

Title: Two Approaches to Edward Lear's Nonsense Songs
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One method of approach to Edward Lear's nonsense songs, what might be called the traditional method if there were anything like a body of Lear criticism, is to regard the songs as nearly perfect confections of romantic poetry, to see them as self-contained descriptions of life in the green world. Aldous Huxley suggests, "Change the key ever so little and '**The Dong With a Luminous Nose**' would be one of the most memorable romantic poems of the nineteenth century."¹ The "ever so little" is very significant. Lear's green world is not a Forest of Arden where bad people reform. It is a world where there are for the most part no people of any kind, no real human beings. The central characters of the songs do have a lot of human characteristics, but they meet few people and even few other humanoid animals, animals not in the dramatic personae at the very beginning of a poem. And the people--and whatnot--they do meet are always types from a very limited range.

Far and few, far and few
Are the lands where the Jumbles live.

In fact, the key to the romantic charm Lear's songs do have seems to be to a large extent the result of the melancholy apartness of the characters from any kind of traditionally organized society. The typical concern of the few central characters of a song is romantic relationship with each other. Romantic longing is a motif. The courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò is the sort of thing we find. The Jumbles and the Dong are looking and looking, always looking. But the ultimate situation for a Lear nonsense song is the marriage of two green-world creatures who would be bitter enemies in the real world--or at least incompatible there. The strange couples Lear habitually establishes place especially strong emphasis on the need for love in his green world. Not only is marriage everywhere in the green world, but the most unlikely marriages are everywhere. The kangaroo lies down with the duck; the spider is a friend to the fly. But Lear's theme is not simply that all creatures love one another in his dehumanized green world. His moral is narrower, less traditional. He seems to be saying something like: This perverse relationship between two animals is the only one left and the only one available because these are the only two creatures about in the naked landscape of the green world, in the cardboard world painted a solid, flat, unrelieved pea-green.

"**The Owl and the Pussycat**," Lear's most famous poem, is the one that most clearly adopts this point of view. At the beginning of the poem Owl and Pussycat go out to sea, setting themselves apart from the normal world by the very color of their boat--pea-green: green, suggesting the green world for which they are searching, but frivolous pea-green, making clear that the search is not serious comedy, not real romance. But the romance elements of the story are numerous and clear. Owl and Pussycat take food and money with them as if to establish themselves in a little society apart from the world (of course their provisions are parodic). Owl is infatuated with Pussycat and sings a love song to her, serenading her with the traditional romantic guitar under the traditional stars. Pussycat is charmed by the sweetness of the song and herself proposes marriage. After a ritual engagement of a year and a day, during which they sail away to a vague and distant land marked off from the real world by the Bong Trees that grow in it, they do get married. They have the traditional wedding breakfast of romance and then dance away as the poem ends in the tradition of romantic comedy. Howard Moss, in the introduction to his edition of Lear's nonsense, suggests that the romanticism and the haunting quality of the whole poem are to a large extent built out of the extensive repetitions that occur in the refrain lines of its stanzas.² Owl and Pussycat do dance away in the light of the moon, but the lines that say they do read:

They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon,
The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

The repetition is insistent enough to be almost incantatory. Moss's commentary is illuminating. The mere fact that there seems to be nothing else to say at the same time that there is a clear and immediate need that something be said gives the poem its urgency. It becomes horribly clear that there is great emptiness someplace in the universe. But the green world cannot be the place of this emptiness because it is before the

reader's eyes in all the reality of verbalization--insistent, repetitious verbalization. The world of the poem must be real because the reader believes in it enough to read about it. The world of the poem has an immediate if tenuous reality, so the emptiness is turned away from the green world of the poem onto the normal world that has no part in the poem. Horrible loneliness may throw the central characters of a Lear song together, but the characters are no longer lonely in the world and marriage they have. This is their escape. In "**Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos**," Mr. Discobolos sees the danger of the empty social forms of the normal world as being so great that he finds death preferable for himself and his whole family. The joy of the green world is that fragile. This "note of melancholy desolation" in Lear's songs, as J. T. Brockway calls it, is especially explicit in a poem such as "**Calico Pie**" with its repeated "They never came back."³ "They never came back" is a refrain of several of Lear's songs, a theme of all of them.

But "melancholy desolation" and escape to the green world are only part of Lear's theme. A second approach can fruitfully be taken to Lear's nonsense songs. They need to be understood as a body of literature peculiarly stamped by their author's personality. When we dismiss nonsense as "only nonsense" or judge it to be "pure romance," we may have appreciated a great part of what it has to offer but we cannot have begun to understand how it goes about making its offering. Twenty years ago George Orwell was able to point out that "it is easy to guess there was something wrong in [Lear's] sex life,"⁴ and his suspicions have since been documented by Rupert Croft-Cooke and Vivien Noakes.⁵ But the psychological quirks and obsessions that are so easy--perhaps too easy--for the sophisticated mind to read into Lear's nonsense have yet to be made use of in a critical understanding of it. And Lear's psychological peculiarities, while irrelevant to an appreciation of the fun of his nonsense, cannot be regarded as merely his own personal business, because they are what his nonsense is about, what it presents under comic disguises. The limericks have for a long time been recognized as presenting a picture of Lear as a man with a narrow range of rather explicit obsessions--noses, beards, eating, growth, age. But many a nonsense song, as has not been widely noted, goes even further and plays with an obsession to suggest a thesis about it--that is, works out a complete theme through comic disguise.

Consider "**The Pobble Who Has No Toes**." "Who has no toes" is a persistent refrain, almost a Homeric epithet. The Pobble cannot so much as be mentioned without the central fact of his life's being mentioned too. His toelessness becomes terribly, metaphysically important. And the cold but perceptive *they*, the hard-headed people of the world who figure so prominently in Lear's nonsense,⁶ see from the beginning that the Pobble is bound to lose his toes, that losing his toes is going to be the theme of the Pobble's life. *They* are pointing out to him by the third line of the poem that "someday [he] may lose them all." Since the Pobble lives with his aunt and seems to have no parents, he is, the reader assumes, dependent and young and has had, to some extent, an unnatural childhood. His aunt is very concerned about his toes and gives him a tonic specially designed as good for them. When he sets out to seek the world in the immemorial fashion of youth, specifically to swim the Bristol Channel, he protects his toes by wrapping up his nose in scarlet flannel. The suggestion of sexual displacement becomes at this point inescapable. The male genitalia are at the root of the Pobble's problem. The color is, as usual in Lear, explicit. The Pobble's nose has a long, symbolic tradition behind it. The point is that by choosing to make his poem about Freudian displacement and comic disguise--that is, by having his character express his concern about his toes by doing something to his nose--Lear tells his reader to speculate that maybe Pobble and poet are concerned about neither toes nor nose, but about sexual potency and the possibility of castration.⁷

At any rate, a sudden stanza later, the Pobble, having carelessly lost his magic and symbolic flannel, discovers he has lost his practical and real toes as well. But he loses his toes in two solid stanzas of hypothesis and vagueness. Obviously something important enough to talk about for two stanzas happened; but what happened is not the sort of thing that can be talked about straightforwardly. The Pobble lost his toes "in a manner so far from pleasant," but he did not realize they were gone till he happened to look down at his feet. At the same time, the poet suggests many ways the Pobble might have lost his toes, but he and the world and the poet do not know for sure how he lost them. The second of these two stanzas ends with the interesting paraphrasis that he was robbed of his "twice five toes." The appropriate dual number is insisted on. When the Pobble gets home, his aunt plies and soothes him with food, a rather sensible and likely substitution for the potency he has lost, at least symbolically. The aunt shows herself a true vicarious parent by observing unnecessarily that

It's a fact the whole world knows,
That Pobbles are happier without their toes.

Her philosophicality disguises her relief that she did not have to perform the operation herself.

Lear lends himself to sexual explication rather readily. His very favorite word, *runcible*, for example, can be taken as pure nonsense and a charming irrelevance whenever it occurs. But there is such a thing as a runcible spoon, a kind of fork with two short blunt prongs and one long, curved, pointed one--a virtual sculpture of the male genitalia, something never far from Lear's mind. Lear even ingenuously describes himself as wearing a runcible hat ("**How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!**"). And it is only charmingly and not grossly inappropriate in "**The Owl and the Pussycat**" that the two lovers eat their wedding breakfast with a runcible spoon. And of course it was for his aunt's runcible cat, with its crimson whiskers, that onlookers assume the Pobble is searching when he is out in the Bristol Channel. A suspicion that there is sex everywhere in Lear is readily rewarded. It is not casually that the reader decides Pussycat is female. At one level Owl's serenade is quite gross and explicit:

O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love
What a beautiful Pussy you are,

You are,
You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!

Where this kind of analysis ultimately leads, however, is another issue. Where it leads immediately is to the Dong with the luminous nose. Sometimes in Lear's nonsense songs the comic disguise and sexual displacement work beautifully, as in "**The Owl and the Pusycat**," and sometimes they work well, as in "**The Pobble Who Has No Toes**." Sometimes a poem is a consistent whole on its own terms and can be read and understood from a point of view that finds it sexually symbolic as well as from one that regards it as pure romantic nonsense. But sometimes Lear's obsessions just get in the way. "**The Dong With a Luminous Nose**" simply does not hold up as romantic melancholy. Lear here straps on the artificial apparatus right before the reader's eyes:

And he wove him a wondrous Nose,--
A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!
Of vast proportions and painted red,
And tied with cords to the back of his head.
--In a hollow rounded space it ended
With a luminous Lamp within suspended,
All fenced about
With a bandage stout
To prevent the wind from blowing it out;--
And with holes all round to send the light,
In gleaming rays on the dismal night.

You would have to have the wit of a six-year-old not to laugh at this. But you are not laughing in the spirit of the poem. You cannot laugh with the Dong--because the poet does not recognize phallic worship when he participates in it. The comic character here is the poet himself. And you are embarrassed for him because he does not realize how funny he is.

What keeps "**The Dong With a Luminous Nose**" from being one of the memorable romantic poems of the nineteenth century is its gaucherie. The theory of the green world cannot explain the unfunny and the embarrassingly ludicrous in Lear. Serious attention to Lear's sexual obsessions is helpful in understanding all his poetry. It is necessary for understanding why some of his poems are failures or partial failures, why some of his poems are ridiculous, rather than sublime, nonsense.

Notes

¹Aldous Huxley, "Edward Lear" in *On the Margin* (London, 1928), pp. 168-169. C. M. Bowra, "The Romantic Achievement," *The Romantic Imagination* (London, 1949), pp. 278-280, makes basically the same point.

²Howard Moss, ed., *The Nonsense Books of Edward Lear* (New York, 1964), pp. xvi-xviii. I have taken my Lear quotations from this text.

³J. T. Brockway, "Edward Lear: Poet," *Fortnightly Review*, N.S. 167 (1950), 334-339.

⁴George Orwell, "Nonsense Poetry," *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (New York, 1950), pp. 189-190.

⁵Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (New York, 1967), pp. 147-153; Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer* (Boston, 1969), pp. 250-251, 260n.

⁶Huxley, pp. 169-172; Orwell, pp. 190-191.

⁷Though it may be true, as Angus Davidson shows (*Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet* [New York, 1939], photographs passim and Ch. i), that Lear did have a big nose, he had more than just that. You cannot be so inordinately concerned with noses as he was, you cannot be so consistently interested in their hugeness, you cannot tell so many stories as he does about noses that get snipped off, without being obsessed with other things as well. See also S. A. Nock's review of Davidson's book, "Lacrimae Nugarum: Edward Lear of the Nonsense Verses," *Sewanee Review*, XLIX (1941), 68-81.

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A selection of nonsense poems, songs (not sung!), stories, and miscellaneous strangeness. The work includes the "Owl and the Pussycat" and a recipe for Amblongus Pie, which begins "Take 4 pounds (say 4½ pounds) of fresh ablongusses and put them in a small pipkin." Edward Lear was an English writer, poet, cat-lover, and illustrator (his watercolours are beautiful). This recording celebrates the 200th anniversary of Lear's birth. (Summary by Adrian Praetzellis). Arts. One method of approach to Edward Lear's nonsense songs, what might be called the traditional method if there were anything like a body of Lear criticism, is to regard the songs as nearly perfect confections of romantic poetry, to see them as self-contained descriptions of life in the green world. Aldous Huxley suggests, "Change the key ever so little and 'The Dong With a Luminous Nose' would be one of the most." But the ultimate situation for a Lear nonsense song is the marriage of two green-world creatures who would be bitter enemies in the real world--or at least incompatible there. The strange couples Lear habitually establishes place especially strong emphasis on the need for love in his green world. Nonsense Songs book. Read 9 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. This book was converted from its physical edition to the digital form. Edward Lear was an English artist, illustrator and writer known for his literary nonsense, in poetry and prose, and especially his limericks, a form which he popularized. For more information, please see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Lear. Other books in the series.

Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets. By Edward Lear. With One Hundred and Fifty Illustrations. 1894. Originally published 1871. 1894 Cover [Click for larger version](#). Nonsense Songs. The Owl and the Pussy-Cat. The Duck and the Kangaroo. NONSENSE SONGS. The Owl and the Pussy-Cat The Duck and the Kangaroo The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly The Jumblies The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs Calico Pie Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow The Broom, the Shovel, the Poker, and the Tongs The Table And The Chair. The owl and the pussy-cat. I. The Owl and the Pussy-Cat went to sea In a beautiful pea-green boat: They took some honey, and plenty of money Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

Lear, Edward, *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*. Ed. Vivian Noakes. Davidson, Angus, *Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet*. London: John Murray, 1938. Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Hilbert, Richard A., "Approaching Reason's Edge: 'Nonsense' as the Final Solution to the Problem of Meaning," *Sociological Inquiry*, 47.1 (1977): 25-31. Huxley, Aldous, "Edward Lear," in *On the Margin* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1923), pp. 167-172. Lecercle, Jean-Jacques, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. LibriVox recording of *NONSENSE SONGS, STORIES, BOTANY AND ALPHABETS*, by EDWARD LEAR. Read by Adrian Praetzellis. A selection of nonsense poems, songs (not sung!), stories, and miscellaneous strangeness. The work includes the "Owl and the Pussycat" and a recipe for Amblongus Pie, which begins "Take 4 pounds (say 4½ pounds) of fresh ablongusses and put them in a small pipkin." Edward Lear was an English writer, poet, cat-lover, and illustrator (his watercolours are beautiful). This recording celebrates the 200th anniversary of Lear's birth. (Summary by Adrian Praetzellis)

Edward Lear was the 21st of 22 children! Alas, This little book (fits within your hand) of nonsense rhymes put a big smile on my face. It has become my new go-to companion for whenever I visit the animal shelter, as it's easy to carry and the older dogs patiently sit and listen as I read to them. They seem to appreciate Mr. Lear. They went to sea in a Sieve, they did, In a Sieve they went to sea; In spite of all their friends could say, On a winter's morn, on a stormy day, In a Sieve they went to sea! Edward Lear was the 21st of 22 children! Alas, the mother wasn't particularly Edward Lear's Nonsense Songs. The Secret Life of Books Series 2. Episode 2 of 6. Nicholas Parsons explores the fine line between joy and melancholy in Edward Lear's writing and discovers how this epileptic, asthmatic depressive pioneered a new kind of poetry. Show more. Nicholas Parsons, a lifelong fan of Edward Lear, revisits the book that gave the world The Owl and the Pussycat to explore the fine line between joy and melancholy in Lear's writing and discover how the epileptic, bronchial, asthmatic depressive pioneered a new kind of poetry that married brilliant wordplay with Edward Lear: laureate of nonsense. By holbrook jackson. 1. Just over a hundred years ago the children of England (and also many older folk) were surprised into entertainment by the appearance "out of the blue" of an oblong book of hilarious rhymes and still more hilarious pictures by an author hitherto unknown to the general public. There are several ways of approaching the fine arts and particularly that of an artist so peculiar as Edward Lear, for although the entertainment value of the Book of Nonsense and its pendants is obvious, the personality and motives behind that work will repay examination.

Edward Lear's Birds, Country Life, April 1972. MILLER, Edmund, Two Approaches to Edward Lear's Songs, Victorian Newsletter, 44, 1973, pp. 5-8. MONOD, Silvanore, Introduction to Edward Lear, Nonsense Poems/Poèmes sans sens, Paris, Aubier-Flammarion, 1974, pp. 11-55. BOUISSAC, Paul, Decoding Limericks: a Structuralist Approach, Semiotica, 19, 1977, pp. 1-12. HARK, Ina Rae, Edward Lear: Eccentricity and Victorian 'angst', Victorian Poetry, 16, 1978, pp. 112-22. EHRENPREIS, Anne Henry, Edward Lear Signs Tennyson's Songs, Harvard Library Bulletin, 27, 1979, pp. 65-85. ROBINSO Nonsense Songs The Owl and the Pussycat The Duck and the Kangaroo The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly The Jumblies The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs Calico Pie Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow The Broom, the Shovel, the Poker and the Tongs The Table and the Chair. Nonsense Stories The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple. Nonsense Cookery. Nonsense Botany. Nonsense Alphabets [1] [2] [3]. [Home] [Table of Contents] [Lear's Nonsense Books]. There was an Old Derry down Derry Edward Lear's Nonsense Poetry and A Lear, Edward, 1812-1888; Brooke, L. Leslie (Leonard Leslie), 1862-1940, ill. Publication date. [1910?] Publisher. London : Warne. Collection. newyorkpubliclibrary; americana. Evidence reported by scanner-nicole-deyo for item nonsensesongs00lear2 on July 13, 2007: no visible notice of copyright; exact publication date unknown. Copyright-evidence-date. 20070713183704. Copyright-evidence-operator. scanner-nicole-deyo. Copyright-region. US.