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# IMAGES OF IRREVERENCE: NONSENSE POETRY IN TRANSLATION AS EXEMPLIFIED BY EDWARD LEAR'S POEM "THE AKOND OF SWAT"*

## Abstract

This article discusses selected "rewritings" of Edward Lear's nonsense poem "The Akond of Swat", focusing specifically on the translators', illustrators', adapters' and editors' attitudes towards the allusive nature of the poem – and specifically the reference it makes to the historical figure of the Pashtun religious leader Abdul Ghaffūr, also known as the Akond (or Wali) of Swat or Saidū Bābā, which may be viewed as orientalist or parodistic from a contemporary viewpoint. Recent translated and illustrated versions of the poem inscribe it with new aesthetic and ideological values. Two Polish translations considered in this article, produced by Andrzej Nowicki and Stanisław Barańczak respectively, demonstrate changing approaches to the nonsense genre evidenced in Polish literary circles (revealing a gradual transition from pure to parodistic nonsense). Graphic representations of the poem discussed in the article testify to the artists' interpretive powers in redefining the genre of Lear's poem, rebranding it as an infantile fairy tale on the one hand and a disturbing reflection on tyranny and "the war on terrorism" on the other.

**Keywords:** nonsense poetry, translation, postcolonialism, Edward Lear, Andrzej Nowicki, Stanisław Barańczak

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## Carefree bestiary

The world of literary nonsense is inhabited by creatures alien to scientific taxonomies and inaccessible to human experience: green-headed Jumblies, predatory Jubjubs, Pobbles who have no toes, and other sinister hybrids of snail, snake and shark. A particularly interesting specimen in this lively menagerie is "Akond of Swat", the eponymous character of Edward Lear's poem, known to Polish readers as "Akond of Skwak" or "Jakąd of Wszczot", and to children looking at picture books as an anthropoid caterpillar or a big-eyed comb. Seemingly absurd like other Learical characters, "Akond" acquires a new dimension upon closer acquaintance, for he does not belong exclusively to the world of fiction but rather has a prototype in extra-literary reality. As Lear scholars and experts in Middle Eastern and Central Asian studies emphasize (cf. e.g., Yapp 1977; Ahmed 2002), in his own light-hearted way the author refers in the poem to the spiritual leader of the Pashtuns, Akond ("teacher") Abdul Ghaffūr (c. 1794–1878), also known as Saidū Bābā, who captured the attention of the international press. The mention of a Pathan Sufi from the remote land of Swat, found in a small news item in "The Times of India", fascinated Lear, both rhythmically and phonetically (Dubois 2018: 41). He decided to play with sound and allude to orientalist preconceptions shared by his contemporaries, thus composing a tiny masterpiece, which sets in motion both conceptual mechanisms typical of nonsense poetry, as well as cognitive mechanisms typical of the Victorian era: namely, his compatriots' imperialist belief in the unpredictability and idiosyncrasy of the East, and, as a consequence, in the cultural superiority of the West. From today's perspective, the poem elicits unease: the carelessness or even nonchalance with which Lear allows himself to abduct a Pashtun ruler into the realm of literary nonsense can in fact be interpreted as both a parody and an apology for imperialist arrogance and obscurantism, prompting reflections on the role of colonial overtones in contemporary editorial, translational, graphic and musical renditions of the work.

Following André Lefevere's well-known claim that readers have access to literature not so much "written" by the author as "rewritten" by critics, editors, anthologists, translators, adaptors, illustrators or designers who shape the reception of literary works and genres in accordance with the ideological and artistic requirements of a given era (1992: 4, 8), I intend to look at selected verbal, visual and musical refractions of Edward Lear's

poem and see how they situate it against other works of literary nonsense, thus co-defining the genre. I will focus on two Polish translations of the poem by Andrzej Nowicki and Stanisław Barańczak respectively and describe the changing editorial approaches to Akond/Jakąd and to the (non) sense the poem makes. In doing so, I will attempt to answer the question of how authors of the Polish versions defined the text's genre affiliation, how they construed the eponymous character and, finally, what ideological and aesthetic convictions are expressed in their work. In order to highlight Polish publishing practices against a broader background, I will first briefly present selected ideas of Anglo-American anthologists, illustrators and adaptors on how to "rewrite" Lear's original work within a contemporary postcolonial reception context.

## An empire of nonsense

Absurdity and nonsense have intrigued philosophers since antiquity, and today they still remain of interest to logicians, mathematicians, linguists and literary scholars (Grodziński 1981; Wołk 2014). Linguists focus primarily on the means of formulating and expressing nonsense, such as logical deviance, semantic anomaly, vagueness and indeterminacy, syntactic ill-formedness, textual incoherence, specific use of figures (for example, catachresis), as well as phonological and graphological experimentation (Chrzanowska-Kluczewska 2017: 27–30). Literary scholars see nonsense as both a stylistic device and a distinct literary genre, the canon of which primarily includes the works of celebrated writers: Edward Lear (an advocate of "popular" or "folk" nonsense based on playing with sound), and Lewis Carroll (a patron of "ornamental" nonsense, based on sophisticated logical mechanisms; cf. Tigges 1988: 2–3, 49). The earliest discussions posited that nonsense literature was the exclusive domain of Victorian England (cf. Tigges 1988: 10). Subsequent commentaries identified the precursors of the genre among ancient, medieval and Renaissance authors such as Aristophanes, Chaucer and Shakespeare. However, these writings pointed to the connection between literary nonsense and children's rhymes, which typically exploit sonority and glossolalia, and are passed down from generation to generation in folk culture. With each new anthology of nonsense, its genre and geographic boundaries expanded to eventually include works from different countries and traditions (cf. Heyman 2008), ranging from rural counting-out rhymes

to the experiments of the Dadaists, Surrealists, or even the verbal excesses of John Lennon (cf. Hołobut, Hołownia 2017).

The fluidity of the categories has not dissuaded experts from trying to define the determinants of the genre. Much has been accomplished in this regard by Dutch literary scholar Wim Tigges (1987, 1988), the author of a comprehensive monograph on the genealogy of nonsense. He defines it as

> a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with the 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. (…) 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 (Tigges 1987: 27).

Tigges lists four fundamental characteristics of literary nonsense: (1) an unresolved tension between meaning and its absence; (2) the narrator's emotional and moral indifference to the events being reported, however bizarre or grim; (3) the convention of playfulness; (4) the primacy of language, which "creates a nonsensical reality, rather than, as in the absurd, a nonsensical reality being verbally represented" (Tigges 1988: 55). The first principle seems particularly important for distinguishing nonsense from gibberish: nonsense is usually accompanied by formal over-organization, and in the case of poetry by rigor of versification (Heyman 2008: xxiv). This gives the reader a false sense of security, an illusory impression that since the text pulsates with regular rhyme and moves on with a jaunty, springy rhythm, it is probably headed somewhere.

The most important representatives of the genre use particular stylistic devices for the purpose, which Tigges [following Stewart's (1979/1989) typology] calls "procedures for turning sense into nonsense" (Tigges 1988: 56). The first of these, "mirroring", shows the world upside down – reality turned on its head. The procedure manifests itself, for example, in the systematic inversion of classes, i.e., the attribution of human characteristics to inanimate entities and the animalization of human characters, in the reversal of cause and effect, and on the level of expression, for example, in the use of spoonerisms, palindromes, charades, and mirror writing (Tigges 1988: 56).

The second procedure is "imprecision": blurring the category boundaries and merging the concepts, manifest for example in the surplus or deficiency of signification (spelling riddles, calligrams, lipograms, blank spaces); or in the externalization of the implicit (such as mixing fictional with nonfictional reality; Tigges 1988: 56–57).

The third procedure is known as "seriality", "stringing" or "play with infinity" (Stewart's term, 1979/1989). Literary nonsense is often based on regression *ad infinitum*, enumeration (visible in the format of famous nonsense alphabets), nesting, or circularity. As Tigges points out, the sense of confusion is intensified by an unexpected closure.

The fourth procedure is "simultaneity", i.e., ambiguity; the coexistence of mismatched elements that creates conceptual tension. On the content plane, it involves a juxtaposition of incompatible puzzle pieces (Lautréamont's chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table); on the formal plane, it encompasses the use of neologisms and riddles typical of literary nonsense: puns, portmanteaux, rhymes and alliterations that phonetically bring together concepts that are far apart (Tigges 1988: 59–60).

The last procedure distinguished by Tigges is "arbitrariness"; i.e., the establishment of "a spatial playground" within the boundaries of which the nonsense game shall unfold. According to Tigges, the procedure consists in endowing a text with a formal framework, such as an enumeration, an alphabet, a geographical limerick, a quest, a court hearing, a feast, etc. (Tigges 1988: 69).

The Dutch researcher also attempts to draw a distinction between literary nonsense and other related artistic phenomena, such as humour (parody, travesty, satire, irony or jest serve to ridicule or evoke laughter, while nonsense serves no purpose); light verse (which must be characterized by wit, inessential to nonsense); the grotesque (which thrives on ugliness and evokes emotion, while nonsense does not encourage value judgment; 1988: 114); surrealism (which, like nonsense, relies on incongruity, but presents it as an effusion of the subconscious and endows it with a symbolic dimension; 1988: 114); Dada (which brings to the fore not so much the logical anomaly as the graphic and phonetic shape of words that express this anomaly); absurd or, finally, metafiction (which involves self-reflection, while nonsense does not bother itself with itself; 1988: 131). The genres can merge and exchange artistic devices with each other, which I will demonstrate more extensively using the example of Lear's poem and its broadly understood translations.

## Akond and nonsense

According to Martin Dubois who has studied colonial themes in Lear's Indian poetry, "The Akond of Swat" was written in 1873, when Edward Lear – by then an established author of light verse, a bold adventurer, and seasoned illustrator – was preparing for a thirteen-month trip to India. Browsing through the press in July, he came across a report in "The Times of India" from the Swat valley noting that "the Akhoond's son has quarrelled with his father and left the parental presence with a following of 500 sowars, refusing to listen to the Akhoond's orders to come back" (quoted by Dubois 2018: 38–39)[1]. In September of the same year, Lear sent a manuscript of the poem in a letter to his friend Lord Carlingford, with a comment: "I send a ridiculous effusion, which in some quarters delighteth – on the Ahkond of Swat; – of whom one has read in the papers, and some one wrote to me to ask, 'who or what is he' – to which I sent this reply" (quoted by Strachey 1911: 161–162).

Published later – with minor changes – in the collection *Laughable Lyrics* (1877), the work is a stunning example of nonsense poetry with a highly sophisticated versification. Critics have compared it to a ghazal (Graziosi 2008), a traditional Persian lyrical form popular among Victorian poets. Indeed, Lear retains its selected features: he employs *radif*, which is an invariable phrase that repeats in each couplet and functions as a refrain (here: *The Akond of Swat!*), and *qāfiye*, which is a monorhyme that runs throughout the piece (here: WHAT, NOT, SHALLOTT). However, he complicates this traditional pattern by rhyming *radif* and *qāfiye*, and enriching each couplet with an additional rhyme (Graziosi 2008). The whole composition is consolidated by the ubiquitous alliteration, and dynamized by the ubiquitous monosyllable. Apparently, Lear marks out his poetic "playing field" with precision, and formulates strict rules for the game following the principle of arbitrariness mentioned by Tigges: his poem comprises a small world, governed by its own complicated laws.

[1] Interestingly, a different – and arguably less accurate – version of events was presented by James and Mary Ford in their book *Every Day in the Year* (1902), indicating that the poem was inspired by the news of Akond's death, rather than a quarrel with his son. Under the date 22 January, the authors included the following statement: "On this day, Jan. 22, 1876, the ruler of a remote eastern principality died after a reign that had lasted from very early in the century and had been so peaceful and devoid of incident that very few people, outside of the British Foreign Office, knew of the existence of either Swat or its venerable ruler" (quoted by https://www.bartleby.com/297/35.html, access: 11.11.2019).

The poem's most noticeable feature is its discursive framework, which consists exclusively of questions and exclamations. Endowed with curiosity and a superb sense of rhythm, the narrator ruminates on the identity and habits of the eponymous character. Over the course of twenty-three stanzas, he raises endless doubts all of which remain unresolved. Similarly, all that readers have to conjure an image of Akond are implicit assumptions made by the narrator while formulating his questions (cf. Szulińska 2009: 151). And since these presuppositions, as befits nonsense literature, turn out to be chaotic, incongruous, and sometimes mutually exclusive, the eponymous character constantly shifts shape in the reader's imagination: it is not clear whether he/it is a creature or a man, a head of state or an unruly child. The first stanza travesties philosophical inquiry and presupposes only that the Akond exists (Lear 1877/1994):

1. WHO, or why, or which, or what,
Is the Akond of SWAT?

Subsequent stanzas are somewhat more precise: they are based on the assumption that the Akond is either a man, a boy, or a being endowed with human qualities. These ruminations still do not fit together conceptually, as rational and absurd questions alternate. They do, however, fit together phonetically, which is the guiding compositional principle of the text:

2. Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?
Does he sit on a stool or a sofa or a chair,
or SQUAT,
The Akond of Swat?

3. Is he wise or foolish, young or old?
Does he drink his soup and his coffee cold,
or HOT,
The Akond of Swat?

4. Does he sing or whistle, jabber or talk,
And when riding abroad does he gallop or walk
or TROT,
The Akond of Swat?Orientalist echoes become increasingly audible in the poem. At first, they seem discreet: the narrator considers Akond's typical props (turban and fez, mattress, mat and even a cot), only to abandon these cosmopolitan tropes in favour of a more familiar vision, such as the Akond practising Latin calligraphy:

5. Does he wear a turban, a fez, or a hat?
Does he sleep on a mattress, a bed, or a mat,
or COT,
The Akond of Swat?

6. When he writes a copy in round-hand size,
Does he cross his T's and finish his I's
with a DOT,
The Akond of Swat?However, as the text unfolds, the aura of exoticism intensifies and it becomes increasingly obvious that, contrary to his earlier declarations, the narrator has indeed certain preconceptions about who or what the Akond is. In between the lines there lurks the Victorian stereotype of an Oriental satrap; as Lear himself put it, alluding to *Arabian Nights*, "the Barbaric despot sort of thing one has read of as a child" (quoted in Dubois 2018: 41). The narrator begins to assume that the Akond is a leader or ruler; one who can execute his subjects in various ways (no bloodless alternatives to the death sentence are considered):

8. Do his people like him extremely well?
Or do they, whenever they can, rebel,
or PLOT,
At the Akond of Swat?

9. If he catches them then, either old or young,
Does he have them chopped in pieces or hung,
or SHOT,
The Akond of Swat?

Akond's subjects themselves are also of interest: the narrator wonders how despicable they are (whether busy themselves with robbery or perhaps prefer to strangle their victims with a garotte), and how they comfort and please their ruler. The scenarios sound disarming in their absurd, macabre detail, described with unflinching indifference:

10. Do his people prig in the lanes or park?
Or even at times, when days are dark,
GAROTTE,
The Akond of Swat? (…)

12. To amuse his mind do his people show him
Pictures, or any one's last new poem,
or WHAT,
For the Akond of Swat?

13. At night if he suddenly screams and wakes,
Do they bring him only a few small cakes,
or a LOT,
For the Akond of Swat?

Oriental and familiar patterns intertwine, which suggests the narrator is letting his imagination run wild. Further speculation is based on typically British assumptions: that Akond sails a boat, indulges in (exclusively small) beer, that he enjoys local food and observes Western dress codes. The narrator also inquires, with morbid expertise, whether the protagonist beats his wife with a pipe whenever she fails to pick gooseberries on time. Lear enhances the comical effect by providing over-specific detail (e.g., describing the ornamentation on a pipe used for domestic violence):

15. Does he like to lie on his back in a boat
Like the lady who lived in that isle remote,
SHALLOTT,
The Akond of Swat? (…)

18. Does he drink small beer from a silver jug?
Or a bowl? or a glass? or a cup? or a mug?
or a POT,
The Akond of Swat?

19. Does he beat his wife with a gold-topped pipe,
When she let the gooseberries grow too ripe,
or ROT,
The Akond of Swat?

20. Does he wear a white tie when he dines with friends,
And tie it neat in a bow with ends,
or a KNOT.
The Akond of Swat?

21. Does he like new cream, and hate mince-pies?
When he looks at the sun does he wink his eyes,
or NOT,
The Akond of Swat?

The last stanza is the logical icing on the cake: the narrator asserts with conviction (evidenced by the archaic form *I wot*[2]) that either someone or no-one knows who, why, which or what the title character is. It is indeed hard to disagree with him:

23. Some one, or nobody, knows I wot
Who or which or why or what
Is the Akond of Swat?

By the end, we have learnt nothing about the protagonist but much about the narrator. He is someone thoroughly "Learical", who struggles with logic and clearly loses the battle. The text employs typical nonsense procedures: it is characterised by vagueness (the litany of unanswered questions paradoxically leaves the impression of semantic deficiency and surfeit, the latter resulting from repetitiveness and monotony; fiction and reality merge); seriality (questions are enumerated, and within those questions further enumerations are nested, as in Chinese boxes); simultaneity (the protagonist is imagined in two incongruous and mutually exclusive cultural contexts); and arbitrariness (the game of enumerations ends as abruptly and pointlessly as it began). Thoughts are clearly governed neither by intellect nor by emotion but by sound. Today the poem could be considered a paragon of literary nonsense, were it not for the thin thread that connects the fictional world with colonial reality. A thread which the author deliberately revealed himself, adding a comment to the first print edition of the poem: "For the existence of this potentate see Indian newspapers, *passim*. The proper way to read the verses is to make an immense emphasis on the monosyllabic rhymes, which indeed ought to be shouted out by a chorus" (Lear 1877/1894).

When the poem was first composed, its allusive layer expressed (or rather travestied?) stereotypical images of the Other, ingrained in the mentality of Victorian readers. It certainly did not preclude the reception of the text in terms of literary nonsense. However, modern translators, editors, adaptors, and illustrators may doubt the genre purity of the original text. Does a play on sound remain a piece of innocuous nonsense – at least on the surface – if it is done at someone's expense? Especially if that someone is a person

[2] Bromhead (2009: 206–221) explains as if it were "one of the epistemic verbal phrases expressing certainty and confidence", derived from the verb "to wit" ("to know"), although since the 13th century "wot" began to function as a base form of the verb, especially in the expressions "wot well", "I wot" or "I wot not".

inscribed in the imperialist historical discourse? How to respond to Lear's "nonsense Orientalism"?

## Akond and Orientalism

The real Akond of Swat influenced the history of the British Empire due to the unrest that occurred around the North-West Frontier of British India. This was an area inhabited by warlike Pathans, divided into myriad tribes and factions, under the influence of the Amir of Afghanistan, but practically governed by local rulers and mullahs (Farwell 1985: 144). The Pathans had enjoyed independence for centuries; in 1947, their lands were incorporated into Pakistan as autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas, today districts of the Khyber Pashtunkhwa province.

Abdul Ghaffūr was born in 1794[3] in the Swat valley and, as reported by contemporary historians, was a highly respected political and religious leader (Fahim 1978: 57; Farwell 1985: 153). At the age of eighteen, he left his family home and travelled through the Peshawar valley, receiving religious training in the Sufi tariqas of Quaderyya and Naqshbandiyya (Fahim 1978: 57; Haroon 2007: 39). For twelve years he led a hermitic life on the banks of the Indus, where he earned a reputation as a saintly sage and became known as a "teacher" (i.e., Akond). In 1835, he joined forces with the Amir of Afghanistan against the Sikhs. After the defeat of the Amir, he withdrew to Bajaur and eventually settled in Saidu (today's capital of Swat District), exerting great political and spiritual influence on the surrounding tribes (Fahim 1978: 57).

His relations with the British were – just like the situation on the border between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan – extremely complicated. Since imperial troops had occupied the neighbouring Peshawar valley, Ghaffūr feared for the fate of the Valley of Swat but did not engage on the side of the neighbouring tribes in order to avoid confrontation with the British. It was only at the end of 1849 that he became convinced that the Swatis and Bunayr-Wals, the tribes over which he exercised spiritual leadership, were in danger. He then assumed the religious leadership as *Shaykh al-Islām* and called his co-religionists to holy war several times over the next two decades, uniting the border peoples in a fierce struggle against the British,

[3] Other sources (e.g., Haroon 2007) suggest 1793.

despite the tensions that divided them (Fahim 1978: 58). An account of these bloody and intricate events can be found in a book with the significant title *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (Farwell 1985), commemorating what the author deemed the most incomprehensible and barren involvements of the Empire army, which today would rather be forgotten. Suffice it to say that having been assured by the British of the inviolability of the borders of Swat and Bunayr, Abdul Ghaffūr ceased actions against the Empire and, until his death in 1877, urged his co-religionists to maintain neighbourly relations with them (Fahim 1978: 63).

Modern historians' attempts to explain who, or which, or why, or what the Akond of Swat actually was, reveal firstly the complexity of the cultural and political context in which he exercised his authority, and secondly the blatant untranslatability of Pashtun reality into any English-language categories (evidenced by an overwhelming number of borrowings which writers incorporate in their texts, making them hard to follow by non-professional readers; cf. Yapp 1977). In Lear's time the press must have achieved a similar stylistic effect, because apart from Lear, writers from the New World also alluded to the Sufi in their light verse. The Canadian parodist George Thomas Lanigan wrote a sorrowful and sonorous "Threnody" on the death of Akhoond of Swat, and another threnody, "Dirge of the Moolla of Kotal, rival of the Akhoond of Swat" (quoted in Graziosi 2014), while the American poet Eugene Field referred to him in one of his poems as "a vague sort of man who lives in a country far over the sea" (quoted in Farwell 1985: 162). Thus, as Farwell puts it, "English-speaking people" must have "found in the sound of 'the Akhund of Swat' something both poetic and amusing" (1985: 161).

This is how the Akond found his way into the pages of humorous verse, and from there straight into Anglophone history books, which often cite literary sources and "rewrite" them for their own purposes. As Farwell ironically observes, the most lasting effect of the skirmishes waged at Umbeyla Pass was precisely "to make the Akhund and his country famous as symbols of outlandish peoples and remote places no one had ever heard of and ordinary people had no interest in" (1985: 161). Yapp holds a similar opinion, describing the Akond created by the works of fiction as "that exotic individual who, for Edward Lear and many literate Britons, summed up the obscurity of Asia" (Yapp 1977: 173). The convention adopted by Lear is an expression of Victorian Orientalism in that it is based on speculations about the irrational, bizarre and deviant behavioural patterns allegedly typical of the Oriental man. It is, at the same time, a blatant sabotage of that Orientalism,

for Lear's speculations are themselves irrational and bizarre, and the Oriental man escapes irrational categories of Western discourse and remains mysterious and amorphous (cf. Said 1977: 39). It seems, then, that the generic features of nonsense sabotage Orientalist patterns of thought. If, as Said ironically puts it, in colonial discourse "the European is a close reasoner, his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; … his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism", while the mind of the Oriental is as winding as "his picturesque streets" (1977: 39), then they clearly swap roles in Lear's verse.

The colonial dimension of Victorian nonsense has been explored by various scholars, and an overview of the most important approaches is presented by Dubois (2018). He first mentions the reflections of Daniel Bivona (1990), who devoted a section of his monograph to *Alice in Wonderland*, reading it as "the most impressive comic critique of British ethnocentrism in the age of imperialism" (quoted in Dubois 1990: 36). According to the author, the little heroine, uncomprehending of different (and in her eyes ridiculous) systems of behaviour, embodies the Victorian point of view and "the imperial unconscious", which shaped all types of Victorian discourse, including artistic works (Dubois 2018: 36). Sumanyu Satpathy (2003), on the other hand, treats Lear's texts in an entirely literal way, as an externalisation of unconscious Orientalism. He assumes that "nonsense and Empire are not disparate, unrelated domains – one cultural, the other one political, one innocent, the other nocent" (2003: 73). Referring to Lear's travelling fascinations, he tries to prove that "this genial spirit and his 'innocent' pleasure-giving work" has an "oriental streak" (Satpathy 2003: 73–74).

Martin Dubois argues against such a view. He stresses that nonsense is usually motivated by the need for parody (although it by no means stops at the parodic effect), which makes the genre "intensely aware of its own processes". This self-awareness must not be overlooked, for then we attribute the wrong intentions to the parodist. Dubois argues that "rather than unwittingly transmitting or subverting ideology, nonsense's play of language enables the desire for the exotic to be contemplated in plain view" (Dubois 2018: 38). According to the scholar, in Lear's "orientalising" poems, the language of nonsense steals, absorbs, and digests the discourse of the exotic, thus revealing its naivety and simplification. Lear used similar devices not only in the poem discussed, but also in "The Attalik Ghazee", written before his journey to India, and in "The Cummerbund. An Indian Poem," which was written during the journey itself and abounds in misinterpreted Anglo-Indian words.

According to Dubois, Lear utilizes genres of poetry based on explicit melodic patterns, such as the Romantic ballad or – as in this case – the ghazal, to exploit figures of speech and play with sound scot-free (Dubois 2018: 37). The nonsense inherent in the music of words disarms their imperial message: the sound governs the message, not the other way round (Dubois 2018: 40). Following the scholar's train of thought, Victorian nonsense inhabits and immediately vandalises the intellectual order of its era, and the poem in question has a parodic dimension and seems simultaneously to both evoke and ridicule racial stereotypes. However, it is difficult to make similar observations based on contemporary editions of the text, because many of them effectively mask Lear's references to Eastern culture, whilst others use them for completely non-parodistic purposes.

## Akond redrawn

As mentioned above, in the first print edition of the poem, Lear himself emphasised its connection to the extra-literary reality by pointing to the presence of "the potentate" in Indian newspapers. Hence, his first readers must have easily grasped the allusive nature of the poem, recognising in it references to certain types of discourse (for example, reports from the frontiers of the Empire, or travel journals saturated with proper names). As Luree Miller writes, "the British, because they ruled India for two hundred years, were vaguely aware that there were some ridiculously small, ferociously independent, semi-autonomous kingdoms, with improbable names like Chitral, Dir, Gilgit, Hunza and Swat, tucked away in inaccessible valleys beyond snowbound passes" (Miller 1990: 85).

Over time, the Asian trope has been toned down in the reception of the poem, not only because the political context has changed, but also because editors preparing subsequent editions of *Laughable Lyrics*, and anthologisers compiling collections of light verse and children's poetry, have gradually ceased to include Lear's annotation in them. With fading awareness of Queen Victoria's "little wars", fewer and fewer English-speaking readers identify the word "akond" as a borrowing; few recognise the poem's non-fictional inspiration, except for audiences familiar with the person of Abdul Ghaffūr and the history of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (unfortunately, the latter may have recently grown in familiarity over the past two decades due to increasing armed conflict and violent attacks in the region). Their voices

enrich literary forums and blogs, where fierce discussions continue over the historical circumstances in which the poem originated and the current situation in the province.[4]

In addition, illustrators responsible for "redrawing" the poem often mask its colonial subtext. It is difficult to judge to what extent this is either as a result of a conscious strategy or simply unfamiliarity with the original context (one literary scholar mentions "the Akond of Swat" as an illustration of the "fantasy of a private language as a pleasure and a provocation", together with such neologisms as adjectives "scroobious" or "amblongus", cf. Philips 2016: 341). Among the four illustrated editions of the original version of the poem that I have been able to access,[5] two rely on animal metaphors that derealise the character and purify Lear's nonsense, neutralising the exotic overtones.

The illustrations created by Torbjörn Lundmark and Dana Lundmark for the Methuen publishing house (Lear 1986/2015) are portraits of a grumpy old caterpillar who wears mittens and holey socks on his twelve feet and indulges in typically Western pleasures: a packet of crisps, a TV session, a pause for breath with a fishing rod in one of his many hands. The graphic design enhances the comic effect: the incongruous realia create an impression of mirroring, simultaneity, imprecision and seriality (reduplication of visual elements: legs, Akond's glasses). The artists use a precise – if caricatured – line, which lends credibility to the fictional world, free of orientalist accents. [6]

The graphic design by Christine Pym (Lear 2014) is based on a slightly different idea. The protagonist – a solid black shape like an angular cut-out, depicted against a colourful, background presented with more precision – seems to take on more or less identifiable animal forms which literally multiply before our eyes. Several expressive silhouettes appear on each page, which, the reader can only surmise, embody Akond's ever-new visions offered in the course of successive speculations: sometimes a silhouette of someone resembling a toothy hare, sometimes a fat, leggy bear, sometimes a penguin with feelers, a squirrel or an unbearably long centipede.

[4] See for example the discussions on blog http://fotolibrarian.fotolibra.com/?p=176 (access: 17.05.2020) or https://allpoetry.com/The-Akond-of-Swat or http://excelsiorfile.blogspot.com/2007/03/akond-of-swat.html (access: 17.05.2020).

[5] I am grateful for the opportunity to conduct a search at the British Library with research travel funds bequeathed by Professor Juliusz Palczewski.

[6] A selection of works can be seen on the artist's website, http://www.torbjornlundmark.com/books/akond.htm (access: 17.05.2020).

The figures are perfectly flat and black, devoid of any detail. They interact with each other and cut away from the colourful scenery of their world: the notes, the table, the dishes, the boat. Akond's incarnations double and triple, and often crawl out of frame, leaving behind hairy limbs. Sometimes they jump into the graphic composition headlong. This is pure visual nonsense based on seriality, simultaneity, and mirroring; nonsense based largely on a conventional, semi-figurative style of representation. And here there is no question of any colonial overtones: Lear's poem transforms into the tale of a shapeshifting, mysterious creature.

Interestingly, these interpretations allude – perhaps unintentionally – to idea entertained by the author himself (Figure 1), who, in a private letter to Lady Waldegrave of 25 October 1873, expressed his delight at the poem's popularity and depicted his "potentate" as a clumsy hybrid of a sparrow, fish and man, signed with an orthographically incorrect variant of the title (Strachey 1911: 168):


Figure 1: An illustration of Akond of Swat included in Edward Lear's letter to Lady Waldegrave (Strachey 1911: 168).

So far, I have been able to find two graphic representations of the poem that highlight its orientalist entanglement. The first is a collector's edition published in a small print run by the Berkeley-based publisher Ian Jackson Books (Lear 1997), in which illustrator Ann Arnold uses a naïve style to outline figures in Eastern attire, resulting in awkwardly sketched silhouettes of men in shalwar, whose heads are adorned with turbans and fezzes. The sketchy, "under-drawn" illustrations seem to transpose the inept voice of the narrator – taking his point of view.

The second example is an anthology, *Poetry for Young People: Edward Lear*, edited by Edward Mendelson (2001), in which the text is prefaced with the following annotation: "the poem never tells us who the Akond of Swat might be, but there really was a person with that title: he was a religious leader in what is now Pakistan, and Lear read about him while planning a trip to India" (Mendelson 2001: 34). The page is decorated with an illustration designed by Laura Huliska-Beith, which depicts a human-like question mark seated in a comfortable armchair. He has a sharp moustache and raven-black eyebrows, an expressive nose, and a colourful fez on his "head"; he weaves his arms comfortably around a prominent dot. The armchair possibly symbolises a throne, and the personified punctuation mark brings together the most important features of the work: endless speculation with orientalist overtones. The American book cleverly sets the work in its historical context; it provides young readers with an opportunity to evaluate for themselves the tangle of fact and fiction in Lear's poem. It replaces the author's simplistic reference to the "potentate" with a closer-to-the-truth interpretation that does not exclude readers with ties to Central Asian and Eastern cultures.

The most controversial interpretation of the original poem that I have come across is the animation illustrating American jazzman Ken Nordine's composition "The Akond of Swat". Nordine included it on his album "A Transparent Mask" (2000; Lear 2000/2011), turning Lear's nonsense into a dark, disturbing melorecitation. In December 2006, three weeks before Saddam Hussein's execution, he endowed it with a new context by publishing on his YouTube channel a psychedelic music video for the song, based on a simple compositional principle: distorted portraits of dictators and war criminals appear in the frame, melting before the viewers' eyes and changing shape as if reflected in a horror-like distorting mirror (Lear 2006). It is easy to recognise Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Kim Jong Il, Khomeini or Idi Amin among the characters, and the visual refrain is constituted by the deformed face of Saddam Hussein and the animation of flames (cf. Figure 2). These visual and musical refractions give the poem a new resonance: absurd speculations interspersed with questions about the abuses of power stop being funny when Nordine recites them in a serious, revelatory voice. They begin to sound ominous, like Wisława Szymborska's musings on "Hitler's First Photograph."[7] When we consider

[7] See e.g. https://canvas.wayne.edu/courses/152001/pages/wislawa-szymborska-hitlers-first-photograph-a-poem (access: 01.05.2020).

the circumstances in which the video was made public, it can be understood as an affirmation of "war on terrorism", an artistic setting for an imminent execution. The vocal interpretation of the poem obliterates its nonsensical overtones. The visual interpretation obliterates its parodic overtones – here, the alternate foreignization and domestication of the Akond as an Oriental man (which may be seen as a travesty of imperial ignorance or arrogance), turns into an attack on the Middle-Eastern demon and other tyrants. In the process, Abdul Ghaffūr merges with Saddam Hussein and an international array of despots, confirming the validity of (neo-imperial?) stereotypes: together with the Akond they become *en masse* the embodiment of evil.

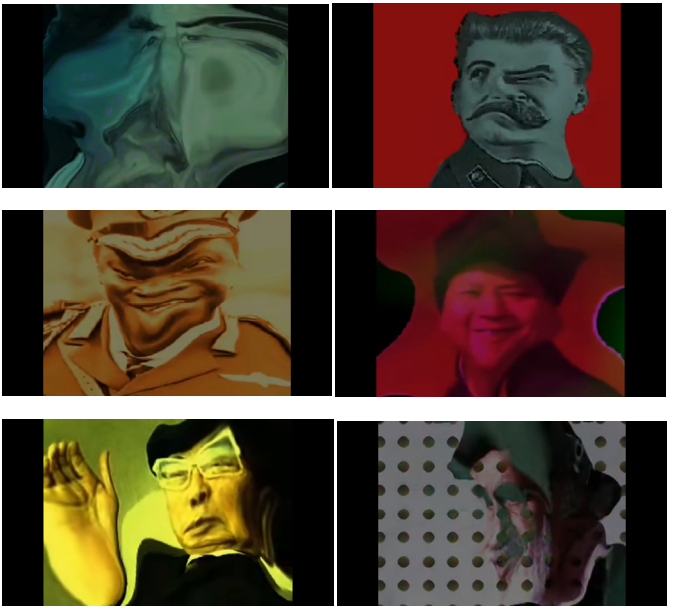

Figure 2: Selected stills from Ken Nordine's music video for "The Akond of Swat", available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhVAEBk5K_Y (access: 09.05.2020).

A lively discussion arose around the publication of the video, individual threads of which can still be followed today (one viewer turned to Nordine with the comment: "Your art is great, but your politics regrettable"; Lear 2006).

Polish renderings of the poem, which avoid interpretative dilemmas and situate Lear's text firmly in the domestic tradition of humorous verse, free of colonial overtones, will certainly not stir up similar controversy.

## Nowicki's pure nonsense

One of the main disseminators of Edward Lear's work in Poland was Andrzej Nowicki (1909–1986), humourist, radio playwriter at the Humour and Satire Editorial Board, co-founder of and contributor to the magazine "Szpilki". His extensive translation output includes illustrated books for children and young adults, classics of English-language prose (Saul Bellow, John Steinbeck, Robert Graves' *Mythology*) and selected poetic works (by authors such as Ogden Nash, T.S. Eliot and J.R.R. Tolkien). As for the Polish reception of nonsense literature, the splendidly illustrated children's books (adored by adults, too) seem to be his most important contribution. Most prominent among them is a selection of Lear's poems *Dong, co ma świecący nos, i inne wierszyki pana Leara Edwarda*, with unforgettable illustrations by Bohdan Butenko, published in 1961 by the Nasza Księgarnia publishing house. Critics considered it an important event on the book market; Artur Międzyrzecki hailed it as "one of the most brilliantly published poetry books of the season" (Międzyrzecki 1961).[8] The artist designed the volume in the form of a perfect square, using "counter print" (white on black page, vividly reminiscent of chalkboard scribbles on a school blackboard). Publishing the book required a collaboration with a typesetter's workshop in Toruń and a printing house in Łódź (n.d. 1961). It was reissued in 1973 and again in 1999, this time by the Drzewo Babel Publishing House.

Translations of Edward Lear's poetry (including "The Akond of Swat") appeared also in the collection *Takie coś* (1987) with illustrations by Krystyna Michałowska. Adult readers, on the other hand, could encounter the Akond and other nonsense characters earlier, in 1958, in the anthology *Księga nonsensu: rozsądne i nierozsądne wierszyki*… (republished in 1975 and 1986), illustrated by Janusz Stanny.

When we look at the poem "rewritten" for Polish readers by Andrzej Nowicki in the late 1950s, we can see how dominant ideology, and the poetics of "absurd and selfless humour" (Kaczorowska 2011: 235) typical of his

[8] Unless marked otherwise, all translations from Polish have been prepared by me.

generation, influence the final shape of the target text. It becomes nonsense of the purest kind: good-natured and light-hearted, self-contained, indifferent to the fate of warring tribes and the imaginary scheming of imaginary rulers. Polish editions of the poem are not prefaced with Lear's explicit mention of the "potentate". Any reference to his position as a ruler also disappears. As one can guess, allusions to the corruption of power, executions of dissidents or domestic violence, which in the source version serve to travesty the stereotype of Oriental satrap, would have been perceived in Communist Poland as a valid commentary on the current political situation, thus failing to pass the test of censorship. Neither would they have suited the childlike perspective adopted by Nowicki in his renditions of humorous verse. The translator sanitizes the motifs of violence and directs the poetic musings onto innocent, nonsensically incongruous paths. On the content plane, he presents us with a tale of the mysterious "Akond of Skwak" (a fictitious toponym associated with the onomatopoeic Polish equivalent of "quack"), who nominally retains his "teacher" status (should any reader check the meaning of the borrowing "akond" in Polish), but loses all his superior prerogatives and gains a fictional origin. "Skwak" sounds like the name of a region in Duckistan, not Pakistan. And although Nowicki develops this story according to a new formula, he applies all the fundamental mechanisms typical of Lear's nonsense. The most important among them is the incongruity of presuppositions, which results in mirroring (i.e., topsy-turvy world); simultaneity (i.e., a harmonious composition of incongruous elements); and arbitrariness (pedantry in maintaining one's own made-up rules). As in the literary original, each stanza brings different assumptions about the identity and shape of the protagonist: sometimes he is a man and sometimes an animal; sometimes he seems to be small, and sometimes large (Lear 1961/1973: n.d.):

1. Kto to czy co to? Skąd, gdzie i jak
wziął się
Akond ze Skwak?
[Is he tall, red-haired, skinny? Does he like to lie in moments of boredom on his back, the Akond of Skwak?]

2. Czy jest wysoki, rudy, chudy?
Czy lubi leżeć w chwilach nudy
na wznak
Akond ze Skwak?
[Is he tall, red-haired, skinny? Does he like to lie in moments of boredom on his back, the Akond of Skwak?]

3. Czy myśli? A gdy myśli – o czym?
Czy zawsze, gdzie utarty, kroczy,
jest szlak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[Does he think? And when he thinks – what about? Does he always take the beaten track, the Akond of Skwak?]

4. Czy śpiewa, gwiżdże, mamle i czy
Jak lew, czy raczej ciszej ryczy
jak Yak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[Does he sing, whistle, mumble, and does he roar like a lion or rather more quietly, like a yak, the Akond of Skwak?]

5. Czy robi, co mu zabroniono,
Czy nosi mundur, czy kimono,
czy frak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[Does he do what he is forbidden to, does he wear a uniform, a kimono, or a tailcoat, the Akond of Skwak?]

Some stanzas imply the protagonist is indubitably an adult, although not very mature in his behaviour:

9. Kiedy go w czegoś proszą imię,
To odpowiada wtedy im „nie”,
czy „tak”,
Akond ze Skwak?
[When they ask him in the name of something, does he answer them with “no”, or “yes”, the Akond of Skwak?]

Often, however, the narrator imagines Akond as weak and infantile, thus unmasking his own childish perspective. At the same time, it is worth noting that this perspective is profoundly good-natured: the narrator seems more empathetic than his anti-sentimental English counterpart, thinks about reality more warmly, evoking emotions and passing evaluations (e.g., embarrassment, pride, appreciation for polite behaviour):

13. Gdy komuś jakąś zrobi szkodę,
To wstydzi się jak dziewczę młode,
czy żak,
Akond ze Skwak?

[When he does harm to someone, is he is ashamed as a young girl, or as a schoolboy, the Akond of Skwak?]

14. Czy jakiś w czymś osiągnął wyczyn?
Czy do trzydziestu umie liczyć
na wspak?
Akond ze Skwak?
[Has he achieved any feat in anything? Can he count to thirty backwards? The Akond of Skwak?]

17. Czy kiedy widzi wieloryba,
To myśli, że to wielka ryba,
czy ssak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[When he sees a whale, does he think it's a big fish, or a mammal, the Akond from Skwak?]

19. Czy zawsze do drzwi pierwszy pcha się,
Czy czeka, aż do wejścia da się
mu znak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[Does he always push to the door first, or does he wait until you give him a sign to enter, the Akond of Skwak?]

The translator alludes in the poem to his native realia, the way Lear did. But while Lear plays with the juxtaposition of Oriental and ethnocentric stereotypes, Nowicki sanitizes Orientalism, but enriches the story with fantastical motifs that contrast with the down-to-earth domesticity of the tale. In doing so, he also introduces a misleading literary allusion. The source text implies that Alfred Tennyson's Lady of Shalott liked to lie on her back in a boat; in Nowicki's translation, the fratricidal prince Krak, known from Polish legends as a person who murdered his brother instead of killing the dragon, is praised for his heroic battle with the beast:

6. Czy woli barszcz, czy żur, czy rosół?
Czy pieprz wsypuje do bigosu,
czy mak,
Akond ze Skwak? (…)
[Does he prefer borscht, or sour soup, or broth? Does he put pepper in his bigos, or poppy seeds, the Akond from Skwak?]

18. A gdyby smoka gdzie zobaczył,
To uciekłby, czyby z nim walczył,
jak Krak,
Akond ze Skwak?
[And if he saw a dragon, would he flee or fight it, like Krak, the Akond of Skwak?]

The translator also reproduces with great care the subtle logical mechanisms typical of English nonsense poetry, and indicative of its imprecision. We find in the text a feigned alternative (as in the 12th stanza, where the narrator ponders Akond's attitude to the cream in the cakes and gives him no choice in the matter), and a tautology, as in the 16th stanza, where words *przecież* ('after all') and *wszak* ('after all') mean essentially the same thing and yet appear together in the text.

12. Czy lubi w ciastkach dużo kremu,
Czy też uważa raczej, że mu
go brak,
Akond ze Skwak? (…)
[Does he like a lot of cream in his cakes, or does he rather believe he lacks it, the Akond of Skwak?]

16. Lubi czy nie, kiedy go strzygą?
A przecież winien o swój wygląd
dbać wszak!
Akond ze Skwak!
[Does he like or dislike it when he gets a haircut? After all, he should take care of his appearance, after all, the Akond ze Skwak!]

On the poetic level, the translator meticulously copies the atypical versification of the original; he binds the first couplet of each stanza (written in enneasyllabic verse) with a feminine rhyme, and the second with a masculine monorhyme. He enhances the humorous effect by introducing homonymic rhymes (*jak jak*; "like a yak") and compound rhymes, absent in Lear's poem (e.g. *o czym – kroczy*), which often force readers to make erroneous paroxytonic stresses in Polish (***i*** *czy – ryczy*; *kłócą –* ***mu*** *co*; *imię –* ***im*** *nie*; *kremu –* ***że*** *mu*; *minutach –* ***mu*** *tak*). In doing so, he gives the narrator an aura of gleeful silliness and reveals a penchant for puns; he invites people to play with sound for the sake of playing. In this way, Nowicki does justice to the Victorian tradition, which bound the free flow of imagination with a tight corset of form, and which followed the principle of arbitrariness by

over-organising the text phonetically (revealing, for example, the graphic and phonetic similarity of dissimilar concepts). The translator also plays with inversion, e.g., *Czy zawsze, gdzie utarty, kroczy jest szlak*? (lit. "does he always, where the beaten path is, go?"); *A palto swe na gwóźdź, czy wiesza na hak?* (lit. "And does he his coat on a nail, or rather on a hook hang?") and mixes registers, using lexis and grammar in a peculiar fashion. The whole poem, as the title of the Polish anthology suggests, "invented" by Mr Lear and "written" by Andrzej Nowicki, gives readers a good idea of the style of each of the two authors, while entirely removing the colonial echoes present in the original.

The Polish illustrators of Nowicki's translation do the same, reflecting the mechanisms of pure nonsense by visual means. In his unforgettable graphic design for the 1961 edition, Bohdan Butenko transposes the infantile point of view of the narrator, using naïve visual style and simplified, childlike lines. The text is presented on a black background in clumsy handwriting, reminiscent of chalk calligraphy exercises, almost as if the narrator were writing down his incongruous thoughts in person. Poetic form is enhanced by graphological means: the badly formed letters indicate his spontaneity and childishness; the size of the characters and the thickness of the line reflect his emotional attitude to the different alternatives he considers (which are, as previously mentioned, more visible in Nowicki than in Lear).[9]

Butenko combines the handwritten text with figurative elements; these usually represent an extremely simplified stick figure of the eponymous character (simple lines representing his limbs, an oval representing his body, above it a blank circle with no facial features, topped with straws of hair and an outline of a hat), together with more detailed images of the supporting characters: props involved in the story (pies, birds, a dragon, a whale), and the entities to which Akond is compared (for example, a blushing girl or a huge hare hidden behind a miniature bush).

Butenko's delightful doodles have an indexical rather than iconic function: they are a symptom of the narrator's state of mind rather than a concretisation of some recognisable reality. By interspersing Akond's faceless images with those of hares, comb-like yaks or dragons, Butenko emphasises their fictionality, ludicism and incredulity: they are all products of the narrator's imagination. It is worth noting that the 'ineptitude' of Butenko's style

[9] Illustrations can be viewed at the Publisher's website, http://drzewobabel.pl/shared/dong/dong_fragment.html (access: 05.05.2020).

is a Polish analogue of simplified nonsense drawings produced by Edward Lear, an otherwise outstanding and meticulous draughtsman who specialised in photorealistic nature illustration. The flatness of non-perspectival images transposes the nonsense procedure of arbitrariness. It heralds the triumph of an individual point of view: the creator formulates his own rules of visual representation instead of learning somebody else's. At the same time, it also appeals to the tastes of the youngest readers.

The illustrations by Krystyna Michalowska, on the other hand,[10] follow a surreal fairy-tale convention: they concretise and validate the incongruous musings of the narrator. Two scenes depicted by the artist show Akond, who is "cheerful like a sparrow or a starling" (15), and who fights a dragon "like Krak" (18). In both, he takes on a human form and resembles a gnome: he is red-haired, long-nosed and dressed in a vaguely historical courtly costume: a top hat, frock-coat, neckerchief and poulaines. He is surrounded by a fantastic landscape: at one moment he is doing somersaults on the leaves of a large blue rose, observed by huge birds; at another he is running down the slope of a volcano to escape a three-headed dragon. The composition of motifs captured in the images follows the principle of mirroring and simultaneity: cornflower roses look like trees, birds are larger than humanoid creatures, and a dandy walker seems surprised by the sight of a monstrous dragon towards which he has been heading. At the same time, the visual style deviates significantly from its verbal equivalent. The point of view adopted by the illustrator is not in itself naïve or ludic; it is a mature "fairy-tale" approach to the matter of nonsense. Illustrations put forward desirable interpretative paths, explaining the absurdities of the poem to children, rather than translating these absurdities into visual language. They still have a humorous dimension, but it becomes more obvious when we compare them with the text and notice, for example, the incongruity between Akond-Krak's implied heroism in the poem and his cowardice in the picture. Akond 'redrawn' by Butenko is a shape-shifting enigma – a travesty of rational thought and of mature vision of the world. Akond 'redrawn' by Michałowska is a coherent fairy-tale character cast in a fairy-tale role. None of them, of course, has anything in common with the 19th-century religious leader of the warlike Pathans.

[10] Some of which can be viewed online, e.g. https://jarmila09.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/takie-coc59b_blog.jpg (access: 05.05.2020).

## Baranczak's impure nonsense

And neither does the eponymous character presented in the second translation of Edward Lear's poem, published by a celebrated Polish poet and translator Stanisław Barańczak in his anthology *Fioletowa krowa: 333 najsławniejsze okazy angielskiej i amerykańskiej poezji niepoważnej…* (1993/2007), and later in *44 opowiastki* (1998). Both anthologies were aimed at the adult reader and lacked illustrations, although the latter was adapted for the stage by Helena Modrzewska Theatre in Legnica in 2016 as a children's play *Polowanie na Snarka* ("The hunting of the Snark").

Stanisław Barańczak's version demonstrates his general attitude towards nonsense poetry and light verse, identified by Polish literary scholars (c.f., Kaczorowska 2011 Tarnogórska 2014). In an excellent sketch, Maria Tarnogórska points to a clear genre shift in his renditions of literary nonsense. Following his own aesthetic and ethical ideals, Barańczak tends to impart a strongly parodistic tone to his translations, thus setting new norms for domestic humorous verse. As the researcher emphasises, literary nonsense has always been thought to express not so much a **lack** of meaning as a **parody** of meaning. It transgressed against the tyranny of rationality and played with conventional ways of thinking, rather than affirmed thoughtlessness (Tarnogorska 2014: 41). However, the parodic qualities of "classic nonsense [written] under the banner of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear" are difficult to recognise today; Barańczak, meanwhile, reaches for an "ostentatious and complex" style that forces us "to recognise broadly understood parody as one of the primary means of shaping nonsensical effect" (Tarnogórska 2014: 41–42). The translator thus engages in a polemic against the humorous poetics of his predecessors. As Tarnogórska emphasises, the aim of the "game, which a translator plays with the literary original" is to 'rewrite' the text in a more sophisticated convention that deviates from the infantilising vision of children's nonsense" (2014: 42).

Imposing his mature outlook on the poem, Barańczak removes any references to the historical and geographical reality of present-day Pakistan, referring to the protagonist as "Jakąd of Wszczot". The consonance of these Polish neologisms with the original title (Kaczorowska 2011: 163), the anthroponym being a blend of adverbs (presumably *jak* "how" and *skąd* "whence" or *dokąd* "where to") and the invented toponym being a true tongue-twister in Polish, all show the linguistic complexity of Barańczak's poetics and the

disappearance of some conceptual mechanisms typical of the source text. Above all, the incongruity of presuppositions becomes obliterated: Jakąd of Wszczot invariably appears as an adult, most likely a certain eccentric dignitary (although at times his social status and manners may seem incoherent).

In post-communist Poland, Barańczak adjusts the poetics of the Victorian author to his own linguistic convictions, and turns the original parody of the British coloniser's nonchalance and obscurantism into a humorous tale of a fictional dignitary, which gradually transforms into a reflection on the abuse of power. As in his other translations of humorous verse, Barańczak amplifies the stylistic and conceptual devices present in the original, most notably enumeration. This is evident, for example, in the first stanza, in which a series of incongruous questions about the protagonist's ontological status becomes more coherent (he is invariably "someone"), and gains an additional pun (the question *skąd i odkąd* "whence and starting where/since when [is he]" can be read both spatially or temporally) (Lear 1998: 64–69):

1. Kim jest, skąd i odkąd, po co jest i od
Czego
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Who is he, from where and since when, why is he and what for, Jakąd of Wszczot].

The same happens in other stanzas: the translator multiplies exotic alternatives, belonging to different historical, geographical and stylistic contexts. In doing so, he employs sophisticated rhetorical devices absent from the simple-minded original: periphrases ("covering nakedness" with pieces of attire instead of "wearing" them), or synecdoches ("donning a wellington"). Such devices heighten the impression of seriality and a topsy-turvydom, being both pedantic and semantically deficient, whilst also revealing amusing conceptual meanderings (such as "covering nakedness with armour"). At the same time, these stylistic devices transform the narrator: they strip him of his childish naivety and endow him with knowledge and social experience:

3. Kto, ujrzawszy go w tłumie, zawoła: „O, rodak!"?
Czy wzuwa kalosz, sandał, botfort, ciżmę, chodak
Czy BOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Who, having seen him in the crowd, will call out: "Oh, compatriot!"? Does he put on a wellington, a sandal, a riding boot, a poulaine, a clog or an overshoe, Jakąd ze Wszczot?]

4. Czy nagość kryje togą? Zbroją? Giezłem? Frakiem?
Czy siada na tron, zydel, sofę, czy okrakiem
Na PŁOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he cover his nakedness with a toga? With armour? A peasant shirt? A tailcoat? Does he sit on a throne, a stool, a sofa, or straddle a fence, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

Engaged in his conceptual play, Barańczak imitates and multiplies conundrums typical of Victorian nonsense poetry, resulting in incongruity. He creates, for example, a pleonastic image of tying a weave in knots; he offers absurd alternatives (such as reading a newspaper or tearing it); he investigates the use of diacritical marks while spelling words that do not require them and reveals Polish cultural obsessions:

2. Czy jest wysoki? niski? blady? szczupły?
Jeśli włosy ma bujne, czy związuje w supły
ich SPLOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Is he tall? short? pale? Thin? If his hair is luxuriant, does he tie it in knots their weave, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

5. Czyta prasę codzienną czy też drze ją w strzępy?
Odznacza się polotem czy raczej jest tępy
Jak MŁOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he read the daily press or does he tear it to shreds? Does he have panache or is he dull like a hammer, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

7. Kiedy kaligrafuje list: „Kochany Szwagrze!" –
Czy stawia kropkę ponad każdym „I" czy także
Nad „JOT"
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[When he calligraphs a letter: "Dear Brother-in-law!" - Does he put a dot above every "I" or also above the "J", Jakąd of Wszczot?]

15. Czy chętniej je sałaty czy też salcesony?
Czy NA spodnie zazwyczaj wciąga kalesony
Czy POD
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Is he more likely to eat lettuces or headcheeses? Does HE usually pull his longjohns on top of his trousers, or uder, Jakąd of Wszczot?]
16. Czy lubi woń kotleta, gdy w kuchni się smaży,

Czy woli w świeżej bryzie, na odludnej plaży
Czuć JOD,
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he like the fragrance of pork chops when in the kitchen? Or does he prefer in a fresh breeze, on a deserted beach To smell the yodh, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

He enhances the humorous effect by mixing formal and informal, literary and colloquial styles. This strategy can be seen, for example, in the elevated and earthy "fragrance of pork chops" quoted above, or the contrast between "panache" and "dullness of a hammer", but it is perhaps most readily apparent in the sixth stanza, when the subject abruptly abandons sophisticated language and reaches for startling, emotionally charged colloquialisms that defy the irreverence and antisentimentality of classical nonsense:

6. Czy śpiewa? Gwiżdże? Ględzi? Ryczy: „Ja chromolę!"?
Używa życia – czy na spracowanym czole
Ma POT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he sing? Whistle? Prattle? Roar: "I'll be damned!" Does he enjoy life or does he have sweat on his tired out forehead, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

In contrast to Nowicki's innocent vision, Barańczak pays considerable attention to the themes of Jakąd as a dignitary. Where Lear promotes the colonial stereotype of an oriental ruler, the translator builds up a stereotypical image of a civil servant who gains more and more prerogatives with each successive stanza, eventually turning out to be a tyrant or a monarch, a person who, by implication, can perform military functions, has subjects and butlers:

8. Czy w każdej sprawie słucha odgórnych dyktatów,
Czy sam dyktuje co dzień setki ultimatów
I NOT
Jakąd ze Wszot?
[Does he listen to top-down dictates on every issue, or does he himself dictate hundreds of ultimatums and notes every day, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

9. Czy szepczą o nim ze czcią „Mąż Opatrznościowy!",
Czy przeciwnie, nie umie uniknąć obmowy
I PLOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?

[Do they reverently whisper of him "Saviour!" Or, on the contrary, is he incapable of avoiding aspersion and gossip, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

10. Czy, kiedy krytykanta dostanie w swe ręce,
Wdaje się z nim w dyskusję, czy też grozi: „Skręcę
Cię w KNOT!" –
Jakąd ze Wszot?
[Or, when he gets his hands on a nitpicker, does he engage in discussion with him, or does he threaten: "I will twist you into a wick!", Jakąd of Wszczot?]

11. Tyran zeń – czy monarcha czuły jak gołąbek?
Własny pomnik myć każe przy pomocy gąbek
Czy SZCZOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Is he a tyrant or a monarch tender as a dove? Does he order his monument to be washed with sponges or brushes, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

12. Ma specjalnych balwierzy, czy też sam się goli?
Czy po dniu rządów skłonny jest do melancholii
Czy PSOT
Jakąd ze Wszczot? (…)
[Does he have special barbers or does he shave himself? Is he prone to melancholy after a day's reign? Or to pranks? Jakąd of Wszczot?]

14. Gdy w szpitalu kuruje stłuczony pośladek,
Dostaje od poddanych pudła czekoladek
Czy SZPROT
Jakąd ze Wszczot? (…)
[While in hospital treating a bruised buttock, does he get from his subjects boxes of chocolates or sprats, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

19. Czy je kompot łyżeczką, czy lokaj go karmi?
Czy głównodowodzącym jest rozlicznych armii
I FLOT,
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he eat compote with a spoon, or does the butler feed him? Is he the commander-in-chief of a multitude of armies and fleets, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

Comparig the two versions, Jakąd seems less bestial than Akond, who is proficient in executions. Threats that he is suspected of hurling at his contesters of "twisting them into a wick" also have a comical effect, yet in Lear's version humour was triggered by the narrator's dispassionate tone, while in Barańczak's version it is triggered by the threatener's sick imagination.

It seems, however, that with each stanza (even the one describing Jakąd's treatment of his bruised buttock), Barańczak further develops in a veiled, humorous form, the theme of the privileges and degradations of power. In Lear, intrusive reflections on totalitarianism, crime, chauvinism or domestic violence prompt a revision of stereotypes, by parodying colonial ignorance and ethnocentrism. In Barańczak, reflections on bureaucratic routine, censorship, the privileges of power or megalomania are intended to ridicule a totalitarian system that forces citizens to be obsequious and to tend to the buttocks of their dignitaries. Under the guise of parody, Barańczak encourages serious reflection on the failings of the system. That being his primary goal, he interestingly transforms the image of marital relations, portraying Jakąd as a husband who lives under his wife's thumb. This may have aided the translator in emphasising the character's inherent weakness, masked by systemic violence:

20. Czy miota się i pieni w urażonej dumie,
Słysząc przytyki żony, czy raczej rozumie
Ją W LOT,
Jakąd ze Wszczot?
[Does he toss and froth in offended pride, hearing his wife's taunts, or rather does he understand her in the blink of an eye, Jakąd of Wszczot?]

The last stanza in Barańczak's translation comes logically close to the original, but is amplified:

23. Ktoś wie – albo Nikt nie wie – gdzie ów Szyfr czy Kod,
Który objaśni, kim jest, skąd, po co i od
Czego
Jakąd ze Wszczot!
[Someone knows – or No One knows – where this Cipher or Code is, which will explain who, whence, why and what for Jakąd of Wszczot is!]

In terms of form, just like his predecessor Barańczak reproduces the original versification, although he uses a more capacious Polish alexandrine in the couplets, which accommodates elaborate auditory and rhetorical effects. He often reaches for rich rhymes, based on the similarity of longer sequences of sounds (*frakiem – okrakiem*, *szwagrze – także*; *ręce – skręcę*; *wiedza – zwiedza*). In this respect, he differs from Nowicki, who enhanced the comic effect by using seemingly naïve compound rhymes. Barańczak surpasses Lear in rhetorical mastery: he uses elaborate enumerations, synecdoches,

metaphors, sophisticated official, archaic and colloquial vocabulary, absent in the original. As both Monika Kaczorowska and Maria Tarnogórska emphasise, by turning to linguism, Barańczak takes issue both with Lear's poetics, and with the dada poetics of the older generation of Polish translators. To quote Kaczorowska:

> Barańczak is a stranger to this type of humour: even in his volumes of light verse, comism is brought under control of the genre; it is always intellectual, linguistic humour that he is after, demonstrating the possibilities or limitations of language. Barańczak's poetics subsumes satire, parody and irony: genres, tricks and tropes referring to something, aimed at someone; he also searches for metaphysical meanings in the nonsense verse he translates (Kaczorowska 2011: 236).

In the poem, the narrator's point of view shifts: his tone becomes critical, as if he resents a character about whom he allegedly knows nothing. Lear's narrator makes a fool of himself with his unconscious prejudice and insensitivity, whilst Barańczak's narrator shows life wisdom in his suspiciousness. Kaczorowska aptly describes this mechanism, summarising Barańczak's views on nonsense poetry: "the translator attributes metaphysical depth to it, he considers it an artistic response to the horror of existence, for laughter (comic quality), alongside irony and poetic sophistication, is for Barańczak a remedy for the experience of suffering (as a gesture of individual rebellion)" (Kaczorowska 2011: 141). Thus, a joke inspired by a newspaper note becomes a pretext for serious existential reflections disguised as light verse; poetry changes its genre properties, transforms into parodic nonsense, and acquires "the hallmarks of a literary practice of an intellectual and sophisticated (…) nature" (Tarnogórska 2014: 49).

## Akond in a kaleidoscope

Contemporary incarnations of Akond/Jakąd encourage readers to follow different paths of reflection: some amuse, others delight; some frighten, others instil existential angst. Interestingly, the ideological and aesthetic shifts that the text undergoes on genre maps (and on political maps at the same time), result as much from interlingual translation practices as from editorial decisions. Lear's historically entangled nonsense is "purified" by Andrzej Nowicki, but also by an international group of illustrators. It "gets dirty" and complicated thanks to Barańczak's parodist bent, but also thanks to

Nordine's anti-parodist appropriation. Each new edition of the poem reveals a different face of Akond. If we continue to be curious as to "where this Cipher or Code is, which will explain who, whence, why and what for" our mysterious hero is, the answer seems simple: it exists in the imagination of translators, editors, adaptors and illustrators, who must find their own key to open Lear's endless speculations.

**Trans. by Agata Hołobut**

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