An Osmotic Approach to the Photographs

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At one time it could have been Graham Ovenden's intention as a photographer to attempt a kind of terrestrial paradise, regained on behalf of the shade of the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson who, on thinking it over in Heaven, was probably regretting the destruction of his photographs of naked little girls. But if ever it was Ovenden's self-imposed task to provide photographic confirmation of Dodgson's impassioned perception of the 'perfectly pure and lovely' bodies of little girls, he has long since covered that imaginary assignment. The photographs in the present book are not primarily emblems of innocence. Ovenden's interest is in form and mood, and some of his images have an almost 'unearthly' beauty of a kind that would have sent Dodgson reeling.

Unlike the double life led by many eminent Victorians, Dodgson's Jekyll and Hyde were both as white as driven snow. He was Dodgson of Christ Church, mathematical lecturer and enthusiastic amateur photographer, and he was Lewis Carroll, author of books ostensibly for children. As Dodgson, even more than as Carroll, he adored little girls and throughout his life was adept at making friends with them. I think he died a virgin. He backed away as soon as Nature began to flaunt her intentions for the female body. (In this respect he was like Ruskin.) His associations were with well-spoken, well-dressed little girls of his own class, and he probably never knew that there were children in the lower classes who were sold into prostitution. He started to photograph celebrities and little girls early in the 1850s, before he became Lewis Carroll, and although he retained the status of an amateur he was one of the best photographers of his time. It was not until 1879 that his desire to photograph little girls in the nude became too compulsive to be ignored. He wrote long-winded letters to fond mothers, seeking permission to undress their daughters and seems never to have felt humiliated by refusals. But it is evident from a passage in Derek Hudson's illustrated biography of Lewis Carroll that permission was very rarely given. Hudson quotes from Dodgson's instructions to his executors: 'Please erase the following negatives: I would not like (for the families' sake) the possibility of their getting into other hands. They are best erased by soaking in a solution of washing soda. 2175-2176-2180-2441-2444-2447-2457-2462-2465'. It suggests that he took only nine photographs of the nude, and an examination of the numbering of the negatives leaves one with the impression that, since he is not likely to have been content with only one image of each model, not more than three and possibly only two of his young friends posed for him in the nude. Doubtless he himself, whilst seeking a pose of the utmost taste and discretion, caught a full-frontal view of the model, but we can be sure that he did not allow his camera the same privilege.

Ovenden's admiration for Dodgson the photographer is revealed in his *Pre-Raphaelite Photography* published by Academy Editions, in which he reproduces no less than twenty-six examples by Dodgson including the outstandingly lovely open-air photograph, *Alice Liddell as a beggar girl,* an admirably restrained version of a popular Victorian theme — so restrained in fact that I wouldn't have known she was playing at being a destitute if it were not for the title given in Ovenden's book. She looks clean and well-brought up as ever, and the title is the slender pretext for exposing her shoulders. Curiously, Alice has cupped one of her hands in front of her, but it appears to be empty, and I wonder if Dodgson intended her to hold an apple, then thought better of it, since it might be thought symbolic of temptation.

Two other photographers, Rossetti and Mrs Cameron, are richly represented in *Pre-Raphaelite Photography.* They are not obsessive about little girls and they are, I think, less technically assured than Dodgson, but frequently achieved images whose expressive content had an intensity outside Dodgson's range. Rossetti was almost exclusively interested in catching the likeness of Jane Morris, and his photographic images of her are so startling that his failure to capture her phenomenal appearance in his paintings not too surprisingly led him into desperate phantasising which culminated in *Astarte Syriaca.* The camera so marvellously revealed the bulge and stare of her eyes (they look as if Nature herself got carried away in the process of forming them) that Rossetti didn't really attempt them; they would have looked absurdly improbable in any face that he could have drawn round them. It would have needed a Picasso to construct a trap for them. These photographs of Jane make one disturbedly aware of the camera's powerful automatism. She is the magic mirror image that stays when the person mirrored is not there. Delacroix once said that in some ways photographs are false just because they can be so exact. If he had put it another way and said that its integrity could be unreasonable, one would have been reminded of the commerical photographers who straighten a nose or whisk off a pimple in the darkroom.

Mrs Cameron was somewhat prone to accidents at every stage of the procedure imposed by the apparatus and materials available to nineteenth-century photographers. Models blinked or wriggled during long exposures and prints got messed up by the wet collodion process. Nevertheless, whenever she was dazzled by a human face the image somehow survived mishaps which would have totally ruined the work of more conventional and objective photographers. Her many failures to obtain good prints of her sister Mia's daughter were happily preserved in Mia's album, which was edited by Ovenden for an edition by Seeker and Warburg. It's clear that Mia thought it a kind of sacrilege to destroy any likeness of her daughter, and nearly all the fourteen examples rescued for her album are out of focus, blotched, smeared and streaked, too pale or too dark. Yet, in spite of all these faults, and perhaps because of the near-hysteria to which Mrs Cameron had reduced her hypersensitive niece by thrusting the lens too near to her face and demanding perfect stillness, her neurasthenic beauty strikingly emerges to make every imperfect image enchanting. Accident was again Mrs Cameron's good friend

when she took the portrait of a nine year old girl named Annie Phillpot. She called it her first success although it was by no means technically perfect. Nobodies like Annie were usually expected to personify something or other, but instead of being posed as Goodness or Sorrow or Prayer, she was allowed to be her lovely young self, and the streaks and specks on the print didn't matter. Indeed, the streaks on her cheek resemble tear-stains and spontaneously symbolise the inner state of a little girl who managed to keep rigidly still for several minutes to allow Mrs Cameron to 'arrest' her beauty.

The girls who pose for Graham Ovenden are the Annie Phillpots of our time, released from tension. Had Dodgson's nudes survived, I think they would have been disappointing if only because he was so anxious to register innocence, he would scarcely have dared to allow his camera to stare at their forms as openly as Ovenden's. Ovenden's photographs reveal an intensely subjective selectiveness, which far exceeds even Dodgson's, but one is equally aware that once the choice has been made, the camera takes over and the results spring from an inspired absence of interference.

Ovenden has an increasingly high reputation as painter, draughtsman and printmaker, but no medium in which he works can be called subservient to another. All of them, equal in difference, disclose the same powerful motivation. He comes to photography with an unrivalled knowledge of the monochromatic masterpieces of the great Victorians, and his photographs share with them the virtue which Stieglitz described as a 'subtle chiaroscuro beyond the range of the human hand'.

His little girls are the inheritors of woman's struggle for liberation. When they have gazed into his camera, the reflections of their faces and bodies which emerge from his darkroom confront us with an insouciant awareness. They are confident that the world will belong to them. They may even decide to turn the male of the species into a second-class citizen, for there is one among them - perhaps the most seductive of all - whose looks seem full of turbulent prophecy. She could be in Monique Wittig's predictive novel *Les Guerilleres:* 'In his cities it is easy to do him violence. You lie in wait for him at a street corner one night. He thinks you are beckoning to him. . . he hasn't even the reflex to cry out.' I hope it may add to the pleasure that awaits you beyond this page to leave you to discover for yourself the little girl I have in mind.