

The Art of the Child: Turning the Lens on Lewis Carroll

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Introduction

In mid-2008, those who could bear to watch bore witness to the gross evisceration of a protectionist underbelly; a kind of pro-child, anti-art movement that pulsed across Australia, turning photographer into paedophile and viewer into pervert. When the New South Wales Police shut down an exhibition of Bill Henson's photographs at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington, Sydney, it sparked commentary and debate on the scale of the *Tampa* case, the Chamberlain trial, and the issue of a governmental apology to indigenous Australians. Whilst a handful of eminent artists leapt to his defence, Henson and his child nude images were widely decried, one vociferous critic declaring "it is child pornography, it is child exploitation, and it is a crime".¹ For the ostensible moral majority, it was deemed an act of depravity to *photograph* a naked child, to *display* the photograph of a naked child, or to *view* the photograph of naked child. Henson was pilloried, the gallery owner viciously rebuked, and the good name of good art dragged through a very muddy circus.²

The rationale for this extreme reaction can only be the obdurate position that an unclothed child occupies a necessarily *sexualised* space in the company, or in the view, of an adult. It is a grand, myth-making enterprise; an act of 'innocence profiling' that attempts to define childhood as a fixed and primitive period, delicate and sexless in nature. The innocence profile erases the nuanced complexities of childhood, obtusely denying the child any freedom to act wilfully or identify sexually. Henry Jenkins explains:

the myth of childhood innocence 'empties' the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfil the symbolic

¹ David Marr, *The Henson Case* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2008), p. 15.

² See, for example, C. Masters, G. Trickey, J. Vallejo, & M. Westwood, 'Artist Bill Henson Faces Child Porn Art Investigation', *Herald Sun* (23 May, 2008), at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/charges-on-child-porn-art/story-0-111116421110>. Accessed 23/12/09.

demands we make upon it. The innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing, and demands nothing – except, perhaps, its own innocence.³

For the adult and for the child the Henson saga was a sad indictment. The controversy ushered in a new penal code for photographers, naming child as unwitting nymph and adult as insidious deviant. In a climate of paedophilia-phobia, child nakedness became a perilous condition, plainly cautioned by the vociferous critic in her pronouncement: “to depict children naked ... that is porn”.⁴ And whilst the saga may have ebbed, the legacy flows. For the adult with the camera there is no longer a presumption of innocence; innocence is the exclusive domain of the child.

Henson was not the first photographer to sustain the strike of society’s moral hammer. Indeed, it seems something of a contemporary trend to earmark photographs of children *sans habilement* and reinvent the motives of the person behind the lens. Reflecting on this custom, Joanna Mendolssohn identifies advertising and its subcontextual layering as a cause for our inclination to overanalyse art. So accustomed are we to the concept of subtext that “all possible imputations are drawn from an image”, and meaning is entirely mutable.⁵ Mendolssohn’s adage, “Yesterday’s innocence is today’s evidence of intent to corrupt”, rings true for photographers Sally Mann, Jock Sturges, David Hamilton, and Polixeni Papapetrou, who have each weathered aspersions against their images of nude children.⁶ Even photographers no longer alive to protest are posthumously slandered with “crass and entirely inappropriate” exegeses of their portfolios.⁷ Victorian painters and photographers are common targets of such disparagement, with Charles Dodgson a conspicuous victim of the campaign.

Charles Dodgson and the Child Nude

Charles Dodgson is better known as the famed children’s author, Lewis Carroll. Dodgson was born into a high-church Anglican family in 1832. His formative years acquainted him with the academic elite, the artistically-inclined, and the Christian of heart. It was not surprising that in his maturity he would hold the Mathematical Lectureship at Christ Church College, Oxford,

³ Henry Jenkins, 1998, ‘The Innocent Child And Other Modern Myths’, in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. H. Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 1.

⁴ Marr, *The Henson Case*, p. 44.

⁵ Joanna Mendolssohn, ‘Bill Henson’s Images Not Paedophilia’, *ABC News – Unleashed* (23 May, 2008), at <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/stories/s2253908.htm>. Accessed 1/12/2009.

⁶ Mendolssohn, ‘Bill Henson’s Images Not Paedophilia’.

⁷ Karoline Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll* (London: Peter Owen, 1999), p. 68.

take Deacons' orders through the Cathedral, and establish himself as an enduringly popular author of children's fantasy. Though much of his portfolio has been destroyed, he would also come to be regarded amongst the most technically proficient photographers of child subjects in the nineteenth century.

In addition to his biographical particulars, Dodgson's interest in children in general is also of major significance. On his many young acquaintances, and indeed to older ones also, Dodgson bestowed the affectionate moniker 'child-friend',⁸ and it is regrettably this very term that echoes unfavourably through the misinformed pop-hagiography of his life. Amongst other epithets, Charles Dodgson carries the retrofitted title of a 'paedophile'.

In the poison-pen accusations levelled against him, Dodgson has been described as "utterly depend[ent] upon the company and the affection of little girls",⁹ as a man "whose sexual energies sought unconventional outlets",¹⁰ and a man whose photography skated "perilously close to a kind of substitute for the sexual act".¹¹ The relationships he enjoyed with children, and the whimsical, invented worlds they cohabited have been variously maligned as sick and exploitative, and his desire to photograph young children fashioned into some kind of lustful, predatory fetish. Even those who have suffered similar besmirchment show little support for Dodgson. In an interview with *Vogue Magazine* in 1966, Vladimir Nabokov, author of *Lolita*, was asked to comment on the issue of Dodgson's supposed child fetish. His reply was laconic but unambiguous in design: "Have you seen those photographs of him with little girls?"¹²

To support this unfavourable rendering of Dodgson, early twentieth-century biographies offer other anecdotal tidbits of information selectively restyled to fit the model of a paedophile. For example, it is invariably

⁸ See Leach's comment: "It was Dodgson who invented the now famous term 'child-friend'. But with typical elusiveness he chose to use it in a peculiarly personal, almost deliberately misleading way. For Dodgson a 'child-friend' was any female of almost any age — at least under forty — with whom he enjoyed a relationship of a special kind of closeness. Some indeed were little girls, some began as such but grew up and were still "child-friends" at twenty or thirty; some were given the name even though their relationship with Dodgson began when they were young women. A little girl of ten and a married woman of thirty-five, a child he met once at the beach and a woman he shared intimate exchanges with for twenty years or more, might equally be termed 'child-friends' by Dodgson", Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, pp. 12-13.

⁹ Michael Bakewell, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1996), p. xvii.

¹⁰ Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 530.

¹¹ Bakewell, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, p. 245.

¹² Cited in Bill Reed, 'Legend of Lewis Carroll Has Dark Side', *The Gazette* (26 October, 2006), at <http://www.gazette.com/articles/carroll-6600-alice-dodgson.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

misreported that Dodgson was uninterested in adult company; that he associated exclusively with children. It is also alleged that he detached himself from all involvement with his female child-friends after they turned fourteen, suggesting that his interest in them was entirely confined to their pre-pubesence. Dodgson's bachelorhood is also cited as evidence of his disinclination towards orthodox adult partnerships, and his declination to take Bishop's orders through the Cathedral a sign that his profligate lifestyle produced in him enough Christian guilt to view the appointment as ethically untenable.

In 1933 Anthony Goldschmidt furnished a Freudian biography of Dodgson that aimed to profile him through the lens of his most popular work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The article, titled 'Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analysed',¹³ remapped the entire landscape of Wonderland onto a sexually-galvanised terrain where each feature and each action therein ultimately revealed something of Dodgson's carnal motives. The fall down the rabbit hole symbolised sexual penetration, and Alice's choice of the small door over the large door clearly mirrored Dodgson's own paedophilic preference for 'smaller' things. Whilst it has been speculated that Goldschmidt's treatise was tendered with tongue in cheek, the influence of his analysis cannot be soft-pedalled.¹⁴ Subsequent authors readily (and earnestly) took Goldschmidt's psychoanalytical lead, with Paul Schilder suggesting in 1938 that Alice might have been, for Dodgson, something of a substitute penis.¹⁵ In fact, so proliferate was this Freudian take on Wonderland that it insinuated itself into almost every biographical utterance concerning Dodgson for over sixty years. Even the pool-of-tears episode cannot escape a Freudian check-up, with William Empson explaining of Alice: "She runs the whole gamut: she is a father in getting down the hole, a fetus at the bottom, and can only be born by becoming a mother and producing her own amniotic fluid".¹⁶ For Empson, it is a Wonderland of wombs and rectums, and the architect a schizoid sex-fiend peddling filth into the orifice of literature.

With this picture of Dodgson firmly etched by the 1970s, it is unsurprising that he was to be further maligned in common folklore by

¹³ Anthony M. E. Goldschmidt, 'Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analysed', in *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Karoline Leach (London: Peter Owen, 1999), pp. 35-38.

¹⁴ Goldschmidt, 'Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analysed', p. 36.

¹⁵ Paul Schilder, 'Psychoanalytic Remarks on *Alice in Wonderland* and Lewis Carroll', *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, vol. 87, no. 2 (1938), pp. 159-168.

¹⁶ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk CT: New Directions, 1938), p. 260.

suggestions of opium addiction.¹⁷ This of course played neatly into the psychotropic counterculture of the 60s and 70s, with Charles Dodgson and his phantasmagorical writings enjoying new-found fandom in the hippie movement. Two articles in the book *Reading the Beatles* examine the influence of Dodgson on the nonsense lyrics of Lennon and McCartney. Walter Everett notes that 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' is "Lewis Carroll-inspired",¹⁸ while Ian Marshall comments that in 'I am the Walrus' "Alice is thematically pertinent".¹⁹ Lennon's lyric, 'I am he as you are he as you are me and we are altogether' is:

[R]eminiscent of Alice's identity crisis in *Adventures Through the Looking-Glass*, when she asks, "Was I the same when I got up this morning?... I'm sure I'm not Ada ... and I'm sure I can't be Mabel ... Besides, *she's* she, and *I'm* I ... Who am I, then?"²⁰

(In addition to the Dodgson connection, it can be of no coincidence that these two songs are popularly re-read as psychedelic excursions into the world of LSD.)

Alice has also enjoyed resurrection in innumerable filmic interpretations. Whilst the 1951 Disney animation is probably the best known, several made-for-television renditions have summoned cultic status, possibly due to the cameo roles of such prominent actors as Whoopi Goldberg, Sammy Davis Jr, Ringo Starr, Shelley Winters, Red Buttons, Beau and Lloyd Bridges, Martin Short, Gene Wilder, and Sir Ben Kingsley. Even an X-Rated musical adaptation, the 1976 *Alice In Wonderland: A Musical Porno* was a phenomenal success, remaining one of the highest grossing adult films of all time.²¹

As if Dodgson's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was a necessary work of either perversion, drug-influence or brainsickness, suggestions of epilepsy, migraine, and tumours have also abounded. In fact, so open was Dodgson's reputation to aberration and aspersion that in 1996 he found himself

¹⁷ See, for example, such comments as those in Kate Connell, 'Opium as a Possible Influence on the Alice Books', *Lenny's Alice in Wonderland Site* (1997), at <http://www.alice-in-wonderland.net/explain/alice816.html>. Accessed 23/12/09.

¹⁸ Walter Everett, 'Painting Their Room in a Colorful Way: The Beatles' Exploration of Timbre', in *Reading the Beatles: Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, And the Fab Four*, eds Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 86.

¹⁹ Ian Marshall, 'I am He as You are He as You are Me and We are All Together: Bakhtin and the Beatles', in *Reading the Beatles: Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, And the Fab Four*, eds Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 17.

²⁰ Marshall, 'I am He as You are He', pp. 17-18.

²¹ Bill Osco (prod.), *Alice in Wonderland* (Subversive Cinema, 2007 [1976]), at <http://www.subversivecinema.com/>. Accessed 20/12/09.

named as a new suspect in the infamous Jack the Ripper murders. Richard Wallace, who floated the Dodgson-as-Ripper theory, formulated his hypothesis on a series of lines extracted from *Nursery Alice*, which, when anagrammed according to Wallace's design, revealed definitive confessions. Dodgson, a keen mathematician and word-game player, was known to have toyed with anagrams to some level of technical proficiency. He was also known to possess a strong confessional inclination, driven by an ongoing sense of Christian guilt. These two attributes, in combination with Dodgson's peculiar psychopathy, apparently provided Wallace the validation he required to tender the anagram theory. From Dodgson's *Nursery Alice*, Wallace takes the following passage:

So she wandered away, through the wood, carrying the ugly little thing with her. And a great job it was to keep hold of it, it wriggled about so. But at last she found out that the proper way was to keep tight hold of its left foot and its right ear.

And anagrammatically works it into:

She wriggled about so! But at last Dodgson and Bayne found a way to keep hold of the fat little whore. I got a tight hold of her and slit her throat, left ear to right. It was tough, wet, disgusting, too. So weary of it, they threw up - Jack the Ripper.²²

Even *entertaining* the ideas that a) Dodgson is Jack the Ripper and that b) Dodgson's elaborate prose exists essentially as an anagrammatic cryptogram that confesses the former, fashions him into something of a *savant*; a kind of splinter-skilled serial killer-type figure; the kind of individual no parent would allow their child to be familiar with.

But invariably for Charles Dodgson, parents readily did. If we can remove the mythological barnacles that have built up over the twentieth century and now obscure his likely nature; if we can push aside the suspicions of mass murder and the accusations of paedophilia, and seat ourselves in a time before Freud had unlocked the grottoes of the shameful subconscious, a very unscandalous picture allows itself to be drawn. The picture shapes a deeply sensitive, deeply grounded, and deeply pious individual. The picture also reveals something of the social milieu in which that individual existed, and the attitudes – particularly the attitudes towards children – that informed acceptable standards of adult conduct. In reference to Dodgson's relationships with children, Leach explains: "Things that spoke to the Victorians of naivety and sweetness speak to the twentieth century of hypocrisy and deviant, dangerous, repressed sexuality".²³ Whatever suspicion of iniquity may be

²² Cited in Karoline Leach, 'Jack Through the Looking Glass (or Wallace in Wonderland)', *Casebook: Jack The Ripper* website (2000) at, <http://www.casebook.org/dissertations/dst-leachwallace.html>. Accessed 23/12/09.

²³ Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, p. 35.

glossed upon him, it should not be ignored that Dodgson “was working well within his educated bourgeois Victorian sensibility”.²⁴

Through his lecturing position at Christ Church, Dodgson became well-acquainted with the family of the Dean, Henry Liddell, and with Henry’s young daughter, Alice, who would become the eponymous dream-child of his Wonderland adventures. Alice was not his exclusive child-friend, however. In fact, from indications in his diary and collections of letters, his child-friends numbered in the hundreds. So, what exactly was the nature of these relationships, and do they actually require any special kind of justification? If Dodgson must be explained, it seems most propitious to understand him as something of a *padré*; a fatherly confidant, a spiritual guide, an entertainer, an advocate, and a friend. He was certainly possessed of the church credentials to deliver appropriate Christian counsel, and was known to espouse a most moralistic, repentant faith. His diaries are peppered with confessional sentiments, prayers, and biblical hymns of compunction, suggesting that Dodgson was not merely principled in the Christian tradition but indeed fearful of being forsaken by the God he revered.

Critics are quick to pounce on the confessional timbre of Dodgson’s diary, suggesting it evinces an enduring guilt. His 1862 supplication, “Oh God, help me to live a better and more earnest life” is typical of the entreaties that colour his journals.²⁵ “Gracious Lord”, he implores in June, 1866, “send Thy Holy Spirit to dwell in this sinful heart – to purify this corrupt affection – to warm into life this cold love for Thee”.²⁶ For those who maintain that Dodgson was improperly involved with Alice Liddell – or indeed that he asked for the child’s hand in marriage – such murmurs of atonement juicily corroborate the rumours. But of course, as Leach explains, there remains “no evidence, either *prima facie* or secondary, cryptic or elliptic” that Dodgson was romantically inclined toward Alice or any other child, thus the suggestion that his self-denunciation is a product of such improper conduct becomes sophistic.²⁷ In that Dodgson distinguishes a ‘distance’ between himself and God, it is perhaps best to understand his lamentations as resonant with his denominational bent, as Lucas remarks: “Dodgson was not an Eighteenth-Century Deist... he was a

²⁴ Mendelssohn, ‘Bill Henson’s Images Not Paedophilia’.

²⁵ Cited in Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, p. 140.

²⁶ Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, p. 142.

²⁷ Leach, *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, p. 172.

child – or perhaps better a grand-child – of the Oxford Movement, founding his faith on God’s revelation of Himself in His son, Jesus Christ”.²⁸

The Oxford Movement was a philosophical tract espoused by an alliance of Anglican theologians, most of them Oxford associates, in the middle of the nineteenth century. In short, it propounded a re-Romanisation of the High Church, and a Catholicisation of liturgy, doctrine, and practice. The chief propagandist of the Oxford Movement, Dr. E. B. Pusey, in particular, promoted a doctrinal return to the practice of confession, both in public/performative and private/psychological terms. In 1846, Pusey delivered a sermon at Oxford, entitled ‘The Keys of the Kingdom and the Complete Absolution of Sinners’, after which he was increasingly called upon by persons who “wanted to make confession to him and receive absolution from him”.²⁹ As a result of this burgeoning trend, it was reported by spokesmen of the Movement that confessors were,

filled with a powerful new feeling, with a warmth and enthusiasm that caused them to talk readily about what weighed on their minds... They cast their sinful lives behind them, resolving that they would surrender themselves to God and follow His commandments.³⁰

Dodgson, who sympathised with Pusey’s campaign, and whose father was influential in the inception of the Oxford movement, is a product of its promise. Unlike Pusey, who “love[d] [his] grief better than any hollow joy”,³¹ Dodgson retained an inescapable Anglicanism in his appreciation of a loving, creative God. But in his effusive inclination to confess and repent, the influence of the Oxford Movement cannot be ignored.³²

Whilst it is tempting to pursue a Christian analysis of the Lewis Carroll stories, and to understand the author’s spiritual interests as saturative, it must be made clear that ‘Lewis Carroll’ is not merely a pen-name but something of an alter-ego. It was under this name and in this otherworld that Dodgson was

²⁸ J. R. Lucas, ‘Charles Dodgson: A Talk given in St Mary’s, Guildford, on May 17th, 1998’, *The Home Page of J. R. Lucas* (1998), at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~jrlucas/dodgson.html>. Accessed 23/12/09.

²⁹ Erik G.A. Berggren, *The Psychology of Confession* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), p. 12.

³⁰ Berggren, *The Psychology of Confession*, p. 61.

³¹ Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti, ‘Lewis Carroll: Mad Deacon’, *Blogcritics* (27 August, 2004) at <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/lewis-carroll-the-mad-deacon/>. Accessed 23/12/09.

³² Some writers have even attempted to understand *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as allegorical representations of infighting in the High Church, specifically between proponents of the Oxford Movement, and those who opposed it. For a succinct example, see Shane Leslie, ‘Lewis Carroll and the Oxford Movement’ in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll’s Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics’ Looking-Glasses*, ed. Robert S. Phillips (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972), pp. 211-219.

able to suspend his Christian rigour and visualise a kind of unstable, non-moral fantasy world, a world in which the laws of physics and of logic appear to take leave of themselves entirely. These imagined worlds of Dodgson's culminated, of course, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Through the Looking Glass*. In these heady, heterotopian stories, Dodgson encourages his child-readers through the character of Alice to venture, to risk, and to trust; to "find some freedom in a world of restraint".³³ As an author he educates and liberates, constructing contingencies that are fantastical but also didactic, as Rother explains: "[Dodgson]'s genius is expressed in his empathetic understanding of the terrors of childhood and in the ingenuity of the coping mechanisms he provides for the child's use".³⁴

In his real world, Dodgson was shy, reclusive, abstemious, charitable, socially diffident, and habitual to the point of eccentricity.³⁵ Some found his manner pompous, others child-like. He invariably declined invitations to dine, ate seldom and fussily, and was dogged all his life by an embarrassing stammer. He certainly preferred the company of children over that of adults, though ultimately spent more time with himself than with any others. As such, the themes of boredom and alienation that appear in the Alice stories register an autobiographical element, where the author is reflected in the predicament of the eponymous child character.

Despite its folkloric glory, Wonderland is in fact a tiresome place, a refracted version of that which bores and exhausts in the real world. It is "filled with adult institutions, including obnoxious tea parties and trials", and inflicts a sense of tedium in its unyielding failures of logic.³⁶ Through her ordeals, Alice must learn that momentary escape is possible, as Lennon remarks: "Charles, trapped in the cave of his period, was the laughing philosopher who could show others the way out".³⁷ Whatever deliverance they offered, the Alice books enjoyed immense popularity, and through the wild notoriety of 'Lewis

³³ C. Rother, 'Lewis Carroll's Lesson: Coping with Fears of Personal Destruction', *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 19, no. 1/2 (1984), p. 93.

³⁴ Rother, 'Lewis Carroll's Lesson', p. 89.

³⁵ Dodgson's choice of benefactors attests to his both his Christian and humanitarian natures. Amongst the scores of charities he supported, the following can be named: The Associate Institution for Improving and Enforcing the Laws for the Protection of Women, The Christian Evidence Society, The Dogs' Temporary Home, Dr. Barnardo's Home for Orphans, and The Lock Hospital for the Treatment of Venereal Disease.

³⁶ Jan B. Gordon, 'The Alice Books and the Metaphors of Victorian Childhood', in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses*, ed. Robert S. Phillips (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972), p. 102.

³⁷ Florence B. Lennon, *Victoria Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), p. 7.

Carroll', riddling fantasist, the author's child-friends propagated, though it was the sound and temperate Dodgson, of course, that they ultimately befriended.

It is partly through retrospective reinvention that Charles Dodgson does not enjoy the 'salvific' reputation of a C. S. Lewis-type figure. Ostensibly, Lewis and Dodgson's attitudes towards children, their roles as literary entertainers, and their commitment to the Christian faith seem to have been comparable. Both respected children and revelled in the unselfconscious imagination of the child-mind. Neither saw the child as a figure to ostracise, but rather to nurture and in turn, to be nurtured by. Said Dodgson of his child-friends: "Their innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful, and gives one a feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred".³⁸ C. S. Lewis derived similar pleasures, as one of his biographers explains:

Among the many letters Lewis received were thousands of fan letters from his young readers of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The author believed that answering these letters was his God-given duty, and his replies reflect the concern and care that he brought to the task. He once described it this way: "The child as reader is neither to be patronised nor idolised: we talk to him as man to man ... we must of course try to do [children] no harm."³⁹

A committed letter writer, Dodgson also maintained regular communication with his flock. The letters he wrote and received, hundreds of which have survived, suggest that a mutual and affectionate esteem resonated between Dodgson and his child-friends, many of whom enjoyed the task of scrutinising Lewis Carroll's newest stories and riddles. The following excerpts from his letters are typical of the kind of tender, amusing, and educative repartées he staged with them.

To Gertrude:

My dear old friend, (The friendship is old though the child is young). I wish you a very happy New Year, and many of them, to you and yours, but especially to you, because I know you best and love you most. And I pray God to bless you, dear child.⁴⁰

To Marion:

My dear Marion, ("dear" indeed! Remarkably dear, *I* should say! *What* doesn't that child cost me in journeys by Railways, and

³⁸ Morton N. Cohen (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: Papermac, 1996), p. 220.

³⁹ Lyle W. Dorsett, & Marjorie Lamp Mead (eds), *CS Lewis Letters to Children* (London: Collins Publishers, 1985), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Lewis Carroll, *A Selection from the Letters of Lewis Carroll (the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) to His Child-Friends Together with Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-Writing*, ed. Evelyn M. Hatch (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 105.

admissions to Aquariums, and luncheons, at which nothing will serve her but the most expensive jellies and turtle-soup, and such things! Not to mention the damages I have to pay for, when she gets savage and breaks things!)⁴¹

And to Edith:

My poor dear puzzled child. I won't write you such a hard letter another time. And can't you really guess what the gentleman meant when he said Your head is M.T.? Suppose I were to say to you: "Edith, my dear, my cup is M.T. – will you be so kind as to fill it with T?" Should you understand what I meant? Read it and try again ... always your loving friend, CL Dodgson.⁴²

It was Dodgson's habit to 'tease' his child-friends with riddles, anagrams, syzygies, mathematical puzzles, and picture-letters. Whether to intellectually stimulate or to simply bemuse, his letters suggest the employment of logic as a conduit for empathy: an invitation to the child to understand something of Dodgson. In terms of keeping company with children, Dodgson's own admission on the issue is perhaps the most telling. When prompted to discuss his preference for child company, he explained:

I don't think anybody, who has only seen children [in the company of adults], has any idea of the loveliness of a child's *mind* ... It is very healthy and helpful to one's own spiritual life: and humbling too, to come into contact with souls so much purer and nearer to God, than one feels oneself to be.⁴³

To the mother of a child-friend, he similarly remarked:

[M]any thanks for lending me Enid. She is one of the dearest of children. It is *good* for me (I mean, for one's spiritual life, and in the same sense in which reading the Bible is good) to come into contact with such sweetness and innocence.⁴⁴

Children also afforded Dodgson the kind of convivial interaction that University denied him. In a letter on loneliness to his child-friend Helen, Dodgson related the terrible boredom of life at Oxford in a simple affidavit: "There never was such a place for things not happening".⁴⁵ The parallel world that Dodgson inhabited outside the walls of Oxford – and particularly in the home of the Liddells – was supplementary and curative, as Clark explains:

⁴¹ Carroll, *A Selection from the Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 176.

⁴² Carroll, *A Selection from the Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 61.

⁴³ Cohen, *The selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 247.

⁴⁴ Cohen, *The selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 220

⁴⁵ Henry Levin, 'Wonderland Revisited' in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses*, ed. Robert S. Phillips (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972), p. 178.

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Alice and her sisters ... stepped into Dodgson's life at a time when there was a void which they were uniquely able to fill. The celibate atmosphere of Christ Church in those days was not a healthy one... [T]here was no denying that he missed the companionship of children in general, and little girls in particular. He had come from a large family.⁴⁶

It is thus not difficult to understand Dodgson's desire to be near to children, and to map his predilection onto the broader cultural currents of Victorian England.

Dodgson's sentiments chime agreeably with the 'cult of the child'; a powerful rhetoric that prospered in the politics of William Wilberforce and echoed in the poetics of Blake and Wordsworth. For the Victorians, purity was the ultimate human virtue. The child, of course, represented the most perfect article of purity, existing in a naturally sinless, almost prelapsarian state. The image of the innocent, often naked child was widely commodified; on birthday and Valentine's Day cards, in family albums, in photographic studies, and in sketches. For the Victorians, "the charm of buying childhood grew out of an active imagination that envisioned one's early years as a lost utopia: a bower to retreat to, a secret garden that every middle class person could enter through children's books and other child-centered products".⁴⁷ This bespoke appropriation of youthfulness was neither aberration nor perversion, but a nostalgic yearning for the idyll that is childhood.

For Dodgson – ever disillusioned by iniquity in the adult world; by malicious gossip, dishonesty, sexism, sexual abuse, bigotry and impiety – what appeal the child-world must have had! In this sense, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are not merely fantastical, but allegorical, illustrative of Dodgson's personal dilemma. Edmund Little explains:

Against the background of nastiness, Alice's charm stands out all the more clearly, and so, in a more subtle way, does her physical beauty. Wonderland and the territory behind the looking glass are full of physical ugliness.⁴⁸

Perhaps it is not solely Freudian slander that has ruined Dodgson, denying him the chaste reputation retained by C. S. Lewis. It may instead be of greater value to highlight a prominent but often overlooked dissimilarity in the authors' attitudes to child company: where Dodgson adored it, Lewis 'tolerated' it. In

⁴⁶ Anne Clark Amor, *The Real Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dream Child* (New York: Stein & Day, 1981), p. 49.

⁴⁷ Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3.

⁴⁸ T. Edmund Little, *The Fantasts: Studies in J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis Carroll, Mervyn Peake, Nikolai Gogol and Kenneth Grahame* (Amersham: Avebury, 1984), p. 47.

fact, it is often observed that much unlike Dodgson, “Lewis’s own direct contact with children was limited”,⁴⁹ spending very little time even with his own adopted sons.⁵⁰ Certain friends and biographers even suggest that despite the Narnia author’s adeptness in engaging younger generations, he frankly did not like children.⁵¹ In light of this biographical sketch, and keeping in mind the tendency for adult/child relationships to be heavily scrutinised, we can discern something of a ‘safe distance’ operating between Lewis and his fans; an appropriate protocol of adult/child conduct that satisfies the ethical superintendents and protects him from allegations of misdoing. No such concessions are offered to Dodgson, however, whose emotional proximity to children, even from a distance of over a century, is rendered far too immediate.

Perhaps the most improper ‘closeness’ attained by Dodgson – a position not approached by Lewis – was the role of child photographer. For Dodgson, who photographed children both naked and clothed, the ‘undraped’ child was aesthetically glorious. Whilst he was certainly sensitive to modesty, he saw not profanity but beauty in the body of a naked child. Even Moreton Cohen, often unsympathetic towards Dodgson, explains:

Victorian parents who shared Dodgson’s views allowed their innocent offspring to romp about in warm weather without any clothes on ... and were quite accustomed to seeing nude “sexless” children used as objects of decoration in book illustrations and on greeting cards. Child nakedness was quite normal and pleasing: it was thoroughly acceptable.⁵²

His child nude photography sessions were conducted with fastidious preamble; with parental consent; with counselling for the child and ongoing attention to their spiritual comfort. In a letter to his illustrator, Dodgson wrote:

A child’s instincts ... ought to be treated with the utmost reverence. And if I had the loveliest child in the world, to draw or photograph, and found she had a modest shrinking (however slight, and however easily overcome) from being taken nude, I should feel it was a solemn duty, owed to God, to drop the request *altogether*.⁵³

Certainly, there can be no suggestion that Dodgson’s conduct during his photography sessions was anything less than ethically scrupulous, regardless of whatever psychosexual intent might be inferred. Importantly, the images

⁴⁹ Dorsett, & Lamp Mead, *C.S. Lewis Letters to Children*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ These were the sons of his wife, Joy Davidman, from her previous marriage.

⁵¹ See, for example, G. Sayer’s comment in James T. Como, *Remembering C.S. Lewis: Recollections of Those Who Knew Him* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), pp. 339-40.

⁵² Cited in Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, p. 9.

⁵³ Lennon, *Victoria Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 317.

themselves suggest the photographer's objective of capturing the child *as a child*, rather than as a pretender to the carnality of adulthood.⁵⁴

Concerning Dodgson's desire to photograph children, Lindsay Smith suggests that beyond mere aesthetics, Dodgson held a "complex psychological stake in representing the child photographically".⁵⁵ Smith's thesis, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', offers an account of the extent to which Dodgson's "rather terrifying" speech impediment inhibited both his career and his social aptitude.⁵⁶ Dodgson's stammer was most pronounced when reading aloud, thus he frequently declined invitations to speak in Church, and ultimately rejected both familial tradition and ecclesial obligation in avoiding an advance to the bishopric. To be sure, Dodgson's stammer embarrassed him deeply. Should anecdotes be believed, however, he was also quietly inclined to tease fun from it; Alice's 'Dodo' poignantly caricatures the author's struggle with his own name, 'Charles Do-do-Dodgson'.

Otherwise a "foreigner in his own language", Dodgson communicated warmly with children, and empathised with their linguistic predicament.⁵⁷ His photographic subjects were mostly very young, and, whilst certainly educated, like any learning children they exhibited the classic imperfections of speech that characterise an immature tongue. Thus, Dodgson's child-friends inflicted no threat of humiliation upon him, and, in fact, constituted such 'safe' conversationalists that his stammer eased perceptibly in their presence. That Dodgson chose the photographic medium in which to 'acknowledge' his impediment chimes with his declaration that children were the only audience before whom he could comfortably perform. The question of why he should choose to photograph them is perhaps best addressed by Lindsay Smith in her suggestion that Dodgson longed to capture the "perfect body of a child who as a speaking subject [could] never be perfect".⁵⁸ By taking their physical likeness he was able, through the photograph's "unique assault on temporality" to render the child not only enduringly beautiful but enduringly voiceless.⁵⁹ The visual language of photography was thus a sort of psychological salve; a remedy for the child's – and by proxy Dodgson's – failings as verbal communicator.

⁵⁴ Unfortunately, of the probable hundreds of child nudes that existed in Dodgson's portfolio, only four survive. Dodgson, predicting a storm of conservative judgment, destroyed the rest.

⁵⁵ Lindsay Smith, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 3. no. 1 (2004), p. 96.

⁵⁶ Smith, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', p. 97.

⁵⁷ Smith, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', p. 97.

⁵⁸ Smith, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', p. 98.

⁵⁹ Smith, 'Lewis Carroll: Stammering, Photography and the Voice of Infancy', p. 98.

Conclusion

It is important – for the sake of historical accuracy if nothing else – to dismiss much of the hyperbole and biographical misinformation that has rendered Dodgson something of a sex-starved loner. In truth, he was not a lonely man, not friendless or forced to seek company in unorthodox quarters. In reality, he existed at the hub of a large and active family. Whilst he delighted in child-company, he had plenty of adult friends and more than a handful of intimate relationships with adult women. More aberrant than his literary fantasies are the suggestions that Dodgson was a paedophile, and that his photographs, like Henson's, are the progeny of malfeasance. Behind the apparent anarchy of Lewis Carroll is the decorum of Charles Dodgson; a self-effacing, acutely-restrained Christian, a slave to etiquette, to humanitarian causes, and to an ardent but in all likelihood *unsexual* love for children.