

Through A Distorting Looking-Glass

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's artistic interests as mirrored in his nieces' edited version of his diaries

By Hugues Lebailly

In utter contradiction of Roger Lancelyn Green's solemn pledge, in his introduction to his 1953 edition of Charles Dodgson's private diaries, that -

"though I have cut out a number [of entries], besides shortening many others. My principle has been to keep every entry of literary interest, every reference to even the least important of his works, every mention of the books that he read, the plays that he witnessed, and the pictures that he saw..."

--in truth hundreds of omissions in the artistic and cultural field alone show that the original material of the nine surviving manuscript notebooks had been severely edited by Dodgson's nieces Violet Dodgson and Frances Menella Dodgson when they prepared the typescript that Green was allowed to reproduce.

No fewer than:

13 % of the books C. L. Dodgson read [32 out of 242]

20 % of the plays he witnessed [139 out of 683]

65 % of the concerts he heard [79 out of 121]

53 % of the light entertainments he attended [18 out of 34]

40 % of the exhibitions he visited [87 out of 215]

and 15 % of the individual sculptures and paintings he singled out [44 out of 293]

were omitted from the first printed version of his diary, together with 199 mentions of or judgments passed on the impersonations of actors and actresses of all ages out of 870 [about 23 %].

Moreover, these figures only give an account of the total suppressions affecting that field, to which should be added hundreds of partial quotations, leaving out part of the original text.

Whereas some of these gaps could easily be explained by the natural weariness of two ladies well into their seventies, encouraging them to curtail the immense task they had set themselves, other cuts, systematically affecting certain references, obviously proceeded from Violet and

Frances Menella's deliberate concern, often ill-directed in its obsolete Victorianism, to reflect a refined image of their uncle as the ideal embodiment of universal benevolence, innocence and purity.

This highly questionable though well-meaning purpose was nowhere more obvious than in their extremely awkward handling of their uncle's expressions of interest in mature as well as immature members of the fair sex: but, whereas most of his words of praise for the former were ruthlessly censored, his indisputable fascination for the latter was dealt with far less consistently.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in C. L. Dodgson's reports of the photographic sessions during which some of his childfriends posed in the nude. Whereas about two thirds were edited out of the 1953 publication, others were included in full, and vague mentions of 'life studies' were laboriously elucidated by interpolated "[i. e. in the nude]" or "[i. e. in their 'favourite dress of nothing']" between square brackets, as if the better to expose what had been previously hidden.

However short and sparse they were, those few allusions were glaring enough to launch on the track of the 'paedophile photographer' a pack of scandal-thirsty journalists and pun-labouring biographers, like Brassai and his 'Lolitas' Blue-Beard', and it is hard to make out why hagiographic scissiors, having performed three-fourths of the task set to them, would have stopped short early enough to condemn their efforts to such pathetic ineffectiveness.

It seems much more likely that such wavering should be put down to Violet and Frances Menella's deeply Victorian faith in pre-Freudian conceptions of the child as a sexless pure angel, and hence to their sincere reluctance to suppress all references to an aspect of their uncle's personality they must have deemed perfectly innocent, and more attractive than repulsive.

What they found much more difficult to cope with was the plentiful evidence, offered by other entries, of C. L. Dodgson's attendance at and enjoyment of what they considered as coarse performances starring young pert actresses, as well as of the favourable impression various adult female nudes produced on him: proof of such vulgar tastes looked to them far more scandalous, and they suppressed it in a much more consistent and systematic way, unaware that they were thus reinforcing and confirming the already too widespread view of 'Lewis Carroll' as a monomaniac perverse.

From the "charming" Florence St John who was the gem of Madame Favart and Lurette to the "very pretty" parodist of Mary Eastlake, a Miss F. Hastings; from Maud Millett and Annie Hughes he described as "two beauties [who] would alone have made [*The Middleman*] worth seeing" to Ellaline Terriss and Decima Moore, whose singing and dancing in *A Pantomime Rehearsal* he found "fascinating"; from Miss Millward, "most winning in The May Queen" or Miss Gwynne Herbert, "very pretty" in *Devil-May-Care*, to Annie Hill, the "charming" heroine of *Sweet Lavender*, Ellen Goss and her "wonderful 'serpentine' dance" in *La Cigale*, or Hilda Rivers, who looked "very pretty" in *Love in Idleness*, one can draw a very impressive list of all those actresses, well out of childhood, whose grace and beauty seduced C. L. Dodgson, though the reader of the 1953 edition of his diaries could know nothing about them, either because the comic operas and other light pieces in which they appeared - often adapted from the French -

were not respectable enough to escape the old ladies' scissors, or because his too favourable comments on them were crossed by a vengeful pencil from a paragraph that was only allowed to be printed in an expurgated version.

Instances of similar omissions abound too in C. L. Dodgson's comments on the fine art exhibitions he visited, and it was consistently when he praised *adult* female nudes that the censoring of his impressions was most drastic.

Convinced perhaps through their readings of John Ruskin that William Mulready was the most "degraded and bestial" artist of the first half of the century, and that the collection of his 'life studies' gathered in 1864 at Kensington Museum were "of all pieces of art [...] quite the most vulgar, and, in the solemn sense of the word, abominable", Violet and Frances Menella ruthlessly barred out of his timetable of April 6th 1864 the visit C. L. Dodgson paid to it, in the highly respectable company of his friend Thomas Vere Bayne's mother, and it is most likely to their biblical theme that we owe the mention of his admiration for "three very large [pictures] by Etty, [...] illustrations of the history of Judith" he enjoyed as much as Joseph Noel Paton's diptych on Oberon and Titania, when he examined the collection of modern works at the Edinburgh National Gallery in 1857.

They would very likely have excluded any other subject by that other 'obscene' painter, "the most disagreeable of English artists" according to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who detected in him "a diseased appetite for woman's flesh", and condemned him for spending his life depicting odalisques "with enormously developed busts [...], really thrusting their nudity upon you with malice aforethought."

Nothing but their ignorance of the exact content of some of the pictures C. L. Dodgson paid a brief tribute to can account for the presence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Venus Verticordia', Edwin Long's 'The Search for Beauty' and 'The Chosen Five', or Frederic Leighton's 'Psamathe' and 'Crenaia' in their typescript. None of the works being referred to by its title in the short entries where they appeared, their precise identification would have required an artistic culture and an availability for scholarly research the two copyists were equally deprived of, in their hurry to have done with the colossal task they had set themselves.

Long's diptych, depicting two successive steps in the Greek sculptor Zeuxis's quest for five models worthy of lending some of their beauty to his ideal Venus, coming second to his 'Anno Domini' among C. L. Dodgson's favourite pictures at the 1893 Edwin Long Gallery, had its pagan theme so redeemed by the holy proximity of the famous 'flight into Egypt', that Violet and Frances Menella seemed unconscious it came from the very brush of the master of picturesque exoticism who had perpetrated the scandalous 'Babylonian Slave Market'.

Leighton's works, hardly better known half a century ago than Long's, appeared within narratives of C. L. Dodgson's flattering private receptions at the President of the Royal Academy's prestigious house, which obviously could not be left out without harming his social image. Moreover, Leighton's uncompleted 'Crenaia' was merely mentioned as a curiosity, "a female figure which look[ed] very queer [...], as the (unfinished) drapery only reach[ed] to the waist", and the quasi-telegraphic style used by Dodgson to describe his 'Psamathe', "a sort of 'Hero' on

the shore (nude figure, seated, back view)" in no way pointed to the fullness of her generous figure, worthy of a Rubens, which F. G. Stephens described as "exuberant, and therefore not severe in their character, [...] studied from the life, and [...] less classical than those usually affected by Sir F. Leighton", a sight that should have been repulsive to a C. L. Dodgson exclusively addicted to the slender outlines of pre-pubescent girls !

Just as unexpected, his enthusiasm over Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Venus Verticordia' was nevertheless reasserted on his two successive visits to the ill-reputed painter's studio: in June 1864, the picture was still unfinished when he judged it would certainly be "very beautiful". One year later, the completed work again met with his approval when, in Swinburne's presence, the artist showed him "many beautiful pictures, two quite new: the bride going to meet the bridegroom (from Solomon's Song) and Venus with a background of roses." Once again, the biblical reference appended to 'The Beloved' came just where needed to temper the alluring sensuousness of the pagan goddess, Rossetti's single bare-breasted 'stunner', whose gaze looks straight into the viewer's eyes in a provocative way.

Even if C. L. Dodgson had only been confronted, on that second visit, with a watercolour version R. L. Megroz deemed "rather sentimental [and] quite inoffensive, which is more than one can say about the oil", that "tall, massively-built [Venus], no spiritual goddess of beauty", of whom F. G. Stephens wrote that "she reck[ed] not of the soul" and that "there [was] more of evil than of good in her" should have aroused 'Lewis Carroll's' reprobation and disgust, had his personality been so unidimensional as usually alleged.

That such disconcerting infatuations, in full contradiction with the generally accepted and constantly peddled view of his tastes and interests, should have been overlooked for half a century would be difficult to account for had not most of the other expressions of C. L. Dodgson's admiration for adult female nudes been implacably eradicated out of the 1953 printed version then available.

Such was the case, for instance, of John Collier's 'Pharaoh's Handmaidens', one of his five favourite paintings - none of which depicted little girls - at the 1883 Grosvenor Gallery, though F. G. Stephens saw in it only "three saucy ladies of the modern ballet who ha[d] been dyed brown", whose only assets were their "plump contours", and Cosmo Monkhouse, who condemned their "wholly unredeemed" nudity, liked much better a "pretty naked little girl playing with her father's palette" by a P. R. Morris, which, paradoxically, C. L. Dodgson does not seem to have noticed.

Among those 'unmentionable' works ranked also Jean Alexandre Joseph Falguiere's 'Madeleine', which he praised as a "wonderfully life-like picture", disturbing enough to make him misattribute it to Emmanuel Benner, another French artist whose sylvan nymphs also adorned the walls of the 1887 Bond Street exhibition of Salon pictures, Thomas Riley's 'After the Chase', shown at Burlington House in 1888, which he remembered with pleasure as "a beautiful 'nude' study", an impression shared by F. G. Stephens who described it as "an elegant group of nude girls, deftly designed and painted", and, most embarrassing of all, Marcelli Suchorowski's 'Nana'.

That C. L. Dodgson should have noticed Anna Lea Merritt's 'Eve', "seated, with hands clasped round her knees, bowed head and face hidden in her hair" was not that objectionable : the female hand that had produced it, freeing it from any suspicion of lewdness, the biblical theme, the repentant, natural and perfectly decent attitude of the first sinner, as well as the somewhat sententious tone of the words that introduced its title, noticing the "unusual number of pictures of the nude" at the 1885 Royal Academy without necessarily deploring it, but open enough to that interpretation for Violet and Frances Menella to read it that way if they chose to, everything concurred in ascribing to this particular mention a respectability his acknowledged vision of a lurid depiction of Zola's infamous heroine could obviously not aspire to.

Not only had the painting itself, by a Russian emigrant living in Paris named Marcelu Suchorowski, been called by *The Magazine of Art* "a cheap, clever, and singularly impudent Salon picture of the vulgarest type" and by *The Art-Journal* "a revoltingly sensual picture", but it was moreover exhibited at the Egyptian Hall in a sensational setting aimed at increasing its success of scandal: standing by itself on an easel raised on a platform, in the centre of a room dark enough to protect its viewers' anonymity, but also to bring out the brilliantly lit canvas, its outrageous subject was yet enhanced by two mirrors placed on either side of it, reflecting endlessly, as in a brothel room, the voluptuous curves of its heroine's body. No wonder *The Magazine of Art*'s critic concluded his review with a paraphrase from the Gospel, stating that "no great work of art shuns the light of the day; and 'Nana' appeals not so much to lovers of art as to lovers of M. Zola's work, two very distinct divisions of mankind."

For C. L. Dodgson to have compromised himself among the latter, even on the ill-advised commendation of a friend of his, the actor Lionel Brough (who was obviously aware of his interest in adult nudes), was in itself an unforgivable *faux pas* that had to be concealed from posterity; but, on top of that, the moderation of C. L. Dodgson's negative judgement on it sharply contrasted with the indignant curse called down on it by *The Art- Journal* , who wished "the authorities who look after [the country's] morals [would at last] be roused to action" against such an ignominious show.

C. L. Dodgson simply wrote down that he "did not like the feeling of [this] very life-like picture of a reclining woman, nude, except for a little drapery covering one leg from knee to foot", and, true to his conviction that only complete nudity could look natural, healthy and innocent, added that "it would have been better entirely nude, but even so rather 'French' in feeling."

Such a degree of tolerance, highly typical of a man who was anything but the "prudish and pernicky" average Victorian that Virginia Woolf denounced, is yet another proof that, contrary to John Ruskin, he did not find adult nudes shocking as such, but only when they seemed to praise the great social evil of prostitution.

In their zeal for erasing any trace of what they interpreted as their uncle's occasional yielding to a perverse curiosity, the two old ladies in fact concealed for several decades from students of C. L. Dodgson's life evidence of his open-mindedness and his usually denied sexual normality, as they also did when they threw a prudish veil on his regular attendance at the various aquatic shows performed by winsome young ladies on Brighton's pier or at Eastbourne's Devonshire Baths.

Even more than his description of 'Miss L. Saigeman's Swimming Entertainment' as "a very pretty performance", it is the fond satisfaction with which he noted it was "the first year gentlemen ha[d] been admitted" that testified to the eagerness with which he had taken advantage of this new opportunity to quench his thirst for legitimately contemplating the beauty of God's most perfect creation. Such shows were to hold a not inconsiderable place among his seaside entertainments, to the point of attending on four occasions Miss Louey Webb's during the summer of 1887, on the account that "she [was] 18, and as she [was] beautifully formed, the exhibition [was] worth seeing, if only as a picture."

A few months before his death, he was still a devoted patron of 'Miss Saigeman's Swimming Entertainment', and ready to go to the trouble of sailing from Eastbourne to Hastings just to applaud the feats of the Beckwith family, featuring a girl he had indeed admired for the first time when she was 9 in 1888, but who had by then reached the mature age of 18, and must have nevertheless afforded him the same degree of visual pleasure as Louey ten years before.

Thus, provided we are willing to re-examine in a new, objective light the data Violet and Frances Menella Dodgson went into such trouble concealing from us, which is now available to all researchers with a British Library Manuscript Students Room card, and will soon appear wholly in print, thanks to the admirable exertions of Edward Wakeling, it is an entirely different view of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson we can catch a glimpse of, in utter contradiction of the fussy, fastidious old-maidish don as much as of the hypocritical sad paedophile so often described, belittled and abused.

It would be ridiculous to reverse Kathleen Baker's abrupt statement, and pretend that what Charles Lutwidge Dodgson did is more interesting than what Lewis Carroll wrote. A scientific approach to the matchless amount of information on a cultured Victorian picture-lover and theatre-goer's reception of the works of art of his time C. L. Dodgson's diaries contain is nonetheless a fascinating seam to work, which holds in store the unexpected discovery of a balanced, tolerant, unconventional personality, neither more nor less fraught with contradictions than any true Victorian intellectual ever was.