



## A QUEER NOTE

*“Everything is queer today,” said Alice.*

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>1</sup>

Even though Alice is only seven years old in Wonderland, her blossoming, shooting, falling, swelling, leaking, shrinking body, a body that cannot decide whether it wants to be tiny or big—rather it wants to be tiny *and* big—is a body anticipating adolescence. “I’m quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!” (57). “That’s quite enough—I hope I shan’t grow anymore” (57). Just as she dreamed it, Alice’s adolescence did come, at least in *real* life, as it did to Alice Liddell, the real little girl of Wonderland fame (whether or not she or her scholar-lover-of-only-girls-friend, whacked-out Lewis Carroll, the Oxford professor, Mr. Do-do-do-do-Dodgson, wanted her to). Like all of us privileged with growing up, she grew into *it* and in spite of *it*, some years after getting back out of the White Rabbit’s hole and crossing through Looking-Glass’s narcissism. But what is *it*?

“Found *it*,” the Mouse replied rather crossly: “of course you know what ‘it’ means.”

“I know what ‘it’ means well enough . . .” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog or a worm”(47).

The meaning of *it*, adolescence, is as wavery as the body that *it* inhabits, ranging from nonnormative behavior to plain just not being cute anymore, as in being fourteen years old, becoming a young lady; as in buying your first tampons. (Before I started my period, or as scholars, especially Victorianists say, “my menarche,” my school anticipated the blessed event by handing over to me, in a plain white envelope, as if it

were pornography, a really scary pink booklet with a cameo *Lady* on the cover, entitled *You Are a Young Lady Now*. After reading *it* from cover to cover—and finding out about *it*, of which I can honestly say that, at that time, I had never even heard of *it*, periods at least, at least not the bleeding kind, and that pornography would have been less shocking than *it*—I could honestly boast, “Thank God I am not yet *it*, at least not yet a *Lady*.”)

Now, I am beyond *it*, yet I find that I still fall for *it*. “Down, down, down. Would the fall *never* come to an end?”(27). I fall, as an adolescent, someone who is grown, but not. (But not what?) I fall for “some other world magically different from the world of family and school.”<sup>2</sup> I once fell for Carroll. (Joseph Litvak, who is informing my theory of adolescent falling, fell for Proust.) Now—no longer beckoned down by a White Rabbit’s twitching whiskers, ticking watch, waistcoat with pocket, fan, and tiny white kid gloves (Hélène Cixous’s “penis on paws”<sup>3</sup>)—I fall for Hawarden. She is my new magical person. She beckons me with daughters, especially Clementina, and crinoline.

Just as “reading Proust can induce a fantasy of *being* Proust,”<sup>4</sup> gazing into Hawarden’s picture-world can induce a fantasy of *being* Clementina. At the center of this delight, this secret treasure, is the thrill of becoming Clementina not once, but twice: as mother and daughter, looker and object of the look, adolescent and woman, model and photographer, Clementina and Clementina. As Alice remarks over and over in Wonderland, it is all a bit queer:

“They were indeed a queer-looking party.”(45)

“She was getting so well used to queer things happening.”(90)

“How queer it seems.”(56)

“I should think you’ll feel a little queer.”(68)

“It was a queer-shaped little creature.”(86)

“See that queer little toss of her head.”(162)

Yet, this second little note is trying to work against the Alice/Carroll epithet with which it began: “Everything is queer today.” A queer approach should not, although it often does, happen too easily.

Hawarden is *particularly* queer. Not only through the same-sex eroticism of her pictures and the ways in which the eroticism of her pictures

has been closeted, but also through photography's inherently reduplicative process of sameness.<sup>5</sup> And just as this last ribbon, or perhaps less elegantly, this third handful of tangled hair, of *Becoming's* p-p-p-prefatory braid is a step into queer representation, adolescence is queer.

Nonnormative, peculiar, sugared in shame, as in drinking Coke and eating pancakes with lots of maple syrup for breakfast, as in giving stupid presents to the object of your first affection (your first fall), as in ruptures and awkward hair and ruptures of awkward hair, as in clothes that can be described as nothing else but "adolescent" (in my case/history, purple knit hot pants, real Christian Dior sheer violet hose over not-yet-shaven legs, matching striped sweater of various bumbleberry colors and putrid pink featuring the ever popular faux "layered look" to give the appearance of wearing a short-sleeved sweater over a long-sleeved one, impossible mocha-brown suede wedgies with ankle strap buckles—all worn as awkwardly as possible by a body that had no idea of how to present such an ungainly, unwieldy, uncomfortable, unskillful spectacle, while anxiously awaiting or suffering from a period): adolescence is more often closeted than performed with reverie.<sup>6</sup> Thereby, for me and anyone less pampered (psychologically, materially) than the Hawarden girls (that certainly would be almost everyone), Hawarden's queerness is not available as lived experience, but rather as the fantasy of, the desire for, adolescence as incommensurable beauty.<sup>7</sup>

Hawarden's obsessional photographs of adolescence not only prompt fantasy, they evoke a practice of adolescent reading. This book's introductory chapter, "Adolescent Reverie," takes on Julia Kristeva's desire to read as an adolescent does: wavery, androgynous, fresh, irreverent. But queer theorists, like Sedgwick and Litvak, have also turned to that awkward age as a model for theorizing queer reading practices. For example, Sedgwick's brilliant introduction to her edited volume *Novel Gazing: Queer Reading in Fiction* (which, appropriately enough, at least in my mind, features a Hawarden photograph of Clementina and Isabella on its cover), discusses how the far-ranging essays included (i.e., the writings are on queer texts and authors as well as nonqueer ones) become specifically queer, attain their "queer specificity," not only from being informed by "gay/lesbian studies and queer theory movements in literary criticism" but by actively refusing a "predetermined idea about what

XXXI

*A Queer*

*Note*

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makes the queerness of a queer reading.”<sup>8</sup> Determined like an adolescent, they are determined yet not predetermined; they read differently: “Often these readings begin from or move toward sites of same-sex, interpersonal eroticism—but not necessarily so. It seems to me that an often quiet, but very palpable presiding image here—a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading—is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site or identification.”<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Litvak points out, with grave disappointment, that we choose to evade the awkwardness of adolescence in favor of finding, re-discovering, reading our fantasy of and for the child: “But if the structural intermediacy of adolescence accounts for its reputation as that awkward age, what is the content of this awkwardness? In our eagerness to reclaim the child, inner or otherwise, do we seek to evade (or with greater cunning, indirectly to reach) her even more embarrassing, and even more exciting older sibling?”<sup>10</sup>

The parameters of the child, unlike those of the adolescent, as James Kincaid has made clear, are solidly false, as solid as they are false.<sup>11</sup> The fantasy of the child, pure *tabula rasa*, is ripe and ready for our own predetermined inscriptions: pink, blue, pants, skirt, dress-up, play, sailor cap, wide-brimmed hat, short socks, knee socks, naughty or nice. After years of such “abuse,” the child becomes adolescent and chooses his or her own clothes (his or her own sartorial ego) and is thereby prone to (according to adult standards) falling into any number of quite unsuccessful looks, patterns, styles.<sup>12</sup> Our desire for the child is the lure of the “blank page.” But it is the adolescent (and all that he or she has to offer) who is left out when desire is so stunted and stilted. The loss is both theirs and ours.

Only in Carroll’s photographs can little Alices remain child-perfect. Different from in the photographs, Alice as story, as *histoire*, is gorged in words that cannot impede her growth spurts. Approaching monstrous adolescence, as when her neck grows and leaves the rest of her body behind, she grows unevenly at best. Spurned by the fears and anxieties familiar to adolescence, part girl and part more, Alice sheds buckets of

tears of shame. “‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself,’ said Alice, ‘a great girl like you,’ (she might well say this), ‘to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!’ But she went on all the same, shedding gallons of tears, until there was a large pool all around her” (36). (As Barthes has written, “Who endures contradictions without shame?”<sup>13</sup>) Disproportionate, she is no longer just girl.

Alice’s new adolescent appetite, ranging from the voracious to the delicate, is signaled with the turn of nearly every page: from being accused of eating eggs by the Pigeon, to her disappointment in finding the orange marmalade jar empty, to quickly finishing off a drink that tastes “a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy and hot buttered toast” (31), to passing out comfits (hard sweetmeats) as prizes, to eating a cake with currants that spell out EAT ME, to eating cakes out of pebbles, to swallowing bits of mushroom, to imagining whether cats eat bats or bats eat cats, to talking about cats who eat mice and dogs who eat rats, to a mouse nearly drowning. Alice’s eclectic tastes emphasize her impurity, her indignity, what the Pigeon can see as nothing short of cannibalism. Awkward growth, outrageous appetites, she is becoming teenager, becoming monster. The Pigeon to Alice: “You’re looking for eggs, I know *that* well enough; and what does it matter to me whether you’re a little girl or a serpent” (76). She is *looking* like an adolescent.

Like Alice, like Barthes, I too am looking for eggs: good- and bad-object eggs, chocolate and golden eggs, eggs to find me adolescent, to seek me my reader.

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*Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche (que je le “drague”),  
sans savoir où il est. Un espace de la  
jouissance est alors créé.*

*I must seek out this reader (must “cruise” him) without  
knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created.*

— Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*  
(*The Pleasure of the Text*)<sup>14</sup>

XXXIII  
*A Queer*  
Note  
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