

«Sensational nonsense» Edward Lear and the (Im)purity of Nonsense Writing

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Abstract The article explores Edward Lear's contribution to the Victorian aesthetic debate, characterized by a marked resistance to the literary use of sensation (epitomised in Wilkie Collins' fiction), and in which, according to Bourdieu and to many critics after him, the so-called cultural divide between high art and mass culture originated. In particular, the analysis verifies the degree of 'impureness' of Lear's nonsense, a hybrid genre that has often been apprehended as literarily and socially subversive. After a brief discussion of the main features of this genre and its acknowledged 'parodic' quality, the study examines Lear's engagement with 'high' and 'low' literary conventions in «Growling Eclogue» and «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» (whose second part was expressly written at Wilkie Collins' suggestion), with the aim of investigating if and to what extent Lear's crossing of genres and use of bizarre and at times grotesque literary images blur (and question) the boundaries between élite and popular culture.

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Keywords Aesthetic debate. Edward Lear. Nonsense. Sensationalism.

1 Introduction

Natural illustrator, travel writer, landscape painter, nonsense poet – in all his artistic *personae*, the figure of Edward Lear conjures up a variety of contradictory images, which reflect the manifold facets of his unique personality. In one of his popular limericks, he famously referred to himself as «A Man who lived on the Border». Indeed, in both his life and artistic career, Lear repeatedly defied most Victorian social and aesthetic conventions.

For all their mirth and liveliness, his correspondence and diaries convey the impression of a remarkable character often confined in a liminal space: his social alienation and predilection for the children's company at Knowsley Hall, the seat of the Earl of Derby, his loneliness as a single man, his financial insecurity, his despair at the frequent epileptic fits which he nevertheless managed to keep secret, and the sense of uprootedness that permeated his life abroad, are powerfully revealed also in his poetical and visual self-portraits. Lear's artistic endeavours are equally marked

by an inherent hybridization of forms, media and cultures, which include «animal portraiture», watercolours, multi-media travel books - with the incorporation of texts, lithographs and musical scores - illustrated poetry and «nonsense» botany. In truth, it is as «the Laureate of nonsense» (Murphey 1953, p. 9) that Lear is best remembered. In tracing literary nonsense's origins back to the twelfth century, Noel Malcolm states that as an English literary phenomenon this genre possessed «a peculiarly close relationship - largely a parodic one - to the 'high' literary conventions of its day» (Malcolm 1997, p. 4).

In this regard, my paper intends to explore Lear's contribution to the Victorian aesthetic debate, which was characterized by a marked resistance to the literary use of sensation - epitomized in Wilkie Collins's fiction -, and in which, according to Bourdieu and many critics after him, the so-called cultural divide between high art and mass culture originated. The refusal of 'impure' taste and *aesthesis* (sensation) is generally thought to have emerged in the period of the European Romanticism, stemming from Kant's distinction, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), between 'empirical' and 'pure' aesthetic judgements. Since the former are understood as subjective judgements of sense, while the latter only can be considered judgements of taste proper, Kant's framework establishes an implied aesthetical hierarchy within a process of taste formation that from a sociological point of view seems to favour the 'reflective' quality of 'high', upper- and middle-class judgement over the (supposed) merely sensuous taste of the popular classes. Although such an interpretation, advanced by Bourdieu, does not fully consider the fact that «classes and their cultures are always more complexly interwoven» (Wayne 2014, p. 106), it nevertheless foregrounds Kant's seminal attack against 'sensation': «The universal communicability of a pleasure carries with it in its very concept that the pleasure is not one of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but must be derived from reflection; and thus aesthetical art, as the art of beauty, has for standard the reflective Judgement and not sensation» (Bernard 1914, p. 187).

Among the British Romantic poets, Wordsworth has been the one most frequently acknowledged as the founder of the divide between high and popular culture, or, in Kantian terms, between «the taste of reflection» and «the taste of sense». His status as a «poet of reflection» - that Arthur Hallam famously contrasted to Tennyson as a «poet of sensation» (Armstrong 1972, p. 89) - originated both in his aesthetics of sensation elevated through the powers of contemplation and thought, and in his numerous invectives against the most popular literary genres of his age - «frantic novels», «German Tragedies» and gothic stories - which, as he famously claimed in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, exploited and nourished «the degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation» (Stafford 2013, pp. 99-100). At the same time, sensation is so central in Wordsworth's theory of poetry as a «history or science of feeling» (p. 200) that contemporary critics like

Arnold and Pater in different ways regarded his work as distinctly sensuous, hence 'impure' to a certain extent, and contributed to fostering the alternate image of Wordsworth as a «poet of feeling». However, as noted by Noel Jackson, Wordsworth's conception of aesthetic experience is more dialectical than binomial or simply reflective. In his attempt «to accommodate bodily sensation within reflective mental activity» (Jackson 2008, p. 200), Wordsworth blurs as forcefully as he imposes the distinction between the modes of élite and popular literary enjoyment, inaugurating alternative legacies that variously eroded this cultural opposition in the Victorian era.

By reading Lear's poetry against this theoretical background, the present study aims to verify the degree of 'impureness' of Lear's nonsense, a hybrid genre that has often been apprehended as literarily and socially subversive. After a brief discussion of the main features of this genre and its acknowledged 'parodic' quality, I will examine Lear's engagement with 'high' and 'low' literary conventions in «Growling Eclogue» and «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» respectively, with the aim of investigating if and to what extent Lear's crossing of genres and use of bizarre and at times grotesque literary images blur (and question) the boundaries between élite and popular culture.

2 Nonsensical Pastiche and 'High' Literary Genres: «The Growling Eclogue»

Any discussion of the place Lear's nonsense poetry holds in the Victorian aesthetical debate inevitably brings the focus back to the very essence of nonsense. As a cursory examination of the critical literature on this form reveals, it is a very elusive category, for it can designate at the same time «a stylistic device, a literary mode, and a genre» (Tigges 1988, p. 2). Even if limericks are generally regarded as the most nonsensical of Lear's verses (p. 141), Lear's repertoire of nonsense writing covers poetry, prose and illustration, comprising such diverse forms as nonsense songs, eclogues, short stories, alphabets, recipes and botany, typically accompanied by illustrations. This variety has challenged and broadened the critical interpretation of nonsense as a proper genre, of which, when not considered the father, Lear certainly remains an inescapable model.

From being considered just like 'entertainment' for children, a mere aesthetic fancy or a «dreamland» (cf. Cammaerts 1926, p. 32; Colley 1993, pp. 1-45), nonsense has been gradually differentiated from other literary genres such as satire, light verse, nursery rhymes and the joke (cf. Hildebrandt 1970; Tigges 1988), and thus classified, investigated and even 'anatomised' (cf. Tigges's *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, 1988)

in its several linguistic and rhetorical constituents (cf. Sewell 1952; Stewart 1978; Lecercle 1994; Parsons 1994). Despite the diversity and at times incompatibility of their hermeneutical perspectives, most critics agree that literary nonsense does not designate a meaningless text, i.e., a text with **no** sense. Rather it defines an artistic form organized around a balance between meaning and its absence, which can inform the whole work or simply appear as an aesthetic device within a playful framework. Crucially, for the nonsense to emerge it is necessary that the tension between the two (or more) contradictory meanings remains unresolved. It follows that nonsense is built on paradox, viz., the presence of two irreconcilable utterances that stand side by side. In challenging the law of noncontradiction, nonsense seemingly partakes in the relativistic overturning of traditional doctrines that laid its philosophical foundations in J.S. Mill's *System of Logic* (1843). As Lecercle clarifies, «a nonsense text requires to be read on two levels at once – two incompatible levels: not 'x means A', but 'x is both A and, incoherently, B'. In other words, nonsense deals not in symbolism but in paradox» (Lecercle 1990, p. 20).

From this perspective, nonsense also approximates to Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of «heteroglossia» understood as a plurality of meanings and voices. Moreover, the violence, laughter and the dynamics of social control exposed in Lear's limericks connect nonsense with the Bakhtinian definition of «the carnival», which celebrates the «temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order (absence of boundaries); [...] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions» (Bakhtin 1968, p. 51). Often used to understand the link between high and low culture, Bakhtin's categories of the carnivalesque and the grotesque can be effectively employed in the exploration of Lear's topsyturvydom and 'impure' imagery (which will be the subject of the last part of the present study), inasmuch as they are relevant for the majority of nonsense 'markers'. Besides its semantic indeterminacy, Tigges identifies three more defining features of nonsense, which encapsulate some characteristics that had long attracted critical attention: «lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature» (Tigges 1988, p. 55). Notable nonsense strategies comprehend reversals and inversions, imprecision, gibberish, the use of puns, portmanteaus, and neologisms, faulty cause and effect, simultaneity, arbitrariness, picture/text inconsistency, and misappropriation.

A more controversial aspect in the characterization of nonsense, and one which is central to the examination of Lear's aesthetic stance, is its 'parodic', hence inter-textual and rhizomatic tendency (cf. Palumbo 2009), alluded to in Malcolm's above quotation. The tradition of interpreting nonsense, in T.S. Eliot's terms, as «a parody of sense» (Eliot 1942, p. 53) was inaugurated by Strachey who distinguished between vulgar parody

or travesty – which «takes some noble poem, and for its idea, thoughts and images, substitutes the writer's own low and vulgar fancies, which he couples as far as possible with the words of the original which he thus outrages» (Strachey 1888, p. 353) – and Lear's parody «in which the comic writer gives you real fun of his own, while clothing it in the style of some great author, but without any mere employment of his words, unless it be in so far as they are taken to express that style» (p. 354). It is undeniable that nonsense engages in a critical dialogue with several 'high' and 'low' forms of literary enjoyment, ranging from children's literature to Romantic and contemporary poetry, from nursery-rhyme to sensation fiction. It must be said that if early Victorian literature for children, mainly moralistic and unimaginative, often represents the most prominent (implied) target of Lear's nonsense, many of his compositions for children are neither parodic nor nonsensical and deeply renewed the modes of the genre.

Other critics, especially in more recent times, recognize nonsense parodic properties but are more careful in using the label of parody, on the ground that, being a form shaped on an open tension, nonsense is deliberately purposeless. This critical division partly comes from the heated debate over the nature of parody itself, which revolves around the issues of its censorious or more neutral, renovating power, and its intended target – single text, author or genre. Applying Roland Barthes's distinction in *S/Z*, Lecercle assimilates nonsense more to pastiche than parody proper. While parody «operates through a simple rule of inversion, it is easy recognizable, even blatant [...], and substitutes another controlling voice, the parodist, for the voice of the original author» (Lecercle 1994, p. 173), in pastiche the presence of a model text is equally clear, but the details «do not all point in the same direction» (p. 171). Pastiche thus activates the «polyphony» of nonsense. In this latter case nonsense goes beyond parody and affirms its distinctness as a genre.

As Michael Benjamin Heyman has showed, Lear's writings exhibit examples of both 'pure' parodies and nonsense pastiche, which can offer a first inspection of his manipulation of high and low literary genres. Among the straightforward parodies of a 'low' form Heyman cites «The Alphabet poem» published in *Laughable Lyrics* (1877) and modelled on a popular seventeenth-century alphabet that centred on the image of an apple-pie – which Lear replaces with the obsessive motif of an injured arm. On the 'high' side of the cultural divide, in a letter to Chichester Fortescue dated 12 September 1873 we find an imitation of the first lines of four Tennyson poems that Lear was illustrating, which is revealing of both Lear's «good ear for the texture of Tennyson's verse» (Levi 1991, p. 175) and of his pleasure in subverting literary tones and conventions. Tennyson's «The crag that fronts the evening/ all along the shadowed shore» (Strachey 1911, p. 158) is turned into «Like the Wag who jumps at evening/ All along the sanded floor» (p. 161), while the second example is more

nonsensical in evoking a typical Learian topsy-turveydom by rendering Tennyson's line «To watch the crisping ripples on the beach/ with tender curving lines of creamy spray» (p. 158) with «To watch the tipsy cripples on the beach/ with topsy turvy signs of screamy play» (p. 161). Interestingly, the hypotext for two of Lear's parodies transcribed in the letter is the dedicatory poem «To E.L. on His Travels in Greece» (1853) that Tennyson composed after reading Lear's travel book *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania* (1851). Written in four-line verses of iambic tetrameter - the so-called «In Memoriam stanza» - Tennyson's first two quatrains depict in heightened tones the Albanian landscapes explored by Lear (cf. Marroni 2012-13, pp. 45-46):

Illyrian woodlands, echoing falls
Of water, sheets of summer glass,
The long divine Peneian pass,
The vast Akrokeraunian walls,

Tomohrit, Athos, all things fair,
With such a pencil, such a pen,
You shadow forth to distant men,
I read and felt that I was there.
(Ricks 1989, p. 487)

Lear preserves the rhythm and phonetic pattern of Tennyson's poem but alters its semantic fabric:

Delirious Bulldogs; - echoing calls
My daughter, - green as summer grass; -
The long supine Plebeian ass,
The nasty crockery boring falls; -

Tom-Moory Pathos; - all things bare, -
With such a turket! such a hen!
And scrambling forms of distant men,
O! ain't you glad you were not there!
(Strachey 1911, p. 161)

Lear's lexical changes transmute the model's 'serious' and lyrical atmosphere into a new poetical form rich in unsophisticated vocabulary and informal syntax, which the author himself justly defines as «parody» (p. 161). As such, it needs its literary reference; if read on its own, Lear's parody becomes 'sheer' nonsense, for, although it shows the semantic incoherence that typifies literary nonsense, it lacks any unresolved tension. Despite its linguistic mockery and reversal of register, Lear's parody is more humor-

ous than 'vulgar' in Strachey's sense, and it does not diminish the unfading admiration for Tennyson's poetry that Lear repeatedly expressed in his correspondence and works.¹ Intertextual references to Thomas Moore, Tennyson and Wordsworth also abound in «The Dong with a Luminous Nose» (cf. Heyman 1999, pp. 28-29; Sewell 1952, pp. 64-69) while echoes of Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson and Arnold can be traced in «Colds are the Crabs» (cf. Byrom 1977, p. 230). In most cases Lear's allusions are veiled and rather convey a genuine predilection for Romantic themes and atmospheres.

If 'pure' parodies are rare in Lear's works, a good instance of his 'nonsensical' engagement with high literary conventions is offered by «The Growling Eclogue», written in Cannes on 8th December 1867 and published posthumously in *The Complete Nonsense Book* edited by Lady Strachey (1912). From its very title, the poem resurrects a classical pastoral genre popularised by Latin poets, notably Virgil and Theocritus, which usually took the form of a short dialogue between two shepherds in a rural environment. Parodical devices can be immediately discerned in the French urban setting, in the Latinization of the names of the two male interlocutors - *Edwardus* and *Johannes* -, and in the adjective connoting the eclogue, «growling», which hints at the triviality of the subject, albeit tainted by an 'impure' undertone of animal aggressiveness. The poem, in fact, revives the convention of having two men opposed in a contest and a third speaker as a judge. In this case, however, the judge is a woman, Catherine Symonds, who is not invited to determine who is the better singer/poet - as in traditional eclogues - but to elect the better 'growler' between her husband, the poet John Addington Symonds, and Edward Lear (by his own admission an impenitent growler):

J. - See Catherine comes! To her, to her,
Let each his several miseries refer;
She shall decide whose woes are least or worst,
And which, as growler, shall rank last or first.

Catherine - Proceed to growl, in silence I'll attend,
And hear your foolish growling to the end;
And when they're done, I shall correctly judge
Which of your griefs are real or only fudge.
Begin, let each his mournful voice prepare,
(And, pray, however angry, do not swear!).
(Noakes 2002, p. 233)

¹ It is worth noting that Tennyson's second stanza from «all things fair...» is inscribed on the headstone of Lear's grave in Sanremo. Lear also set to music a number of Tennyson's lyrics, collected in two books in 1953 an 1859, and in the Eighties produced about two hundred drawings inspired by Tennyson's poetry, some of which were published posthumously as *Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Illustrated by Edward Lear* (1889).

The ensuing verbal fight between the two opponents is linguistically communicated through the insistent rhyme scheme of couplets (often rhetorical questions) and stanzas of four or six lines in iambic pentameter rhyming AABB and AABBC respectively. The evidence the two contenders provide to support their claims as 'growlers' encompasses prosaic arguments such as French terrible weather and the perils of getting colds and coughs - «Why must I sink all poetry in this prose/ the everlasting blowing of my nose?» -, their respective uncomfortable lodgings, and the ubiquitous presence of insects and noisy dogs, cats and people who interrupt their work - Johannes's writing and Edwardus's painting. In this connection, the fact that the growlers' lamentations chiefly concern animal and natural elements, commonly extolled in pastoral poetry, certainly adds to the parodic effect.

Nevertheless, Lear's «Ekklogg» - as he refers to the poem in his diary (p. 505) - transcends parody in many ways. If on the whole the composition conforms to the linguistic rules of correct spelling and grammar, nonsensical techniques surface in alliterative lines such as the above «she shall decide whose woes are least or worst» and in the tongue-twister-like couplet «In vain amain with pain the pane with this chord/ I fain would strain to stop the beastly discord!» Most importantly, the ending leaves the reader baffled as it is not very clear who eventually «rank[s] last or first» (a nonsensical phrase in its own right). Furthermore, in place of laurels, both growlers are given a punishment of some kind. Catherine's «official dictum» for her husband - «to nurse/ the Baby for seven hours, and nothing worse» - is verbally shorter and, on account of his «poorly» state and younger age - «you're younger than the other cove» -, (implicitly) lighter than the one awaiting Edwardus. Contrary to the reader's expectations, he is 'simply' obliged to return to his daily life. Yet, in Catherine's description, based on his 'growling' account, Edwardus's lot is far from being a pleasant one:

For you, Edwardus, I shall say no more
 Than that your griefs are fudge, yourself a bore;
 Return at once to cold, stewed, minced, hashed mutton -
 To wristbands ever guiltless of a button -
 To raging winds and sea (where don't you wish
 Your luck may ever let you catch one fish?) -
 To make large drawings nobody will buy -
 To paint oil pictures which will never dry -
 To write new books which nobody will read -
 To drink weak tea, on tough old pigs to feed -
 Till spring-time brings the birds and leaves and flowers,
 And time restores a world of happier hours.
 (p. 237)

Edwardus's grim life is evoked through the anaphoric and symmetrical patterns of the lines beginning with the infinitives «To make/paint/write/drink», which, together with the recurrence of negative lexemes like «nobody» and «never», infuse the modulation of a curse poem into the verses. Despite the poem's informing humorous tone, Lear's explicit commentary on the difficulties he was facing in every artistic field – as a painter, travel writer and poet – inevitably betrays a melancholy vein, a hallmark of his (later) poetry that also points to the author's urge to exorcize his financial and professional dissatisfaction. In the final couplet, though, Catherine makes clear that Edwardus's sentence is temporary and the poem closes on the hope that spring will bring a merrier time.

The autobiographical and self-referential elements contained in the final stanza make the poem drift further away from parody towards literary nonsense. In particular, the line «to write new books which nobody will read» greatly amplifies the nonsense force, since we can only see the phrase if we are reading the book. In addition, the reader is concomitantly constructed as an alien – distanced from the mass of those who will not read the book –, obliterated as a «nobody», and 'disembodied' into an intra-textual construct (a «no-body»). As a result, in «The Growling Eclogue» the relationship with the parent genre is neither crucial nor 'meaningful' in the way it was in Lear's imitation of Tennyson's dedicatory poem. However marginal, as a model genre with its codified themes and linguistic conventions, the eclogue is nevertheless integral to the emergence of nonsense, considering that part of the governing tension can only be built on the reader's recognition of the poem's literary references. The unresolved opposition between the two 'grumpy old men' thus mirrors the poem's aesthetic interplay with a high genre that is simultaneously present and absent. On a metanarrative level, we are invited to believe that the poem, like Edwardus, «surely might have some sense»; yet, this remains undisclosed.

«The Growling Eclogue» is suggestive of Lear's aesthetic way of engaging with high literary genres. The formal features of the parent text or literary tradition are first appropriated and subsequently parodied/subverted through the introduction of trivial content and the adoption of nonsensical techniques associated with everyday language and popular literature, thus projecting the eclogue towards a lower cultural edge. At the same time, the poem's resistance to any straightforward decoding, its verbal play, and autobiographical/metanarrative allusions elicit a 'reflective' (in Kantian terms) and more sophisticated response on the reader's part, a response which leaves the text at once on both sides of the cultural divide.

Significantly, in the last decades the reader's active involvement in nonsense aesthetic dynamics has gained new critical consideration and substantially shifted the focus of nonsense studies from the text to its function, or, as John Rieder put it, from what nonsense means to «what it does»

(Rieder 1998, p. 47). This is a key issue for the investigation of nonsense 'impurity' and its connection with the aesthetic of sensation, which of necessity raises the question of Lear's audience and its emotional response.

3 Nonsensical Sensation: «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos»

Since their appearance, Lear's nonsense writings – *The Book of Nonsense* (1846), *More Nonsense* (1862), *Nonsense Songs and Stories* (1871), *More Nonsense Songs, Pictures, etc.* (1872), and *Laughable Lyrics* (1877) – have hovered between both sides of the cultural divide: their original intended audience being children, the unexpected success of the books among adults contributed to a shift in attitude towards a form hitherto relegated to the inferior category of the trivial, which in its turn in the last decades of the century resulted in the rise of children's literature – and in the increase in its prestige – furthered by the publication of Carroll's *Alice* books. It is precisely in this period that the depreciative attitude implied in the meaning of the term – according to the OED it was first recorded by Ben Jonson in 1614 with the sense of «spoken or written words which make no sense or convey absurd ideas» (cf. Hildebrandt 1970, pp. 11-17) – began to change, and nonsense was granted serious, 'high' critical appraisal «As a Fine Art» by Edward Strachey in his classical article for *The Quarterly Review* (1888). Paradoxically, the end of the century also marked the 'return' of nonsense to the adult world, where it influenced a number of movements, like Surrealism and Dada, and writers, notably James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and more recently, albeit to a lesser extent, Dr. Seuss and Roald Dahl. Moreover, beyond the borders of literary criticism, nonsense has been fruitfully employed in the field of child theory, psycholinguistics, and language acquisition studies (cf. Harmon 1982; Jenkins 1985).

The dual audience of children and adults represents one of the first boundaries that Lear's works transcended, uniting the two cultural streams of the 'low', folk tradition of ballads and nursery rhymes on the one hand, and the adult, 'literary' tradition of nonsense devices and techniques on the other. Lear's split readership sheds light on another aspect already implied in the understanding of nonsense as parody, that is its multiplicity and proliferation of reading levels. Nonsense resistance to 'closed' readings is further complicated by the presence of a dual implied readership (especially in Lear's later books): the reader's degree of reflective or emotional response is not only textual-determined, but also depends on a series of personal, social and cultural factors, i.e., the reader's encyclopaedia, including the reader's age. In this regard, nonsense ties with the Romantic conception of the child have been the subject of critical appreciation (cf. McGravan 1991); what is relevant to the present discussion, instead, is the multiplying effect that this divide within the readership has on the

nonsense aesthetic enjoyment, especially in relation to Lear's reworking of popular forms.

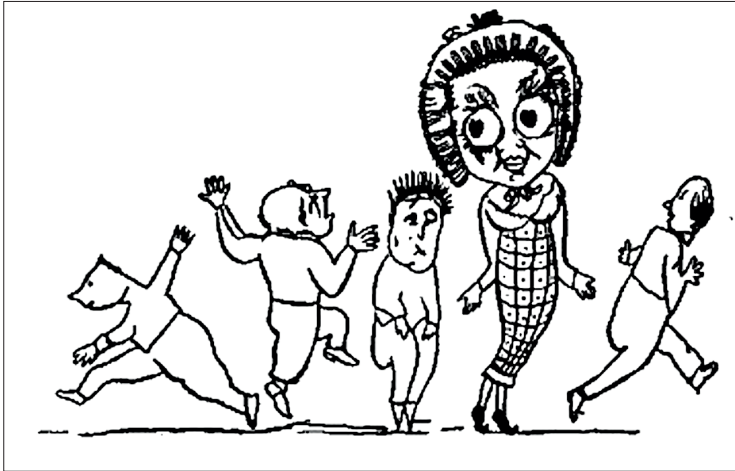
As a poem like «The Growling Eclogue» suggests, Lear's transmutations of literary formats is both formal and thematic, affecting the text in its combination of phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic constituents. Nevertheless, these textual layers are played against one another with the aim of creating an unresolved tension and eliciting a mixed response. It is not preposterous to claim that in Lear's nonsense a perfect balance between meaning and its absence is (often) paralleled by a balance between aesthetic modes of 'reflection' and 'sensation'. On the one hand, nonsense creates the impression of irrationality through a series of linguistic or semantic deviations that are all the same skilfully devised and logically organized. As such, it has been repeatedly likened to a 'game' with either its own set of arbitrary rules (cf. Sewell 1952) or none (cf. Deleuze 2004); in any case, it is «a game played by a rational, methodical mind» (Noakes 2004, p. 194) which engages and at times strains the (adult) reader's intellectual capacity in the process of textual disambiguation. As a corollary, nonsense is characterized by emotional detachment: «The play- or game-like quality of nonsense also reinforces its avoidance of emotions» (Tigges 1988, p. 54).

On the other hand, nonsense verses are highly rhythmic and melopoeic, and share with 'low' forms of oral tradition, particularly with nursery rhymes, a pronounced musicality. The pervasive use of rhyme, alliteration, puns, assonance and other figures of speech that Northrop Frye associated with the process of «babble» (Frye 1957, p. 275) is aimed at stimulating the reader's aural thus 'sensual', embodied response. Apparently, in Lear's nonsense world events or a character's destiny seem to be dictated by fortuitous combinations of rhyme and metre which undermine the principle of causality: «There was an Old Man of Vesuvius/ Who studied the works of Vitruvius» or «There was a Young Lady of Hull/ Who was chased by a virulent Bull» (Noakes 2002, pp. 83-84). In the majority of Lear's songs, especially the limericks, both aural and visual stimulations are activated (and complicated) by the tension between verses and their illustrations, or, in Frye's terminology, between 'babble' and 'doodle'. In subordinating sense to sound, musicality intensifies nonsense power to produce hedonistic reactions in the reader, both young and adult. Paradoxically, this quality directs nonsense towards Aestheticism and its theorization or 'pure poetry' as a form of art that, in Pater's maxim, aspires to «the condition of music». Such tendency to self-reflexion is not peculiar to poetry, though, since it can be easily discerned in Lear's short stories or «puffles of prose» collected in *Laughable Lyrics*, which reject traditional plot in favour of a kind of narrative 'autogamy'. Beyond their common insistence on formal play and poetic craftsmanship, on calling attention to themselves as language, nonsense and Aestheticism further share a marked refusal to hew to normative Victorian values of moralism and realism.

Nonsense challenge of objective knowledge, its emphasis on the 'sensual' potential of poetry and celebration of artistic autonomy also connect it to the popular (prose) counterpart of Aestheticism, sensation fiction. Although «hardly a trace remains» (Robinson 1952, p. 93) of Lear's life-long friendship with Wilkie Collins – another «rebel against conventions» (Costantini 2008, p. 13) –, the relation between the two men was certainly close, and intensified in the late Seventies and Eighties (cf. Lonoff 1995, pp. 40-41). It is known that Collins was one of the few friends with whom Lear corresponded until his death and also the recipient of a manuscript copy of his last poem, the autobiographical «Some Incidents in the Life of My Uncle Urly» (1886), which the novelist regarded as Lear's best poem (cf. Levi 1995, p. 329). References to Collins's *The Woman in White* appear in Lear's diary – where he recorded the reading of the book in June 1861² – and in *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* (1876). A singular aspect of their friendship was their personal resemblance, so striking that Lear was frequently mistaken for his novelist friend. Notwithstanding the personal bond that united their respective 'fathers', certain thematic affinities between nonsense and sensation should be rather ascribed to a common reaction against a whole cluster of contemporary cultural, social and epistemological tensions. The convergence between these seemingly distant genres mainly concerns the use of 'impure' imagery and situations.

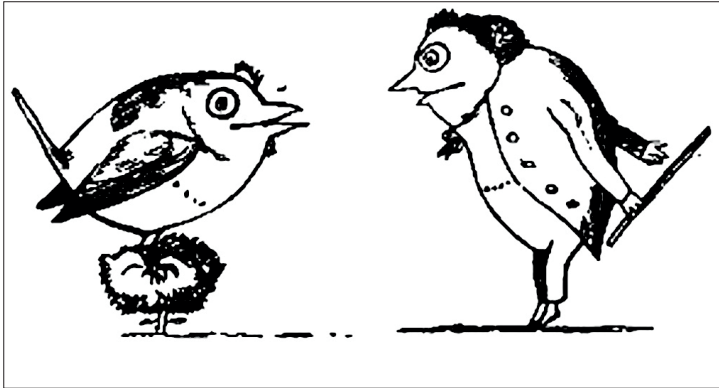
Lear's nonsense works are pervaded by a conspicuous anxiety about the body (cf. Parsons 1994, pp. 87-114). Both human and animal characters tend to be uneasy about their physical appearance, and are often confined into abnormal bodies. In particular, Lear persistently exaggerated physical traits he found atypical or unattractive in himself – also recurring in his numerous self-caricatures –, such as his plumpness, short legs, long beard and flat nose. Hyperbole governs the process of body distortion in both linguistic and visual modes of expression. Accordingly, Lear's poetry teems with eccentric figures encumbered by long legs and oversized noses: «There are people with noses which reach to the ground, noses which finish in tassels, noses like trumpets and noses which simply disappear out of sight, and the Dong gathered the bark of the Twangum tree and 'he wove him a wondrous nose'» (Noakes 2004, p. 22). In Lear's limericks such fetishisation of the body is ubiquitous and can work towards diminution too: it affects both the person of Dutton «whose head was as small as a button» and the old man of Koblenz, «the length of whose legs was immense». Lear's cartoons usually tend to emphasize the character's isolation, its sense of inadequacy, and its antagonistic relationship with society, making the deformity even more alarming:

2 Cf. Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng. 797.3. Lear's diary records disprove Lonoff's claim that «Lear became a reader of Collins' novels only in 1881» (Lonoff 1995, p. 41).



There was a Young Lady whose eyes,
 Were unique as to colour and size;
 When she opened them wide,
 People all turned aside,
 And started away in surprise.
 (Noakes 2002, p. 75)

In some cases, however, illustrations not only contradict the text – for example, the old man of Ancona finds a dog that, contrary to what is stated in the limerick, is anything but small –, but can also expand it, either by portraying a defect not mentioned in the verses – the old person of Cromer, the old man of Whitehaven and the young person in Green, among others, are all drawn with protruding noses – or by creating a disturbing effect by means of visual ‘attributional’ metaphors (cf. Bruni Rocca 2012-2013, p. 115). One of the most interesting instances of this latter mechanism can be detected in cartoons that point to a disquieting affinity between human and animal characters, encouraging an ambiguous emotional response.



There was an Old Man who said, «Hush!
 I perceive a young bird in this bush!»
 When they said, «Is it small?»
 He replied, «Not at all!
 It is four times as big as the bush!».
 (Noakes 2002, p. 173)

To a certain extent, the recurrent creation of zoomorphic creatures - as well as of phytomorphic beings in nonsense botany - is ascribable to Lear's activity as a natural history draughtsman. As claimed by Colley, in both Lear's natural and nonsense animal portraiture, animals are often gifted with anthropomorphic individuality and thus released «from the objectifying and classifying gaze of the colonial collector» (Colley 2012-2013, p. 14). At the same time, the accretion of corporeal details and the insistence on physicality push Lear's picture-limericks well beyond the boundaries of natural illustration and nursery rhyme; here nonsense virtually borders on the grotesque, a 'low' genre that, according to Bakhtin, elicits fear of those same characteristics that induce laughter. In addition, while the illustrations certainly incite a harmonious relationship between the species, the 'alterity' inscribed in the human bodies inevitably lays bare Victorian preoccupations with the body's potential to regress to an animal state and to derangement. Through different aesthetic experiences, Lear's nonsense comes to address an informing motif of lowbrow nineteenth-century literature, considerably exploited by sensation authors like Collins and by Gothic fiction. As claimed by Wagner, «physical deformity features centrally in the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins who creates increasingly unusual forms of disability in the course of his novels» (Wagner 2010, p. 47). In a society that translated surface into moral knowledge, somatic oddity, according to the dictates of physiognomy and criminal anthropology, was read as a moral signifier. Incidentally, Lombroso himself maintained that

the criminal's nose was typically aquiline, «like the beak of a bird of prey» (Lombroso-Ferrero 1972, p. 15).

Being an 'index' of the mind, it was vital for the body to preserve its 'integrity' in order to avoid degeneration into madness and insanity. In its profusion of dismembered bodies, Lear's nonsense, therefore, also subverts one of the most sacred tenets of Victorian physiology. In the upside-down universe of nonsense, characters can easily lose their limbs as well as lives accidentally, as it happens to the old man of the Nile who cuts his thumbs while sharpening his nails with a file, or even deliberately, as both a person of Tartary («who divided his jugular artery») and the old man of New York («who murdered himself with a fork») do, in a sub-genre that Dilworth has called «suicide limerick» (Dilworth 1995, p. 535).

The most noticeable example of the 'destructive' drive ingrained in nonsense writing can be found in the second part of «Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos», which Lear expressly wrote at Wilkie Collins's suggestion (Noakes 2002, p. 535). Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos – whose name is a possible conflation of «discobolus», discus thrower, and «obol», a Greek coin – are the latest in Lear's long series of odd pairs, which include animate objects like 'the table and the chair' and unlikely animal partners, such as Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow, The Duck and the Kangaroo, and the celebrated Owl and the Pussycat. Part One shows the young Discobboloses climbing on the top of a wall «to watch the sunset sky/ And to hear the Nupiter Piffkin cry/ And the Biscuit Buffalo call» (p. 321). Their simple happiness in a nonsense land peopled by creatures with strange names is soon ruined by the thought of a possible fall. Hence they decide that perhaps «it is wiser far/ 'To remain for ever just where [they] are» (p. 321). The poem ends on the image of the contented couple contemplating the prospective advantages of their choice to fly «from worry of life»:

So Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos
 Stood up and began to sing,
 «Far away from hurry and strife
 «Here we will pass the rest of life,
 «Ding a dong, ding dong, ding!
 «We want no knives nor forks nor chairs,
 «No tables nor carpets nor household cares,
 «From worry of life we've fled –
 «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!
 «There is no more trouble ahead,
 «Sorrow or any such thing –
 «For Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos!».
 (p. 322)

Significantly, the existence from which the Discobboloses wish to «fly» is construed in negative, and almost Darwinian terms, like a blend of «hurry and strife» that hinders individual fulfilment. The numerous exclamations and the gibberish line enhance the couple's enthusiasm at the thought of escaping the strictures of social conventions by renouncing the comforts of (Victorian) domesticity emblemized in the inventory of «knives», «forks», «carpets» and «household cares».

Part Two finds them on the same wall after «twenty years, a month and a day», a little aged – «their hair had grown all pearly gray,/ And their teeth began to fall» (p. 430) – but apparently gratified, «by all admired, and by some respected» (p. 430). In the intervening years they have been blessed by the birth of twelve children, none of whom «has happened to fall» thanks to Mrs. Discobbolos's «maternal care!» (p. 430). Ironically enough, the Discobboloses have recreated on the narrow space of the wall the very picture of domestic incarceration they so much abhorred. Mrs. Discobbolos now longs for the social life they have renounced, encapsulated in the list of events – balls, garden parties, bazaars – their children cannot attend. Upon his wife's fatal question – «'Did it never come into your head/ 'That our lives must be lived elsewhere,/ 'Dearest Mr. Discobbolos?» (p. 430) – Mr. Discobbolos digs a trench, which he fills with «Dynamite gunpowder gench» (p. 431) and proceeds to detonate:

Pensively, Mr. Discobbolos
 Sat with his back to the wall;
 He lighted a match, and fired the train,
 And the mortified mountain echoed again
 To the sound of an awful fall!
 And all the Discobbolos family flew
 In thousands of bits to the sky so blue,
 And no one was left to have said,
 «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!
 «Has it come into anyone's head
 «That the end has happened to all
 «Of the whole of the Clan Discobbolos?».
 (p. 431)

However unexpected, the poem's brutal epilogue is in tune with a long tradition of children's literature as well as with the emerging genre of 'penny dreadfuls'. The verses resound with Learian coinings, nonsense words such as the memorable «runcible», and the rhythm of chants, alphabets – the self-referential «Oh! W! X! Y! Z!» –, and nursery rhymes, with the final stanza particularly reminiscent of the well-known figures of Humpty-Dumpty and Guy Fawkes. Such devices set the poem into a playful atmosphere that softens the severe attack on the cardinal values of

family ties and parental care that Lear's pendant poems yet impart. The force of the conflagration dismembers the whole of the Clan Discobolos that this time literally «fly» «in thousand of bits». It is surprising, in this respect, Lear's use of the term «Dynamite», since this high explosive had only recently been patented by Nobel and would rather feature in several works of fiction at the end of the century. The phrase «Dynamite gunpowder gench», moreover, provides a suitable instance of how Lear's nonsense is poised between referentiality – «Dynamite gunpowder» – and linguistic inventiveness – «gench», a typical Learian word-like non word. Nonsense 'sensation', in this regard, is primarily lexical: unknown, less-known or non-existent words are regularly used to create an effect of mild horror (cf. Kretschmer 1983, p. 240). This dynamics is almost commented upon in Lear's «The Land of the Blompopp Tree» (1882), a «Fantasy Story» set on the Moon. In describing the cryptic «Jizzdoddle Rocks», the narrator simply states that they «leave a profound impression of sensational surprise on the mind of the speckletator who first behold them» (Noakes 2002, p. 436), a passage which denotes Lear's consciousness of the Victorian engagement with spectacle and the power of sensation.

Given its subject matter, the second part of «Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos» can be defined sensational. Undoubtedly Lear meant it as a humorous homage to Collins, an author that, with equal conviction, «reproduced cultural dynamics and described paradoxical situations that pose philosophical riddles» (Costantini 2008, p. 15). Indeed, scenes of violence, as we have seen, are not uncommon in Lear's nonsense writing, where very often rebellious and eccentric characters, like Mr. and Mrs. Discobolos, break all the rules of decorum and logic, before meeting a tragic end. The poem's conclusion is reminiscent of the extermination of the rival families in the Calabrian village of Pentedattilo that concluded the Gothic tale Lear had related in his *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria* (1852): «Finally, as if it were ordered that the actors in such a wholesale domestic tragedy were unfit to remain on earth, the castle of Pentedattilo [sic] fell by the shock of an earthquake, crushing together the Baron and Marchese, with the nurse, and every other agent in this Calabrian horror!» (Lear 1852, p. 198).

Notwithstanding their entertaining spirit, like sensation stories Lear's nonsense songs and tales appear to be tempered with an underlying fear for the unleashing of non-rational forces that can drive characters to the verge of insanity and death. The analogy between the two genres – equally interpreted as sites that are «outside of meaning» (Miller 1988, p. 147) –, is more thematic than aesthetic, though.

Whereas sensation fiction was deemed to appeal to the 'nerves', conjuring up «a corporeal, rather than a cerebral response in the reader» (Daly 2004, p. 40), nonsense verbal play and metanarrative intimations blunt its own 'sensational' content and imagery generating emotional de-

tachment. Unlike respectable mainstream fiction, popular genres of the nineteenth century – Gothic novels, ‘penny dreadfuls’, ‘shilly shockers’ and sensation novels – aimed to stimulate the reader’s excitement. In line with contemporary physiological studies such as Alexander Bain’s *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and George Henry Lewes’s *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859), sensation stories literally seized the reader’s body with ‘dangerous’ effects (cf. Garrison 2011, pp. 7-11). As Miller argues, this «genre offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction, and so on» (Miller 1988, p. 146). Nonsense, on the contrary, even when it adopts the modes of ‘low’ literature seems to thwart the reader’s identification with the characters and events presented, thereby standing in inverted relation to sensation fiction. However, as Tigges claims, «lack of emotion is only the reverse of excess of emotion» (Tigges 2012-2013, p. 123). Admittedly, Levi defines Lear’s nonsense as «emotional parody»: «[his] songs, his comic lyrics, were parodies of the deepest emotions they expressed, but they were at least as sad as they were funny, and when they were in perfect balance, the emotion overcame the parody» (Levi 1991, p. 183).

Lear’s nonsense, in this perspective, prompts both cognitive and affective reflections, showing, once more, its intrinsic porous nature. Regardless of the cultural ‘status’ of the form he appropriated, Lear developed a poetical language that defies categorizations. As Soccio points out, «in Lear’s case, not only is genre reinvented according to the writer’s imagination, but it is redefined again and again so that the readers must be prepared to re-think their way of looking at traditional categories» (Soccio 2012-2013, p. 189). In its pervasive cross-fertilization of literary forms and themes, which operates within the text (the picture limericks), between the texts (that are parodied), and (considering Lear’s enthusiasm for inter-semiotic transposition) between artistic languages, Lear’s nonsense ultimately elicits an aesthetic response that, in Kantian terms, is reflective and sensual, pure and impure, rational and sensational, at the same time. This undecidability and dialectical force disclose the Victorian renegotiation of cultural canons and traditional literary modes that were collapsing under the weight of changing market conditions and new relativistic theories.

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