

Carol Mavor

ALICIOUS OBJECTS

Believing in six impossible things before breakfast;
or reading *Alice* nostologically

While Lewis Carroll's stories of Alice, as well as his photography, have long been understood, and rightly so, as an attachment to childhood, especially girlhood, what happens when we read Alice geriatrically? This essay reads Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, not as a nostalgic yearning for childhood, but as a yearning for agedness. "Alicious Objects" makes good a word that has not yet made it into our current vocabulary: nostology. Nostology is another word for gerontology, but with the ring of nostalgia. At the heart of this investigation is Carroll's old and forgetful White Queen, whom he based on a character, seemingly plagued with Alzheimer's, from Wilkie Collins' 1862 novel No Name. Through the lens of the elder, it turns out that Carroll is less about childhood than we may have previously understood. Using Carroll's nonsense writing as a springboard, "Alicious Objects" playfully engages with a range of images: including photographs of the real Alice (Alice Liddell) as well as works by such contemporary artists as Ann Hamilton, Sally Mann, Olivier Richon and Rosemarie Trockel. This is an effort to undo ageism, to see nostology as forward thinking, to make growing old, and even loving the old, less shameful.

Nostology: another word for gerontology (from Greek nostos a return home (with reference to ageing or second childhood) + -logy)

As children, it is impossible to believe that we will grow old.

This is the impossibility that Sally Mann captures when she photographs her young daughter Virginia, with the old woman Virginia Carter. (Carter cared for the photographer when she was a child and, later, for Mann's own children.) This couple of Virginias: one is a girl-child, asleep and dreaming; the other is a truly old woman, her long white hair in a crown of exhausted loose ringlets, her arthritic fingers held up to the heavens. Young Virginia has just arrived. Old Virginia is waiting to leave. *The Two Virginias* no. 4, 1991: a just-emerging pupa and a withered, past her season, petal-dropping rose of yesteryear (Figure 1).

Unlike Lewis Carroll's White Queen who brags, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast" (Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* 199) — the child simply cannot believe the outrageous fact of impending old age. Alice, who is just seven in *Wonderland* and seven and a half in *The Looking-Glass*, finds it impossible to believe that the White Queen is "one hundred and one, five months and a day" (199).¹ For sure this is because the White Queen reports her age with all of the preposterous specificity usually associated with the child, who swaggers age in *both* years and halves,



FIGURE 1 A just-emerging pupa and a withered, past her season, petal-dropping rose of yesteryear. Mann, Sally. *The Two Virginias, no. 4*. 1991. Copyright Sally Mann. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

just as Alice boasts: “I’m seven and a half, exactly” (199). And, undoubtedly, Alice would have to doubt the centenarian queen because few people live to be over one hundred. But somewhere in there is the fact that Alice, like all of us when we were children, cannot imagine herself as growing old.

Alice, like most children, finds it easy to believe in talking rabbits, talking legs of mutton, babies that turn into pigs, pebbles that turn into cakes and her eventual Queendom — “‘Well, this *is* grand!’ said Alice. ‘I never expected I should be a Queen

so soon' ” (250). It is easier to believe in Wonderland and Looking-Glass Worlds than it is in growing old. Alice can imagine herself as queen, but not as the White Queen.

Like the remoteness of Alice's “poor little feet”, after she opens up “like the largest telescope that ever was! Goodbye feet!” — grey hair for the mop-topped youth is “almost out of sight” (20). The future, not the past, is the child's foreign country. She cannot see the forest for the trees. To be old, to the child, is as meaningless as reading *The Hunting of the Snark*. To be old, to the child, is to be a *boojum*.

When Alice Liddell (the real Alice of Wonderland fame) reaches the age of eighteen, her face (as photographed by Carroll on the 25th of June, 1870) is dramatically changed (fig. 2). Her adult face, no longer holds the delightful blankness of *The Snark's* utopian,



FIGURE 2 No longer the sweet emptiness of her child-self.
Dodgson, Charles. Alice Liddell. 1870.

unchartable “Ocean Chart” (fig. 3). Adult Alice is mapped with dark gloom. It was her last sitting with Carroll. Her eyes say it all: the approach of the mountains and the seas, the rivers and the trees, the countries and the cities and the elderflowers of old age. The “Ocean Chart” has turned as dark as the famous black page in Laurence Stern’s *Tristram Shandy* (fig. 4).

It is especially through the medium of photography that childhood has been sealed with a utopian wax. Photography offers up childhood as preserved, like jam. Or as Peter Wollen once famously wrote: “like flies in amber”. While subjects grow older through photographing them over time (as in Nicholas Nixon’s documentation of his once-young wife and her once-young sisters year after year), in the actual photograph nothing changes. It is only the paper that yellow, turns, crumbles and tears. It is only the glass of the daguerreotype that breaks. Photographic subjects do not age. From its beginnings, as both art and amateur hobby, photography has been associated with holding onto childhood nostalgically, even a moral duty of parents. As Susan Sontag has pointed out: “Not to take pictures of one’s children, particularly when they are small, is a sign of parental indifference” (8)

While the *Alice* stories have long been understood, and rightly so, as an attachment to childhood, especially girlhood, what happens when we read Alice geriatrically? This essay reads the two *Alices* (both the *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass*), not as a nostalgic yearning for childhood, but as nostologically yearning for agedness. Nostology’s desire (so rarely acknowledged, so foreign to appreciation) is to live in the moment as an ancient, an elder, an antique, as if in the midst of a golden anniversary celebration, as if not governed by a ticking retirement watch, as if one did not know what day yesterday was or even what day today is, as if one were not a morning glory, but an evening primrose (already popped for the last time, withered and confused in its twilight time), as if one were an already-bloomed, night-blooming cereus flower.

I may have written a book entitled *Reading Boyishly*, but time flies faster than Looking-Glass bread-and-butter-flies, who live on weak tea with cream. Today, I am advocating for reading not youthfully, but geriatrically. As self-proclaimed twin of Carroll’s shawl dropping, crooked, mussed old White Queen (I have given up on Alice), I now advocate for marmalade and jam rules anew. I embrace the confusion. I do not resist. The White Queen herself articulates this nostological logic best:

“The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday - but never jam to-day.”

“It MUST come sometimes to ‘jam to-day,’” Alice objected.

“No, it can’t,” said the Queen. “It’s jam every OTHER day: to-day isn’t any OTHER day, you know.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Alice. “It’s dreadfully confusing!”

If you are young, and reading this, live backwards.

“Living backwards!” Alice repeated in great astonishment. “I never heard of such a thing!”

“— but [said the White Queen] there’s one great advantage in it, that one’s memory works both ways.”

“I’m sure MINE only works one way.” Alice remarked. “I can’t remember things before they happen.”

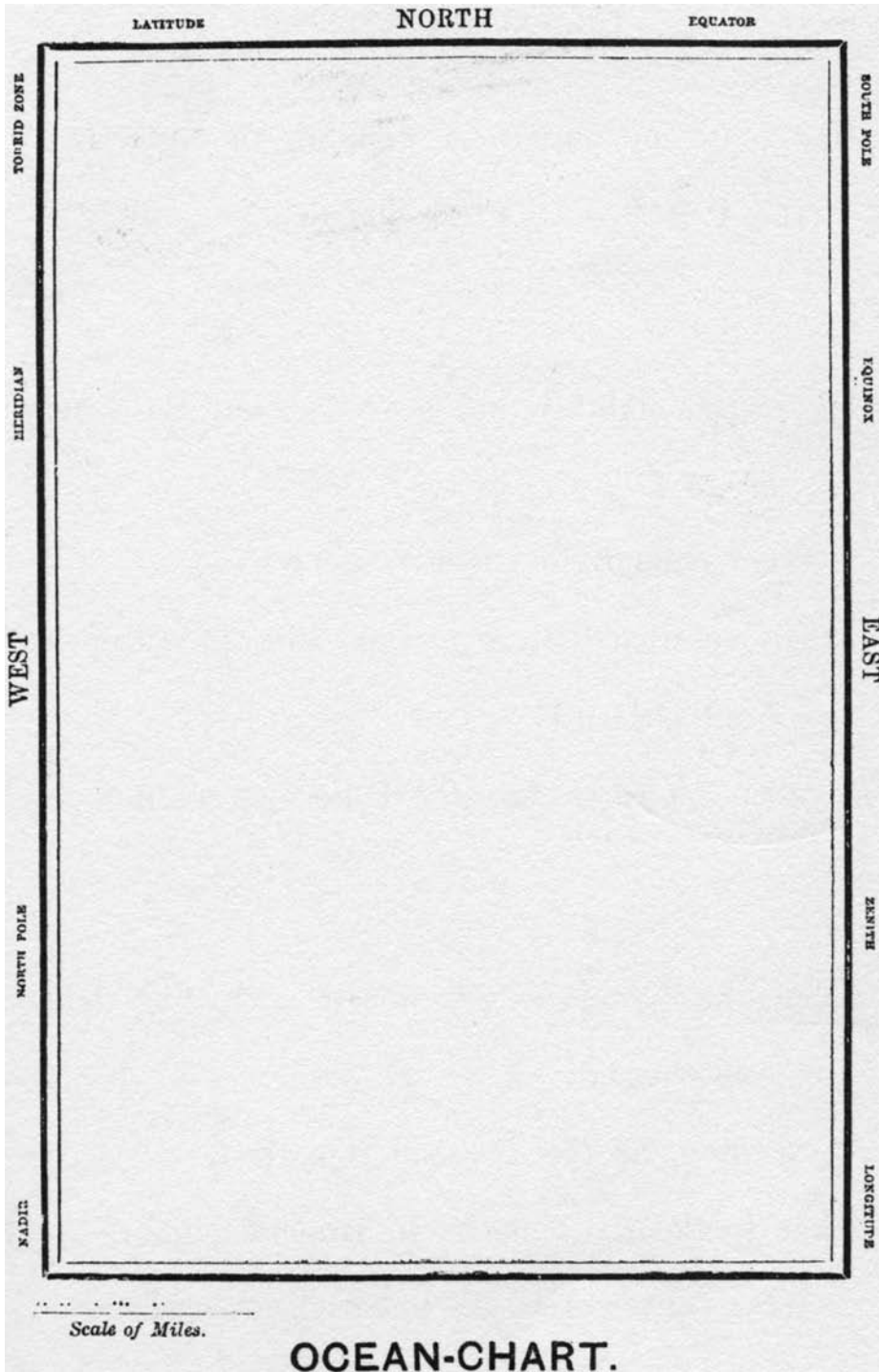


FIGURE 3 The delightful blankness of *The Snark's* utopian, unchartable "Ocean Chart". Carroll, Lewis. *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*. First published by Macmillan in 1876.

John Rylands Library, Special Collections, University of Manchester.

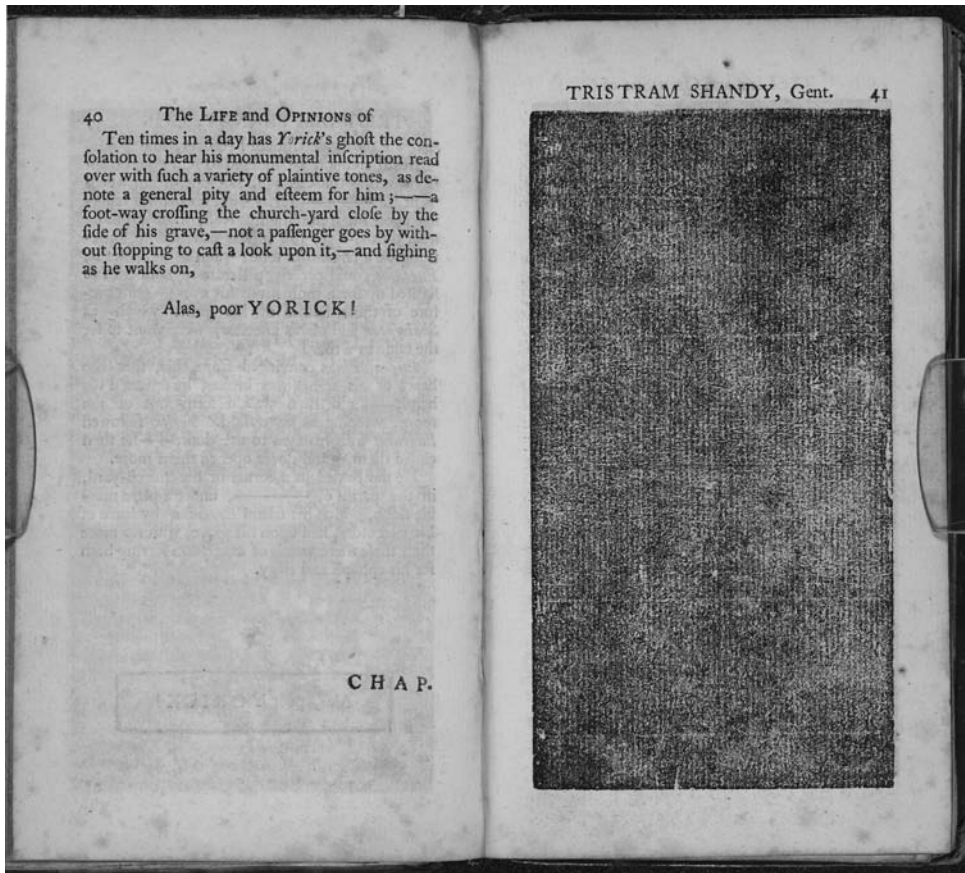


FIGURE 4 The “Ocean Chart” has turned as dark as the famous black page in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.
 Sterne, Laurence. *Tristram Shandy* (first appeared in instalments between 1759 and 1767). *The Works of Laurence Sterne*. Dublin: H. Saunders, D. Chamberlaine, and J. Potts, 1769–70. John Rylands Library, Special Collections, University of Manchester.

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” the Queen remarked.
 “What sort of things do YOU remember best?” Alice ventured to ask.

“Oh, things that happened the week after next,” the Queen replied in a careless tone. “For instance, now,” she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger as she spoke, “there’s the King’s Messenger. He’s in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn’t even begin till next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all.”

“Suppose he never commits the crime?” said Alice.

“That would be all the better wouldn’t it?” the Queen said, as she bound the plaster round her finger with a bit of ribbon. (196–7)

If you are old and reading this, then, to twist Freud’s words from another context, “you are yourselves the problem” (Freud 113).² Embrace yourselves.

Whether young or old, remember things before they happen.

If you prick your finger, be sure to scream, like the White Queen does, *before* you are pricked. As the likeable old gal herself comments: “What would be the good of having it all over again?” — when you have “done all the screaming already”? (198).



FIGURE 5 Backwards.

Dodgson, Charles. *Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes*. Glass negative. 1860.

Like Carroll's camera, which revealed the world upside down and backwards, like Carroll's glass negatives (Figure 5), which revealed black as white and white as black, what follows is a nostological look at Alice through aged, near-sighted eyes, plagued by cataracts, framed by objects that *perfectly makes* no (stological) sense at all.

This is an essay on believing, *only to forget*, six things for starting obsolete and extinct, as if one were a living dodo remembering forward. My six objects, which all turn on helplessness, are as follows:

- 1 The pansy face of an *ars oblivionalis*.
- 2 A mouthful of stones.
- 3 A pullover with *two* neckholes.
- 4 A house split in *two*.
- 5 A sceptre crowned by a dodo.
- 6 A boat full of holes.

This essay is an embracement of helplessness. Even philosophers, as the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott reminds us were once babies (Phillips, *On Flirtation* 64). "Helplessness is where we start from and helplessness is where we all end up." Inspired by the work of yet another British psychoanalyst, Adam Phillips, I embrace helplessness as something *not* to overcome, but as a state to sustain (without misuse) (Phillips, "Freud's Helplessness").³ It is time to wax *nostologic* about the White Queen, rather than about Alice. I'm no longer a paedophile; I'm done with Alice. I like old ladies now, not little girls. I am a swollen with pride geriophile.

This essay is not advocating for taking more photographs of the elderly (although that might be interesting). My writing is a campaign for the conceit of reading geriatrically. In the eyes of the elder, it turns out that Lewis Carroll is less about childhood than we may have previously understood. Mine is an effort to undo ageism, to see nostology as forward thinking, to make growing old, and even loving the old, less shameful.

Object one: the pansy face of an *ars oblivionus*

Both the young child and the elderly person are studies in forgetting, are figures empty of what went before.

When we are old, we forget, especially, the recent past. We are too old to remember. (" 'You are old, Father William,' the young man said, 'And your hair has become very white . . . ' " [49])

When we are young, we only have the recent past. We are too young to remember very far back.

Old people are babies in their second childhood. Babies are often understood as wise old men. (Consider the legend of Lao-tzu, the Tao-te-king, who "meditated for eighty years in the uterus of his mother: he was born an old man of eighty. Lao: old + tzu: child" [Barthes 155]). Even the very middle-aged Red Queen (who, like so many mid-lifers, gets nowhere while running in the same place) instructs Alice to treat the elderly

White Queen like a child (“Pat her on the head, and see how pleased she’ll be! . . . and sing her a soothing lullaby” [257]).

As Carroll wrote, in regard to his development of the character of the White Queen:

Lastly, the White Queen seemed, to my dreaming fancy, gentle, stupid, fat and pale; helpless as an infant; and with a slow, maundering, bewildered air about her just *suggesting* imbecility, but never quite passing into it; that would be, I think, fatal to any comic effect she might otherwise produce. There is a character strangely like her in Wilkie Collins’ novel *No Name*: by two different converging paths we have somehow reached the same ideal, and Mrs. Wragge and the White Queen might have been twin-sisters. (Carroll, “Alice on the Stage” 296)

(More on Wilkie Collins’ 1862 novel later. For now, suffice it to say that the most admirable character in Collins’ *No Name* turns out to be the lovable, old Mrs Wragge, who seems to have Alzheimer’s.)

Both the small child and the geriatric have empty pansy faces.

Is it because they are thinking or because they are not?

Or to quote Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “There’s pansies, that’s for thoughts” (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V).

Pansy comes from the French *pensée* (a thought).

As the Red Queen says in “The Garden of Live Flowers”: “Speak in French when you can’t think of the English for a thing” (116). That’s a thought.

Recall the singing pansies in Walt Disney’s rendition of *Alice in Wonderland*. (Because I was born of that time when fairy tales came to the child first, and possibly only, through celluloid, this is my first Alice memory.) These brightly coloured pansy flowers, unforgettable to me, as if thinking about the etymology of their own name, persist: “You can learn a lot from the flowers” is the title of their song that they sing with Alice (Figure 6).

A pansy is but a bigger sibling to those tiny pansies known in English and German as forget-me-nots (*Vergißmeinnicht*) (Weinrich 3)⁴. *A pansy is the flower of thought for forgetting.*

In *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, the original manuscript for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the Dodo (the very emblem of extinction, the animal forgotten) leads the way along the river “fringed with rushes and forget-me-knots” (Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* note 2, 31) towards a little cottage where Alice can dry off. This mostly forgotten part of the story does not appear in the final Alice.

If I may echo Umberto Eco, forgetting can only be accidental. In other words there can be no art of forgetting, as there can be an art of memory. An *Ars Oblivionalis*? “Forget it!” is Eco’s answer (254).

Object two: A mouth full of stones

Marcel Proust and Carroll, in their own very different ways, were interested in stories of cakes that turn into stones.

For Proust, it was the crumbs of his famed madeleine-memory cake of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which resided within his body, only to resurface from a stumble upon uneven paving stones outside Venice’s St Mark’s. “The happiness which I had just felt [as



FIGURE 6 A pansy is the flower of thought for forgetting.
Disney, Walt. Still from Alice singing "All in the Golden Afternoon". *Alice in Wonderland*.
1951.

a result of the uneven paving stones] was unquestionably the same as that which I had felt when I tasted the madeleine soaked in tea" (255–6).

For Carroll, it was the inverse, a story of pebbles into cakes:

The next moment a shower of little pebbles came rattling in at the window, and some of them hit her in the face. "I'll put a stop to this," she said to herself, and shouted out, "You'd better not do that again!" which produced another dead silence.

Alice noticed with some surprise that the pebbles were all turning into little cakes as they lay on the floor, and a bright idea came into her head. "If I eat one of these cakes," she thought, "it's sure to make some change in my size; and as it can't possibly make me larger, it must make me smaller, I suppose."

So she swallowed one of the cakes, and was delighted to find that she began shrinking directly. (44)

Inversely, inside Carroll was a hard insoluble, undigested crystal-stone, which (did not shrink him but rather) starved him from growing up. As Virginia Woolf has written:

[Inside Carroll there was an] untinted jelly [that] contained within it a perfectly hard crystal. It contained childhood. And this is very strange, for childhood normally fades slowly . . . But it was not so much with Lewis Carroll. It lodged in him whole and entire. He would not disperse it. And therefore as he grew older, this impediment in the centre of his being, this hard block of pure childhood, starved the mature man of nourishment. (48–9)

Carroll's "crystal", lodged inside him, making him a bit of lunatic, who stuttered and wrote nonsense, who was obsessed with going to the dentist, whose walk wobbled with an ailment called "Housemaid's Knee", who was rather anorexic (lunch a mere biscuit and a glass of sherry), who recorded dinner parties in his diaries, noting where each guest sat and what each guest ate. A man of many identities, the given name of this mathematician, logician, preacher, Oxford don, photographer, writer of children's stories and nonsense was Charles Dodgson. Charles Dodgson grew old, but, at times, seemed as helpless as a child. In the words of Marina Warner, "the enigma of Carroll is insoluble: how does the stiff, pedantic, Tory don, High Churchman and lacklustre lecturer in mathematics fit with the light-footed, breezy amiable, humorous inventor of stories, games, jokes, puzzles and treats?" (11). Stuttering into adulthood, he pronounced his birth name as Mr Do-do-dogson, hence the famed Dodo that begins *Alice in Wonderland*. As old queen, this man who never married, would develop many literary alter egos including Alice, the Dodo and the White Knight. But the White Queen is the true alter ego of Carroll/Dodgson and all of us as readers who find that (to quote the prefatory poem to *Alice Through the Looking Glass*) "We are but older children dear, / Who fret our bedtime near" (135).

Carroll's perfectly hard crystal lodged inside of him was his personal joy and his torture. Perhaps it was the cause of his famed stutter. Perhaps it also allowed the Oxford don to lose his stutter, to become at ease, as the "myth" of Carroll famously goes, in the presence of little girls. Medical lore claims that reading with marbles in your mouth, perhaps made of stone, as featured in Ann Hamilton's video *aleph [Mouth/Stone]*, 1992, will cure stuttering (Figure 7). Perhaps, it was with stones in his mouth that Carroll first dreamt of pebbles turning into cakes and of Alice into White Queen. After all, Alice would grow old too.

On those occasions when Carroll

was simply too happy for words, he would do as the Romans did and write in his diary: "I mark this day with a white stone." In so far as these Diaries cover his life (they have been shortened, and several volumes are lost), they show that Bachelor Dodgson was unspeakably happy on exactly 27 days. On 23 of these he had spent part or most of the day among the little girls to whom "Lewis Carroll" was dedicated. ("White Stone Days")

Carroll turns young girls into (white) stone.

Carroll metamorphosized stones into cakes and little girls into stones. (What else is a photograph than a person held in stone?) Carroll's girl-stones fed the insatiable crystal of childhood that lived within him. But he could never get enough. Carroll's hard crystal



FIGURE 7 Perhaps it was with stones in his mouth that Carroll first dreamt of pebbles turning into cakes and of Alice into White Queen.

Hamilton, Ann. *aleph*. Still from video. 1992. Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

stunted him, kept him helpless, kept him living backwards, all the way into old age, like the White Queen.

Object three: A pullover with *two* neckholes

As adults, we often feel that our child-self was another person or even that the child that we once were has died. Carroll's crystal may have been a condensed rock of childhood, but it was not alive. It was geological stone trying to ward off old age and death. The contemporary French artist Christian Boltanski claims that it was the death of his crystal of "Little Christian" that made space for his creative production:

I began to work as an artist when I began to be an adult, when I understood that my childhood was finished, and was dead. I think we all have somebody who is dead inside of us. A dead child. I remember the Little Christian that is dead inside me.⁵

Throughout *Alice* there is a continual theme of losing her (child) self of forgetting who she is. "And now who am I? I *will* remember if I can! I'm determined to do it! . . .

L, I know it begins with L!" (177), says Alice, in the forest of forgetting. As a kind of twin to the White Queen, Alice is always in danger of losing herself, as if she were suffering from what would later be called Alzheimer's disease.

In 1901, when "Auguste D(eter)", 1850–1906, was first examined by Dr Aloïs Alzheimer, he began with many queries. Auguste could answer many of the doctor's questions, but she did not remember when she got married and was documented as repeating the word "twin", seemingly without reason. When asked to write her name, she could only give her title. In the words of the study: "When she has to write 'Mrs. Auguste D.' she writes 'Mrs.,' and we must repeat the other words because she forgets them. The patient is not able to progress in writing and repeats, 'I have lost myself [*Ich habe mich verloren*]' " (Whitehouse et al. 17).

To lose oneself strikes fear in all of us.

But what if we were not so afraid of forgetting? What if remembering the past was as fictional as remembering forward? What if we were less anxious about finding that dead child within and we just were, well, "Mrs. Wragge", as so affectionately rendered by Wilkie Collins? Would we fear forgetting so deeply? Would we fear old age so deeply? Maybe the primary right of the aged is the right to forget. "Forgetting one's misfortune is already half of happiness" (Weinrich 15).⁶

Perhaps to sing along with the pansies and forget-me-knots is to forget. Perhaps to mark a day with a white stone is to forget. Perhaps Carroll (as inspired by Collins) is practising an art of forgetting (*ars oblivionalis*). As Harald Weinrich has so astutely observed:

The verb "forget" is composed of the verb "get" and the prefix "for." The prefix converts the movement *toward* implicit in "get" into a movement *away*, so that one might paraphrase the meaning of "forget" as "to get rid (of something)." (1)

The stones of Carroll are washed with the waters of Lethe (the mythical river of forgetting). As the poet Stephanie Bolster writes of Carroll's "white stones", in a poem entitled "White Stone", these mythical pebbles of remembering are always, already just out of our grasp: "It is a shining shape receding as we near it" (19). Carroll's white stones are cousins to Alice's dream rushes, as she floats down the Lethe of the *Looking-Glass*: "What mattered to her just then that the rushes had begin to fade, and to lose all of their scent and beauty from the very moment that she picked them?" (204)

If our fear of old age is a fear of losing our memory, than to dip memory in the oblivion of Lethe, might it not be better than drowning in our own tears?

* * *

While *No Name is* essentially the long story of how Magdalen Vanstone, a rich, beautiful, happy young woman, suddenly loses her father and mother, only for it to be discovered that her seemingly perfect father was not legally married to her wonderful mother. (Early in life, a disreputable woman in America, whom he had married and who had refused divorce.) After the death of her parents, Magdalen thereby loses her inheritance (to a wicked uncle) and her right to her own name (hence the novel's title). Magdalen then spends some five hundred pages trying to get back what is rightfully hers (her money and her name). Her endlessly complex series of schemes (including disguises

and taking on other identities) is aided by a likeable swindler (with parti-coloured eyes) named Captain Wragge. But Magdalen, I would argue, experiences her most tender connections in the novel with the always-outrageous Mrs Wragge.

Mrs. Wragge, who was extremely large, was nevertheless very meek and gentle. This “giantess of amber satin” (Collins 163),⁷ with her “faded blue eyes” and pansy “moon-face” (163) is always frustrating the much smaller, compulsively neat Captain Wragge. Much to his distress, Mrs Wragge was “the crookedest woman” (163) that Captain Wragge had ever met.

Captain Wragge and Mrs Wragge are a study in contrasts. Captain Wragge fears forgetting the tiniest morsels of information. He has to write everything down, in clear black and white, in one of his many, many ledgers or he will “go mad!” Captain Wragge is driven mad by Mrs Wragge. Mrs Wragge is so out of order that she even falls asleep crooked. As soon as her left “heel” (or boot) is pulled up, the right heel falls down. Or, worse yet, she is discovered to be wearing only one of her shoes. Her cap is awry. Her head is always buzzing. Captain Wragge has to shout at her constantly. If he speaks softly to her, she will vacuously drift.

Mrs Wragge, like the White Queen, is always out of order, going everywhere and nowhere at once. For some reason, Mrs Wragge is particularly stuck on one book, *Treatise on the Art of Cookery*. Mrs Wragge cannot get past the recipe for making an Omelette with Herbs. As she exclaims, as if the White Queen was doing all of the talking for her: “mince small! How am I to mince small, when it’s all mixed up and running?” (166)

Mrs. Wragge is terrible not only at cooking, but also at sewing. Her horrific Oriental Cashmere Robe (which is always under construction), “half made, and half unpicked again” (374), seems to scream into her buzzing head: “I won’t fit.” Like Alice’s leg of mutton that takes a bow, or the broad good-natured grin of the White Queen in the soup tureen, the always-unfinished dress confuses Mrs Wragge with animism. As the good old schizoid (Mrs Wragge) remarks to her young no-name friend Madaglen:

I know I’ve got an awful big back — but that’s no reason. Why should a gown be weeks on hand and then not meet behind you after all? It hangs over my Bosom like a sack — it does. Look here, ma’am, at the skirt. It won’t come right. It draggles in front, and cocks up behind. It shows my heels — and, Lord knows, I get into scrapes enough about my heels, without showing them into the bargain! (376)

In *Through the Looking Glass*, before the White Queen turns into a soup tureen, she turns into the knitting sheep that holds so many needles that she looks like a porcupine. One suspects that Mrs Wragge may have been teaching the White Queen in the art of knitting. Nevertheless, Mrs Wragge just might make a sweater perfect for Alice, who is “very fond of pretending to be two people” (18). It would be a duplicate of Rosemarie Trockel’s *Schizoid Sweater*, two neckholes to comfortably fit Alice and her twin: either the loveable Mrs Wragge or the loveable White Queen (Figures 8–9).⁸



FIGURE 8 A sweater perfect for Alice, who is “very fond of pretending to be two people”. Trockel, Rosemarie. *Schizo-Pullover*. Wool. 1988. Photo: Bernhard Schaub, Köln / Cologne. Courtesy Sprüth Magers, Berlin / London. © Rosemarie Trockel, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2009.



FIGURE 9 Two neckholes to comfortably fit Alice and her twin: either the loveable Mrs Wragge or the loveable White Queen. *Schizo-Pullover* (worn). 1988. Photo: Bernhard Schaub, Köln/Cologne. Courtesy Sprüth Magers, Berlin/London. © Rosemarie Trockel, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2009.

Object four: A house split in *two*

Dementia: from Latin *de* = “apart, away” + *mens* = (genitive *mentis*) “mind.”



FIGURE 10 Dementia is to become apart from the world.
Matta-Clark, Gordon. *Splitting*. 1974. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Dementia is to become apart from the world, as exemplified in Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Splitting* (Figure 10). The White Queen, Mrs Wragge and Mrs Auguste D. live in the crack, live in both halves.

Splitting is twin to *Schizoid Sweater*.

Object five: A sceptre crowned by a dodo

Carroll’s Dodo, its very name a play on the stuttering of Do-do-dodgson, is an obsolete beast, which we cannot help from loving and laughing at, at once. The Dodo is a queer creature: beyond reproduction, he is as helpless and useless as the thimble that the Dodo offers (back) to Alice as a prize after the Caucus-race:

“But she must have a prize herself, you know,” said the Mouse.

“Of course,” the Dodo replied very gravely. “What else have you got in your pocket?” it went on, turning to Alice.

“Only a thimble,” said Alice sadly.

“Hand it over here,” said the Dodo.

They all crowded round her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble saying, “We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble”; and when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered. (32)

Not only is the Dodo a mirroring of Carroll’s own speech, the beast is a true repetition of his own queer non-reproduction. (Perhaps this is some of the reasoning behind Carroll’s blatant critique of Darwin in the form of a child’s fairy tale (Empson 14). The dodo is Carroll’s own inner law: a birdly “ancient, masochistic adolescent” (Cixous 235). Carroll, who must have long known that he would not procreate, with his typical comic verve, always coupled with a melancholic patheticness, engenders the Dodo. Of note is the fact that Oxford, during Carroll’s time and still today, holds the remains of one of the last dodos.

In Tenniel’s illustration, we find the Dodo is the only animal of the Caucus-race with hands, which makes him that much more human: one hand, offers Alice the un-treasure of a thimble (perhaps this is the seed of J.M. Barrie’s figuring of a thimble as a kiss in *Peter Pan*) and the other hand clenches a cane. The cane, of course, comically emphasizes that the dodo could not fly (the reason for its extinction).

A cane is not far from Queen Alice’s sceptre:

To the Looking-Glass world it was Alice that said
 “I’ve a sceptre in hand, I’ve a crown on my head.
 Let the Looking-Glass creatures, whatever they be
 Come and dine with the Red Queen, the White Queen, and me!” (260)

A sceptre is, perhaps, simply a gilded, treasured cane.

“Curiouser and curiouser” (20) is the fact that the emblem of London’s Royal College of Art is a sceptre with the helpless dodo on one end (and in a complete inverse of this non-flying, extinct bird, we find a phoenix at the other end of the baton). The editor of this volume, photographer Olivier Richon, has pictured the dodo, a White Queenish hero in all of his, or her, royal splendour.

A sceptre with a dodo is a *special* gilded, treasured cane for living and ruling nostalgically (Figure 11).

Object six: A boat full of holes

“Mrs. Wragge is not deaf,” explained the captain. “She’s only a little slow. Constitutionally torpid — if I may use the expression . . . Shout at her — and her

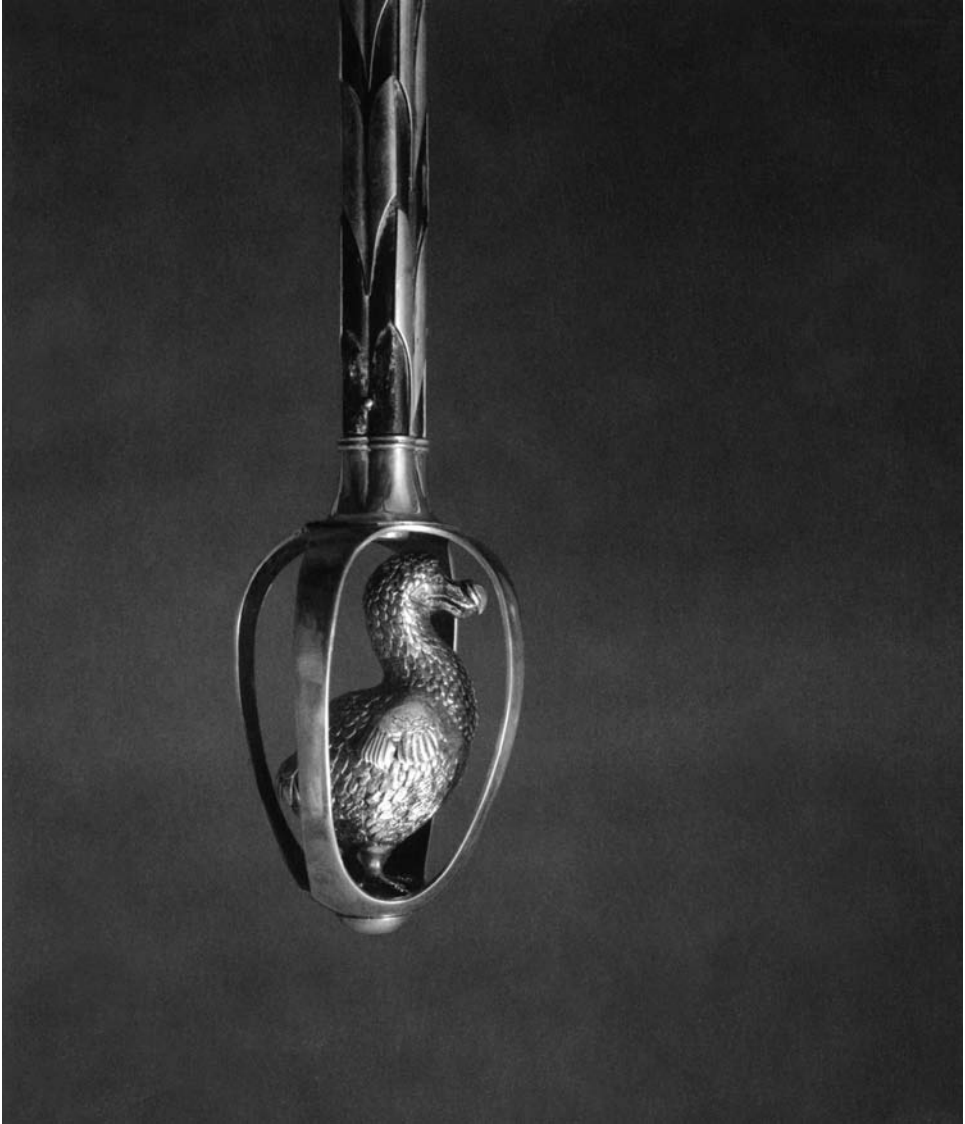


FIGURE 11 A sceptre with a dodo is a special gilded, treasured cane for living and ruling nostalgically.

Richon, Olivier. *Dodo*. 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

mind comes up to time. Speak to her—and she drifts miles away from you directly.
(Collins 163)

Esther Teichmann’s photograph *Mythologies I* (2008) features an older woman rowing on what looks to be an Alicious “golden afternoon”. An older man is asleep in the little boat. His body is stretched out. A foot hangs over the edge. He rests his sleepy head on the breast of the rower. They are not trying to remember. (Their heads are not in



FIGURE 12 It is the Alice story, told in a boat, long ago, but retold nostalgically. Teichmann, Esther. *Mythologies I*. 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

that fateful state of “buzzing” which Mrs Wragge complained of). They are peacefully “drifting” and Captain Wragge is not yelling. The older people are Teichmann’s parents. Let’s call them Charles and the White Queen. It is the Alice story, told in a boat, long ago, but retold nostalgically (Figure 12).

The photograph is painted over in layers of oil pigment, so as to make the scene shimmer like an opal. With its pink, blue and green opalescent colour, it has the flair of a 1960s, tripping, Jefferson Airplane, go-ask-Alice-when-she’s-ten-feet-tall kind of look. But it is also reminiscent of Carroll’s painted-over photographs of nude girls, especially the one of Evelyn Hatch (1879), which has been caressed, if rather crudely so, with its own surreal, Titianesque oils. Both Teichmann’s *Mythologies I* and Carroll’s photograph of Evelyn are portmanteaus of a “real” photograph and layers of other-wordly atmosphere.

Mythologies I was taken in a secluded swamp of dead trees in the Black Forest. Almost sub-tropical, it has its own kind of Alicious magic, made not of Carroll’s Isis River in Oxford, upon which the fairy-tale of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was originally told all on a “golden afternoon” (7), but of the Rhine, which flows through this valley of this *different* forest of forgetting. Teichmann’s Black Forest is twin to Alice’s wood “where things have no names” (176). The Black Forest, like Alice’s woods and, even, the woods of Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood and so many other enchanted stories, is a fairy-tale forest. So rich, it has inspired not only the great Romantic Poets, but even a cake of cherries, kirsch, cream and chocolate shavings.

This swamp of dead trees is a place that Teichmann returns to often. She has long wanted to capture its fantastical quality: pinning it down, like a rare, iridescent butterfly. Her idea was to emphasize the castle-in-the-sky trait of this magical watery space, by enhancing the scene with love. But not just any love, it would have to be nostalgic love. To the *mise en scène*, she decided to add her mother and father (who know that they are “but old children, dear, / Who fret to find their bedtime near”).

On a day over one hundred years past that “golden afternoon”, Teichmann drove to the swamp at five a.m. to get the low light of dawn, to set the Alicious picture “beneath such dreamy weather” (7) — “moving through a land / Of wonders wild and new” (7).

After setting up her tripod and camera, Teichmann set the White Queen and Charles afloat in their boat inflated “with breath of bale” (136), gently pushing them out onto the mirror of shallow water. But the “pleasance of our fairy tale” was soon fraught. Within minutes, the boat was tangled on waterlogged trunks and branches. Unbeknownst to all, the boat was full of tiny holes and was threatening to collapse. (The small boat had been found by Teichmann in the family’s cellar of mostly useless treasures. She should have known.) In constant need of resuscitation, the boat was hopeless: the boat was *helpless*.

But Teichmann would not give up. She needed her opal picture.

As Teichmann was working on her last take, Charles started moaning and waving his hands about frantically. He had a horrible leg cramp. He was trying to stand up in the boat to relieve his pain; but he could not get his footing in the always-on-the-verge-of-sinking boat. Charles was as vulnerable as the boat. Teichmann was shocked to see her father in such a state of helplessness. Using a rope attached to the boat, Teichmann pulled the White Queen and Charles to the log that she was standing on. Leaving the White Queen in the boat, she hoisted Charles out of the golden brown liquid. Holding onto his girl, the two limped to shore: camera, dinghy and White Queen left behind.

A few steps before dry land, Charles let go of his girl, thinking that his cramp had subsided, only to slip off the slimy algae covered ground. Before Teichmann could blink her eyes, Charles’ legs and torso disappeared into the unforeseen, bubbling quicksand. “Down, down, down” (14). Immediately, Charles grabbed onto Teichmann, who was still on her log of safety. With unprecedented strength, she dragged Charles out, covered up to his neck in swamp treacle.

Charles stood shaking. He was sobbing, which also shocked Teichmann. She pulled off his wet clothes off, wrapping him in the towels that the White Queen had thoughtfully packed, somehow having remembered the small tragedy *before* it happened.

“I weep for you,” the Walrus said:
 “I deeply sympathize.”
 With sobs and tears he sorted out
 Those of the largest size
 Holding his pocket-handkerchief
 Before his streaming eyes. (187)

Teichmann sat Charles down on another dry log and turned to the White Queen, who was still adrift on the lake, unperturbed by the about-ready-to-sink boat. (The White Queen had lost herself: she was laughing and picking dream rushes.) Teichmann

did not yet notice the fringe of forget-me-nots (*Vergißmeinnicht*) that remained half-hidden under the log upon which Charles sat.

Notes

- 1 All further citations to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass are from *The Annotated Alice*.
- 2 I am referring, of course, to Freud's famous "Lecture on Femininity" (1933) in which he stated: "Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem — those of you who are men; those of you who are women this will not apply — you are yourselves the problem."
- 3 In a recent lecture, Adam Phillips has spoken on the value of helplessness, as something *not* to overcome, but as a state to sustain (without exploitation). Phillips makes this central point: helplessness is where we start from and helplessness is where we all end up. As Phillips comically remarks, paraphrasing D.W. Winnicott, even philosophers were once babies. Phillips' provocative work begs the question: "What if we grew into helplessness, rather than out of it?"
- 4 As Weinrich writes: "the little flower known as the forget-me-not (German *Vergißmeinnicht*; both forms derived from the Old French *ne m'oubliez mie*, botanically *myosotis*), which was often mentioned in the Middle Ages and has since become indispensable for lovers in many countries, and which is a reminder to be faithful that is at least as effective as its positive version, the pansy (derived from French *pensée*)." P. 3.
- 5 For a full discussion of the death of the child that once was, see Mavor's *Reading Boyishly* and *Pleasures Taken*.
- 6 On the political perils of forgetting and remembering, especially after Auschwitz, see Weinrich's chapter: "Auschwitz and No Forgetting" 183–205.
- 7 All further citations to *No Name* will be parenthetically noted in the body of the text.
- 8 Katherine Guinness has opened my eyes to the work of Rosemarie Trockel; I thank her for sharing her research with me.

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