

[L]ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

[R] EDWARD LEAR'S DANCING LINES

Edward Lear's Dancing Lines

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ONE OF THE MOST CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES of Edward Lear's work, as readers of it have long noted, is the presence of animal and inhuman characters and figures;¹ and this owes an important debt to his early work as a zoological draughtsman, and consequent familiarity with nineteenth century classificatory science.² Lear orders his creaturely world by a singular taxonomic imagination, and in doing so offers a redescription of the forms of relation that might be possible between humans and other animals.

In Lear's nonsense, humans and other animals are transformed into page-bound creatures, and the relations between them become functions of poetic and artistic lines. Lear creates a place in which beings of different orders might coexist; the place of non-sense where 'cats', 'tables', 'Germans', and 'tongs' might 'waltz madly'.³ The jumble of orders might call to mind the sort of taxonomic confusion evoked by Borges in his famous account of a Chinese encyclopedia. Foucault, who helped make it famous, terms the locations in which diverse orders may coexist 'heterotopias', places of many: for Foucault, heterotopias 'desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the possibility of grammar at its source ... and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences',⁴ but Lear imagines a place of both lyricism and accommodation, where the laws of poetic and artistic structure allow 'a large number of possible orders [to] glitter separately in the dimension' of the page.⁵ As Auden rightly said, his work 'became a land'.

One of the reasons that Lear's nonsense works as hard as it does to order things, is ~~because~~ that the 'personages' (to use Anne Stillman's term⁶) that people it frequently hover on the border of indistinguishability. If there are two or more figures in a poem or illustration, it's likely that they will resemble each other, or conflate in a flicker of ambiguous syntax.⁷ He was always drawn to 'muse on the way that one thing can morph into something else while not losing its identity entirely, or how something can lose a part of itself but still retain a feeling of intactness', as Anna Henchman has put it.⁸ The poems are full of fantasies of cross-species confusion, as in the limerick which speaks of the 'Old Man of Kamschatka', for instance:

Who possessed a remarkably fat cur;
His gait and his waddle,
Were held as a model,
To all the fat dogs in Kamschatka.⁹

Whose gait and *whose* waddle?, we might momentarily wonder.¹⁰ The line turns and ostensibly resolves the ambiguity; the 'cur' is the likeliest model for all the other fat dogs in Kamschatka. But it remains possible, grammatically at least, that the dogs have found the Old Man's gait just as impressive. Choices of syntax always themselves raise questions of order, but the ambiguous 'His', bearing the extra weight of the beginning of a line as well as the rest beat at the end of the one preceding it, offers a studied pose of uncertainty. The leash which joins the two figures in Lear's illustration reiterates, with a visual prompt, the yoking together of man and dog contained in the words. We might also think of the 'Old Man of Whitehaven, / Who danced a Quadrille with a Raven' (p. 172), caught as he is in a similarly syntactical confusion. They 'said – "It's absurd, to encourage this bird!"', but again, we might ask, *which* bird? For this is a limerick written by a man who was wont to say, 'Verily, I am an odd bird'.¹¹ Just as the turn into the final line of the first limerick promises a kind of

resolution, without fully delivering, Lear's work in general is constantly proposing orderings and arrangements that are provisional.

As well as syntactical ambiguities, a transformative 'process of empathy', as John Lehmann has called it, runs through the nonsense, grotesquely and absurdly exaggerating aspects of anatomy, clothing, or posture in order to clarify the points at which one figure most resembles or approaches another.¹² We might witness the work of this aesthetic empathy in the following:

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!'

(p. 173)

Like the 'Old Man of El Hums', who lived on 'crumbs, / Which he picked off the ground, with the other birds round', the Old Man who says 'Hush!' mirrors the pose and appearance of the creatures with whom he associates.¹³ This habit of mimicry runs through Lear's limericks – a kind of contagious aesthetic – and is the most visible and characteristic way in which Lear's nonsense blurs the boundary between humans and other animals.

Lear's creatures mirror each other in ways which make it hard to say precisely where the differences and similarities between humans and animals lie. At times, this mimicry is deliberate:

There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who never knew what he should do;
So he tore off his hair,
And behaved like a bear,
That intrinsic Old Man of Peru.

(p. 87)

The use of 'intrinsic' in the last line teases us with the idea that there might not be any intrinsic difference between the Old Man and the bear; it might also call up thoughts of Darwin's coinage of 'incipient species' (a 'group of plants or animals in the process of becoming sufficiently distinct to be described as a full species', as the *OED* has it).¹⁴ It draws attention to 'like' in the previous line, and sharpens its interpretative import; how far can an Old Man behave 'like' a bear? How far is the distance between the two reduced by this acting likeness, and how far does it being merely a likeness just further reinforce the distinction?

These are transformations, as well, which can occur over the course of a volume. The 'Old Man of Peru' first appeared in the 1846 *A Book of Nonsense*, and the final limerick in this volume witnesses a 'Young Lady of Clare' being 'sadly pursued by a bear' (p. 88): that Lear should conclude his first volume of poetry with *The Winter's Tale* – 'Exit, pursued by a bear' – hints at the importance to the volume of magical, inexplicable transformations, and the suspension of disbelief they require. As with the 'Old Man of Kamschatka', a reader might be snagged by a syntactical ambiguity: is the fact of her being pursued 'sad', or is the bear pursuing her in a sad manner? The difficulty in attributing the adverb to either creates a sense of their sharing it, and so draws an equivalence between the two figures. And there is a hint that Lear's characters might migrate and continue their metamorphoses; that behaving

‘like a bear’ might involve more than tearing one’s hair out. Behaving like a bear can mean, figuratively speaking, to act like a boor – ‘a rough, unmannerly, uncouth person’ (*OED*). But it is possible to imagine both a ‘thick-furred plantigrade quadruped’ (*OED*) and a rough, uncouth person pursuing young ladies down the street, and so the words of the limerick suggest some elision between metaphorical language and creaturely metamorphosis. It would be possible, in other words, for a human to behave like a bear (either by hunting salmon with their bare hands in Alaska, or by making inappropriate comments at dinner), but it would be impossible for a bear to behave like a bear (perhaps by drinking too much marsala and gambling heavily on horses). Lear’s language and images are sensitive and always alert to instances of what we might call theriomorphism; and, indeed, the young lady herself appears to have been transformed by the chase; she resembles nothing so much in the accompanying illustration as a gleeful mermaid.

Nonsense is a game played with a fixed multiplicity of individual parts, as Elizabeth Sewell showed in her foundational study. It is a kind of structured play, in which ‘certain object[s] or class[es] of objects’ may be played around with, ‘within a limited field of space and time and according to fixed rules’.¹⁵ As T. S. Eliot observed, nonsense is not ‘a vacuity of sense; it is a parody of sense’,¹⁶ and Sewell makes a similar point regarding nonsense literature’s relation to logic, which ‘requires for its operation a collection of discrete units, and the nature of the mind’s operation in logic consists in attending to certain relations existing, or considered as existing, between those terms’ (p. 49). The ‘only aspect of language which Nonsense can be said to disorder’ is the relations between terms (p. 38), not the terms themselves. The game is one of structure and arrangement, like a Rubik’s cube or game of solitaire, and it therefore depends ‘upon the integrity and separation of the units, each unit remaining constant in itself and separate from every other unit’ (p. 29). The model works so well because it offers a way of structuring our reading of Lear’s often baffling verse; if we can at least trust that the ‘units’ within the game remain reliably discrete, then their slippery relations with each other need not be so disorienting. However, Lear’s nonsense is rarely so straightforward, and the relations which emerge between characters (both person and inscribed mark) and figures (both rhetorical and visual) tend to blur the sharpness of their distinctions.

But the work of lines, and the versions of structured disarray, to be found in Lear’s nonsense trouble Sewell’s insistence on discrete parts. Lines separate, but they also join, and throughout Lear’s career the desired clarity of the ‘classifying imagination’ of the nineteenth century is blurred by the complex orderings of humans and other animals staged by his lines.¹⁷ Working out of, and alongside, the formal and conceptual frameworks of Victorian taxonomy, Lear’s poetry and illustrations create worlds in which relations are provisional, arrangements can be all kinds of shapes, and bodies (old and young; animal, vegetable, and mineral; textual and pictorial) lean on each other. Lear’s ‘nonce taxonomies’ reimagine and redescribe the relations between human and animal (among others) each time they come into contact,¹⁸ and the resources of the written and printed page (shifts in perspective or scale; colour; line; shade, tone, and gradation; juxtaposition and sequence) enable these experiments. Following Lear himself, we might call this unpredictable mesh of relations his ‘spasmodic rhapsody of arrangement’.¹⁹

Before his emergence as ‘Old Derry down Derry’, Lear worked as a zoological draughtsman, and one early ‘watercolour of a small rodent (*Hyrax Capensis*)’, from 1829, offers a glimpse of the relation between word and image which would go on to characterise Lear’s work.²⁰ The rodent’s body is both surrounded by, and bears traces of, the faint but legible marks of Lear’s writing. This is characteristic of Lear’s work as a young man, as Susan Hyman points out: an ‘early sketchbook ... contains paintings of birds, insects, shells, flowers, fish, feathers and landscapes ...]all meticulously precise, and across a drawing of a nettle Lear has written the Latin names of its class, order and species’.²¹ This hint of a

permeable relation between figure (the image depicted) and character (the inscribed letters) becomes more evident in the illustrations to the limericks, but other examples of Lear's early zoological images point to a keen interest in the flexibility offered by the arrangement of words and images on the page, and in the possible revision of classificatory systems of knowledge.

Daniel Brown has picked up on the taxonomic imperatives which energised his work. He notes how 'being identified with a place name', as the Old Persons of the limericks habitually are, 'implies belonging, fitting in with a habitat or social group. Usually native to a particular place, the protagonists of the limericks are presented as peculiar species that each consist of only one member'.²² Other figures in Lear's poetry organise themselves even more neatly into classificatory schemes. In *The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple*, by the 'closing chapter of this little natural history the children from the Seven Families of animals have all fallen prey to a nonsensical "nature red in tooth and claw"', leaving only their parents 'to represent the full taxonomical array of the Lake, a role they fulfil conscientiously, as they decide to leave their remains to science, pickling themselves in seven bottles and giving "strict orders" in their wills that they be carefully sealed and labelled and "presented to the principal museum of the city of Tosh"'.²³ This ending mimics the sealed forms of Lear's limericks, and while some of the language games 'fold back upon themselves in tautologous reiteration', turning to the natural history illustrations of his youth requires us to revise and complicate claims of an involuted self-sufficiency.²⁴ The figures of Lear's nonsense emerge from this early work, and his nonsense exhibits a delicate balance between a circular, closed form, and a desire to orient itself in relation to co-ordinates beyond that limit.

Lear's main early career work came from his instalment at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool. Lord Stanley, the heir of the earl of Derby had requested the young illustrator to sketch the vast menagerie housed within the grounds.²⁵ In perhaps the happiest period of his life,²⁶ Lear spent five years there, and contributed several illustrations to the impressive, privately produced *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall* (1846). Some of the creatures illustrated by Lear offer a tempting source for characters in later poems: the 'Whiskered Yark', the 'Yagouarondi', the 'Banded Mumgous', the 'Jelerung Squirrel', the 'Eyebrowed Rollulus', and the 'Piping Guan' all feel as though they might fit alongside the Scroobious Pip or the Dolomphious Duck; while the antics of the Maned Goose seem to implore more than the teasing figures visible in the corner of the accompanying illustration: 'On the approach of a stranger they have the habit of raising their bodies nearly erect, swelling out their breasts, and flapping their wings against the legs of the intruder. They sometimes bend themselves backwards to such an extent, that they appear as if they would fall on their backs'.²⁷ In some ways, nineteenth-century taxonomy must have felt like a load of old bosh.

In contrast to the illustrations by other authors in *Gleanings from the Menagerie at Knowsley*, Lear's highlight the relation between the blank space of a page and the creature depicted. Rather than masking or filling the empty space with multiple figures of the same species, and fleshed-out backgrounds, Lear's paintings contain only the most minimal background – such as part of a branch – and are framed by the white expanse of the page on which they are set. Rather than Hawkins's Audubon-esque scene, where the various versions of the same species (young/old, male/female) interact with each other in a diorama of species self-sufficiency, the abrupt break-offs at the edges of Lear's backgrounds meet unpredictably with the white page. Lear's poetry – like all verse, of course – repeats this pattern in its own line breaks, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why poetry seems to lend itself so well to thinking about relation, and categorisation. To place an individual in blank space is to invite the possibility of a connection, just as the final word in a line carries the possibility of its connection to a rhyming partner, or its continuation and modification into a longer syntactic

unit.²⁸ Indeed to read poetry is largely to practise making groups or units – wholes out of parts, the singular out of the multiple – in rhymes, metrical feet or syllabic lines, alliteration, units of syntax, or stanzas: in that sense, the art of reading poetry is a taxonomic one. As much as the isolation of Lear's limericks might seem to cut them off from the world, preserving them like specimen jars in a paginated museum, their strange mix of exemplarity and individual character contains within it the impulse both to categorise and to particularise; to identify the species as a definable and complete whole, and to set it in relation to everything beyond it.

In Lear's verse, the determination of identity or category can offer a measure of satisfaction akin to relief. The 'Old Man of Dunrose', for instance, finds that 'A parrot seized hold of his nose'; but 'When he grew melancholy, they said, "His name's Polly," / Which soothed that Old Man of Dunrose' (p. 334). Like a true taxonomist or natural historian, learning the names of things is a gratifying outcome to a potentially uncomfortable situation – a way of taking back control from unruly nature. The same impulse animates a moment of comedy in Lear's *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria*. Lear's local guide, who consistently answers the party's enquiries with 'Dógo; díghi, dóghi, dághi, dà', sparks the classifier's desire to categorize: 'What the "Dógo" was we never knew, though it was an object of our keenest search throughout the tour to ascertain if it were animal, mineral, or vegetable'.²⁹ One possible answer to this conundrum, as Vivien Noakes suggests, is that 'dóghi, dághi, dà' became the 'Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò', that unfortunate romantic who tries unsuccessfully to woo Lady Jingly Jones:³⁰ "'On this Coast of Coromandel, / Shrimps and watercresses grow, / Prawns are plentiful and cheap," / Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò' (p. 325). And indeed it may be the case that this character undergoes a further and final transformation, appearing eponymously in 'How pleasant to know Mr Lear!', who 'weeps by the side of the ocean, / He weeps on the top of the hill; / He purchases pancakes and lotion, / And chocolate shrimps from the mill' (p. 429). The keynote ringing across the two may be melancholy – the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò leaves Lady Jones 'On that Coast of Coromandel', where 'Still she weeps, and daily moans' (p. 327) – but it is the shrimps as well which draw our attention to the similarities between the two.

Lear's ability to capture the comic in the taxonomic can also be glimpsed in a limerick concerning 'a Young Lady of Wales, / Who caught a large fish without scales; / When she lifted her hook, she exclaimed, "Only look!" / That extatic Young Lady of Wales' (p. 101). The accompanying sketch shows a large aquatic creature on the hook, part of its body out of the water. Implicit in the unspoken rhyme for Wales is, of course, that a 'large fish without scales' might not be a fish at all, but a whale. Although by the time of the limerick's publication in 1845 in *A Book of Nonsense*, 'all systematists ha[d] agreed in placing these animals [cetacea] among Mammalia',³¹ earlier in the century their classificatory status was less clear. At the start of the nineteenth century, when 'Thomas Bewick asserted that although the walrus seemed "to partake greatly of the nature of fishes," it was "nevertheless classed by naturalists under the denomination of quadrupeds", he hardly spoke for a consensus'.³² Pinnipeds (seals and walruses) seemed to many naturalists contemporary with Bewick to be a missing link between creatures of the land and creatures of the deep, while, Harriet Ritvo suggests, 'Bewick probably assigned the role of mediating between mammals and fish to the walrus, because he considered whales and dolphins ... to be incontestably fish'.³³

Lear's eye for natural history, the particularities of individuals within species, was keen. It was also proliferative and accretive. He records, during a trip to Egypt, for example, '4 black storks – one legged: apart. – 8 pelicans – careless foolish. 17 small ducks, cohesive. 23 herons – watchful variously posed: & 2 or 3 flocks of lovely ivory ibis'.³⁴ The oddness of some of the adjectives in this passage seems again to illustrate the inseparability of Lear's natural-historical eye from his nonsense one. That 'one legged', 'careless foolish',

‘cohesive’, and ‘watchful variously posed’ are the telling descriptors suggests the importance of posture for Lear, an artist and individual who always seems ‘more understanding of the idiosyncratic than of the exquisite’.³⁵ The outward appearance of the birds Lear records marks them out as species: ‘lovely ivory ibis’, ‘small ducks, cohesive’. But this focus on exterior similarity ran counter to the burgeoning studies of homology appearing at the same time.³⁶ Richard Owen, in 1848, castigated the lack of a wider, multi-species perspective in anatomical study: ‘when the exigences [*sic*] of the veterinary surgeon, or the desire of the naturalist to penetrate beneath the superficial characters of his favourite class, led them to anatomise the lower animals, they, in like manner, seldom glanced beyond their immediate subject, and often gave arbitrary names to the parts they detected’.³⁷ In order to understand anatomy it was necessary to understand it comparatively; to look for the hidden indicators of homology and shared structure, rather than relying on the ‘superficial’ characteristics of a species. As in the letter above, the nonsense birds he produced for young acquaintances suggest Lear paid little heed to Owen’s warnings, organising them by colour and character – ‘Blue Bird’, ‘Brown Bird’, ‘Yellow Bird’, ‘Scroobious Bird’, ‘Runcible Bird’ – while nonetheless differentiating them in form as well as hue.³⁸

For Lear, the imaginative potential in the frustration of the impulse to categorize was something worth singing about. ‘Scroobious’ has appeared above, and perhaps we might detect in it a meaning corresponding to this suspension of confident classification. The poem ‘The Scroobious Pip’ derives its refrain precisely from the titular creature’s lack of clear-cut generic signification. The stanzas are arranged according to the order of creatures which feature in it – beasts, birds, fish, and insects – but the Scroobious Pip sits placidly athwart this taxonomic structure, integrated only by the same rhyming couplet which occurs in each stanza: tip/Pip. “‘Tell us about yourself, we pray! – / For as yet we can’t make out in the least / If you’re Fish or Insect, or Bird or Beast’”, the creatures exclaim, only to be rebuffed with a name, and nothing more: “‘Chippetty Flip – Flippetty Chip – / My only name is the Scroobious Pip’” (pp. 387–8). The poetic structures of stanza and rhyme thus constitute both the categories which fail to accommodate this ‘scroobious’ creature, and the means by which it escapes categorisation, for the repeated couplet in each stanza, or group of creatures, fits identically into each one, and thus belongs properly to none of them.

Noakes’s transcription of the likely unfinished seventh stanza of the poem even fortuitously echoes Lear’s interest in the work of lines. Orthographically, the stanza tests out their ability to signal breaks in a verse while still holding it together. ‘The Scroobious Pip went into the sea’, it begins, following the established rhyming couplet scheme – until the seventh line

The —— spluttered, the Porpoise puffed
 —— Flounder ——
 And when the Whale began to spout –

 And every Fish he shook the tip
 Of his tail as he gazed on the Scroobious Pip.

(pp. 388-9)

It almost works: we might almost believe that, in a moment of virtuosity and carelessness, Lear could institute a daring breakdown of rhythm, *melos*, and rhyme, in which the length of the interruption escalates, as though testing out how long an absence he might leave and the poem still continue. Either way, it invites readers to reflect on the lengths to which they are willing to go to preserve continuity and relation, as well as what kind of gaps they might be willing to leap; and, characteristically of Lear’s verse, even a gap invites a playfulness, with ‘spluttered’ itself splashing and stuttering out of the silence preceding it, and the not-quite-

blank space provided for the whale's spouting perhaps requesting an approximation of such a sound. It suggests the kind of experimentation and willingness to test, stretch, and break the line that Emily Rosko and Anton Vander Zee discuss. 'If one thing defines how poets approach the line', they suggest, it is 'acquisitiveness and curiosity'.³⁹ Lear enjoyed playing with classification and taxonomy; and in large part what enables the extraordinary degree of play in his writing is the page-boundedness of his creatures. Ann Colley has picked up on Lear's sensitivity to the variety of effects possible on the page, arguing that we can understand both the serious landscape/fine art, and nonsense/caricature aspects of Lear's work better if we see them as reversals of each other. This is most evident, Colley argues, in a comparison between Lear's landscapes, and his limerick illustrations. She argues that the attention to detail in Lear's landscapes paradoxically tends to blur distinctions, while the nonsense drawings, by contrast, particularize and highlight them. In the limerick illustrations, the 'stretching, approximating, and exaggerating [of] the idiosyncrasies of their compositions' lends to their surface 'an explicitness which the orientation of realism dismisses'.⁴⁰ As a result of the absence of desire to represent accurately that which is observed, Lear's nonsense illustrations draw attention to their immediate environment, the page. With context, depth, and contour stripped away, the figures in the images are pushed to the exterior of the page, as well as into juxtaposition with each other. They become more a part of the page, 'flattened and letter-like', than a representation of something beyond it.⁴¹

The gaps and blanks within the limerick illustrations foreground questions of space and relation: 'faces of subjects turn to look out beyond the text, and serialized, sometimes isolated, images frolic on a frameless page, admitting and displaying the gaps that fall between them'.⁴² In juxtaposition with the limericks' 'shopping list[s] of places, events, and items', the illustrations seem just as often to be pulling things together, as apart.⁴³ An illustration of Lear's competing instincts to separate and agglomerate can be found in an 1864 letter to Evelyn Baring:

deerbaringiphownacuppelloffotografsthismawningwitchisendjoothereiswunofeec
hsortsoyookankeepbothifyooliketodoosoanweyoo=
=haveabetterwunofyourselfletmehavit.

Yossin seerly,

DwdL[ear].

(p. 195)

Again, Lear's nonsense imagination works in lines of poetry, ink, and thought, as a 'means of exploring the claims that art might make on our attention'.⁴⁴ For instance, while, in the 'Adventures of Mr Lear, the Polly and the Pusseybite', the protagonists end up being arbitrarily reassembled from their various parts, at the conclusion of their adventures they end up, along with 'the 2 Jebusites & the Jerusalem Artichokes and the Octagonal Oysterclippers', in a 'deep hole', which is pictured as seven pairs of legs and feet protruding above a single horizontal line (p. 218).⁴⁵ Lines of individuals are characteristically 'Learical' forms of arrangement, both joining bodies together and separating them.

A small, odd sketch by Lear, held in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, offers what is likely to be an early example of a decidedly spasmodic arrangement of exotic creatures. 'Portraits of the inditchenous beestes of New Olland' was probably inspired by John Gould's 1838 visit to Australia and made at Knowsley,⁴⁶ and features a range of sketches of creatures 'inditchenous' to Australia, such as 'ye great kangaroo, or Boomer', 'ye duckbilled Platypuss', 'ye peculiar or prickly porkyupine', and 'ye greate blacke deville', as well as more quotidian ones, such as 'ye dogge' and 'ye cowe' (p. 57). The

sketches range in detail and realism: a number of views of a kangaroo, which is accompanied by notes on its appearance and size; a rougher sketch of a Tasmanian devil, heavily inked in, which weights the bottom of the page like an anchor; and absurd and rudimentary line drawings in profile of dogs, cows, and cats. Each of the animals is isolated in an irregularly shaped cell. Their co-presence on the same page, and in the same disorderly scheme, appears to designate them all as inhabitants of 'New Olland', but the variety of shapes, shades, verisimilitude, and postures of the creatures, alongside their separation into distinctly shaped boxes, pulls the other way: how could this motley band of 'beestes' constitute a single category?

The 'ditch' in 'inditchenous' plays a pun on other trenches in Lear's poetry, which separate people, or in which personages find themselves. Such as the 'Young Person whose history / Was always considered a mystery', and who 'sate in a ditch, although no one knew which, / And composed a small treatise on history' (p. 374). Folded snugly in a v-shaped ditch, the young woman pictured gazes serenely at her 'small treatise', while the sun sets to her left. Or we could turn to the 'Old Person of Diss', whose misadventures might be the result of a deictic misprision: he said "'It is this! It is this!'" / When they said, "What? or which?" – he jumped into a ditch, / Which absorbed that Old Person of Diss' (p. 380). The confidence with which the Old Person regards the self-evidence of that which he indicates hints at a joke about the difficulty of naming in general, and is another instance of Lear's exploration of the 'relations between language and being' which Daniel Brown has described. What's the use of giving something a name, when it risks *misnaming* it? Lear's limericks often, Brown notes, 'precipitate their own referents, a set of self-subsisting relations that constitute a curious and discrete little world'.⁴⁷ The 'curious and discrete' little rooms of the limericks are much more neatly and regularly ordered than the boxes in 'Inditchenous beestes', but they still serve the same function. The repetition of the *a*-rhyme in the final line neatly envelopes the limerick, but it also quietly holds out the possibility of another rhyme. As Matthew Campbell puts it, 'in verse with terminal rhyme endings, the movement of the line is carried both forwards in anticipation from the sound at a line-ending and backwards in recollection from the recurrence of words which sound similar but are not the same'.⁴⁸

Ditches are one kind of line which arrange Lear's personages, but his verse is full of others, and often they act as a kind of multi-species roost, a foundation for the meeting and juxtaposition of different kinds of creature. The 'Old Person of Hove' lies on the floor, reading a book, while 'the wrens and the rooks' use 'that tranquil Old Person' for a perch (p. 352); and the same happens to the 'Young Person of Bantry', who 'frequently slept in the pantry', reclining as comfortable bench for 'the mice' whom she 'appeased ... with rice' (p. 328). The 'Old Man of Cashmere' gazes across a large horizontal blank (corresponding to a wall in the limerick) at 'two fat ducks' (p. 352).⁴⁹ 'The Old Person of Nice, / Whose associates were usually Geese' (p. 360), exactly mirrors the diagonal inclination of these associates – falling into line, perhaps, in a way not always exhibited by Lear's eccentrics. The 'Old Man whose despair / Induced him to purchase a hare', however, determinedly rides the immaculately linear hare (p. 329). Both these individuals' alignment with their companions suggests a shared purpose, a *simpatico* relationship. The 'Old Person in gray', who 'purchased two parrots, and fed them with carrots', illustrates another possibility, holding out her arms and a carrot for the parrots to eat, offering an olive branch even as she seems to be drawing away (p. 368). Perhaps exemplary is the 'Old Man on whose nose, / Most birds of the air could repose' (p. 178).

Just like the intrepid and disarticulated adventurers in 'Adventures of Mr Lear, the Polly and the Pusseybite', organising individuals in or on a line allows them to remain distinct and together. It is as though the sections of branches on which perch Lear's parrots and other birds in his early zoological drawings have been extended, and found alive with other kinds

of creature. Unlike, perhaps, Lear's verse as a whole, which resounds with noisy echoes of the voices of preceding and subsequent poets, lines offer a desirable kind of sociability; connected but independent. The nonsense botanies also seem to replicate this imaginative tic; the long, thin stems of plants turn out to be able to hold a considerable number of creatures, if only of one species. 'Nastiscreechia Krorluppia', 'Tigerlillia Terribilis', 'Bluebottlia Buzztilentia', 'Manypeeplia Upsidownia', and 'Piggiawiggia Pyramidalis' all illustrate the accommodating potential of long lines, their use as meeting points for a diverse menagerie of beings and things.

Some of the most direct examples of this are to be found in the text-image couplets known under the title 'Ribands and pigs'. Combining the roominess of both lines and lists, these pieces of nonsense feature three lines with terminal monorhymes, and accompanying illustrations. They list two pairs of objects, and the final line sets a personage or object 'going'. For example, the title piece goes: 'Ribands & pigs, / Helmets & figs, / Set him a jiggling & see how he jigs' (p. 135). 'The form has much in common with the limericks', Hugh Haughton notes, 'and like them and the Alphabets depends on the mirroring of texts and pictures'.⁵⁰ They neatly order an apparently disparate set of figures, curating them according to the logic of rhyme and rhythm, rather than homologous resemblance; and they illustrate how the ordering capacity of rhyme might lead to nonsense taxonomies with a hint of sense. 'Ribands and pigs', for instance, might suggest that the jiggling man is at a fair or fête, with ribands, piglet-chasing, choice comestibles, and costume pageantry. 'Chimnies & Wings, / Sailors & Rings, / Set him a sing & hark how he sings!' contains a hint of chimney swifts, as well as of Shelley's 'To a Sky-lark'. And, as Matthew Bevis has pointed out, these 'non-epic catalogue[s]' might also be 'an invitation to play': 'Cutlets & eyes, / Swallows & pies, / Set it a flying & see how it flies' (p. 142) traces the thread of an associative circularity which joins them together like beads on a necklace: "Swallows" are birds, but you can swallow a pie; a pie is made to be eaten, but a pie can be a bird (a magpie or a close relation). [And] like other kites in Lear's poetry, the "it" set a-flying here also has eyes (two little dots), perhaps because a kite is sometimes a bird of prey rather than a plaything'.⁵¹ The 's' at the end of 'flies' is indeed let loose and set a-flying, as it traces a journey up the page as the kite's tether. But although the final letter in 'Cutlets and eyes' joins itself to the object it describes, the poem-picture itself also replicates the visual organisation common to many of the other pieces in 'Ribands and pigs'. Each of these is arranged according to an invisible diagonal line running from top left to bottom right, either side of which sit the words and the illustrations, with the final 'it' or 'him' frequently straddling or hopping over the divide (as in 'Mitres and beams', 'Teapots, and Quails', or 'Tadpoles and Tops') (pp. 138-9). Arranged as such, they give a further impression of order and structure – a kind of descriptive note to an exhibit in a museum, or, conversely, the illustration to a piece of writing, implying a separating line even as they enact its permeability. But, occasionally, this arrangement buckles under the energy of the inhabitants it is trying to contain, as in 'Lobsters and owls' and 'Saucers and tops' (pp. 139-40).

'Ribands and pigs', like all of Lear's verse, stages questions of relation visually as well as semantically. Lear's longer nonsense and serial poems and narratives explore with particular interest the possibilities both of the line of narrative and the poetic line. 'The Akond of Swat', like 'The Scroobious Pip', offers an example of this:

{typesetter: this needs to be laid out exactly as shown; if not possible without a line turn, please set all displayed verse in this article to a smaller size to allow for exact layout}

Does he sing or whistle, jabber or talk,
And when riding abroad does he gallop or walk or TROT,
The Akond of Swat?

(p. 399)

But the ringing finality of the comically hectoring capitalised rhyme disappears at the end of the poem, as Lear ends with a familiar note of categorical uncertainty (in the sense both of emphasis and classification):

Someone, or nobody, knows I wot
 Who or which or why or what
 Is the Akond of Swat!
 (p. 400)

An accompanying illustration likewise confounds any hope of answering this question. And the familiar taxonomic ambiguity with which Lear ends the poem is played out by the metre and arrangement of the line itself. Each penultimate line, with the capitalisation, gallops forward in a flexible five-beat rhythm:

Is his steward a Swiss or a Swede or a Russ
 Or a bowl? or a glass? or a cup? or a mug?
 or a SCOT...
 or a POT...
 (p. 400)

As these two examples show, many of the lines lean towards an anapaestic pentameter, but the looseness of the metre ('Do they bring him only a few small cakes / or a LOT', for example) also provides an opportunity for playing with the syntactical relations within the poem. This flexibility means that the multitude of 'or's across the poem can either form an integral part of the rhythm throughout the line (as one of the mechanically important single-syllable words that anapaestic metre relies on, but which nonetheless can keep the sense of the line moving along as well), or it can sit alone and emphatic, introducing the capitalised rhyme at the end of the line. 'Or' is the most important word of the poem, both in terms of sense and structural function. It keeps open possibilities even as it distinguishes between them, acknowledging the necessity of ordering and categorisation, while simultaneously declining to settle on one order. And it gives a sense of an almost bewildering plenitude, a feeling of there being too much to choose from. But the last section of the final line of 'The Akond of Swat' forgoes both the 'or' and the capitalisation. There is a strong feeling of a missing beat in its absence:

Who or which or why or what
 Is the Akond of Swat!

The result is that the reader has to emphasise 'Is' in a slightly stilted way. This emphasis on the identity of the Akond renders the final line into a question, contrary to the exclamation mark at its end. The poem's rhythm asks the reader to lean into the final, apparently decisive, verb – 'is', *to be* – only for the resolution it promises to give way under the pressure.

In the second illustration accompanying 'The Akond of Swat', Lear sits atop a gleefully bounding elephant, paintbrush and palette in hand, peering resolutely into whatever is ahead, like an intrepid adventurer – and not without an air of daredevil about him. Perched, apparently less securely, towards the back of the elephant sit two figures carrying a parasol and a canvas respectively. The backmost figure is in the process of slipping off the leaping

elephant. As an inveterate itinerant, Lear regularly had to sit on large animals, and relied on them to transport himself and his belongings to his next destination. The travel journals are full of mentions of loading up the horses and mules, and it is fair to say that Lear depended on the exertions and co-operation of various other species in his wandering – even emotionally, in the shape of his perennial companion later in life, Foss the cat. It is therefore unsurprising, perhaps, that Lear's nonsense and letters are likewise full of creatures depending on one another, leaning on each other, co-operating or co-habiting space, balanced in poses of variously uncertain equilibrium.

Part of the spasmodic aspect of these arrangements involves playing with the roles of leaner and leaned-on, as in the 'Old Person in black':

There was an Old Person in black,
A Grasshopper jumped on his back;
When it chirped in his ear,
He was smitten with fear,
That helpless Old Person in black.

(p. 333)

In the illustration, the Old Person crouches on a stool, a distinctly large and menacing grasshopper perched on his back, who seems stably ensconced, but might just as likely be swiftly shaken off by an inadvertent shudder on the part of the Old Person. We might also turn to Lear's letters, and find an ageing Lear in the imaginary company of 'two remarkably large & amiable Frogs, whose arms [he] took & who saw [him] down the lane', in a letter to Anna Duncan (p. 199). The accompanying illustration shows Lear arm-in-arm between the two 'genteel & intelligent' creatures (p. 200), on his tip-toes, the frogs' arms outstretched in ambiguous gestures of delight, exhortation, or – perhaps – mid-dance. They are likewise poised on the tips of their webbed feet, if not slightly airborne, and the figure on the left seems to have a smile creeping across his face. 'Nothing could exceed', Lear jokes, 'the urbanity of their deportment and the melancholy and oblivious sweetness of their voices' (this from the man who had sung his own musical settings of Tennyson's poems with 'the greatest expression and passion [in] the most sentimental words'⁵²).

The older, frequently lonely, poet and painter clearly found something imaginatively appealing about the idea of an arm to lean on – even an amphibious one. But Lear wasn't above imagining playing a joke on those who might lean on him, as we can see in a letter to Augusta Parker. Complaining about the 'melancholy mucilaginous Molluscs' who have eaten all his 'Higher-cynths & also my Lower-cynths', he hatches a plan to rid himself of these 'enemies': 'by flattering their vanity in taking them friendly walks up & down the garden, – an inganno which blinds them to ulterior consequences', by which Lear means his plan to 'pitch them into the water, where they [may] justly expiate their unpleasant & greedy sins' (p. 263). The illustration sees Lear with two friendly arms cast around the 'shoulders' of two large and unsuspecting molluscs.

The joke, though, could also be on Lear himself, as a series of sketches showing 'Lear's adventures on horseback' indicates. The series features Lear and a not-so-ferocious 'ferocious horse' (who, in the first illustration, stares characteristically back at Lear, mirroring his own expression to the point that the horse actually has a pair of spectacles) in a succession of comic tableaux, demonstrating Lear's utter incompetence on horseback (pp. 63-70). The anarchic energy and variety of positions evident in the illustrations speaks to Lear's sharp eye for comedy, the captions beautifully understated: 'L. changes his position for the sake of variety' describes a picture in which Lear clings with arms and legs round the neck of his horse, leaving the saddle unoccupied (p. 64). But it also speaks to the sense

that this variety of positions – diversity of arrangements and accords – between human and other animals might be, not just possible, but a necessary part of living and getting on together.

Michael O'Neill has suggested that there are similarities between Lear's and Lord Byron's approach to rhyme, using an image which picks out one of the more prominent kinds of relationship in Lear's work: both 'delight in the way in which rhyme can seem to mimic social convention and its subversion, behaving as if its two terms were partners in a dance'.⁵³ Auden's famous poem, too, highlights the importance of dancing to Lear's nonsense: a cat soon has the eponymous 'dirty landscape-painter ... waltzing madly'.⁵⁴ John Lehmann claims that 'there is a sense of dance everywhere in [the] drawings, as there is so often in the verses themselves'.⁵⁵ He may have been referring to a number of different situations: dancing in Lear's nonsense might bring together individuals in a moving tête-à-tête, as in 'The Owl and the Pussycat', who 'danced by the light of the moon'; or in the 'serial improprieties of a quadrille for two' (p. 172), as in the 'Old Man of Whitehaven, / Who danced a quadrille with a Raven'; or in the 'long catalogue of creatures which come together to play and dance on the Quangle Wangle's hat'.⁵⁶ Dancing seems peculiarly liable to bring out aspects of similarity, or even identity, between individuals. The 'Old Person of Skye', for instance, bears a remarkable likeness to the 'Bluebottle fly' with whom he 'waltz'd' (p. 55); likewise the 'Old Man of Whitehaven'.

The dance of rhyme noticed by O'Neill draws attention as well, says Denise Levertov, to the 'mind's dance among perceptions', the 'slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word' enacted by the turn at the end of a poetic line.⁵⁷ But while Levertov suggests that the 'dance of a-logical thinking/feeling' introduced by line-breaks seems to be limited to the extent that they are incorporated into metrical forms, Lear's deft play with syntax, metre, and sense seems rather to put the creaturely forms of life within his poems into richer relations of thinking and feeling. Sewall notes just this in the final chapter of *The Field of Nonsense*, where she sees dance as the counterpoint to the games of logic found in nonsense literature. For her, dance is at once a kind of magical and somatic thinking; 'a kind of thinking with the body, freedom and mobility combined with the experience of some intuitive make-believe way of understanding things by dancing them' (p. 192). To use the words of William Carlos Williams, Lear's lines are an example of 'that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being'.⁵⁸ 'The Quangle Wangle's Hat' offers a glimpse of this drawing into relation:

And the Quangle Wangle said
To himself on the Crumpetty Tree, –
'When all these creatures move
What a wonderful noise there'll be!'

(p. 392)

'Said / To himself' both dramatises and splits the isolation of the Quangle Wangle witnessed at the start of the poem, invoking, in the blank space after 'said', the possibility of another auditor. Though foreclosed, the next lines alter this space to one of kinetic and relational potential: "'When all these creatures *move* / What a wonderful noise there'll be!'"'.⁵⁹

This multi-species choreography might sound, to a posthumanist ear, something like Donna Haraway's description of the 'material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another': where humans and other beings 'become who they are *in the dance of relating*, not from scratch, not *ex nihilo*, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter'.⁶⁰ And that might serve as a good description of how relations work in Lear.

Dances involve accommodation, a fluidity of positions, organisation and spontaneity, structure and free flow, and these are the qualities of relation which emerge between humans and other animals most strongly in Lear's nonsense. The arrangement of individuals in lines puts them in relation and keeps them apart; preserving some of the integrity of the pieces of the nonsense game, while nonetheless finding ways to articulate the possibility of blurred lines of distinction.

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NOTES

- ¹ 'In all, animals appear in over one-fifth of the limericks', as Ina Rae Hark notes in *Edward Lear* (Boston, 1982), p. 41; see also Thomas Byrom, *Nonsense and Wonder* (New York, 1972), pp. 61-81.
- ² On Lear's relation to nineteenth century classification and his work as a zoological illustrator, see Robert McCracken Peck, *The Natural History of Edward Lear* (Woodbridge, 2016).
- ³ W. H. Auden, 'Edward Lear', in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1977), p. 245.
- ⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; 2002), p. xvi.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ 'Not characters, but something both more and less than an ordinary person': Anne Stillman, 'T. S. Eliot Plays Edward Lear', in James Williams and Matthew Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 260-80: 273.
- ⁷ Matthew Bevis has shown how insistently Lear thought of, and illustrated, himself as bird-like, in 'Edward Lear's Lines of Flight', *Journal of the British Academy*, 1 (2013), 31-69.
- ⁸ Anna Henchman, 'Fragments Out of Place: Homology and the Logic of Nonsense in Edward Lear', in Williams and Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 183-201: 191.
- ⁹ Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, ed. Vivien Noakes (2006), p. 76. All subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.
- ¹⁰ James Williams also makes this point in 'Lear and the Fool', in Williams and Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 17-51: 23.
- ¹¹ See Bevis's discussion of this ambiguity in 'Edward Lear's Lines of Flight', p. 41.
- ¹² John Lehmann, *Edward Lear and His World* (1977), p. 55.
- ¹³ Byrom notes this mirroring in *Nonsense and Wonder*, p. 76.
- ¹⁴ On the relation of Darwin's writings to Lear's nonsense, see Bevis, 'Edward Lear's Lines of Flight'.
- ¹⁵ Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (1952), pp. 26-7. Subsequent references are incorporated in the text.
- ¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), p. 53.
- ¹⁷ On this, see Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

- ¹⁸ 'Nonce taxonomies' is a phrase coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to describe 'the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world': *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, 2008), p. 23.
- ¹⁹ Letter to Emily Tennyson, 12 Nov. 1857, *Complete Nonsense*, p. 465.
- ²⁰ This was long considered to be Lear's first datable illustration, but a recent study has shown this to be based on a misreading of the notes around the watercolour. Peck, *Natural History of Edward Lear*, p. 91.
- ²¹ Susan Hyman, *Edward Lear's Birds* (1980), p. 13.
- ²² Daniel Brown, 'Being and Naughtiness', in Williams and Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 162-82: 168.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- ²⁵ Vivien Noakes notes that the Knowsley Menagerie 'was famous throughout Europe' for its size and quality: *Edward Lear: Life of a Wanderer* (1969), p. 40.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ J. E. Gray, *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall* (Knowsley, 1846), unpaginated.
- ²⁸ On lineation in poetry, see Christopher Ricks, 'William Wordsworth I: "A pure organic pleasure from the lines"', in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 89-116; James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 12-25; and Mary Rosko and Anton Vander Zee (eds.), *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line* (Iowa City, 2011).
- ²⁹ In 'Over the Land and Over the Sea': *Selected Nonsense and Travel Writings*, ed. Peter Swaab (Manchester, 2005), p. 241.
- ³⁰ Noakes, *Life of a Wanderer*, p. 193.
- ³¹ Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, p. 49.
- ³² Thomas Bewick, *A General History of Quadrupeds*, 5th edn. (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1807), p. 503, cited in Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, p. 47.
- ³³ Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, p. 48.
- ³⁴ Cited in Hyman, *Edward Lear's Birds*, p. 69.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ³⁶ On the relation of Lear's work to Owen and homology, see Henchman, 'Fragments Out of Place'.
- ³⁷ Richard Owen, *On the Archetype and Homologies of the Vertebrate Skeleton* (1848), p. 1.
- ³⁸ Hyman, *Edward Lear's Birds*, p. 82.
- ³⁹ Rosko and Vander Zee (eds.), *A Broken Thing*, p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ Ann C. Colley, 'Edward Lear's Limericks and the Reversals of Nonsense', *Victorian Poetry*, 26/3 (1988), 285-99: 287.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.
- ⁴² Colley, 'Edward Lear's Limericks', p. 291.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 292-3.

- ⁴⁴ Bevis, 'Edward Lear's Lines of Flight', p. 31.
- ⁴⁵ Henschman discusses this image in 'Fragments Out of Place', pp. 185-6.
- ⁴⁶ *Complete Nonsense*, p. 483 n.
- ⁴⁷ Brown, 'Being and Naughtiness', p. 174.
- ⁴⁸ Matthew Campbell, 'Rhyme', in Matthew Bevis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 74-92: 78.
- ⁴⁹ Peter Swaab discusses this image in "'Some Think Him ... Queer": Loners and Love in Edward Lear', in Williams and Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 89-114: 103-4.
- ⁵⁰ Hugh Haughton, 'Edward Lear and "the Fiddlediddlety of Representation"', in Bevis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, pp. 351-69: 355.
- ⁵¹ Bevis, 'Edward Lear's Lines of Flight', p. 33.
- ⁵² Marianne North's description, cited in Noakes, *Life of a Wanderer*, p. 115.
- ⁵³ Michael O'Neill, "'One of the dumms": Edward Lear and Romanticism', in Williams and Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 51-69: 69.
- ⁵⁴ Auden also emphasises the importance of the arrangement on the page by choosing an unconventional layout for the sonnet's fourteen lines: two quatrains, rhymed *abab* and *cdcd*, before a quintet (*efegf*) and a single final line (*g*).
- ⁵⁵ Lehmann, *Lear and His World*, p. 55.
- ⁵⁶ Matthew Bevis and James Williams, introduction to *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, pp. 1-15: 10.
- ⁵⁷ Denise Levertov, 'On the Function of the Line', in *Light Up the Cave* (New York, 1981), pp. 61-9: 62.
- ⁵⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York, 1970), p. 13.
- ⁵⁹ Williams and Bevis discuss this moment in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, p. 11.
- ⁶⁰ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2007), p. 25; emphasis in original.