selection of the small door standing for copulation with a female child instead of an adult woman; while Alice’s growings and shrinking hold a phallic significance

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and even the sneezing baby implies an autoerotic event (Goldschmith 280-281). Although Goldschmidt’s first psychoanalytical take on Alice in 1933 was possibly intended as a hoax to spoof Freudian terminology (Nickel 69), it became an influential piece with many similar studies to follow. The affective charge characterizing readings which regard Carroll’s authorial persona and Alice the muse and fictional character as inseparably united by emotional ties – be it Platonic adulation, paedophilic perversion, or savant-autistic love-lack – is complemented here by the explicit sexualisation of the female figure for the sake of her male author’s (and critics’) erotic excitement. In William Empson’s complicated analysis, Wonderland is a battlefield between uncontrollable carnal passions (embodied by the Red Queen) and the conscious intellectual detachment from sexuality (impersonated by the disappearing Cheshire Cat), yet it also stages an allegory of reproductive development, whereby Alice personifies a father who descends the rabbit hole to become a fetus at the bottom and to be reborn amidst her own pool of tears, by becoming a mother producing amniotic fluid (358). Clinical psychiatrist Phyllis Greenacre diagnosed Carroll’s “intense, unconsummated love” for Alice as “a reversal of the unresolved Oedipal attachment” caused by his mother’s premature death. In John Skinner’s view the adventurous little girl is a shapeshifted, compensatory version of “adult masculinity,” while Paul Schilder regarding Alice as a “substitute penis,” goes as far as to ponder explicitly over the following dilemma: “What was his [Carroll’s] relation to his sex organ anyhow?” (291)⁴

A titillating text? Investing literary nonsense with erotic charge

The sexualisation of an author heralded as the father-figure of literary nonsense goes hand in hand with saturating his trademark linguistic subversion with an erotic charge. Somehow the most pure-hearted, playful fairy-tale fantasies seem to transform into fatally luring melodies of a Pied Piper upon learning the trick of Carroll’s haunting pioneering photographic work: he used storytelling as a means of enchantment, to make underdressed child models sit still, willing to be captured for eternity. As his legendary muse Alice Liddell recalled: “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.” (Hargreaves 274) These reminiscences record the memorable moments of innocent joys the photographic sessions meant for the child-sitter, but her sensitivity to the intricate lure of verbal and visual media of enchantment nearly necessarily ties the figure of the storytelling photographer Carroll/Dodgson to Jenny Lynn Bouilly’s notion of the “nympholept.” Bouilly (2011) employs in place of paedophilia the more sophisticated term “nympholepsy” she associates with the Greco-Roman-mythologically inspired Victorian cult of the prepubescent girl child and more specifically Carroll’s intimate relations with his underage muses. 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 on her own right for good.

This faulty cause-and-effect correlation between presumed life-choices/sexual preferences and artistic/linguistic quality works in the opposite direction too. Carroll’s stylistic perfection and logical purity are referred to as proofs of his spiritual innocence and counter-arguments against his potential paedophilia. In the opinion of Kenneth Baker Carroll’s “pattern[ing] books with witty references to games and puzzles, broaching paradoxes that logicians would not take up until a generation later, suggest the work of a mind undisturbed by emotional pathology” (2002). But even denial holds a certain affirmative

⁴ For more, sex-centred Freudian interpretations of Alice see Phillips 279-377; for a detailed analysis of them see “The Freudians and the Apologists” in Leach 69-113.

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charge: the mere mentioning of emotional pathology arouses suspicions before attempting to shatter them. It is indeed fascinating how the two most common and rather contradictory interpretations of Carrollian nonsense-realm as a "parable of narrative and linguistic *innocence*," of prelapsarian goodness *and* an "allegory of experience," adventure, "philosophical sophistication and *perverse* intellectual wit" (Haughton 1998, xii, emphasis mine) coincide with the most often mythologized antagonistic facets of the author as a virginal, asexual, sensitive scholar or a frustrated, corrupted, clandestine pervert. (Brooker calls the two sides of the mythical coin, the "Saint Lewis" versus "the pop-Freudian" myth. (1))

When Vladimir Nabokov, the Russian translator of *Wonderland*, mockingly calls the author Carroll Carroll after the pedophile protagonist-narrator Humbert Humbert of his novel *Lolita* (1955), I believe he also refers to the erotic fascination with the infantile, ambiguous, 'feminine' forms of language, amorously and adventurously explored in both novels, beyond disciplined, referential/denotative, phallogocentric symbolization fixated on making sense. In a similar misreading to Carroll's, Nabokov's novel was found morally dubious for its truthful first-person account of a sexual obsession with a minor "nymphet," since critics were reluctant to recognize that the novel full of pure poetry and wordplay (lines like "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." (9)), double entendres, multilingual puns, coinages, and anagrams – like *Wonderland* intertextually summoned in the novel – was in fact an elaborate metaphor of the non-native speaker author's "love-affair with English language" itself (Nabokov 316). Apart from similarities in Carroll and Nabokov's literary language use James Joyce discusses in his article entitled "Lolita in Humberland," *Alice* is summoned intertextually in Humbert's struggle to break through "to the queer mirror side" (Nabokov 308). (see Prioleau 428)

With reference to post-structuralist theories of a subjectivity (de)constructed by/in language, one could claim, with a daring metaphor, that Carroll (and his most successful adaptors and followers, like Nabokov) had a narcissistic, auto-erotic, more infantile than paedophiliac relation to language. Nonsense's ludic, "revolutionary poetic" rhymes, riddles, tunes or babbles serve to consciously lead back to a linguistically unrestrained, childhood realm, where the physical experience of sounds can joyously predominate over common sense. Wonderland can be located in Julia Kristeva's blissful-bodily semiotic register that precedes symbolic language-acquisition and socializing Oedipalization's repressions, but can be reclaimed by the adult, mature craft of poetry, apt to embrace the nostalgically desired child-like being/speaking. Carroll, like Nabokov, surely was ravished by the physically stimulating appeal of riskily testing the constraints of representation (toying with meaninglessness, unspeakability, unimagability), and equally revelled in representation's capacity to subtly hold the child-muse/self in the artwork for good, while touching emotionally involved audiences. Carol Mavor stresses the parallel between the erotic implications of Carrollian and Nabokovian language-use by poignantly and poetically pointing out that Carroll's list written on march twenty-fifth 1863 of "girls photographed or to be photographed" composed of 107 Christian names grouped together alphabetically, "all the Alices together, all the Agneses together, and all the Beatrices together" with their dates of birth as a telltale sign of their girlishness aptly indicated can be compared to "a poem of girlhood that rolls off the tongue, like a catalogue of Victorian flowers [reminiscent of] Humbert Humbert's most cherished poem, Lolita's class list, he took the pains to memorize by heart" (Mavor 7).

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In Anne Marsh's feminist psychoanalytical reading, Carroll's combination of languages of the unconscious and feminine registers (languages of nonsense, jokes, and dreams) provide adequate rhetorical means for his sensible and sensual narrativization of "becoming-girl" and a nymphic "jouissance beyond the phallus" reached through a "masturbatory" masquerade that helps to conquer patriarchal voice and phallogocentric space/discourse. The cacophonous melodies and strange as/symmetries of Carrollian nonsense echo with the embodied voice of the Other, mingling the "hysterics of the rebellious girl child" Alice, the "stuttering shadow" of the Reverend Dodgson, the whisperings of the nymph-muses, "the feminine, the (m)other, the Other, the Unconscious." (Marsh 133-4)

Although, quite similarly, philosopher Gilles Deleuze invests the Carrollian nonsense language-of-the-Other with an erotic potential, but he clearly does not share Marsh's enthusiasm about the stuttering male voice's transformation into an empowering *écriture féminine*, a feminine stylistics vibrated by female corporeal energies (see Cixous 1976). On the contrary, for Deleuze, Carroll's is an impotent art of the surfaces or, at most, a kind of dull safe-sex teasing logical paradoxes within the confines of well-behaved, civilized humour. Lacking the astonishing abysmal madness and the daringly repulsive anality of Antonin Artaud's text, the superficial, bourgeois, infantile Carroll remains a "non-subversive, stuttering and left-handed" "perverse without a crime." Deleuze regrets that Carroll tames sexual energy in a closed circuit via complementary media: his visual art "uses the desexualized energy of the photographic apparatus as a frightfully speculative eye, in order to invest the sexual object par excellence, the little girl phallus" (281), while his writing 'remains limp,' unable to be erected by the imaginary authorial persona, "one third Stoic, one third Zen, and one third Carroll." Deleuze reads Wonderland nonsense along the lines of impotence: "with one hand, [Carroll] masturbates in an excessive gesture, with the other, he writes in the sand the magic words of the pure event open to the univocal: "Mind – I believe – is Essence – Ent – Abstract – that is – an Accident – which we – that is to say – I meant – thus he makes the energy of sexuality pass into the pure asexual." (285) Paradoxically the 'pure pervert' Carroll's asexual nonsense philosophical stutter can only be adequately described by the over-sexual terminology of Deleuzian stylistics.

Czech puppeteer Jan Švankmajer phrased the same idea in a much more blatant manner when he cracked a bad joke about "Carroll [being] an illustration of the fact that children are better understood by pedophiliacs than by pedagogues" (1987, 51). Švankmajer's surrealistic stop-motion animation *Alice* (1988) ranks among the best Carroll-adaptations because it realizes the argument so awkwardly hidden in this rather problematic maxim: it empathically and lovingly adopts a child's perspective without any instructive, disciplinary, domineering intent. The sensual/sensible imagery of troubling visual metaphors, of shots with a tactile feel allow spectators a secret glimpse of Alice's childish fantasy dreamscapes, framed by the mesmerizing sound of her inner monologue, the only human voice we hear throughout the entire movie.

Desiring Alice in Contemporary Wonderlands

Today's most popular adaptations are perhaps the ones which 'reload' Wonderland adventures with erotic (dis)contents, move beyond the paranoia of male critical discourse, and let a mature Alice have her share of the fun. As Helen Pilinovsky convincingly argues, Alice is retrospectively aged in order to excuse the contemporary readers' excited interest in her puerile figure and to resolve the tension caused by our "uneasy fascination" with her mythified relationship with Carroll. Alice's entry into the public domain gradually gives rise to a whole "Alice Industry" and a proliferation of more nubile versions of the originally seven

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year-old heroine whose “trade goods [nowadays] consist of more broadly salable lingerie than commemorative tea sets” (Pilinovsky 175).

The corpus of eroticized Alice-revisions is truly heterogeneous ranging from soft-porn musical, adult fairy tale, and graphic art novel to feminist manifesto and fictional court trial record. In the 1976 soft-porn musical comedy movie *Alice in Wonderland*, subtitled *An X-Rated Musical Fantasy*, the journey to the other side of the looking-glass serves by as a sexual initiation for the virginal, prudish, young librarian Alice who is introduced to her imagination’s pleasurable powers in a wondrously idyllic realm of licentious carnal delights and eternal orgasms, and on her return finds herself at ease integrating into an ordinary grown-up life enriched by sex, even if in its safe, monogamous form. We find the same theme of sexual liberation complemented by a fictional, “moral pornographer” problematization of the cultural construction of desire and the unequal social distribution of pleasures in Angela Carter’s weird, magical-mannerist love-story of two social outlaws, feral Mowgli-like Alice and beastly vampire Duke in “Wolf Alice” published in her 1979 collection of rewritten fairy tales entitled *The Bloody Chamber*, a companion piece to her pro-porn feminist culture-critical analysis on *The Sadeian Woman*. Succeeding adaptations trace darker sides of Alice’s erotic adventures, like Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie’s 2006 mixed-genre graphic novel *Lost Girls* that transforms Wonderland into “a place of nightmare, corruption, and debauchery, holding as little of lessoning as its inspiration, but considerably less in the way of wonder” (Pilinovsky 189), while exploring – by means of moral pornography (Kérchy 2014) – childhood sexual traumas and compensatory, even colonialist (see Yoshinaga) erotic fantasies of the most memorable heroines of children’s literature, including Alice from *Wonderland*, Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*. Likewise, numerous postmodern (meta)texts are explicitly sex-centred and ironically deprived of any idyll or illusion: the 2006 collection *Alice Redux* edited by Richard Peabody contains paradigmatic short-fiction such as Bruce Bauman’s “Lilith in Wonderland” on adult Lorina undergoing psychoanalytical therapy with Freud because of her childhood experience with that “fucking mad rabbit” and the “crazy old wanker” “Dodo” (109), or Beth Bachmann’s piece with the telling title “Dodgson mumbles (After reviewing the supreme court ruling on virtual child pornography).”

Mutable collective desires intertwined with changing cultural anxieties and aspirations are projected in fictionalized form upon Alice’s imaginary erotic personas. Accordingly, the eroticized Alice-figures embody counter-cultural icons of the 1970s’ sexual and political libera(liza)tion, initial “new leftist” ideas of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism, ‘revamped’ by/in increasingly self-reflective (self-ironic or self-destabilizing) postmodernist metanarratives. Moreover, many of these various adaptations associate female sexual pleasures with a specific female creativity, an imaginary apt to reach an intimacy both with the “otherness” and the corporeality patriarchally excluded from the subject, and with the polysemic, ambiguous, nonsensical wordplay banished by the symbolic, phallogocentric order’s solidification of meaning. Thus, they portray sexual and discursive initiation as coincidental, traumatic, ecstatic experiences which trouble the very logic of representation, but can be soothed by the therapeutic act of storytelling, of sharing nonsensical, sensual tales of love and desire. Alice’s fall(ing down the rabbit hole/in love/into the story) inevitably results in the blurring of the dividing line between reality and imagination, presence/surplus and absence/loss of sense, and a succeeding free, uncorrupted eroticization of the indeterminacy of meaning.

Luce Irigaray’s feminist libidinal poetics beyond the Looking-Glass

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One of the most challenging, most unjustly neglected, and most sensual adaptations of Alice’s adventures is feminist psychoanalyst philosopher Luce Irigaray’s Alice-inspired, erotic, poetic piece entitled “The Looking Glass, from the Other Side.”⁵ It first appeared in 1973 as a pre-textual antecedent formulating in fictional terms the major future arguments of her succeeding interdisciplinary theoretical work, *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), in which it later appeared as a preface. For Irigaray the mirror’s (ie. representation’s and subjectivity’s) “other side” belongs to woman, patriarchally marginalised, objectified, exploited, and excluded from great masternarratives like his-story on grounds of her being over-identified with irrational, unspeakable corporeality deemed incompatible with a speaking subjectivity constructed in mature, masculine discourse. Woman nevertheless undertakes to explore herself, her desires, and her language (adequate to express these) in a story of her own making, modelled on Alice’s adventures.

Irigaray’s attempt to alter the ‘othered’s subordinated situation relies heavily on discursive and sexual means. Her preface’s alternative, associative, non-linear, non-teleological, poetic, erotic text – inoculating “hard” theoretical discourse with more feminine “fluid” languages of poetry and fable – echoes Carrollian nonsense in its disregard of conventional narrative signposts such as the protagonist-antagonist divide, the conflict-dénouement structure, the closure by a moral conclusion, or the “familiar rules of (masculine) logic” (Burke 289). This text is “doubly reminiscent,” for besides the allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* it re-views a 1974 Swiss independent art movie, *The Surveyors*, whose heroine, the sensual and mysterious Alice, inhabits the ‘house of love’ on the “other side” first attracting men, then another woman, an accomplice, possibly her double or herself, with whom she creates a fragile female community, a pleasure-zone threatened by hostile systems of oppression. (Burke 297) Similarly, Irigaray’s preface is more of an anti-story, and quite difficult to summarize: Alice appears as a schoolmistress and mistress, constantly hovering in the “in-between”, troubled by desires, playing roles, seeking her self-identity, changing sides, “coming and going from one side [of the mirror] to the other” (18)⁶, moving from her garden to her house then back, as she is visited by lovers of both sexes, lovers of these lovers, her mother, her double, and surveyors “striding back and forth between houses, people, and feelings” (21), or maybe just memories, dreams or fantasies of them, since she desperately tries to recover what is it that she should not forget, what induces her desires which make her Alice – and so many others she has been, will or could be.

Feminine forms of irrationality and sexuality are cornerstones of Irigaray’s subversive strategy of “mimesis”: she starts out from women’s stereotypical, degrading dislocation on the margin of meaningfulness as a desiring fleshly “other” in order to demonstrate the faults in this majority-misconception. Paradox and parody turn political, since women’s presumed irrationality is explored (affirmed to be refuted) within a strictly rational argumentation, whereby there is always *reason* to madness, and irrationality is very far from unthinking. As in the original Carrollian illogic which is organised by rule-bound chess- and card games, in Irigaray’s revamped Alice’s mind Wonderland “with all the wonders *observed* first hand” is not simply “imagined” nor “intuited” but “*induced*” as a necessary possibility (12, *emphasis mine*).

On the other side of the looking-glass, reality is not privileged as the ultimate truth/meaning but instead is simply regarded as one – eventually realized – version of an infinite number of possibilities, of ‘what if’-s which all have the potential to be actualized,

⁵ First published in *Critique*, no. 309 (February 1973) as “Le miroir, de l’autre côté”

⁶ Henceforth all parenthesised page number references unless indicated otherwise are to Irigaray’s “The Looking Glass, From the Other Side.”

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and made real. The fascination with the contingency of what turns from possible to real is accompanied by an erotic frisson due to intimate affairs’ and sexual attractions’ having the same infinitely incidental character. On the one hand, possibilities of pleasure can never fully be exhausted, there are always remainders left behind for another time (19). On the other, it is a matter of undefinable, haphazard circumstances why we feel desire or fall for (‘down the rabbit hole’) one person and not another. The text is rendered ambiguous and open-ended by unanswerable speculations about ‘how I might have ended up being someone else had I made love to another and not the one I ended up with?’ The questions continue:

What’s the difference between friend and no friend? A virgin and a whore? Your wife and the woman you love? The one you desire and the one you make love with? One woman and another woman? The one who owns the house and the one who uses it for her pleasure, the one you meet there for pleasure? In which house and with which woman does – did – will love happen? And when is it time for love, anyway?...Can pleasure be measured, bounded, triangulated, or not? [...]

Who deserves more gratitude, the woman who *duplicates* the possibility of sexual pleasure or the woman who offers it a *first* time? And if one goes back and forth between them, how can one keep on telling them apart? How can one know where one is, where one stands? [...]

Who’s made love, Lucien? Who’s one? Who’s the other? And is she really the one you want her to be? The one you’d want? (10, 13, 15)

The preface on Alice has so many narrative threads and loose ends that it practically rejects a single coherent interpretation. Irigaray – like her alter-ego, Alice – emphatically refuses closure through an ultimate final conclusive meaning. She finds knowledge (Logos) tyrannical and phallic, and prefers the learning process, endless curiosity, a feminist epistemology of uncertainty, in which all possibilities, ambiguities, counterarguments, and “elsewheres,” “zones of not yet” (11) are taken into consideration, and where riddles are to be left unsolved, facts are not prioritized to fantasy, musings overtake arguments, and meanings flow free like desires.

In fact, Irigaray’s major gambit is the analogy drawn between women’s sexuality and women’s language in a “new vaginal fable of the process of signification” (Burke 294). In *This Sex Which is Not One* she (re)defines female sexuality misconceived in terms of the dominant, phallogocentric⁷, heteronormative, reproductive libidinal economy as the lesser other of all hierarchically organized binaries: penetrable, passive, lacking. She argues for women’s radically different sexuality, with decentred, diffuse, multiple and self-multiplying (auto)erotogenous zones, fleeting yearnings, a “diversified geography of pleasures,” “sex organs more or less everywhere” (28); and celebrates the vulva(’s labia) as the emblematic organ of Woman who “within herself, [...] is already two [hence *each other*] – but not divisible into one(s) [hence *itself*] – that caress each other” (24). Moreover, the two “lips of the vulva” speak up/back in a libidinal voice, heralding the carnal self as a liberating and not a debilitating source of creative female counter-narratives.

Interestingly, Irigaray’s definition of *parler femme* (more or less identical with fellow ‘New French Feminist’ Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*), of women’s language

⁷ Derrida’s term “phallogocentrism” mocks – by means of deconstructive wordplay – psychoanalytical discourse’s fixation with the “phallus” and “Logos” as central transcendental key signifiers and unquestionable/unquestioned grounds of meaning.

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fuelled by desiring corporeality – summed up in a tone uncannily reminiscent of the preface on Alice – seems to encapsulate the very essence of literary nonsense: of communication gone awry as a ‘mock-/anti-language’ intelligible only dubiously or ambiguously on accounts of refusing to pin down one single, coherent, rational meaning, while systematically defamiliarizing conventional representational and interpretive strategies meant to normatively make sense. However, nonsense here is also engendered and embodied as a specifically feminine mode of empowering self-expression:

One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an “other meaning” always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not become congealed, fixed in them. For if “she” says something, it is not, it is already no longer identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover, rather it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*. And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at “zero”: her body-sex. (29)

These language-philosophical arguments rhyme with Carroll’s Mad Hatter’s apparently nonsensical but eventually quite logical distinction between “saying what one means” and “meaning what one says”⁸ that he explains to Alice, who is unable to come to terms with these suggestions and thus remains a perplexed outsider to his mad tea party. On the contrary, Irigaray’s Alice takes her active share in lovers’ discourse, turning it into the ultimate nonsensical speech act as hypocorisms, terms of endearment, “telling secrets, whispering into each others’ ears, “just for fun, not to say anything” (13) belong to a private mythology/language, meaningless to anyone else besides the couple who find significance in the affective charge and corporeal context of words rather than their common sense.

Amidst the free flow of desire and poetic nonsense – totally troubling socially prescribed means of representation and bonding – each sexual and signifying act enchant with the illusion of being an unprecedented, unrepeatable first time that radically changes the self into another. Analogous to Wittgenstein’s maxim concerning one’s language constituting the limits of one’s world, in Irigaray amorous connections prove to be formative of the I: whom one (makes) loves (to) defines who one is. A relational model of self-identity (see Weir 1996) is circumscribed whereby the other is not defined in terms of exclusion and domination but is embraced as a potential part (nearly a mirror image) of the self. Conforming to romantic-erotic clichés of madly irrational ‘true passion,’ lovers cannot be told apart, one cannot “pass between them” because when “I” and “you” add up, the “we” they constitute proves to be more than the sum of their parts (Irigaray 21).

Irigaray seeks to explore this *surplus* of desire, in a specifically feminine form – differing from masculinised manifestations of desire which are organized by lack and endanger appropriating the other (her) according to one’s (his) needs and expectations, “stuck paralyzed by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. Transfixed, including by their admiration, their praises, what they call ‘love.’” (17) In a feminine libidinal economy of “postpatriarchal/preoedipal” desire (Burke 296) ‘to be wanted’ is not synonymous with ‘to be wanted to be *like*,’ pleasure can be given and taken beyond the horizon of reproduction and

⁸ ‘Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?’ said the March Hare.

‘Exactly so,’ said Alice.

‘Then you should say what you mean,’ the March Hare went on.

‘I do,’ Alice hastily replied; ‘at least — at least I mean what I say — that’s the same thing, you know.’

‘Not the same thing a bit!’ said the Hatter. ‘You might just as well say that “I see what I eat” is the same thing as “I eat what I see”!’

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representation, beyond the "fixture of his line of sight," "taking aim at the other side of the looking glass." (18)

In Irigaray, women's sexuality, language and meaning-formation are heavily influenced by the experience of *touching*. Touching stands as a 'trans-discursive' sensual alternative to the masculine ocular obsession that privileges *seeing* as a means of/to pleasure, and *visibility* (along with sameness and identity) as a condition for representation in language. The male *gaze's* sadistic, fetishistic objectification of women is extensively criticized by feminist scholars, like Laura Mulvey, Mary-Anne Doane, and Irigaray among them. Paradoxically, the gazed female sex "offers nothing to see" (Burke 289) and, thus, constitutes a gap, an empty hole in knowledge, a blank counterpoint to porn movies' final cum-shot of a compulsory spectacular/specularisable male erection and orgasm (see Williams 1999). *Seeing* is also problematized in its male hegemonic sense of comprehending, grasping meanings, producing truths, gaining mastery over the seen by virtue of a "cannibal-eye fucking the whole world" (Haraway 1996, 249) while assuming to be unseen, uncontrolled, untouchable. In Irigaray's poetic words, there are "no traces of adventure in that gentleman's eyes," so adventurous Alice would prefer to "curl up somewhere [to] protect [herself] from his penetrative, scheming gaze." (12)

Its exact opposite, "Alice's eyes are blue. And red." "violate, violated eyes" able to perceive colour changes beyond the binaries of black or white, of seer and seen, oppressor and oppressed, author and character, male and female, identity and difference, to recognize "the other side" "behind the screen of representation," and not so much see but *get a feel of* the blur caused by the loss of identity and meaning (9-10). Alice here is not so much looking, but looking *for*, aware of her perspective's being partial, her sight finite, and her views transitory. ("She? She who? Who's she? She (is) an other [...] *looking for* a light." Where's a light?" (12, *emphasis mine*) Tellingly, a special emphasis is laid on Alice's slow, repetitive *blinking* as if this "reversal of eye-sight" (21) by her eyelids softly touching each other was meant to foreground the period of not-seeing as a necessary and inevitable component or counterpart for seeing – and, in a similar vein, unknowing, hesitation, secrecy, ambiguity, non-sense as necessary and inevitable components or counterparts for meaning.

Touching is a particularly appropriate new metaphor or model for a more egalitarian, mutually pleasurable, feminine mode of spectatorship/spectacularity and meaning-formation because it is a reciprocal sensual experience allowing for an empathic blurring of ego boundaries. When 'she' touches 'she' is also being touched. When 'she' looks 'she' does not merely call to life through her perception and cognition the object seen as part of (her) reality, but her reality is also thoroughly affected by her sight, her perspective, her blindspots: it is not only that 'she' shapes the thing 'she' sees with the help of her interpretive consciousness attributing a certain meaning to it, but the thing 'she' sees also shapes her and her way of seeing, as it (the thing/objectified person) is invested with a capacity to look-back. When 'she' looks, 'she' also sees herself being seen, and sees herself seeing. Beyond pure narcissism, this is a recursive, reciprocal project highly respectful of the other recognised as potential part of the self (as the other always sees me as the other). This is nicely symbolized by Irigaray's recurring emblematic gesture of self-touching as a prerequisite of self-awareness.

A simultaneously tactile and visual, sexual and scientific means of self-inspection features in the major mirror-metaphor of Irigaray's oeuvre, "the speculum of the other woman." The speculum (latin plural for mirror), a medical instrument for investigating bodily cavities, commonly during gynaecological examinations, serves to symbolically reveal how a privileged perspective (men's) becomes constitutive of a normative concept of reality excluding the majority of population (those who are *not* white, upper-middle class,

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heterosexual, able-bodied men). Irigaray's speculum reflects how rather than natural differences, these are instead the canonized theoretical biases of western philosophy and psychoanalysis (from Plato to Freud) – "masters of discourse" articulating epistemological, ontological, metaphysical truths from a male point of view – which portray female embodiment as monstrous, unthinking, maternal matter, and thus exclude the *othered* women from the field of rational, 'normal' comprehensibility. The woman under examination re-defines herself with the help of strategic mimicry, complementing parodic quotations from "masters of discourse" with *parole femme*'s non-argumentative, poetic, subversive allusions, homophones, puns (Alice's mistress-talk), and replaces the supremacy of the omniscient male-gaze with a subjective body-awareness, the tactile feel of coming to sight through the speculum. Irigaray's Alice "thinks it will suffice to turn everything inside out" (18) to make "the looking-glass dissolve, already broken [while] everything is whirling. Everyone is dancing." (15). Her sight brings about physical experiences of losing balance, dancing, swaying, limping, being moved from one to another (15, 18, 19).

Irigaray eradicates here an ancient tradition of male domination by/in regimes of visibility already present in fairy tales. We are reminded of feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar's faerial parable on male narratives'/perspectives' delimiting the meaning of femininity. Their focus is on the magic mirror of Snow White's wicked stepmother. The evil Queen's mirror speaks up in a male voice to define the standard of femininity, dictate who is the fairest of them all, and as a result arouse female self-denigration, rivalry amongst women, and utter submission to the male point of view. It is truly interesting to note that in Carroll's original, it is Alice's pet cat pretended to be a Queen who initiates the entry through the looking-glass and the adventures onto the other side where Alice has to fight aggressive elder female figures, the chess Queen and the Duchess to become in the end a Queen herself, like Snow White at the end of her tale. However, unlike in Carroll's first Alice-book concluding with (a vision of) the compulsory patriarchal happy ending of Alice's future marriage and motherhood – *Through the Looking-Glass*'s closure contains the title character's ponderings over whose dream this has actually been. This neatly ties in – as if a metanarrative comment – with my initial research question: whose desires are made real via fiction here? Is this Carroll's phantasmagoria about his secret flame, or does he merely act as the interpreter of the wishes of a little girl who lacks the adequate words to express them? Does he voice the collective unconscious of his contemporary Victorian society, or is it all about the universal readers' desires without which the fantastic story could not come into being?

A close-reading of Carroll's text shows the considerable influence it must have exercised on Irigaray's feminist model of sensual perception. All the minor details of Carroll's subtle choice of words depicting Alice's bordercrossing experience on/to the other side of the looking-glass reemerge as cornerstones of Irigarayan theory: Carrollian expressions such as "you never can tell," "as if," "something like," "let's pretend," "everything seemed" (148) circumscribe the Irigarayan epistemology of uncertainty; "the glass [getting] all soft, like gauze, so that we can get through [...] turning into a sort of mist [...] beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist" (149) foreshadows her tactile-visual experience; the phrase "it is very like [...] only you know it may be quite different beyond" (148) sums up her internally subversive strategy of mimicry; "the words go[ing] the wrong way" on the mirror's other side pre-enact her *parole femme*; and the volatile, voluptuous, vulnerable feminine spectacularity/spectatorship are captured in sentences like "I don't think they can hear me [...] and I'm nearly sure they can't see me. I feel somehow as if I was getting invisible [...] [S]he watched in great curiosity what would happen next" (151). While with Carroll "you can just see a little peep of the passage into the Looking-glass House" (148), Irigaray develops out of his fictional fragments and allusions a whole,

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elaborate, poetically-metaphorically dense, politically self-conscious alternative project of seeing/feeling/thinking/reading other-wise.

Significantly, in Irigaray's revision of it, looking-glass also refers to Alice's spectacles, her *reading glasses* which facilitate her looking for herself in the dream-like story of an aimless quest, amidst a pleasurable proliferation of potential polysemic meanings, disregarding any of them as privileged, final destination, "rejecting the lonely fiction of superiority over a text" (Burke 296). Ironically, these glasses are simultaneously means of self-inspection and self-destabilization; as authentic instruments of adventure they must be worn "when something really important happens [because] it would help them straighten out the situation, *or the opposite*" (20, *my emphasis*).

One enigmatic line about the glasses, namely, "[t]hey have to be given back to Leon, to whom they don't belong" (20), unites Alice and her lover, Léon as uncertain, transitory, exchangeable owners of the glasses (hence of sight and understanding) but also as facets of the same kaleidoscopic communal identity they construe when in/making love. The recognition that the first letter of lover-Léon's name coincides with the first sound of (a)Lice's name leads us back to the Irigaray-article's motto, a quote from Carroll's novel concerning the struggle with language to call oneself into being via self-naming: "she suddenly began again. 'Then it really has happened, after all! And now, who am I? I *will* remember, if I can! I'm determined to do it!' But being determined didn't help her much, and all she could say, after a great deal of puzzling, was: '*L, I know it begins with L.*'" (Irigaray 9, Carroll 186, *emphasis mine*) In addition, L also stands for the strangely feminine-sounding pseudonym of Lewis (Louise Carroll) who in little Alice conceives a fictional self-portrait, as well as the first name of Luce Irigaray who revises both Lewis C. and (a)Lice to gain an adequate reflection of women's erotic/linguistic experience. As Carolyn Burke notes, for the French speaker L also means *elle/elles*, the third person feminine, both singular and plural: the multiple female self, and all of us – "nous: toute(s)," the final words of *This sex which is not one* – written into and conjoined within the text of desire, signed by an ambiguous, "multiple signature," that resists the "proper" "Name of the Father"⁹ (299) In a sense, (a)Lice, lover Léon, Lewis, Luce, and *elle/elles* are twisted mirror images to each other.

Irigaray's mirrors malfunction in order to criticize patriarchal representation that thinks in terms of hierarchically organized binary oppositions, presuming that *this* side of the looking-glass is preeminent over the *other*. In Irigaray, the real and reflective sides constitute equally viable possible worlds' equally troubling realities. (For Carroll's Alice, this world's side is mostly boring, the other, Wonderlandish is mostly threatening). Moreover, the reflection is never fully identical with the original since the mirror-image may somehow surpass reality('s image)

Accordingly, in Irigaray, Alice's worlds in/beyond the looking-glass and deep down the rabbit hole function as Foucauldian heterotopias – radically different "counter-sites" simultaneously re-presenting, reflecting, contesting and inverting all the other *real* sites that can be found within a particular culture (Foucault 1967) – and, thus, provide satisfactory locii for the generation of specifically feminine languages of desire. Irigaray's *parole femme* and Carrollian nonsense seek linguistic/narrative zones of comfort and pleasure beyond the paranoid, restrictive, literal-minded patriarchal discourse so blatantly parodied in their

⁹ Jacques Lacan's concept of the "Name of the Father" refers to the social identity inscribed in the subject through the assumption of the patronym within a patriarchal order (see Burke 292). The original French homonymical pun on *le Nom/Non du Pere* associates paternal naming with discipline, prohibition, and exclusion. Rejecting the proper Name of the Father and the discourse of mastery is also a vital biographical experience for Irigaray who was dismissed from the Vincennes Department of Psychoanalysis headed by Lacan for her 'dissident' ideas published in *Speculum*.

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fantasies beyond the lookingglass. In Nicholson's view, "the tragedy at the heart of the Alice-books" is that the childish innocence, docility, and loving which "make her femininity admirable in his [Carroll's] eyes render her unable to represent for him, imaginatively speaking, any alternative linguistic position" (368). I would add that these features of the title character also lead to speculative criticism about the author as a victimizer of a little girl lost in a hostile wordland.

However, Irigaray manages to challenge Nicholson's contention by turning Alice into a fictional self-portrait, a clandestine trickster with non-meaning, with Burke's pun, a anti-authoritarian "an/alyste" involved with a nonsubordinate "analys-and" in "an extension of the performance of psychotherapy, for female self and other," who learns to accept and value "the hesitations and *silences* of unfamiliar meanings," and, most importantly, attentive *listening* (Burke 301, *my emphasis*). Accordingly, the preface's final lines appear thus:

she may be taken or left unnamed, forgotten, without even having been identified, 'I' – who? – will remain uncapitalized. Let's say:

'Alice' underground. (22)

These lines are more celebratory than melancholic or hopeless due to the typographical play with the blank space; a mock-mimicry of non-significance, that does not so much signal here the muted, castrated female lack, nor a failure of the speaking subject, but on the contrary a promise of the multiple, heterogeneous subject-in-process coming into text, dwelling in the rupture of the text's tissue, in the heart of sexual/linguistic subversion. It is a productive and even co-productive omission left open for all possibilities and meanings, a counter-narrative of non-speech for the silenced others' unheard voices, for all sliding signifiers of vanishing-re-emerging Cheshire cat smiles present by their absence, telling by the non-discursive trace of their lurking radiance, always "elsewhere," almost-(t)here, "at best from Wonderland" (Irigaray 22).

I believe that this emphasis on quiet, attentive listening, as well as the subtle rhetorics of the Irigaray-rewriting on the whole, relocate our speculations about the emotional, erotic relations between Alice and Carroll in the new context of an amorous, co-dependent union of story-teller and listener, who both yearn for the tale's accomplishment as the narrative satisfaction of their mutual desire, endlessly insatiable and renewable through the new stories to come.

Moist verses, sensuous sonorities, bedtime rebellions: Feminists read Carroll

Hélène Cixous, the other legendary figure of New French Feminism, circumscribed a similarly sensitive reading/writing strategy. She renounced of the mastery of meanings for the sake of the pleasure of textual ambiguity and associativity, adopting an alternative interpretational model in her 1982 "Introduction to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark*." Cixous argued that the Carrollian fiction is moved forward by the "feigned innocence" and "innocent feint" of Dreamchild Alice joyously submitting to the capricious "rule of 'Let's pretend!'" that opens the doors of the House of the text" with the aim to pass "to the other side of the structure, to play the part against the whole, and fairly and squarely to seize the writing and its adventures where it pauses for breath." Readers are invited to follow Alice and "pretend under the cover of reading, to reflect the text, and [..] methodically pursue what escapes between sense and nonsense, between nonsense and appearance, [..] to enjoy losing and relosing the game in many different ways: reading as one dreams" (231).

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The crossing of the mirror or the fall down the rabbit hole makes possible an inverted reading of the world brought into being by words fundamentally disorganized by the quarrel for the control over significations – fictionalized in the dilemma "who dreamt it?" – that is predetermined to end up in a tie due to the preeminence of sounds over sense, of "piercing notes" over closed meanings. In Cixous' view the "sonorous other side of words" constitutes the primary object of desire in/of the *Alice* tales, remaining beyond the reach of verbalization, untranslatable, elusive... The transversality of sounds attributes a sensual corporeal quality to the text "which just brushes and never stops," "skips, flutters, moves out of breath, without trying to maintain or catch sense, moved by the curiosity about its own existence" constantly "question[ing] itself what it will be able to say, what it's going to do, how far it's going?" (234)

Cixous's psychoanalytical feminist reading boldly uses a metaphorical language evocative of sexual arousal upon describing Carroll's "moist verses" "a humid text between the banks of dream through which the hidden meaning flows...mirroring timidities." Children's fiction is clearly charged with eroticism as the fairy-tale fantasy about Alice is apparently compared to a wet dream, an involuntary, spontaneous nocturnal emission that acquits the author of accusations of actual paedophilia abuse but also burdens him with the role of a self-blaming masturbator

Carroll wanted to tell the story to a little girl, the story loses its way, the little girl changes, Desire remains alone master of the space which is oriented by no time, while on the edges of the text, he who gave the signal for departure laments, and confides the anguish of an ancient, masochistic adolescent to its moist verses. (235)

For Cixous, Carroll is the amorous author for whom writing is equally therapeutical and traumatic(ally recursive). Desiring, "he saw himself at risk, took pleasure in it, exploited this pleasure [to write], while the very fact of writing down this pleasure frightened him out of his wits" (235). His desire for the text is shared by any reader risking the integrity of his/her subjectivity. While Carroll gets lost in the vicious circle of his own making, Alice struggles with a homelessness mingled with an odd ubiquity. Refusing "to be either on one side or on the other but here and there, as a visitor, as a tale-teller, neither a child nor a grown-up, neither out nor in" she ends up embodying Wonderland's trademark figure-of-speech, the portmanteau. A hybrid mixture of the real girl and the fictional figure (doubled in the two volumes) she proves to be radically inseparable from the creative imagination calling her into being. "She is subject to the outside of the inside of this outside, to this place where language is situated between monologue, soliloquy, and dialogue, to this one in the other." (235) She is Carroll's Alice authored by Alice's Carroll – and still, in a vein similar to Irigaray's revision – she is able to see through the mirror, to see "the glass for seeing, the glass to be seen, the glass which sees" where she can see herself being seen and see herself seeing, and can eventually start to read from there *Looking-Glass*. (238)

Alice also appears as an emblematic feminist icon making a cameo appearance in the preface to Teresa de Lauretis's seminal theoretical essay collection *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984). The cryptic title *Alice Doesn't* suggests a plethora of associations, making readers think of *Alice in Wonderland* first of all, then independent *Radio Alice* in Bologna, "Alice B. Toklas, who 'wrote' an autobiography as well as other things; or Alice James who produced an illness while her brothers did the writing, or Alice Sheldon who writes science fiction but with a male pseudonym, or of any other Alice" (vii), including the protagonist of Scorsese's 1974 film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More* about a woman's

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journey of self-discovery in pursuit of a dream of becoming yet another Alice, a legendary singer like Alice Faye. Entirely up to the reader, Alice’s identity is never fixed, she remains a multi-faceted shape-shifting figure representing the heterogeneity of female subjectivity and the validity of rebellious female counter-narratives, writing her selves with a difference. As Lauretis explains, the ambiguity in the title – borrowed from the flyer of a 1975 demonstration for women’s rights – indicates “the unqualified opposition of feminism to existing social relation, its refusal of given definitions and cultural values, the affirmation of political and personal ties of shared experience that join women in the movement, and are the conditions of feminist work, theory, and practice” (vii). Alice speaks in an alternative womanly voice in so far as she is a title-character who refuses to predominate the text or master meanings, who is present by her absence and her belonging to other Alices, who permeate theoretical objectivity with fictions’ ambiguity, and whose silence resonates with a multiplicity of subversive significations.

A decade later Susan Sontag makes a feminist argument in fictional terms, in her *Alice in Bed* (1994), a free dramatic fantasy with a title that courts the eroticization of the Wonderland theme but instead of staging sexual acts which could objectify women, grants agency to a bed-ridden title-character whose imagination roams free during her psychosomatically induced invalidity that performs a political act by staging the social, familial confinement women restricted in their creative, intellectual achievements. Sontag’s Alice was inspired by Alice James, who succumbed to illness in the shadow of her gifted brothers -- novelist Henry James and psychologist, moral philosopher William James – immobilized by “not knowing what to do with her genius, her originality, her aggressiveness,” and whose figure Sontag merged with that of the most famous fictional Victorian girl-child, oscillating between repression and rebellion, Alice in Wonderland, a daring explorer of the world of adult arbitrariness in dreamscapes of her own making where she can enact the “perplexities about her changing feelings“ via incalculable physical metamorphosis (Sontag). This Alice’s bed is neither a nest for lovemaking nor a site of passive vegetation, but a lively locus for fantasizing and imaginary conversations with feminist foremothers. At the Mad Tea Party dreamt up by her, Alice is advised and consoled by the ghosts of two nineteenth-century American womenwriters, Emily Dickinson and Margaret Fuller – both disrupted in their careers by housekeeping obligations and a premature death, respectively – along with fictional heroines of the theatre stage emblemized by their unfeminine rage: from the romantic ballet *Giselle*, Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis, a company of young female revenants, betrayed in love, deceased before their wedding day (mad as the Hatter); and from Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*, Kundry, the bitter, guilt-ridden woman who wants to sleep (like the Dormouse).

Sontag calls the play – a piece she has been preparing to write all her life – a play about the grief, anger and imagination of women, the reality of the mental prison, the triumphs of female fantasies, and the insufficiency of victories of the imagination. For her Alice, ‘to get out of bed or not’ becomes an existential question about what to do with our lives and how to love ourselves, in and outside of Wonderland.¹⁰

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