Reading Nonsense: A Journey through the writing of Edward Lear
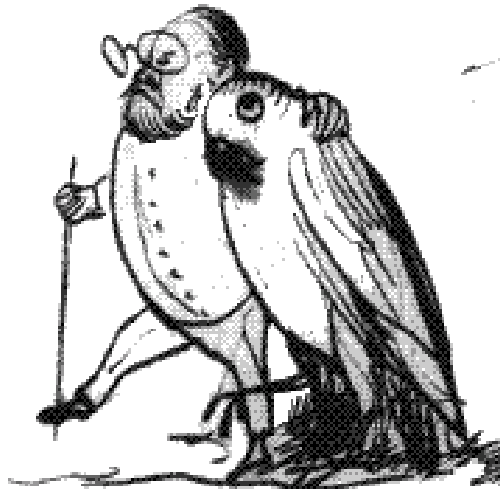
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Abstract

In this thesis I have addressed some of the problems that have arisen in critical approaches to the nonsense works of Edward Lear from the late nineteenth century. I have entitled it "Reading Nonsense" because my central concern is with how best to apprehend the paradoxes inherent in literary nonsense, which inevitably raises interpretative questions. Because nonsense is a "basic type of communication" whose essence is "unresolved tension… between [the] presence and absence of meaning" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 51), we are called upon either to "make sense of" that which claims to offer up no meaning or to surrender ourselves to meaninglessness.

Broadly, critical approaches to nonsense fall into two classes: those that maintain that nonsense is not, in fact, "not sense", but rather a kind of symbolic language that can be reconciled into meaning; and those which uphold the nonsensicality of nonsense, maintaining that certain ambiguities and paradoxes cannot be accounted for, and it is inappropriate to try to do so. In addition, Lear's texts are situated in various traditions of writing for children and adults and in the distinctive setting of the Victorian era; and these cultural and literary influences play an important role in the interpretation and misinterpretation of nonsense.

My first chapter comprises a *mise en scène* of the genre of literary nonsense; while in Chapter 2 I turn to the cultural backdrop of Lear's nonsense in particular, and examine one of the claims frequently made in nonsense criticism: that Lear's literary nonsense is distinctively "Victorian". Chapter 3, "How to Read a Learian Limerick", rests on the exegesis of nonsense that appears in Chapter 1, for here I propose a technique for reading Lear's limericks that preserves both their

"sensical" and nonsensical elements in contrast to critical analyses that attempt to reconcile the nonsense into a code. In Chapter 4 I examine Lear's songs from the critical perspectives of nonsense and of romanticism. Finally, in conclusion, I consider the role and significance of humour in nonsense, and gesture towards further possible explorations, including in the appendix my essay on the nonsense poetry of South African writer Philip de Vos.

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Introduction

Great literature is like spinach.

Stephen Booth[1]

In his 1998 monograph, *Precious Nonsense*, Stephen Booth argues that it is not because literature is "good for us" that we value it, but rather for "the pleasure of the experience it affords us" (19). Like spinach, many of the "spiritual nutrients" contained in acclaimed works of fiction cannot be processed by the mental digestion of even the most sophisticated readers; and what draws us to these works (and also to their lesser brethren) is the state of delighted perplexity that they induce in us. In other words, where the Western academic paradigm extols the virtues of profundity and the elevated insights that are supposed only to be extracted by dedicated chewing through texts rich in intellectual roughage, Booth argues to the contrary that "the special appeal of highly valued works is that they are in one way or another nonsensical" (3). While Booth's concern is with bringing "great literature" down to the level of nonsense, part of my purpose in this thesis might be described as the inverse: that of bringing nonsense literature up to the level of greatness.

One of the premises (or perhaps, effects) of Booth's argument is that there is something special about nonsense: in part, its "ability to free us from the limits of the human mind" (5). Nonsense is closely connected to humour. While the exact nature of their relationship is difficult to articulate (Susan Stewart, for instance, describes nonsense as "humour without a context"[2]), both fall into a broad category of social activities that I shall call "folly". Folly I define loosely as that which opposes solemnity, majesty, self-importance; and includes play, humour, and absurdity. In his essay *On Humour*, Simon Critchley might equally be writing of folly when he says,

> …[humour] recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the
> human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic

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[1] Booth, Stephen. *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on his Children, and Twelfth Night*. Berkeley: California UP, 1998. "Introduction" 19.
[2] Stewart, Susan. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. 38.

> affirmation, but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean
> authenticity, but a laughable inauthenticity. (102)

Folly, humour, nonsense, absurdity – whichever category we examine, and whatever we choose to call it – are those unimportant things that are important precisely because they are unimportant, and because of their irreverence towards that which is believed to be important. Literary nonsense, as the particular brand of folly with which this thesis is concerned, is important for the redemptive power of its fun and for its ability to hold up and critique the incongruities of real life, in particular those found in social discourse. It is a genre born out of perplexity: in particular, that state of bewilderment that arises out of the realisation that many of the habits and interactions of human beings are from a certain perspective nonsensical.

Nonsense inevitably raises interpretative questions: because it is a "basic type of communication" whose essence is "unresolved tension…between presence and absence of meaning" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 51) we are called upon either to "make sense of" that which claims to offer up no meaning or to surrender ourselves to meaninglessness. Of course, "literary nonsense" may be a misnomer pointing not in the direction of gibberish or absurdity, but rather towards certain types of play and humour that can in fact be resolved into meaning. In part this view is accurate, for the genre of nonsense literature as it is traditionally understood in the study of English literature is a contrivance referring to that body of children's writing beginning from and following in the traditions of its Victorian fathers, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Nonsensical writing, however, preceded Lear and Carroll – we see it in Aristophanic comedy, in Rabelais, in Shakespeare – and it is the devices which appear in these earlier texts that characterise the works of Lear and Carroll and their successors and lead us to group them together in a formal body of literature.[3] These techniques – which are explored in the first chapter of this thesis – include the inversions, paradoxes, ambiguities and wordplay that pepper Lear's and Carroll's prototypes. Yet the procedures of nonsense, as Booth demonstrates, are everywhere in literature; and might be seen,

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[3] Nonsense also, of course, appears in the folklore and traditional literature of cultures which have had no contact with the Victorian tradition. Indeed, it may be argued that nonsense is a social phenomenon that occurs in all cultures: a discussion that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

even, to distinguish the literary or artistic from the purely functional text. Stewart, too, sees nonsense as characteristic of "fictions": she sets out to show

> …that fictions and play are texts standing in a paradoxical and dependent relationship with texts manufactured using common sense; that the varieties of play and fictions are arranged through common-sense reasoning in relationships of decreasing reality to the texts of common sense; and that the outer limits of this arrangement are characterised by nonsense and its concomitant categories of fate, chance, and accident. (*Preface* viii)

As we shall see in Chapter 1, "common sense" is that routine set of social processes according to which everyday "reality" is interpreted. "Fictions", by which Stewart denotes the non-literal discourses that stand in opposition to these practises, distinguish themselves from this order through their "unreality"; and the most nonsensical of texts are those most removed from the techniques and effects of realism. "Fictions" include fiction, poetry, folklore, mythology and others: in other words, the literature of the imagination for which our reading requires the suspension of disbelief. Poetry in particular is a form of fiction in which the methods that distinguish "literary" from common sense texts are pressurised through the use of structure, metaphor and so on,[4] and thus tends to approach literary nonsense more closely than less ambiguous types of text. Nonsense might then be described as an extreme form of fiction, for the methods that it employs characterise all non-factual texts. What distinguishes literary nonsense from other types of fiction may indeed be the compulsive manner with which it deploys the tools of poetry; it also might be the nature of the intention – or lack thereof – behind its poetic inversions.

These are questions that sit in the background throughout this thesis, for one of the central issues with which I am concerned is that of interpretation: texts that fall into the category "nonsense" may be seen to beg the question, "what does this mean?"; or if not this question then another, "if this does not mean anything, then what is the objective of this text; what do we take from it?" These are not questions that I shall attempt a rigorous answer to (and we shall see that, like

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[4] According to this description many novels might be classified as "poetry". Thus, for the purposes of this argument, "poetry" should not be seen as the alternative to "prose", but rather one version of "fiction" that stands out against common sense discourse. There is, of course, no clear line between, say, poem and novel, and here I have deliberately kept my definitions hazy to reflect the fluidity of the different forms.

nonsense, they do not yield easily to explanation). However, a prefatory note needs to be made concerning the issues of analysis and appreciation with which I shall be dealing: for nonsense, like great literature, is the subject of another variety of at times nonsensical discourse, that of literary criticism. Broadly, critical approaches to nonsense fall into two classes: those that maintain that nonsense is not, in fact, "not sense", but rather a kind of symbolic language that can be reconciled into meaning; and those which uphold the nonsensicality of nonsense, maintaining that certain ambiguities and paradoxes cannot be accounted for, and it is inappropriate to try to do so. This is a particular concern with regard to Edward Lear, whose nonsense has been interpreted from biographical, Freudian, Jungian, Structuralist, reader-response and linguistic perspectives.[5] While my approach with regard to these varieties of reading will be eclectic, I position myself on the side of "not sense" on the meaning-nonsense divide. This split might be better conceptualised as a spectrum, for there are obviously senses in which nonsense "makes sense": it yields to poetic form and grammar, and responds to the personal and cultural milieux from which it comes (and the latter features can be seen to give it certain types of symbolic value). However, I shall argue that in true nonsense there is always something that does not give in to analysis.

It is very difficult to isolate the features of the genre of literary nonsense, and I am not convinced that it is appropriate to circumscribe so malleable a mode with a generic strait-jacket. Nonsense has a habit of occupying – and sometimes usurping – other forms of literature: notably among them, folk literature, nursery rhyme, fantasy and absurdism. Nonsense is special, but not that special; or at any rate, not that unique. Consider the opening lines of Eliot's "Burnt Norton":

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.

The repetition of the words "time", "present", "future", "past"; the configurations, reconfigurations, ambiguities and confusion of the excerpt all ring of nonsense. And the devices that Eliot employs include those that are used to produce generic

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[5] For a more detailed discussion of the various "approaches" and references, see Chapter 3.

nonsense. Yet *Four Quartets* is not nonsense: the breadth and density of its meaning are as substantial as the paradoxes and incongruities that have to be internalised if we are to perceive a glimmer of its sense.

Perhaps Eliot's masterpiece is a bad example with which to demonstrate the nonsensicality of fictions, for modernist writing is characterised by its concern with meaning and its flirtations with unmeaning. However, following Stephen Booth, I propose that all poetry involves some degree of nonsensicality; largely because metaphor – an essential instrument of fictions – is itself nonsensical, for it requires "the interaction of two domains that ordinarily do not intersect" (Stewart 34). In other words, metaphor calls upon us to believe temporarily that object A is object B; and the more unalike our common sense tells us objects A and B are, the more we relish the metaphor. While metaphor may be resolvable into meaning in a way that nonsense is not, the immediate conjunction of disparate entities is nonsensical in its organisation; and the movement from polysemy into nonsense is a continuum.

It is important that we consider the fluidity and range of nonsense when examining questions of interpretation because the issues raised are very often not unique to the genre, and may thus be enlightened by (and enlightening to) other fields. Tigges's definition implies that nonsense will always yield a degree of sense – it involves a "balance" or a "tension" between meaning and meaninglessness – beyond which we surrender to uncertainty and ambiguity. This, however, is a process that all but the most blandly realistic literature imposes upon us: this is what we acknowledge when we suspend disbelief. And this brings me back to Stephen Booth, both for an explanation of the uses of nonsense in "great literature", and the value of nonsense literature in itself: that by allowing us to accept incongruous premises, nonsense "does something comparable to the impossible: it gives us understanding of something that remains something we do not understand" (6). In addition to the "pleasure" that the "experience…affords us" (19), then, the paradoxes of nonsense, and our paradoxical "understanding" of them, satisfy one of the more incorrigible desires of the human mind. Our lives are complex, and nonsense resists the urge to resolve that complexity: nonsense, in a funny way, is true to life.

I turn, then, to Edward Lear, whose canonical works of literary nonsense are the vehicle through which I consider questions of reading and reception in the field; and who, through his nonsense, ridicules the elevated intentions of "serious" literature. I have entitled this thesis "reading nonsense" because my central concern, as noted above, is how best to apprehend the paradoxes inherent in the nonsense: how, I ask, should we "read" a subject that resists discourse? Lear is a fitting subject for this study because, as the celebrated "father" of the genre of literary nonsense, there exists a body of critical writing on his work in which several different styles of approach to the field are represented. One of the issues which recurs in the following chapters is the consideration of the appropriateness of these different literary methods and the accuracy of the conclusions that result from them. A problem that I grapple with particularly is the utility of the biographical reading to the understanding of Lear's poetry and nonsense in general. Lear's experience as a Victorian eccentric is inevitably implicated as both a source and subject of his nonsense, yet all too often the gaps filled in through knowledge of his biography are flooded with inaccuracies when personal facts are conflated with conjecture. (This, as we shall see in Chapters 1 and 3, is one of the particular problems of the Freudian reading.) Moreover, a purely biographical reading is necessarily narrow, for it takes its evidence from Lear's nonsense and its conclusions return, inevitably, to Edward Lear. While what draws us toward literature may – if we agree with Stephen Booth – be the gratification of the moment, what we take away from it should transcend the narrow world of the author. Lear's nonsense is situated in various traditions of writing for children and adults and in the distinctive setting of the Victorian era; it also occupies a space in the lives of readers, critical and casual, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Part of what this thesis examines, then, is what the reader should take away from nonsense by examining the issues that surface in critical writings on nonsense.

My first chapter comprises a map of the territory: I have called it "An Overview of Nonsense" because I do not intend to define the genre (a project which would necessitate a certain level of artifice) but rather to present a *mise en scène* of what the field and its related areas involve. Here most of my examples

are from the writings of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, and I use them to discuss the activities that take place in the landscape of nonsense. In keeping with my interest in critically examining nonsense criticism, I am concerned with others' definitions of nonsense, and thus I investigate a selection of literature in which the characteristics of nonsense are dealt with. My "Overview", then, is metatextual, for I consider both "what nonsense is" and what it is thought to be. While I resist the impulse to circumscribe the genre, in the latter part of the chapter I outline the "devices" or "procedures" through which nonsense is produced – relying heavily on the work of Wim Tigges[6] and Susan Stewart – and thus present the tools of the trade if not a finished product.

In Chapter 2 I turn to the cultural backdrop of Lear's nonsense in particular, and examine one of the claims frequently made in nonsense criticism: that literary nonsense is a distinctively "Victorian genre". While the methods of nonsense are nothing new to literature or life, it is in nineteenth century England that two independent nonsense *oeuvres* appeared in the work of Lear and Carroll, and it is a platitude in scholarly and biographical writing to describe their work as a response to the social conditions of their age. Thus in this chapter I consider various "Victorian issues" often thought to be given a voice – or reacted against – in Edward Lear's literary nonsense. The foremost factors that I explore are, firstly, the social rigidity of the age and, secondly, developments in children's literature and popular conceptions of childhood. These features constitute the backdrop to the nonsense of Lear and Carroll and help to explain its characteristic irreverence towards social convention and also contemporary reception of the new style of children's writing. In keeping with the theme of interpretation, I also discuss others' readings of Lear's nonsense in which its "meanings" are connected to the cultural context of man and work: in particular, Clifton Snider's Jungian analysis.[7] I have attempted to maintain a level of caution in my discussion of the cultural "location" of literary nonsense, as one of the problems frequently encountered in

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[6] Tigges, Wim. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988.
[7] References to Snider appear without page numbers as I refer to a non-paginated online version of his essay: Snider, Clifton. "Victorian Trickster: A Jungian Consideration of Lear's Nonsense Verse". (2001) First published in *Psychological Perspectives* 24, 1991. *Home Page of Clifton Snider*. 25 June 2005. <http://www.csulb.edu/~csnider/edward.lear.html>.

critical writing on this subject is the generalisation involved; and it is these "readings" that I seek to recontextualise in this chapter.

Chapters 1 and 2 may be seen as the background to the actual texts of Edward Lear, and it is these that I "read" – and discuss "readings of" – in the remaining two chapters. Chapter 3, "How to Read a Learian Limerick", rests on the exegesis of nonsense that appears in Chapter 1 for the understanding and misunderstanding of Lear's limericks that I propose. A number of erroneous interpretations of the limericks have appeared in Lear criticism: most notably, on the one hand, Freudian Structuralist readings which view the limericks as codes for the ostensibly taboo activities of sex, death, and eating; and on the other, those that compare them to the modern form of the limerick, which is humorous but not nonsensical. I demonstrate, first, the flaws inherent in these interpretations (the main one of which is that they recommend *interpretation* – or resolution into sense – rather than apprehension of nonsense) before offering an alternative approach, which I have divided into six "reading principles". My principles take into account both the context of Lear's limericks – in particular, the probable response of his primary audience – and also the methods and effects of nonsense, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Chapter 4, meanwhile, steps back from the interpretive matters that arise with regard to Lear's limericks, and asks whether his long poems, by contrast, are similarly nonsensical. Edward Lear's nonsense songs do not exhibit the same absurdity that characterises the limericks: indeed, many of their themes and images are typical of romantic poetry; and the link between nonsense literature and romanticism is another platitude sometimes served up by critics.[8] Thus, in Chapter 4, "The Green World of Nonsense: Romanticism and Lear's Songs", I examine Lear's songs from these two critical perspectives, noting that the divide is in some ways a specious one, for his nonsense is intimately bound up in romantic attitudes. In this chapter, then, I explore further issues of interpretation in

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[8] For instance, connections between nonsense and romanticism are made in: Byrom, Thomas. *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear.* New York: Brandywine Press, 1977; Miller, Edmund. "Two Approaches to Lear's Nonsense Songs." *The Victorian Newsletter.* 44, Fall 1973. 5-8; and Smith, A.J.M. "Nonsense Poetry and Romanticism" *Essays in Honour of Russell B. Nye.* Ed. Joseph Waldmeir. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1978. 180-194.

nonsense, for one of the marks of Lear's "more romantic" poems is that, compared to the limericks, they are more easily resolvable into sense. Often the resulting meaning is related to the author's personal experiences; and it is here, chiefly, that I tackle matters related to biographical "readings" of Lear and nonsense.

While Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with the two main bodies of Lear's writing – his limericks and his songs – these are not the only nonsense texts that he has produced. His alphabets, botanies and cookeries, as well as some juvenilia and one nonsense story, "The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple Popple", are referred to in the remainder of this introduction and Chapter 1, while in Chapter 2 I discuss another prose piece, "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" in some detail for what it illustrates of Lear's distinctively "Victorian" concerns. Like the major nonsense works, these also call upon matters of reading and interpretation and gesture, through their folly, towards the deeper value of nonsense. Finally, in conclusion, I consider, briefly, the role and significance of humour in nonsense, and gesture towards further possible explorations, including in my appendix an essay on the nonsense poetry of South African writer, Philip de Vos.

The subtitle of this thesis is "A Journey through the Writing of Edward Lear": a caption that alludes to one of Lear's lifetime activities that is also given expression in his nonsense. Lear was a constant traveller, and his writing takes the reader through several exotic locations; both real and imaginary. Thus, in discussing questions of "reading" I encounter – and, on a different level – enact a kind of literary journey; and my "less scholarly" purpose in this thesis is to take its reader on a "tour" of Lear's writing. In preparation, then, I turn for the remainder of this introduction, to a brief history of the "guide" and subject of this thesis.

The Life of My Uncle Arly

Left by his friend to breakfast alone on the white
Italian shore, his Terrible Demon arose
Over his shoulder; he wept to himself in the night,
A dirty landscape-painter who hated his nose.

The legions of cruel inquisitive They
Were so many and big like dogs: he was upset
By Germans and boats; affection was miles away:
But guided by tears he successfully reached his Regret.

How prodigious the welcome was. Flowers took his hat.
And bore him off to introduce him to the Tongs;
The demon's false nose made the table laugh; a cat
Soon had him waltzing madly, let him squeeze her hand;
Words pushed him to the piano to sing comic songs;

And children swarmed to him like settlers. He became a land.

W. H. Auden, January 1939

Edward Lear was the twentieth of twenty-one children (of whom thirteen survived infancy), born to Ann and Jeremiah Lear on 12 May, 1812.[9] He was raised and educated largely by his eldest sister, also Ann, who was twenty-two years his senior. In his letters and diaries Lear is almost entirely silent about his parents and family origins, save when he finds the opportunity for a facetious story: "my own [name]…is really LØR, but my Danish Grandfather picked off the two dots and pulled out the diagonal line and made the word Lear (the two dots and the line and the O representing the sound –ea). If he threw away the line and the dots only he would be called *Mr Lor*, which he didn't like."[10] While Lear's grandfather was uninspiringly English, this anecdote does reveal something of his grandson, whose playful escapism and fascination with language were defining traits. Lear was an eager student, and after the fine tuition acquired at the hands of his sisters and his independent exertions, was scornful of prescriptive schooling. He was

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[9] Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical details concerning Lear are from Vivien Noakes's *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968 (while an updated edition appeared in 1979, I have only had continuous access to the former edition).
[10] Letter to Hubert Congreve, 31 December, 1882 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 13-14).

well-versed particularly in the classics, and in the Romantic poets – of whom he had a particular fondness for Lord Byron.

His father, a London stockbroker, lost a large amount of money when Lear was four, resulting in the family's move from their large lodge home and a dramatic change in their standard of living. Lear was left without an inheritance and an enduring distrust of material attachments, and (after a brief miserable period of formal schooling) with the necessity of finding a job at the age of fifteen. Like his contemporary Charles Dickens, Lear clung to his early awakening to the world of commerce and self-sustenance[11] although Noakes notes a tendency to exaggerate his sense of fiscal abandonment (*Wanderer*, 28). He spent much of his adolescence casually employed as an illustrator of flowers, butterflies, and (his speciality) birds and, as his talent developed, a drawing instructor. During the late 1820's and early 1830's he worked and travelled with zoologist John Gould, a "harsh and violent man" who, in Lear's opinion, "owed everything to his excellent wife, [and] to myself".[12]

At the age of eighteen the first two of Lear's four volumes of *Illustrations* of parrots were published. The precision exhibited in his professional drawing is reversed in his later nonsense illustrations, which are spontaneous and naïve in style yet contain absurd details that magnify the nonsensicality of the accompanying text. Lear's early contact with birds provided a motif for his later nonsense, in which they appear frequently as allies to his sundry eccentrics, who often themselves resemble birds. Indeed, during his employment as an illustrator, Lear was amused to find himself a spectacle in the menagerie, and often sketched caricatures of himself as a round-bellied fowl with wings folded in the lines of his greatcoat – perhaps describing himself in pictorial idiom as a "rare bird".

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[11] For example, letter to C Empson (bookseller), 1 October 1831 (*Selected Letters* 14): "…I had rather be at the bottom of the river Thames than be one week in debt – be it *never* so small.– For me – who at the age of 14 & a half, was turned out into the world, *literally without a farthing…*"
[12] Diary, 7 February 1881. Apparently Gould exploited Lear, claiming credit for Lear's drawings in his publication, *The Birds of Europe*.

The Spectacled Owlet or the Learned nonsensical Jargon Bird

     From a young age Lear suffered from violent depressions which he called, playfully, "The Morbids." His "strange and unhappy childhood" (Noakes, *Wanderer* 18), like much of his adult life, was coloured by a sense of grief for irretrievable happier days, and this nostalgia is reflected in the whimsical longing that constitutes the mood of his mature nonsense such as "The Quangle Wangle's Hat". Lear was also afflicted by feelings of physical inadequacy, and teasingly exaggerated his ugliness: "both my knees are fractured from being run over which has made them peculiarly crooked[13]…my neck is singularly long, a most elephantine nose – & a disposition to tumble here and there – owing to being half blind".[14] He was a habitual exaggerator, and part of his sense of humour inheres in self-parody. Lear was also epileptic: a fact that perhaps none of his friends realised, as he experienced a prognostic "aura" and was thus able to isolate himself before a seizure occurred. His name for the fits, the "Demon," reflects the diabolical associations that many still attributed to the disease during the Nineteenth Century. Like many young Victorians, Lear had been told that the seizures were a consequence of masturbation and went to great lengths to keep them secret. Thus, shame and self-condemnation became features of his psychology from an early age, and the young Lear occasionally consoled himself by drawing and composing poems about eccentric folk like those who featured in his later published nonsense.

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[13] Apparently, soon after Lear left school to seek work drawing in London, a carriage ran over his legs permanently damaging his knees (Chitty, 18).

[14] Letter to Empson, 1 October 1831 (*Selected Letters* 16).

Lear experimented briefly with "serious" poetry as a teenager in the late twenties, expressing the same sense of nostalgia that would characterise his later nonsenses:

> When the light dies away on a calm summer's eve
> And the sunbeams grow faint and more faint in the west,
> How we love to look on, till the last trace they leave
> Glows alone like a blush upon modesty's breast![15]

Here we see his attraction to landscape and nature: a theme in his life and work that motivated the years of wandering and appears in the colourful backdrops of verses such as "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" and "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò". Indeed, Lear recorded a closer affinity with nature than with human beings: "the Elements," he wrote, "– trees, clouds, &c., – silence…seem to have far more part with me or I with them, than mankind".[16]

His first incursions into the field of nonsense involved parodies of "serious" poets and verse-letters. One letter addressed to a childhood neighbour, Fanny Drewitt, stands out for it contains Lear's first explorations of the interaction between visual and written nonsense which, as we shall see, is essential to his limericks. "Miss Maniac"[17] is a narrative in rhyming couplets telling of a woman's descent into madness following her thwarted love affair, illegitimate pregnancy, and paternal banishment. While the verse itself is only nonsensical for its hyperbole, the absurdity of the drawings undercuts the story's threatened pathos. For example, in the sketch accompanying the lines "But when my phrenzied fit is o'er, a dreary hour comes on, –/A consciousness of unknown things, – of reason overthrown" (7-8), Miss Maniac is shown surrounded by phrases: "Perpetual motion," "indian [sic] passage by the North Pole," "Discovery of the Longitude," and "way to pay the National Debt." When Miss Maniac weeps, it is into a teacup; and her raging father closely resembles an orang-utan. Thus, in this poem Lear both sanitises and mocks madness – a concern which resurfaces in his treatment of the eccentrics and outcasts of his limericks and later verse. The nonsense brought out in the disparity between word and image is characteristic of Lear's

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[15] From a sixteen line poem written in November 1829 in response to the sense of loss and longing experienced by Lear looking out over the Arun Valley (Noakes, *Wanderer* 35-36).
[16] Written in 1862 (Noakes, *Painter* 8).
[17] Written in the late 1820s or 1830s (*Complete Verse* 23-40, n.473).

work and produces the wealth of implication that gives his limericks in particular their force and paradox.

In 1832, at the age of twenty, Lear began a project that would indirectly bring about his first published nonsense: painting the menagerie kept by the Earl of Derby, Lord Stanley, in his home at Knowsley, a village outside Liverpool. Stanley's grandchildren fell in love with the playful artist, who had discovered the limerick form in a collection published in 1822, *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen.* Lear, primarily an illustrator, began his explorations of the form with drawings accompanying rhymes like the "old man of Tobago":

> There was an old man of Tobago
> Who lived on rice-gruel and sago;
> > But at last, to his bliss,
> > His physician said this:
> "To a roast leg of mutton you may go."

It was from these verses that Lear obtained his characteristic limerick structure in which the subject of the rhyme is an "old person" who is qualified by his geographical location. In the majority of Lear's limericks the final line is almost identical with the first, but for a subtle yet significant addition of an adjective.[18] It is through his early limericks and sketches that Lear progressed from being a charge of the housekeeper to a guest of the family. At Knowsley he discovered his great love for children and the tender silliness that was to inform his nonsense. In spite of the continual stimulation of the Stanley household, however, he felt at times a sense of isolation, and the anti-materialism that had grown out of his childhood experiences only increased in the "uniform apathetic" company of "lofty society".[19] As an epileptic and a nonconformist, Lear perhaps felt himself an outcast of the urbane surroundings of the Stanley home, and thus he sought solace in his own menagerie: the oddball collection of foreigners, many of them aged and eccentric, who populated his "nonsenses".[20] He did not initially regard the limericks as publishable material, and they were written merely for his amusement and that of the young Stanleys. It was only in 1846 that they were published

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[18] In addition, Lear employed a four-line construction in which lines three and four of the standard limerick are combined into one. I have preserved this format in the limericks which I cite in Chapter 3.

[19] Untraced letter to Miss Coombe (Noakes, *Wanderer* 45).

[20] Lear never referred to his limericks as "limericks"; a term that apparently only appeared in the late nineteenth century. Instead, he described them as "nonsenses" or later, his "old persons".

under the pseudonym "Derry down Derry": a rearrangement of the folk music refrain, "derry down down", which Lear appropriates in the limerick epigraph:

> There was an Old Derry down Derry,
> Who loved to see little folks merry;
> So he made them a book, And with laughter they shook
> At the fun of that Derry down Derry.

The first edition of Lear's *Book of Nonsense* proved a resounding success – perhaps in part because of the refreshing assault that the limericks perpetrated against Victorian propriety – and reprints appeared in 1855 and 1861: in the latter case, under his own name, and with the addition of 43 new limericks.

In addition to his epilepsy and depression, Lear's respiratory system was weak, and his ill-health initiated what was to be a lifetime of travelling. In 1837, suffering from a bad cold, he escaped the damp English winter for the Mediterranean comfort of Rome. From then onwards he was frequently on the move and even when settled avoided making his home in England, which he described in a diary as a "dreary land of chill & damp".[21] Noakes writes that as a young man Lear was happiest in Italy, where he found a niche in Rome "between the bearded bohemians and the English aristocracy" (*Wanderer* 55), although he came to despise it in the late 1850's, when he struggled to sell his artworks to the disaffected English wintering there: whom he called "beastly aristocratic idiots" (Noakes, *Painter* 20-21). In addition to Italy, during his lifetime's travels Lear passed through Holland, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, France, Egypt, Turkey, Malta, Corfu, Greece, Crete, Palestine and India, painting as he wandered and publishing altogether seven illustrated tracts of his journeys. Like his limericks, the travel journals depend equally upon word and image for their effect, for the lyrical prose enhances the drawings just as the absurd sketches augment the nonsense verses (ibid 16). Lear usually travelled alone "by preference" for, his epilepsy notwithstanding, solitude allowed him to "devote every minute to [his] work, or so arrange plans to ensure their success".[22] While Lear's roaming is often attributed to his lung conditions and epilepsy (which was

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[21] Diary, 3 December 1867.
[22] Lear, Preface to *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* ix.

relieved by walking), the alacrity with which he pursued foreign terrain as both a subject for his art and an escape has the force of a compulsion:

> …if you are absolutely alone in the world, & likely to be so, then move about continually & never stand still. I think therefore I shall be compulsed…to go to Japan & New York, or Paraguay, or anywhere before long…[23]

His characters, too, feel compelled to move – to escape isolation and despair or simply, perhaps, because they cannot keep still. Indeed, when in February 1856 he refused a position as director of a new art department at the university in Corfu – a post that would have provided financial security and agreeable surroundings – his decision was probably at least partly motivated by the constraint that a settled profession would have had on his travels.

In the same year, Lear visited the quarantine monastery at Mount Athos, a long-held travel ambition that proved "one of the most singular bits of [his] whole life" and a source – or confirmation – of his religious disillusionment. The monks of Athos – "dead men," in Lear's view – spend their lives in prayer and chanting atop the secluded mountain from which not only women, but all female creatures are barred. To Lear they seemed "half foolish" and "utterly ignorant" and brought out all that he felt was hypocritical about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, for he was horrified by their apathy towards the surrounding natural splendour, their empty asceticism, and their misogyny.[24] Rather, Lear considered human spirituality to be intimately connected with natural beauty: "when I go to heaven–" he wrote, "if indeed I go – and am surrounded by thousands of polite angels, – I shall say courteously 'please leave me alone!'…let me have a park and a beautiful view of sea and hill, mountain and river, valley and plain…".[25] So too, he derided the dogma and hierarchies of the "screamy ganders of the church" for the "nonsense and curses"[26] that he saw as stifling to tolerance and reason. Lear was suspicious of all things bureaucratic and his nonsense rebels against propriety and reflects his progressive scepticism.

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[23] Letter to Fortesque, 1 May 1859 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 75).
[24] Quotes from a letter to Emily Tennyson, 9 October 1856 (*Selected Letters* 138-140).
[25] Letter to Fortesque, 20 April 1862 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 190).
[26] Letter to Fortesque, 15 March 1863 (ibid 302).

Lear's chief employment as an adult – and the art for which he was best known during his lifetime – was the painting of foreign landscapes which, when properly displayed, fetched competitive prices and won him an acquaintance and pupil in Queen Victoria. He was also a pioneering lithographer, and illustrated his travel journals with reproductions of his watercolours. Often, however, he foundered in his decisions regarding the exhibition of paintings and the sale of journals, displaying works under circumstances that were poorly calculated to result in sale and appealing to friends and acquaintances for subscriptions. Sometimes his artworks disappointed potential patrons because they violated artistic convention or because the quality of work presented in a single exhibition was inconsistent. While he was probably merely misfortunate in some of his commercial artistic endeavours, Lear's frequent difficulties in retailing his Journals and paintings may have been partly a consequence of the repugnance that he felt for the profit-making involved: "financial transactions," he felt, were "a nabbomination!" (Noakes, *Painter* 23).

In 1850 Lear enrolled at the Royal Academy School in London in an attempt to develop his artistic skill – in particular his rendering of figures – abandoning the ten-year course early; probably largely for financial reasons. It is at the Academy that he made several eminent acquaintances, in particular the innovative Pre-Raphaelite painters whose vivid style of painting and close attention to nature won Lear's sympathy although his own choice in subject matter was unsuited to their principles. In William Holman Hunt – one of the three founders of the movement – Lear found an artistic mentor who shared his scepticism towards commercial art. In his letters, Lear addresses Hunt as "Daddy", playfully alluding to the younger man's influential role in the development of his artistic style. One of Lear's artistic projects involved illustrating a collection of Alfred Tennyson's poems;[27] to which he enjoyed composing piano accompaniments and singing emotional renditions. While Lear was a close friend of the poet and never tired of his writing, they fell out in the late 1860's, for Lear condemned Tennyson's "harshness and egocentricity" and his poor treatment of his sons, and Tennyson came to find Lear

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[27] This was not completed during his lifetime – however, an incomplete copy has been compiled by Ruth Pitman: *Edward Lear's Tennyson*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1988.

absurd and tiresome. Emily Tennyson, nonetheless, remained Lear's confidante and the recipient of many quaint and poignant letters.

While Lear came to feel tyrannised by his art, he was still driven to landscape by powerful imaginative and emotional forces and cherished the "walking–sketching–exploring–noveltyperceiving & beautyappreciating part of the Landscape painter's life" as incontestably superior to "moneytryingtoget smokydark London life".[28] Indeed, he sought – and, during hopeful periods, found – something deeply sustaining in scenery; and the magic that he perceived in real natural surroundings is evoked in the fantasy settings of his nonsense, where "a keen sense of beauty" engenders both rapture and melancholy. To Ann he wrote that a feeling for the aesthetic is "always more or less sorrowful to its owner, – tho' productive of good to others".[29] As Lear grew to resent painting, especially the "Tyrants" – miniature reproductions of his larger works that he felt compelled to paint to earn a living – he channelled his artistic disappointment into his nonsense literature.

A subject that frequently arises in the discussion of Lear's nonsense is his supposed homosexuality: a matter sometimes brought in to account for the incongruent couples of his nonsense verses. While I maintain that this kind of interpretation constitutes a misunderstanding of the intentions and effects of his writing, it is sometimes suggested that Lear twice fell in love with male friends, and that this had a significant effect on the themes and "meaning" of his nonsense.[30] The evidence, however, remains inconclusive, and tells little of the implications of Lear's nonsense, for one of the main problems with certain biographical readings of Lear, as we shall see, is that they base their arguments on "facts" to which, in truth, we have no access.

Whatever his sexual proclivities, Lear did on at least one occasion contemplate marriage: in 1867 to Augusta Bethell, daughter of the Baron of

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[28] Letter to Emily Tennyson, 10 May 1865 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 205).
[29] 19 July 1848 (ibid 100).
[30] Susan Chitty, for example, builds her biography of Lear around a week spent with Judge Franklin Lushington, whom he met in Malta in 1849: an important friend who corresponded with him regularly into his old age, although there is inadequate evidence to indicate that he was a lover. Danish painter Wilhelm Marstrand, meanwhile, is described in a diary as the F[ranklin] L[ushington] of [earlier] days" (Noakes, *Wanderer* 134 n.3): a statement that may or may not be significant. For further discussion and references, see Chapter 2, "A Victorian writer?".

Westbury. "Gussie" was a young woman he had befriended during her childhood, and Lear's painful deliberations surrounding their possible nuptials were thwarted when, during a two-week visit to her household, a mysterious proposal was rebuffed by her sister. The disappointment of this brief romance is often thought to be expressed in "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò" where the Bò flees from the site of his rejection and decides to "accept a lonely destination and make the best of it".[31] However, Lear remained at the Bethell household after his disappointment, writing "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" for Augusta's niece and nephews. His need to maintain a silence about his epilepsy probably intensified his sense of social exclusion, just as his avoidance of communal living may have featured in his failure to marry. Lear was an outcast and a wayfarer during an era when the pressure of conformity was great, and described his feelings as "woundily like a spectator…never like an actor".[32]

In spite of his feelings of estrangement, Lear had a large and diverse group of friends. Nevertheless, it was very often children with whom he connected most directly and easily, and they were the inspiration and beneficiaries of his nonsense. "The Owl and the Pussy-cat", for instance, was written for the daughter of John Addington Symonds (a fellow grumbler for whom Lear wrote his "Growling Eclogue"[33]) when she was ill during one of Lear's visits. Here the narrative of the voyaging fantasy lovers, bird and cat, reflects the themes of foreignness and travel that recur in the limericks and later verses – an echo of Lear's own life of wandering and escape.

During his travels Lear befriended the offspring of his hosts as well as the children he met on train corridors and in dining rooms, sympathising with their distress at hotel formalities. He would introduce himself by his "long name" – Mr Abebika kratoponoko Prizzikalo Kattefello Ablegorabalus Ableborinto phashyph or Chakonoton the Cozovex Dossi Fossi Sini Tomentilla Coronilla Polentilla Battledore & Shuttlecock Derry down Derry Dumps – a concatenation that has its

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[31] Diary, 5 December 1867 (Chitty, 211-212).
[32] Letter to Tennyson, 9 June 1855 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 127).
[33] Written on 9 December, 1867 (ibid, *Complete Verse* 233, n.505). This piece takes the form of a dialogue between two inveterate complainers, "Edwardus" and "Johannes", who are appeased by a character representing Symonds' wife, Catherine.

origins in the Victorian tongue twisting game, Aldiborontiphoskyphorniostikos[34] and contains the evocative multilingual sounds that Lear relished. He would charm his new young friends with verses, absurd sketches and nonsense alphabets that were sometimes designed just as much to confuse as to educate, such as:

> The Absolutely Abstemious Ass
> Who Resided in a barrel, and lived only on
> Soda Water and Pickled Cucumbers.[35]

The feeling for children – "who of all creatures," Lear wrote, "are the most interesting" (*Selected Letters*, "Introduction" xii) – is significant, for in his nonsense, his letters and his interactions with the young, Lear always upholds the virtues of fun and anti-didacticism. He followed the children's literature of the day, lauding those works which could be seen to support the interests of a disencumbered, imaginative childhood, and encouraging those capacities in adults. To one of his publishers, he wrote, "one does some good by contributing to the laughter of little children, if it is a harmless laughter";[36] and to Charles Kingsley, "I should like to thank you for so much gratification given me by your many works – (perhaps above all – "Water Babies", which I firmly believe to be all true)".[37]

Lear found solace in play with word, sound and image, and his delight in language is revealed in the gleeful inventions of names, places, botanical objects, and the unexpected epithets that frequently appear in his limericks. Unlike his contemporary Lewis Carroll, whose writings Lear had probably read but apparently never commented on, Lear's linguistic play operates on an emotional rather than an intellectual level, and his appeal to children might be seen to mlie in his possession of his own childlike qualities, including the capacity to be struck by the incongruities of ordinary events. Like Carroll, "his mind", as he put it in the "Self-Portrait of the Laureate of Nonsense", was "concrete and fastidious": a quality which enabled him to jumble language with the precision manifested in the compulsive puns and games with language that appear in his letters. Lear was a

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[34] This example of pre-Learian party nonsense must have been well appreciated by the laureate of bosh: players read out episodes from a tongue-twisting additive story on the murder of Aldiborontiphoskyphorniostikos
(http://www.chrononhotonthologos.com/aldiborontiphoskyphorniostikos.htm).
[35] From perhaps Lear's most nonsensical alphabet, made for Daisy and Arthur Terry, 31 August 1870 (*Complete Verse* 256-269).
[36] To James Fields, 18 November 1869 (*Selected Letters* 214-215).
[37] *Selected Letters*, note on letter to William Holman Hunt, 31 December 1863, p.305.

prolific letter-writer, and his correspondence is replete with the wordplay, distinctive spellings, caricatures, and at times sheer gibberish that characterise his nonsense and reveal the gentle mischievousness of its author. One of his closest friends and correspondees was Chichester Fortesque, a prominent judge with whom he shared a fascination with sound and word that is revealed in the numerous letters they exchanged. He described Lear as "a delightful companion, full of nonsense, puns, riddles, everything in the shape of fun…" (Noakes, *Wanderer* 66).

In 1870 Lear attempted for the first time to settle, building himself first one house in San Remo, Italy and then another when a large hotel – the "Enemy" – obstructed his view of the Alps and destroyed his studio light. In his new home, Lear threw himself into his painting before leaving after much deliberation for his final journey: what was to be an abortive Indian expedition in 1873. Although, much to his disappointment, India did not provide escape from the tedium of his fellow Englishmen, it did present fuel for both his painting and rhyme, producing "The Akond of Swat" and "The Cummerbund" – which, of all his nonsenses, is the most Carrollian in character. Three books of nonsense were published during the 1870's (none of which achieved the popularity of the first *Book of Nonsense*) containing limericks, verses, botanies, alphabets, and cookery: *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1870), *More Nonsense* (1871) and *Laughable Lyrics* (1877). Lear shared his house with a tabby cat named Foss, who became an indispensable companion and the subject of several cartoons in which owner and pet appear as rotund, amicable caricatures.
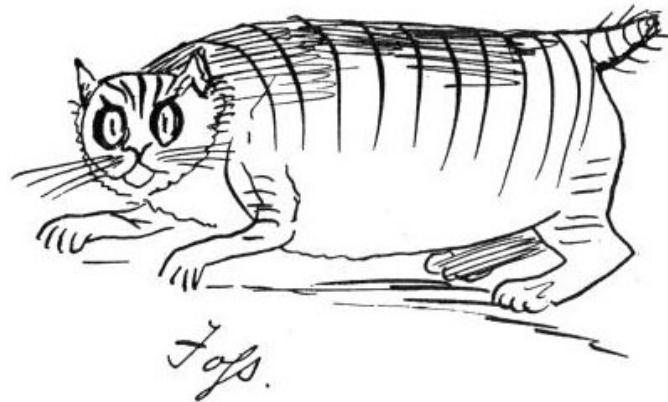
Foss appears in Lear's 1879 autobiographical verse, "How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear", a gentle self-parody which encapsulates in eight stanzas the significant features of his life, personality and nonsense. In his last completed song, also an autobiographical piece, "Incidents in the Life of My Uncle Arly",[38] Lear reflects parodically on his life's experiences, which are cast as futile nonsensical events:

> Like the ancient Medes and Persians
> Always by his own exertions
>   He subsisted on those hills; –
> Whiles, - by teaching children spelling, –
> Or at times by merely yelling, –
> Or at intervals by selling
>   Propter's Nicodemus Pills.

A parenthetical refrain appears at the end of three of the seven stanzas of this poem: "(But his shoes were far too tight)". Here Lear refers metaphorically to the sense of constraint that he felt at the time of writing, confined to bed and oppressed by a cough and bronchial tightness. However, in 1879, Lear had written in his diary:

> O dear! how disgusting is life!
> To improve it O what can we do?
> Most disgusting is hustle and strife,
> And of all things an ill fitting shoe –
>   Shoe
>   O bother an ill fitting shoe![39]

While this statement may lack a context, the metaphor for a sense of having been mis-cast and poorly equipped in life is unambiguous. And indeed, this is a recurrent theme in Lear's life that is manifested in the misfits that populate his nonsense. During his middle and old age, however, Lear increasingly examined the events of his life with a critical but forgiving eye: "looking back to, & carefully analysing all the curious physical phenomena of myself from 4 years old, & all the consequent effects on the mind, I ought to see I am little to blame & therefore must hold on and abide".[40] Lear died in January 1888 at the Villa Tennyson, San Remo, Italy.

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[38] "Incidents" was begun in 1873; however, he only completed it in 1886 when he was ill and bedridden (*Complete Verse* 456 n.545).
[39] 3 January 1879 (*Complete Verse* 427).
[40] Diary, 10 December 1868 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 233).

Chapter 1

An Overview of Nonsense

"I can explain all the poems that ever were invented –
and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

Humpty Dumpty, *Through the Looking Glass*

Alice's first literary discovery in the Looking-Glass House is "Jabberwocky", a
poem often seen as representative of the methods of literary nonsense. Several
chapters later, she encounters Humpty Dumpty, whose pedagogical endeavours to
decode "Jabberwocky" might be seen to "mimic the activities of literary critics and
philosophers, only in an excessive and subversive way" (Lecercle 5). Humpty's
assertion that he can "explain" all extant and some nonexistent poetry is a non
sequitur through which Lewis Carroll mocks the intellectual arrogance of real
"eggheads",[41] and thus might be seen as a warning to those of us who seek to
explicate the field of literary nonsense – and hence run the risk of over-describing
it. Carroll's egg approaches "Jabberwocky" as merely a lexical problem, for the
information that he offers is not an "explanation" of the poem, but a series of
specious definitions of the words therein. Thus, even after his interpretation we
remain unclear of what the poem is "about". For example, Humpty identifies *toves*
as "something like badgers…something like lizards…something like corkscrews"
(*Annotated Alice* 271) – an intractable combination even with the aid of Tenniel's
illustration – and the word might equally represent any other object that Humpty,
Lewis Carroll, or the reader decides upon. This is the case with all the neologisms
in the poem, and the most certain "meaning" that we can then ascribe the verse is
that it constitutes Alice's initiation into the logic and anti-logic of the looking-glass
dream world.

In this chapter I too proffer an introduction to the methods and madness of
literary nonsense although my approach, unlike Humpty Dumpty's, aims to avoid

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[41] While the possibility of a connection between Carroll's Humpty Dumpty and this derogatory term
for an intellectual is an appealing one, the OED cites the first use of the word "egghead" in the
early twentieth century.

"explaining" texts that "haven't been invented yet". In other words, I do not intend
to generate a set of rules for analysing literary nonsense, to circumscribe the genre
using a narrow set of criteria, or to interpret it as a purely linguistic phenomenon.
Instead, I shall broadly explore the features and motifs of the field in an attempt
to produce an impression (as opposed to an "explanation") of what literary
nonsense involves. In addition to primary texts by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll,
I will consider aspects of various scholarly accounts of nonsense, in particular that
of Wim Tigges, whose *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* is the most systematic
study on the subject that I have encountered. Another scholar on whom I lean
heavily is Susan Stewart, whose definition of nonsense as antithetical with
"common sense" corresponds with my own intuitions concerning the inversions
that characterise nonsense and its relationship with social codes. While I dip into
the explications of various scholars, my own examination will be necessarily
sketchy. A full history of writing on the subject up until 1987 (including early
journalism and texts in French and German) may be found in Chapter 1 of
Tigges's *Anatomy*, "Towards a Definition" (6-46).

The nature of my taxonomy of nonsense is paradoxical: for the most part I
agree with Tigges's anatomisation of the genre – in which he identifies the
characteristics that distinguish nonsense from related fields – but suspect that we
are better off with a rough rather than a concrete delineation. (This, I would
argue, is as much a consequence of the amorphous character of literary genres as
the specific identity of the genre of nonsense.) Nevertheless, a sense of the
territory is necessary to the "readings" of the subsequent chapters, and thus I
consider in the following pages both "what nonsense is" and what it is thought to
be.

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Literary nonsense is a field that scholars and readers have struggled to define since
its formal emergence during the Victorian era:[42] as Tigges notes – echoing one of

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[42] While instances of nonsense "modes" and "devices" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 47) have probably
occurred through-out the history of literature (a classical example, for instance, may be found in
the plays of Aristophanes), for the purposes of this thesis I adhere to Tigges's demarcation of the
genre as the body of literature beginning with and continuing in the tradition of Edward Lear and
Lewis Carroll (ibid 2-3). While this delimitation is problematic (for there are both earlier works that

the first commentators on nonsense, Émile Cammaerts – it is far easier to articulate "what nonsense is not…than to say what nonsense is" (*Anatomy* 89). We may begin, however, by differentiating nonsensical "devices" from the literary genre. Nonsense devices are the tools through which meaning is usurped – for example, logical inversions, wordplay, arbitrary connections and contradictions. They may appear in works which are not in essence "nonsensical", but rather use the same methods towards different ends: in other words, these techniques characterise the genre but are not exclusive to it. The grotesque, for example, employs similar distortions to nonsense, but "evokes horror rather than laughter" (ibid 114); while surrealism and Dadaism involve nonsensical absurdities for the emotional impression that they evoke in the reader (ibid 116). Nonsense, by contrast, does not have an overarching "point" beyond humour or absurdity[43] – although items of nonsense may serve to bring into question problems of language, logic and etiquette. And here it should be noted that, just as the intentions of a piece of writing may be unclear, generic boundaries are hazy and may overlap. Thus, while a work of nonsense will include certain necessary features, a text that is traditionally placed in a different class may also sometimes also be described as nonsense. As noted by Tigges, some nursery rhymes could be properly classified as nonsense:

> Hey diddle diddle,
> The cat and the fiddle,
> The cow jumped over the moon;
> The little dog laughed
> To see such a sport
> And the dish ran away with the spoon. (*Anatomy* 101)

Fantasy is another field characterised by playful subversions that are so similar to those of nonsense (in particular Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories) that their categories might easily be seen to intersect: both types of writing interrogate language and logic, both depict impossible circumstances, and both are teasingly irreverent. The drama and prose of Samuel Beckett, meanwhile, brings out analogous questions of

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may be properly classified as nonsense, and pieces in other languages and cultures), I maintain the restriction for the sake of simplicity and convention.

[43] I am slightly hesitant to make too strong a claim about the purposelessness of literary nonsense (or, for that matter, to distinguish it too strictly from related fields such as the grotesque or absurdusm), for while Lear's work lacks any objective beyond its fun, Carroll's *Alice* stories are explicit in their scrutiny of language and logic. We might, on the other hand, say that strictly speaking the latter are better classified as something other than literary nonsense – perhaps fantasy.

interpretation to those that inevitably arise in nonsense through the subversion of metaphor and the use of parodic forms. Genre is problematic, but for the purposes of this thesis I do not intend to scrutinise the issues raised, for my intention in this discussion is simply that we bear in mind the inexactness of the territory and the potential problems of attempting too precise a definition.

While the boundaries of the field of nonsense are unclear, we may still attempt to identify its features. I turn, then, to the "essence" of nonsense as suggested (albeit using different terminology) by Stewart, Tigges and Michael Heyman:[44] the relationship that it maintains between meaning and absurdity. Where Tigges writes that the fundamental nature of literary nonsense inheres in "a perfect tension between meaning and the absence of meaning" (*Anatomy* 4), Stewart refers to a balance between "common sense" and its antithesis (5),[45] and Heyman discusses the interaction between sense and "non-sense" ("Defense" 2). I begin by quoting from Tigges's account:

> [Literary nonsense is] a genre of narrative literature which
> balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence
> of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with rules of
> language, logic,
> prosody and representation, or a combination of these. In order
> to be successful, nonsense must at the same time invite the
> reader to interpretation and avoid the suggestion that there is a
> deeper meaning which can be obtained by considering
> connotations or associations, because these lead to nothing. The
> elements of word and image that may be used in this play are
> primarily those of negativity or mirroring, imprecision or mixture,
> infinite repetition, simultaneity, and arbitrariness. A dichotomy
> between reality and the words and images which are used to
> describe it must be suggested. The greater the distance or
> tension between what is presented, the expectations that are
> evoked, and the frustration of these expectations, the more
> nonsensical the effect will be. (*Anatomy* 47)

In this definition we see that nonsense is distinguished by its irresolution and contrasts, including those between rules and anarchy; expectation and fulfilment;

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[44] Heyman, Michael. "A New Defense of Nonsense; or, 'Where then is his phallus?' and other questions not to ask." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Winter 1999-2000, Vol. 24.4. 187-194. Page numbers as in draft obtained from author.

[45] As Stewart's monograph is concerned with the devices of nonsense as they manifest in text and discourse of any genre she is does not explicitly define literary nonsense. However, her central theme involves the interaction between common sense and nonsense, and thus I have interpreted this as a claim alluding to the fundamental nature of nonsense.

common sense and meaninglessness. The most significant dialectic, however, is the latter: indeed, the epistemic uncertainty of literary nonsense might be said to constitute its "purpose" inasmuch as it can be said to have one.

This implies that for the incongruities of literary nonsense to perform their ostensive function there must be an accumulation of explicable material which, once the sense is grasped, yields to "non-sense" and ambiguity. Lear's limericks are a case in point, for there is always a degree to which the verses and their drawings are understandable: we may note, for instance, visual and textual puns, the implications of the Old Persons' facial expressions, meanings suggested by polysemy and so on. Nevertheless, words and images do not cohere; there is always something incomprehensible or contradictory in the pairings of adjectives and nouns; meaning cannot be resolved and logic gives way to anti-logic. I shall not immediately discuss the interplay between sense and non-sense in other nonsense texts as the methods employed to achieve this tension should become clear from the following exploration. It is important, however, that we heed the uncertainties of nonsense for, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, by appealing to "sensical" explanations or trying to resolve absurdity into symbolism, the paradoxical "intentions" of nonsense are lost to what Heyman describes as a "false sense of sense" ("Defense" 2).

While Stewart's characterisation of nonsense preserves this non-sensicality, her appeal to "common sense" rather than "sense" as the contrary of nonsense helps to refine our understanding of the quality of the procedures that nonsense subverts and illuminates the thematic interests of literary nonsense. She describes "common sense" as "a domain of situations in the everyday lifeworld" which is "characterised by a set of fundamental assumptions that we further assume to be intersubjective" (8). Nonsense, then, is a feature of many literary texts, for "fictions and play are texts standing in a paradoxical and dependant relationship to texts manufactured using common sense" (Preface viii). While Stewart pointedly avoids "explaining" the genre of literary nonsense, the nonsensical discourses to which she alludes – which "include children's folklore, the 'nonsense literature' of the nineteenth century, and the 'modernist' tradition in literature" – all express an extreme form of the oppositional relationship with "common sense" (51). I shall,

then, further explore the territory of "common sense" and the manner in which literary nonsense in particular subverts it.

"Common sense" has already been described as a social phenomenon: it involves matters 'that we all know' (this is implied by its "intersubjectivity") including beliefs about social interaction (11), science (17-18) language (27), and communication (30). It should come as no surprise, then, that literary nonsense is very often (if not inevitably) concerned with "social" matters: on a basic level, that of language, and at a more superficial level, those which relate to norms of social interaction or "propriety". As we shall see in the next chapter, Victorian nonsense emerged partly in response to a highly controlled society that was deeply concerned with decorous behaviour; and this in part accounts for the frequent and paradoxical images of matters related to etiquette and human interaction. While it may be hasty to presume that all literary nonsense is necessarily concerned with matters of "correct behaviour", a case might be made that as an extension of language and communication, nonsense inevitably turns to social interaction as a theme.

"Common sense" is also important to nonsense for it explains the way in which nonsense strives to usurp our everyday expectations: in Stewarts words,

> …nonsense involves a transgression of common-sense
> interpretive procedures, a hermeticism in its establishment of
> another domain of reality and – as we have seen in the case of
> nonsense and metaphor – not a simple rearrangement of
> hierarchies of common-sense discourse, but a transgression of
> those hierarchies. (Stewart 37)

"Common-sense interpretive procedures" are the tools with which we interpret commonplace reality as opposed to the world of fiction and metaphor: an alternative "domain" in which the figurative or the mythical (or, at the extreme end of the spectrum, the nonsensical) constitute the basis for understanding rather than certain "agreed upon facts" of quotidian experience. Nonsense, meanwhile, is that which "messes things up" (Stewart 5), or usurps the "hierarchies" of the "order, integrity, and coherence accomplished in social life" which constitute the standards for common sense (ibid, "Preface" vii). Nonsense, in other words, opposes the basic rules for human existence. Chief amongst the "hierarchies" that nonsense

disturbs is that of language, and one of the first observations often made with regard to nonsense literature is that it subverts linguistic convention.

By way of comparison, we may examine another variety of "nonsense": one found in biological discourse. In the field of molecular biology the term "nonsense DNA"[46] describes a sequence of nucleotides that occur in a biochemically unrecognisable combination such that the information contained does not manifest as any physical characteristic in the organism of which it inhabits the cells. The parallels with nonsense literature are clear when we consider that DNA, like language, is expressed in code. When the code is not reflected in a recognisable structure the result is "nonsense". While this observation reveals little more than the common use of a term with analogous meanings in different contexts, the surface correspondences may direct us towards one feature in our account of nonsense: that it breaks the established pattern of a discourse and has no real-life referent. In Stewart's terms, it constitutes an alternative self-contained "domain". Even although we may make some "sense" of Humpty Dumpty's definition of a tove, for example, the creature described is incoherent in "common sense" terms because it contradicts our everyday expectations of reality. Literary nonsense, then, subverts, ignores or plays with natural, linguistic, logical and conventional laws; and although many of the consequent impossibilities may occur in other non-realistic literary modes (anthropomorphised animals, for example, are common in children's literature, while improbable creatures often populate fantasy literature) nonsense is distinguished by the extent and absurdity of its transgressions.

The principal tool of literary nonsense is language, and thus I explore the methods by which everyday meaning-ful language is turned into nonsense, and the applications thereof for the literary genre. In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,[47] nonsense is described as a linguistic event in which the "absence, alteration, or violation" of the "rules or conventions to which language is subject" gives rise to certain varieties of meaninglessness (520). At this level, the definition of nonsense

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[46] "Nonsense mutation", National Human Genome Research Institute webpage, 23 July 2007. <http://www.genome.gov/glossary.cfm?key=nonsense%20mutation.>
[47] Baier, A.C. "Nonsense." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 5-6. Ed. Paul Edwards. New York and London: Macmillan, 1967. 520-522.

is obvious: it is that which is "not-sense", or incomprehensible to the mental structures by which we usually interpret the information provided us by language. Baier delineates six different types of nonsense: nonsense as obvious falsehood, semantic nonsense, category mistakes, nonsense strings, vocabulary nonsense and gibberish (520-521). "Obvious falsehood" is characteristic of all fictions: this is why literature requires that we suspend disbelief. In literary nonsense, however, the falsehood is taken to extremes of absurdity, for the reality presented is so outrageous that such a "suspension" is impossible to our conceptual apparatus – Humpty Dumpty's definition of a "tove" makes this explicit – and part of the reason that nonsense induces laughter is that it calls upon us to believe in things that are irreconcilably bizarre. "Semantic nonsense", meanwhile, consists in utterances which "make sense", but do not fit their context, such as the statement "I can't remember my name", in response to the question "Will you marry me?" This variety of nonsense is not of central importance to the literary genre, although it may occur in the absurd causal connections and non sequiturs that sometimes feature in nonsense texts.

Category mistakes or "semisentences"[48] are a less easily explicable form of nonsense that has particular relevance to the genre of nonsense literature, and hence I cite Baier at some length. She "tak[es] as the paradigm of sense the utterance "'[T]he water is now boiling', spoken to an audience ignorant of and interested in the fact". The category mistake might involve:

> The words "The water is now toiling" spoken in almost any circumstances (at this point in the history of the English language): This would constitute nonsense of the sort which fascinates the philosopher, since although it is in most respects a well-formed sentence, it attaches to its subject, "water," a predicate in some way unsuitable. In just what way it is unsuitable is a contested point. What it involves has been called a category mistake. The principles disregarded in such utterances are difficult to state or to characterise. They may be regarded simply as very specific rules of syntax or as ontological truths. The difficulty in citing or establishing them is increased by the fact that the very same rules can be broken without producing nonsense, in all figurative language. "The kettle is

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[48] While Baier follows linguistic convention, describing this variety of nonsense as "semisentences", I have used the phrase "category nonsense" because it seems to me that this term more accurately gestures towards the error that occurs in the category mistake.

boiling" makes perfect sense in any suitable semantic context, despite the metonymy and consequent category mistake embedded in it (the kettle, as distinct from its contents, cannot boil). Even "The water is toiling" can make sense when said of the water turning a mill wheel. The problem here is to find the decisive factor which makes some category mixing successful in communication and the rest nonsense. Many nonsense verses rely on such category mistakes for their effect, such as

> He thought he saw a Garden-Door
> > That opened with a key:
> He looked again and found it was
> > A Double Rule of Three.
> > > (Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*)

We may, following usage in current linguistics, call these deviant utterances "semisentences". (520-521)

While this type of nonsense may present a knotty problem for philosophers and linguists, for the purposes of this explanation it should clarify rather than confuse, for while we may struggle to explain just what makes this variety of mistake nonsensical, it constitutes an element of the nonsense repertoire that is both easy to identify and to produce. So too, the category mistake may be used to demonstrate the importance of context for the production of nonsense. Noam Chomsky's famous sentence, "colourless green ideas sleep furiously",[49] is another example of a category mistake, invented to demonstrate that language which is grammatically correct may still be nonsensical. Just as the phrase "The water is toiling" may make sense in certain exceptional (or poetical) circumstances, Chomsky's sentence can acquire meaning through metaphorical interpretation. In both cases these statements would not be "nonsenses" and it is important that we recognize this distinction, for it tells us that where there is a particular sort of communicative intent (and just what qualifies this intent is another inextricable matter), a text should not be classified as nonsense. Paradoxically, Baier's discussion of the category mistake also points to the fact (discussed further below) that the figures of speech of everyday language – such as the metonymy contained in the statement, "the kettle is boiling" – often involve "mistake[n]" or nonsensical use of language. This is another case in which the technique is nonsensical, although the effect may 'make sense', and it is important to note this phenomenon

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[49] Chomsky, Noam. *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1966 (Sixth Printing), 15.

because it shows again that the boundaries between nonsensical and 'sensical' language and literature are not always clear-cut.

"Nonsense strings", meanwhile, are series of words that violate the syntactic rules of language, such as the sequence "colourless sleep furiously ideas green". These, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle[50] notes, are uncommon in literary nonsense: indeed, he argues that the syntax of nonsense tends to be "hyper-correct" (51). It is worth noting, however, that syntactic nonsense is a technique frequently employed by the poet E.E. Cummings, whose writing disobeys linguistic rules, but is not quite nonsense:

> since feeling is first
> who pays any attention
> to the syntax of things
> will never wholly kiss you

Even although syntactic subversion has not been commonly employed as a device in extant nonsense literature, it is still a technique for producing nonsense; and the above poem illustrates the use of a nonsensical tool toward a meaningful end.

"Vocabulary nonsense", on the other hand, is common in nonsense literature. This refers to the neologisms with which poems such as "Jabberwocky" are peppered, the nonsense words in which Lear delights, and the names of some of his characters: for instance, the Pobble, the Dong and the Quangle Wangle Quee. Like the other types of nonsense, vocabulary nonsense on its own is insufficient to make a text "a nonsense"[51] – as is demonstrated by the writings of James Joyce, whose fanatical wordplay, impenetrability and Carrollian interest in nursery rhyme have sometimes led him to be described erroneously as a nonsense writer (Tigges, *Anatomy* 126). While "nonsense words" of this kind are phonotactically acceptable as they are composed of recognisable "language sounds", the final type defined by Baier – gibberish – consists of sounds that do not resemble the language of the speaker (such as "ajbbrweocyk" as opposed to "Jabberwocky"): a category not generally found in literary nonsense. This is significant because, as we have seen, literary nonsense relies upon a level of

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[50] Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature.* London: Routledge, 1994. 51-59.
[51] Henceforth, I shall use the phrase "a nonsense" to refer to a text that falls into the genre of literary nonsense – as opposed to a non-nonsensical text that employs nonsense devices.

meaning for its meaninglessness to be of any worth; gibberish, meanwhile, is purely nonsensical – too nonsensical even for nonsense – because in the absence of coherence we cannot apprehend even absurdity.

Baier's account is a description of a broad philosophical phenomenon which tells something of the activities of literary nonsense, but should not be seen as a full "explanation" thereof. Indeed, linguistic interpretations of nonsense literature, such as that offered by Lecercle, overlook important features of the genre and may arrive at conclusions that are inaccurate or uninteresting. Lecercle argues that nonsense functions by following basic linguistic rules meticulously – those of phonetics, morphology and syntax – and defying the higher-level conventions of semantics (68). When breached, the first two varieties of law produce gibberish, while syntactic errors make for the nonsense string. The violation of semantic principles, meanwhile, creates category mistakes. Lecercle thus maintains that nonsense is a "conservative-revolutionary genre" (2) because it adheres to the rudimentary rules of language and plays with the secondary ones. He supports his claim through observations about the thematic concern with etiquette and idiom in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories and Lear's limericks, which he argues reinforce what he sees as the conservative stance of nonsense literature (100-111):

> Language is an immoral universe. Those perversions seem to bring success to whoever indulges them. More often than not Alice remains speechless, for she who believes in the maxims of good breeding and grammar is always surprised at the actions that breach them. There is violence in such perverse deviations: characters are liable to be "suppressed", like the Dormouse in the trial scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, deprived of their heads, or destroyed in various ways, like the mild eccentrics of Lear's limericks. The fabric of social life, and the fabric of language, are torn, and *subversion* [Lecercle's emphasis] triumphs. There are no rules left in this social and linguistic chaos, the best emblems of which are the game of croquet and the poem "They told me you had been to her" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. All we can do is watch Alice drift aimlessly, and drift ourselves, as all rules and regularities of language and behaviour dissolve. The characters in Wonderland are not even like the villains in Dickens, who know what they are about and will get their comeuppance – they are not evil, but characterised by an arbitrary and thoughtless general acrimony, the linguistic equivalent of the state of nature. (112)

According to Lecercle's argument, Victorian nonsense expects its reader to support the cause of social and linguistic conformity, for defiance leads to chaos and violence. Just as linguistic conventionalism on a basic level is seen to point to the conservative nature of the genre, the interest in matters of decorum is used to support the argument that "nonsense is a conservative pedagogic genre disguised in an unconventional method": a consequence of the paradoxical inability of language to refer to itself (Heyman, "Defense" 4).

There are several problems with Lecercle's approach, not least of which is the fact that although his description of the linguistic levels at which sense and nonsense interact is accurate, as both he and Heyman note, these observations are "banal" (ibid 3; Lecercle 22). While there may be certain limitations in the ability of language to describe itself that Lecercle would argue can only be filled by partial subversion based upon strict compliance, it is not obvious that this should make nonsense a hyper-conservative field. As Heyman points out, the "dialectic between 'subversion and support' is important in making nonsense readable" – it provides the "sense" or "meaning" that makes it possible to engage with nonsense – but does not mean that the genre is really a "covert pedagogical scheme of language instruction" ("Defense" 4). So too, Lecercle's reflections upon nonsense are in many cases relevant only to Lewis Carroll's works – in particular, the *Alice* stories. Lear's nonsense, by contrast, is far less explicitly concerned with language and logic – and his linguistic and logical absurdities often constitute flourishes to, rather than the focus of the work. Furthermore, I would argue that it is far from clear that we are intended to sympathise with sense and politeness in the *Alice* stories (or, for that matter, in Lear's limericks), for the attention given to etiquette – like that given to poetry – is parodic, playful, and contradictory in its intentions. Lecercle's argument seems to presume that the *Alice* stories were created for the purpose of teaching manners and proper speech to Victorian children when in fact (as he notes) Alice enters Wonderland and the Looking Glass House well-equipped with knowledge of social mores – although, because she is young and imaginative, her approach to politeness is careless and questioning. And through the bizarre experiences that she undergoes, Alice comes to question customs and speech-habits that she had previously taken for granted. A sympathetic audience

should share Alice's response, for she, like the genre of literary nonsense, calls upon us to interrogate "common sense"; and the dialectic that results can only be more revolutionary than conservative.

I turn, then, to a discussion of two varieties of literary rebellion closely related to nonsense: those of parody and humour. One of the first writers on literary nonsense, Victorian columnist Edward Strachey, described the field thus:

> [Nonsense is]…a delightful and humorous way of bringing confusion into order by setting things upside down, bringing them into all sorts of unnatural, impossible, and absurd, but not painful or dangerous, combinations. (Strachey 515)

While Strachey's description is noteworthy for being one of the first and for celebrating the affective and moral value of nonsense, he does not distinguish nonsense from other types of comic text, many of which are characterised by the real-world object that is undercut: the person, institution, or habit that is mocked. Nonsense, however, like strings of gibberish DNA, is without a referent, for it creates incongruities but does not attack them, and thus it lacks both the objective and the resolution of satire and witticism. Even if nonsense may in some ways be seen to possess an implicit target – language structures, social etiquette, and common sense are some possibilities – its approach to the subverted goal and the quality of the "attack" are different to those of other sorts of humour. The objects undermined in nonsense are often so large and indispensable to everyday life that the project can only sabotage itself. Thus, at least in part, it is the preposterousness of the condemnation enacted by nonsense that separates it from other comedy.

The connection between nonsense and parody, however, deserves further exploration. According to Tigges, nonsense is incompatible with parody, which "satirizes a subject-text, whose weaknesses (usually formal) come under attack". A nonsense cannot be a parody, in Tigges's view, because the most salient feature of the genre is that it does not have a "point" outside itself, and because it is characterised by its ambivalent approach to meaning. (*Anatomy* 95) However, the frequency with which nonsense forms derive from other texts suggests that at the very least we should consider parody as a compelling foundation. This is the contention upon which Heyman's dissertation rests, for "[w]hile most studies of

literary nonsense focus on its creation of 'nonsense' out of general linguistic and logical modes of sense," the origins of nonsense in "literary sense" constitute "half, if not more, of the genre, and that which distinguishes it from nursery rhyme, fairy tale, light verse, and other possible nonsense-related genres" ("Isles" 14). Heyman explores the literary background with which the nonsense of Lear and Carroll interact in previous and contemporary children's literature, arguing that while nonsense is essentially "parodic," its distinctive approach to the parent texts separates it from true parody (Ibid 15-16). The difference inheres in the intentions behind the mimicry, for while strict parody is directed toward mockery of the original text, nonsense is not motivated by intertextual commentary, but rather by playfulness. Lecercle, meanwhile, distinguishes between parody and pastiche, the latter of which involves a kind of unrecognisable parody in which "the style, the clichés, the slips of the pen, are recognised as somehow other', but no name can be given to this other" (170). "Pastiche" may be a more apt description of the parodic activities of nonsense literature than "parody", for it refers to that which engages with a "polyphony not of voices, but of discourses" (Lecercle 176). In other words, inasmuch as there is irony and subversion in nonsense, it is directed toward life and society (yet, as we have just seen, on too absurdly broad a scale to be "taken seriously") rather than specific works of literature. Lecercle's account is useful for it explains how nonsense "parodies" transcend the themes and structures of the original texts – although, as Heyman points out, it is not clear how Lecercle marries nonsense pastiche with the claim discussed above that nonsense is a vehicle for conservative social and linguistic education ("Isles" 19). In the following discussion I have avoided scrutinising these definitions any further, taking Tigges' understanding of parody as satisfactory, partly for the sake of space, and also because my interest is in the general links between nonsense and parody rather than the minutiae of the term.

The parodic nature of nonsense is most evident in Carroll's *Alice* stories, which are punctuated with poetic encounters that have their roots in verses that would have been recognisable to Victorian readers. While from a certain perspective we cannot avoid describing these poems as parodies – John Ciardi and

Florence Milner,[52] for example, both note that part of their purpose is to "deflat[e] [the] serious morality" of the parent texts (Ciardi 306) – it is important also to consider their contextual function. When Alice enters Wonderland, she is forcibly removed from all her habitual experiences: social, linguistic and pragmatic. It should come as no surprise, then, that when she attempts to ground herself by appealing to knowledge that she had previously taken for granted, the "words [do] not come the same as they used to".[53] In Wonderland, Alice tries repeatedly to recite verses that are well known to her, producing – to her bewilderment – nonsensical if lyrical variations. She is equally flummoxed by the "poetry" that is declaimed to her which, as both she and the reader would be aware, also imitates extant rhymes, replacing sense and sobriety with absurdity. Thus, the chief function of these "poems" is not to satirize the originals, but as measures of Alice's displacement from the world of sense into that of non-sense: in other words, to characterise Wonderland (and later the looking-glass world). This, admittedly, is an unfairly reductive reading of the Wonderland texts, for the verses that Alice encounters also serve to bring into question the "sensical" activities of language and literature to which the real world has accustomed her (although not, at times, without resistance – recalling her objection to her sister's novel which "had no pictures or conversations in it"). In other words, the devices employed in the poems – and the inversions of which they themselves consist – reflect the cause of unmeaning rather than constituting an attack upon the "subject-texts". The original poems, then, might be said to provide a structure for nonsense rather than an object of derision.

In the case of Edward Lear, many of the nonsense songs have their roots in or contain echoes of serious poetry: for example, the refrain of "Calico Pie"[54] alludes to the final lines of Tennyson's "Break, break, break" (1842) – "But the tender grace of a day that is dead/Will never come back to me" (*Complete Verse* n.244, 510):

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[52] Ciardi, John. "A Burble through the Tulgey Wood." (1959) 303-311; Milner, Florence. "The Poems in *Alice in Wonderland*." (1903) 295-302. *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as seen through the Critics' Looking-Glasses 1865-1971*. Ed. Robert Phillips. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

[53] Chapter II, *Alice in Wonderland* (*The Annotated Alice* 38). In this chapter, Alice attempts to recite "How doth the little busy bee", producing instead "How doth the little crocodile".

[54] Written 1869; published in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (ibid 508).

> But they never came back to me!
> They never came back!
> They never came back!
> They never came back to me!

In Tennyson's poem, natural scenery is depicted for its potent effect on human emotions, and it is part of the non-sense of "Calico Pie" that the sense of loss of a profound aesthetic experience is transformed into a context-less impression of sheer abandonment. Lear thus inverts Tennyson's mournful tone through his gleeful and dissociated nihilism. This poem might, then, be seen to deride the yearning after nature (here embodied in the members of the animal kingdom who desert "me") yet at the same time Lear supports the sorrow and feels the loss.

As another example, Lear's "The Jumblies"[55] suggests both the fifteenth century "The Ship of Fools" by Sebastian Brant and a nursery rhyme in which the "Three wise men of Gotham" sail to sea in a bowl.[56] These are but two of several examples of intertextuality between Lear's songs (which according to Lecercle's designation more closely approach pastiche than Carroll's poems) and other texts, and it should be noted that in these cases, as in almost all of his verse, the parent text(s) provides little more than a form and inspiration for the nonsense. The instances in which the relationship between nonsense and parody are less clear-cut occur where Lear comments obliquely upon the "awful warning book" through which morality was inculcated into young minds by threats of doom and brutality during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (Heyman, "Isles" 44). Lear's mockery of this form is evident in the levity – and even glee – with which he treats violence and death in his limericks and the story, "The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-popple".[57] Here parental warnings unheeded result in the bizarre and horrible deaths of the children of seven animal families, which are then celebrated by the creatures responsible for their demise and immortalised by their parents in pickling jars. Contrary to the moral tale, in which death and disobedience are used to terrify the reader into compliance, the matter-of-fact absurdities of this tale nullify the emotional impact that would be produced by

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[55] Written 7 July 1870; published *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (*Complete Verse* 512).
[56] Ibid. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of these and other songs by Lear.
[57] Henceforth, "The Seven Families".

death in a serious context, and so reduce both moral threats and insubordination to frivolity. Whether this work should be said to constitute parody or nonsense is open to discussion – and it should be clear from the preceding examination that the two terms need not be seen as mutually exclusive (Heyman, "Isles" 47-50). I do not, however, intend to engage with this debate here, for it should suffice to demonstrate that nonsense has deep roots in parody.

One of the parodic impulses in nonsense involves its eschewal or subversion of figurative language. Metaphor and its related activities involve the identification or comparison between unrelated objects – Keats's Grecian urn, for example, is described "as" a virgin "bride". As Stewart notes, metaphor abounds in everyday and idiomatic language (58): we all know that "birds of a feather" are "like-minded human beings"; while an example that has repercussions for nonsense literature is the expression, "to grin like a Cheshire cat": an adage of uncertain origin that was common during the Victorian era.[58] One of the devices of nonsense, meanwhile, involves the "literalisation" metaphor (ibid 77-81), an activity in which a figurative phrase is reified as a real object. Hence, not only the Cheshire Cat, but the Cheshire Cat's grin, is given a real existence in *Alice in Wonderland*; while the sun and moon in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" (for instance) are not personified, but literally alive. Nonsense carries itself on the surface, and thus figures of speech are usually absent, or appear as objects of play, as in the case of the nonsense similes which Lear employed in his letters:

> …I must close this as the Cyclopses used to say of their one eye.[59]

> This is my tale as the pertinacious peacock said aloud when he spread his in the radiant sumbeans.[60]

Nonsense excludes allegory and symbolism, which are forms of meaning that occur when a text gestures toward something beyond itself. As Stewart might put it, nonsense is hermetic; self-contained; refers only to its own inventions. In other words, nonsense is apolitical: it exists only "for the sake of nonsense". There is another sense, however, in which nonsense cannot avoid making sense, and this is the paradox referred to by Lecercle: that by insisting that it has no meaning

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[58] *The Annotated Alice*, Chapter VI: "Pig and Pepper", n.4, 83.
[59] Letter to Fortesque, 11 January 1857 (*Complete Verse* 461).
[60] Letter to Bruce, 8 September 1866 (ibid).

beyond itself, nonsense inevitably interrogates language and meaning themselves. Stewart thus describes nonsense as "discourse that denies itself" (72): as we shall see in the latter part of this chapter, one of the processes through which nonsense is produced is the reversal of events and objects created within the nonsense text.

Another characteristic of nonsense that distinguishes it from other genres is its approach to emotion. While the themes of nonsense may include potentially affecting subjects such as courtship, death and violence, the intensity of these weighty matters is always undercut with absurdity. Sentiment, in other words, is confounded through humour, although at the same time sadness and yearning are common effects in literary nonsense, especially that of Edward Lear. In many of Lear's songs, he gestures toward tragedy: "Calico Pie", for instance, depicts a scene of utter desertion; the Pobble's loss of his toes is a grievous event, and "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò" is a tale of romantic despair. However, the incongruities of the situations depicted as well as the verbal play mean that the pathos elicits both mockery and sympathy: the reader feels the character's pain, but at the same time laughs at himself for feeling it. One of the projects of nonsense might then be described as "anti-emotional", for by tackling discomforting and potentially emotive issues from an impractical, playful perspective, nonsense "reduce[s]…to absurdity" experiences which "are central to the human condition" (Byrom 150).

Death in particular is a subject worthy of further exploration as it appears with great frequency in nonsense. The fabulous demise of Lear's Discobbolos clan in "Mr and Mrs Discobbolos",[61] for instance, is an innocuous event that we may find amusing for its very banality. Lear's limericks too are replete with instances of violence and obliteration, portraying individuals who are variously baked alive, burned alive, devoured or pursued by animals, choked to death or simply "smashed". Similarly, in *Alice in Wonderland*, the Queen of Hearts relishes every opportunity to threaten Alice's precarious survival, while the Cheshire Cat flirts with existence, gliding in and out at will. This interest in death is not a manifestation of nihilism for it arises partly in a tradition in children's writing in which death was frequently a theme (Heyman, "Isles" 171) and, more particularly,

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[61] This poem is examined further in Chapter 4.

the levity with which nonsense approaches the subject challenges the "common sense" values which regard mortality as a matter of great seriousness. On a more esoteric level, the balance in nonsense between being and unbeing might be said to correspond with that between meaning and meaninglessness: sense and existence, in other words, achieve a metaphysical parallel. The concern with death in literary nonsense (as it manifests in Lear's limericks) is further discussed in Chapter 3 and thus I turn now to a discussion of the attribute that enables nonsense to mock its serious subject-matter.

Elizabeth Sewell[62] describes nonsense as "an attempt at reorganising language, not according to the rules of prose or poetry…but according to those of play" (25). I have already discussed some of the linguistic aspects of literary nonsense, and here am concerned with the implications of the latter part of Sewell's statement: that nonsense is essentially playful in character. Tigges too alludes to the "game-like quality of nonsense", which not only "has its own rules or laws, but…adheres to its self-appointed rules only voluntarily" (*Anatomy* 54). This is most obvious in the *Alice* stories, where events happen almost at will and there is no constant structure to their causality: the things that Alice consumes, for instance, may cause her to grow or shrink, and she can only discover which by trial and error. While "common sense" reality is circumscribed by prognostic systems, nonsense does 'whatever it likes' – both with language and with phenomena – and the result is a self-governing arbitrary universe.

Nonsense literature can be seen to be playful in another sense as well, for its primary audience is the child and, as we have seen, it opposes the pedagogical schemes of a large body of children's literature, instead upholding the aims of frivolity and irreverence. Nonsense, however, is paradoxical in its child-directedness, for very often the words and scenarios that it employs deliberately elude a child's understanding even while they attract his imagination. This is not uncommon in children's literature, although nonsense performs a unique sort of mischief upon its audiences' understandings partly through the different "messages" it imparts to young and old readers. Where a child reader might be struck by immediate incongruities, mellifluous language or logical impossibilities in

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[62] Sewell, Elizabeth. *The Field of Nonsense.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1952.

nonsense, a receptive adult would grasp intertextual references (for example, in the philosophical problems presented in *Alice*) and, because he has a more complex vocabulary, appreciate unusual or contradictory word-choices. While Heyman describes adult readings of nonsense as "incorrect", revealing "that their childhood has not been properly preserved in them" ("Isles" 164-165), I would argue that it is only a certain type of "adult" reading that misapprehends nonsense. The child's reception of nonsense, according to Heyman, is superior because he intuitively absorbs and celebrates absurdity, while the adult is baffled and attempts – and fails – to 'decode' it. This adult is thwarted by various "traps" – including illustrations that contradict their texts and linguistic misappropriation – and the effect produced is one of bewilderment rather than enjoyment. (Ibid 165-167) So too, Heyman argues that the child reader's understanding of death and despair (or the "ideal child" to whom the nonsense is directed[63]) is naturally superior to an adult's, enabling him to laugh at situations which would distress the experienced mind (ibid 169-170). While on a basic level it is obvious that young and old must respond to nonsense in different ways, I would argue that the adult's understanding of vocabulary should enrich rather than compromise his reading, for his more sophisticated knowledge gives him a subtler understanding of both sense and non-sense. In addition, the disparity in interpretation – which only the adult would notice – creates a kind of 'meta-joke', for the adult understands that the 'real' audience, the child, does not grasp the full implications of wordplay and allusion. Hence, the child is mocked for the paucity of his knowledge and the adult, at the same time, is the victim of the paucity of his imagination. The adult who has retained his sense of the childlike, then, is the truly "ideal reader", for he is the brunt of none of this humour, and appreciates the nonsense on all its different levels.

Such an "ideal reader" should not be seen to constitute any real person or audience, but rather a construct based in reader-response theory: the model through which Heyman interprets literary nonsense. As reader-response criticism includes a range of sometimes contradictory approaches, I shall avoid a detailed

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[63] This is an important distinction, for Heyman examines nonsense in the light of what it implies about its readers – and this "ideal audience" should not be conflated with the real one. I refer to this matter further below, in my discussion of the application of reader-response theory to literary nonsense.

exegesis, and interpret it on a most basic level as an account which repositions the text in relation to its reader. This theory shifts our focus from the writing to the impressions that it produces, for it notes that the reader "assume[s]… that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume" (Gibson 1). By examining these "attitudes and qualities", then, the intentions or effects of the text are illuminated – and in a field such as nonsense where these are often very difficult to pin down, and where misreading is common (as we shall see in Chapter 3), reader-response theory may aid our appraisal of the genre.

Reader-response theory posits an "implied reader": an hypothetical person suggested by the "gaps" in a text, or the information that has been omitted from it (Iser 51). The "implied", or "ideal reader" would interpret the material according to what is contained in and left out of it, and it is the information that is not supplied that reveals the nature of both textual intent and the characteristics of the model audience (Heyman, "Defense" 2). In other words, the absences from a text are what "challenge the reader to participate in making meaning" (Chambers qtd in ibid 8) for they "indicate that the different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text does not say so" (Iser qtd in ibid). To Heyman, the "gaps" in nonsense are constituted by its absurdities – for example, words that do not cohere with their context (9), or "faulty cause and effect situations" (11) – which the reader is then called upon either to interpret or to surrender to his inability to interpret. Reader-response theory is useful to nonsense because it accommodates the different receptions of adult and child audiences. More importantly, however, a reader-response understanding of literary nonsense can enable us to read the genre for what it is: maintaining the irreconcilable tension between meaning and meaninglessness or sense and non-sense as discussed above (16). Because reader-response theory does not "interpret" or "decipher", but rather considers how the subject-text would be perceived, it can direct us towards its intentions and also avoid "impos[ing] meanings or artificial structural significance unfairly on such a plastic genre" (2).

The main potential problem with a reader-response approach to nonsense arises out of the critic's subjectivity in his construction of the "implied" or "ideal" reader, for it may not always be obvious what sort of an audience the "gaps" in a

text would produce, or how the hypothetical reader would respond to them. On the other hand, critical bias is likely to affect any sort of interpretation, and a theoretical model that adheres as closely to the "facts" of a text (and in particular so intractable a text as that constituted by literary nonsense) as does reader-response theory is of use to the reader who seeks to understand his material for what it is, rather than what it might be.

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I turn now to the devices through which non-sense and ambiguity are created as they are mapped in Tigges's and Stewart's taxonomies of nonsense. Although Tigges's account is closely based on Stewart's (with some variations in terminology) for the most part I shall refer to the former, which is more concise and directed towards an explication of literary as opposed to social nonsense.

Tigges's "Nonsense Repertoire" includes the following five methods: mirroring, imprecision, play with infinity, simultaneity, and arbitrariness (*Anatomy* 56-70). Stewart describes "mirroring" as the device concerned with "reversals and inversions" (57-84); it might also be described as that which involves opposites or "topsyturvydom": it includes linguistic and logical inversions such as occur when words are deprived of their expected meanings, impossible events take place or non-existence achieves a status equal to that of existence (Stewart 62-63). Reversals and inversions, in other words, are those procedures which turn reality on its head. This also occurs when different sorts of category are merged (ibid 66-68), as in Lear's nonsense botanies.

Queeriflora Babyöides[64]

Phonemic and lexical reversals, meanwhile, occur in spoonerisms, palindromes and absurdities such as the phrase "we think so then and we thought so still"[65] (Tigges, *Anatomy* 56). A text's sabotage of its own goal is another nonsensical inversion that takes place when contradictory voices are included in the same piece of writing, such as the following excerpt.

> Ladies and Jellyspoons:
> I come before you
> To stand behind you
> To tell you something
> I know nothing about…[66]

Imprecision or "boundary play" (Stewart 85-115), meanwhile, is the tool through which uncertainty is created by a "deficiency or surplus of signification" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 58). In Lear's cookeries, for example, the information presented is irrelevant to the project of the recipe (which also illustrates the methods of inversion in the text's subversion of its own ostensive goal):

> Take a Pig, three or four years of age, and tie him by the off-hind leg to a post. Place 5 pounds of currants, 3 of sugar, 2 pecks of peas, 18 roast chestnuts, a candle, and six bushels of turnips, within his reach; if he eats these, constantly provide him with more.
> Then procure some cream, some slices of Cheshire Cheese, four quires of foolscap paper, and a packet of black pins. Work the whole into a paste, and spread it out to dry on a sheet of clean brown waterproof linen.
> When the paste is perfectly dry, but not before, proceed to beat the Pig violently with the handle of a large broom. If he squeals, beat him again.
> Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties.
> If it does not then, it never will; and in that case the Pig may be let loose and the whole process may be considered as finished.[67]

Under-signification, on the other hand, occurs when insufficient information is deliberately provided, as in the case of the grammatical puzzles created by

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[64] From Lear's third Nonsense Botany, published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 419).
[65] "The Pelican Chorus", Edward Lear.
[66] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, ed. qtd in Stewart 72.
[67] "To Make Gosky Patties", [Nonsense Cookery] (*Complete Verse* 250).

Carroll's "mock turtle soup" and "bread-and-butter-fly" (or, in *Alice in Wonderland*, when it is uncertain whether the duchess's baby is a baby or a pig[68]). The information that we lack for interpreting these phrases concerns the grouping of words: in common sense discourse we are familiar with both the phrases, "mock turtle" and "turtle soup" (and in the later example, "bread and butter" and "butterfly"). By suggesting both very different objects and withholding any method for favouring one arrangement over the other, the reader is denied the possibility of understanding and the result is what we call nonsense. Boundary play, in other words, is that characteristic of nonsense which makes us 'not know what we are dealing with' or creates uncertainty concerning the borders or distinctions between different objects.

"Play with infinity" may be seen in the series, circles, repetitions and incongruous causal sequences of nonsense (Tigges, *Anatomy* 58-59). The concern with progressions and infinity in nonsense – which has also been called "stringing or seriality" (ibid 58) – creates absurdity by suggesting infinite regression. This occurs in non-terminating verbal games such as "the bear climbed over the mountain" and the lists of nonsense verse:

> They sailed to the Western Sea, they did,
>   To a land all covered with trees,
> And they bought an Owl, and a useful Cart,
> And a pound of Rice, and a Cranberry Tart,
>   And a hive of silvery bees.
> And they bought a Pig and some green Jack-daws,
> And a lovely monkey with lollipop paws,
> And forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree,
>   And no end of Stilton Cheese.[69]
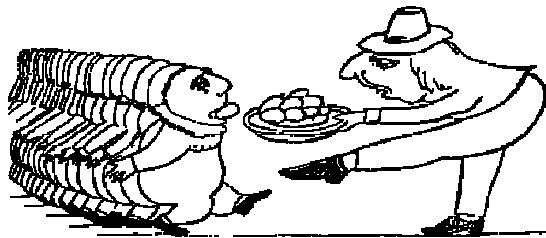
Tigges describes "simultaneity", meanwhile, as the "strongest semiotic device of nonsense literature", for it includes the lexical apparatus that

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[68] Chapter VI, *Alice in Wonderland*. This is the example that Tigges uses to illustrate workings of "imprecision" (*Anatomy* 57-58).
[69] "The Jumblies", Edward Lear.

characterises the genre: the puns, neologisms and misappropriations (*Anatomy* 59) that evoke a multiplicity of meanings between which the reader is unable to choose and is thus left, not with a wealth of understanding, but with none. Stewart defines simultaneity as "the quality of existing, happening, occurring at the same time in more than one space; the quality of being coexistent in time while being contiguous in space" (146). In the pun, for example, two meanings are suggested simultaneously by one word, as is the case in Lear's "The Two Old Bachelors",[70] where the plot of the verse relies upon the confusion of two definitions of the word "sage". In seeking the culinary herb, a pair of elderly housemates are directed to a wise and inedible scholar, and disaster occurs when they attempt to "chop [him] into bits to mix [him] into Stuffin'". Because "nonsense requires the non-resolution of the tension between the two meanings" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 61) suggested by a pun, the Bachelors never realise the distinction between the two types of sage – although as it is clear to the reader what is going on, this nonsense is relatively feeble. A pun may also be visual, as is the case in the following "picture letter" by Edward Lear in which the phrase, "snail mail" is reified:[71]
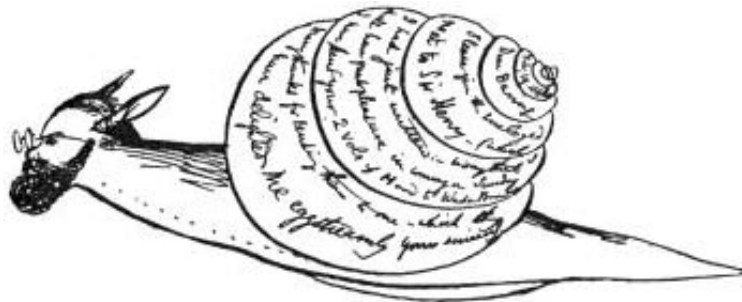
Neologisms, meanwhile, do not refer to an identifiable object, but evoke the existing words suggested by their sounds: the neologism is therefore adaptable to any context, and may be seen to "combine[s] *all* meanings" (ibid 67), thus rendering the result meaning-less. Lear's two favourite nonsense words, "runcible" and "scroobious" are paradigmatic examples, for they have been used to describe such diverse objects as spoons, hats, birds, colours, and states of mind. The portmanteau is a type of neologism in which existing words are combined – as

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[70] Date of publication unknown; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 531).
[71] To Evelyn Baring, 19 February 1864 (*Selected Letters* 194).

Humpty Dumpty explains in the passage alluded to above when he explains "Jabberwocky":[72]

> "Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word."[73]

Thus, the two (and sometimes more) parent-terms are suggested concurrently – making the portmanteau a kind of "imperfect pun" (Tigges, *Anatomy* 67). Misappropriation is another sort of simultaneity related to malapropism, discussed by neither Tigges nor Stewart which is common in Lear and rare in Carroll. This occurs when a word is used out of context for the evocations of its sound, as in the following extract from one of Lear's nonsense letters (Heyman, "Isles" 231):

> The conduct of these singular domestics is usually virtuous & voluminous, & their general aspic highly mucilaginous & meritorious.[74]

The words "voluminous" and "mucilaginous" are uninterpretable as descriptions of "conduct" and "aspect" respectively ("aspic", meanwhile, is a malapropism – another variety of simultaneity) and thus fulfil a similar function to the non-derived neologism discussed above, simultaneously suggesting all and no meanings. Simultaneity is important to nonsense because it is through this technique that meanings are multiplied and removed, generating ambiguity.

Finally, "arbitrariness" constitutes the "playing field" of nonsense and provides a "linking device" for the events of the discourse (Tigges, *Anatomy* 69-70). This is the technique that allows content to be governed by form (for example, plot in the nonsense verse is often subservient to rhyme – resulting in incongruous series of events) and while it forms the background to the other devices (ibid 69; Stewart 171), deserves a separate mention because in its broadest sense, arbitrariness directs us toward one of the central activities of literary nonsense, and the sense of dissociation that characterises it.

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[72] It should be noted that neologism and portmanteau are not really exclusive categories: while Lear's neologisms are not clear combinations in the way that Humpty Dumpty explains "slithy", they do contain other words in their etymologies. "Runcible", for instance, suggests the botanical term "runcinate", while "scroobious" contains the word "scrooch". So too, Humpty's definition of "slithy" is in some sense specious (partly because we already know that Humpty's accounts are unreliable): because it is a "new word" its meaning can only remain undefined; it means whatever we want it to, and everything else besides.

[73] Chapter VI, "Humpty Dumpty", *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, *The Annotated Alice*, 271.

[74] Letter to Mrs Stuart Wortley, 26 February 1882 [The Moon Journey] (*Complete Verse* 435-437).

In conclusion, a comment might be made concerning the types of subject matter frequently dealt with in literary nonsense. I have already referred to matters of language, etiquette and death; and there are several other themes and motifs to which nonsense is drawn, including voyages, food, clothing, invention, games, madness, dance and occasionally courtship (Tigges, *Anatomy* 77-80). Certain of these subjects – propriety, food, clothing, madness, dance, courtship – might be described as 'borderline activities' for they are situated at the boundary between taboo and 'safe' human behaviour in common sense discourse. This is significant because nonsense, as we have seen, is subversive at a basic level; yet it is playfully so, as it still strives to remain within certain bounds of acceptability. Other themes may be seen as leading naturally from nonsense devices and the concern with common sense: the voyage or quest, for example, allows for the false causal connections and logical inversions that characterise the genre, while invention by definition challenges the monotony of common sense (ibid 77-78). I am hesitant to draw too strong a conclusion from the recurrent themes of nonsense, although many of them might be seen to grow out of the methods that the genre typically involves.

In this chapter I have approached the characteristics of literary nonsense in a manner that is descriptive rather than systematic, discussing various features in turn rather than creating a concrete scheme. This is partly in response to the difficulty of delimiting any literary genre, and partly because nonsense occupies an especially problematic corner in the field of fictions, for more often than not it inhabits or overlaps with other forms and the qualities that distinguish it are contradictory and resist characterisation. Nevertheless, I have identified certain tendencies in nonsense, and these may be encapsulated thus: firstly, literary nonsense maintains an opposition or equilibrium between meaning and the lack thereof; "sense" is suggested and then removed. The more problematic aspects of nonsense include its apoliticism and self-referentiality – the absence of a "point" beyond what is contained in the text itself – yet, at the same time a tendency to parody other forms and a subversive concern with language and propriety. The subversion, however, is humorous and playful, and avoids or literalises figurative language and eschews emotion. This may be achieved through what Arthur

Koestler describes as the "bisociation of exalted form with trivial content" (78); an explanation that alludes to the parodic inclinations of nonsense. Finally, nonsense has a distinctive relationship with its audience, which includes both children and adults, whose modes of "reading" are dependent upon their different approaches to "sense". As a field of children's writing, English nonsense literature is embedded in the Romantic and Victorian periods, for it is during these eras that a critical expansion in interest in children and children's literature occurred, thus creating a market for the works of Lear and Carroll. This and other socio-historical changes that facilitated the emergence of nonsense are the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 2

A Victorian Writer?

In the course of this life I have had a great many encounters with people who have been concerned with matters of consequence. I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately, close at hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them.

The Little Prince

Much has been made by critics of the emergence of English literary nonsense during the Victorian era. Before the writings of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll there was no formal body of nonsense although instances of it occurred in the writings of, for example, Aristophanes, Rabelais, and Shakespeare (Tigges, *Anatomy* 229). Why then, the scholar of nonsense may ask, did an entire genre spring up in England during the mid-1800s at the hands of two independent writers, and furthermore, maintain its popularity? The Victorian era is a period that is most remarkable for its reputation: it is popularly believed to be a time of singular repressiveness, prudery and religious intolerance governed by strict and arbitrary rules of propriety. Nonsense is often described as an act of retaliation against this constricting environment: an outlet for psychological, social and philosophical anarchy that is safe because it appears to be meaningless. (Snider; Tigges, *Anatomy* 229; Wullschläger 5) Furthermore, Victorianism is also associated with a distinctive approach to children and childhood in which the disencumbered Romantic image alluded to in works such as Rousseau's *Emile* and Wordsworth's "Prelude" was increasingly valorised. The celebration of the child is the condition that enabled the work of Lear and Carroll (and subsequent "fantasists" – such as Antoine de Saint Exupéry) to achieve its popularity just as it may have allowed the authors to maintain a sense of their own childlike capacities (Wullschläger 3).

In this chapter, then, I explore the cultural and historical influences on Lear and the field of Victorian nonsense, first considering commonly held perceptions

about Victorian society: in particular that the age was one of particular rigidity, repressiveness and anxiety (for example, Houghton 1, Snider, Wullschläger 22). I then examine Lear's role in relation to his social milieu through an evaluation of Clifton Snider's Jungian analysis of man and work, before investigating the Romantic attitudes towards childhood and children's literature that promoted the emergence of literary nonsense. In conclusion, I consider what have been described as the distinctively "English" influences on the genre.

While Walter Houghton names "transition" as the defining characteristic of the nineteenth century for the fundamental changes that occurred in politics, science and literature and the effects thereof on English society (Houghton 1), it is more accurate to see "Victorian" developments as part of a broader scheme that pre- and post-dates Victoria's reign. For example, taboos regarding sex (which are sometimes thought to have influenced Lear's nonsense) emerged during the sixteenth century – at the same time that sexuality started to become a subject of discursive enquiry – and maintain their hold today in the proscriptions of social intercourse and conventions of public and private activities (Foucault 12). Similarly, the romanticisation of childhood is a development that accompanied the growth of modernity heralded by the Renaissance (Nelson 69) and reached its full impetus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the writings of Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge (Coveney 29). Thus, the cultural conditions often associated with the appearance of literary nonsense are not unique to the nineteenth century (although they may have reached their height within it), but had been accruing for centuries. While this does not drastically alter the role that social forces played in the emergence of the genre, it should be born in mind that the factors coalescing to produce it are not as exceptional as it is sometimes assumed. Defining the mood of an era is inevitably a knotty if not a specious task as "cultural" forces are often contradictory, seldom recorded and inconsistent amongst individuals of different backgrounds. Nevertheless, certain generalisations concerning the social context of a discourse are both unavoidable and helpful in evaluating responses to it and to the psychological and social function that it plays. Lear's nonsense in particular, as we shall see, has a distinctive and frequently scrutinized relationship to its milieu.

The Victorian Era has been described as a period of social and intellectual ferment in which revolutions in science and technology resulted in opposing drives towards religious conservatism and radically new modes of thought (Harrison 27; Houghton 1; Trevelyan 509). The "crisis of meaning" resulting from the conflict between religion and rapidly evolving scientific perspectives might be seen to be reflected in the rise of a genre that explicitly eschews meaning. Nonsense rejects sources of knowledge both spiritual and empirical, instead positing rule by non sequitur, and thus the unpredictability of the nonsense text mocks the desperation with which learned Victorians may have sought epistemic security. While in practice Edward Lear – a progressive thinker with an artistic background that had exposed him to the biological sciences – championed Darwinism[75] and railed against "fibs, & bad deeds, and clerical crookedness",[76] his nonsense playfully subverts even the scientific systems that in life he endorsed. Indeed, just as the broad project of nonsense involves retaliation against knowledge and its structures, Lear tampers explicitly with the organs of science in his Nonsense Botanies: fanciful drawings in which the vegetable class combines with the animal, domestic and musical genera. Here he parodies the Victorian mania for categorisation, creating a gleeful burlesque of botanical taxonomy (Lecercle 202).

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[75] For instance, in a letter to Thomas Woolner, 1 May 1870, he censures Holman Hunt's growing "holy horror of Darwin" (*Selected Letters* 216).
[76] Letter to Emily Tennyson 10 May 1865 (*Selected Letters* 204).

Tureenia Ladlecum[77]

    While science was at the forefront of nineteenth century developments, religious influences – in particular those associated with Evangelical Christianity – had left their mark in the puritanical severity with which those affected by the doctrine played out their lives (Adams 125). Lear had always resisted the more dogmatic and oppressive forms of religion, yet it should be remembered that his absence from England for much of his life meant that his exposure to Evangelicalism was limited. Lear's complaints against religion were thus more often directed towards the Catholic dogma that he encountered on the continent than Evangelical earnestness, although it is the mood of the latter faith against which his nonsense rebels. Indeed, Lear records being aggrieved by the emotional reticence that accompanied this doctrine; reporting after a visit with the pious Lushingtons that he found their cheerless Sundays stifling (Noakes, *Wanderer* 104). The exuberance of his nonsense, then, can be seen in part as a response to and an antidote for a mood of dour devotion. More significantly, however, Lear's nonsense is a reaction against the solemn pretensions of affluent Victorians and the stratification of English society (Wullschläger 73). This can be seen in his rage at the sense of constraint and narrow-mindedness that he encountered as a young man among the cultured individuals at Knowsley. Nonsense is typically concerned with social mockery, and in this Lear's work is a case in point, for in his limericks in particular he takes on the arbitrary and restrictive codes of behaviour that characterised upper class Victorian existence. (Tigges, *Anatomy* 230; Wullschläger 73)

    One of the more dubious connections often made between the emergence of literary nonsense and "Victorianism" concerns nineteenth century inhibitions regarding sex (for example, Miller 5, Snider, Wullschläger 6). Even although many of the generalisations concerning the relationships between the Victorian era, Lear, nonsense and sex are misplaced and easily dismissed, I explore this subject because there is a small truth in the approach that locates the body as the subject of social repression and Lear's nonsense a response to a sense of physical constraint.

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[77] From Lear's third Nonsense Botany, published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 418).

I begin by contextualising nineteenth century approaches to the body and sexuality based on a Foucauldian reading of the evolution of beliefs about physicality in the West. In the *History of Sexuality*, these attitudes are traced from the beginning of the seventeenth century, when "sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit" (Foucault 3). This is contrasted with the Victorian and subsequent eras, when sex "moved into the home," assumed a functional reproductive role, and became a subject for secrecy and moralising. Just as there emerged a realm of permitted sexuality – the heterosexual married couple, behind closed doors – sex that violated the norm was pathologised and forbidden. Thus certain parallel antithetical movements appeared, for just as sanctioned sex fell under a veil of polite embarrassment, its forbidden forms became a matter for medical and juridical debate. (Ibid, 3-4) Of especial significance to the case of Edward Lear is the attention given to masturbation and, at the end of the century, to homosexuality.

While Victorian attitudes towards sex were probably not as puritanical as is popularly supposed, the phenomenon of "masturbation mania" (Adams 131) does reveal a delusive fixation on the body and its pleasures. Havelock Ellis's seven volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, first published in 1897, both illustrates the Foucauldian dictum alluded to above and reveals the vestiges of this nineteenth century obsession. His concern with the sundry misconceptions (and the expression, of course, of his own) surrounding masturbation is instructive for the account it provides of the popular beliefs of the preceding century.   For instance, his report of the presumed effects of "auto-eroticism" by "medical writers of the last century" includes a long list of the burdens psychic and physical that might have contributed to the "masturbatory guilt" of epileptics like Lear (Ellis 249-250). We have no means, of course, of evaluating precisely how this encumbrance might have affected Lear in his daily life or filtered through into his nonsense, but that his seizures had to be kept unfailingly secret – and that by the end of his life he had concluded that they bore no connection to "self control".

While some scholars have concentrated on the role of Victorian sex lives in the emergence of the genre of nonsense literature in England, suggesting that it

signifies the displacement of repressed unacceptable desires into harmless childish discourse,[78] it is more significant that Lear experienced guilt than that it was "masturbatory". Indeed, the Victorian interest in masturbation should be read here for what it demonstrates: a misconceived concern about "the flesh" and, more particularly, anxiety about bodily pleasure. "Victorian repression," in other words, is more aptly viewed as one aspect of a society that viewed pleasure and sensuality in general as dangerous (Adams 127); and against this sort of oppression Edward Lear surely raised a voice. His oft-quoted expression of the desire to "giggle heartily and to hop on one leg down the great gallery" at Knowsley,[79] for instance, is a declaration of rebellion against the confinements of the lifestyle of the Victorian upper classes. The suppression of physicality is not a uniquely Victorian phenomenon, however, for the body "had always held an uneasy place in the Christian West" (Adams 127). According to Pauline theology, biblical law is made "weak through flesh", while "to be carnally minded is death" (Rom 8.3; 8.6): both of these statements are indicative of the burdensome space that the body had long inhabited in Christian lore. The religious awakening in the late eighteenth century identified with Evangelicalism emphasized the threat and consequences of sin – a danger inherent in the pleasure-seeking body, which had to be "purged of all excess; the pleasures of food and dress, of song and dance, laughter and play" (Noakes, *Catalogue* 13). While the forces behind Victorian inhibition preceded Queen Victoria, certain injunctions on behaviour did characterise nineteenth century experience as particularly restrictive. Lear's epilepsy gave him special insight into the subtleties of the marginalised Victorian body, and his challenge to this form of subjugation can be seen in the vibrant physicality of the characters in his limericks.

At this point we might consider Victorian attitudes toward homosexuality: something else sometimes erroneously believed to constitute a suppressed theme

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[78] For instance, Edmund Miller argues that "there is sex everywhere in Lear" – revealed in the image of the runcible spoon, a representation of the "male genitalia, something never far from Lear's mind" (Miller 7). While Miller has in mind an image of a runcible spoon as "a kind of fork with two short blunt prongs and a long curved pointed one" (ibid) – a post-Learian interpretation not depicted in any of Lear's illustrations – the implement Lear probably imagined in this instance would have more closely resembled a traditional spoon with a serrated rim, in imitation of a *runcinate* leaf. We have seen, however, that it befits nonsense terms to have no referent in the real world: "runcible" is such an agreeable word because we do not know what it means.

[79] Untraced letter to Miss Coombe (Noakes, *Wanderer* 45).

in Lear's nonsense. While Clifton Snider, Thomas Byrom, Edmund Miller and Thomas Dilworth[80] all maintain that many of Lear's concerns involve the encoded expression of repressed homosexuality, this is one area in which the notion of Victorian carnal shame needs to be properly contextualised. It is important to note that while Lear's sexual preferences may have been directed towards men, before the end of the nineteenth century it is in error to describe an individual as "homosexual" (Adams 134). Many of the misconceived and over-sexualised accounts that have been made of Lear are a consequence of reading him from a background of twentieth century conceptions of sex, friendship and desire. While the modern tendency is to locate all of these experiences and their subgroups in discrete categories, before the end of the Victorian era, same-sex friendships would have occurred along a "homosocial continuum"[81] where the boundaries between romance and companionship were undefined and irrelevant. Lear's affection for Marstrand and Lushington would surely have fallen within this spectrum, for in truth we have no way of knowing whether his passions achieved a form more specific than zealous attachment.[82]

For most of Lear's existence, however, it seems most likely that if, as George Orwell[83] has suggested, "there was something seriously wrong in his sex life" it is that he probably did not have one. Interpretations which suppose, for instance, that Lear's "explicit obsessions – noses, beards, eating, growth, age" (Miller 6) are indicative of some mysterious preoccupation in which all objects and events remotely corporeal reveal a distorted sexual fixation take Freudian

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[80] Snider, Clifton. "Victorian Trickster". Byrom, Thomas. *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear*. New York: Brandywine Press, 1977. Miller, Edmund. "Two Approaches to Lear's Nonsense Songs." *The Victorian Newsletter*. 44, Fall 1973. 5-8. Dilworth, Thomas. "Society and Self in the Limericks of Lear." *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol.45, 177, 1994. 42-62.

[81] Sedgewick, Eve Kosofsky *Epistemology of the Closet* (qtd. Adams 134).

[82] Rupert Croft-Cooke, in his re-evaluation of several "late Victorian" homosexual writers, including John Addington Symonds, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, considers it unlikely that Lear ever "explained, even to himself, his passionate friendships with men and his sexual indifference to women" (148). While Croft-Cooke's analysis is relatively shallow and his evidence for Lear's "passion" for men and "indifference" towards women is lacking, his reading of Victorian sexualities is otherwise relatively astute, and his assessment of Lear's sex life is refreshingly sober.

[83] References to Orwell appear without page numbers as I refer to a non-paginated online version of his essay: Orwell, George. "Nonsense Poetry." *Whitewolf eText Library: "Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays" 1945*. 10 October 2006. <whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/essay/ShootingElephant/nonsensepoetry.html>.

symbolism to improbable heights of inventiveness. I shall examine the errors inherent in the Freudian analysis in greater detail in Chapter 3 with reference to Lear's limericks. Here, however, I discuss Byrom's account of "The Pobble Who Has No Toes" as an example of a Freudian reading of nonsense.

In this verse Byrom reads a tale of emasculation, concentrating on the drawing that accompanies the poem:

> The Pobble is depicted swimming across the Channel, with a
> bell in one hand (the clapper just showing) and a flannel round
> his nose. The flannel is completely flat; it is plain enough that
> underneath it he has no nose and the wrapping is really a
> bandage. We recall with a shiver that the Dong also bandaged
> his nose. In the verse, the flannel is scarlet, the water pink, the
> Cat has crimson whiskers; in the romantic version, the Princess
> has a cap made of a "Beetroot red/With a hole cut out to insert
> her head." The poem is swimming in blood! The Pobble's
> mission is predatory – he has been sent by his aunt to catch fish
> for her cat with blood-stained whiskers. Instead, a porpoise
> steals the Pobble's flannel, and either the shrimps, crawfish, or
> mermaids rob him of his toes. The aunt is the villain of the
> piece. She pretends to be looking after his best interests, but
> sends him on a dangerous and murderous expedition. When he
> returns, horribly mutilated, sexually incapacitated, she declares
> he is happier as he is – toeless and (though she does not admit
> this) noseless. The disastrous fishing expedition is a ghastly
> metaphor for the failure of love. (186-187)

As I shall explore this poem from the perspectives of nonsense and romanticism in Chapter 4, I comment on it only briefly before presenting some of the more general problems with this kind of reading. The Pobble's Aunt Jobiska may be an equivocal figure in his life, but it is for reasons that are consistent with nonsense: in particular the preservation of a state of affairs in which meaning is ambiguous and intention contradictory. Thus we should not be distressed that Jobiska is both thoughtful and tyrannical for compelling the Pobble to imbibe her tinted tincture (and here it is equally possible that "lavender water tinged with pink" is an emasculating "feminine concoction"[84] as a reassuring tonic) and later consoling him for its failure to protect his feet. Through this depiction Lear does not so much expose a fear of despotic females as parody the contradictory stories that adults tell children and the bewildering requests and manipulations that the former

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[84] Noakes, *Wanderer* 20.

sometimes impose upon the latter. The Pobble's disaster, then, might be seen as the consequence of having followed the adult injunctions of his aunt, so demonstrating the dangers of obedience and illustrating Lear's affiliation with the child. The contradiction unveiled in Jobiska's misdirected concern loses both its force and its obscurity through Byrom's ingenious unpacking, while his suggestive gloss on the exposed clapper of the Pobble's bell can only constitute an unscrupulous instance of over-reading.

Byrom's deliberation over the phallicism of the Dong's nose is similarly misplaced:

> Vast, red, with a rounded end, luminous – "A Nose as Strange as
> a Nose could be!" – this is the phallic make-believe of a man
> who, disappointed in love, has only a squeaking, plaintive pipe
> to play on. The fear of sexuality, and of sexual inadequacy in
> particular, has floated to the surface. (Byrom 177)

The main error in both these interpretations is that they indicate a misconceived approach to nonsense: which is not a sexual code waiting to be deciphered, but a literary game in which symbols deliberately have no referent. Byrom's suspicion of a penis fetish and his exaggeration of Lear's supposed sexual problems indicate a misunderstanding of Lear and an appeal to facts concerning which we have limited evidence. There is often, indeed, a more plausible counter-explanation to the symbolic sexualised interpretation. For example, the ambiguity surrounding the genders of the Owl and the Pussy-cat and the Duck and the Kangaroo in the verses of those names is sometimes ascribed to Lear's own confusion about his sexual identity (Byrom 159-153; Snider). An alternative analysis, meanwhile, would note that in these depictions Lear subverts Victorian gender relations and mocks conventional tales of courtship. Furthermore, the comic effect of these rhymes inheres in their subjects' genderlessness, which makes them yet more incongruous and hence fulfils the paradoxical intentions of nonsense.

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Readings such as Byrom's presuppose that Lear's nonsense constitutes an encoded or euphemistic response to bourgeois prudery and nineteenth century inhibition.

In this interpretation (like those of Paul Boussiac,[85] Dilworth and Miller) the minutiae of Lear's verses and their illustrations are scrutinised for their supposed sexual symbolism and the outcome of the analysis is the resolution of the texts into a "meaning" entirely different from that suggested by the words on the page. While this kind of reading constitutes a misapprehension of nonsense (and in Chapter 3 I shall argue against the Structuralist stance in which literary nonsense is described as a code for social taboos) there is another sense in which the genre as a whole can plausibly be seen as a cryptic treatment of or response to the culture from which it comes that still preserves the nonsensicality of nonsense. In such a reading, nonsense is examined for its social function and for the cultural commentary that it offers without insisting that individual nonsenses are "translatable" into images of proscribed acts.

The nineteenth century, as we have seen, was an age marked for its social repressiveness; and literary nonsense, with its characteristic irreverence towards language, logic, and social ritual, responds obliquely to the sense of constraint and the rules for correct behaviour to which upper class Victorians were subject. Edward Lear's work in particular is frequently concerned with social interaction, depictions of the body, and adulthood: many of the limericks, for example, have as their subject-matter the relationship between an individual whose eccentricity is often voiced through vibrant physicality and another person or persons who are bewildered by the protagonist's idiosyncrasy. Their interactions often parody stereotypical parent-child conflicts, and while the object of the exercise is humour and play, the humour holds up a mirror to contemporary cultural problems and absurdities in social life. Lear's nonsense, then, responds to the society from which he comes, although this observation should neither be seen as a complete explanation for his *oeuvre*, nor to suggest that nonsense is a code serving to conceal something sexual. Indeed, the aspects of Victorian society against which Lear raises a voice include, principally, those related to decorum and age-relations.

Thus I explore Clifton Snider's Jungian analysis of Lear, which points to the role that man and work filled in nineteenth century society. Snider writes that the

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[85] Bouissac, Paul. "Decoding Limericks: A Structuralist Approach." *Semiotica*, 17, 1977. 1-12. Boussiac argues that the limericks constitute a cultural code in which, for instance, activities such as eating represent sexual acts.

"creative impulse" expressed through Lear's nonsense drawings and writings sprang "from the [Victorian] collective":[86] a position which, taken to its most literal extreme, might be seen to negate the artist's agency, implying that he is but a conduit for societal forces. A more moderate version, however, provides an appealing metaphor for Lear's position in relation to those around him and addresses the originality of his literary contribution.

Snider notes (as I have also observed above) that literary nonsense emerged partly as a counterbalance to a puritanical yet increasingly scientific outlook. Its creator, in this view, represents the aspect of culture that is inimical to itself, and thus Snider describes Lear as representing the Jungian Trickster archetype: a figure who "is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself" (Radin ix). According to Paul Radin – a contemporary of Jung's who studied Trickster mythology in Native American Winnebago culture and described the tradition in Jungian terms – this archetype is a figure of moral ambivalence who is "at the mercy of his passions and appetites", but paradoxically also a bearer of common ethical responsibility. He is an equivocal persona frequently associated with animals – the form of which he sometimes assumes – and his activities are characterised by comedy and fun. (ibid ix-x) It is easy to see, then, where Snider makes his connections between a mythic model whose "traits were perpetuated in the figure of the medieval jester" (ibid) and Edward Lear, a sad clown and general foolerer with a penchant for depicting humanlike animals and animal-like humans in his nonsense. However, Snider does not differentiate between man and work – an oversight that is perhaps not inconsistent with a Jungian interpretation, but that does suggest some irresolution in the application of the theory. It may lead, for instance, to the problems observed in Byrom's and Miller's approaches: the tendency to postulate about Lear's inner life on the basis of his literary outpourings.

Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic, vibrant expressiveness of Lear's work matches that of the Trickster who, in teasing others, mocks and reveals himself.

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[86] Snider cites Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann, who argued that "the creative impulse springs from the collective" (Neumann qtd. in Snider).

So too, Lear's writing contains the same vital insights about and quiet retaliation against the more or less subtle oppressions of his time that the Trickster conveys in his jesting. The characteristic upon which Snider focuses, however, is the Trickster's "unbridled sexuality" (Radin 167), which in Lear's case, he claims, is revealed in the phallic noses of his nonsense drawings. Snider refers to Winnebago lore, in which the penis is a symbol of carnal knowledge and sexuality and can be removed and reappear on different parts of the Trickster's body (Radin 141-142). The supposedly phallic noses that sometimes appear in Lear's drawings are thus compared to the penis that appears on the Winnebago Trickster's back and head as he discovers the correct place for it in a comical process of attaining sexual maturity (ibid). The connections may seem uncanny, yet (I have already argued) it takes a leap of conjecture to deduce that Lear's sexuality was "unbridled" – and it is both misleading and uninformative to reduce his literary imaginativeness to a preoccupation with sex when the forces that played upon his life were many and varied.

While a Freudian or a Jungian perspective on Lear exaggerates the significance of sex in his nonsense, however, an archetypal reading points to the cultural and historical significance of work and author, and it is this aspect of Snider's analysis that is valuable. Edward Lear occupied a liminal position in Victorian society in many ways: as Englishman abroad, eccentric, depressive, humorist, and friend of animals and children. Whether or not we concede to the literal existence of the collective psyche, Lear's nonsense fulfilled a societal need for levity and self-mockery. His personality and experiences mean that he was well placed to respond to the taboos imposed by propriety and to voice the sense of the bizarre repressed by societal constraint; and the result would have satisfied something in any reader conscious of the same injunctions upon behaviour. A large part of Lear's humour and mockery is implicated in his sense of the importance of childhood and childlike capacities, and I now turn to a discussion of Lear's nonsense in the socio-historical context of changing attitudes towards childhood.

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While earnestness had penetrated many upper class Victorian lives, a parallel and perhapsw opposite drive existed in the growing interest in children and in the valorisation of immaturity. This was a literary and societal development that (like the other transformations alluded to above) had been evolving since the Middle Ages (Ariés 45), but took a significant step in the eighteenth century when childhood first acquired the status of a theme in fiction (Coveney 29). The growing literary interest reflected cultural transformation also evident in an increase in the number of schools, changes in family demographics, a fall in child mortality and the creation of laws that protected the interests of children (Grylls 19-22). Where before the eighteenth century, the young were treated as wayward miniature adults who had "to be trained out of [their] childish ways", the growth of Romanticism repositioned childhood at the centre of human life, while maturity signified a decline into depravity and materialism (Coveney 40). In Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode, for instance, the child is portrayed as his elders' moral superior:

> Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
> Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
> That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
> Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,--
>   Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
>   On whom those truths do rest,
> Which we are toiling all our lives to find…

Following in the Wordsworthian tradition, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the child came to symbolise emotion and intuition for the "cult of sensibility", which re-evaluated the merits of feeling and intellect respectively, denouncing the Enlightenment rationalistic approach to reality. Thus, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge – three Romantic poets for whom the image of the debased child expressed the potential risks that threatened industrial Europe – all use children as symbols of original innocence, purity and creativity (ibid 29). This recentering of man around his immature self constituted a fundamental change in approach to human development, for instead of progression toward a more mature logical person, it described personal development in terms of the return to or preservation of a simpler, wiser, more honest child-self.

The appearance of a category of writing exclusively directed towards the young is another factor that supported the rise of literary nonsense. The first

children's books of the late eighteenth century, however, were designed to instruct in the morals and etiquette of the day (Jackson 3); while the anti-moralising subversion of Lear's nonsense works parodies these early forms. The imaginative tradition in which Lear writes was still a marginal yet persistent strand during the nineteenth century: a reaction born out of Romanticism which favoured playful anarchism over coaching in the ways of society. (Bratton 70) Nevertheless, games and literature involving humour and word-play had become popular by the 1820s– when the limerick collections from which Lear discovered the verse-form were published (Jackson 203) – and thus Lear's nonsense corresponded with a contemporary recreational fashion amongst both children and adults. So too, literary nonsense falls under the designation of another newly emergent body of writing: literature directed at both young and old (Nelson 78). As Sewell puts it, the antididactic fun of nonsense appeals to the child within (Sewell, "Nonsense Verse" 135): one aspect of the psyche which during the Victorian era – a period emerging from an age of Rationalism – was in special need of a voice.

It is important to remember, however, that Lear did not initially write for a market – although he was pleased, if perplexed, to find that he had one (Noakes, *Wanderer* 67) – and nor did he explicitly set out to defend the idea of a disencumbered childhood. Nevertheless, his intuitions had always lain with the child, and the backdrop of Romanticism enabled him to produce the literature that was so appealing to children through the spontaneous application of his own whimsicality. Like the Romantics, Edward Lear opposed formal schooling, believing that life is a better tutor in receptiveness to ideas. As Heyman notes, Lear attributed his own capacity for wonder to his home (and very often self-motivated) education:

> I am almost thanking God that I was never educated, for it seems
> to me that 999 of those who are so, expensively and laboriously,
> have lost all before they arrive at my age – and remain like
> Swift's Stulbruggs – cut and dry for life, making no use of their
> earlier-gained treasures: whereas, I seem to be on the threshold
> of knowledge…[87]

Here Lear expresses the Wordsworthian dictum that there is something psychically arid and fatal to the imagination – the "earlier-gained treasures" – in systematic

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[87] Letter to Fortesque, 2 September 1859 (Heyman, "Isles" 106).

schooling (Heyman, "Isles" 107). It might also be noted that in nineteenth century England formal schooling was increasingly related to entry into positions of public power (Nelson 71). Thus, in effect, in the above passage Lear signals his opposition to one aspect of a power structure that he attacks from another angle through his nonsense. Nonsense, indeed, is intended to appeal to the rudimentary child who is still resistant to the strains of civility that the representatives of "society" – parents, teachers, moral literature – have tried to inculcate into him, for it rebuffs the moralising literature that still constituted the mass of Victorian children's writing.

For example, in "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World"[88] – Lear's only narrative work with human child characters – he lauds the virtue of individuality also expressed in Wordsworth's "Prelude" (Heyman, "Isles" 107-108) and at the same time parodies contemporary travel writing. Imperialism is another nineteenth century theme that is expressed (and caricatured) in Lear's nonsense: largely because Lear himself was a participant in the common Victorian pursuits of travel and exoticism. Where the popular imperialism that manifested in mainstream children's literature involved ideologies of "empire, crown, 'race', armed forces… sportsmanship, chivalry and patriotism" (Richards 2), Lear's images of travel subvert or ignore these ideals, instead depicting travel as mundane or bizarre; and this, indeed, is one of the main parodic projects of "The Four Children". (On the other hand, Lear also romanticises landscape in his nonsense: another tendency in the writing of the imperial age that I discuss further in Chapter 4.) My discussion of this story rests on Heyman's exposition of Lear's vision of childhood as an expression of the Romantic conception constructed in the works of the abovementioned poets. While I shall demonstrate some similarities between the Learian and the "Romantic child" (admittedly, a hazy designation[89]), it is important to note that the former is better described as an intuitive response to cultural – and more significantly – personal circumstances than a theoretical conception.

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[88] Henceforth referred to as "The Four Children".
[89] Heyman notes that there was no single image of childhood during the Romantic era; however, he uses the term broadly to refer to the Wordsworthian conception which survived into the Victorian era and beyond (Heyman, "Isles" 106).

A note must be added here concerning the importance of individualism in Victorian society. Heyman describes the chief conflict experienced by the Victorian collective as a tension between the autonomy of the individual and the stability of the group (ibid 113). And while the paradox of these opposing drives is probably not so much a "Victorian" as a modern[90] phenomenon, I have already alluded to the possibility that cultural angst peaked under the contradictory impulses created by Evangelical Christianity, rising capitalism, technological development and geographical expansion (Krueger 146). Nonsense – an inherently anti-establishment discourse – favours the cause of the individual. And indeed, the retaliation by a singular person against the whole constitutes the central concern of Lear's limericks. Furthermore, one of the main interests of Wordsworthian romanticism as played out during the Victorian era is in the value of individuality, a quality attributed to and encouraged in the young (Heyman, "Isles" 113). This is a virtue well-illustrated in "The Four Children", and the context in which this story was written only adds to our understanding of the author's personal commitment to the autonomy of the child.

"The Four Children" was composed in November 1867, very soon after Lear had relinquished the possibility of marrying Gussie Bethell, and just before one of his own numerous escapes abroad (*Complete Verse* 503, n.220). The beneficiaries and protagonists of the story were Gussie's nephews and niece Violet, a child Lear disliked as he did her grandfather: a humourless aristocrat with little patience for wordplay (ibid 504, n.220). The children in the story, an intrepid foursome, decide "that they should like to see the world" and, purchasing a large boat, sail to various absurd and exotic locations, accompanied by a cat and an aged Quangle Wangle. The tale consists of a burlesque of the travelogue, charting their experiences, both bizarre and pedestrian, in various foreign settings. While Lear plays here with common sense notions of the journey and the foreign landscape, he also celebrates the independence of his child-subjects. A romantic reading[91] of the tale might then note the implicit injunction Lear offers his real child audience: escape the adult world of failed love and grim sense; pursue your imaginative

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[90] "Modernity", as I have implied above, should be seen to originate from the beginning of the Renaissance.
[91] See Chapter 4 for definitions and discussion of the relationship between Lear's literary nonsense and romanticism.

impulses. The events that transpire might amount to a deliciously anarchic child's-only fantasy, but the adult world lingers in the form of the pilot of the boat and the cook – the cat and the Quangle Wangle, respectively – and the officious Violet. While the cat and the Quangle Wangle represent an improvement on sermonising Victorian parents, Violet is an ambivalent figure. Perhaps Lear demonstrates the distaste that he felt for the real girl by quietly lampooning her in his story, thus hiding his criticism beneath a veil of humour. In the "The Four Children", Violet represents the sort of child that would be repugnant to both the Romantic ideal and Edward Lear: she is a self-important schoolgirl at the boundary of childhood and adulthood who has renounced her child's sense of wonder. Hence, she admonishes cat and Quangle Wangle for their theft of the blue tail-feathers of "sixty-five great red parrots" (an act both of merriment and – at least in the case of the cat – an expression of animal instinct) and then hypocritically confiscates the feathers for her own beautification. The accompanying picture shows Violet, arms folded aggressively, looking very like a young schoolmarm; albeit with an outlandish an North American style headdress.

Lear seems less offended by the other children. For example, in Lionel he demonstrates the redemptive power of humour: when the Quangle Wangle suffers a foot injury which leaves the party melancholy, Lionel amuses them "with a most praiseworthy devotion and perseverance," by "stand[ing] on one leg and whistl[ing] to them in a loud and lively manner," so distracting his peers from their despondency and salvaging their cheer.

Later on the children encounter a flock of Blue-Bottle-Flies, who subsist in a state of "copious and rural harmony" that is admired by the unfettered minds of the four siblings. Like the "romantic child", Violet, Slingsby, Guy and Lionel are intuitively aware of natural value – although Lear's nod to the cultural ethic is parodic – they remember the encounter with the rustic flies, after "many long years" as "one of the happiest in all their lives". There is one other child in the story who disturbs the romantic fantasy: an "odious little boy"[92] who throws "an enormous pumpkin" at the travellers as they sail past. He might be a spoiled violent child, but true to nonsense, no explanation is given for his odiousness save his "rose-coloured knickerbockers" which, in the accompanying illustration, are ornate enough to suggest royalty.[93] The story ends with the children's return to the banality of their middling nineteenth century existence and, at their reception, "joy tempered with contempt". The contradictory emotions of the elders and betters who welcome them indicates the adults' incomprehension of the imaginative purposes of travel and thus allies the author with the children and suggests, as did the romantics, that childhood is the more praiseworthy phase of life.

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In conclusion, it is sometimes noted that literary nonsense is a distinctively English phenomenon: a feature implicit also in its "Victorian" designation. Émile Cammaerts, for instance, in his delightful if uninformative chapter "Nonsense and England" in *The Poetry of Nonsense*, suggests that there is something in "the English temperament" that "predisposes it to appreciate the freaks of the Nonsense spirit, and to enjoy a joke even if there is no point in it" (Cammaerts 74). While he does not explore the source of "English humour", Cammaerts does note the Anglo-Saxon predilection for sport and hobbies, suggesting that these are an indication of the romantic preservation "in some remote corner of their soul" of the "days of their childhood" (ibid 78). A less fanciful, but more illuminating explanation is provided by Wim Tigges, who notes the publication dates of major nonsense works and critical appreciations of literary nonsense beginning with

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[92] "Odious" is an epithet Lear had used in a diary to describe the real Violet (*Complete Verse* 504, n.220).

[93] The reader who psychoanalyzes the colour of the Pobble's prophylactic potion might suggest that the offending boy is angered by the feminine attire that some unthinking adult has clothed him in – or that he is envious of the siblings' contentment.

Lear's *Book of Nonsense* in 1846, conjecturing that nonsense is most likely to occur during periods of political and economic stability (Tigges, *Anatomy* 230). In other words, the recreational habits of English people – including the creation and consumption of nonsense – are not a consequence of some special feature of their ethnic make-up, but rather the leisure that accompanies affluence. Cammaerts, in any event, neglects the fact that while it may be a predominantly English genre, nonsense has been produced in other languages: in particular, French and German.[94]

In addition to a backdrop of socio-economic prosperity, Tigges suggests that one of the preconditions for literary nonsense is an "inflexible social system" – of the sort, as we have already seen, that typified Victorian England and also Germany at the turn of the twentieth century (Tigges, *Anatomy* 230). Some aspects of the "social rigidity" attributed to Victorian England, then, might describe a broader cultural trait that would have contributed to the appearance of nonsense as well as the popularity of the style of humour frequently described as "British". As a class-bound, reticent society with meticulous unwritten rules of interaction, the off-beat incongruous humour and self-mockery of The Goon Show and Monty Python's Flying Circus, for example, might represent relief from a restrictive social environment. So too, it is possible that there is something in the irrationality and responsiveness to play that predisposes the English language to nonsense.

Finally, Tigges notes a rise in literary nonsense during periods of capitalist growth and prosperity observing that:

> The capitalist market, in contrast with the older forms of exchange, has a nonsensical quality, in its seemingly pointless exchange of commodities, in its suggestion of meaning in the form of employment and profit, a meaning which is simultaneously taken away in the form of exploitation, unemployment, bankruptcy and poverty, and in its refusal to allow any emotional value to be attached to the products to be exchanged, which is a marked difference with earlier craftsmanship. Factories and department stores have become the

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[94] Tigges mentions the Frenchmen Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Erik Satie (1866-1925) and the German Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914) and Peter Bichsel (1935-) (*Anatomy* 231). While instances of literary nonsense may have been produced in other languages – and, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the genre intersects with several others – a survey of other nonsense writers and thoroughgoing analysis of the socio-economic circumstances of nonsense is beyond the scope of this project.

> concrete equivalents of dictionaries, with their infinite series of simultaneous goods of the utmost variety. (*Anatomy* 233)

To this gallant observation I can only add that the main body of Edward Lear's nonsense appeared during a stage when he had become disillusioned with the buying and selling of his art: thus making a nonsense of what had been most meaningful to him. In the next chapter I turn away from the conditions implicated in the emergence of nonsense literature and the interpretations that relate it to its cultural milieu, examining more closely the concerns that arise in the reading of the particular items of nonsense constituted by Lear's limericks.

Chapter 3

How to Read a Learian Limerick

Both Lear and Carroll suffered from the undiscerning
critics who persisted in seeing in their nonsense a
hidden meaning, a cynical, political, or other intent,
veiled under the apparent foolery.

Carolyn Wells[95]

This chapter is born out of a debate concerning different scholarly approaches to
Edward Lear's literary nonsense and in part responds to and proceeds from
Michael Heyman's "A New Defense of Nonsense". Here Heyman criticises the
symbolic readings of Paul Bouissac and Thomas Dilworth and also Jean-Jacques
Lecercle's linguistic interpretation, arguing instead that reader-response theory
offers a more apposite tool for exploring literary nonsense. While Heyman's
elucidation of nonsense might lead to a similar understanding of the limericks to
that which I shall propose, my reading is not explicitly allied with a particular
literary theory. Instead, I strive for a full and charitable appraisal of the
"nonsenses" rooted largely – with a nod to reader-response criticism – in a
receptivity to the sort of perception that Lear's initial audience might have had of
them. So too, while Heyman's paper is not exclusively concerned with Lear's
limericks and their illustrations, but rather with his nonsense (and the genre of
literary nonsense) in general, it is my intention here to propose a set of principles
through which the limericks may be best "understood" (or, as the case may be,
mis-understood – and our failure to understand most relished). This chapter, then,
is directed toward what might be called an "intelligent recreational reading", for I
do not propose to discuss the literary implications of the limericks, but rather to
provide a tool for their "appreciation": in effect, I answer the question posed in my
introduction, "how should literary nonsense be read?", using Lear's limericks as a

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[95] Wells, Carolyn. "Introduction," xxvi. From *A Nonsense Anthology* Ed. Carolyn Wells. New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903. xix-xxxiii. <http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/essays/wells_1.html>
29 March 2006.

generic prototype. My reading should, then, form the background to and direct us toward an accurate understanding of the limericks' more general significance.

My argument rests upon the account of nonsense sketched in the Chapter 1 – in particular, the model in which the central feature of the genre is the tension that it maintains between meaning and its absence. The principles I shall outline should direct the reader towards the "sensical" aspects of the Learian limerick, assuming that when the preliminary logic is digested we may better appreciate the consequent anti-logic. I begin my "re-reading" with a glance at critical responses to Lear's nonsense before considering specific analyses of the limericks which are for various reasons problematic, focusing in particular on the Freudian Structuralist reading which presupposes that nonsense comprises an encoded expression of repressed sexuality. I also consider Thomas Byrom's biographical reading, which at times misapprehends sexual symbolism in the limericks, but still supports the counter-balance between meaning and ambiguity. I then challenge the tendency to evaluate Lear's limericks using the same standards as the witty, non-nonsensical "modern" form of the verse, before submitting an alternative account which I have divided into six "reading principles".

Briefly, these principles require that we closely examine the drawings that accompany the limericks and the interaction between text and image; that we are attuned to the subtleties of Lear's linguistic play; that we acknowledge variation in method and intent from verse to verse; that we note the inconclusive relationships often depicted between the Old Persons and "they", but without imposing a system upon them; that we consider the humorous affront against decorum and Victorian age-relations; and finally, that we should not be discomforted by the violence and annihilation depicted in many of the limericks, but rather read them in the contexts of comedy and a certain tradition in children's literature. The common effect of my principles should be to indicate that Lear's limericks were not created – and thus should not be read – as a systematic whole. Rather, what unifies them is their humour, their playful subversiveness (and the word "playful" is significant here in distinguishing their irreverence from subversion that has a political end) and the meticulousness of Lear's play with word and image.

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Critical readings of Lear's *oeuvre* have necessarily derived from different theoretical standpoints: among them basic biographical and cultural readings as well as linguistic, Freudian, Jungian, Structuralist and Reader-response interpretations.[96] While certain features of Lear's life and work may lend themselves to particular schools of criticism (suggestive noses, for instance, may appear to call for a Freudian response, while the ambiguities of nonsense appeal to Structuralist critics), the accuracy and appropriateness of the more oblique of these readings is not always examined. (And we might note that there is something peculiar about choosing literary "evidence" to cohere with one's theory.) The main problem with the Freudian and Structuralist readings is that they perceive symbolism where there is none: an obvious danger when handling a field in which the central feature is an uncertain approach to meaning. My principles for "reading the Learian limerick", meanwhile, support the epistemic ambivalence that is necessary to nonsense, although I suggest that on occasion there is more "meaning" latent in the rhymes than the non-sense school acknowledges. This, however, occurs on a linguistic or pragmatic, rather than a symbolic level – for instance, where intertextual allusion or double meanings are overlooked.

In Lisa Ede's[97] analysis of "The Young Lady of Troy" ("Limericks"109-110), for instance, she is baffled by the "grotesquely large flies" drowned by the protagonist, one of whom "walk[s] before her like a tame dog".

There was a Young Lady of Troy,
Whom several large flies did annoy;

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[96] These include, respectively: Lecercle (*Intuitions*) and Nöth, Winfried. "The Art of Self-Reference in Edward Lear's Limericks." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Germanic Linguistics and Semiotic Analysis*. 10.1, 2005. 47-66. (both linguistic analyses); Miller ("Two Approaches"); Snider ("Victorian Trickster"); Bouissac ("Decoding Limericks"); and Heyman ("Isles of Boshen" and "Defense").

[97] Ede, Lisa. "Edward Lear's Limericks and their Illustrations." *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*. Ed. Wim Tigges. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987. 103-116.

> Some she killed with a thump, some she drowned at the pump,
> And some she took with her to Troy.

The classical allusion in this nonsense seems to elude Ede, for the Young Lady is surely a nonsense Helen (remembering that Lear was a keen Hellenophile): a possibility supported by the finely proportioned figure in the drawing around whom men might have swarmed 'like flies'. What is going on here, I would argue, is that in the critic's desire to preserve the non-sense, she commits the opposite error to that of the Structuralists and Freudians, under- rather than over-reading the text.

Returning to general readings of Lear; the traditional analysis of his verse is biographical,[98] describing his nonsense as a consequence of various physical and emotional maladies, psychological traits and personal experiences, all coalescing to produce a new and irreverent literary genre with the aid of various "cultural" phenomena: in particular, the repressiveness of the period and contemporary developments in children's literature. In its most basic form, when generalisations regarding Lear's sexuality and "Victorian prudery" are avoided, this reading is both relatively accurate and interesting, for it explains something of the origins of Lear's nonsense. In the case of the limericks, for example, we may see reflected Lear's own anxiety about the "uniform apathetic tone of lofty society" at Knowsley that constituted his surroundings when he first began his forays into the form. There is, of course, far more to the nonsenses than this section of the author's experience, for they also represent an episode in the histories of humorous and children's writing, and thus may be seen to parody literature as well as life. And while this background is telling and may direct us toward Lear's anarchic interests, it does not quite reveal how best to apprehend the nonsenses – a skill that has perhaps been lost through the popularity of the "modern" limerick form. Often, indeed, a biographical interpretation may have just the opposite of an elucidating effect, for example, when it departs from the known facts about Lear into the realms of Freudian fantasy. Edmund Miller's account of the long songs constitutes just this sort of reading, for his assumptions lead him to the far from obvious

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[98] Including Byrom, Thomas. *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear*. New York: Brandywine Press, 1977; Hark, Ina Rae. *Edward Lear*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982; Wullschläger, Jackie. *Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and A.A. Milne*. London: Methuen, 1995.

conclusion that there is "sex…everywhere in Lear" (Miller 7). Here, however, I am concerned with the limericks, so shall provide an example of an interpretation that deals with these items of nonsense using Freudian imagery before explicating the errors of such an approach.

In "Edward Lear's Suicide Limerick", Thomas Dilworth deciphers the "riddle" that he perceives in the following nonsense:
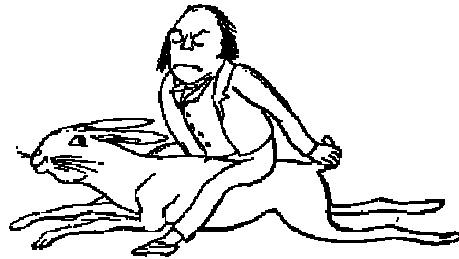
There was an Old Man whose despair
Induced him to purchase a hare:
Whereon one fine day, he rode wholly away,
Which partly assuaged his despair.

Dilworth regards this limerick as resolved through the apprehension of an "elaborate visual pun" (535) upon the term for Japanese ritual suicide, *hari-kari*. Just as the accuracy of this claim is up for grabs (and I am not convinced that Lear would have been aware of Japanese idiom) Dilworth's subsequent analysis – in which the sexual symbolism of riding, the intricacies of the Old Man's hand positions and the erotic significance of death are noted – is similarly inventive. I cite a passage:

> In basic outline…the back, neck, and head of the hare in Lear's
> Limerick suggest, with more anatomical accuracy than a horse's
> neck and head, an exaggerated phallus. And animals of the
> rabbit genus are famous for abundant sexual reproduction.
>   The rider's grasping the hare's tail may or may not be
> erotically suggestive. But with his other hand he reaches inside
> his leg to grasp something else. This may be the animal's side.
> It may also be the rider's penis. If so, he is engaged in what the
> Victorians called self-abuse, a term verbally cognate with suicide
> because, since the Renaissance, the swoon of orgasm has been
> regarded as 'a little death'. Masturbation would be a means of
> attempting to escape despair through a momentary experience of
> oblivion. (537)

In this extract we can see several leaps of imaginative exegesis: firstly, the phallic shape of the hare's head and neck – chosen, according to Dilworth, over a horse

for its sexual evocations. Perhaps the animal resembles a penis; but probably many things do if we look at them in a certain way. So too, Dilworth neglects the intentions of Lear's limerick form, including the necessity of rhyme: "horse", of course, does not rhyme with despair – and nor does it rhyme with any other obvious word related to misery. More significantly, he ignores the processes of nonsense, which operates through just such incongruities as rodent riding and "*partly* assuaging" despair by riding "*wholly* away". This may not even be a "suicide limerick", for the Man rides merely "away", and it is just as likely that he is escaping from a location as from his life; and this uncertainty is part of the "point" of the verse. As Dilworth notes, the position of the Old Man's left hand "may *or may not* be erotically suggestive". And as for his right hand, perhaps it is hanging on to the hare, perhaps he is masturbating, perhaps Lear has failed to draw it, or perhaps it is hidden behind his body.[99] Such are the uncertainties of nonsense, for these are "questions", as Heyman would put it, "not to ask".

Dilworth's accounts of the limericks, unlike others that employ Freudian imagery, are not biographically based – indeed, he notes that a "psycho-biographical analysis of Lear has too often brought interpretation of his works to a premature conclusion" ("Society" 43). While this gloss is perhaps well placed, the use of an overly responsive version of reader-response theory based in psychoanalytic imagery illustrates the methods and madness of the sexual-symbolic interpretation. Dilworth's main error, however, is that he approaches nonsense as a riddle or social code, ignoring the irresolution – the lack of "moral" – that is necessary to the genre. This is the foundation upon which the Structuralist approach to literary nonsense rests: Paul Boussiac, for example, regards "nonsensical discourses as meta-discourses referring to the codes which condition cultural meaning" (2). According to his account, a nonsense is an elaborate puzzle at the heart of which lies a social taboo which we can only apprehend by "deciphering" the code. The limerick in particular he regards as a "micro-narrative[s] through which one or several meta-cultural operations are performed" and which "seems[s] to manipulate the rules concerning the culinary

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[99] In support of the latter option, we may note that the right-hand lapel of the Old Man's blazer is not shown, suggesting that his right shoulder is flung back, perhaps with his right hand directed wing-like behind him in the pose often depicted by Lear.

system of our society – a highly taboo endeavour – through a translation of those rules into a sexual code" (2-3).[100] I have already argued in Chapter 1 that the reading of literary nonsense as a secret language constitutes a misapprehension in which the non-sensical effects of the genre are neglected and the humour denied. In forcing every limerick into a cryptic mould for matters gustatory and sexual, Boussiac "stands the actual nonsense on his head" (Heyman, "Defense" 4); for instead of examining the text for its meaning and anti-meaning he engages in a gratuitous pursuit of sexual imagery.

I turn, then, to the flaws inherent in the Freudian reading. Firstly, we might note its anachronism. This, of course, is no knock-down blow to a committed Freudian, Jungian or Structuralist, one of whose axioms is that the symbols he works with are universal in human consciousness (or unconsciousness, as the case may be). This presumed generalisability makes his claims yet more difficult to refute – and hence dubious in the eyes of the unconvinced. The Freudian principle most often wielded in the interpretation of Lear's nonsense involves the alleged centrality of sex in human life and art: another irrefutable premise to which the best opposition I can offer is its reductiveness. In the case of Edward Lear, an individual whose uncertain proclivities and "provisional life" (Baynes qtd. in Snider) make him especially vulnerable to Freudian attack, his diaries and letters reveal a complex personality whose concerns may have included sex, but certainly involved much else besides: his artistic struggles, loneliness, depression, poor health and so on. Furthermore, both the phenomenology of the sexually motivated artwork and its relation to the artist's life are obscure. One might ask whether the Freudian critic means to imply, as Miller states explicitly, that "the male genitalia [were] something never far from Lear's mind" (Miller 7) – or whether it is some sort of "subconscious obsession" that speaks through his nonsense. Miller's bold assertion exemplifies what other scholars merely insinuate: that Lear's nonsense is the distorted expression of some sort of sexual fixation: a matter concerning which we are never to know the truth. Again, these questions may not be problematic to the critic working within a certain set of

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[100] I shall not explore the single reading that Boussiac makes of one of Lear's limericks in "Decoding Limericks" as most of his errors are similar to those of Dilworth – and rest upon the same faulty premises. His argument is discussed at greater length by Heyman in his "Defense" (4-6).

assumptions, but where there is a more explicable account of the process of an artwork, Occam's razor suggests that it is this for which we should opt.

This brings me to my final and most telling complaint with regard to Freudian readings of Lear: that in pursuing symbols and meanings that are not obvious they often overlook allusions that are. In his analysis of the above nonsense we have already seen that Dilworth neglects the influence of rhyme in Lear's choice of creature, and while his exploration of the absurd possibilities of wholly riding away for the purposes of partly assuaging despair begins astutely enough,[101] the "sensical" construction that he imposes upon the incongruities discounts their full non-sensical force.

Another instance in which an inaccurate Freudian construction distracts us from the effects of nonsense occurs in the case of a limerick much beloved by those with a bent for sexual symbolism, the "Old Man with a nose":
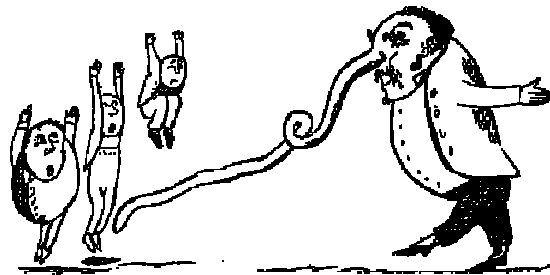
There was an Old Man with a nose,
Who said, "If you chose to suppose,
That my nose is too long, you are certainly wrong!"
That remarkable Man with a nose.

Where both Dilworth and Snider perceive the phallic symbolism of this nose as "unmistakable" (Snider) and note the terror of the three individuals against whom

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[101] Dilworth writes:

> The shut-eyed sadness of the man contrasts with the smiling amusement of the hare. Like the happy hare, the "fine day" is antithetical to the man's "despair", which – the suggestion seems to be – he wilfully sustains by keeping his eyes closed. Strictly speaking, the expression "he rode wholly away" is redundant. Either you ride away or you do not; there is no wholly (or partly) about it. But colloquially the adverb does intensify the action to suggest disappearance. This action "partly assuaged his despair" – another redundancy since the verb contains the meaning of the adverb. You cannot partly lessen anything; either you lessen it or you do not. So the adverb undermines the assuaging and puts it in doubt. The notion of lessening despair is itself problematic since despair is an intellectual-emotional absolute that can vanish but not lessen; you cannot feel less despair or a little despair – either you feel it or you feel something else. ("Suicide Limerick" 535-536)

the nose/penis aggresses, both critics are so intent upon sexual allegory that it apparently eludes them that this nose carefully approximates a skipping rope. As Lisa Ede points out,

> The drawing seems reminiscent of a child's rope game, where one person swings the rope evenly but at increasingly higher levels, while others try to jump above it as it twirls around; only here the rope is a nose, and the boys appear surprised and upset at being included in such a strange sport. The Old Man's feelings are less clear, but the intensity of his gaze and his somewhat malicious smile seem to indicate that he is taking great pleasure in revenging himself against those who maligned him. The effect of the illustration is to give considerable ironic force to the meek "you are certainly wrong" of the verse. (105)

Admittedly, this reading does not belie a Freudian interpretation (as probably no reading can), for the staunch symbolist may relish the possibility of a nose-rope-phallus. However, the manifest oversight in both Snider's and Dilworth's explanations – neither of which mention a skipping rope – suggests that there is something misguided in the style of their approach: as I have suggested above, they are more interested in what is obscure than what is obvious.

The next problematic reading of Lear's nonsenses with which I am concerned is Thomas Byrom's. In *Nonsense and Wonder*, he discusses the limericks as a series concerned with two individuals – an Old Man and a Young Lady – whose changing relationships with the animals and "they" in the 1861 and 1872 publications respectively are seen to reflect Lear's own growing ease with nature and society and also tell of his ambivalent sexuality (51-52).[102] While the treatment of the protagonists as two reappearing figures is an understandable step to take given the recurrence of Lear's concerns, in his separate analysis of Man and Lady, Byrom attributes more differences to the "male" and "female" limericks than actually are there. He fails to recognise that gender, like location, is very often irrelevant to the action of the verses and their illustrations. Exceptions to this occur where Lear parodies the dress or conventional behaviour of Victorian women; and these are significant for their humour rather than anything related to

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[102] Byrom fails to note that 43 of the limericks which appeared in the 1861 collection were not part of the original Knowsley anthology published in 1846, and were written between 1846 and 1861 (*Complete Verse* 492, n.157). This is a relatively minor chronological problem, but points to some inaccuracy in Byrom's evaluation, for some of the "early" poems were in fact written nearer to the later time-frame.

the author's sexuality. So too, part of the nonsense inheres in the bizarre individuality of Lear's characters, whose origins and activities are described independently and should thus have their singularity upheld even as we observe patterns and commonalities among them. In addition, the conclusions that Byrom reaches regarding the Lady – that she might correspond to Lear's sister Ann, illustrate his incomprehension of women, or represent "the female aspect of the artist's own personality" (118-119) – are unsupportable because they rely upon facts about the author's psyche to which we have no access. Indeed, Byrom admits that "there is too little information about Lear's early life" to make anything of his own "speculations" but the barest suppositions; for in truth we cannot know the state of Lear's anima or the complexity of his feelings about his sister.

More particularly, Byrom's conjecture concerning Lear's feelings about the natural world has no grounding in either the text or biographical records, for Edward Lear, as we have seen, was a constant lover of nature. The main error that Byrom makes in these hypotheses – as is the danger in many biographical readings – is that he moves too far outside both the text and what we know of Lear's history. Nevertheless, there are other aspects of Byrom's critique that are insightful: namely, his close attention to the drawings and his description of Lear's nonsense as articulating wonder. I note the latter observation for it is one often lost to the Freudian and Structuralist interpretations in which nonsense is seen primarily as retaliation against unpleasant facts of reality rather than a celebratory play with unreality and incongruity.

The failure to appreciate the drawings as integral to the text is an error more often made by the recreational reader of Lear or the authority on the "modern" limerick form than those familiar with his *oeuvre.* And "pictorial embellishments"[103] are not the only feature that distinguishes Lear's nonsenses from other limericks. Thus, in the interests of a thorough investigation of the reading and misreading of Lear's limericks, I shall explore the problems of evaluating them using standards applicable to what is really a different form.

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[103] In the second chapter of his dissertation, Heyman uses this phrase – originally from an 1888 *Spectator* article on Lear – to refer to the significance of the drawings accompanying Lear's limericks ("Isles" 97). We might note, then, that while contemporary readers apparently understood the significance of the drawings, they are often overlooked by later readers.

In 1925 Émile Cammaerts described two different types of limerick: the verse I have referred to as the "modern" form,[104] which is not nonsensical, and is distinguished by its witty terminal line; and Lear's nonsenses, which are characterised by their "incongruous whole" (5). The "good limerick", according to the criteria of the witty form, is often deemed to have three essential elements: a novel rhyme, a surprising plot and a clever last line.[105] Clearly, Lear's limericks will be found defective according to these principles, for while his rhymes are sometimes inspired (for instance, Russia/"hush her"; Apulia/peculiar), the modern reader may feel his expectations to be thwarted by the repetition of the opening line at the end of the limerick. So too, the Learian plot is invariably too crazy to cohere with the droll humour of the witty form, and his last lines never encapsulate or resolve the preceding scenario in a pointed manner. Evaluating the nonsenses thus, then, might lead to an interpretation like Legman's:

> Lear's imitation of this form, as is well known, invariably
> drops back from the simple but dramatic resolution of the action
> in the final line, to the namby-pamby repetition of the first line –
> very weak, even for nonsense verse – made to do double duty as
> the last line as well, possibly with some tremendously
> unimportant change in the adjective rung in by way of climax.
> (Introduction xiii)

Legman's evaluation of Lear's limerick "imitations" reveals only his own failure to apprehend the methods of nonsense: in particular, its eschewal of "resolution". He misinterprets the effects of the change in adjective, neglecting the humour and absurdity attendant upon Lear's linguistic subtlety, and instead of assessing the nonsense using criteria appropriate to the form, attacks it for failing to adhere to a model that belongs to another genre entirely. So too, he ignores the importance of the drawing, the careful examination of which constitutes my first "reading principle", to which I now turn.

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While some critics' interpretations of the drawings involve so close a scrutiny that they perceive objects that are not relevant to the nonsense – such as the right

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[104] Both Lear's style of limerick and the "modern" – or perhaps, surviving – form were in use at the time that Lear was writing (Prickett 122). For the sake of distinguishing between them, I shall henceforth refer to the latter as the "witty form" and Lear's as the "nonsensical form".

[105] Reed referred to in Ede 103; Harrowven qtd in Tigges 119.

hand of the hare rider – we should examine the subtleties that Lear uses to confound or enhance the superficial meaning of the verse. Very rarely does the action depicted in the illustration agree with that described in the rhyme and this "discrepancy" (Byrom 126)[106] – as almost every Lear familiar has observed[107] – is one source of incongruity essential to nonsense. In the following illustration, for instance, the poem is contradicted on several accounts.
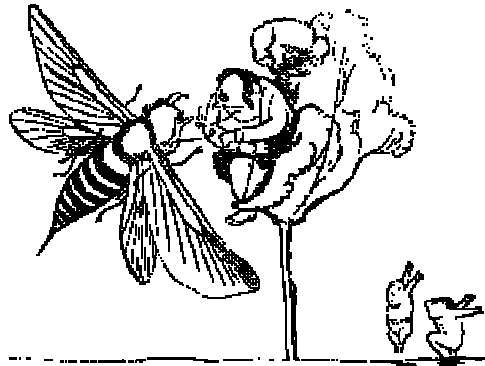
There was an Old Man in a tree,
Who was horribly bored by a bee;
When they said, "Does it buzz?" he replied, "Yes it does!"
"It's a regular brute of a bee!"

First of all, the Old Man appears to find the bee neither brutish nor boring – they share a pipe and an involved, if doleful, exchange. So too, the innocuous dialogue recounted with "they" suggests a greater affinity between the human parties than between man and bee, unlike the situation indicated in the picture. And "they" are shown to be distressed – leaping in fright, their arms thrown back – while the Old Man glowers out of the corner of his eye at "their" capering, so intimating that it is the other human beings, rather than the bee, that have irked him. It should be clear, then, that in the absence of the image this text loses much of the force of its ambiguity and humour, without which it would be reduced to a fairly pedestrian rhyme (although one not without its own incongruities: for instance, that the implications of the word "brute" are not contained in any of the preceding information about the bee).

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[106] According to Byrom, there are only two instances in which text and image agree: a suggestion that I have not confirmed, although I suspect that it depends partly on the reader's perspective – and that Byrom exaggerates the occurrence of image-text discrepancy.
[107] For example, Ede 104; Heyman, "Isles" 11; Tigges, "Sonnet" 121.

It is also significant that the bee in this picture is distinctively human in his appearance, while the man – although not quite animal in his aspect – resembles the bee. This is a technique that Lear employs frequently in his limericks, which Byrom describes as "metamorphosis" (133): whereby the subject of the verse and his animal companion appropriate one another's characteristics.
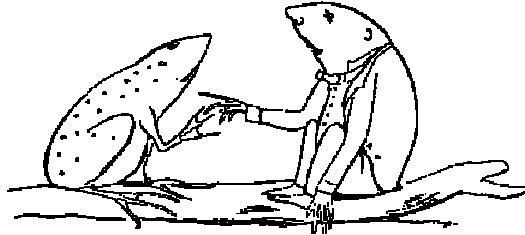
The effect of this style of illustration is very often to suggest amity or kinship between man and beast: an incongruity that is humorous even without the interplay with the poem and may also (as is the case in the "Old Man in a Tree") serve to contradict the sense of the verse.

The relationship between image and text is not always antithetical. Sometimes, for instance, an absurdity described in the rhyme may be reinforced by the drawing:
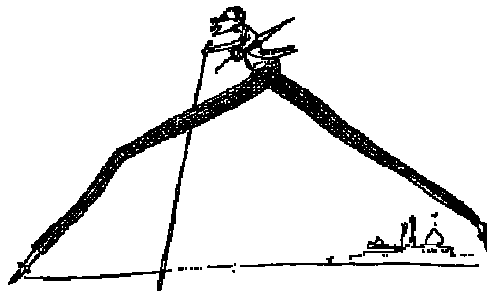
There was an Old Man of Coblenz,
The length of whose legs was immense;
He went with one prance, from Turkey to France,
That surprising Old Man of Coblenz.

Even although this picture does not in any way undermine the denotation of the rhyme, it fulfils a function through the bizarre details that are introduced: the extended walking stick; the umbrella tucked conventionally under the Old Man's arm; the formal flying coat-tails; the darkened spectacles. None of these features requires or could obtain explanation, but they contribute to the advancement of nonsense.

A drawing may also continue or enact the intentions of the wordplay begun in the rhyme as, for instance, is the case when the Young Person of Janina has her head literally "fanned off" by an enthusiastic uncle:
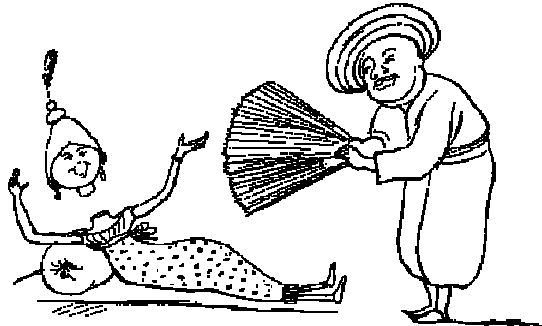
One of the uncertainties frequently introduced into the text by way of the drawing involves chronological incoherence, as it may be unclear which part of the plot of the limerick its illustration is intended to represent. This occurs most often in the limericks concerned with death.
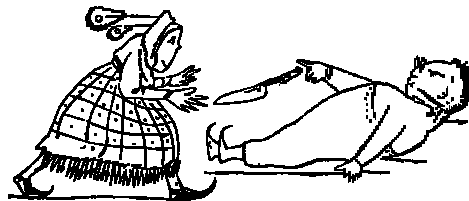
There was an Old Person of Tartary,
Who divided his jugular artery;
But he screeched to his wife, and she said, "Oh, my life!
Your death will be felt by all Tartary!"

In "The Old Person of Tartary", for instance, the individual is shown to have already slashed his throat, yet his accusing posture indicates that he is still alive. The knife appears to have just left the Old Person's hand, and is aimed at his eager-looking wife, as if in preparation for revenge. We might note further inconsistencies in that man and wife both appear to be pleased with the sacrifice, and while the Tartarian points accusingly at his spouse, her exclamation, "Oh my life!" points to a confusion in identity from which the Old Person may wish to remove himself through a most extreme act of individuality.

These are just a few instances of the different varieties of correlation that may be found between the pictures and poems, and should serve to illustrate the complexity and subtlety that Lear's visual "embellishments" add to his verses.

While the Freudian or Structuralist reading may pursue the same visual details, part of the difference between these approaches and mine lies in interpretation. Where Dilworth, Miller and Byrom attempt to "make sense of" the minutiae of the drawings – imposing social or personal meanings upon them – in my reading there very often is no explanation, for the pictorial incongruities are there to create nonsense, and our response to them should preserve the confusion.

Just as Lear's illustrations call for careful examination, so too should we examine the words he uses with a careful eye to etymology, idiom and connotation. In this regard, the most astute exploration I have encountered is Stephen Prickett's,[108] in which he observes that Lear's peculiar melodious adjectives are not strictly misappropriations[109] but, to the contrary, are frequently "pedantically correct" (123). Whereas some of the phrases that appear in Lear's epistolary nonsense and his stories – such as "a negative although nutritious star"[110] – contain genuine linguistic misuses, it is inaccurate to classify the unexpected words that appear in the limericks as instances of the same phenomenon. While the (usually descriptive) words that Lear uses may strike us as out of place or unexpected, on closer examination they often suit their context perfectly. The three examples that Prickett provides are the "luminous" Old Person of Barnes, the "incipient" Old Man at a casement, and the "intrinsic" Old Man of Peru (124-125). I shall illustrate this point further by examining two additional instances of lexical incongruity that, under scrutiny, reveal their rationale.
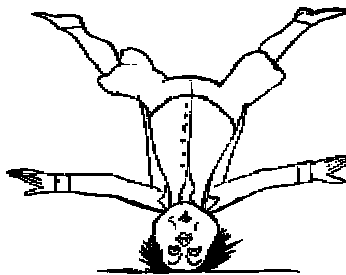
There was an Old Man of Port Grigor,
Whose actions were noted for vigour;

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[108] See Prickett, Stephen. "Nonsense and Consensus." *Victorian Fantasy*. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979. 114-149.

[109] See Heyman, "Isles" 58. As should emerge from the following discussion, "misappropriation" is a problematical concept that is perhaps better understood as a progression rather than an exclusive category.

[110] From the epistolary nonsense, "The Moon Journey", a letter to Mrs Stuart Wortley, 26 February 1882 (*Complete Verse* 435-437).

> He stood on his head, till his waistcoat turned red,
> That eclectic Old Man of Port Grigor.

Here the word "eclectic" – usually interpreted as referring to a style of scholarly approach – also denotes "that [which] borrows or is borrowed from diverse sources. Also, of persons or personal attributes: Unfettered by narrow system in matters of opinion or practice; broad, not exclusive, in matters of taste." (OED) While the connection between the Old Man's waistcoat-reddening headstand and his eclecticism is not outwardly apparent, his "vigour" and distinctiveness – as reflected in his untenable posture – are symptomatic of his defiance of "matters of taste". Here the reference to a second party – the unnamed faction who "note" the vitality of his "actions" – suggests the norm, often present in Lear's limericks, against which the Old Man's individuality stands "unfettered". So too, the nonsense causality implicit in the process described in the plot might be seen as an instance of eclecticism for its failure to comply with the "narrow system" of regular causation in which such developments are debarred. The word is apt, then, even although its meaning must remain unresolved.

The second peculiar word choice that I shall examine is an atypical one as the word that appears to be out of place is not a final line epithet, but a past passive verb implicated in the plot of the limerick.
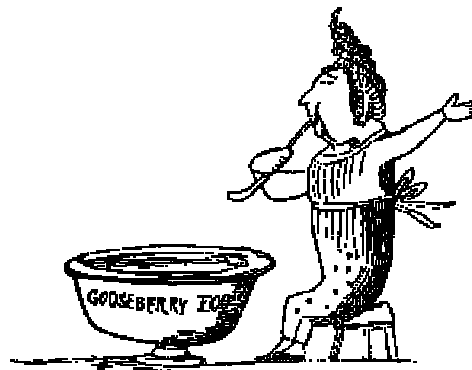
> There was an Old Person of Leeds,
> Whose head was infested with beads;
> She sat on a stool, and ate gooseberry fool,
> Which agreed with that person of Leeds.

It may seem strange to have one's head "infested" with beads – as if diseased or pestered with insects. However, the OED provides a rare meaning for *infest*: "to

fasten or fix in something" as, patently, this Person's head is "fixed in" to her beads. "To infest" may also, more commonly, denote the following: "to attack, assail, annoy, or trouble (a person or thing) in a persistent manner; to molest by repeated attacks; to harass (said of persons, animals, hurtful things…diseases, perverse opinions, errors, etc)". While the uncommon meaning is the most apposite to the situation depicted, the implications that are more likely to be projected onto the word are also referred to in the drawing and in the idiosyncrasy suggested by the Person's eating habits. We might note that the "beads" that adorn her head resemble a pile of larvae or worms; so too, the causality of the rhyme suggests that the gooseberry fool is a remedy: perhaps for a troubling outbreak of beads. The Person, however, is pleased by the fool (and it is no mistake that Lear has chosen a dessert with such an evocative name) – her gesticulation and her closed eyed pleasure magnify the sedate connotations of the phrase, "which agreed with" – while her strange pose and the enormous bowl of comestibles suggest an oddity akin with madness. It may be, then, that the "infestation" is on the inside rather than the outside of her head: perhaps it is the thought of the beads, rather than the objects themselves, that required the fool-ish antidote. None of these "solutions", however, should be settled upon, for such are the irreconcilable ambiguities of nonsense.

Even Lear's neologisms, in Prickett's perceptive evaluation, are worthy of closer examination for the "sly etymological puns" that they often contain (124). The Old Person of Bangor, for example, who "tore off his boots, and subsisted on roots", is assigned the adjective "borascible". Clearly this neologism suggests the word "irascible" (which follows the logic begun in line 2: "[his] face was distorted with anger") as well as several others: perhaps "boring" (a diet of roots can hardly be inspiring); perhaps "boots" and "roots"; perhaps the Person's place of origin. As another example, one of Lear's favourite words is "scroobious":

There was an Old Person of Philæ,
Whose conduct was scroobious and wily;
He rushed up a palm, when the weather was calm,
And observed all the ruins of Philæ.

Here, as Heyman notes with regard to Lear's use of the same word in a different context, "we witness Lear's ability to coin words which somehow phonetically fit their context" ("Isles" 233), for "scroobious" seems perfectly to evoke the "wily" remoteness of the hunched ruin surveyor. There may even be the suggestion of a portmanteau[111] here, for the OED lists the word "scrooch" as meaning "to crouch or bend" – as the Philæn, clearly, is hunched in his tree. And indeed, although Lear employed of the word "scroobious" in diverse contexts, this limerick constitutes its first appearance.[112]

I return, however, to the adjectives that Lear uses in the terminal line of the majority of his limericks, which may be used to illustrate the techniques that occur even in the nonsenses that do not employ his typical formulation.[113] These words are worthy of particular attention for the roles that they play in relation to the rest of the nonsense. While the adjective usually in some way encapsulates what the actions undertaken in the "plot" and the drawing have already led us to suspect about the protagonist, it also serves other functions: for example, by revealing additional information about the Person and so confounding the "meaning" of the

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[111] As noted in Chapter 1, the distinction between portmanteau and neologism is problematic: all neologisms will suggest existing words, while portmanteaux are necessarily ambiguous in the terms to which they refer.

[112] *Complete Verse*, 494, n.167.

[113] While not all of Lear's limericks use the formula in which the final line is a near repetition of the first with the significant difference in the qualifier, this is the structure he uses most often – and one often heavily criticized (as we have seen in Legman above). See Nöth's "The Art of Self Reference" for an inventory of the structural stereotypes that Lear employs in his published limericks.

verse. Sometimes, as follows, this information is contradictory to the rest of the limerick:
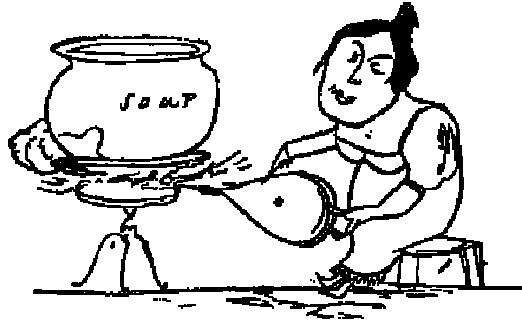
There was a Young Lady of Poole,
Whose soup was excessively cool;
So she put it to boil, by the aid of some oil,
That ingenious Young Lady of Poole.

Heating food is no matter requiring ingenuity, and this limerick therefore acquires its non-sense through hyperbole and caricature. The Lady performs an activity that is pedestrian – although her methods and equipment, as revealed in the drawing, are peculiar and symptomatic, perhaps, of a crazy sort of ingenuity.

Similarly, the effects of the qualifier may inhere in its bathos or banality:
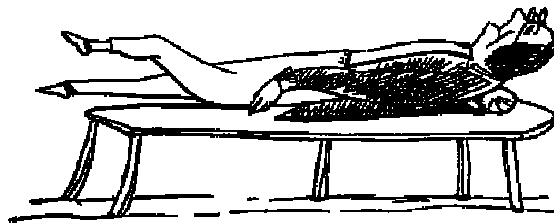
There was an Old Man of Moldavia,
Who had the most curious behaviour;
For while he was able, he slept on a table,
That funny Old Man of Moldavia.

Here we may be baffled by the juxtaposition of the idiomatic and dictionary meanings of the word "funny": is the Old Man "funny-peculiar", or are we intended to laugh at him? His form and posture are certainly "curious", and he is sleeping whilst wearing his spectacles.

Most often, then, Lear's epithets impose a quirky slant upon what we already know, intimating the intentions behind the action and exacerbating the inconsistency between illustration and poem. While I have discussed some of the effects produced by the final line adjectives, it should be emphasized that my

investigation is intended neither to be exhaustive nor to generate a system for classifying Lear's word-use in his limericks. Rather, it should be remembered that although the limerick imposes a strict structure on its content, within that form Lear did not adhere to a code – and thus there can be no laws for deciphering his lexical curiosities save that (like the drawings) they should be examined carefully.[114]

This brings me to my next reading principle: that Lear's objects and intentions vary from limerick to limerick, and hence each should be considered as an independent item – we should bear in mind commonalities in theme and technique, but not treat these as imperative. Indeed, not all of the nonsenses are equally non-sensical. While Lear had publicly declared that "in no portion of these Nonsense drawings have I ever allowed any caricature of private or public persons to appear",[115] at least one has been read as "direct political satire…aimed at Gladstone's whistle-stop election tours" (Prickett 119):

There was an Old Man at a Station,
Who made a promiscuous oration;
But they said, "Take some snuff! – You have talk'd quite enough
You afflicting Old Man at a Station!"

While Heyman disavows so "sensical" a reading as that implied by political burlesque, it seems to me that this limerick is so unmistakeably derived from a real-life situation that its non-sensicality is at least partly compromised. Edward Lear was not systematic in his creation of the nonsenses, and it should be

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[114] I am compelled, at this point, to consider the "other" approach to the Learian limerick: that of the young child who would not have the faculty for etymological intricacies. I would argue that the child appreciates the limericks for a different and less questioning sort of misunderstanding than that experienced by the adult, and that in them Lear enacts a sort of linguistic game with himself and his adult audience by alluding to complex implications in a text that is ostensibly for consumption by children. See also Heyman, "Isles" Chapter 5, "The Elevated Child", 164-179.
[115] From *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, Etc.*, (1872) qtd in Heyman, "Isles" 212.

remembered that as spontaneous compositions they do not fit in with an overarching project, and thus it follows that their intentions and effects are inconsistent. In some, for instance, the geographical location named in the opening line is relevant to the meaning and anti-meaning produced (as is the case in "The Lady of Troy", above), while in others it provides but a rhyming challenge. So too, while certain of the limericks will appeal to adult etymological interests, others are more accessible to children.

Principle 4 also requires that we acknowledge the diverse intentions of the limericks, for here I am concerned with the relationship between Lear's Persons and their "opponents", "they". Just as the purposes of the nonsenses are not consistent, so too it is inaccurate to ascribe a uniform identity to "they" except in the most minimal and obvious sense in which they represent an "other" – or a faction distinct from the protagonist of the limerick. Strictly speaking, it may even be inaccurate to regard "them" as always representing the forces of "society" – as scholars almost inevitably do[116] – for sometimes it is the individual who appears to be more closely allied with cultural norms, while "they" seem impartial. The above nonsense may be a case in point if we view the subject – the Old Man at a Station – as the individual being caricatured, for according to the purposes of the satire, it is with those who object to his scattered[117] address that we sympathise. This limerick may be atypical for its satirical intent, but there are others in which we might see the subject as more closely allied with "they" than "the eccentric".[118]

There was an Old Person of Pisa,
Whose daughters did nothing to please her;
She dressed them in gray, and banged them all day,
Round the walls of the city of Pisa.

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[116] For example, Byrom 52-120; Dilworth, "Society" 42; Hark 29; Heyman, "Isles" 116.
[117] See Prickett, 126 and Heyman "Isles" 168 for discussion of Lear's use of the word "promiscuous".
[118] In Hark's study, the protagonists are described as eccentric individuals in tension (although not always in a state of mutual hostility) with the societal agents represented by "they" (24-51).

There are, however, ways to get around exceptions such as these, for the Old Person of Pisa (and others like her) might be described as eccentric or noncompliant for behaviour that takes the societal norm to its extreme. Adults may control, oppress and punish children, but inexplicably "bang[ing] them all day" is a transgressive act. Similarly, in "The Old Man at a Station", we might observe that the foibles of the Person are brought out such that while he may represent a real individual, he is also a typical Learian oddball. And this, indeed, is how the caricature works, for in depicting a culturally acceptable behaviour as idiosyncratic, Lear deprives it of its solemnity and so mocks the Prime Minister's electioneering techniques.

Whatever our scheme for defining the identities of the Old Persons and "them", the interactions that take place between the two parties almost always involve some sort of tension between self and other – although not the uniform hostility sometimes perceived. I shall avoid a close scrutiny of the intricacies of these relationships – which have already been explored at some length by Byrom and Hark[119] – instead using an example to illustrate the complexities and ambiguities that inevitably surface in their exchanges.
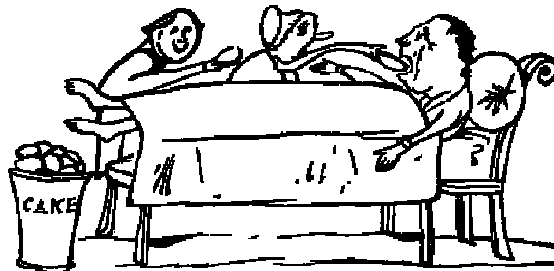
There was and Old Person of Rheims
Who was troubled with horrible dreams;
So, to keep him awake, they fed him with cake,
Which amused that Old Person of Rheims.

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[119] Hark, for instance, delineates six non-exclusive categories describing the types of interaction between "them" and Lear's subjects as follows:

1. "They" are hostile and quell the innocent individual.
2. "They" are hostile, but the individual quells them.
3. "They" are hostile, but the individual is culpable in provoking their anger.
4. "They" express a neutral interest which the individual rebuffs.
5. The manner in which the individual expresses his individuality pleases "them", and "they" extend approval.
6. The individual is in difficulty, and "they" try to help him, or vice versa.
(30)

While her taxonomy is accurate, the assumption that "they" always represent "society" and "the individual" an character who opposes cultural forces is not always correct.

On a superficial level, "they" are supportive of the individual in distress, and he is gratified by their assistance. However, their relationship is inconclusive: "they" are baffled by the Person's nightmares and, failing to confront the source of the problem – the troubling dreams – tackle a less perplexing one by simply keeping him awake, so potentially creating further difficulties. One might note, too, the contradictory expressions on the faces of those who assist the Person: the first is urgent in her distress, while the second approaches the feeding project with glee (Ede, "Limericks" 114). It seems there is no unity in their intent, and their fellow-feeling for the subject is uncertain, although they are superficially trying to help. They may be similar to the grown-ups who purport to have a child's "best interests" at heart but in fact claim too much of an authoritative distance to empathise with their charge. Whatever the case, we can never be entirely sure whether "they" are helping or hindering the subject, and this ambivalence is necessary to the advancement of non-sense.

This brings me to my penultimate proposition for Learian limerick-reading: that we consider the nonsenses in the context of Victorian norms of etiquette and interaction: in particular, those which relate to the experiences of the child. Edward Lear habitually referred to the limericks as his "Old Persons" (Hark 26), and part of their humour inheres in the role reversal implied by the often bizarre and childish behaviour of individuals who are not merely grown-up, but often aged.[120] The nonsenses provided an opportunity for Victorian children to poke fun at their elders, for in them it is often wayward adults who suffer the impositions or assistance of a parent-like authority. Sometimes, for example, the advice given to a Person parodies a misguided grown-up attempt to help:
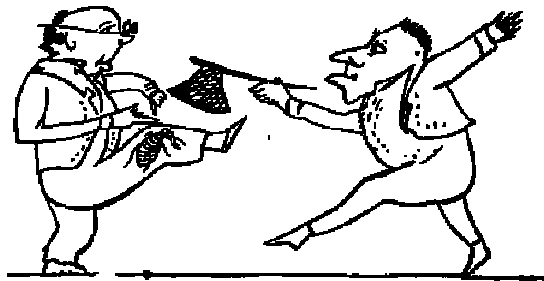

There was an Old Man of the Dee,

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[120] One of the frequent discrepancies between drawing and rhyme is that while the Persons are often described as "old", in the picture they may appear to be young – so too, Lear's few Young Ladies frequently are depicted as old.

> Who was sadly annoyed by a flea;
> When he said, "I will scratch it" – they gave him a hatchet,
> Which grieved that Old Man of the Dee.

The geriatric may also be punished needlessly and excessively for his rumpus-making:
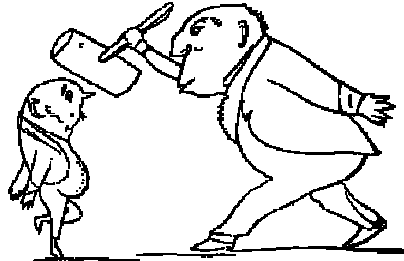
> There was an Old Person of Buda,
> Whose conduct grew ruder and ruder;
> Till at last, with a hammer, they silenced his clamour,
> By smashing that Person of Buda.

In comparison to the representative of "them", this Person is childlike in size and posture – if not in form – and entirely non-threatening to his opponent. The unmotivated "smashing", then, may be compared to an exaggerated parental quelling of juvenile exuberance.

Not every limerick is explicitly concerned with parodying conventional age-relations, but it is instructive to attend to the effects that would have been appreciated by Lear's original audience. Social norms and decorous behaviour also feature frequently as subjects for caricature in the limericks, and while we should avoid trying to force them into a uniform mould or over-reading Lear's societal concerns, our alertness to this theme can direct us towards Lear's special brand of humour.

Often the treatment of matters of propriety is subtle and indeterminate, as in the following limerick.
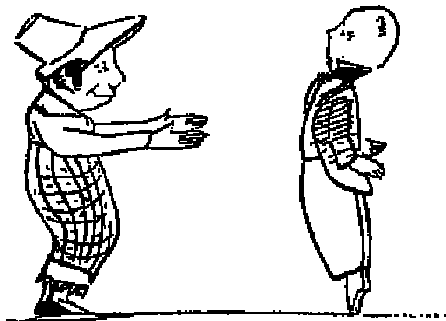
> There was an Old Person of Burton,
> Whose answers were rather uncertain;
> When they said, "How d'ye do?" he replied, "Who are you?"
> That distressing Old Person of Burton.

Here the Burtonian disrupts the conventional order of the greeting ritual by his curious rejoinder while his body pulls away from the welcoming arms of his acquaintance – and she appears to want not merely to hail, but to embrace him. By comparison, we might envisage a child's reluctance towards an overbearing relative. Hence the Old Person is described as "distressing" for his paradoxical response and his refusal to interact naturally with an unfamiliar. It is no mistake that the qualifier which describes the Old Person might equally refer to his own feelings toward the amicable "they" as "their" feelings towards him (a technique of which Lear is fond), for one of the intentions of this limerick and others like it is to make a nonsense of conventional social interaction and the emotions which are expected to motivate it. Indeed, literary nonsense may very often be seen as a response to real life phenomena, in particular social norms that are in fact nonsensical or absurd.

Finally, in reading the Learian limerick, it is essential always to see the comic intent behind the nonsense, for the "attack" that Lear launches against propriety and adulthood is directed towards laughter without sedition. And while the limericks may reveal Lear's intuitions about – and often against – an age characterised by rigid social practices, his subversions are innocuous. So too, where the modern adult reader may be disturbed by the frequency with which death and despair surface in the limericks, we have seen in Chapter 1 that these concerns are misdirected. Heyman argues that the "child constructs" that constitute Lear's implied audience would "have a much more enlightened view of what death is" than do adults, for they would intuit that it is a subject not to be taken seriously ("Isles" 169). While I am wary of speculating about the attitudes of any reader – real or ideal – with regard to death, one of the requirements for a charitable reading of the limericks is that we perceive the humour and absurdity in oblivion and non-existence. In any event, the large number of limericks that depict instances of annihilation do so in a manner that undercuts the solemnity that we presume is proper to the subject: the illustrations accompanying the death

limericks soften the impact of the words and reduce the intent of both to a state of meaninglessness (ibid 170). I would suggest further (as I have intimated in Chapter 1) that there is something about obliteration that makes it an ideal topic for nonsense – and not merely because the gravity with which it is treated by "common sense" provides such a fine opening for mockery.

Sewell describes literary nonsense as an "annihilation of relations" (4): it is a genre characterised by opposites and inversions, one of the main instances of which is that of existence in contrast to non-existence. While at a lexical and semantic level nonsense delights in inversions, negations and nots, I submit that human annihilation constitutes an extension of this concern. There may be a problem with this argument, for it implies that the genre precedes the material. However, one might still maintain that the deaths and removals that characterise literary nonsense are curious and amusing for the same reason as are other instances of discursive self-denial,[121] and hence are almost unavoidable.

We might also note – as does Heyman – that "[d]eath has saturated children's literature from its beginning" ("Isles" 171), and thus Lear's depictions continue in a thematic tradition even although the tone with which he approaches it is unique. Lear's facetious treatment of death includes bizarre causes – an Old Man of Peru, for instance, is "accidentally baked" – as well as the suspicion that non-existence is impermanent or incomplete (as may be the case in "The Old Man whose despair", above).[122] Thus, nonsense mocks the dire threats of moralising children's literature through the manner in which "death is celebrated, defeated, applauded, and irrationally brought on" (ibid). By not taking death seriously, Lear ridicules those who do, and thus the Old Persons whom he murders with such glee and abandon should not be pitied, but exalted.

In conclusion, I offer a "sample reading" of two of Lear's limericks, using the six principles described above to "explain" the interplay between sense and non-sense and so demonstrate what a charitable reading of the Learian limerick should involve. The first rhyme I consider is the "Old Person of Chili", a nonsense

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[121] See Stewart for a description of nonsense as a "discourse that denies itself" (72).
[122] The absurdity and transience of the nonsense death is best illustrated, as Heyman notes, in "The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-popple" ("Isles" 48).

that is representative of the aims of the genre for its absurdity and its impenetrability:

> There was an Old Person of Chili,
> Whose conduct was painful and silly;
> He sate on the stairs, eating apples and pears,
> That imprudent Old Person of Chili.

I begin by examining the drawing. This is a typical Learian Old Person: his head out of proportion to his body, his arms flailing, a peculiar or insane expression on his face. (We might also note that his nationality is reflected in his dress – a superficial source of humour that also suggests that Lear may be making some kind of cultural allusion.) He is holding, dropping and consuming several flattened round and teardrop-shaped objects barely identifiable as "apples and pears". The strangeness of the "fruit" represents an immediately noticeable source of non-sense: the Person is shown in some detail and the stairs depicted to allow for perspective, yet the victuals are drawn in a different style[123] – and one so simplified as to suggest that what the Chilean consumes is some papery geometric substance. This might account for his torturous silliness – which may or may not be reflected in his grimace and his out-flung hands. His clenched teeth, at any rate, suggest his reluctance to ingest the circular object that is apparently balanced in front of them. It is not clear, then (turning from the picture to Principle 2, the words, and Principle 4, the relationship between the subject and "they") whether the Person's "conduct" is "painful and silly" to himself or to some other party. His facial expression might be one of anguish – or it may be that his behaviour is painful (in the idiomatic sense) to the observer of it.

While this limerick does not explicitly refer to "they" (a feature that reflects Principle 3: that the patterns and intentions of Lear's limericks are inconsistent) the

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[123] Ede notes that "[s]ome of Lear's most powerful illustrations are those in which he blends different styles in one drawing" ("Limericks" 113).

words used to describe the Old Person's actions – "conduct", "painful", "silly" and "imprudent" – allude to a societal norm with which he is in tension. Because we do not know which party identifies his behaviour as "painful" it is ambiguous whether we are to sympathise with the Person or the implied other who deems him "imprudent". At first glance this adjective may appear to be misplaced: there is nothing in the act of eating apples and pears whilst sitting upon stairs that makes it inherently unwise or reckless behaviour. And again, this is a confusion that may be resolved or intensified by the illustration: if the fruit is really the razor inedible substance that it is pictured as, eating it is probably foolish and self-destructive. More particularly, however, this nonsense demonstrates the fifth principle described above, for the implicit injunction on the Person not to perform the banal and harmless activity of eating apples and pears from his stair-top perch caricatures the real directives that govern acceptable "conduct". We know neither why his actions are "painful", "silly" or "imprudent"; nor, indeed, do we have an explanation for his habits of consumption, but for some reason the latter have been proscribed – as if by an autocratic parent only concerned with dominating her charge. Of course, this comment on paternal or societal demands is complicated by the fact that the subject himself appears to be eating grudgingly, but this is a contradiction that in nonsense should not be resolved.

In the following limerick the implications of the relationship between "they" and the subject and also of the depiction of violence in nonsense are illuminated.

There was an Old Man who screamed out
Whenever they knocked him about;
So they took off his boots, and fed him with fruits,
And continued to knock him about.

As Byrom would put it, the drawing here serves to "mollify" the rhyme (121), for both the Old Man and "they" appear to be pleased with the state of affairs in spite

of the brutality suggested by the words. The postures of both Man and his tormentors suggest dance-like ease: their hand gestures are open and friendly, and the Person is smiling. His boots have just been removed – or kicked off, perhaps, for the illustration implies that it is the Old Man and not "they" who has removed his footwear – while he holds the "fruits" in his outstretched hands. Clearly there is no "screaming" in this incident, and while the verse indicates that the fruit and the extraction of his feet have pleased (or at least, eased) the subject, in the drawing it seems to be the "knocking" that delights him. We may be surprised at the colloquialism, "knock about": a euphemism for what really amounts to a gratuitous beating that also suggests – as do the knockers' paddles and the Man's rotund form – that what is really going on here is a sort of eccentric ball sport. In other words, this nonsense functions partly through a pun (which is realised through the drawing) on two different idiomatic uses of one phrase.

Thus far I have explored this nonsense using Principles 1 and 2, and Principle 3 is best demonstrated by comparison with other limericks. Principle 4, meanwhile, concerns the interaction between "they" and the Person. And here the inconclusive nature of their relationship is made plain, for it is not apparent whether "their" actions amount to help or hindrance. On one level, "they" are clearly intended to represent the Old Man's bullies; however, he seems to take pleasure in their cruelty and their sporting suggests collusion rather than animosity. Indeed, the "game" depicted might imply that rather than victim and oppressors, the individuals shown are all oversized children at play (and here I allude to the implications of Principle 5). The portrayal of grown-ups engaging in so childlike a pastime inverts the Victorian norm in a manner that would have been amusing to child readers and those wearied by strait-laced adulthood, while the Person's gratification at his beating subverts the social "rule" that one should object to being injured, as does the absurd consolation of fruit and shoelessness. It should be clear by now that we should not attempt to demystify any of these incongruities, for multiplicity or "simultaneity"[124] is one of the chief procedures of nonsense.

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[124] See Chapter 1 44-46; Tigges, *Anatomy* 59.

This leaves only Principle 6 with which to evaluate this limerick. And here the ambiguous roles of "they" and the Old Man, and the paradoxical effects of the cruelty signify that the violence should not disturb us. While the modern reader may be baffled by the prospect of laughing at what might in a different context seem a monstrous game, it is important that we remember that nonsense subverts the custom which requires that violence and its effects be injurious – and, furthermore, that this reversal of our expectations serves the purposes of comedy. The suggestion of a socially motivated beating also implies that the nonsense follows in – and parodies – the tradition of cautionary children's literature in which the threat of violence was used to enforce a moral message. By denying the brutality its customary effects (and also neglecting its causes) it loses its admonitory power and laughs at the moral system to which the limerick responds.

Lear's long poems perform similar acts of social ridicule, although here the ambiguities represented are both less concentrated and less perplexing than those of the limericks: indeed, strictly speaking, some of the verses may be too easily resolvable into meaning to qualify as members of the genre of nonsense. This is the subject of the next chapter, "The Green World of Nonsense: Romanticism and Lear's Songs", in which I examine the features of the long poems which ally them with the characteristics of romanticism. While the limericks are emblematic of nonsense literature, the songs fit only clumsily into this designation, and thus the interpretative theme that I examine in Chapter 4 concerns whether they might equally be described as instances of romantic poetry.

Chapter 4

The Green World of Nonsense: Romanticism and Lear's Songs

Lear is not making fun of romantic excesses. He doesn't disapprove of romanticism; but he does parody it; he does criticise it – for all parody is a form of criticism, though it may be (as here) appreciative criticism.

A.J.M. Smith[125]

In his "Two Approaches to Edward Lear's Nonsense Songs" Edmund Miller offers two accounts of Lear's long verses: the "traditional method" in which they are seen as "confections of romantic poetry" (5) and a Freudian interpretation that describes nonsense as a "comic disguise" for its author's "psychological quirks and obsessions" (6). While Miller favours the latter understanding – a style of approach that I have already examined and dismissed in Chapters 2 and 3 – an account of the poems as instances of literary romanticism offers up intriguing possibilities that he does not pursue. As "self-contained descriptions of life in the green world" (Miller 5), the songs reflect the sense of yearning for and the exaltation in the natural environment that are characteristic of romantic art and literature (Thurley 1). On the other hand, Lear's idealism is often playfully derisive in its intent, and a parodic approach undercuts the romanticism even while we sense the wistfulness beneath it. In this chapter, then, I explore the nonsensical and romantic elements in Lear's long poems, so taking up again one of the more intractable challenges in the reading of nonsense literature: that of the relationship between the features of nonsense and those of "sensical" poetry. As we shall see, Lear's songs reflect both the serious features of romanticism (in particular, the utopian vision associated with the romantic approach) and also the absurdities and parodic concerns with "common sense" matters –in particular, those related to propriety and age-relations – that are characteristic of literary nonsense. While

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[125] Smith, A.J.M. "Nonsense Poetry and Romanticism" *Essays in Honor of Russel B. Nye.* Ed. Joseph Waldmeir. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1978. 188.

romanticism constitutes but one poetic tradition, this is a literary strand with which Lear's nonsense is closely allied, and thus provides an illustrative model for the problematic concerns of literature and nonsense and the interaction between them. As there can be no concrete divide, but rather a continuum between sense and its antithesis, it is inappropriate to define a work as exclusively "nonsensical" or "romantic," and part of the purpose of this study is to make a case that Lear's poems can be both without contradiction, so demonstrating one of the problems of generic taxonomy alluded to in Chapter 1.

I begin by defending my use of the word "romanticism" and discussing the nature of the "romantic" features as they are manifested or parodied in Lear's writing. Thereafter, I refer to Thomas Byrom's analysis of the long poems – a study which considers both their romantic and nonsensical elements – before making my own exploration, in which I examine the verses from the critical perspectives of romanticism and nonsense. I shall discuss the songs roughly chronologically, but follow thematic connections between works, looking first at the lyrics published in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1871); and then those that appeared in *Laughable Lyrics* (1877); as well as two unpublished pieces, "The Scroobious Pip" and an early version of "The Pobble who has no Toes". I have ignored the autobiographical verses as well as "Calico Pie" (which has been discussed in Chapter 1) and three poems which are relatively uninteresting for the purposes of this chapter: "Mr and Mrs Spikky Sparrow" is a nursery ode that is of only tangential interest for its implications concerning clothing and conformity (Byrom 194), while "The New Vestments" and "The Two Old Bachelors" are closer to light verse than nonsense and reveal relatively little about Lear's romantic concerns, either genuine or parodic.

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Geoffrey Thurley offers two senses by which the movement of romanticism may be understood: the "art-historical" and the "typological". In the former case, the "Romantic era"[126] is seen as an historical development circumscribed by the

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[126] For the purposes of this chapter, I shall capitalise the term "Romantic(ism)" only when referring explicitly to the historical time-frame. As my concern here lies with the characteristics of the works typically described as "romantic" in isolation from their historical context(s), I shall almost always refer to it thus.

preceding and following epochs – respectively, the Enlightenment and the Victorian era. In this scheme the qualitative features of the movement are seen as a function of social and historical forces and consist largely of a reaction against earlier systems. From a "typological" perspective, meanwhile, "romanticism" is described as the set of attitudes or "a kind of artistic temperament" that is not necessarily constrained by its historical location (Thurley 2). According to the latter definition, a "romantic" artwork may be the product of any age or milieu and need not be directly linked to the cultural or political developments commonly associated with or preceding the Romantic era (such as Lockean rationalism or the French Revolution), but rather gives voice to an outlook that may arise in a variety of cultural contexts. While on some level it is reductive to separate an artistic "state of mind" (ibid) from the environment that produced it, for the purposes of this chapter my approach will be largely typological, for as a stylistic designation the term "romantic" is useful in describing a broad style of literary approach into which many of Lear's songs fall. In addition, I have in Chapter 2 investigated the cultural and historical forces on Lear's work, and it is that exploration upon which this chapter rests. We have seen that Edward Lear was inspired by many of the same ideologies that influenced Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, and my aim here is to discuss the characteristics of the songs themselves that reflect these "romantic" values. In other words, I shall take for granted that the nonsense of Edward Lear (and in particular his long songs) derives from the literary interests of the Romantic era, and concentrate on the expression of those interests rather than their origins. It should be noted that my concern with literary nonsense in relation to romanticism is twofold, for while on the one hand I portray "nonsensical" and "romantic" as contradictory literary modes (both of which may be employed within one work), this is a false dichotomy, for there is a sense in which the genre of nonsense might itself be described as a romantic form (or at least, share certain important features with romanticism), and this is a matter to which I return in the conclusion of this chapter.

According to Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*[127] the characteristics of romantic art include:

> (a) an increasing interest in Nature, and in the natural, primitive and uncivilised way of life; (b) a growing interest in scenery, especially its more untamed and disorderly manifestations; (c) and association of human moods with the "moods" of Nature – and thus a subjective feeling for it and interpretation of it; (d) a considerable emphasis on natural religion; (e) emphasis on the need for spontaneity in thought and action and in the expression of thought; (f) increasing importance attached to the natural genius and the power of the imagination; (g) a tendency to exalt the individual and his needs and emphasis on the need for a freer and more personal expression; (h) the cult of the Noble Savage. (769-770)

Most of these features may be seen in Lear's long songs, in particular the admiration for nature and the sublime: or, as Miller puts it, the idealisation of "the green world". The romantic interest in the natural aesthetic is related to the cultures of imperialism and travel or tourism[128] that defined the period, for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were an age of geographical discovery and expansion, and these spoke to the popular and the literary imagination of the time (Buzard 19). Part of the interest in new places involved the idealisation of landscapes both alien and unsullied, which stood in contrast to the familiar, tainted vision of industrialised Europe (ibid): the "smokydark London life"[129] which Edward Lear bemoaned and fled in pursuit of light and natural beauty. Lear, of course, was himself a constant wanderer, and the motif of the journey – which appears in some form or other in almost every one of his nonsenses – is a reflection both of his own imaginative cravings and those of his era, and is thus a significant feature to be considered in the contexts of nonsense and of romanticism.

Returning to Cuddon's definition; the values of individuality, imagination and irreverence towards convention upheld by the romantic ethos are also inevitably of interest to a genre that is principally concerned with the unique: as is

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[127] Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* (1977) London: Penguin, 1999.

[128] Buzard defines "tourism" as the superficial, commercial form of "travel": a burgeoning industry during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (19). It is curious that while Edward Lear devoted much of his life to travel it is the tourist industry to which his travel journals contributed.

[129] Letter to Emily Tennyson, 10 May 1865 (Noakes, *Wanderer* 205).

literary nonsense. And these principles are celebrated as themes within Lear's verses, several of which involve music, dance and invention. The importance granted to "natural genius" in the romantic paradigm – the imaginative capacities with which man is born – involves an appeal to the childlike in people of all ages: that which the adult retains of his younger self, and longs or strives toward. Nonsense too calls upon the faculties of "earlier-gained treasures":[130] as Elizabeth Sewell puts it, it is the "[c]hild…in each of us, regardless of age, [that] responds to [n]onsense verse," while nonsense is "that to which this child responds" ("Nonsense Verse" 135). In other words, "natural genius" is the force which is subject to wonder and to yearning for "the green world" and which, by the same token, derides "adult" conventions and societal norms, and hence laughs at the ridicule thereof that occurs in works like Lear's songs. It is this attribute, then, to which the category of writing into which Lear's nonsense falls – 'children's literature for adults'[131] – speaks most directly.

According to the above definition, romanticism can be seen to gesture towards a utopian ideal, and this is also a principal feature of literary nonsense. In "Nonsense Literature and Radical Utopianism",[132] Kevin Shortsleeve connects nonsense to the medieval tradition of the carnivalesque: a form characterised by the same inversions, ambiguities and madness that I have described in Chapter 1 (Shortsleeve 1-2). While carnivalesque texts such as Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* may not have been traditionally considered as part of the canon of literary nonsense, the similarities between the fields mean that they are surely the same class of work, and the "utopian vision" (6) – or the "constant striving for a condition beyond any known in this world"[133] – is the same as that of Lear and Carroll and their successors. The paradisal aspirations, the recurrent image of the moon, the exotic locales, and the focus on eccentricity (Shortsleeve 6-10) are all features of this literary yearning that locate nonsense in the context of this radical

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[130] Letter to Fortesque, 2 September 1859 (Heyman, "Isles" 106). See p.60.

[131] See Chapter 1, pp.14-15; Nelson 78.

[132] Unpublished; presented at Children's Literature Association Conference, 14-16 June 2007, Newport News, Virginia, USA. Draft obtained from author.

[133] Qtd in Shortsleeve (6) from Malcolm, Noel, *The Origins of English Nonsense*: a text I have been unable to obtain in South Africa. Malcolm's *Origins* examines the development of English nonsense texts from the late sixteenth century, and includes references to a "Utopian tongue": the idea of a "universal language" (ibid) in which is embedded the striving for an ideal world.

– and also romantic – idealism. While the Romantic Era may be a far cry from medieval Europe, the resemblances that the literary forms growing out of these traditions share in both their effects and intent suggest that a strand may be drawn between these diverse fields of literature, connecting them via their impulse to transcend the mundane world. Lear's writing, however, involves caricature and hyperbole, and subverts the same poetic systems that it holds up: "his poetry," as Smith puts it, "is at once an extension of romanticism and a parody of it, but the parody is oblique and allusive. Lear loves the Romantic masters, and he only gently presumes to correct them – by showing them how their job ought to have been done" (189).

●

I move, then, to Lear's songs, into which my point of entry is Thomas Byrom's analysis: a taxonomy which implicitly reveals the romantic framework within which they occur. His account considers both the romantic elements and the non-sensical procedures of the poems although it does not explicitly discuss the interplay between the two modes[134] – and it is this that I intend to explore further in this chapter. Byrom's readings of the songs are at times inconsistent with an understanding of the aims of non-sense as I have described them in Chapter 1, for he imposes upon them biographical and psychological meanings (including Freudian explanations) that are incommensurate with the elusiveness of the genre. Nevertheless, at times I yield to this approach, for while I have criticised certain biographical interpretations of Lear's nonsense elsewhere, in some cases it is almost inevitable that we evaluate his work against the background of his life experiences and emotional circumstances. The feelings of constraint; the theme of escape through travel; the obsession with conformity and physical abnormality, for example, are all features of Lear's own existence that he would have freely admitted to putting in his nonsense. And this "writing in nonsense his emotional biography"[135] is part of what makes Lear exceptional and also reveals his romantic

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[134] I use the term "mode" very loosely here, for even from a typological perspective "romanticism" and "nonsense" cannot be said to represent the same sort of category – although both might be described as "genres" in different contexts.

[135] Nock qtd in Hark 154.

interests. Thus, while I dismiss sexual-symbolic interpretations of nonsense,[136] my investigation of the songs will at times involve a discussion of their personal context in the author's life. Indeed, one of my concerns in this chapter is to hold up an alternative to the psychoanalytic readings often offered by critics: one which, in particular, notes the mockery of age-relations or parent-child interactions that takes place in Lear's nonsense.

Byrom categorises the long songs in three main groups according to theme: "ten poems are about courtship and voyages, three about families, and three about paradise and bliss" (Byrom 152).[137] While his classification is broadly accurate, and points to the significant romantic themes of love, travel and what Miller might call a longing for "the green world", Byrom's categories overlap and are sometimes inaccurate: for example, "The Jumblies" is a "voyage" poem that has its resolution in "paradise". For my purposes, however, it is more significant that these themes recur, and that they reflect typically romantic concerns, than that the songs may or may not be divided into discrete classes.

I consider first the motif of the journey. Lear's long songs were written after many of his life's travels, and express both nostalgia and ambivalence regarding home and escape. We should remember, however, that the sense of irresolution reflected in the futile quests of some of Lear's characters can be equally well explained as a consequence of the aims of nonsense as of his psychological state, and it is important to bear both motivations in mind. Five of the songs from Lear's 1871 collection, *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets*, are variations on the theme that Byrom describes as "love and roving" (157): "The Duck and the Kangaroo", "The Owl and the Pussycat", "The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly", "The Table and the Chair" and "The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs".[138] In all cases but that of "The Owl and the Pussycat", the characters

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[136] I shall discuss possible Freudian interpretations of "Mr and Mrs Discobbolos" and "The Pobble Who has No Toes" for the sake of comparison with romantic and nonsensical readings.

[137] He further notes that two poems are concerned with clothing, and refers to three autobiographical verses, but neglects Lear's Indian piece, "The Cummerbund", which is stylistically unique in Lear's *oeuvre*. Although this poem is more explicitly nonsensical than the other verses and might be seen to fall clumsily into a discussion of romanticism in nonsense, it presents incongruous and barely intelligible images that caricature the romantic idealization of nature.

[138] These songs were all written during the late 1860's, or in 1870. "The Duck and the Kangaroo", "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" and "The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly" were first published in the

describe themselves as maladapted or oppressed by their circumstances: the Duck's "life is a bore in this nasty pond"; Daddy Long-legs and Fly are both plagued by legs which are the wrong length; the Nutcrackers's and Sugar-Tong's lives are "idle and weary," and "full of remorse"; the Table suffers from chilblains. In the case of the Daddy Long-legs and Fly, the characters' physical abnormalities also have social consequences, as their legs make them unacceptable as guests at court; while in "The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs" a public outcry results from the implements' decision to take to "the blue hills and green meadows": (Byrom 162-170)

> The whole of the household was filled with amazement,
>   The Cups and the Saucers danced madly about,
> The Plates and the Dishes looked out of the casement,
>   The Salt-cellar stood on his head with a shout,
> The Spoons with a clatter looked out of the lattice,
>   The Mustard-pot climbed up the Gooseberry Pies,
> The Soup-ladle peeped through a heap of Veal Patties,
>   And squeaked with a ladle-like scream of surprise.
>
> The Frying-pan said, "It's an awful delusion!"
>   The Tea-Kettle hissed and grew black in the face;
> And they all rushed downstairs in the wildest confusion,
>   To see the great Nutcracker–Sugar-tong race.

The characters decide, then, that in order to escape the bleakness of their circumstances and pursue a more transcendent reality, they will take some kind of journey. Travel arises, then, out of a tension between domesticity and the desire for escape, and provides release from the complaints or constraints of the initial situation; although the minutiae of the creatures' voyages are given in more or less detail and the lands they reach variously fantastical. The Table and Chair merely stroll around town and return to dine, bathetically, on "beans and bacon"; Tongs and Nutcrackers fade away as if committing a symbolic suicide; Kangaroo and Duck bound emphatically around the world; Daddy Long-legs and Fly settle peacefully in Gromboolia; and "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" ends climactically, with the protagonists dancing on the sands of the land of the Bong-tree.

March, February and April editions of *Our Young Folks*, while all appeared in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (*Complete Verse* 500-516).

For the most part it is the inanity of these quests that produces their nonsensicality, as well as logical disjunctions such as the kangaroo's 'objection' to travel and the duck's 'solution' (respectively, wet feet and worsted socks) and the parodic interrogation of common sense concepts such as that which occurs in the following exchange between Table and Chair.

> Said the Table to the Chair,
> "You can hardly be aware,
> How I suffer from the heat,
> And from chilblains on my feet!
> If we took a little walk,
> We might have a little talk!
> Pray let us take the air!"
> Said the Table to the Chair.
>
> Said the Chair unto the Table,
> "Now you *know* we are not able!
> How foolishly you talk,
> When you know we *cannot* walk!"
> Said the Table, with a sigh,
> "It can do no harm to try,
> I've as many legs as you,
> Why can't we walk on two?"

So too, irrelevant details such as the Daddy Long-legs and Fly's game of "battlecock and shuttledore" and Lear's comical anthropomorphism of his various creatures and implements adds to the non-sense of the poetry. These rhymes are not as replete with absurdity as (for example) Lear's nonsense stories, but still for the most part are more closely allied with nonsense than romanticism. "The Owl and the Pussycat"[139] is an exception, for the tone of this song is more moving than it is facetious, the nonsensical elements are few (limited, perhaps, to the incongruity of the characters) and the end is triumphant rather than irresolute. We may also note that in the serenade scene the characters' mental states are identified through stereotyped natural imagery, as is typical in romantic poetry.

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[139] Lear began composing a sequel to "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" in 1885: a piece that is nonsensical in a way that the original poem is not, picking up on the consequences of a marriage between a bird and a cat. As an illustration of the different styles of the original and the sequel, I cite the opening section of "The Later History of the Owl and the Pussy-cat":

> Our mother was the Pussy-cat, our father was the Owl,
> And so we're partly little beasts and partly little fowl,
> The brothers of our family have feathers and they hoot,
> While all the sisters dress in fur and have long tails to boot.
> We all believe that little mice,
> For food are singularly nice. (*Complete Verse* 541)

Furthermore, the courtship narrative is a familiar romantic tale whose climax, dancing "hand in hand, on the edge of the sand…by the light of the moon" is an image of romantic fulfilment in nature. In this poem more than any of the others mentioned so far we may recognise the longing for something "more": a fantastic "promised land" in which the characters are unfettered by burdens social or physical and wholeness is a real possibility. This yearning after a utopian ideal is characteristic of fantasy literatures – a range of genres that emerged in the aftermath of the age of imperialism – and may constitute a response to disillusionment with the real exotic locations that exploration had unearthed.

We have seen that Duck and Kangaroo, Daddy Long-legs and Fly, Table and Chair, and Nutcrackers and Sugar-tongs experience the same yearning as the Owl and the Pussycat; but their desire is expressed as a burlesque, for what they want to escape from or strive towards is always absurd, and ridicules more than it reflects real human struggle. In "The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly", for instance, Lear parodies romantic disillusionment and the yearning for completeness:

> So Mr. Daddy Long-Legs
> And Mr. Floppy Fly
> Sat down in silence by the sea,
> And gazed upon the sky.
> They said, "This is a dreadful thing!
> The world has gone all wrong,
> Since one has legs too short by half,
> The other much too long!
> One never more can go to court,
> Because his legs have grown too short;
> The other cannot sing a song,
> Because his legs have grown too long!"

The paradox of Lear's writing, however, is that he shares his characters' longing for the "green world" – in his own life he constantly sought out solitude, nature, a sense of transcendence – yet at the same time he mocks the craving by reducing it to a state of absurdity.

In "The Broom, the Shovel, the Poker and the Tongs",[140] 'travel' takes the form of a blandly middle class 'drive in the park'. Here the subject of courtship is more significant than that of the journey, although the futility of the excursion

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[140] Written October 1868; published *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (*Complete Verse* 508).

mirrors the ineffectuality of the characters' relationships. The Poker serenades the Shovel, praising her shape and lustre, while Mr Tongs accuses his wife Mrs Broom of dissatisfaction with his defects. Both ladies respond with anger and threats of violence, charging their suitor and husband respectively with nonsense-making (a self-referential comment, perhaps, on the author's deliberate nonsense). In this poem the journey is not restorative, but a source of domestic strife, and a tentative calm is only restored with the security of home and the promise of a curative cup of tea.

> Mrs Broom and Miss Shovel together they sang,
>   "What nonsense you're singing to-day!"
> Said the Shovel, "I'll certainly hit you a bang!"
>   Said the Broom, "And I'll sweep you away!"
> So the Coachman drove homeward as fast as he could,
>   Perceiving their anger with pain;
> But they put on the kettle, and little by little,
>   They all became happy again.
>   Ding-a-dong! Ding-a-dong!
>   That's an end of my song!
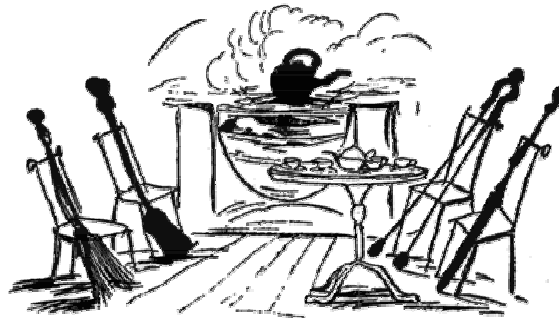
The harmony, however, is uncertain, for the parties have achieved no resolution; and their residual tension is suggested by the blunt anticlimax at the end of the poem and the stiffness of the final illustration, where the lovers are shown facing each other uncompanionably, the scene animated only by the seething kettle (Byrom 171). Of course, the characters' physical rigidity is a consequence of the fact that Lear has chosen for their personas the most unbending of household implements: a decision which adds to the humour and the lunacy of the piece. Their failure to find tranquillity in the outdoors and the banality of their 'quest' mock the elevated romantic faith in the environment, while their interactions caricature human courtship and marriage. Although there is little in this poem to

lift it from nonsense or parody into romanticism, the burlesque depiction of conjugal disharmony may be motivated by a characteristically romantic yearning for a world in which relationships succeed and individuals can relate to each other with an authenticity unfettered by social mores. Indeed, the tools' conflict comes out of their traditionalism, for every aspect of their behaviour, from the conventional 'drive in the park' to the style of their conflicts is governed by social ritual. The desire to transcend the meaningless customs that constitute social ceremony is one that Edward Lear himself experienced, and he was pained by strife of any variety between people. As noted by his foremost biographer, he tried "[a]ll his life…to avoid quarrelsome noise and arguments, and to search instead for gentleness and tranquillity" (Noakes *Wanderer* 19). So too, the impression that is presented of the characters' relationships suggests a child's-eye view, for the mockery made concerns a kind of partnership that the young child can only observe from the outside, and one of the effects upon the reader's 'inner child' is that we feel bewildered by the dissension in what is supposed to be a love relationship.

I turn now to one of Lear's most exultant celebrations of the journey and exotic paradise, "The Jumblies". Here Lear's rendition of travel is largely nonsensical but still suggests a thirst for what the Romantics called "the sublime": "that power in nature and art which inspires awe and deep emotion and which is manifest in grand and wild natural scenes" (Day 48). The Jumblies are physically peculiar and socially deviant: green-headed and blue-handed, they embark upon a crazy voyage in spite of "their friends'" insistence on the physical and moral dangers of sieve-sailing. It is significant to the non-sense of the piece that "their" vague ethical concerns ("happen what may, it's extremely wrong/In a sieve to sail so fast") are presented as more important than the obvious dangers of taking a highly permeable vessel to sea. And the Jumblies prevail against even logical obstacles and go on to rejoice in the moonlit countryside:

> And all night long they sailed away;
>   And when the sun went down,
> They whistled and warbled a moony song
> To the echoing sound of a coppery gong,
>   In the shade of the mountains brown.
> "O Timballo! How happy we are,

> When we live in a sieve and a crockery-jar,
> And all night long in the moonlight pale,
> We sail away with a pea-green sail,
> > In the shade of the mountains brown!"

The Jumblies' romanticism makes a playful travesty of the idealisation of foreign scenery, and the tone of bounding exaltation amplifies the parody, which also involves a measured dig at the proponents of societal values. The Jumblies' "friends" are reminiscent of the authorities of the limericks: initially wearily correct, they worry about the Jumblies' propriety but are converted to spirited "Jumbly philosophy" (Hark 66) by the traditional accomplishments of growth and travel (which they celebrate, conventionally, with food and drink):

> And in twenty years they all came back,
> > In twenty years or more,
> And every one said, "How tall they've grown!
> For they've been to the Lakes and the Torrible Zone
> > And the hills of the Chankly Bore!"
> And they drank their health and gave them a feast
> Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;
> And every one said, "If only we live,
> We too will go to sea in a Sieve –
> > To the hills of the Chankly Bore!"

The role of the "friends", like "they" in the limericks, should be examined for its humour and non-sense from the perspective of stereotypical parent-child interactions. "Every ones'" initial injunctions are like the anxieties of the adults who would rather quell the enthusiasm and individuality of their offspring than risk a challenge to their own sober authority. The Jumblies' voyage, meanwhile – whether we view it as Romantic, nonsensical, or with elements of both – appeals to the individualist and the child within: one who upholds the rebellious ideals of the free traveller.

There are three pieces which share the exuberance of "The Jumblies": an unfinished poem, "The Scroobious Pip",[141] "The Quangle Wangle's Hat"[142] and "The Pelican Chorus".[143] "The Scroobious Pip" is concerned with the identity of the "intrinsic individual" (Heyman, "Isles" 119) as it is embodied in the Pip: "a class of

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[141] Begun in November or December 1871, "The Scroobious Pip" lacks only two full lines and three phrases in a 101-line verse.
[142] Written May 1872; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 523).
[143] Composition date unknown; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 531).

being all to itself" (ibid) whose essential nature is a source of bewilderment and fascination to the beasts around him.

The narrative consists of the Pip's journey to the land of Jellybolê, where he encounters beings from the beast, bird, fish and insect kingdoms, each of which have elected their most sage individual to ask the Pip into which class of being he falls. The Pip is a conglomerate of all creatures and refuses to pin down his identity to a single type, responding with his babble,

> "Flippetty chip – Chippetty flip –
> My name is only the Scroobious Pip."

At the end of the poem the animals acknowledge the Pip's uniqueness and rejoice in his eccentricity with an exultant circle dance, mimicking his distinctive voice:

> Then all the Beasts that walk on the ground
> Danced in a circle round and round,
> And all the Birds that fly in the air
> Flew round and round in a circle there,
> And all the Fish in the Jellybol
> Swam in a circle about the sea,
> And all the Insects that creep or go
> Buzzed in a circle to and fro –
> And they roared and sang and whistled and cried
> Till the noise was heard from side to side –
>   "Chippetty Tip! Chippetty Tip!
>   Its only name is the Scroobious Pip."

 The Scroobious Pip represents an impossible combination: Lear's main drawing offers up several different interpretations (and the second illustration at the end of the verse provides yet another), thus suggesting the artist's struggle to

capture a being that is both all creatures and something entirely new. And herein lie both the sense and the absurdity of this verse, for the Pip is both nonsensical and a kind of ultimate being. By celebrating the Pip's radical singularity, Lear advances the "fiercely individualistic tendencies" that grew out of romanticism (Heyman, "Isles" 113). As Shortsleeve puts it, in this poem "it is in the joyous acknowledgement of biological connectedness and equality" demonstrated through the coexistence of all creatures in one individual "that the utopian desire is revealed" (10). Like Lear's nonsense botanies, this poem at the same time caricatures the Linnaean taxonomies that constituted one of the central scientific pursuits of the nineteenth century and in part motivated the imperial endeavours that sit in the background to Lear's interest in travel and alien places. Thus, again, Lear's purposes are contradictory: he both ridicules and advances the concerns of his time.

"The Quangle Wangle's Hat" also champions the values of romantic individualism through the depiction of an eccentric's fantasy of belonging. The Quangle Wangle is a fading stick figure who also appears in Lear's nonsense prose piece, "The Four Little Children" as companion and tea maker for the intrepid children. He seems to be either painfully shy or chronically ashamed, because his head and face are always hidden – in the story, behind the striped sail of the boat, and on one occasion in a slipper, and in the poem beneath an extravagant hat.
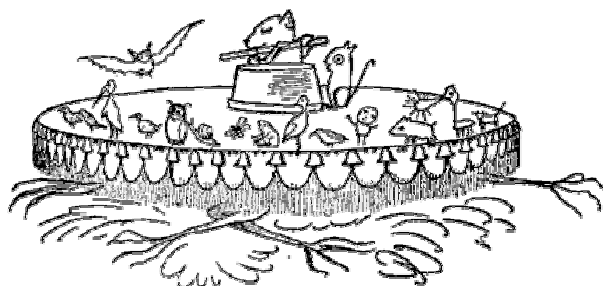
Paradoxically, although the hat conceals the Quangle Wangle's face – and much of his body as well – its vastness and fantastic ornamentation also make it an eye-catching object:

> On top of the Crumpetty Tree
>   The Quangle Wangle sat,
> But his face you could not see,
>   On account of his Beaver Hat.
> For his Hat was a hundred and two feet wide,
> With ribbons and bibbons on every side,
> And bells, and buttons, and loops, and lace,
> So that nobody ever could see the face
>   Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.

And in the same contradictory spirit, the Quangle achieves bliss at the climax of the poem by being at the hub of, yet not participating in a great commotion.

After describing the hat and evoking the mystery of the creature beneath, Lear tells us that the Quangle Wangle is materially comfortable: 'Jam; and jelly; and bread;' he says, 'Are the best of food for me!' But there is something missing from the Quee's life. He is lonely and spiritually deprived: "life on the whole is far from gay". His dilemma is solved by the panoply of creatures real and imaginary who join him by creating a festival on the top of his hat. Lear's whimsical list of beasts, including some that appear in his other verses, represents the population of his personal nonsense land: a country of rebels, freaks and dancers where conformity does not matter, and where there is community and blithe abandon: as Noakes puts it, "width, tolerance and safety" (*Catalogue* 177). The finale of the poem presents an ecstatic image of a nonsense 'green world', yet the paradoxes implicit in the Quangle's desire for both companionship and fortification from the social realm, as well as the incongruity of the hat-top gathering temper the romanticism with absurdity.

> And the Quangle Wangle said
>   To himself on the Crumpetty Tree, –
> "When all these creatures move
>   What a wonderful noise there'll be!"
> And at night by the light of the Mulberry moon
> They danced to the Flute of the Blue Baboon,
> On the broad green leaves of the Crumpetty Tree,
> And all were as happy as happy could be,
>   With the Quangle Wangle Quee.

In "The Pelican Chorus" Lear celebrates again exotic paradise and revels in natural beauty through the characters of a family of pelicans:

> We live on the Nile. The Nile we love.
> By night we sleep on the cliffs above;
> By day we fish, and at eve we stand
> On long bare islands of yellow sand.
> And when the sun sinks slowly down
> And the great rock walls grow dark and brown,
> When the purple river rolls fast and dim
> And the Ivory Ibis starlike skim,
> Wing to wing we dance around, –
> Stamping our feet with a flumpy sound, –
> Opening our mouths as Pelicans ought,
> And this is the song we nightly snort; –
>> Ploffskin, Pluffskin, Pelican jee!
>> We think no birds so happy as we!
>> Plumpskin, Ploshkin, Pelican Gill!
>> We think so then, and we thought so still!

In this stanza Lear's use of colour imagery derives from his artist's eye, and while the context is ridiculous, the effect commends romantic values, producing an impression both strange and sublime. The remainder of the song tells the story of the courtship of the Pelican daughter Dell and the King of the Cranes, whose appearance is described as an extravagant parody of the dress-suit:

> Yes, they came; and among the rest,
> The King of the Cranes all grandly dressed.
> Such a lovely tail! Its feathers float
> Between the ends of his blue dress-coat;
> With pea-green trowsers all so neat,
> And a delicate frill to hide his feet, –
> (For though no-one speaks of it, every one knows,
> He has got no webs between his toes!)

And again, the love relationship constitutes a familiar subject, a source of humour and an opportunity for gentle derision of human concerns with appearance:

> As soon as he saw our Daughter Dell,
> In violent love the Crane King fell, –
> On seeing her waddling form so fair,
> With wreaths of shrimps in her short white hair.

Dell and her paramour marry and depart for the great Gromboolian plain amidst much celebration. While the whole of the song is unwaveringly exultant in tone, Dell's parents' assertion that "we probably never shall see her more" might seem mournful in a different context. However, the paradise in this song is not to be undermined, and part of the non-sense inheres in the uncompromised happiness

at the separation of parent from child. The most obvious absurdity occurs in the final line of the refrain, "We think so then, and we thought so still", a technical inversion of time-frame and tense that both sustains the non-sense and satirizes nostalgia and sentimentality (Byrom 189). In "The Pelican Chorus", then, "meaning cuts fantastic capers to an absurdly endearing accompaniment of music" (Smith 188), yet the crucial effect produced is the exultation in Edenic surroundings: an essentially romantic project.

We may then see Lear's semantic "capers" as the non-sense; and the "musical accompaniment" as the romanticism which his play with meaning inhabits.   In the first of two poems about "Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos",[144] the "music" inheres in the natural surroundings in which the characters revel, while in the second poem the paradise is symbolically obliterated, thus vitiating the image of romantic bliss. In Part One the "octopod Discobboloses" climb to the top of a wall to watch a dreamy sunset, enhanced by an atmosphere of bathetic sublime:

> Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos
> Climbed to the top of a wall.
> And they sate to watch the sunset sky
> And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry
> And the Biscuit Buffalo call.
> They took up a roll and some Camomile tea,
> And both were as happy as happy could be…

The couple become aware that they may fall to their death or the ruin of Mr Discobbolos's "new green coat" and decide that in order to avoid that danger, as well as the burdens of "knives", "forks", "chairs", "tables", "carpets" and "household cares" – the symbols of domesticity – they will pass the rest of their lives atop the wall. This is romantic nonsense: the pursuit of a place of safety, transcendence and natural beauty, where the protagonists are free from the "perpetual misery of all belongings".[145]

In Part Two, twenty years and twelve children later, Mrs Discobbolos decides that there is no longer any space upon the wall for a family of fourteen, and no opportunity for the Discobbolos children to marry. This time, instead of

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[144] Composition date of both parts unknown; part one appeared in *Laughable Lyrics* (ibid 517) and part two in the posthumous *Nonsense Songs and Stories* (ibid 535).
[145] Lear's diary, 23 September 1866 (Noakes, *Catalogue* 178).

agreeing with his wife, Mr Discobbolos leaps to the ground, digs and fills a trench with dynamite and blows them all sky-high:

> Suddenly Mr Discobbolos
>> Slid from the top of the wall;
> And beneath it he dug a dreadful trench, –
> And filled it with Dynamite gunpowder gench, –
>> And aloud began to call, –
> "Let the wild bee sing and the blue bird hum!
> For the end of our lives has certainly come!"
>> And Mrs Discobbolos said,
>> "O! W! X! Y! Z!
>> We shall presently all be dead,
> On this ancient runcible wall, –
>>> Terrible Mr Discobbolos!"

Thus the romanticism is annihilated: bees and birds may continue to sing, but Mr Discobbolos brings his family to an abortive end before further marital dissension can occur. It may be tempting to psychoanalyse the relationship between the Discobboloses: Mrs Discobbolos makes the family decisions, to which her husband initially submits reluctantly but later retaliates with a most extreme form of domestic violence. One might argue (as Byrom does) that Mr Discobbolos is emasculated by his harebrained, demanding wife to whom he can only respond with the sheerest destructiveness (Byrom 203). A more accurate reading, however, would interpret their interactions in the same manner that I have approached those in "The Broom, the Shovel, the Poker and the Tongs": as a caricature of the marital squabble. Indeed, the tone with which the calamity at the end of Part Two is described is not tragic but triumphant, and the celebration of disaster introduces a non-sense that undercuts the romanticism gestured toward at the beginning of the poem.

> Pensively, Mr Discobbolos
>> Sate with his back to the wall; –
> He lighted a match, and fired the train, –
> And the mortified mountains echoed again
>> To the sounds of the awful fall!
> And all the Discobbolos family flew
> In thousands of bits to the sky so blue,
>> And no one was left behind to have said,
>> 'O! W! X! Y! Z!
>> Has it come into anyone's head
> That the end has happened to all
>>> Of the whole of the Clan Discobbolos?'

The autobiographical basis of these poems is often noted by critics, and reveals something of the author's personal romantic interests. Part Two was inspired by Lear's disgruntlement at the construction of "The Enemy" hotel in 1879: an event which upended his own 'green world' at San Remo.[146] Lear's home represented a place of asylum where he was safe from material concerns and surrounded by the natural beauty that he had pursued his whole life, but the hotel obstructed his view of the sea, spoiled his studio light and brought multitudes of tourists to the area.[147] The violence that Mr Discobbolos commits against family and home destroys the romantic paradise of their initial circumstances and might be seen as symbolic of the calamity that the hotel represented to Lear. So too, Mr Discobbolos's annihilation of his nonsense paradise suggests Lear's rage at the assault on his attempt at domestic calm; for which writing the song might have provided him something of a "riotous" catharsis (Byrom 203).

"The Dong with a Luminous Nose",[148] meanwhile, has been described in relation to Lear's own creative temperament; for just as the Dong reacts to failure and disappointment with a bizarre invention, Lear sought solace for his artistic dissatisfaction through the fabrication of nonsense (Byrom 178). This poem achieves its effects through romantic excess, evoking in the opening sections an "aura of Byronic brooding and Gothic mystery" (Hark 77):

> When awful darkness and silence reign
>   Over the great Gromboolian plain,
>   Through the long, long wintry nights; –
> When the angry breakers roar
> As they beat on the rocky shore; –
>   When the storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
> Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore: –
>
> Then, through the vast and gloomy dark,
> There moves what seems a fiery spark,
>   A lonely spark with silvery rays
>   Piercing the coal-black night, –
>   A meteor strange and bright: –
> Hither and thither the vision strays,
>   A single lurid light.

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[146] *Complete Verse* n.430-431, 535-536.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Composition date unknown; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (ibid 532).

These might be the opening stanzas of a serious narrative poem were it not for the nonsense place-names: Lear depicts a "typical romantic landscape – wild, grotesque, rugged, and calculated (like romantic art in general) to make an assault on the nerves by the addition of strangeness to beauty" (Smith 186). Or, as Heyman puts it, "nonsense words are used within poetry seemingly to describe real scenes" ("Isles" 185-186) – and, indeed, the style of Lear's description of the Gromboolian plain is reminiscent of his account of Mount Athos to Emily Tennyson: "I never saw any more striking scenes than those forest screens & terrible crags, all lonely lonely lonely".[149] However, the "gothic mystery" of this vision is soon parodically exaggerated: ominous adjectives are overplayed; actions and hesitations piled meaninglessly on each other as the light "wanders, - pauses, - creeps…sparkles, - flashes and leaps…". And the Dong, whose nonsense name belies the tension built up with such anticipatory zeal appears behind his nose as an absurd and pathetic creature, bemoaning the lost love of a Jumbly Girl as he roams about Gromboolia.

The narrative of the poem tells the history of the Jumblies' festive sojourn at the Gromboolian plain and the story of the Dong's courtship and loss. The Jumblies' departure provides the explanation for the Dong's crazy prosthesis: a self-fashioned "wondrous Nose" containing a "luminous Lamp" with which he lights his way as he searches vainly for his beloved:

> But when the sun was low in the West,
>   The Dong arose and said; –
>   – "What little sense I once possessed
>   Has quite gone out of my head!" –
> And since that day he wanders still
> By lake and forest, marsh and hill,
> Singing – "O somewhere, in valley or plain
> Might I find my Jumbly Girl again!
> For ever I'll seek by lake and shore
> Till I find my Jumbly Girl once more!"

Like the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò and the Pobble who has no toes, the Dong "seem[s] [a] flesh and blood" individual (Heyman, "Isles" 186), and his character raises the sort of questions that are appropriate to serious literature, such as whether he is an "uncompromising Romantic idealist or a love-sick fool" (Hark 78). Although the

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[149] Letter to Emily Tennyson, 9 October 1856 (*Complete Verse* n.422, 532).

Dong's grief is partly undercut by absurdity, "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" is a tragic love story in the romantic tradition with its roots in Thomas Moore's "The Lake of the Dismal Swamp":[150]

> And now each night, and all night long,
> Over those plains still roams the Dong;
> And above the wail of the Chimp and Snipe
> You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe
> While ever he seeks, but seeks in vain
> To meet with his Jumbly Girl again…

It is significant that the Dong expresses his grief through art and music, for while his prodigious red-painted round-bottomed proboscis is too easily interpreted by critics as a monument to sexual frustration (for example, in Byrom 177 and Hark 77) it may also be seen to symbolise the redemptive power of the imagination. The Dong's response to despair is originality, and although his invention and his compulsive wandering are in part expressions of futility, he achieves the status of a mythic figure:

> "This is the hour when forth he goes,
> The Dong with a luminous Nose!
> Yonder – over the plain he goes;
>   He goes!
>   He goes;
> The Dong with a luminous Nose!"

The fanciful vision of creativity realised in the Dong is like the Wordsworthian conception of imagination: a restorative power borne by children and individualists (Heyman, "Isles" 116). Indeed, light is often symbolic of the imagination, and although in "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" the creative spirit is rendered absurd, the eminence of the Dong is maintained and his ingenuity celebrated.

In "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò",[151] on the other hand, the response to the failure of love is not creative expression, but flight. This poem has been seen as a response to Lear's unsuccessful courtship of Augusta Bethell

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[150] The introduction to "The Lake of the Dismal Swamp" describes the poem as "the tale of a young man who lost his mind upon the death of a girl he loved, and who, suddenly disappearing from his friends, was never afterwards heard of. As he frequently said, in his ravings, that the girl was not dead, but gone to the Dismal Swamp, it is supposed he had wandered into that dreary wilderness, and had died of hunger, or been lost in some of its dreadful morass." (*Complete Verse* n.422, 533)

[151] Written 11 December 1871; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 517).

(Noakes, *Wanderer* 211; Byrom 182; Hark 78). Lear's deliberations concerning marriage in the late 1860's were never acted upon and "Gussie's" subsequent marriage to the infirm Adamson Parker was a blow to his ego if nothing else (Noakes, *Wanderer* 158-159). "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò", meanwhile, involves a failed romance, an alternative engagement and an escape from despair. The Bò, a disencumbered inhabitant of the pastoral paradise of the Coast of Coromandel, during a walk meets and proposes to Lady Jingly Jones, the wife of Mr Handel Jones: a conventional Englishman whose description, "Esquire & Co", suggests a mercantile profession and wealth that contrast with the Bò's meagre possessions of "two old chairs, and half a candle, –/One old jug without a handle". Like the Bò, Lady Jones is an eccentric – sitting on her heap of stones and conversing with her milk-white hens – and she reciprocates his affection, but cannot return it. Thus the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò flees from her rejection for the land of Boshen on the back of a "large and lively turtle", while the Lady is left eternally bemoaning her loss from her throne of boulders. Apart from the absurd details such as (for instance) Lady Jingly's "heap of stones", the Bò's quaint list of possessions, and his turtle-back flight, then, "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò", is an earnest love tragedy, and the image of the austere, natural life that the Bò offers Lady Jingly is a vision of romantic bliss:

> "On this Coast of Coromandel,
>   Shrimps and watercresses grow,
>   Prawns are plentiful and cheap,"
>   Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò.
> "You shall have my chairs and candle,
> And my jug without a handle! –
>   Gaze upon the rolling deep
>   (Fish is plentiful and cheap;)
>   As the sea, my love is deep!"
>   Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò,
>   Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò.

The value in emancipation from material encumbrance is figured through the Bò's few possessions and subsistence on nature's beneficence, for he has the life of a nomad, free from the accoutrements of civilisation. Handel Jones, on the other hand (and Jones' first name identifies the attribute that he has which Bò lacks), is materially well-endowed and exports Dorking Hens so that his wife need not suffer the crude provisions of the Coromandel environment (Hark 80). The

contrast between natural and artificial modes of existence – and also that between the English domesticity that Jones exports with his hens and the uncertainty of the Bò's wandering – signifies the very different quality of the Bò's and Jones' affection for Lady Jingly (ibid 79). And indeed, the feelings are reciprocal, for the Bò's abnormalities appear to be an object of affection to the lady:

"Though you've such a tiny body,
    "And your head so large doth grow, -
        "Though your hat may blow away,
    "Mr, Yonghy Bonghy Bò!
"Though you're such a Hoddy Doddy –
Yet I wished that I could modi-
        fy the words I needs must say!
        Will you please to go away?
        That is all I have to say –
Mr Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò!
Mr Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò!"

The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò's offering to Lady Jingly is crude yet meaningful, while Jones's is sophisticated but superficial: Bò fulfils a romantic ideal and his rival stands for the materialistic values against which he reacts. "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò", together with "The Owl and the Pussy-cat", is perhaps one of the least nonsensical of Lear's songs, for both the characters and their predicament are recognisable as familiar romantic stock, and their eccentricities serve to advance the individualistic projects of romanticism.

"The Pobble who has no Toes",[152] meanwhile, caricatures inter-generational relationships through the interactions between the Pobble and his officious aunt, Jobiska. This song is more typically non-sensical: it comprises an outlandish

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[152] This poem appears in two versions, of which only the second was published in *Laughable Lyrics* (composition date unknown) (*Complete Verse* 524-525). For the purposes of this analysis I shall focus largely on the more well known revision.

chronicle telling of the loss of limb experienced by a delicate humaniform creature when he swims across the Bristol Channel, apparently under the injunction of his Aunt Jobiska for the purpose of feeding her Runcible Cat. The Pobble and his aunt are inexplicably anxious about preserving his toes, which he protects by keeping his nose warm following a non sequitur typical of nonsense. However, the Pobble's scarlet nose flannel is whisked away by a "sea-green Porpoise" and with it, mysteriously, his toes. Balance is restored by Aunt Jobiska, who recants her former concern, telling the Pobble that his kind is in fact better off without their toes and consoling him with a meal of eggs, fish and buttercups: a shabby solace used to send up the futile real-life consolations offered by parents and elders.

As in the case of "The Dong with a luminous Nose," the relationship between Jobiska and her nephew might seem to call upon a psychoanalytic reading. Hark suggests, for instance, that "the poem deals with a losing struggle to maintain potency…in a smothering, effeminate atmosphere" (84), while Byrom sees the aunt as "the villain of the piece…[who] pretends to be looking after [the Pobble's] best interests, but sends him on a dangerous murderous expedition" (186). It is important to note, however, that "The Pobble who has no Toes" does not have the atmosphere of a disaster, and the bizarreness of the plot undercuts this kind of emotional involvement. The Pobble is upset by the removal of his toes, but the intention behind Jobiska's turnaround should be read against the background of Lear's intended audience: the Victorian children who would have laughed at his aunt's inconsistency and the lunacy of her advice. Indeed, the whole poem might be seen as a burlesque of a certain type of parent-child relationship in which the real-life parent's concern for the child is so misguided that it borders on nonsense – which is just what Lear makes of this variety of parental anxiety. By having the Pobble lose his toes in spite of Jobiska's care and warnings – and then letting her reverse her position – Lear alludes to the superior wisdom of the younger character. Thus, even although the Pobble loses out on his toes, his aunt's lunacy gives him a moral victory. Jobiska's dominance, then, comes merely from the position of being an elder who supposedly "knows better", but the process of the poem shows that her pre-eminence is delusive.

The absurdity is amplified, as we have seen, by Aunt Jobiska's ridiculous advice:

> And his Aunt Jobiska made him drink,
> Lavender water tinged with pink,
> For she said, "The World in general knows
> There's nothing so good for a Pobble's toes!"

So too, the inexplicable toe-theft that comes of the Pobble's loss of his nose-protection reaffirms the nonsense just as it proves Jobiska's crazy counsel right. And although the tone of the stanza that follows the amputation is brooding and almost poignant, in this case the effect is closer to burlesque than real feeling.

> And nobody ever knew
>   From that dark day to the present,
> Whoso had taken the Pobble's toes,
>   In a manner so far from pleasant.
> Whether the shrimps or crawfish gray,
> Or crafty mermaids stole them away –
> Nobody knew; and nobody knows
> How the Pobble was robbed of his twice five toes!

In an early version of "The Pobble who has no Toes",[153] where the quest has a happy resolution in a gleeful marriage to the Princess Bink, the nonsense is sustained through absurdities and a sense of frenzy that is absent from (for example) "The Owl and the Pussy-cat". Here the Pobble's loss of toes is not a misfortune, but a nuptial gift:

> Said the Princess Bink – "O! Yes!
>   I will certainly cross the Channel
> And marry you then if you'll give me now
>   That lovely scarlet flannel!
> And besides that flannel about your nose
> I trust you will give me all your toes,
> To place in my Pa's Museum collection
> As proof of your deep genteel affection."

This song does, however, contain certain of the romantic elements that we have seen in "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" and "The Jumblies", such as the images of dance and landscape in the final stanza:

> They danced about all day,
>   All over the hills and dales;
> They danced in every village and town

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[153] The full title of which is, "The Story of the Pobble, who has no toes, and the Princess Bink"; composed May 1873 (*Complete Verse* 524).

In the North and the South of Wales.

This, however, is comic romanticism, and the early version of the "Pobble" closes with a very similar incongruity to the later one.

> And their Aunt Jobiska made them a dish
> Of Mice and Buttercups fried with fish
> For she said, – "The World in general knows,
> Pobbles are happier without their toes!"

In conclusion I look briefly at Lear's Indian poem, "The Cummerbund",[154] a verse that is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and shares with Carroll's nonsense its interrogation of linguistic structures. Here Lear misappropriates familiar Indian words as nonsense terms,[155] creating a story that functions through its semantic blanks:

> She sate upon her Dobie,
> To watch the Evening Star,
> And all the Punkahs as they passed,
> Cried, 'My! how fair you are!'
> Around her bower, with quivering leaves,
> The tall Kamsamahs grew,
> And Kitmutgars in wild festoons
> Hung down from Tchokis blue.

The technical games that Lear plays in this poem are of only passing interest to this chapter, for what is more significant here is that even although the objects that punctuate the narrative are unrecognisable, Lear presents – and mocks – the romantic sentimentalism of exotic scenery. In addition to the "Evening Star", the quiver-leaved bower and the wildly festooned "Kitmutgar", "she" is environed by a river rolling "with soft meloobious sound" in which swim "golden-finned Chuprassies". Indeed, the first three stanzas of the poem serve to create an atmosphere that might be described as bizarre sublime. This is interrupted by a parody of the gothic mode when the "Cummerbund" arrives:

> She sate upon her Dobie, –
> She heard the Nimmak hum, –
> When all at once a cry arose, –
> "The Cummerbund is come!"

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[154] Composed 20 April 1874; published in *Laughable Lyrics* (*Complete Verse* 528).
[155] Many of the Indian words Lear uses refer to various ranks of Indian servant (*Complete Verse* n.405, 529-530). This may be intended to contribute to the humour of the piece - for Lear writes of persons as if they are plants – on the other hand, as a colonial in India, these may simply have been the evocative-sounding terms that he would have first encountered.

> In vain she fled: – with open jaws
> The angry monster followed,
> And so, (before assistance came,)
> That Lady Fair was swollowed.

Thus, in addition to his playful exploration of the possibilities of words and sounds, Lear in "The Cummerbund" caricatures the affecting intentions of the serious poetry of his era through the quixotic excesses of the description, and the pointed failure to ascribe "her" identity.

It should be apparent by now that in addition to Edward Lear's particular romantic inclinations, there are several features shared by the genre of literary nonsense with the broad group of projects and forces that can be called "romantic". Both romanticism and nonsense uphold the values of individualism and both in different ways support the interests of a certain sort of child: nonsense speaks directly to that child, while the ideals of romanticism laud his distinctive nature. We might say, then, that nonsense is in some respects a romantic form, for we have already seen the influences that the period had on Lear and Carroll, and also the shared projects of the two modes. Even more than the Romantics, Edward Lear posited a kind of "extreme individuality" (Heyman, "Isles" 6) reflected in "the gallant spirit of so many of his characters, and their noble disregard of any of those inconveniences which ensue upon the indulgence of personal eccentricity".[156] The chief distinction between romanticism and nonsense, however, is that nonsense laughs at itself, and although it may sometimes appear to approach the tragic mode, it does so flippantly. Nonsense feels the sadness, but laughs at itself for feeling it. Of course, a large part of Lear's project is parodic: yet his parody, as Smith has pointed out, is appreciative (188). Lear both supports the ideals of romanticism and sees their excess, and his further immoderation both revels in and laughs at them, and at himself. And this, perhaps, is one significant feature that separates literary nonsense from the other genres with which it intersects: the prevailing principle of mockery of self and other. I return to this matter in the conclusion of my thesis, in which I gesture

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[156] This quotation from an early review of Lear cited by Heyman: "Lear's Book of Nonsense," *The Saturday Review*, 65.1691 (24 March, 1888), 361-62 (p. 361) ("Isles" 116).

toward the significance of nonsense in general and in particular toward the restorative insights of folly.

Conclusion

*"Lear" said his Lordship "I abominate the forcible
introduction of ridiculous images calculated to distract
the mind from what it is contemplating."*

Lear to Chichester Fortesque[157]

While Lord Westbury may have disdained Lear's mischief for its irreverence
towards matters of consequence, I hope to have shown in this thesis that
nonsense has implication and worth, if not meaning. By "forcibly introducing
ridiculous images" into the minds of his friends and readers, Edward Lear imparted
a feeling for things as they are: the world in its ludicrous, hilarious imperfection.
Lear's very purpose, indeed, is this "distraction", for by diverting "the mind" from
weighty contemplations, folly of this nature redirects us towards something that is
deeply valuable: what Simon Critchley describes as "the modesty and limitedness
of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation,
but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity, but a laughable
inauthenticity" (102).

At the core of Lear's "message" lies humour, play and a sense of the absurd:
sustaining forces to a man who "[saw] life as basically tragic and futile" and felt
that "the only thing that matters [is] making little jokes".[158] While the sense of
despair that lurks behind this statement might be seen almost to compromise the
buoyancy of Lear's nonsense and play, what this maxim points to is the mirror that
humour and absurdity hold up to the social world, the relief that they offer from it,
and the power that they have in human interactions. I have to some extent thus
far neglected the significance of humour to nonsense; yet this is one of the
defining features of the field, and one through which it attains much of its
significance. Although humour is central to the genre, it is a distinctive and
elusive style of mirth that the successful nonsense induces. Where jokes and wit
function through their punch lines – in which the tension produced by the

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[157] Recounted in a letter to Fortesque on a visit to Lord Westbury (*Selected Letters*, "Introduction"
xiii).
[158] Diary entry (Wullschläger 65).

expectation preceding the climax is reconciled and the laughter an explosive response to a clever reversal – in true nonsense, as we have seen, there is no such resolution, for the "meaning" of the joke remains ambiguous. Nonsense, then, might produce delight, but also perplexity: it may not bring us to laugh, but to snort, roll our eyes or shake our heads. The satisfaction that we take in nonsense is not unlike what Stephen Booth calls the "pleasure of the experience…afford[ed] us" by "great literature" (19), and this is one instance where sense and nonsense overlap in literature.

Walter Nash begins his monograph, *The Language of Humour* by exonerating the statement, "nothing suffocates humour more swiftly than a thesis"[159] (1): a concern to which nonsense responds by the fact that it does not yield to interpretation in the same way as other sorts of humour. In other words, nonsense presents the sort of irrepressible, unsmotherable joke that is enduring precisely because it cannot be reconciled into a hypothesis. And this, in a paradoxical way, is one of the themes of this thesis: rather than attempting to resolve Edward Lear's nonsense into meaning, I hope that my "explanations" – and my investigations of others' explanations – have preserved a state of affairs in which, while we have come to a better understanding of the historical and literary phenomena supporting the rise of Lear's nonsense, certain aspects of it remain inexplicable and hilarious.

This is a matter that has come under particular scrutiny in Chapter 3, in which I have described a 'technique' for reading Lear's limericks that both upholds their absurdity and, by locating the poems and drawings in their social context, points to one source of their humour. While Lear's long poems are less replete with nonsense than his "Old Persons", the humour that derives from their scrutiny of matters of common sense and propriety as well as the unashamed fun of their rhythm and rhyme mean that they, too, need to be located through the perspective of folly. These poems, as we have seen, are primarily engaged with the projects of romanticism, and it is their "appreciative" parody (Smith 188) of the romantic

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[159] Nash, Walter. *The Language of Humour: Style and technique in comic discourse.* (1985) Essex: Longman, 1994. The full statement reads, "Though nothing suffocates humour more swiftly than a thesis, the comic muse will never lack commentators. Sooner or later, protesting our good intentions, acknowledging the futility of the enterprise, we are all drawn to this challenge: explain the joke" (1).

utopian vision that, in part, lends them their folly and their significance. And this is one of the paradoxes offered up by nonsense: that it at the same time both esteems and mocks its sources. This feature, indeed, is something that is misinterpreted by certain fields of criticism that strive to reconcile nonsense into sense: in particular, the Freudian and Structuralist approaches that see Lear's humour not as an end in itself, but as a cover for social anxieties; and his semiotic play as a code for proscribed subjects. This kind of approach neglects the well-meaning intentions of Lear's laughter: an event, in the words of his friend Evelyn Baring, that was "akin to tears" (7). Part of what Baring's statement alludes to – again – is the sense in which Lear's humour touches something in the reader that is both poignantly and ridiculously human. Lear's works, in addition, are directed towards a child audience (although it is important that they also had adult readers), and the benignly anarchic tone of Lear's "message" to his young readers is part of what gives his nonsense its import, for Lear designs to share his insight and also to celebrate that of the child to whom he writes.

My main interest in this thesis, however, has been to appraise how others have "read" Lear: in other words, to explore critical responses to a body of writing that is inherently resistant towards both authority and interpretation. And thus while the main body of the thesis constituted by Chapters 3 and 4 considers critical issues that arise with regard to Lear's limericks and his songs respectively, in Chapter 1 I have explored various approaches to the genre of literary nonsense: providing, in effect, my own account of the field. In Chapter 2, meanwhile, I have investigated the connections that have been made in critical writings on Lear between his nonsense and the historical context in which it arose. These sections, then, constitute the support upon which the bulk of the thesis rests, and also articulate my concern with critical approaches to Edward Lear and nonsense.

While Lear's writings constitute a major part of the canon of nonsense literature and thus – because there is a significant body of commentary on his work – allow for the project of this thesis, I have touched on several topics that may yield further and more original fruit in the scholarship on nonsense. Here I have focussed exclusively on critical reception of Lear's nonsense, thus neglecting the responses of his real audiences, both contemporary and subsequent. One

potential study might then explore actual readers' interpretations of or reactions to literary nonsense. I have gestured in particular toward the different responses of adult and child audiences, and this is something that might be substantiated by empirical study. Furthermore, I have noted in chapter 3 that the reception of Lear's limericks has changed since their first appearance in the mid-nineteenth century. Part of this may be a result of the fact that the use of nonsense – or nonsense devices – has grown and proliferated in contemporary children's literature and television, leaving the Old Persons seeming weak or obscure. The evolution of nonsense, then, might be examined from the Learian tradition (and before) to modern nonsense and the nonsensical techniques that appear in numerous forms: for instance, song, animation and literature.

Just as nonsense has burgeoned in modern texts (children's cartoons in particular abound in the arbitrary connections and logical inconsistencies that distinguish nonsense), it becomes increasingly apparent that it is a cross-cultural phenomenon. (This stands out against the assumption made by many writers – for instance, Cammaerts, Burgess and Wullschläger, to name a few – that literary nonsense is a uniquely English phenomenon.) Indeed, as Susan Stewart points out, folk literature tends to contain nonsense (51), and thus it follows that most (or, I suspect, all) cultures generate nonsense of some form. Oral tradition is a fertile source of nonsense, for the logical continuity that is lost through retelling engenders the incongruous sequences and the absurdities that characterise the genre. So too, culture is distinguished by its codes of propriety and ritual, and these, as we have seen, may provide a basis for the ridicule that occurs in nonsense: human beings are irrational and absurd, and literary nonsense has a knack for pinning down social nonsensicality. Inter-cultural nonsense, then, may present yet another object for explorations in the field, and as a gesture towards this kind of study I have included in my appendix an essay on the South African nonsense writer Philip de Vos, whose verses have their origins in Afrikaans folklore.[160] Nonsense in traditional literature inhabits the boundary between the social and literary phenomena alluded to in Chapter 1 in the context of Stewart's

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[160] "*Goggas*, *Tannies* and Old Persons: A Cape Nonsense" was presented at the annual Children's Literature Association conference in June 2007. Publication is forthcoming in *Sankofa: A Journal of African Children's and Young Adult's Literature*, Vol. 7 (2008).

monograph. And this too is a subject for future investigation, for just as it is probably an inter-cultural trend, nonsense also occurs across different fields of study, and might then be explored from an interdisciplinary perspective. In Chapter 1, for instance, I have referred to conceptions of nonsense in linguistics, philosophy and genetics – and it may also be seen to appear in such diverse branches of learning as mathematics (where basic axioms and concepts such as infinity are antithetical to a common sense outlook), quantum physics (where, for instance, the idea of wave-particle duality is incoherent to everyday thought) and art (M.C. Escher's prints in particular depict impossible – or perhaps nonsensical – situations).

Finally, in the domain of literary nonsense, I have referred to various themes that recur in nonsense texts, such as death, travel, propriety and utopia. These returning interests should also yield to further explorations in the field of nonsense. With regard to the concern with death, for instance, I have suggested tentatively that the frequency with which the subject arises in nonsense might reflect a kind of parallel between metaphysical and epistemological concerns: one in which existence and non-existence are set alongside meaning and meaninglessness. This might be explored across a range of nonsense writers (and in related literary fields), including more recent – and more macabre – authors such as Edward Gorey. The fixation on death again brings out matters related to humour in nonsense, for nonsense inhabits the unique position of being able to laugh at and even celebrate death and other morbid subjects, and this may be one feature that sets it apart from other genres.

Nonsense, in short, both presents and, in a paradoxical way, tackles puzzles in literature and life; and while the inexplicability of certain aspects of these conundrums should be preserved, the scrutiny of their deeper application (in particular, what nonsense suggests about human beings) is of great value on both literary and social levels.

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Appendix

<u>*Goggas, Tannies* and Old Persons</u>
A Cape Nonsense

A paper presented at the Children's Literature Association conference at Newport News, Virginia, USA in June 2007. Publication in Sankofa *Journal of African Children's and Young Adult Literature forthcoming in 2008.*

Philip de Vos[161] is a Cape Town writer of children's literature and nonsense whose personal history bears certain uncanny parallels with that of Victorian father of literary nonsense, Edward Lear. Like Lear, de Vos stumbled upon nonsense relatively late in his life: initially an Afrikaans teacher at Cape Town High School, he gave up teaching in 1973 to begin careers in opera and photography – pursuits that are reminiscent of Edward Lear's musical interests and artistic career – and only produced his first volume of nonsensical writing in 1984 at the age of 45. De Vos's operatic background can be seen in his nonsense verses, many of which (like Lear's limericks) have music and dance as themes, and also reveal a concern with musicality in their rhythm and rhyme, and their intertextuality with Afrikaans folk song. Indeed, de Vos's rhymes are directed toward public performance, and some of them have been set to music. In addition to nonsense and light verse, de Vos is also the author of comic strips, satiric verse and children's fiction, and the translator of several traditional children's texts into Afrikaans: an indication of his interest in rendering canonic children's literature accessible to Afrikaans-speaking children. He has also produced three volumes of limericks, one of which is designed to teach the verse-form to children.[162] Although de Vos commemorates Edward Lear as a source of inspiration in a limerick epigraph in one of these collections,[163] for the purposes of this paper I will not be examining his limericks, which favour the "modern" non-nonsensical form of the rhyme – in which humour is produced and tension dispersed through the terminal line of the verse. De

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[161] Biographical details from Breuer, "Philip de Vos", and Mr Tim Huisamen, Lecturer in Afrikaans and Netherlandic Studies, School of Languages, Rhodes University.
[162] *Limericke vir die Lekkerte* (Lit. "Limericks for fun"), 2004.
[163] Old Foss was 'n Engelse kater/In 'n land daar dóér oor die water./Hy't sy vriend Edward Lear/Elke dag inspirer/Met nonsense vir toe – en vir later. Lit. "Old Foss was an English cat/From a land far across the water./His friend Edward Lear/Was inspired every day/With nonsense for then – and for the future." (*Die Worcester Asporcester En Ander Lustige Limericke*, 1989)

Vos's other nonsense verses, on the other hand, more closely approach the epigrammatic absurdity of Lear's "nonsenses", and it is these with which I am concerned.

De Vos has produced six collections of Afrikaans nonsense verse, of which I shall be working from the most recent, *Mallemeuleman* (2004): a compilation of previous works and a selection of new poems illustrated by Piet Grobler. De Vos's earlier nonsense collections are illustrated by Jan Vermeiren, whose naïve style line drawings, as we shall see, enhance the absurdity of the poems although they are not indispensable in the same way as the pictures that accompany Lear's limericks are.[164] De Vos has also published a collection of English nonsense,[165] which I do not explore in this paper as they are neither as intertextually evocative as the Afrikaans verses nor as nonsensical.

Here a note is needed concerning the theoretical framework within which I work. Literary nonsense is a strikingly difficult phenomenon to pin down, and its forms inevitably intersect with those of other genres. Thus I shall avoid a strict definition, broadly following Wim Tigges's account in which the most essential feature of the genre is the tension maintained between meaning and the absence thereof (Tigges, *Anatomy* 4). Strictly speaking, according to this description, not all of de Vos's rhymes qualify as nonsense; however, what ties his poetry to its international kin is the irreverence that it demonstrates towards social and cultural norms and "common sense"[166] concepts. The earthy sounds and the distinctive patterns of inflection found in the Afrikaans language, meanwhile, give the celebratory soundplay that is characteristic of nonsense writing a special resonance, and thus I shall cite the verses that I examine in Afrikaans before providing literal English translations. The purpose of this paper, then, is to illustrate the methods and madness through which de Vos's nonsense engages

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[164] See, for example, Ede's "Edward Lear's Limericks and their Illustrations." Here Ede discusses the complex relationship between image and text in the limericks, where nonsense is often sustained through contradictions between words and pictures.

[165] *Beware the Canary.* Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2000. He has also written English and Afrikaans versions of Saint-Saëns *"Carnival of the Animals"* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998).

[166] Susan Stewart writes of nonsense as the antithesis of "common sense": which she defines as "a domain of situations in the everyday lifeworld" which is "characterised by a set of fundamental assumptions that we further assume to be intersubjective" (8). In other words, nonsense exists in a paradoxical relationship with everyday approaches to knowledge.

with its South African – and specifically, its Afrikaans – context, while at the same time exploring its place in relation to the broad tradition of nonsense literature through comparison with some of the themes and devices that appear in the writing of Edward Lear. I shall first explore the poetic forms which de Vos's verse recalls and certain characteristics of the culture with which it interacts. I then discuss the subject matter and techniques that locate his poetry in the tradition of literary nonsense and also make it uniquely South African, including among them matters related to propriety and adulthood, as well as the depiction of distinctively South African flora, fauna and landscape. I shall consider, too, the features of Afrikaans language and idiom that make it amenable to play and thus to nonsense: in the process, I hope, introducing the unique possibilities of this strand of the genre.

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While de Vos may be the only individual South African to have produced a nonsense *oeuvre*, the traditional *volkspoësie* – folk poetry – that his rhymes recall is often nonsensical in its methods. As an oral form, folk verses lose logical continuity through retelling, as is reflected in the following rhyme:

> Padda in die dam, kriek in die vlei,
> doring in die hart, dit steek vir my.
> Kokkewiet, waarom trou jy nie?
> Koggelmander, kan nie vrou kry nie.[167]

[Frog in the dam, cricket in the veld,/thorn in the heart, it stabs me./Cockroach, why do you not marry?/Rock-lizard, I cannot get a wife.] De Vos employs the same structural stereotype – mentioning a series of animals and attributes – in the following rhyme:

> Die kat
> se kies,
> die hond
> se lies,
> koei
> se kind
> is lief vir bies;
> draai
> sy nekkie
> hot om

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[167] Du Toit 207

haar om
en dan
sê jy
vir my
waarom.[168]
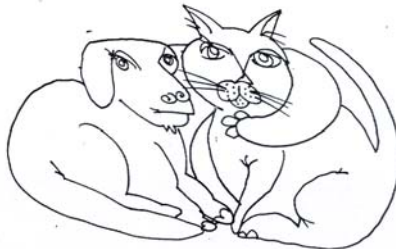
[The cat's cheek; the dog's flank; the cow's child loves colostrum; twist his neck to the left, to the right and then tell me why.] Here we can see another common feature of literary nonsense – its penchant for cruelty and violence (in retrospect, this is suggested by the naming of traditional enemies, cat and dog – and contradicted in Vermeiren's drawing). This is an intertextual nonsense, for "*hot om/haar om*" – "to the left, to the right" – is an Afrikaans dance refrain. This verse also suggests another traditional song:

> Siembamba, mama se kindjie, siembamba!
> Draai sy nek om, gooi in die sloot,
> trap op sy kop, dan is hy mos dood;
> Siembamba, mama se kindjie, siembamba![169]

[Siembamba, mama's child, siembamba!/Strangle him, toss in the ditch,/tramp on his head, and then he'll be dead;/Siembamba, mama's child, siembamba!] "*Siembamba*" is a nonsense word of uncertain origin that is used here – typically, of literary nonsense – purely for its lyrical sound: nonsense is often more concerned with the auditory quality of the words than their meaning. So too, in "Die kat se kies", de Vos responds to the original nursery rhyme, "Siembamba", with a question: why, he wants to know, was "*mama se kindjie*" killed? This interrogation of other literature is characteristic of nonsense, which frequently takes parodic forms and is concerned with subverting the devices and intentions of "serious" writing.

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[168] *Mallemeuleman* 15
[169] Stevenson , "Willem Boshoff".

One of the traditional modes with which de Vos's verse engages is Afrikaans dance-music; and here his cultural background reveals the anarchic intentions behind his nonsense. Afrikaans society is traditionally Calvinist, and frowns upon dancing and physicality. Many of de Vos's lyrics, however, occupy dance forms or celebrate music and dance, as is the case in the following rhyme:

> Pas op
> vir die mamba
> wat heeldag
> wil samba,
> wat dink
> hy weet al's
> van die langasemwals.
> Sy lewe is vaal,
> sy lewe is saai
> en nou
> wil hy polka
> en swaaitiekiedraai.[170]

[Beware of the mamba who day-long wants to samba, who thinks he knows everything about the long-winded-waltz. His life is dull, his life is tedious and now he wants to polka and turn-*Tiekiedraai*] The *Tiekiedraai* is a turning dance, and one of the few in traditional Afrikaans culture that permits prolonged bodily contact. This snake, then, in addition to defying expectations of his species, goes about it in a specially wayward fashion. And true to the nonsense form, it is incongruous that we should fear him because he dances rather than for his lethal bite. Naughtiness is one of the central goals of de Vos's (and perhaps all) nonsense, as he tells in the epigraph of his first collection of nonsense, "silly little verses for naughty children".[171] When he began writing in the 1980's, de Vos's nonsense was described by critics as a rebuff to what in Afrikaans is described evocatively as the "*soetsappigheid*" – the "syrupiness" – that impedes other Afrikaans children's literature.[172] Just as he subverts the dour conservatism of traditional Afrikanerdom, de Vos comes down on the side of the child in a manner typical of literary nonsense.

Like Edward Lear, de Vos mocks the tedious correctness of conventional adulthood. In the following verse, word and image combine to produce an impression that is perplexing and suggestive – not unlike Lear's limericks in which representations of Victorian gentility are juxtaposed with animal absurdity.

> Die haaie in die see
> hou van sitronellatee –
> en hul Sondagmiddaghappie

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[170] *Mallemeuleman* 14

[171] "lawwe versies vir stout kinders" (De Vos, *O Togga!* 1)

[172] Leuvennink 94

is tant Isabel du Preez.[173]

[The sharks in the sea/like citronella tea –/and their Sunday treat/is Aunt Isabel du Preez] Here we may observe an unexpectedly apposite cultural parallel, for the stern Victorian "Young Lady" that appears in Lear's limericks is easily replaced by a schoolmarmish Afrikaans *tannie*. In Afrikaans culture members of the older generation are referred to as *tante* or the affectionate *tannie*, and *oom* – "aunt" and "uncle" respectively. Afrikaans custom is deferent towards age: one's elder is only rarely addressed in the second person, and then using the formal pronoun *u* – as opposed to the informal *jou*. The *tannie's* uncertain friendship with the *haai* – symbolised in the tea-sharing and undercut by her imminent ingestion – represents an eccentricity that would be as amusing to Afrikaans children as Lear's Old Persons were to his young Victorian audience.

De Vos, like Lear, also parodies the advice that parents give children:

> Jy
> bly klein,
> jy
> bly klein
> van kasaterwaterwyn.
> Jy
> word groot,
> jy
> word groot
> van 'n koekmakrankabrood.[174]

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[173] *Mallemeuleman* 13
[174] Ibid 12

[You stay small, you stay small from cat's-piss/weak tea-wine. You grow big, you grow big from koekmakranka-bread.] Apart from the mockery of age-relations, the "purpose" of this verse consists largely in the wacky sounds: *kasaterwater* and *koekmakranka* – the latter of which is probably derived from the Khoi word for a traditional veld herb. Thus, this poem illustrates the earthy auditory-ness of Afrikaans, a creolised language that is characterised by the expressiveness of its guttural sounds. Vermeiren's illustration, meanwhile, portrays the differences between "*klein*" and "*groot*" in a fashion that is both rudimentary and absurd: as if to present childhood and adulthood in their most elemental form.

One of the most malleable and distinctive sounds of the Afrikaans language is the throaty "g":

> Jy's te pragtag
> allakragtag –
> Is jy wragtag
> ag-en-tagtag?
> Ek sou
> regtig
> plegtig
> sweer:
> jy's sés-
> en-tagtag
> en niks meer![175]

[You're too beautiful oh my goodness – Are you really 88? I would have really solemnly sworn: you're 86 and no more.] In the following verse we see further

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[175] Ibid 25

verbal foolery with the patterns already offered up by the language: here, in addition to the *gee*, de Vos also manipulates the *ou*-sound and the diminutive *tjie*.

> Was jy
> 'n goggamannetjie
> en sy
> 'n goggavroutjie,
> dan
> loop jy
> op 'n reëndag
> dalk
> met haar
> 'n goggabloutjie.
> En as
> die wolke opklaar,
> dan sê
> die goggavroutjie;
> Hier
> in my goggakoutjie
> is plek,
> ou gogga-outjie![176]

[If you were a little goggaman[177] and she a little goggalady then once in a while (lit: "in the rain"), you'd have a gogga-disagreement. And when the clouds had cleared, the goggalady would say: here inside my goggamouth is space for you, old goggaboy!] The compounding that occurs in this poem is common in standard Afrikaans, but also makes for a delightful nonsense device. So too, Afrikaans idiom creates its own opportunities for puns: figuratively, the phrase "*'n bloutjie loop*" means to receive a rejection, while the word *loop* is also literally "to walk": as one might, romantically, in the rain. This instance of simultaneity – where more than one meaning is suggested by a single word or phrase – is just one of several elements of indeterminacy that may produce nonsense. The casual "*dalk*" –

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[176] *Mallemeukeman* 12

[177] A "*gogga*" refers to an insect or, idiomatically, a "creepy-crawly".

"maybe" – together with the figurative clearing of the clouds after the lovers' spat and Vermeiren's pictorial interpretation of the anthropomorphised insects all leave the friendliness of this goggapartnership undefined. By playing on insect courtship (a recurring interest in his nonsense) de Vos adds an extra dimension of mischief, for while the child reader of this nonsense would appreciate the joke that results from describing gogga mating habits in human terms, an adult would recognise the sexual connotations of the female insect's invitation into her "*koutjie*" – which means both "a little cage" and "a small mouthful". Furthermore, there is an Afrikaans adage which de Vos inverts in this poem: "*eers die koutjie, dan die vroutjie*" – "first the cage and then the bird". Traditional Afrikaans culture is patriarchal. Thus in this verse, de Vos reacts against customary misogyny with an absurdist edge.

Just as de Vos playfully interrogates the gustatory-romantic habits of insects, he also reinterprets biblical episodes in a series of rhymes on *tannies sonder eerste name* – "aunts without first names" – here again sending up traditional gender dynamics:

> En die lot van Mevrou Lot
> klink vir my ook bra verspot.
> Haar hart was (glo my) goed soos goud,
> al was haar kos 'n bietjie sout.
> Ja, sy was óók (soos ek verstaan)
> 'n tante sonder eerste naam.
>
> Maar sy was te nuuskierig,
> haar nek het sy gerek –
> en nou is sy 'n soutpilaar
> waar beeste aan kan lek.[178]

[And the lot of Mrs Lot/sounds really silly to me./Her heart was (believe me) as good as gold,/even though her food was a bit salty./Yes, she was also(as I understand it)/a lady without a first name./But she was too curious,/she stuck her neck out/and now she is a pillar of salt/that cattle can lick.]

De Vos also tacitly mocks the piety of the stereotypical Calvinist *tannie*:

> Nig Annabel van Staden
> sit hoog in a bloekom.
> Sy sing die sewende gesang

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[178] Ibid 29

en almal wil weet hoekom.[179]

[Cousin Annabel van Staden sits high up in a bluegum. She sings the seventh hymn and everyone wants to know why.] "Why" is a question frequently asked by de Vos and by nonsense: a genre that uses literary absurdities to interrogate the incongruities of real life, in particular those found in social discourse. It is significant, then, that the writings of Philip de Vos and of Edward Lear are both embedded in cultures in which social ritual was of great importance, for it is the illogicalities of conservative Afrikaans tradition and of Victorian society that many of their respective nonsenses question. As in the case of Tant Isobel du Preez, the similarities between the above rhyme and Lear's limericks should be clear: "Cousin" Annabel appears rather elderly in Vermeiren's drawing, and is unmistakably bizarre in her tree-dwelling hymn-singing habits. (And Lear too was fond of depicting the eccentric "old persons" of his limericks in trees:

There was a Young Lady of Portugal,
Whose ideas were excessively nautical:
She climbed up a tree, To examine the sea,
But declared she would never leave Portugal.)

Returning to de Vos's verse; the bluegum or eucalyptus is native to Australia; but as an alien import has prospered and constitutes a familiar feature of the South African landscape. Thus, in addition to the rhyme, the image of local terrain (including the "*nig*" and the hymn) gives the nonsense a distinctively South African feel in contrast to Lear's internationalism.

Typically South African fauna that inhabit de Vos's poems include numerous members of the insect and reptile families, standard zoo fare and, of course, the guineafowl:

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[179] Ibid 22

> Tarentaal o tarentaal
> heesstem boerenagtegaal;
> jou liedjie is vol hartseer
> jou liedjie is vol pyn
> as jy so met jou spikkels
> in die wintergras verdwyn.[180]

[Guineafowl, O guineafowl, hoarse-voiced farmer's-nightingale; your song is full of heartache, your song is full of pain when you and your speckles vanish in the winter grass.] Bathos is a frequent feature of nonsense, and the sense of wistful yearning that is given voice in this poem – yet at the same time tacitly ridiculed – is another defining feature of literary nonsense: a genre in which mockery and sadness go hand in hand. This effect, indeed, characterises Edward Lear's nonsense songs, in which such soulful creatures as the wandering Dong with a luminous nose, the lonesome Quangle Wangle Quee, and the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò are depicted in a manner that is both noble and laughable.

Animals are often anthropomorphised in de Vos's verse, and so used to reflect upon human beings:

> Kry toktokkies
> waterpokkies?
> Raak 'n songololo siek?
> Sou 'n oester
> drome koester
> oor 'n kokkerot of kriek?
> Kry 'n mossie
> in sy nessie
> ook soms
> sooibrand en depressie?
> Sou 'n tor ook mor
> en kla?
> Hier's die antwoord
> en dis:
> JA![181]

[Do tapping-beetles get chicken pox? Do centipedes fall ill? Would an oyster foster dreams about a cockroach or a cricket? Does a mossie[182] in his nest sometimes get heartburn and depression? Would a beetle also grumble and complain? Here's the answer and it's: YES!] Words like "mossie" and "songololo"

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[180] Ibid 21
[181] Ibid 58
[182] A sparrow

(a word borrowed from the Zulu) are as familiar territory to almost every South African child as the creatures with which de Vos is so often preoccupied. Nonsense should not yield easily to interpretation, but if there is a question that de Vos asks in this and many other poems in which human and animal attributes are conflated, it is, "what is so special about human beings?"

Literary nonsense is born out of perplexity: in particular, that state of bewilderment that arises out of the realisation that many of the habits and interactions of human beings are in truth nonsensical. The nonsense outlook comes from a child's perspective, for it sees the absurd in the ordinary; and this is what enables it to ask questions, like the question above, that are inane, insane or obvious to the adult mind. Philip de Vos, like Edward Lear, identifies with the childlike in himself: at an interview in 1988 he said, (my translation) "Perhaps I have still not grown up. I am [also] mad about children's art and Walt Disney films. I write because something is strange to me, or touches me in some or other way".[183] Just as nonsense responds to real-life incongruities, it is also an answer and an antidote to despair. And this too is something that de Vos shares with Lear: his pained faith in the redemptive power of humour and the absurd. To *Die Burger*, he once said: (my translation) "I am very aware of the transience, the misery of things – but I write it away with nonsense":[184] a statement reminiscent of Lear's statement: "I see life as basically tragic and futile and the only thing that matters is making little jokes".[185] This, indeed, may be the "point" of nonsense if there is one, for by celebrating the futility of all things, nonsense liberates us from the pursuit of meaning.

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[183] "Dalk het ek nog nooit grootgeword nie. Ek is ook versot op kinderkuns en Walt Disney-tekenprente. Ek skryf omdat iets vir my snaaks is, of my op die een of ander manier raak" (Leuvennink 94).
[184] "Ek is baie bewus van die verganklike, die hartseer van dinge – maar ek skryf dit weg met nonsens" (Pople 6).
[185] Diary entry (Wullschläger 65).

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