EDWARD LEAR AND THE POETRY OF NONSENSE

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This is to certify that the

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EDWARD LEAR AND THE POETRY OF NONSENSE

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CHAPTER I

The Origin and Development of Nonsense Verse

A little nonsense now and then
Is relished by the wisest men.
Anonymous

Most people in taking up a new subject like to be provided with an orientation, or with at least a definition of terms. One finds on beginning the study of nonsense literature, that it is necessary to define the term "nonsense". I began by making a diligent search of various dictionaries, including the standard, international, etymological, and philosophical dictionaries.[1] The results were not very satisfying. The philosophical dictionary altogether ignored the subject. And the best help to be had from so excellent a source as Murray's Oxford English Dictionary did not clarify the meaning of nonsense literature, although "nonsense" was variously defined as:

1. That which is not sense; spoken or written words which make no sense or convey absurd ideas; also absurd or senseless action. (Often used exclamatorily to express disbelief of, or surprise at a statement.)
2. Absurdity, nonsensicalness.
3. Unsubstantial or worthless stuff or things.

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1. Webster's New International Dictionary, 1941.
The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia, Century Co., N.Y., 1911.
An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English, Dutton & Co., N. Y., 1921.
Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, Macmillan Co., N. Y., 1925.
Dictionary of Psychology, Houghton Mifflin Co., N.Y., 1934.
Dictionary of Education, McGraw-Hill, N. Y., 1945.
Dictionary of Philosophy, Philosophical Library, N.Y., 1942.

4. A meaning that makes no sense.
5. A want of feeling or physical sensation.

Needless to say, these definitions do not satisfy our desire to understand nonsense as a fine art and something of the psychology of that art. If we were to be bound within the narrow meaning of such limited and prosaic definitions, we would perhaps find it difficult and even impossible to understand the literature of nonsense, for as that very able critic Edmund Wilson has remarked:

> Our ordinary use of the word "nonsense" in English, in connection with matters of literature, is based upon a complete misconception of the nature of literature, and of human expression itself.
>
> "Nonsense" implies "sense"; and "sense" implies "reason", "rational demonstration", "logic". Yet literature depends on suggestion; it is not explicable by what we call "reason", or reducible to what we call "logic"... A work of literature depends for its effectiveness upon a web of associations as complex and, in the last analysis, as mysterious as our mind and body themselves...
>
> The point is that, in our present uncertainty as to what we mean by "nonsense" and "sense", it is foolish to use "nonsense" loosely as a term of ridicule or contempt... To characterize something as nonsense is usually to throw it out of court as literature.[2]

There are always a great many people ready and willing in any age to dispose of any new and unconventional writing in this way, or to regard it with amused irony as an anonymous critic writing early in the nineteenth century has done:

> Nonsense is, in poetry, what a new power is in mechanics—adding twenty-fold scope, and energy, and capability to all the poet's efforts—absolving him from all the paltry laws and teasing restraints imposed by sense... The poet who neglects these advantages is the dullest of drivellers, and de-

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2. New Republic, "Nonsense", February 20, 1929, 21-22.

> serves never to be lauded by the Quarterly or the Edinburgh as long as he lives... What a dull dolt was poor Boileau who racked his brain and consumed his fingernails in an absurd attempt to reconcile reason with rhyme; and all this to be voted at last a rhymer and a pedant by the lakists and cockneys of the nineteenth century! Had he possessed a spark of the true vis poetica, he would have found, that instead of forcing rhyme and reason into an unnatural conjunction, the only business of the true poet is to discard both, to luxuriate in verse, blank of meaning as of rhyme.[3]

He then goes on in an entertaining fashion to express his high regard for nonsense, and signs himself "Trinculo Sonderling" of Quack Villa, Flummery Place. His idea of nonsense is similar to that held generally during the eighteenth century, and is radically different from that which we shall endeavor to present in this thesis. To quote further:

> I hold, that any one is equally behind-hand with the spirit of the present age, who suffers himself in the nineteenth century, to be a dupe to the long-exploded humbug of good sense... I am preaching a doctrine which our friends and acquaintances are perpetually practicing, and still more recommending and illustrating by their writings... Nonsense, with gay and laughing aspect, trips lightly over the surface of things; enjoys them all—flowers and weeds, ore and dross, wine and lees; is never unhappy; never out of countenance; never thinks, and is therefore never perplexed; never feels, and therefore knows not grief; makes friends easily, and loses them lightly; succeeds in love; is caressed by the world; and received as a most fashionable, entertaining, and inoffensive companion at all the dinner-parties near Grosvenor-square.[4]

Possibly thinking himself to be writing delightful nonsense, he continues his witty banter, which though quite amusing is not nonsense, although it is typical of that conception of nonsense held during the "Age of Reason". This was the concept that continued to prevail throughout the early part of the nineteenth century.

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3. Colburn, "Advantages of Nonsense", Anonymous, 1822, v. 5, 542
4. Ibid.

What is common sense, or any sense, good for? Does it make men loyal and well affected? Does it make men patriots and friends of the people and constitution? Then why is Hunt popular, and why are Canning and Peel not so? Does it conduce to piety? Alas! Alas! Hume, Rousseau, Gibbon, and Voltaire, with sense enough to beat the whole united field of modern witty-kins, were little better than downright atheists. In morals, also, I must assert nonsense has it hollow,—and the morality of men now-a-days is unhappily too often in exactly the inverse ratio of their sense—while their sensuality is in the direct ratio of it... But, Sir, hear the testimony of the most sensible of men themselves, hear their own estimation of those supremacies of sense and mind which the deluded world so much admire. What said Solomon, the most sensible of all? why that everything, sense and learning included, was mere vanity; and did not Socrates, who had toiled all his life after wisdom, come at last to the satisfactory conclusion that all his knowledge only taught him that he knew nothing?—truly a pleasant discovery at the end of 60 years consumption of brain and midnight oil! If these were mere sayings of these great (I mean these nonsensical) characters, I should not attach much weight to them, but only ascribe them to the perverse propensity of great men to under-rate the qualities and characteristics by which they are alone distinguished; but when we remember that the said first-mentioned contemner of wisdom illustrated his own aphorisms by keeping three-score times as many wives and concubines as any of the most nonsensical men could possibly know what to do with, without the assistance of his friends, and that Socrates suffered himself to be henpecked by a jade, in a way that none but men of learning and genius ever do, one must readily admit with them that wisdom is the weakest, and sense and learning are the most nonsensical things imaginable... Now, Sir, if nothing and nonsense are what we are to arrive at in the end, I confess I prefer the shortest cut. If nonsense is the ultimate goal, straight to the mark, say I...Surely it is much easier and more satisfactory, and more rational, and certainly more popular, to be plain downright jackasses and noodles at once, like our friends A. and B. and C. and D. If, then, nonsense is a happy, popular, and fashionable companion, cherished by the great—admitted to a seat in the cabinet—a staple commodity at Murray's—a pious, loyal, and church-going subject—moral and domestic in habits, and the quintessence and result of all knowledge

> and all philosophy, I do maintain that nonsense attains and fulfills in a very easy and delightful and toilless manner, almost, if not quite, all the good ends and purposes of life, and that it is one of the most absurd and hypocritical cants, of these canting days, to affect to quiz and ridicule and despise so main an engine in the affairs of life, and so considerable a contributor to the fame and fortune and pleasures of individuals.[5]

I have quoted from this essay on nonsense at some length, for it is one of the very earliest feature articles dealing with nonsense to appear in any English periodical. Its tone is, of course, predominantly one of amused irony, and the concept of nonsense held by the writer is quite as characteristic as that of any thorough-going eighteenth century rationalist would be. Some good points are made, however, and there are grounds for believing that the author was able to appreciate some of the qualities of nonsense as it occasionally cropped out in literature. In concluding his argument on the subject, he states:

> The real extent and full value of the merits of nonsense can, I maintain, only be truly appreciated by that class of persons who, with the most unpardonable forgetfulness of obligations, are those who raise the loudest outcries against it—I mean <u>authors</u>. This is, indeed, quarrelling with their fame and their bread; and it is observable, that those among them are the most intolerant and vindicative against this quality, to whose writings it has been the most bountiful benefactor; they, with the most barbarous ingratitude, take every occasion of reproaching and vituperating, in the works of others, that which is the only substratum and characteristic of their own... The stilts of nonsense enable hundreds to cut a dashing and dignified figure, which they could never effect on their poor spavined, and tottering marrowbones. In this late and exhausted stage of the world, indeed, I hold that literature must come to an absolute and downright stand-still without the aid of nonsense.

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5. <u>Ibid</u>.

> All the sensible things upon all possible subjects have been long ago said and re-said, written and re-written, to satiety.[6]

There is the suggestion here that nonsense may provide valuable contributions to the art of writing. It may be that nonsense acts as a leaven in those serious writings where it sometimes appears so incongruous. And although Pope couples nonsense with dullness, the spirit of nonsense was highly appreciated by many writers long before him. It is the concept of what is meant by nonsense, however, that has undergone a quite considerable alteration. An evolutionary development can be seen in the art of nonsense literature comparable to the development of other art forms. A great many types of nonsense writing have continued to survive, while nonsense itself was in the process of evolving into the fine art which it became in the Victorian Era. But even at this late stage of the day as M. Émile Cammaerts has observed in his Poetry of Nonsense, "there are as many nonsenses as there are individual opinions, and it would be a perfectly hopeless task to distinguish between them or to attempt to draw up a list of them". And in addition to this "what is nonsense for one person is very often sense for another, which obviously complicates matters".[7] There is, for instance, the nonsense of the story-teller, and of the dramatist; there is the non-

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6. Ibid.
7. The Poetry of Nonsense, Émile Cammaerts, N. Y., 1926, p.1.

sense of poetry, of satire, of caricature; there is the nonsense of Mother Goose; and there is nonsense "pure and absolute", which the nineteenth century brought to the culmination of a fine art principally through the genius of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.

"It is to be regretted", says Carolyn Wells, "that the majority of the reading world does not appreciate or enjoy real nonsense, and this is consequent upon their inability to discriminate between nonsense of integral merit and simple chaff."[8] But it is perhaps expecting rather too much of the reading public that they should show any great powers of discrimination, since the study of nonsense literature is, according to Cammaerts, only in its infancy. He predicts, however, that it will some day come into its own and be recognized and respected as "one of the most valuable contributions of the art of writing to the development and happiness of mankind".

In this study we have found it necessary to limit ourselves to the origin and development of verse nonsense, for a discussion that also dealt with prose nonsense would be entirely too lengthy for adequate treatment in a work of this nature. But as M. Cammaerts has remarked in The Poetry of Nonsense, "nonsense seems particularly conducive to rhythm and rhyme...prose walks too slowly for it; it needs the wings of rhyme and the dance of rhythm." Ordinary nonsense verse may be either words without meaning, or

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8. Scribner's, 1901, v. 29, 239.

words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas. But there is only a small proportion of nonsense verses, contends Miss Wells[9], that comes under the head of language without meaning, and some of these verses are written with intent to be used for "counting out" or to aid students of Latin composition in familiarizing them with the mechanical values of quantity and metre. Although it is often difficult to isolate and define the essence of nonsense, many of its characteristics can be discovered in the poetry of all ages and of many types. These characteristics may be shown quite definitely to exist in old folk tales, ancient ballads, and nursery rhymes. The remarkable connection between popular ballads and nursery rhymes has frequently been noted, the latter often borrowing the metre of the ballad as well as the refrain. In other instances we have occasions wherein a line of modern nonsense verse seems to derive directly from an old ballad refrain, as the refrain of the Three Ravens, first recorded in writing around 1611,

> There were three ravens sat on a tree,
> They were as blacke as they might be.
> With a downe derrie, derrie, derrie, downe, downe.

reappears in the nonsense verse of Edward Lear:

> There was an old Derry-down-derry,
> Who loved to make little folks merry.

It is interesting also to note that the Mother Goose tale of

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9. Ibid.

the Three Children,

> Three children sliding on the ice
> Upon a summer's day,
> As it fell out they all fell in,
> The rest they ran away.

first published in 1662, was sung to the tune of "Chevy Chase". We are all familiar with the fact that a refrain of nonsense-words is an organic part of many otherwise serious poems. In such songs of Shakespeare's as "It was a lover and his lass" or "When that I was a tiny little boy" are to be found highly musical nonsense-refrains. And a celebrated political ballad is known by its nonsense-chorus,

> Lilliburlero bullin a-la.

The value of a nonsense refrain is often considerable. For a refrain with no meaning whatsoever may be extremely musical, and a highly integral part of a poem. Quite often a nonsensical refrain seems to act as the spark that lights the tinder. It may be only a jingle that captures the ear of the crowd, but it leads to ready acceptance and popularization of other lines.

It is, however, to the nursery that modern nonsense writers owe their chief inspiration, especially to nursery rhymes, and fairy-tales of a non-magical sort. M. Cammaerts points out the mistake of identifying the "so-called real world with Commonsense, and the Fairy-world with Nonsense".[10] In brief he maintains that the Fairy-world has laws which are in general as sensible and as logical as those of the real world. "The realm of

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10. The Poetry of Nonsense, p. 31.

Nonsense," he adds, "is not so much Fairyland as Dreamland, for in Dreamland the two worlds meet." In addition he has observed that no absurdity enters into the fairy-tale, nor any magic into the realm of Nonsense, although each succeeds in breaking the bonds of Realism. It is to this realism and prosaic common sense that nonsense is unalterably opposed. And yet, paradoxical as it may at first seem to be, "real nonsense is not just no-sense", as F. W. Knickerbocker so rightly observes, "any more than it is satire, or parody, or allegory. It is quite another sort of sense--child's sense... Satire, parody, wit, epigram, and allegory all have a context, an outside meaning. But real nonsense, like music, means nothing outside itself. Nonsense is its own meaning, as its creators have always known."[11] There is "no sort of use" as Alice in Wonderland exclaimed in trying to explain nonsense. It has a pattern all its own and a dream-like quality that comes of itself. The world of pure nonsense is described by R. L. Mégroz as one of "pure phantasy".[12] It is the world of the healthy child, imaginative, exuberant, and irresponsible. And as the best nonsense has always been that primarily written for children, it will best be appreciated by those adults who retain a childlike freshness of imagination.

"Both Nonsense and the Supernatural," M. Cammaerts maintains, "belong to the child's world and stand more or less in the position which comedy and tragedy hold in the world of the grown-ups."[13]

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11. American Bookman, Sept. and Oct., 1932, v. 75, 465-71, 584-89.
12. Cornhill, February, 1938, v. 157, 175-90.
13. The Poetry of Nonsense, p. 30.

And it is at once evident that modern nonsense writers owe a very great debt to the influence of children upon them; Edward Lear to the Earl of Derby's grandchildren, and Lewis Carroll to Dr. Liddell's little daughter Alice. Nonsense, writes Walter de la Mare, "twinkling on in its intense inane, is as far out of the reach of the ultracommonsensical, the immitigably adult and the really superior as are the morning stars. That flat complacent veto--'This is nonsense' (in the cast-iron sense of the word), while intended as a sentence of death, means little more than 'We are not amused'."[14]

There is an important point made by G. K. Chesterton in his Defense of Nonsense of the spiritual aid that may very unexpectedly be found in pure nonsense. He says, in this fine appreciative essay:

> Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the 'wonders' of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing.. we cannot properly wonder at it... Everything has in fact another side to it, like the moon, the patroness of nonsense. Viewed from that other side, a bird is a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk, a man a quadruped begging on its hind legs, a house a gigantesque hat to cover a man from the sun, a chair an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two.
>
> This is the side of things which tends most truly to spiritual wonder. It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not (as has been represented by the merely rational religionism of the 18th century) a picture of the ordered benefice of the Creation, but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it...

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14. Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 11, 1930, v. 7, 202-3.

> This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense.[15]

These sentiments bring to mind an applicable quotation from Sir Thomas Browne, "Many things are true in Divinity, which are neither inducible by reason, nor confirmable by sense."

That element of wonder, which we have remarked to be present in the best nonsense poetry, is equally characteristic of romantic poetry. In the wake of the Romantic Movement, that followed the "Age of Reason", and brought with it a renascence of wonder to poetry, there seemed to exist a great stimulant to the nonsense literature, which the nineteenth century raised to a fine art. With the best nonsense poetry we are led to give, also, that "willing suspension of disbelief" which the romantic poets liked their readers to possess. There is, too, as I have endeavored to show a connection between the old ballads and nonsense verse, and this influence of ancient ballads and folk legends is likewise remarkably evident in romantic poetry. In addition to all of these common traits later romantic poetry exhibits a very great technical virtuosity and musicality as do nonsense lyrics also. Again to quote M. Cammaerts:

> ...there is a certain connection between the attitude of mind of the old and modern Romanticists and that of Nonsense writers. They make the same appeal to the imagination; they rely on the picture more than on the word, and on sentiment more than on intellect. Nonsense stands, with regard to Romanticism, very much in the same position as Satire and Epigram, with regard to Classicism.[16]

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15. A Century of English Essays, Everyman's, 1935, 446-50.
16. The Poetry of Nonsense, p. 85.

There is a romantic vagueness in many good nonsense lyrics which call up to the reader's mind the details of a landscape only suggested. Of those curious little people who "went to sea in a Sieve", Edward Lear tells us:

> Far and few, far and few,
> Are the lands where the Jumblies live;

These mysterious poetic realms are reminiscent of,

> ... magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Jumblie-land is alluringly mysterious and intriguing, and certainly as indefinite as Keat's Faery-land.

The charge that is sometimes, even yet today, brought against romantic poetry by its critics and detractors, that it is "devoid of sense", is amusing enough when applied also to nonsense poetry. But paradoxical as it may sound, good nonsense seems to obey all unawares some unwritten "laws". For as Charles I. Glicksberg has written in his Creative Nonsense:

> Contrary to the impression that popularly prevails, the writer of nonsense verse or prose does not allow his imagination to run amok; he does not throw off all restraints, all limitations. That fallacy is as bad as the assumption that primitive people are creatures of unbridled orgiastic impulse, that they know unbounded freedom, that they are able to satisfy all their instinctual desires. On the contrary they are hemmed in by tribal laws of propriety, by taboos and inhibitions more severe than those experienced by civilized man. Similarly with the adventurer in the fabulous land of nonsense. He hasn't escaped to an island of freedom where he feels no necessity to conform to any binding laws; he has simply moved to a new dimension where the rules of reason are perversely negated, where topsyturvydom is normal... and fantastic associations hold sway... After one feels at home in this new dimension... One realizes that the writer has a purpose of his own, that his mind does follow a track. It is an Erewhon kind of track, full of

> senseless loops and death-defying angles, and they seem actually to lead nowhere, but a principle of order can be observed. The traffic does obey a number of psychic signals.[17]

M. Cammaerts has noticed, in this regard, that "after reading a certain number of nonsense poems, the first impression is that both the matter and the form are entirely fanciful and that they are without good rhyme or sound sense."[18] However, on closer inspection it is seen "that the technique of good nonsense verse is just as skilful and difficult as that of any other kind of verse."[19] But in nonsense poetry, rhyme and rhythm are not subdued, are not the perfect servant of the thought, as they are made to be in first class serious poetry. In order to be as nonsensical as possible, "nonsense rhyme differs from ordinary rhyme and generally misbehaves itself. Nonsense rhythm is much more docile and follows the rules scrupulously. Being by its very nature, pure music, it has no opportunity to run wild and to give offence and adapts itself to the queerest words with a peculiar relish. But the most foolish nonsense writer, like the most inspired mystic, is obliged, at one time or another, to realise that his power is not infinite and that his flight from reality must end somewhere."[20]

It may well be that the same factors which favor the influence of rhythm and music in nonsense poetry also stimulate the illustrators of nonsense literature. At any event a unique art seems to have grown up around the genre, and it has become almost axiomatic that nonsense writers are also the illustrators of

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17. Education, May, 1943, v. 63, 569-76.
18. The Poetry of Nonsense, p. 39.
19. Ibid., p. 40.
20. Ibid., p. 52.

their own works, to mention but a few, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, W. S. Gilbert, Thackeray, Kipling, and Chesterton. The best nonsense art captures the childish point of view, and the "serene madness which pervades childish attempts at art, for as far as representation of the world may go, children's drawings are utterly mad; but they are at the same time serene."[21] It may be added, however, that it calls upon superior draughtsmanship to produce the kind of pictures that children themselves try to draw, but cannot. It has been out of the fantasy of nonsense literature and nonsense art (a fantasy that has roots in reality and "laws" of its own as we have shown), that the haphazard experimentation of Surrealist writers and painters has developed, and their achievments have shown "how tediously insignificant may be the results of undirected and uncensored dreaming, for the greatest masters of fantasy combined imaginative hardihood with a considerable inheritance of intellectual discipline."[22] The difference between the 'automatic writing' of Surrealism and nonsense literature is best observed in a writer like Edward Lear. "The 'automatic writing' of Surrealism," says Lear's biographer, "with its absence of all control exercised by reason and all aesthetic or moral preoccupation is a '<u>reductio ad absurdum</u>' of the Romantic theory of Inspiration: but Lear's writing is intended to be absurd, whereas that of the Surrealists is not. Lear's effects are deliberate, carefully thought out, selective: there is about him none of

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21. <u>Sewanee Review</u>, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.
22. <u>New Statesman & Nation</u>, Peter Quennell, August, 1947, v. 34, 173.

the conscious, and self-conscious, irresponsibility that is one of the principal dogmas of the Surrealists."[23] Only to the extent that his poetry might be called the 'reductio ad absurdum' of Romanticism does Lear have any slight resemblance to the Surrealists. The Surrealist doctrine, "believing in the expression of thought without the control of reason, and seeking to paint dreams and states of mind by any means whatsoever, was derived from Freudism."[24]

It is the contention of Max Eastman that Freud has "a very unnatural and unwholesome view of wit and nonsense; his idea of the unconscious action of repressed impulses explains so many peculiar things that one naturally gets to assuming, especially if one has been reared in the godlike bad habits of German philosophy, that it explains everything."[25] Here Mr. Eastman seems to have misinterpreted Sigmund Freud. The latter was not really hostile to humor, having always been considered as appreciative of it; his objective analysis of wit and nonsense were scientific dissections to discover in seemingly insignificant and innocent activities a deeper understanding of the individual. "Freud's greatest sin against humor," Mr. Eastman continues, "and against the art of enjoying it, is that he makes it all furtive. He maintains that there is no humor at all in the playful nonsense of children, and that the humor arises only when grown-up people elude their ideals of rationality and other inhibitions, and escape back into that non-humorous childish fun. He does not ex-

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23. Edward Lear, Angus Davidson, N. Y. 1939, p. 200.
24. Encyclopedia Britannica, v. 17, 63d.
25. Yale Review, September, 1936, v. 26, 71-87.

plain why this nonsense which is not comic to a child, should be comic when it is furtively returned to by an adult. I think Freud was brought to this rather fantastic opinion about children not by observation but by the fact that he cannot himself see that pure nonsense is ever comic."[26] Actually Freud was not opposed to humor or to nonsense. He found in them unmistakable signs by which the trained observer might get a truer picture of the inner man. It is beyond doubt to most of us today that nonsense and humor reveal much of the subconscious mind of the author. We feel as certain as Freud that there is meaning in nonsense, and we can only wish that he had also proved that the value of nonsense is considerable. For support of this opinion, however, we may turn to many modern educators, foremost among them Charles I. Glicksburg, whose views on the value of nonsense are worthy of note:

> The principal pedagogic justification of Creative Nonsense is that it breaks down the walls of convention; it opens up new and wonderful perspectives of incongruity; it destroys the tyranny of the commonplace, prosaic, quantitative world; it stimulates and developes the powers of the imagination... The most difficult task to perform is to discard the crutches of common sense and walk along roads that bear no signs, or through an untracked wilderness. The rational, geometric mind will labor and sweat and then give birth to a tame mouse. For such a mind watches itself at work, spies upon the work of magic, hoping to learn the creative secret. The more complex and gifted intelligence is capable of moments of hypnotic surrender, of beholding this inscrutable and metaphorical universe as a pageant, a cinematic dream, a symphony of curious sounds and sights, an Imagistic poem... The world of Creative Nonsense and that of Common Sense are not two realms that may be kept neatly apart without placing an unwarranted strain on the psyche of the individual.[27]

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26. Ibid.
27. Education, May, 1943, v. 63, 569-76.

Glicksburg is in favor of introducing Creative Nonsense into the classroom. And he does not see why it should be necessary to devise a reasoned principle of justification for this, when no such reason is advanced for the study of geometry or algebra.

> One way to get students to express their delight in ordered nonsense is to encourage them to write limericks. Some of them, true to their training, will approach this, like any other school assignment, with owlish gravity. Their primary object in life being to secure a high grade, they will labor desperately to concoct some clever or original idea, but their nonsense, unfortunately, turns sour; it proves to be sober, sedate, serious of mein... The serious-minded student is hog-tied to a code of ethics, a binding doctrine of what is reasonable and right. It is a law, only, of inner necessity which he must obey. He has lost his soul to the devil of rationality.[28]

Along the same line and in the interests of education, Burges Johnson proposes the establishment of Chairs of Nonsense in our colleges and universities.

> Educators tell us that a spirit of honest questioning is the basis of all true education. Where is there less evasion and equivocation than in nonsense? If the sole value of some college courses lie admittedly in the mental training gained in trying to find out what is meant, why not have a course entitled, "Nonsense, Its Literature, Its Uses and Its Philosophy"? True, now and again some such course exists fortuitously, but its conductor is probably a prophet unawares... I have discovered that if Jones's conversation consists in nothing but a succession of exact truths, I do not necessarily get to know Jones. I merely get to know the truths. But if Jones says something that means nothing at all, I feel that I must know him better. "Don't tell me," said William Pitt, "of a man's being able to talk sense. Everyone can talk sense. Can he talk nonsense?"[29]

The Victorian Era was blessed with a number of men who could not only talk nonsense, but could write it sublimely. It was an age

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28. Ibid.
29. Harper's, June, 1920, v. 141, 128-31.

that brought the literature of nonsense to its highest perfection, and to these madcap Victorians all modern nonsense writers are in varying degree indebted. But that is another chapter.

CHAPTER II

The Era of Wonderful Nonsense

There was an Old Derry-down-Derry, who loved
to see little folks merry:
So he made them a Book, and with laughter they
shook
At the fun of that Derry-down-Derry.
E. Lear

"Nowhere else in Europe" writes M. Cammaerts, " do we witness a movement so popular and so widespread as that started by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll in the Victorian era".[1] Certainly nowhere else in Europe do we find anything comparable to the English nonsense literature. The French have, of course, M. de la Palisse and the Germans have Wilhelm Busch, but their creations are rather weak alongside those of the English nonsense writers. And it is evident from the comic drawings of Wilhelm Busch that he has sometimes imitated the style of Edward Lear. "There seems to be", continues M. Cammaerts, "in the English temperament a certain trend of broad humor which predisposes it to appreciate the freaks of the Nonsense spirit".[2] At any rate it is plain enough that the art of true nonsense writing is rather well localized both to time and space.

The great nonsense literature of England, that reached its maddest heights during the latter part of the nineteenth century owed

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1. The Poetry of Nonsense, p. 73.
2. Ibid., p. 74.

a debt to the past, but as we have said, it was also something new and unique in World literature, and its sources of inspiration were mostly immediate and contemporary. "Every century," says Walter de la Mare, "indeed every decade of it, flaunts its own little extravagances and aberrations from a reasonable human standard. The Victorian age was rich in these exotics. It amuses us moderns, having dried and discolored them, to make little herbariums of them. But there is one Victorian wild flower which makes any condescension absurd-- and it is called Nonsense. Unlike other "sports" of its time, this laughing heart's-ease, this indefinable "cross" between humor, fantasy, and a sweet unreasonableness, has proved to be of a hardy habit and is still living and fragrant."[3] Perhaps in looking back at "those earnest Victorians" as Sir Esmé Wingfield-Stratford termed them in his brilliant study, "we shall discover that only the greatly in earnest can be greatly nonsensical--that it takes uncommon sense to write real nonsense."[4]

It is a little puzzle how it could happen that nonsense "pure and absolute" should spring up in the very midst of mid-Victorian seriousness, perhaps it was a protest to, or a criticism of, the feeble romanticism current in the age when middle-class taste was wallowing in sickly sentimental and primly moral literature, art, and music. The sheer madness of nonsense art may in itself have been in the nature of a reaction to that smooth composure of Pre-Raphaelit-

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3. Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 11, 1930, v. 7, 202-3.
4. Bookman, October, 1932, v. 75, 584-9.

ism. On the other hand, here was doubtless a safety-valve for the staid and sensible Victorians, and a relief from the sentimental and moral. The nineteenth century, too, was not one of great wits as the preceeding century had been, and this fact alone would have favored the growth of nonsense literature. In addition, as we are aware, serious poets of the nineteenth century were often excessively musical with a resultant loss of depth and profundity of meaning; the very antithesis of rationalism. This musicality, as we have noted, is a well distinguished characteristic of nonsense verse. We have already spoken of the sources of inspiration found for nonsense verse in the Mother Goose rhymes. "Poor Mother Goose", writes F. W. Knickerbocker, "loved and chanted for generations, to be dissected and psychoanalyzed by ours! We need not argue learnedly; we need only chant rhythmically:

> Barber, barber, shave a pig.
> How many hairs will make a wig?
> Four-and-twenty, that's enough,
> Give the poor barber a pinch of snuff."[5]

We think that is enough answer, too, for four-and-sixty dollars! It is true that the poetry for children did not consist entirely of Mother Goose rhymes, but as Walter de la Mare says, "Not even its kindliest apologists would deny that in the earlier years of the nineteenth century the attitude of mind towards children tended to the over-solemn,— a state resembling a lantern without any light in it."[6] "And those writers", he continues, "who had the nursery

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5. Ibid.
6. Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 11, 1930, v. 7, 202-3.

in view, even after William Blake had sung of innocence, had been for the most part convinced that what was good for the young must be unpleasant. Their rhymes like their prose were 'nearly always in a moral, minor, or miserable key'."[7] The sort of literature recommended for children was in general pretty frightful, and as Charles Lamb said, it was the kind of thing that "starved their little hearts and stuffed their little heads." F. W. Knickerbocker states that "sufficient samples of infant crime and punishment could be culled from such treasuries as Mrs. Turner's Cautionary Stories, Mrs. Sherwood's Fairchild Family, Jane Taylor's Hymns for Infant Minds, and Isaac Watt's Divine and Moral Songs for Children to fairly justify terming "the Lord" of our forefathers the tormentor of children."[8] From out of this drab background the first Book of Nonsense appeared in 1846. In later editions Edward Lear recalled the circumstances of his book thus: "Long years ago, in days when much of my time was passed in a country house, where children and mirth abounded, the lines beginning 'There was an old man of Tobago' were suggested to me by a valued friend as a form of verse lending itself to limitless variety for rhymes and pictures; and thenceforth the greater part of the original drawings and verses for the first Book of Nonsense were struck off with a pen, no assistance ever having been given me in any part but that of uproarious delight and welcome at the appearance of every new absurdity."[9] Here we catch a glimpse of the "Father of Nonsense," a serious, child-loving man, writing in the midst of children. "It is a

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7. Ibid.
8. Bookman, October, 1932, v. 75, 584-89.
9. Angus Davidson, Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet, Dutton & Co., New York, 1939, p. 19.

safe bet," says F. W. Knickerbocker, "that when Isaac Watts penned "How doth the little busy bee" there were no mirthful children hanging over his shoulder!"[10] Lear's principle as he himself states it was none other than to write "nonsense pure and absolute," without any symbolical meaning. And he says, "In no portion of the Nonsense drawings have I ever allowed any caricature of private or public persons to appear, and throughout, more care than might be supposed has been given to make the subjects incapable of misinterpretation."[11] Nevertheless both Lear and Carroll, whose Alice in Wonderland appeared nineteen years later, suffered from undiscerning critics, who continually sought to find in their writings meanings of a political, cynical, or other sort, hidden beneath a cloak of nonsense. On the purposes of these two nonsense authors G. K. Chesterton has given some interesting comments:

> We know what Lewis Carroll was in daily life; he was a singularly serious and conventional don, universally respected, but very much of a pedant and something of a Philistine. Thus his strange double life in earth and in dreamland emphasizes the idea that lies at the back of nonsense—the idea of escape... Lewis Carroll, living one life in which he would have thundered morally against any one who walked on the wrong plot of grass, and another life in which he would cheerfully call the sun green and the moon blue, was, by his very divided nature, his one foot on both worlds, a perfect type of the position of modern nonsense... In Edward Lear this sense is certainly less emphatic, because of the completeness of his citizenship in the world of unreason... Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is purely intellectual, even in "Jabberwocky", that mosaic of new and mysterious words, the sense of mathematical neatness prevails... But Lear introduces his unmeaning words and his amorphous creatures not with the pomp

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10. Bookman, October, 1932, v. 75, 584-89.
11. Edward Strachey, "Nonsense As a Fine Art," Living Age, December 1, 1888, v. 179, 515-31.

> of reason, but with the romantic prelude of rich hues and haunting rhythms. Edward Lear is always introducing scraps of his own elvish dialect into the middle of simple and rational statements, until we are almost stunned into admitting that we know what they mean. There is the genial ring of common sense about such lines as,
>
> "For his aunt Jobiska said, 'Every one knows
> That a Pobble is better without his toes!'"
>
> which is beyond the reach of Carroll. The poet seems so easy on the matter that we are almost driven to pretend that we see his meaning, that we know the peculiar difficulties of a Pobble, that we are as old travellers on the "Gromboolian Plain" as he is.[12]

Lear and Carroll were the two great masters of nonsense in the Victorian Era, but there was yet a third member to round out the great Nonsensical Triumvirate. This was W. S. Gilbert whose "Bab Ballads" are likewise nearly "out of this world". As was the case with Lear and Carroll, Gilbert also provided his own illustrations, but as Carolyn Wells has stated "his work is not characterized by absurd words or phrases; he prefers a still wider scope, and invents a ridiculous plot, wherein schemes of ludicrous impossibility are treated as the most natural proceedings in the world."[13]

There were, however, some very great differences in the members of this triumvirate, as even a perfunctory comparison is able to show. "Lear found in nonsense," writes S. A. Nock, "the vehicle of expression which other writers of nonsense neither found nor needed; and in that form he wrote about himself. Carroll does not appear, even in disguise, in his work: he was merely the guide. Likewise, the irascible W. S. Gilbert appears nowhere in his writings. He is always the puppeteer giving a most excellent show and

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12. "A Defense of Nonsense", A Century of English Essays, Everyman's, 1935, 446-50.
13. Scribner's, 1901, v. 29, 239.

making the puppets look like life, but he is never on the stage himself. Unlike Gilbert and Carroll, Lear could not feel satisfied with his chosen profession and his conduct in it. For Carroll the world he lived in was perfect. Apparently he could not imagine anything better than his horrid existence. For Gilbert the world was a wonderful place where he did exactly as he damn pleased and was as disagreeable as possible, highly successful, and altogether what he might want to be. For Lear, on the other hand, the world was a desperate place. From the beginning of his life to the end he was a sad, lonely, unsuccessful, and bewildered man. The brightest moments in his melancholy existence he spent in the company of children."[14] And it is for his "nonsenses" that he will always be remembered; but he has continued to delight adults as well as children.

Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, says Katherine West, "represent two schools of thought--both perfect nonsense, but different and complimentary. Lewis Carroll was no rival to Lear on his own ground. Much of Carroll's magic has always lain in his relentless logic and metaphysical implications."[15] And to sum up her statement, Lear's characters are "creatures of emotion rather than intellect, and express themselves in action or in poetry rather than in logical thought."[16] "If we compare Carroll's verse with Lear's," says R. L. Mégroz, "(which is perhaps unfair, as he was a nonsense prose writer), we find that though very clever

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14. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.
15. Spectator, March 29, 1946, v. 176, 321.
16. Ibid.

it misses Lear's spontaneity in effect, and usually makes wit supply the lack of fantasy."[17]

In his very fine article entitled Lacrimae Nugarum, S. A. Nock has made an interesting comparison of the geography of these three Victorian artists: "Edward Lear had the facility, like W. S. Gilbert, of inventing geography and inhabitants of strange places, but Lear's geography is more comprehensive and more detailed, whereas Gilbert carried his countries from poem to poem with the same flora and fauna. In Lewis Carroll there is no geography to compare with Lear's. Even the Hunting of the Snark takes place in a nameless and undiscovered region. Alice's adventures take place, so far as we can see, in the England of Lewis Carroll, but an England curiously repopulated."[18] It is easy enough to account for all the travels and strange places recorded in Lear's limericks and lyrics when it is known that his entire adult life was one long round of gallivanting to obscure parts of the world.

The characters of Lear are more vague and mysterious and at once more romantic than those of Gilbert and Carroll, who "with their sharp, bright descriptions", says Nock, "are clear and definite personalities. In other words, whereas Carroll and Gilbert present to the reader a complete, and in some cases an almost documented art, Lear does little more than stir the reader to go adventuring for himself. He has made of his reader a fellow adventurer, a creator, and consequently a vastly more sympathetic in-

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17. Cornhill, February, 1938, v. 157, 175-90.
18. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.

dividual than he might be in the company of Lewis Carroll or W. S. Gilbert."[19]

And finally, although his greater fame lies in the field of the novel, we should not fail to mention Thackeray, who is a minor nonsense artist of that prolific Victorian Era. Thackeray's nonsense cannot, however, claim to be nonsense "pure and absolute", for there is almost always an undercurrent of satirical intent, having to do either with politics or manners. His Book of Snobs, which he also illustrated, is perhaps best known, but the familiar "Little Billie" comes nearer to being sheer nonsense.

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19. Ibid.

CHAPTER III

The Early Life of Edward Lear and His Book of Nonsense

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

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

W. H. Auden

Edward Lear, artist and author was born at Holloway, London, May 12, 1812. His ancestors, who were of Danish extraction, and originally spelled their name Lör, had been naturalized in England a generation or so back. Edward was the youngest of a family of nineteen children, and his struggles began at the age of thirteen, when his father's unfortunate financial speculations ruined the family. Thereafter he was cared for by his eldest sister, Ann, who was twenty-one years older than himself. To her he owed what education and loving care he ever received. But added to his poverty and other misfortunes, he was epileptic; and though the attacks of his "Terrible Demon" were mild, they must have been frequent as the little x's with which he marked them in his Diary are numerous. He was also near-sighted and needed to wear thick spectacles, and this together with the largeness of his nose greatly added to his shyness and his feeling of aloneness. Perhaps the

best description of his adult self is in his autobiographical verses, written in later life at San Remo, from which we quote:

How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!
Who has written such volumes of stuff!
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
But a few think him pleasant enough.

His mind is concrete and fastidious,
His nose is remarkable big;
His visage is more or less hideous,
His beard it resembles a wig.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,
Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;
Long ago he was one of the singers,
But now he is one of the dumbs.

. . . . . .

He has many friends, layman and clerical;
Old Foss is the name of his cat;
His body is perfectly spherical,
He weareth a runcible hat.

When he walks in a waterproof white
The children run after him so!
Calling out, "He's come out in his night-
Gown, that crazy old Englishman,oh!"[1]

At about the age of fifteen, in his own words, --"I began to draw for bread and cheese, but only did uncommon queer shop-sketches... In 1831 I became employed at the Zoological Society and, in 1832, published The Family of the Psittacidae, (Parrots) the first complete volume of colored drawings of birds on so large a scale published in England, as far as I know."[2]

For the next several years he made drawings and colored lithographs of various zoological subjects for many well known British

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1. The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Ed. by Holbrook Jackson, London, 1949, p. vii.
2. Introduction to Letters of Edward Lear, Ed. by Lady Strachey, London, 1908, p. xxvii.

naturalists. His work attracted the attention of the Earl of Derby, who was seeking an illustrator for his menagerie at Knowsley. Here he worked intermittently for about four years, becoming a great favorite of the Earl's grandchildren, and making many notable friends. And in 1846 was published a series of comic drawings and rhymes which he had made for the amusement of the children. In the same year in which the Book of Nonsense appeared he gave some drawing lessons to Queen Victoria, who had liked his volume of lithographs called Rome and its Environs. But it is to the Book of Nonsense that Lear owes his fame. Its popularity with children and adults alike has never waned during the past century. Let us examine some of the reasons for the continued appreciation accorded this book.

We heartily endorse an article by Katherine West, wherein she states, "real nonsense, like all great art, is dateless."[3] Readers of these nonsense verses, despite Lear's contention that he meant to write nonsense "pure and absolute", have always been able to find therein all sorts of meanings, and, indeed, it is a fascinating pastime to analyze his verses. For as C. M. Smith has said, "No matter how absurd the statements—extravagant or obvious or illogical—there are always overtones of logic, implications, suggestions."[4]

In the limerick form the brisk little stanzas of Edward Lear's nonsense verses followed a very old pattern. The question of where the first limerick was "perpetrated" is very much clouded in obscur-

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3. Spectator, March 29, 1946, v. 176, 321.
4. Christian Science Monitor Magazine, July 13, 1940, p. 4.

ity. "There are those who insist that Limerick, Ireland was its origin. Others have professed to trace the origin to Mother Goose rhymes, certainly the verse form is very old and of English origin, rather than of foreign derivation."[5] According to the dictionary the limerick is "a nonsense poem of five anapaestic lines of which line 1, 2, and 5 are of three feet, and rhyme, and lines 3 and 4 are of two feet, and rhyme."[6] Actually, however, few limericks use anapests, most of them being written in iambics or dactyls.

In Mother Goose rhymes there are many varied forms of the limerick, but these cannot be assigned any definite date. An anonymous article that appeared in the Atlantic of July 1924 had some interesting speculations on the limerick source, one of the possibilities considered was the publication in 1606 of Michael East's Second Set of Madrigals to 3, 4, and 5 parts: Apt for Viols and Voices, in which is the following:

O metaphysical tobacco
Fetched as far as from Morocco,
Thy searching fume
Exhales the rheum
O metaphysical tobacco![7]

The writer adds that "the honor of writing the first signed poem in limerick form may possibly belong to Robert Herrick, the last stanza of whose 'Night-piece: To Julia', is particularly beautiful."[8]

Then, Julia, let me woo thee,
Thus, thus to come unto me;

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5. C. Rider, Saturday Review of Literature, Feb. 5, 1944, v. 27, 12-14.
6. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1949.
7. Atlantic, July, 1924, v. 134, 134-37.
8. Ibid.

And when I shall meet
Thy silv'ry feet,
My soul I'll pour into thee.

This article also notes that the limerick form reappeared about 1810 with the "Irish Melodies" of Thomas Moore, and Leigh Hunt used the stanza, too, in the "Song of Ceres". Here are lines that show the limerick is capable of containing excellent poetry:

Laugh out in the loose green jerkin
That's fit for a goddess to work in,
With shoulders brown,
And the wheaten crown
About thy temples perking.[9]

Lewis Untermeyer observes that "all sorts of people have succombed to the lure of the limerick. Great poets have vied with multitudes of the unknown to sharpen the point of their five-line absurdities."[10] Among writers of note who have written credible limericks are Kipling, Stevenson, Rossetti, Swinburne, Galsworthy, Arnold Bennet, and perhaps one William Shakespeare. But the high priest of all limerick writers is Edward Lear. "Later limerick writers sought greater complexity and devised a last line that would come like a climax," continues Untermeyer, "intricate and seemingly impossible situations were designed and then brought off in a blithe nonchalant conclusion. They turned Lear's little limerick inside out, upside down, and helter-skelter. The limerick became more and more freakish, and more and more perverse and precious in word scrambling and tongue

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9. Ibid.
10. Reader's Digest, February 1946, v. 48, 85-86.

twisting."[11] The faults which appear in the limericks of today are, says E. P. Hammond, due to "an excess of sense and a lack of philosophy. Modern Limerickians, by introducing a new idea in the fifth line, forget the value of that last line with its repetition of an earlier sound and earlier idea. Lear saw the value of its restful summary."[12] The quality of the latter's verses are such that, as one critic understandingly observes, "you never roar with laughter at a Lear Limerick, you shake, or softly chuckle. And you had better take them in small doses, for theirs is a flavor so delicate that it is easily lost."[13] It is this unique quality that has caused Mr. de la Mare to remark of limericks, "There are two distinct orders of them: the mere limerick and the Lear Limerick. They differ more than mushrooms and moonshine. A genuine Lear Limerick--and that only derivative--is unlikely to be the reward of a precious moment more than once or twice in a lifetime."[14] Of course, a great deal of the effectiveness of Lear's nonsense verses is owing to the perfect appropriateness of the drawings. "Generally speaking," says R. L. Mégroz, "the human figures are sheer nonsense; while the non-human figures constantly reveal a highly sophisticated technique subdued to the nonsensical élan. This peculiar skill with the non-human forms is well shown in the wonderful Nonsense Botany, where you feel that everyone of those absurd plants ought to exist."[15]

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11. Ibid.
12. Unpopular Review, April, 1916, v. 5, 275-80.
13. F. W. Knickerbocker, Bookman, Sept. and Oct., 1932, v. 75, 465, 584-89.
14. Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 11, 1930, v. 7, 202-3.
15. Cornhill, February, 1938, v. 157, 175-90.

But to return to an examination of the nonsense verses. One might well inquire, what makes a good nonsense verse? Gelett Burgess says its "quotability" is of prime importance, and certainly his "Purple Cow" is widely known enough to grant that it has this essential quality. But it is chiefly important, we believe, that the verse be highly nonsensical. St. John Hankin says, "mere metrical dexterity is the least of the virtues of a good nonsense verse. The essential thing is to have a story to tell, a little drama to present."[16] Lear's verses, being the compact little dramas that they are, fulfill this requirement admirably. "The merit of the verse will really depend on the latent humor of the lines,"[17] adds Hankin. To a very considerable degree the humor of Lear's limericks is of a latent quality. "Those who practice this form of Art," Hankin continues, "would do well to eschew all mere ingenuity, for to elaborate or try to polish a nonsense verse is fatal to its spontaneity. Destroy it instead, and write another."[18] What a fine thing it would be for their art, if many present day nonsense writers would follow his advice.

After reading a number of Lear Limericks one is usually impressed by the amount of action that takes place in one of those neat little dramas. Several very able critics have commented upon the action as well as upon the traits to which the actors, vaguely known as "They", give expression. One of these critics, Mr. E. P. Hammond, writing in 1916, has, we believe, made a finer analysis

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16. Idler, 1898, v. 14, 90-98.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

in many ways than that which Aldous Huxley did eleven years later in his essay on Lear. "The Book of Nonsense", writes Mr. Hammond, "has been almost universally treated as a series of jeux d'esprit, but upon serious examination the fallacy of this hasty generalization becomes evident, and the thoughtful student of mob-psychology recognizes with respect the breadth and depth of Lear's comprehension of that complex and peculiar personality, the Crowd. The solidarity of society is at stake, as the crowd perceives, and to preserve which it instinctively though blindly raises its protest against individualism."[19] This stanza well illustrates that intolerance.

> There was an old man of Thermopylae,
> Who never did anything properly;
> But they said, "If you choose,
> To boil eggs in your shoes,
> You shall never remain in Thermopylae."[20]

"Though not emphasizing the more unpleasant traits of mob-psychology," Hammond continues, "Lear yet acknowledges their existence. His entire work is a most striking demonstration of the inherent antagonism of the Individualistic and Collectivistic tendencies in humanity. His individuals, one and all, take the extremest liberties of action; while his populace, conservative, suspicious of the unusual, keeps a watchful eye on the vagaries of the single member of society."[21] Along the same trend of analysis, R. P. Utter in his essay on "Lear's Characters" has remarked, " 'they' rep-

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19. Unpopular Review, April 1916, v. 5, 275-80.
20. Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Faber and Faber, London, 1949, p. 199.
21. Unpopular Review, April 1916, v. 5, 275-80.

resents a composite social force, which appears with significant regularity in the third line of the stanza. It is an embodied social consciousness, invariably reactionary; to the protagonist, always an obstacle representing the pressure of conventionality. Yet in all his characterization, one notes the sympathy, the insight, the adroitness of the master in his adaptation of method to the purpose in view."[22] Aldous Huxley in his essay, "Edward Lear" writes, "The Nonsense Rhymes are, for the most part, nothing more nor less than episodes selected from the history of that eternal struggle between the genius or the eccentric and his fellow-beings. The sort of people "They" like do the stupidest things, have the vulgarest accomplishments. The people of Shoreham adored that fellow-citizen of theirs whose habits were marked by decorum, and who bought an umbrella and sate in the cellar. Naturally; it was only to be expected."[23] A writer who calls himself "Quintus Quiz" has a few things to say also about "They", "This is the royal hour for such as They, for what is a totalitarian state but a triumph for Them? Unless we are willing to allow oddness and eccentricity we shall never have room for freshness and originality."[24]

Burges Johnson, on the other hand, in a very entertaining essay entitled "Recognizing a Philosopher When You See One" writes;

> It seems strange that during the ninety years since his first book appeared, Edward Lear has been generally regarded as a humorist, even as a writer of nonsense. Yet not so

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22. Pearls and Peppers, R. P. Utter, Yale University Press, 1924, 172-77.
23. Essays New and Old, A. L. Huxley, Doran, N. Y., 1927, 165.
24. "They; Lear's Use of They", Christian Century, June 15, 1938, v. 55, 753.

> for he was an Englishman. Those of his fellow-countrymen who first glimpsed his writings were doubtless perplexed. It is in fact a matter of record that the first British critic who happened upon his book ejaculated "Haw". A second one also said "Haw". A third, hearing the two ejaculations closely following one another and thinking that they emanated from the same man, assumed that the book was funny. This rumor spread until it became a national obsession; and as a result the profound philosophical emanations of Edward Lear, compact and concise beyond parallel, concealing their epigramatic crypticism under a mantle of apparent simplicity, were very nearly lost to the world.[25]

From all of these various comments by notable writers, it must be apparent that there is a great deal more in the Nonsense Rhymes of Edward Lear than their entertainment value, important though that is. The interpretations and applications that imaginative persons usually give when commenting upon the possible meanings of the nonsense verses are actually amazing to comprehend. At this sort of thing Burges Johnson is particularly adept; "Lear's prophetic vision," he says, "is best proved in his treatment of that eternal controversy between radical and conservative. Who can deny that he foresaw the great Slavic experiment:

> There was a Young Lady of Russia,
> Who screamed so that no one could hush her;
> Her screams were extreme,
> No one heard such a scream,
> As was screamed by that Lady of Russia.

The timid citizen who lives in constant fear of communists is suggested by,

> 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.

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25. Professor at Bay, Burges Johnson, New York, 1937, 141-48.

And the witch-hunting type of journalist and legislator is portrayed in,

> 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!'"[26]

Needless to say, this could, except for lack of space, go on ad infinitum, for there are no end of clever interpretations that might be given to such pure nonsense verses as are those of Edward Lear. "It is a too severe trial of this genre," as R. L. Mégroz points out, however, "to read through a whole collection of limericks as one reads an ordinary book, even when they are as perfectly illustrated as Lear's."[27] Regarding his abilities and personality, Mégroz continues, "he worked hard and suffered much from melancholy and a sense of frustration. He had the makings of a much greater serious artist than he was, and of a poet as fine, let us say, as his friend, Tennyson. External circumstances and certain peculiarities of his temperament, which would not be obscure to a psychologist, appear to have stifled his creative energy in those normal directions, but the powers of his creative genius achieved a partial expression along a channel which it found almost haphazardly."[28] To a very large extent his writings are autobiographical nonsense, this explains in a degree their power to stir the emotions, and as S. A. Nock observes, nonsense "was a medium of expression by which he could reach the audience he most

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26. Ibid.
27. Cornhill, February 1938, v. 157, 175-90.
28. Ibid.

desired to reach, children and Edward Lear."[29]

Marvelous, however, as his nonsense verses are, most critics today are agreed that they are far surpassed by the series of nonsense ballads, in which may truly be discerned a "light that never was on land nor sea."

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29. Sewanee Review, January 1941, v. 49, 68-81.

CHAPTER IV

The Nonsense Songs and Lyrics

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

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

I. Autobiographical Nonsense

The Nonsense Songs were produced during the latter part of Lear's life and appeared intermittently or "spongetaneously" as Lear would have said. The First Book of Nonsense had been published in 1846, but it was not until 1871 that the Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets were given to the world. More Nonsense followed in 1872, Laughable Lyrics in 1877, and the Queery Leary Nonsense was published in 1911, twenty-three years after its author's death.

These productions were but a sideline activity for "a Nartist Cove" who earned his livelihood at the serious profession of landscape painter. Today, however, it is not as an artist that he has secured a lasting claim to recognition, but as the inventor and originator of a new form of literary expression, the nonsense lyric.

Not only was Edward Lear the creator of a new genre, and

for this is all the more credit due him, but there was in his nonsense lyrics something unique. Many of them, excellent nonsense though they are, do not upon attentive reading seem to be exactly funny. Indeed, we find in these lyrics much of the fine emotional quality that we generally experience in the best romantic poetry. And when we examine this emotional element more fully, its source appears to be quite apparently autobiographical.

From Mr. Nock's biographical account we know that in his childhood, Lear "never knew the intense satisfaction which every child feels in being able to put his troubles onto his parents and forget them. He never knew the security, the peace of mind, the satisfaction of either maternal or paternal love in any of its manifestations. All through his life he sought and hoped to find a friend who would stand somewhat in loco parentis, one who would show the complete devotion to Edward Lear that a parent shows to a child, obviously he never found this."[1] He made many lifelong devoted friends, most of whom married and lived through notable careers. But Lear remained a lonely man, easing his restlessness somewhat by extensive travels. What he may have been seeking, suggests Nock, was the "never-never-land of childhood, which most children find all right enough and live in happily and step out of eventually with considerable regret. But Lear had never lived there as a child and had never met the real companions

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1. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.

that most children know in that realm of fancy."[2] It is certain, at least, as Holbrook Jackson has observed, that "Lear was no ordinary writer turning out humorous books for a living. Nonsense was, however, not merely an occasional, still less an idle occupation, but rather the safety-valve of his consciousness. It became ultimately a world in itself specially created by him as a refuge from the trials and irritations of life: ill-health, lack of means, and above all, an over-strung sensibility. Nonsense was thus Lear's Ivory Tower, and far more accessible than most retreats of the kind."[3] In his letters Lear constantly made his own odd appearance, his large nose, his rotundity, his bushy beard and his thick spectacles the butt of his nonsensical humor, and it seems logical to assume that many of the strange characters in his poems have certain characteristics in common with Edward Lear. His self-depreciation, however, as Holbrook Jackson has pointed out, "was not a pose. Lear was as puzzled about his gifts as he was about marriage, or, indeed, about life."[4]

From about the age of forty-one he felt occasional perplexity over the problem of marriage, but although he thought that someday he might marry, he never did, though only a year before his death he contemplated the advisability of taking such a step. Why he never married it is difficult to say. He never felt entirely secure from financial worry, and once he remarked, that if he were to marry he feared he would paint "less and less well". Perhaps, like

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2. Ibid.
3. Introduction, The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Faber and Faber, London, 1949, p. x.
4. Ibid., p. xvi.

Keats, his principal reason for not entering into matrimony was his intense devotion to his creative work. It is the conjecture of S. A. Nock that "perhaps his shyness, illness, and ugliness kept him from actually proposing to anybody. And perhaps he was seeking not so much a wife as a mother, and was more or less unconsciously repelled from a woman who would be for him a wife rather than a mother. Certainly his bachelorhood increased his loneliness, and his isolation from his fellows."[5] From photographs that we have seen of Lear we would, however, describe him as plain rather than ugly. "The Owl and the Pussy-cat are happy," Nock explains, "because they are married. The Jumblies are happy because their relationship is one of intimate and perfect fellowship. The personages in Lear's poems who enjoy companionship such as he never found are the happy ones."[6] This appears a soundly warranted observation in line with the known facts of Lear's own lonely existence. In contrast to these happy figures, Nock adds, "the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò, who seeks in vain to marry the Lady Jingly Jones, sails away on his turtle into the setting sun in utter despair."[7] Mr. Davidson suggests that "in the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò we can see the lover who could not marry his love and whose life, despite the tearful sympathy of the lady, was worth very little."[8] This poem has been called, by Charles S. Day, Jr., the "greatest love story in the world"[9], and surely there is something more than nonsense in this ballad. It is possible that Lear's love-

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5. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Edward Lear, Angus Davidson, Dutton, N. Y., 1939, p. 196.
9. Yale Review Anthology, 1941-47, p. 86.

lorn characters may have been in some measure influential upon the futile and seriocomic romantic figures of several modern poets. One immediately calls to mind T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney" and "J. Alfred Prufrock". But, continues Nock, "even more than the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò the Dong with the Luminous Nose arouses our sympathy. He fell in love with a Jumbly girl who came to his shores with the other Jumblies. Then with her own kind she departed and left the Dong alone to lament her going."[10] The same sense of despair and frustration is likewise found in "My Aged Uncle Arly", the last of his poems.

"On a little heap of Barley
Died my aged uncle Arly,
  And they buried him one night;--
Close beside the leafy thicket;--
There,--his hat and Railway-Ticket;--
There,--his ever-faithful Cricket;--
  (But his shoes were far too tight.)"[11]

II. Romanticism

Some very pertinent comments by the well known writer, Peter Quennell, have been made upon the melancholy tinge and the vague self-depreciatory refrain that runs through many of Lear's poems. According to Mr. Quennell:

> In all the best of those incomparable productions, there presently emerges an uncouth and lonely figure--a Dong or a Pobble or a Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò--who strays across the dream landscape with an air of romantic disenchantment, bound on some endless quest or impelled by the recollection of some mysterious sorrow. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this figure is Lear himself, or bears the same relation

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10. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.
11. Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Faber and Faber, London, 1949, p. 275.

> to Lear that Childe Harold bore to Bryon, a symbol of his disillusionment, a projection of his own interior restlessness...[12]

This "restlessness", we believe, however, may have been in Lear's case due to something more than mere romantic questing. It is known from the facts of his life that the rigorous English climate made it necessary for him to travel for the sake of his health. In addition his vocation was chiefly that of a painter of classical landscapes. How much of his restlessness could be attributed to our modern urge to be up and doing is likewise a difficult consideration. And perhaps, most important of all, Lear was not incapable of rendering the whole romantic outlook to its reducto ad absurdum. It is true that there are, in these poems, traits in common with romanticism, and there is present, too, a large autobiographical element. But in a reading or analysis of Lear's songs we ought not to lose sight of their entertainment value, while at the same time noting those more serious undercurrents so evidently present and meaningful.

"There is only one poem," says Peter Quennell, "on which the romantic shadow does not fall. "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" provide a lyrical exception. This ill-sorted pair wind up with lover's meeting and with the marriage of true minds. Otherwise the note of frustration prevails---alternated and subtilized by the climate of the dream-world, yet none the less perceptible... Throughout all, the figure of Lear himself haunts his own mythology."[13] This is

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12. New Statesman and Nation, August 30, 1947, v. 34, p. 173.
13. Ibid.

all very true, but among other poems on which the "romantic shadow" scarcely falls are "The Jumblies", "The Pelican Chorus", "The Quangle Wangle's Hat", "The Table and the Chair", "Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow", and "The Duck and the Kangaroo". None of these lyrics reach an unhappy dénoûment, but in them are to be found other romantic elements which we will endeavor to discuss more fully.

As a principal theme of many of Lear's poems a journey or a voyage is often implied or described, which is of course an obviously romantic trait. His characters, as S. A. Nock says, "are everlastingly on the go. Some of them at the end of their wanderings find happiness, some do not. Most of them don't belong anywhere,"[14] except, it might be added, in the imagination. They certainly belong there.

A very excellent analysis of the sea-theme in romanticism, and the attendant voyaging, as that occurs in romantic and nineteenth-century writers, has recently appeared in a new book by W. H. Auden. Mr. Auden writes:

> The sea becomes the place of purgatorial suffering: through separation and apparent loss, the characters disordered by passion are brought to their senses and the world of music and marriage is made possible...[15] The sea is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial. An abiding destination is unknown even if it may exist: a lasting relationship is not possible nor even to be desired. ..[16] The sea is the real situation and the voyage is the true condition of man...[17] The sea is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is al-

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14. Sewanee Review, January, 1941, v. 49, 68-81.
15. The Enchafèd Flood, W. H. Auden, Random House, N. Y., 1950, p. 12.
16. Ibid., p. 14.
17. Ibid., p. 13.

> ways liable to relapse. It is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that 'there was no more sea'...[18] When society is normal the image is the City or the Garden. That is where people want and ought to be. As to the sea, the classical authors would have agreed with Marianne Moore. "It is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing; But you cannot stand in the middle of this." A voyage, therefore, is a necessary evil, a crossing of that which separates or estranges.[19]

The number of sea voyages taken by Lear's characters are remarkable, and in the light of Mr. Auden's reflections they assume a deeper significance. Lear was certainly no stranger to the ills of society. We know this from his letters as well as from an analysis of his poems. Perhaps he found in the sea theme a refuge from terrestial troubles, not that happiness was to be found therein, but rather adventure, mystery, and possible deliverance. Auden shows that a parallel possibly exists between Barclay's adaptation of Brant's Narrenschiff and Lear's "Jumblies". The Ship of Fools, deliberately sailing the high seas, is "the state in disorder. This looks so similar to the behaviour of the Jumblies, yet how differently the reader is expected to feel towards the latter.

> They went to sea in a sieve, they did.
> In a sieve they went to sea;
> In spite of all their friends could say
> On a winter's morn, on a stormy day
> In a sieve they went to sea!
> And when the sieve turned round and round
> And everyone cried, 'You'll all be drowned!'
> They called aloud, 'Our sieve ain't big,
> But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!
> In a sieve we'll go to sea'."[20]

And so they went! Lear perhaps in his fancy found momentary diver-

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18. Ibid., p. 7.
19. Ibid., p. 8.
20. Ibid., p. 9.

sion in accompanying them. But when the author or his readers finally reach those nostalgic and indefinite never-never lands so common to romantic literature what is found is not happiness nor fullfillment; but the romantic oases, Auden says, usually "turn out to be mirages or disappointing and dangerous deserts like the Encantadas, of which Melville writes:

> 'Change never comes, neither the change of seasons nor of sorrows. No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief sound of life here is a hiss. In no world but a fallen one could such lands exist.'"[21]

The romantic writer from Keats to Lear is forever questing, never satisfied nor content, and usually forlorn in his hope of happiness. Lear exhibits an anxiety concerning his creative powers, the course that he has followed, and the work that he has accomplished, reminiscent of the doubts that tortured Keats.

The Jumblies, however, (whom we were discussing) give no evidence that they are an unhappy group, but rather a madcap assembly, who sail away with the "adventurous exuberance of Elizabethan seamen," says Josephine Fry, "regardless of their friends remonstrances."[22]

In most of Lear's songs a journey of some kind is undertaken, and as we have said the variety of sea excursions are astonishing. There is the Pobble who swims the Bristol Channel, losing his toes for his efforts. "The Duck and the Kangaroo" circumnavigate the world three times in their wanderings. "The Four Little Children" sailed around the world by sea, and came back

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21. Ibid., p. 23.
22. "The Topography of Edward Lear", Spectator, Dec. 31, 1937, v. 159, 1184.

on the other side by land. "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" went to sea. "Mr. Daddy Long-Legs and Mr. Floppy Fly",

> Rushed downward to the foamy sea
> With one sponge-taneous cry;
> . . . . . .
> They sailed across the silent main,
> And reached the great Gromboolian plain;[23]

In "Calico Pie",

> The little Fish swam,
> Over the syllabub sea,[24]

And in the "Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò", that distraught character fled to the "calm and silent sea",

> There, beyond the Bay of Gurtle,
> Lay a large and lively turtle;--
> 'You're the Cove,' he said, 'for me
> 'On your back beyond the sea,
> 'Turtle, you shall carry me!'[25]

Mr. Auden has summed up very well the romantic poet's use of the symbolism of the sea, we believe, within the following statement:

> The sea is...the Alpha of existence...the symbol of primitive potential power as contrasted with the desert of actualised triviality...[26]

In what has been called the "poetry of departure" the sea has ever been the principal theme. Lear, among other nineteenth century poets, looked nostalgicly to the sea for escape and relief from those pandoric social problems of modern civilization.

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23. The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, H. Jackson, Faber and Faber, London, 1949, p. 67.
24. Ibid., p. 78.
25. Ibid., p. 237.
26. The Enchafèd Flood, Random House, N. Y., 1950, p. 20.

III. Tennysonian Echoes

No examination of the romanticism of Edward Lear would be complete that failed to take notice of the important romantic influence upon his work, both as an artist and a poet, that came from a life-long friendship with Alfred Tennyson. In his biography of Lear, Mr. Angus Davidson has brought out some aspects of this influence very well:

> Lear, clearly, was much influenced by Tennyson--more than merely to the extent of using his metres (the 'Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò', for instance, is in the metre of 'Row us out from Desenzano'; 'My Aged Uncle Arly' in that of 'The Lady of Shallot'; 'Calico Pie' in that of 'Sweet and Low', etc.). But he did not burlesque him; his poetry, rather, is in the nature of a burlesque of bad romantic poetry of the popular kind.[27]

Lear was the possessor, also, of a devastating talent for parody, but he never indulged in it to the mockery of an author. The following parodies on Tennyson's lines have that impersonal nonsense quality, which is all their own. The parodies have been extracted from Lear's letters:[28]

> Like the Wag who jumps at evening
> All along the sanded floor.[29]
> . . . . . .
> To watch the tipsy cripples on the beach,
> With topsy turvy signs of screamy play.
> . . .
> Spoonmeat at Bill Porter's in the Hall

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27. Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet, A. Davidson, New York, Dutton & Co., 1939, p. 200.
28. Later Letters of Edward Lear, Ed. by Lady Strachey, New York, Duffield & Co., 1911, p. 140. (Referred to hereafter as: Later Letters.)
29. And the crag that fronts the even,
    All along the shadowing shore,-- ("Eleanore," l., 40-41.)

With green pomegranates, and no end of Bass.[30]
. . . . . .
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 turkey! such a hen!
And scrambling forms of distant men,
O! — ain't you glad you were not there![31]

Although Tennyson remained always his favorite poet, the amusing remarks that Lear frequently made give evidence of some critical judgment as well as of whimsicality.

> Tennyson sent me Beckett...by far the best of his dramas.[32] ...I saw Aenone on the plains of Troy: she had a pink gown on: one arm and one breast wholly uncovered, a large mole upon the latter & a slight moustache on her upper lip: altogether a different person from what one expected.[33] ...Alfred Tennyson has just read us his new poem...'Maud', (it) is most astonishing. One part, beginning "O that 'twere possible," is enough to make you stand on your head.[34]

It is certain that the effect of Tennyson's poetry had much to do with the emotional coloring, which he gave his own lyrics. Whenever he was a guest of the Tennysons, Alfred's newest poems were likely to be read. Lear, in his turn, perhaps would sing a few of Tennyson's songs, which he had set to music. He had only a small singing voice, but one full of intense feeling. Invariably his singing made a

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30. To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,
And tender curving lines of creamy spray;
. . .
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
(Choric Song, "Lotos-Eaters," l., 3-4; 61-62.)
31. "To E. L., On His Travels in Greece," cf., p. 77.
32. Later Letters, p. 302.
33. Letters of Edward Lear, Ed. by Lady Strachey, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1908, p. 39. (Referred to hereafter as: Letters.)
34. Edward Lear, A. Davidson, New York, Dutton & Co., 1939, p. 93.

remarkable impression upon the listener. Tennyson preferred before all others, the music and rendition, which Lear gave his lyrics. While the admiration that Lear held for Tennyson, says Lear's biographer, "dated back to a period long before the general public had acclaimed him, and continued to be one of the strongest influences in his painting."[35] Mr. Davidson might have stressed, more than he did, the extent of Tennyson's influence upon Lear as a poet; for certain qualities, held in common, give to their poetry overtones of likeness. An extremely sensitive musicality is one of their common characteristics, and another is a persistent romanticism, which has made use of new psychological techniques. Further resemblances are to be found in their romantic plots; romantic heroes; haunting, mystical, romantic phraseology; even in romantic morality; and in the same romantic backdrop of scenery and landscape. Lear had an eye for the portrayal of landscape that was nearly as fine as Tennyson's. It seems unnecessary to quote at length from a poet, whose work is widely known, in order to substantiate his powers in this respect, nor will space permit it. But since the poetry of Edward Lear is not as well known as it ought to be, a look at some of his beautiful descriptive lines should be worth while. Here is, for example, that splendid opening stanza from the "Dong with a Luminous Nose":

> When awful darkness and silence reign
> Over the great Gromboolian plain,
> Through the long, long wintry nights;--

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35. Ibid., p. 84.

When the angry breakers roar
As they beat on the rocky shore;—
  When Storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
Of the Hills of the Chankly Bore:—[36]

This is a setting that, in its total impression, is comparable to those "mystical mid-regions" of Poe. In its imagery, in its sound patterns, and in its subtle rhythm the poet of "Ulalume" would have felt a kindred spirit. For still another instance of Lear's rare descriptive powers, here is a stanza from "The Pelican Chorus":

We live on the Nile. The Nile we love.
By night we sleep on the cliffs above;
By day we fish, and at eve we stand
On long bare islands of yellow sand.
And when the sun sinks slowly down
And the great rock walls grow dark and brown,
Where the purple river rolls fast and dim
And the Ivory Ibis starlike skim,
Wing to wing we dance around,—
Stamping our feet with a flumpy sound,—[37]

These are passages of considerable poetic beauty, and they have a pictorial charm not unlike that grand descriptive scenery, which frequently occurs in the poetry of Tennyson.

Lear had so great a love for landscape that, like many of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, he undertook to illustrate the poets of the day.

> I have been looking carefully over all A. Tennyson's poems, & noting out all the Landscape-subjects once more—which in all amount to 250.[38]

It was too great an undertaking even for Lear. He lived to complete only about a dozen as paintings, although he finished 200 drawings.

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36. Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Ed. by Holbrook Jackson, London, Faber & Faber, 1950, p. 225.
37. Ibid., p. 232.
38. Letters, p. 229.

> I go on irregularly at the illustrations. . .seeking a method of doing them by which I can eventually multiply my 200 designs by photograph or autograph, or sneezigraph or any other graph.[39]

Wherever Lear travelled he sought material for this vast project, a labor of love, and after his death a limited edition of 100 copies of the poems, with his illustrations, was dedicated to him by Tennyson, and each copy privately autographed.

IV. Topographical

> Long ago, in youth, he squander'd
> All his goods away, and wander'd
> To the Tiniskoop—hills afar.
> There on golden sunsets blazing,
> Every evening found him gazing,—
> Singing,—'Orb! you're quite amazing!
> 'How I wonder what you are!'
> (Lear)

Edward Lear liked to speak of himself as a topographical artist, or as that "Globular—foolish fat Topographer". His paintings and drawings are almost entirely landscapes. But his verses, too, illustrate his fondness for interesting topography. His travels furnished him with much natural material for the geographical settings of his poems, but only a great imaginative fancy could make them unique. His mind, adventurous and bold, created a "World of Nonsense" from one of faltering Reason. Josephine Fry, who has made an analysis of Lear's topography, has uncovered, what she regards as a striving toward a New World, and an abandonment of the Old World:

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39. Later Letters, p. 17.

> A map based on Lear's own descriptions, would reveal the poems as an epic of Emigration. There is the Old World and the New. The Old World is effete, over-civilized, and probably over-populated...The poems concerned with this land give an impression of age and disillusionment.[40]

This Old World is what, no doubt, we think of as the "real" world, that ordinary, everyday, humdrum existence that usually is referred to as "life". The New World, in which Lear made important explorations and discoveries, is one that challenges the imagination, and dares the immigrant to enter it.

> Hopes of a newer and better life lay in the New World... the braver spirits of the old kingdom could not resist its lure.[41]

The world of the nonsense songs is a highly imaginative one. The wierd characters and strange topography are in sharp contrast to the definite individuals and fixed localities, that make up the Lear limericks. Miss Fry has also taken notice of the musical qualities of Lear's verses and the appropriateness of his place-names:

> Like Tennyson, Lear makes the sound of his words fit the nonsense; like Milton, he makes his proper names enhance the glamour of his tale. Whether we are watching the sunset from the Isles of Boshen or studying oblong oysters on the Zemmery Fidd, we accept Lear as their charming relations received the Four Little Children--"with joy tempered with contempt," a contempt...no deeper than is implied in the use of that elastic word "Nonsense".[42]

In this discussion of the nonsense lyrics we have taken up separately, in a fourfold division, the principal elements that

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40. Spectator, December 31, 1937, v. 159, 1189.
41. Ibid., p. 1189.
42. Ibid., p. 1189.

must be recognized in an adequate analysis of the nonsense songs. The dominant qualities of these lyrics, it is to be stressed, are chiefly those which fall into divisions, which we have arbitrarily called; autobiographical, romantic, Tennysonian, and topographical. The roots of Lear's art were, as we have tried to establish, real and living. In Lear's poetry there is much more to be discovered than the urge to escape, nor was there in this new literary form, of his creation, nothing more than "mere esthetic fancy", for as G. K. Chesterton has observed:

> Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason. There must always be a rich moral soil for any great esthetic growth. The principle of 'art for art's sake' is a very good principle if it means that there is a vital distinction between the earth and the tree that has its roots in the earth; but it is a very bad principle if it means that the tree could grow just as well with its roots in the air.[43]

There was in Lear's character the "rich moral soil", which Mr. Chesterton contends is necessary for all worth-while artistic endeavor. And in the solemnity, the morality, and the earnestness of Victorian life there was something peculiarly conducive to the writing of nonsense, and in sympathy with its spirit. Victorians may have needed this compensatory mechanism. At all events, it is fortunate for us, that among Lear's contemporaries the art of nonsense found a measure of encouragement and appreciation.

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43. "Defense of Nonsense," A Century of English Essays, New York, Everyman's, 1935, pp. 446-50.

Thus far in this thesis we have probed into the meaning of nonsense, and we have examined various representative types. The great Victorian nonsense writers have been mentioned, and their contributions have been discussed. We have written at length on the work of Edward Lear, who as the "Father of Nonsense" takes precedence over all other authors of the genre. In the remaining chapters we shall attempt to present a fuller picture of the unique personality that was Edward Lear. This will be no simple task, nor are we certain of being completely successful throughout, for Lear was an artist of many complexities, of wide interests, and of varied talents. From his letters, journals, and uncollected verse we shall try to extract his more important and significant views upon the problems of politics and government, religion, society, and art in so far as he has given expression to them. On these subjects of universal interest we do not expect to find that Lear was at all profound, but it is anticipated that few readers will find him dull. And it is to be hoped that the character, the personality, and the man Lear will gain the sympathetic understanding, which they merit.

CHAPTER V

Lear's Religions and Political Beliefs

Mrs. Jaypher found a wafer
Which she stuck upon a note;
This she took and gave the cook.
Then she went and bought a boat
Which she paddled down the stream,
Shouting "Ice produces cream,
Beer when churned produces butter!
Henceforth all the words I utter
Distant Ages thus shall note--
'From the Jaypher Wisdom-Boat.'"
(Lear)

I. Religion

Edward Lear often gave expression to broad religious opinions in letters to his friends. His views show, in general, a critical penetration of some of the faults that are present in organized religion. But the faculty of extracting a ludicrous element from any situation sometimes colored the sincerity of his beliefs. In his criticism of the clergy he was outspoken, prepared to censure or to praise them, whatever seemed their just due. He was extremely impatient with poor sermons and with bad delivery, and the meager intellectual quality of the ordinary church service predisposed him to irregular attendance. The attitude that he took on attending church reveals his fundamental conservatism, as well as a Victorian tendency to observe the proper social amenities, in order to be looked on by one's neighbors as within the pale of organized society.

> I am going to Church this morning,--more because I don't like systematically shewing a determination to ignore all outward forms than for any other cause: but as it is probable I shall be disgusted, possibly I shall not go again... Just come from Church—in a rage: collection for "pastor's aid society"—and foolish sermon to wit...won't go again for 4 months.[1]

There are countless remarks in Lear's letters, which taken in their totality, illustrate the concern that he felt toward religious matters. The great master of nonsense was not one to endure much of that commodity in his house of worship:

> I begin to be vastly weary of hearing people talk nonsense—unanswered,—not because they are unanswerable, but because they talk in pulpits. That same morning I heard a "discourse" on Lot's wife and other unpleasant legends, being—as I find in my journal, the 23rd I have heard on the same subject[2]... Why are men allowed to talk such nonsense unsnubbed in a wooden desk, who would be scouted in an ordinary room?[3]

On occasion he would register his displeasure of bad sermons and mediocre pastors in language highly graphical and emphatic:

> Going to church is my <u>bête noir</u>...why am I expected to sit and listen to a fool for three-quarters of an hour?...one day, if I am so overconstrained to folly, I may get up and snort and dance and fling my hat at the abomination of sermonpreaching where sermons are simply rot.[4]...I have gone to church once, and have heard—or rather couldn't hear—a 40 minute sermon from a detestable shrugging and howling impostor[5]...Is it impossible to find more than half a dozen parsons with commonsense enough to avoid extremes?[6]

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1. <u>Later Letters of Edward Lear</u>, Ed. by Lady Strachey, New York, Duffield & Co., 1911, pp. 39-40. (Referred to hereafter as: <u>Later Letters</u>.)
2. <u>Letters of Edward Lear</u>, Ed. by Lady Strachey, London, Fisher Unwin, 1908, p. 276. (Referred to hereafter as: <u>Letters</u>.)
3. <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 240.
4. <u>Later Letters</u>, p. 165.
5. <u>Letters</u>, p. 245.
6. <u>Later Letters</u>, p. 283.

He did not find all preaching, however, nor all church attendance distasteful and unrewarding. Whenever the service was pleasing to him in some way, Lear wrote of it charitably and appreciatively. In many instances he could be quite commendatory:

> On Sunday 28th, service in our church was a real pleasure—well arranged, simple & good in all respects.[7]...Dear good Mr. Clark...preached a sermon from "be not slothful in business" etc. hardly to be surpassed. He might be split into fifteen Bishops.[8]

It is easy to understand why anyone of Lear's industrious habits should find a sermon on such a topic completely in accord with his tastes. But more often than not, Lear was adversely critical of the church, and of the clergy. He felt a strong dislike for the conventional Sabbath, as it was commonly observed among the fashionable church-going crowd:

> The conventional swell Sunday here is awful!...Women and fine ladies walk miles to morning sacraments and daily prayers: but their dress and the narrowness of their mental perceptions is what most strikes thinking men who see much of them....I go, by way of not being completely unconventional, to church often, bitter as the hideous talk is: on the other hand I think—is one sex doomed to be the prey of the priests and to deteriorate accordingly?[9]

Lear thoroughly disapproved of priests as a class of people, partly because he thought that they held a pernicious influence over the more susceptible minds of women, but most strongly because he felt their opposition to all the liberal movements astir in Victorian society. The bitter struggle of Italian patriots against a hostile Roman clergy in the effort to unify Italy won his fullest sympathy.

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7. Letters, p. 96.
8. Ibid., p. 209.
9. Later Letters, p. 81.

And on the heads of the priests he poured out a hot, indignant wrath:

> Are not the priests of the age blind indeed not to discern that, though from the unassailable vantage ground of custom they may oppress the human intellect for a long while, yet that some day the hour will come for them to go the way of all other priesthoods?[10]...I still maintain that Blasphemy and lying are the Prerogatives of Priestcraft...though I sincerely like and respect many individually, I object to the whole biling.[11]

In spite of his professed dislike of the priestcraft, Lear had innumerable friends among the clergy, and the anxiety which he revealed at the possible loss of one of these friends is amusing and enlightening:

> Clark, the good chaplin is still here (Corfu):—but I shan't go regularly to church,—& if he sees the "Essays & Reviews"[12] on my table—me voilà fini.[13]

Many another priest, however, might arouse only a highly amused scorn:

> Father Ignatius[14]—dressed as a mucilaginous monk—is come to stay here (Malta), and walks about like a medieval donkey.[15]

But Lear was greatly saddened at the death of his close personal friend Dean Stanley:[16]

> In many respects Arthur was not like a priest, for he was tolerant of all creeds and thoughts, which hardly any priests have ever been.[17]

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10. Letters, p. 276.
11. Ibid., p. 252.
12. A liberal work published in 1860, by various authors. It caused some commotion in the English Church because of the alleged heresy of the views expressed. Professor Jowett was one of the contributors.
13. Letters, p. 209.
14. He revived, in 1862, the ancient rule of St. Benedict in the Church of England.
15. Later Letters, p. 57.
16. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley became Dean of Westminster in 1863, and was a strong champion of Bishop Colenso.
17. Later Letters, p. 219.

The antipathy that Lear had for the priestcraft extended, with a much greater intensity, to any and all forms of monasticism. His visit to Mt. Athos in Greece, the so-called "Holy Mountain", made a very deep impression on him at the time. If his opinions sound a little strange in view of the fact that he himself never married, we point out that Lear always, despite his hesitancy, kept an open mind to marriage, nor did he reject the society of women. In his letters he has given a delightful, and typical "Learian" account of his feelings toward monasticism:

> I would not go again to the "Holy" Mountain...so odious seems to me all the atmosphere of such monkery. That half of our species which it is natural to every man to cherish & love best, ignored, prohibited and abhored...(by) these muttering, miserable, mutton-hating, man-avoiding, misogynic, morose, & merriment-marring, monotoning, many-mule-making, mocking, mournful, minced-fish & marmalade masticating Monx. Poor old pigs! Yet one or two were kind enough in their way, dirty as they were: but it is not them, it is their system I rail at.[18]

Mount Athos was not a place which Lear could easily forget, much as he may have preferred to do so. For a long while thereafter he sought to find a scheme that might remedy the situation,—at last coming up with this:

> As soon as Parliament meets, move that all Sidney Herbert's distressed needle-women be sent out at once to Mount Athos! By this dodge all the 5000 monks young and old will be vanquished:—& the whole fabric of monkery, not to say of the Greek-church will fall down crash & forever.[19]

The general effect of his extensive travels throughout the rest of his life was to nullify any favorable opinions that he might possibly have cherished, as a young man, toward organized Christianity.

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18. Letters, p. 41.
19. Ibid., p. 49.

Wherever he went, it seemed to him that Christians were more lax in their ethics than people of other religions. The bickering and squabbling among Christian sects at Jerusalem presented a most unfavorable example to the other faiths. Conditions there were particularly shocking in 1858, much to Lear's distress:

> 'Almost thou persuadest me not to be a Xtian' is the inner feeling of the man who goes to the "Holy City" unbiased towards any "religious" faction:—...(while) Jerusalem is what it is by & through Xtian dogmas & theology,—so long must the religion of Christ be, and most justly, the object of deep hatred & disgust to the Moslem, of detestation & derision to the Jew.[20]

Though he was manifestly dissatisfied with the pretensions and the professed benefits which Christian creeds and sects conferred upon the individual, Lear firmly believed in the necessity of religion and faith of some kind:

> ...For the present, it seems but too plain that no force or effort can greatly improve that (religion) which men follow now.[21]

It might not be possible to make anything better out of Christianity. But he recognized that the establishment of an altogether rational religion would admittedly raise insuperable difficulties:

> The question of how to reconcile a nonsupernatural religion with the wants of humanity is verily a difficulty not to be got over in our days...Why the character and teaching of Christ should not by degrees become as great a support to religious people as the doctrine or dogma of a supernatural birth it is provoking to be obliged to doubt: yet perhaps they could not be so supporting as they are if stripped of their mystery.[22]

To all of his religious questionings, and the nineteenth century raised a great number of them, Edward Lear brought a keenly

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20. Ibid., p. 105.
21. Later Letters, p. 245.
22. Ibid., p. 245.

analytical mind. He clung to his beliefs with stoical satisfaction. He perhaps congratulated himself for not accepting blindly the dictates of any sect or creed. But, he wondered sometimes how much that left him to believe in. The religious topics that absorbed his interest ranged from the Higher Criticism and the Salvation Army to spiritualist séances, which, in 1862, were all the rage in London, and very much provoked Lear:

> They are gross impostors...and it should be the part of those who can suffer fools gladly—(which I never can) to enlighten the Assy-masses who can't help themselves—God not having willed them much brains, and priests having muddled the little they have[23]..."The Salvation Army"—is one of the queerest flights of nonreason in our day.[24]...It is such a queer phase of human folly. And the divisions of opinions of clergy about it are so instructive.[25]

The lively interest which Lear had in the Higher Criticism was heightened by his mistrust of creeds and his wide reading. All of his sympathies were, as might be expected, with the expounders of Higher Criticism. He protested, in so far as he was able, against the prosecution of the authors of the "Essays and Reviews", regarding such action as a tyrannous infringement of the individual rights of free Englishmen. The trial of Bishop Colenso[26] he followed with a righteous indignation, and was greatly concerned for his vindication. The "ravening fanatics" who were persecuting Colenso were to Lear's mind "highly devil-inspired." To his great satisfaction

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23. Letters, p. 238.
24. Later Letters, p. 247.
25. Ibid., p. 243.
26. Author of The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined. This book gave rise to such fierce criticism that he was publicaly excommunicated in 1866.

Bishop Colenso eventually triumphed over his enemies, and after an appeal was made in 1868 to the Court of Chancery, he won a judgment, which restored his salary to him.

> The battle about Colenso interests me immensely...In the nature of things it was not to be supposed that the (Bishops) were to forward Colenso's views, but they might have done another thing—to wit, let him alone. ...Not those who believe that God the Creator is greater than a Book, and that millions unborn are to look up to higher thoughts than those stereotyped by ancient legends, gross ignorance and hideous bigotry—not those are the Infidels,—but these same screamy ganders of the church, who put darkness forward and insist that it is light.[27]

Lear's approval of the Higher Criticism sharpened his distrust of a strict orthodoxy. At times he was much disturbed by the power, which, it seemed to him, the church continued to wield, non too wisely, for the benefit of mankind. He took particular objection to the High Church "idiots" and to the Athanasian Creed:

> It is not the individual peculiarity of worship that grates on us, so much as the public recognition of a hateful exclusion principle.[28]

Though Lear found himself unable to accept organized religion entirely uncritically, he maintained, nevertheless, a strong faith in the possibility of a future existence, which grew for him as the years went by into an almost positive conviction.

> That there is a life beyond this it seems to me the greatest of absurdities to deny, or even to doubt of[29]...We <u>know</u> nothing, but is that a reason we should not cling to a hope of reunion after death...those who would diminish hope are the worst enemies of humanity—not its friends.[30]

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27. <u>Letters</u>, p. 276.
28. <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 190.
29. <u>Later Letters</u>, p. 274.
30. <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 256.

In the midst of his serious thoughts of a hereafter it was quite likely that at any moment some ludicrous idea might intrude to capture his fancy and swing his imagination to the opposite pole.

> At the very door of St. Peter of the Keys, I shall stipulate that I will only go into Heaven on condition that I am never in a room with more than ten people.[31]

This distrust and dislike of crowds was a trait, that might naturally be expected in a temperament, which was fundamentally conservative.

II. Politics and Government

> There was an Old Man of the West,
> Who never could get any rest;
> So they set him to spin, on his nose and his chin,
> Which cured that Old Man of the West.
> (Lear)

The political beliefs which Lear held show in many instances a close tie-up with his religious opinions. Especially was this true in his whole-hearted admiration for the Italian people in their struggle for independence. In their behalf were expressed the most intense political feelings that he ever had. What seemed to him to be a narrow self-interested opposition by the Roman clergy to a free and independent Italy, stirred up his violent dislike of Catholicism. And though he was never active in practical politics, he was capable of shrewd and accurate appraisals of many political situations. His analysis of the complex Italian problem gives evidence of an ability to view political affairs from a liberal and progressive standpoint.

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31. Ibid., p. 173.

> The Roman nobles are so linked by blood and interest with the present Government that they certainly would not join any attempt at a new system of things...the middle classes are also, thro' centuries, partly tied up in the same boat.[32]... And the way in which the high Church idiots here curse the revolutionary folk & weep for the P(ope) is a thing to laugh at or be disgusted with.[33]

From the very beginning he staunchly defended the hopes of the revolutionists and reaffirmed his belief in the capacity of the Italian people for self-government:

> It sounds queer to hear the revolution in Italy (1861) spoken of sometimes with horror, sometimes as merely an absurd phase of politics soon to pass by.[34]...Some who know, or profess to know Italy, declare that representative Govt. never will succeed there.[35]

Gradually the success of the Italian Revolution became ever more apparent, but Lear, who shunned all violence had no desire to take an active part.

> The progress that all Italy is making astonishes even me... the swallowing up of the papal power is...only a question of more or fewer years.[36]... Two things are difficult to realize:— the immense progress Italy has made...and secondly, the intense and ever increasing hatred of the people to the priest class.[37]

Lear usually favored the independence movements of all liberty loving peoples, but he feared violent revolution and disliked fanaticism or demagoguery of any kind. He had a preference for firm and capable government, but was never an advocate of authoritarian rule. His predilection for strong government, and his belief

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32. Letters, p. 162.
33. Ibid., p. 163.
34. Ibid., p. 207.
35. Ibid., p. 194.
36. Ibid., p. 257.
37. Later Letters, p. 117.

in hard work, were somewhat similar in their nature to the policies advocated by Thomas Carlyle. But Lear was far more individualistic than fascist. His individualism was too strong to allow him to go along with the dictum that "the freedom of the inner man consists in obedience," and he affirmed instead:

> Whenever the time comes that a man so willingly practices obedience as to find no annoyance from the process, he does so with a good will, and therefore a choice, & that is freedom.[38]

He seems to have wished only for a competent, an honest, and an effective government for England and her colonies. His travels had brought him, for example, in contact with many representatives of the English Government, who were haphazard political plum holders without adequate qualifications. Such appointees to positions of responsibility were, through their ignorance and general inadequacy, doing an immense amount of injury to English prestige abroad, the more so, as France and other countries were appointing the best men available to their counsulships in the world competition for trade and influence. In criticizing English policy in this respect, Lear did not place the blame upon any particular political party, but he believed that the entire system ought to be revised and overhauled. He then put forth some practical suggestions in the interest of better government:

> The neglect of our consulships is a far more dangerous evil to the English name & commonwealth than is cared to be considered...a better system might gradually be attained to if it were fixed that 2 or more secretaries should be attached to each consul generalship, with a view to education in the

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38. Ibid., p. 75.

> lingo & manners of the countries, so as that the head being removed, one of the secretaries should succeed![39]

Lear complained of the wasteful and inefficient replacement of diplomatic personnel. How often, and that even recently, have we not witnessed in this country the recall of highly capable men and their transfer to the most unlikely posts, as Lear has cited here:

> Wood,[40] undeniably the complete Consul-general...sent to Tunis from Damascus, after years of perfection in Arabic... (his place filled by a man) 70 years of age, & not knowing a syllable of Arabic...if you want illustrations of the blind fool-system...the Gov(ernment) offered Saunders[41] the Consulship of a place in S. America! so fit to bring out the talents used for 30 years in the Levant![42]

The political wisdom that Lear exhibited in letters to his friends, he himself thought very lightly of. The friends, however, a few of whom held high government offices, showed some regard for his opinions, and, as a consequence, Lear became the confidant of several politically important men. His on the spot reporting must have proved valuable back in England on many an occasion, when these Parliamentary friends were talking over the problems of the hour. Thus from Corfu he writes, prior to the cession by Great Britain of the Ionian Isles to Greece in 1858:

> Concerning the concession of the Isles--I do not see that it could be done till there be a certainty of a solid and strong government in Greece.[43]...Unless you governing folk

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39. Letters, p. 159.
40. Sir Richard Wood, Consul-General at Tunis from 1855 to 1879.
41. Sidney Smith Saunders, Consul-General in the Ionian Islands, and thoroughly versed in Greek and Turkish.
42. Letters, p. 160.
43. Ibid., p. 266.

> shew a little less redtapism to these islands--verily, their cession will be a millstone about the neck of the liberal party for long days to come.[44]...The firm hand is wanted here, & I add is wanting.[45]...The Greek screw has been allowed to be put on so much more strongly, with each successive Govt., that every other consideration is giving way to a settled desire to join Greece, & get rid of English.[46]

Politics were generally the more frequent topic of discussion in Lear's correspondence. This was especially true of those letters to his lifelong friend Chichester Fortescue, who later became Lord Carlingford. In the main, Lear had the political leanings of a Whig with liberal views, but he was no strict party adherent at any time. The man and the principle took precedence with him in all his political thinking. He would not go along completely with any one party on all its policies, maintaining rather, that "grave matters of right and wrong" ought never to become "handles for mere party violence." The stand that he took upon controversial issues was one that he honestly felt to be most nearly just and right.

> I do not see why Conservatives should be growled at if they advocate moderate reforms.[47]...I have a set feeling that gross and violent Radicals ought never to govern or help to govern any more than virulent Tories...those who strive to set class against class, and are as violent in their speech as they are crooked in their principles ought not--if it is possible to prevent their being so--to be trusted with power.[48]

But occasionally, like many of us, he would find himself disillusioned with politics:

> I begin to think that public men are mainly alike: & the debates on the address read to me very like a personal set of quarrels carried thro' on polite technical principles.[49]

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44. Ibid., p. 298.
45. Ibid., p. 76.
46. Ibid., p. 78.
47. Ibid., p. 30.
48. Later Letters, p. 226.
49. Letters, p. 139.

Lear was shocked by the views of an American family which he met in 1864 in Italy.

> "Slave Emancipation...has nothing to do with hatred of slavery... it was wholly in substance a political move against the Southern States. Not one of us, nor of thousands in America, would sit at table with a black man or woman!" "But," said I to one of the sons, "you would sit in a room with your dog?"--"Dog? Yes, Sir! but you can't compare an inferior creature such as a negro is with a dog?"[50]

The Americans whom he chanced to meet on his travels were ordinarily a disappointing lot. He wrote from Egypt in 1867:

> You can't imagine the extent of the American element in travel here!...They go about in dozens and scores--one dragoman to so many--and are a fearful race mostly.[51]...Lately many Americans have been robbed & some murdered, which in one sense is a very good thing...they (the American Government) will it is to be hoped get riled and act accordingly.[52]

Many Americans were fond of putting forth their preconceived theories on English politics. These people were particularly irksome to Lear, and he sought to avoid them like the plague. They often ridiculed Queen Victoria (to whom he had once given drawing lessons), and were given over to extravagant praise of Gladstone. The "Grand Old Man", they said, was gradually to make England a republic, and with the aid of the mob, clear away the peerage. He would order the decapitation of the Queen, while his eyes were wet with tears, then return to his tree-chopping. It was perhaps in a mood brought on by such irritation, that Lear sat down to write these verses to Fortescue, inviting his friend to visit him in Italy:

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50. Later Letters, p. 288.
51. Ibid., p. 66.
52. Letters, p. 102.

When "Grand old men" persist in folly
  In slaughtering men and chopping trees,
What art can soothe the melancholy
  Of those whom futile "statesmen" teaze?

The only way their wrath to cover
  To let mankind know who's to blame-o-
Is first to rush by train to Dover
  And then straight onward to Sanremo.[53]

It is plain enough that Lear did not think very highly of William Gladstone, and he sometimes spoke of him as an "incompetent fanatic". One cause for this dislike was the suspicion which he held of the latter's foreign policy. Mr. Gladstone had referred to Russia as a land of religious toleration and social liberty, but Lear considered it, in the light of its history, as possessor of an unequaled record for "filthy and barbarous brutality". Long before the Politbureau, the International, or the general menace of Communism were powerful realities, Edward Lear was unconvinced of Russian righteousness. His opinions, dating back to letters written in 1881, are interesting today:

> The Russian is the beau ideal of intolerance and lying. The wicked cruelties of the Russians have ever been kept unremarked by those who have yelled at facts scores of times less shocking. ...Our low church parson Fenton says "Mr. G(ladstone) is the person appointed to spread the Gospel, and in no case can he promote that blessing more widely than by aiding the Russians to possess Constantinople."[54]...When (Lord Northbrook[55]) wrote to me about the Russians having Batoum, I replied nil, but having written regarding his remark--"I think the Russians should have Batoum--for the greater will be their responsibility,"--"Certainly--and such would be the case if you gave them Anglesea

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53. Later Letters, p. 275.
54. Ibid., p. 229.
55. Thomas George Baring, Governor-General of India, 1872-1876. One of Lear's best friends and a most generous patron.

> or the Isle of Wight."[56]...As for the Russian Mess,[57] the Russians are certain to gain in all arrangements while the G(rand) O(ld) M(an) is at the head of affairs.[58]

Lear felt far more antagonism to Gladstone than to any other politician of his time. But, when there was much opposition expressed on religious and racial grounds to Disraeli, who in 1868 was named Premier, Lear spoke out in his defense:

> For my own part if Judaizing all England would do us any good--why not?[59]

If, however, Lear happened to disapprove of his policies, then Disraeli did not escape criticism either. Conferring the title of "Empress" upon Queen Victoria would, he thought, indirectly furnish aid and comfort to the foes of monarchical government.

> The "Empress business" is far worse than folly.[60]...the Right Hon. Gentleman and Novelist--Charlatan at the head of H M's Government is about the worst R(oyal) Republican going...numbers of Republicans bless him for this last effort.[61]

Lear was always an advocate of better government. Not even the closest friendships were to stand in the way of placing the best qualified men into office, and this conscientious attitude made him impatient with compromise and expediency. In letters to his younger friend, Lord Carlingford, he stressed the need for a continual preparation, and sought to stimulate him to his best efforts in the political arena:

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56. Later Letters, p. 306.
57. In 1885 a dispute broke out over delimitation of the Afghan frontier.
58. Later Letters, p. 304.
59. Ibid., p. 81
60. Disraeli was instrumental in obtaining the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India on May 1, 1876. He was later awarded a peerage.
61. Later Letters, p. 174.

> ...About the Secretaryship for the Colonies. Personally I should like you there naturally:--but the place ought to be filled by one who KNOWS and studies the subject thoroughly[62] ...the more you conquer the details & grammar of the 'whole duty' of the Colonies, the better for you...(if ever) the time should come that you may put into practice theories of a wider & grander kind than fill the noodles of many men, then you will feel the advantage of being up to the full use of the instruments & circumstances you have to work with.[63]

He never tired of urging his friend on to greater political achievments in order to serve England in posts of increasing importance and responsibility:

> I hope to see you Col(onial) Sec(retary) one of these days, if you work that is[64]...In the position you now occupy,[65]... you may be a means of preventing the rapid descent of demagogues to depths we shall not easily rise from.[66]...Parliamentary and official life is more or less hardening, but you will bear a good lot of brutalizing before you become wholly unbearable.[67]

Lear was also well aware of the important role that the women of his day were beginning to take in the political life of the nation. To arrive at a just estimate of his position on nineteenth century women's rights movements would, however, be very difficult. There are but few references to women in politics among his letters:

> In spite of H.I.M. Nap. 3's assertion that it is the mission of woman to think of God and not of the world, I believe that women of talent do and can do--and have done, a vast amount of good in the political atmosphere.[68]

On the other hand he would upon occasion quote with high delight

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62. Letters, p. 51.
63. Ibid., p. 62.
64. Ibid., p. 119.
65. Fortescue was Irish Secretary from 1865 to 1870. He afterwards held several other high posts.
66. Later Letters, p. 213.
67. Ibid., p. 126.
68. Letters, p. 300.

from the remarkable political pronouncements of Mrs. Malaprop concerning the vital issues of the day:

> The present Government is one of vaccination and no policy; nor does it ever act with derision until it is obliged to do so by some dreadful Cataplasm.[69]

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69. Later Letters, p. 275.

CHAPTER VI

Edward Lear: the Man and his Art

Illyrian woodlands, echoing falls
  Of water, sheets of summer glass,
  The long divine Peneïan 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.[1]
  . . . . . (Tennyson)

During his lifetime Lear was known mainly as an artist, and he expended an incalculable amount of effort to perfect his technique of landscape painting. But he fell short of being an important painter for a variety of reasons, the chief of which were, inadequate early training, the influence of mediocre artists, a too great fondness for reality at the expense of imagination, a prodigous quantity of hasty work, and the limitation of his powers by paintings of a type that appealed more exclusively to patrons of a conservative wealthy class. Lear had many traits in common with the Pre-Raphaelite group, which included such artists of note as Martineau, Rossetti, Millais, and Hunt, but his serious painting tended to be even more realistic and unimaginative than theirs. He inclined to minute and detailed representation in his work, choosing as subjects for his pictures principally scenery of an historical and topographical nature. A fine eye for the classical landscape was his forte. His

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1. This poem was written after Tennyson had voiced his pleasure in reading Lear's Journal of a Landscape-Painter in Calabria, which was published in 1852.

paintings are serene, grand, pictorial; he had no talent to portray the tossing sea or stormy sky, but noble rocks and hills, sweeping wastelands, grand ruins, and picturesque mountain valleys. Subdued tastes in color and in style place him as a classicist. And these qualities were well adapted to the treatment and interpretation of the Biblical and classical antiquities which he chose to paint. Modern critics have discovered in Lear's ultra-realistic painting the roots of the surrealist movement in art. To a great number of people, however, those fantastic and inconsequential drawings with which he illustrated the Book of Nonsense are far more appealing. When a re-estimation of Lear is someday undertaken, he will perhaps win fairer treatment as an artist, for it is not in oil painting that his finest work was done, but as a water-colorist. This medium he handled with exceptional skill, and his accurate draughtsmanship greatly enhanced the charm and quality of the water-color drawings. But the philosophy of his art goes far to explain his own limitations:

> It seems to me that in converting memories into tangible facts, recollections & past time as it were into pictures, lies the chief use & charm of a painter's life...for technical study & manipulation will always be a bore to me.[2]...I believe that hard work is the best substitute for the Ideal.[3] ...I now mean to try how far I can make some realities.[4] ...I have been, as I told you, painting on an oly different principle, and so far with grt. success.[5]

Had Lear striven less for the effect of reality in his painting, it would have been greatly to the advantage of his reputation as an

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2. Letters, p. 216.
3. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 38.
5. Ibid., p. 27.

artist. Instead, he felt pleased whenever he was complimented upon the realism of his landscapes. This, too, was the quality that he most admired in the work of his artist friends.

> Holman Hunt has painted a remarkable picture...some day all the figures will certainly come to life and walk out of the canvas--leaving only the landscape: such reality is there.[6]

Though Lear was not an altogether accurate judge of the essentials of great art, he did try conscientiously to improve his technique, and by earnest effort he was able eventually to gain greater confidence in himself. Yet, he was never completely satisfied with his progress, even when he had labored with all possible diligence, and had given his best.

> I don't improve as I wish...I shall join a nightly Academy for drawing from the life.[7] ...(Mastery of) the human figure... would enable me to carry out the views & feelings of landscape I know to exist within me.[8] ...I only wish I could dub and scrub myself into what I wish to be, and what I might be I fear if I took proper pains.[9]

But the ceaseless toil that he endured to overcome a lack of formal training, did nothing at all to help his disposition, for he was brought at times to nearly hate the very act of painting, since his energetic temperament could hardly bear the restricted freedom of movement, which prolonged study and application required.

> No life is more shocking to me than the sitting motionless like a petrified gorilla as to my body & limbs hour after hour.[10] ...There are times when I turn into bile and blackness ...the irritation of an artist's life produces much which works

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6. Later Letters, p. 46.
7. Letters, p. 21.
8. Ibid., p. 13.
9. Ibid., p. 29.
10. Ibid., p. 189.

> its possessor bitterness, when that individual's brain has been so little guided in youth as mine was.[11] ...I have had myself to thank for all education, & a vortex of society hath eaten my time.[12]

To find material for landscapes, Lear travelled widely throughout a long lifetime. His passion for scenery was deep and genuine, and an unfailing eye for beauty was one of his noblest characteristics. He maintained that it was a better principle to discover beauty in everything than to seek conventional beauty, or none at all. But it could hardly be said of him that he followed this principle strictly. Perhaps no other place ever made as great an impression upon him as the Holy Land, where he journeyed in 1858. His delight in the beauty of the scenery seemed boundless, and in his letters are some descriptive prose passages that rival his painting:

> There is enough in Jerusalem to set a man thinking for life.[13] ...Every path leads you to fresh thought:--this takes you to Bethany, lovely now as it ever must have been: quiet, still little nook of valley scenery. ...I cannot conceive any place on Earth like Jerusalem for astonishing and yet unfailing mines of interest.[14]

The subjects that he chose to paint, he usually selected for their dignity or pictorial quality, and interpreted them as faithfully as it was in his power to do so:

> I know the fortress of Masada to be a wonder of picturesqueness ...embodying one of the extremest developments of the Hebrew character, i.e. constancy of purpose, & immense patriotism.[15]

From his Indian visit, taken in 1874 when he was nearly 70 years old, Lear sent back, over a five month period, no less than 560

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11. Ibid., p. 122.
12. Ibid., p. 13.
13. Ibid., p. 106.
14. Ibid., p. 107.
15. Ibid., p. 70.

drawings, 9 sketchbooks, and 4 journals. The energy and versatility that he possessed were truly amazing. And not only did he appreciate beauty everywhere, but he was quick to find the ludicrous and the ridiculous. Indian religious rites amused him greatly:

> All these devout and dirty people carry out their theory of attendance on Public Wash-up on a great scale,--by flumping simultaneous into the Holy Gunga at sunrise on April 11--squash.[16]

One of Lear's most redeeming characteristics as an artist was the good natured manner with which he always accepted criticism of his paintings, sometimes even engaging, at his own expense, in gay raillery of his work. Dissatisfied one day with a large canvas that he had just finished, the fanciful idea occurred to him, that if he were to embellish it with a border he might then "sell the whole for floorcloth by auction." He often told the story of an artist, who viewing one of his paintings, asked him:

> "What sort of tree do you call that, Lear?" "An Olive; perhaps you have never seen one," was Lear's reply. "No, and don't want to if they are like that," was the retort.[17]

Despite the difficulty that Lear found in marketing his prodigious output there remained in his complaints a certain humorous sensibility to his circumstances. Having just completed another of his huge landscapes nine feet long, he considered asking a fantastic £ 500 for it.

> If I can't sell it I shall instantly begin a picture 10 feet long: and if that don't sell, one 12 feet long. Nothing like persisting in virtue.[18] ...If you know anyone as wants a

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16. Later Letters, p. 150.
17. Ibid., p. 15.
18. Letters, p. 39.

> remarkable work of art for £ 500, please name it to the fortunate individdle.[19]

His chagrin, however, at the failure of the well-to-do and of the nobility to assist the struggling artist would occasionally provoke him to some peevish comments:

> The Princess Royal and Alice came, but of course thought the honour sufficient... When such wealthy people as Lord Dalhousie and others set their faces against art, all the sheep foolies go with them.[20] ...As yet I have sold £ 120 worth--but have not received one farthing--for great people generally suppose that artists gnaw their colours and brushes for food[21]... How plainly it is visible that the wise public only give commissions through the Press that tell the sheep to leap where others leap![22]

Like many another artist, before and since, a fluctuating income often put him in the "straits of tinlessness", and a ready generosity to his relatives and servants helped to keep him there. It was a most commendable quality of his character that, with a taste for plain and simple living, he combined a large proportion of charity and benevolence. Although he believed in the rewards that come from thrift, and diligence, and hard work, he would not turn his back upon the unfortunate even when their distress was of their own doing:

> I only wish for money to give it away.[23] ...Like a nass I gave away all I could, so as usual have none over to spare.[24]...(I) can only send £ 5 to the...Lancashire poor spinners, on the principle that he that hath nothing is to give up what he hath.[25] ...Charity, you see, don't always begin at home.[26]

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19. Later Letters, p. 173.
20. Ibid., p. 92.
21. Letters, p. 274.
22. Later Letters, p. 89.
23. Letters, p. 28.
24. Ibid., p. 27.
25. Ibid., p. 239.
26. Later Letters, p. 287.

It was Lear's nature, also, to be considerate and kind to domestics. He was friend and companion rather than master to his lifelong Suliot servant, George Cocali, whom Lear himself taught to read and write. The concern which he felt for his servant's welfare exceeded the strictest moral obligation, a further illustration of the nobility of Lear's character.

> It is hardly possible to be thankful enough for so good a servant.[27]...The reason for servants being unsatisfactory 9 times out of 10 is that their hirers consider them as chairs or tables and take no interest in them as human beings.[28]

When this servant became old and too ill to work any longer, Lear did not abandon him, but provided a nurse, took him wherever the climate might help him recover, and relieved him from all anxiety for the welfare of his family.

> I had no doubt as to my duty. We are not here to receive good service for years, and then, on its ceasing, to turn round, and say we are quits and can do no more for those who have never given us anything but faithful help.[29]...nor will I allow the help and fidelity with which for thirty years he has served me, to be forgotten because he is now helpless and old.[30]

Toward friends and equals Lear showed the same fine, charitable consideration that he extended to dependents. And though it happened that many of his intimate friends had a higher economic and social status than his own, Lear never deliberately chose them for any such reasons. Whoever was a friend of Lear was certain of the staunchest loyalty and devotion. But he never became blindly uncritical of the dearest of these friends:

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27. Letters, p. 129.
28. Ibid., p. 265.
29. Later Letters, p. 177.
30. Ibid., p. 261.

> I met Ld. Kirkwall yesterday afternoon in Pall Mall. He was going to harangue about Sir H. S.[31] when I said, 'I saw much more of Sir Henry than in the year you were in Corfu--and I not only like him very much, but think him an A. No. 1 Governor' whereat he dropped my hand and collapsed.[32]...I was greatly amused by your account of the Tennyson visit, but not in the least surprised. The effect of the 'talk' I do wonder at, for he (A) is at times odiously queer and unsatisfactory, though at others the very contrary.[33]

Lear was, indeed, fortunate to have retained throughout his life the warm friendship of some very kind, helpful, and influential people. And in spite of his self-reliant nature, he was always prepared to make a generous acknowledgment of the indebtedness which he felt:

> My whole life from 14 years has been <u>independentissimo</u>, & on the other hand, the man who will not put himself under obligation of any kind to even the friends who entirely sympathize with his progress--nourishes in my opinion, a selfish & icicle sort of pride...I have no wish whatever to shake off the moral acknowledgement of given assistance.[34]

From his letters it is evident that Lear expected from friendship a considerable amount of mutual understanding and sympathy. On his part, a friend was not simply someone who bought his paintings:

> J. has walked with me at times, yet it is a weary silent work, & now that he has got a dog, one cannot help feeling how far more agreeable it is to him to walk with that domestic object, to whom he has not the bore of being obliged to speak. We are on perfect good terms, but all or anything might happen to either, & neither would dream of telling the other, a state of things I do not call friendship.[35]

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31. Sir Henry Storks, Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands from 1859 to 1864 when the protectorate was resigned. He later became Governor of Malta and Jamaica, and remained a friend and patron to Lear.
32. <u>Letters</u>, p. 283.
33. <u>Later Letters</u>, p. 238.
34. <u>Letters</u>, p. 152.
35. <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 72.

He was greatly displeased with those friends who were slow to appreciate the beauty of nature that he was so sensitive to:

> Last Sunday I insisted--(as Sir C. Sargent and Wolff wanted me to walk) on not pottering to the one-gun-battery--which is like walking up and down Rotten Row--so we walked around Potamo; it was one of the most lovely of afternoons, and the colour and scenery were enough to delight a dead man. These two live ones however never once looked at or spoke of it: their talk was of money and politics only, and made me sick for the three hours.[36]

It has sometimes been unjustly asserted that Lear had a strong predilection for titled friends, but an impartial review of comments made throughout his letters will prove how false such an accusation really is. A true knowledge of the facts of his life, and his own expressed opinions render it obvious that possession of a prerequisite rank was no criterion to which his friendships were either regulated or conformed.

> Bother: I wish they wern't Earls and Countesses--...for I've been so rummy independent all my life that nobody thinks I ever, like rank for ranks' sake I should think.[37]...I dislike contact with Royalty as you; being a dirty landscape painter apt only to speak his thoughts and not to conceal them.[38]

And the caustic comments upon those idle nobility who came to his studio and took up his time are not the sort that would be expected from a fawning sychophant of the great.

> The beastly aristocratic idiots who come here, and think they are doing me a service by taking up my time! one day one of them condescendingly said "you may sit down--we do not wish you to stand."[39]

Lear was naturally very much pleased, though, when his intimate friend, Chichester Samuel Parkinson Fortescue (shortened by Lear to

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36. Ibid., p. 275.
37. Ibid., p. 30.
38. Later Letters, p. 233.
39. Ibid., p. 93.

40 scue), was created 1st Baron Carlingford. And to celebrate the honor, he dashed off these impish verses to him:

> O! Chichester, my Carlingford!
> O! Parkinson, my Sam!
> O! SPC, my Fortescue!
> How awful glad I am!
>
> For now you'll do no more hard work
> Because by sudden pleasing--jerk
> You're all at once a peer,--
> Whereby I cry, God bless the Queen!
> As was, and is, and still has been,
> Yours ever, Edward Lear.[40]

Had Lear really desired to mix with titled people, there was ample opportunity ever present to meet the lesser nobility at the small courts, which were always open to him. But over and over again he has reiterated his dislike for that kind of society:

> I don't take to Court life, and not playing cards am doubtless a bore, or rather useless.[41]...Lord! how I hate the bustle and lights and fuss of 'society'--social in reality as is my nature--not gregarious.[42]...I for one don't choose to go to swell houses & stand against a doorpost & be stared at if I speak.[43]

The social life that most appealed to Lear was that of an intimate circle of friends, with whom he could share, in an informal fashion, an intellectual and refined camaraderie. Not only was he bored by the fuss and noise of courtlife, but he sometimes scoffed in amusement at the strange characters he met there:

> I am afraid to stand near a door, lest the announced names should make me grin...there is a Lady Ross, and a most gigantic daughter--whom Italians wittily call 'the great Ross-child', and her mama, 'Rosso-antico'.[44]...Then there is Lord Seymour,

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40. Ibid., p. 149.
41. Letters, p. 35.
42. Ibid., p. 270.
43. Ibid., p. 164.
44. Ibid., p. 7.

> who seems to me as if he had dreamed a dream and was continually a-dreaming of having dreamed it.[45]

There were, too, other reasons why Lear sought to avoid the hectic social whirl. It was his nature to be somewhat shy and reserved, except among close friends. And he was certain that too much social life would prevent him from accomplishing whatever work he might be planning or trying, even then, to finish up.

> It is part of my nature to grow tired of the 'flâner' life very soon. Three days of it weary me: on the fourth, the senseless chick-chack of billiard balls makes me sick.[46]... I cannot work with my mind frittered away by agreeable society.[47]...totally unbroken application to poetical-topographical painting and drawing is my universal panacea for the ills of life.[48]

In no wise could he endure idleness; at least finding satisfaction in constant activity, even though he knew he would never find complete happiness. He sought to get the most out of every moment, so that his life should not be entirely wasted. This passion for work may have driven him harder, it seems, than was at times necessary, but the philosophical attitude, which in a practical way he attempted to pursue, he has summed up in one of his letters as follows:

> If a man does anything all his life and is not a dawdler, what he does must be worth something, even if only as a lesson of perseverance.[49]

Without the habit of hard work, and amazing energy, it is a certainty that the assistance of sincere friends, together with excellent talents, would not have been sufficient to make of Lear as fine

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45. Ibid., p. 278.
46. Ibid., p. 250.
47. Ibid., p. 114.
48. Later Letters, p. 129.
49. Ibid., p. 103.

an artist as he did eventually become. There can be no doubt, in his case, that one of the main ingredients of his success formula was a capacity for constant effort. But there were other characteristics in his unique personality that appear of greater human interest to us now. One of these engaging traits of his sensitive temperament, was an amusing irascibility, which on occasion has flowed over into his letters. The causes of his annoyance were quite frequently due to either dogs or noise. It was of the latter that he complained loud and long at Corfu:

> A vile beastly rottenheaded foolbegotten brazenthroated pernicious piggish screaming, tearing, roaring, perplexing, splitmecrackle crashmecriggle insane ass of a woman is practising howling below-stairs with a brute of a singing master so horribly, that my head is nearly off.[50]...A piano on each side, above and below, maddens you:--and you can neither study nor think, nor even swear properly by reason of the proximity of the neighbors.[51]

But poor Lear, with an Englishman's love of grumbling wailed loud and long of many things. When he returned from Corfu to England, he wrote then:

> The farther I go from Corfu--the more I look back to the delight its beautiful quiet has so long given me.[52]

London, which he called "Fogopolis" did not suit his temperament for any extended visit. He criticized the city continually while there, and for a long time after he had departed.

> If I were Dante and writing a new Inferno, I would make whole vistas of London lodgings part of my series of Hell punishments.[53]

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50. Letters, p. 132.
51. Ibid., p. 66.
52. Ibid., p. 281.
53. Later Letters, p. 90.

> ...England may be a blessed place for the wealthy, but an accursed dwelling place for those who have known liberty and have seen God's daylight daily in other countries.[54]

From this it would appear that Lear was somewhat of a social critic, and that is true. He has said that he grew very tired of hearing the nineteenth century spoken of as better than any other. The social criticism found in his letters is, however, only whimsical and abbreviated, but that implied in his nonsense verses is, as we have pointed out in Chapter III, full of latent meaning. There was a bit of the paradoxical, also, in his social outlook. Here was an individualist who, never content to be anywhere long, complained everlastingly, and exercised to their fullest his powers of discrimination. And while he labored diligently to overcome difficult circumstances, he could question the value of social protest.

> Circumstances almost force certain conditions of life & cannot easily be changed.[55]...The prompt and earnest recognition of all this 'forza maggiore' being right and for our good in the end, must surely be our wisest move.[56]

He came to believe, as he grew old, that to a great extent, people cannot help being, what circumstances of birth and environment determine they shall become.

> We are not wholly responsible for our lives, i.e., our acts, in so far as congenital circumstances, physical or psychical over which we have no absolute control, prevent our being so. Partial control we assuredly have, but in many cases we do not come to know our real responsibilities or our nonresponsibilities, till long after it has become too late to change the lines we have early begun to trace and follow.[57]

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54. Ibid., p. 64.
55. Letters, p. 213.
56. Later Letters, p. 234.
57. Ibid., p. 285.

The realization of these truths only strengthened that basic tolerance, which was always one of the fundamental qualities of his character. Then reminiscing upon the circumstances around his own development, he found many parallels, by which to illustrate these generalities, and he had reason again to be thankful.

> Much of the evil of my life has arisen from congenital circumstances over which I--as a child--could have had no control; a good deal too has been the result of various ins and outs of life vagaries, and what is called chance--which chance I don't believe in, for if I did I must give up all idea of a God at all. I know also that I owe an immensity to the assistance of friends,--and neither do I put that down to chance.[58]

The gratitude that Lear expressed for the blessings of friendship was only surpassed by the great concern, which he constantly showed, over the activities and the welfare of those friends, who meant so much to him.

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58. Ibid., p. 250.

CHAPTER VII

The Appreciation of Nonsense: Then and Now

O world! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb,
  Trembling at that where I had stood before;
When will return the glory of your prime?
  No more--Oh, never more![1]
  . . . . . .(Shelley)

Looking back to that era of wonderful nonsense, it is impossible to escape the conviction that, for all their sobriety and high seriousness, the Victorians enjoyed some splendidly light moments. Nonsense as an art, however, was not so highly valued by the nineteenth century as it has been in the twentieth,--aside from a few significant exceptions. One of these was a letter by John Ruskin to the Pall Mall Magazine of February, 1886, on the "Choice of Books". Ruskin's praise brought to Lear a great deal of personal satisfaction through the tribute it conferred upon the Book of Nonsense.

> This morning's post brings me many duplicates of a letter written by Ruskin on "Choice of Books". Naturally it is a matter of pride with me that he places "Edward Lear" at the head of his list of 100!! (Vy! Vell! No I never did!!!)!!![2]

He was always pleased, whenever the merits of his "nonsenses" were recognized and applauded. An unfavorable review of them would cause him much annoyance. In truth, he took less kindly to any slighting criticism of them, than to criticism of his painting.

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1. Sir Percy Florence Shelley, only son of the poet, put down in notes Lear's music for "A Lament", when he visited Lear at Corfu in 1863.
2. Later Letters, p. 321.

> I was disgusted at the Saturday Review...talking of the Nonsense verses being "anonymous, & a reprint of old nursery rhymes," tho' they gave "Mr. Lear credit for a persistent absurdity." I wish I could have all the credit due to me.[3] ...I make considerable progress in my new Book of Nonsense--(which I hope will help me to Nazareth--I mean Nazareth in Syria).[4]

He knew that his "nonsenses" had qualities that deserved to be appreciated. They overflow with infectious whimsy, and a quality of authentic lyricism pervades the songs. However adulterated his paintings may have been, there is no cause to deny the good humor, sparkling wit, and originality of his Book of Nonsense.

Today a much wider appreciation of the contribution that Lear has made to English literature is evident; and his work is better understood by critics and public alike. Again it is G. K. Chesterton, who admirably expresses the altered attitude of the twentieth century toward nonsense poetry:

> We incline to think that no age except our own could have understood that the Quangle-Wangle meant absolutely nothing, and the Lands of the Jumblies were absolutely nowhere. ...We fancy that if "The Dong with the Luminous Nose" had been published in the seventeenth century every one would have called it a dull satire on Oliver Cromwell.[5]

Following the so-called "Age of Reason", new concepts of the nature and function of poetry came into being with the beginning of the Romantic Movement late in the eighteenth century. These have been amplified and extended to all forms of poetry. Advancements in the various sciences, especially in physics and psychology, have

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3. Letters, p. 219.
4. Later Letters, p. 69.
5. "Defense of Nonsense", A Century of English Essays, New York, Everyman's, 1935, pp. 446-50.

opened vast new fields of knowledge to the modern poet. There are probably more subjects admitted to poetry in the twentieth century than were thought possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The research of men like Darwin, Einstein, Freud, Jung, and Frazer has brought to the poet of gifted insight knowledge that may enable him to furnish us with a truer picture of man and of nature. No poetry, however, can be made out of scientific material alone, but it is evident that the new science of psychology, with its stress upon the importance of the whole man and the well-rounded personality, has been of great service to all forms of modern literature. And the modern age, confused by conflicting anxieties and tensions as it is, no longer underestimates the psychological rewards conferred by the harmless wit and topsy-turvy humor of nonsense verse.

Yet nonsense is not merely an "escape" mechanism; it is disagreeable to employ such a word in its presently corrupted sense, for as Jacques Barzun has very well observed:

> Our whole modern use of the term "escape" is vitiated by smugness and double meanings, and one should refuse to argue its application with anyone who will not first answer this question: "Suppose a primitive man, caught in a rainstorm, who has for the first time the idea of taking shelter in a cave: is he facing reality or escaping it?"[6]

It is essential to recognize one simple fact, before all else, in order to interpret correctly Lear's nonsense verse. This fact is that he clearly follows in the traditions of romantic poetry, wherein an insistence upon "the reality of double-mindedness and

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6. Romanticism and the Modern Ego, Jacques Barzun, Boston, Little Brown & Co., 1944, p. 23.

self-contradiction",[7] explains Mr. Barzun, is the fundamental nature of the romanticist. In Lear's nonsense verses are to be discovered, also, some of the earlier signs of that new symbolism in romantic literature, a symbolism which made language increasingly subjective, and is best illustrated by the writings of Proust, Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. The kind of light verse that Lear turned out is worthy to be called poetry, and like all good poetry it has those fine qualities that are able to enrich our individual experiences. It is a great deal more than light facetious rhyming. In form and technique it is comparable to the most excellent poetry, and its musical qualities are no less distinguished. It has a unique value as literature, through the development of a type of imaginative expression peculiar to itself. There occur many memorable and quotable lines, and it is principally to the higher senses, the eye, the ear and the mind, that Lear's verses make their appeal. In addition he expresses something from within himself; he does not simply amuse, though one is grateful for the amusement too. His best nonsense poems lack the qualities that are usually associated with light verse. Indeed, it may come as a surprising but pleasant revelation to realize for the first time that "light" poetry, such as Lear wrote, surpasses in freshness, subtlety, and technique the uncreative serious stuff that frequently tries to impose itself on us as great art. Lear gave to the world a quantity of nonsense possessing the qualities of creative writing. That the nineteenth century

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7. Ibid., p. 53.

appreciated or understood him fully is unlikely, but this lack of appreciation seems in a fair way to being completely remedied in the twentieth. With the modern advances in scholarship and psychological criticism there is a growing realization that lightness in poetry does not necessarily imply a lesser poetic value. And George Saintsbury spoke like a modern, when he observed in his History of English Prosody that light poetry may often be the "very highest kind of its own art". Certainly, this is true of the poetry which Lear produced. Moreover, he was fortunate in being able to avoid the pitfalls of so much light verse, conventionality of form and attitude, striking out instead on a new path with boldness and originality. By 1840, when Lear began to write extensively, the patronage system was then a thing of the past, so far as poetry was concerned, and the wonder is that he was able to produce and find acceptance with the general public, whose minds were still in that state "of almost savage torpor", toward the reception of a new literary genre, that Wordsworth had described in his famous preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Indeed, had it not been for the patrons who supported his painting, Lear would probably never have found the leisure to develop his far more original talent for nonsense poetry.

It has been indicated throughout this thesis that the poetry of Edward Lear follows definitely in the romantic tradition. The same forces which influenced the great poets of the Romantic Period were at work upon him. The great social changes that drove those poets to seek for inspiration within their own imaginations and emotions instead of in the reality of contemporary life, influenced Lear to

write imaginative nonsense. If there remain those who still doubt that creative nonsense may occasionally result in the production of light poetry that has high artistic standards, these persons are urged to make an attempt at writing something as inconsequential as this example of the perfect non sequitur occurring in one of Lear's little alphabet verses written for the children of a friend:

> G was Papa's new Gun;
> He put it in a box;
> And then he went and bought a bun,
> And walked about the Docks.[8]

Those who have tried their hand at verse as light as this is have often learned, after a considerable lack of success, with how much less effort and originality they might have composed verses of a serious tone.

Light poetry has steadily grown in stature as poetry. There is almost no important modern poet who has not written a few light pieces. This is a healthy indication that a worthy tradition is surviving, for many of the great English poets, Chaucer and Shakespeare in particular, have written lines as light and merry as could be wished for. And among the modern authors, in whose writings may be found a homage offered to the light verses of Edward Lear, are the notable writers G. K. Chesterton and Aldous Huxley, and such excellent poets as T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Edith Sitwell, and others.

It has already been mentioned that the wonderful nonsense of the Victorians may have resulted from the unknown operations of a law

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8. The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear, Ed. by Holbrook Jackson, London, Faber & Faber, 1950, p. 264.

of compensation, which acted perhaps like a kind of psychic safety valve. Another plausible explanation of the sharp development of nonsense and children's poetry that took place in the nineteenth century, has been put forward by W. H. Auden, who has the remarkable ability to perceive the socio-economic aspect of things. Mr. Auden[9] believes that the true explanation lies in the fact that a shift in society took place, which centered the social emphasis from village to family life. In the industrial and urban society, which grew out of the modern age, the only strong social bond remaining was that of parent to child. When the distinctions of class and occupation became more complicated as the process of industrialization advanced, an escape was sought through nonsense to a world of unconscious nonreason. If it is true that the comparatively peaceful decades of the last half of the nineteenth century looked for escape from the complications of life, how much greater need exists today in an age infinitely more complicated. Yet there are no nonsense artists of the rank of W. S. Gilbert, Lewis Carroll, C. S. Calverley, or Edward Lear in the immediate offing. Present indications, therefore, are not likely to lead one to accept the otherwise logical inference of Mr. Auden's conclusions, even though there is some reason to believe that the quality and quantity of creative nonsense does have a direct correlation with the increasing complexity of society. A rather large number of factors of varying importance enter herein. Most of these factors are the same that are essential

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9. The Oxford Book of Light Verse, Ed. by W. H. Auden, London, Oxford University Press, 1938, p. xviii.

for the healthful development of any other art form.

The particular value of good nonsense often lies in the fact that it seems to be absolutely meaningless, hence it may come to have a special significance for the individual reader, who will find in it whatever meaning suits his fancy. This type of literature, though there are some who will deny it, has a certain affinity with the cryptic writings of James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake, although the latter is not at all nonsense. Joyce takes the same delight in portmanteau words, semantic juggling, intentional malapropisms, and macaronic puns that Lear took in his nonsense writing. Whether it is wise to search for meanings in nonsense, where none are intended, it is difficult to say. The value of creative nonsense as literature, however, need not be diminished thereby. And there is much of permanent value still remaining in Lear's nonsense, though a century has passed since the Book of Nonsense was first published. It appears rather remarkable that for so long a time, the fullest exploitation of Lear's fanciful creations has been overlooked by Hollywood. There is in such characters as the Pobble, the Spikky Sparrows, the Owl and the Pussy-cat, the Duck and the Kangaroo, Mr. Daddy Long-legs and Mr. Floppy Fly, the Quangle Wangle Quee, the Dong, the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò, and the Jumblies, enough material for the creation of a child's comic opera. Walt Disney and others have already utilized Lewis Carroll's Alice and the Wonderland characters, and Lear may perhaps be "discovered" next. On the whole it is pleasant to know that our generation is not entirely unmindful of a debt of gratitude owing to those few nonsense authors of

Victorian days, who have bequeathed to posterity a rich heritage of "innocent merriment".

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

I. The Works of Edward Lear Published in His Lifetime

Zoological Drawings

Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, London, 1832.
J. Gould's Indian Pheasants, London, 1832.
Gould's European Birds and Toucans, London, 1833-36.
Testudinata, for Professor Bell, London, 1833-36.
Bell's British Mammalia, London, 1833-36.
The volumes of Parrots, Monkeys, Cats, of the "Naturalist's Library", editor S. M. Jardine, London, 1833-36.
J. E. Gray's Gleanings from the Menagerie...at Knowsley Hall, London, 1846.
Tortoises, Terrapins and Turtles, by J. E. Gray, London, 1872.

Travel Books

Views of Rome and its Environs, Two volumes, London, 1841.
Illustrated Excursions in Italy, London, Thomas McLean, 1846.
Illustrated Excursions in Italy, Second Series, London, Thomas McLean, 1846.
Journal of a Landscape Painter in Greece and Albania, London, R. Bentley, 1851.
Journal of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria, London, R. Bentley, 1852.
Views in the Seven Ionian Islands, London, 1863.
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Nonsense Books

First Book of Nonsense, London, 1846.
Second Book of Nonsense, London, 1846; 1861 (enlarged), 1863 (enlarged).
A Book of Nonsense, (a 10th edition, and earliest copy in the British Museum), 1863.
A Book of Nonsense, New York, J. Bradburn, 1865.
Book of Nonsense, New York, James Miller, 1870.
Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets, London, Aylesbury (printed), 1871.
More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, etc., London, Aylesbury (printed), R. J. Bush, 1872 (1874).
Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets, Boston, (Mass.), 1876.
Laughable Lyrics: A Fresh Book of Nonsense, etc., London, 1877 (1876).
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II. The Works of Edward Lear Published Since His Death

Nonsense Books

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Pelican Chorus, and Other Nonsense Verses, Drawings by L. Leslie Brooke, London, F. Warne & Co., 1910.
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Lear Colored Bird Book for Children, London, 1912.
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The Book of Nonsense, New York, T. Y. Crowell Co., N.D.
Nonsense Songs, Drawings by L. Leslie Brooke, London & New York, F. Warne & Co., Ltd., N.D.
Nonsense Books, Boston, Little Brown, & Co., 1919, 1924, 1936.
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