

Robert W. Brockway

### The *Descensus Ad Inferos* of Lewis Carroll

On July 4, 1862 (which was either “cloudless blue above” or “cool and rather wet”), a party of picnickers strolled through Christ Church Meadows, Oxford to Folly Bridge where they boarded a gig on the Isis and rowed upstream to a spot where they spent a pleasant afternoon. While Robinson Duckworth rowed stroke, a pale Anglican divine who was also a learned mathematician rowed stroke and entertained little Alice Liddell and her two sisters with a fantasy which he made up as they drifted along.<sup>1</sup> The story was about a girl named Alice who chased a waistcoated rabbit down a hole and plunged into a strange underground Wonderland where everything was topsy-turvy. At Alice’s request, Dodgson wrote *Alice’s Adventures Underground* which was published three years later under the pen-name Lewis Carroll.<sup>2</sup>

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the sequel *Through the Looking Glass* have flourished as masterpieces more pleasing to adults than to children because of their remarkable symbolism and profundity. Wonderland is the inner chaos of the human psyche and Alice the archetypal heroine who descends into hell. She is a Victorian Inanna and her story is in the tradition of the Sixth Book of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Inferno*. While there is no suggestion of conscious derivation or adaptation of this descent theme on Carroll’s part, it is interesting that the story occurred to him during the Late Romantic era when considerable attention was being given the idea of unconscious mind, especially in the Germanies but also in Britain.<sup>3</sup> This preoccupation was to culminate at *fin de siècle* in both psychoanalysis and C. G. Jung’s theory of collective unconscious.<sup>4</sup>

The *descensus ad inferos* or descent into the nether regions occurs in Sumerian mythology in the *Descent of Inanna* and is also the theme of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story of Psyche and Amor in Apuleius, also in Balder’s ride into Hel in Norse mythology. As Eliade shows, Siberian and North American shamans frequently make a psychic descent into hell during trance states.<sup>5</sup> Among Altaians, for

example, the shaman makes a psychic journey across desert and steppe, a perilous quest which eventually leads to the pit down which he plunges into Erlik Khan's kingdom of the dead. Eliade also notes the cosmogonic dive myth which he believes was brought to North America from Siberia by Palaeolithic migrants.<sup>6</sup> In the typical myth an animal is commissioned by the creator god to dive down to the bottom of the sea and retrieve the soil from which the cosmos is created. In many Asiatic versions the animal is actually a man in the shape of an animal. He seeks to set himself higher than the creator god and is punished for his sin. Thus, in an Altaic version, Erlik Khan is Lord of the Underworld because he was the first man to die, a consequence of his sin of pride. He was the adversary who defied the creator god by attempting to be creator himself instead of agent.

In the beginning when there were only the Waters, God and a man were swimming together in the shape of black geese. The "man" tried to rise higher than God and fell into the water. He begged God to help him and make a stone rise from the waters and God sent him to fetch it. The man kept a little in his mouth and the silt began to rise. He had to spit thus producing the marshes. God said, "You have sinned, and your subjects will be evil. My subjects will be pious; they will see the sun, the Light, and I shall be called Kurbystan. As for you, you shall be Erlik."<sup>7</sup>

Eliade suggests that this story is typical.<sup>8</sup> The theme is cosmogonic and the high god creates cosmos from the chaos of primordial waters much as Elohim forms the firmament out of *tehom* in the Genesis cosmogony or Enlil creates cosmos from the body of the salt water ogress *Tiamat* in the Akkadian *Enuma elish* and its Sumerian antecedents.<sup>9</sup> Primeval waters also stand for primordial chaos from which cosmos is formed in the *Theogony* of Hesiod.<sup>10</sup> Examples of the cosmogonic dive as well as of primordial waters as chaos can, of course, be found in many cultures throughout the world and ranges through Polynesia, Australia, the Americas, and Eurasia. It appears to be encountered less frequently in Africa.<sup>11</sup> In some mythologies the descent is into the belly of a sea monster, as in the Finnish *Väinämöinen* stories,<sup>12</sup> in others the descent is sub-terrestrial. The myths vary. Inanna descends into the subterranean land of the dead to challenge her sister; Orpheus and Psyche go down into Hades to revive their lovers; the Siberian creator animal dives to the bottom of the sea to bring cosmos out of chaos; *Väinämöinen* is swallowed up and imprisoned. There is, in other words, the risk of comparing oranges and apples in any attempt to find a common theme in *descensus ad inferos* stories. At the same time, just as oranges and apples are all fruit so do descent stories share the category of quest-myth. Whatever the purpose or goal, the hero or heroine descends into the depths to

emerge wiser than before. While wisdom is by no means the only motive of the journey, it is the one most frequently encountered. The Altaian shaman seeks the wisdom of the dead; Odysseus sailed to the distant land of the Cimmerians to seek the spirit of the blind Tiresias, the Theban sooth-sayer whom Persephone had given occult powers of comprehension.<sup>13</sup> Aeneas descends into the depths of Orcus to find his dead father Anchises and learn his destiny. Thus, while the descent may be an underground plunge, a dive into the depths of the sea, a swallowing up by a sea monster, or a flight into outer darkness, the journey is usually a quest for wisdom.

C. G. Jung refers to the descent story as the *Nekyia* from *Vékus* or corpse, the title of the Eleventh Book of the *Odyssey*. The *Nekyia* is the journey into the Land of the Dead by the living hero/heroine far away and downward into another plane of existence, a realm beyond the limits of the world of the living even if, geographically speaking, it is still part of the same world.<sup>14</sup> Jung was intrigued by the recurrence of the *Nekyia* in the dreams of some of his patients. "In the sea lies a treasure. To reach it he [the dreamer] has to dive through a narrow opening. This is dangerous, but down below he will find a companion. The dreamer takes a plunge into the dark and discovers a beautiful garden in the depths, symmetrically laid out, with a fountain in the center." Jung interprets "the treasure hard to find" as the self which lies hidden in the ocean of unconscious and which only can be reached by the plunge into the depths. The descent into the depths motif is archetypal.

Dante is highly important as a link between archaic mythology and modern thought, especially where the *Nekyia* or *descensus* is concerned. Dante embarks on his journey *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* to meet "the spirits of the ancestors in order to grasp their earthly ways and ours."<sup>15</sup> He first plunges into the Dark Wood in the midst of which lies the entrance into Inferno, the necessary preliminary to the Vision of Hell and here encounters the shade of Virgil who guides him into the depths. There are seven concentric rings which spiral down through rocky gorge and Alpine crag to the frozen pit where Lucifer, buried up to the waist in eternal ice, devours sinners.<sup>16</sup>

In grand design Inferno is the ante-chamber to Purgatorio by which those who persevere eventually attain Paradise and the Beatific Vision. At the gates of Paradise Virgil can go no further but passes Dante on to the angelic Beatrice. Dante could not go on until he had fully explored the significance of the Dark Wood, nor could he enter Purgatorio until he had descended into the depths of Inferno. The imprint of the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid* is clear in *The Divine Comedy*

just as, in turn, Virgil's *descensus ad inferos* has its thematic antecedents all the way back to Homer and possibly to archaic shamanism.

Does *The Divine Comedy* culminate the history of the *descensus ad inferos*? I suggest that it does not, but from the Renaissance on the motif moves from epic to what Northrop Frye calls low mimesis or fictional realism by way of romance and high mimesis. This development is described by Frye in his *The Anatomy of Criticism* in his schema in which there is an evolution in the history of Western Literature in terms of a thematic and modal flow from myth to epic, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis and, finally, irony which he suggests leads back to myth once more.<sup>17</sup> As a literary theme, then, the *descensus ad inferos* first appears in the archaic myths such as *The Descent of Inanna* and given epical form by Virgil and Dante. While the way thereafter is not quite as clear, it is generally accepted that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example, bears an ironic relationship to Dante's *Inferno* and it is also sometimes suggested that Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* is a *descensus ad inferos*.

Without attempting to follow the various possible stages of the *descensus* in terms of transitional literary modes, I suggest that such an examination by competent literary scholars would probably disclose romantic and mimetic expressions of this theme and a schema in which there is an evolution from the predominantly sacred mythical modes to the modern secular forms of literature: a great deal of modern fiction and poetry gives voice to the *descensus ad inferos* motif. I further suggest that an investigation of this development illuminates our understanding of religious thought especially in terms of the relationship of sacred and secular, archaic and modern.

My further suggestion is that children's stories are possibly closer than any other to the mythical mode, especially those classics of the last century and early years of this one such as the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, Collodi's *Pinocchio*, and Frank Baum *The Wizard of Oz* which were invented just after the disappearance of the fairy tale and folk tale as orally transmitted stories. Once the Grimm brothers had collected, recorded, edited, and published German fairy tales that tradition became frozen, a process which occurred with mythology in the ancient world with the classical writers. Considering the close relationship between the folk tale and myth, it is possible to see at least some of the children's literature of the last century as bearing a relationship of epic to myth. While Anderson is believed to have drawn on Danish folklore, the writers of late nineteenth-century children's stories invented their tales. Still, they could not possibly be immune from the cultural heritage as well as from fashions and currents of their times so that what was created invariably bore the

watermark of both tradition and contemporary literary modes both in form and substance.

Lewis Carroll belongs in a category with Collodi and Baum as a creative writer of children's stories rather than a collector and adaptor like the Grimms. Most critics find the sources of Carroll's imagery adequately explained in terms of his own early years in a Yorkshire parsonage. The first Alice story is also supposed to have been inspired by the sight of a rabbit leaping down its hole during the upstream row that July afternoon. Dodgson and the children saw the rabbit and the don started the story, making it up as he went along, and as it occurred to him. At the same time, he necessarily gave expression to both sub-conscious and unconscious motifs the way that story tellers do and, as a creative writer, is known to have elaborated on them further after the excursion when he retired to his chambers and composed the tale more or less as he had told it. Frye refers to the Alice stories as poems which implies even more where symbolism and imagery are concerned, and, to say something further, the poems are ironic.<sup>18</sup> As such they bear a particularly close relationship to myth.

The Alice stories are dreams and, from the Freudian point of view of A.M.E. Goldschmidt, abound in psychoanalytic symbolism. Alice is Ego penetrating the depths of Id. In her dream, Alice leaps down the rabbit hole and chases the white bunny down a labyrinth through a "long low hall" round which are locked doors.<sup>19</sup> While no evidence of pedophilia has been found for the highly repressed and moralistic Dodgson, the Alice stories abound in sexual symbols. What is more interesting, however, is the recurrence of the *descensus ad inferos* theme with or without sexual implication as a motif of an inner journey into the depths of psyche and the discovery of inner chaos barely contained by the fragile ego. Further, what is implied for the self is also voiced for humanity in general, the comment that law, order, and the conventions are appearances which cloak a hidden realm of violent disorder and absurdity. The Alice books, and especially *Wonderland*, offer bleak observations concerning the fragile and largely illusory character of rationality and morality and all other ego functions as well as reality testing itself. Is reality the surface world of common sense order or the psychotic inner world of absurdity, impulse, and intense hostility?

The Alice stories also lend themselves to Jungian analysis. Alice is Carroll's *anima*, archetype of the feminine principle, "who moves from innocence to experience, unconsciousness to consciousness," his Beatrice who conducts him, however, through Inferno rather than Paradiso, "the mediatrix of his psychic universe." Wonderland is the Shadow realm which corresponds to the Freudian id. It is the psychic

underground and Alice the Child Archetype who unites opposites, the healer who makes all things whole and who is also, symbolically speaking, roundness, the circle, sphere, quaternity, mandala, and, therefore, both the archetypal self and God in the Jungian meaning of the latter term. This interpretation is much more optimistic than the Freudian and sees Wonderland as a potentiality which Alice herself transforms into wholeness because as Child Archetype "the child is all that is abandoned and exposed, and, at the same time, divinely powerful, the insignificant beginning and the triumphant end."<sup>20</sup>

While the foregoing interpretation of Judith Bloomigdale is not without considerable interest, it is perhaps too explicit. The same can be said for Goldschmidt's Freudian analysis. Both are pat and in both the effort to force Carroll and his stories into depth psychological theories and modes are suspect. Without specific application of either Freudian or Jungian theories in detail, however, there can be little question but that the concept of the unconscious is implied. I prefer the approach of Joseph Campbell<sup>21</sup> in which the implications are allowed as such but without insistence on sexual symbolism on the one hand or specific archetypes on the other.

What does follow is the recognition that Carroll's Alice books are examples of modern literary creations which echo archaic mythology. They also exemplify the way certain works of children's literature closely resemble myth even though they are not authentic fairy tales but works of creative writers.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a quest myth which employs the *descensus ad inferos* motif. Alice plunges down the rabbit hole on impulse and, by so doing follows a particular mode in which the adventure is leaped into by chance rather than intent. Beneath the tiny door she glimpses "the loveliest garden you ever saw" and after much fumbling because of her awkward size, either too big or too small, she manages to find her way into the strange underground world with its hostile creatures. Here, in the course of her encounters with the rude caterpillar, the Mad Hatter and his crazy guests, the screaming Duchess, and the capricious Queen of Hearts, she discovers that the flowers in what she thought was a beautiful garden are painted. By the time she attends the tea party and meets the Cheshire Cat she has almost reached the bottom of her descent into the abyss. The Cat is the one creature who offers any explanation of pandemonium but he cannot be relied on as an ally.

'Oh you can't help that,' he says, '...we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' Alice retorts.

'You must be or you wouldn't come here,' says the Cat.<sup>22</sup>

Alice is bemused. Her plunge underground is a dive into Unreason, a demonic realm full of wildness and peril, ruled over by a mad queen who constantly shouts "Off with their heads!" but whose commands are never obeyed. All the elemental forces be free, their secrets held by the playing card royals. In truth they are a sham, a sham within a sham since the initial above-ground perspectives are also illusory. At the crazy trial Alice discovers what she has been given reasons to suspect from the first encounter with the Queen at the croquet game. They are really only playing cards. At the trial of the Knave of Hearts Alice grows gigantic once more until she towers over the court and its creatures. In exasperation she shouts "Nonsense!" The words have magic effect because her tormentors turn into the cards they have been all along and the wind blows them away.<sup>23</sup> Neither they nor any of the other denizens underground ever had substance but were always illusory. Alice ascends from her Wonderland dream awakened by her sister and runs off to tea. In *Through the Looking Glass*, the sequel, Alice enters a different kind of quest, one in which she is eventually crowned Queen in the world of the chessmen.

What has she (and Carroll) learned? Like the shaman in his journey down into the Land of the Dead, Alice has braved the ordeals and perils and has been rewarded with wisdom both about herself and the world. While life is not really as it seems in terms of conventional wisdom, what at first appears to be hell is actually redemptive being composed of phantasms without substance. They really are nonsense, not reality. This realization is the beginning of her salvation. Appropriate to a Victorian Anglican clergyman, Carroll's Alice books are soteriological in implication and, as such, far more effective than his later didactic stories which were both sentimental and highly explicit in their Christian orthodoxy. While Carroll did not intend the Alice books to be such they are gospels of a sort addressed to children but with nuances which can only be grasped by adults. In their imagery and drama the stories have charm which has made them classics but they also convey deep insights which are of a religious character and which belong in the ancient tradition of the archaic quest myth. In the *descensus ad inferos* of his heroine Carroll, inadvertently or not, voiced universal truths and was, in that sense, a prophet.

## NOTES

1. C. F. Derek Hudson, *Lewis Carroll* (London: Constable, 1959) pp. 129ff.
2. Florence Becker Lennon, *The Life of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Dover, 1972) pp. 137f.
3. Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970) p. 205ff.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
5. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1974) pp. 4ff.
6. Eliade, *Zalmoxis the Vanishing God* (Chicago: The University of Press, 1970) p. 101.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Cf. ANET, Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (New York: Harper, 1961) pp. 83-7.
10. P. O. Morford, Robert Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (London: Longman's, 1977) p. 24.
11. Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 178.
12. Giorgio de Santillana, Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*, (Boston: David Godine, 1977) pp. 103f.
13. C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, Complete Works*, XII, (Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 53.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Philip Wicksteed, "Hell," in *Discussions of the Divine Comedy*, Irma Brandeis, ed., (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1961) p. 125. Cf. also Frances Ferguson, "The Metaphor of the Journey," *Ibid.*, p. 69.
16. Wicksteed, in *Discussions* p. 125ff.; Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, A New Translation into English Blank Verse by Lawrence Grant White* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948).
17. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1966) ch. i.
18. Frye, *The Secular Scriptures: A Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) p. 124.
19. A. M. E. Goldschmidt, "Alice in Wonderland Psychoanalyzed" in *Aspects of Alice*, Robert Phillips Ed., (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972).
20. Judith Bloomingdale, "Alice as Anima": The Image of Woman in Carroll's Classic", *Aspects of Alice*....pp. 380ff.
21. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1973).
22. *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll, with an introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (New York: Bramhall House, 194) p. 37.
23. *Ibid.*, p. p. 162f.