

Edward Lear's Bittersweet Attempt: Being Seen as a Person Alone in a Landscape

— The Dong with a Luminous Nose

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Abstract: Edward Lear left a rich and precious poetic legacy from the Victorian Age even though accompanied by illness, loneliness, and melancholy throughout his life. Before nearly one hundred years, scholars have pointed out how Lear's subject differed from other nonsense verse writers, as well as the autobiographical elements of his poems. But this self-writing in the form of nonsense is never straightforward. It is often confusing whether Lear's poems are meant to take people to the land of nonsense to wander or explore, hoping that people will feel the same pleasure and spiritual support in nonsense as he does himself, or whether he wants people to see him calling out for cares and hopes, to see his own desires, frustrations and sorrows. Based on *The Dong with a Luminous Nose*, this article examines and explains how the Dong is a symbol of Lear's self. Lear projects his suffering from loneliness and unrequited love and his eccentric lifelong sense of exile into this poem; yet at the same time satisfies some of his desires, his quest for the aesthetic of sadness, his own idealism and his deeply hidden histrionic personality. This article fully integrates Lear's biography, his status as a landscape painter and his creative talents brought about by his illnesses, and draws to the conclusion that this poem is Lear's bittersweet attempt to be seen as a person alone in a landscape.

Keywords: Edward Lear, nonsense poetry, literature

1. Introduction

Born in 1812, the same year as Robert Browning and Charles Dickens, Edward Lear soon started his miserable childhood confronting his parents' bankruptcy and divorce, life under others' thumb and even sexual abuse by his cousin. Lear began to earn his living by drawing from the age of 14, and later developed into a serious "ornithological draughtsman" employed by the Zoological Society, and from 1832 to 1836 by the Earl of Derby, who maintained a private menagerie. Lear's first publication, published when he was 19 years old, was *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* in 1830 [1]. In his 30s, Lear turned to landscape paintings and travels as his eyesight deteriorated too much for him to deal with the high accuracy needed in fine drawings and lithography. He set off on an expedition across the Italian peninsula in 1842, passing through the

regions of Lazio, Rome, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily. Along the way Lear collected his thoughts and impressions regarding the Italian way of life, traditions, and the grandeur of the historic sites in notes and sketches. Among other journeys, he went to Greece and Egypt in 1848–1849 and toured India in 1873–1875, stopping briefly in Ceylon. While traveling he produced large quantities of colored wash drawings in a distinctive style, which he converted later in his studio into oil and watercolor paintings, as well as prints for his books [2]. Lear once said, “I seem to be on the threshold of knowledge.” He turned to the natural and non-human world both to conceal and to expose himself. As Kirby Olson concludes, to Edward Lear, the picturesque was a meal ticket, a “line of flight” (in Gilles Deleuze’s phrase), and a lifelong aesthetic preoccupation [3]. In this line, Lear could flee, escape, become delirious, leave the trail, change and converge upon the streams. For him, it is the line of liberation, creation and deterritorialization, but it is also the most dangerous line because it is the most real.

As a poet, Lear subtly and experimentally played with the form and the genre of literary nonsense to “escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness” [4]. Ina Rae Hark points out that “one of the most sensitive Victorian explorations of the conflict of ‘strictness of conscience’ and ‘spontaneity of consciousness’ occurs in the collected ‘Nonsense’ of Edward Lear” [5]. She illustrates that Lear’s nonsense poems provide an excellent medium for dealing with ambiguous questions because their nature precludes any clear, unequivocal statement. He devotes himself in line after line to the suffering of the individual confronted with either a nameless mass society or an indifferent nature, in front of which he is clearly alone and “other”. Lear’s poems may be characterized as “parables of eccentricity” that offer evidence but reject interpretation. The poetry readily captures in a highly abstract form some of the most profound issues of a highly conflicted era, an era torn between a rigid set of social conventions adopted to control impending chaos and the limitations on individual liberty that this arbitrary control entailed. Furthermore, Kirby Olson adds “Lear, while sympathizing with their plight, went blithely on about his own business” [3]. He may relate to others’ worries, but his own principles remain unchanged. Lear combines lofty idealism with almost unbelievable optimism with a lighthearted but practical appreciation of the harsh realities of life.

Throughout Lear’s long lonely life he was never married, disappointed by a twice-declined proposal to a much younger woman. Lear was also tortured by his fervent but unanswered love for a male friend, Franklin Lushington, a young barrister Lear met in Malta, 1849. Lear toured southern Greece with him and developed an infatuation for him that Lushington did not wholly reciprocate. Although they remained friends for almost forty years until Lear’s death, the disparity of their feelings constantly tormented Lear [6]. Apart from failure in the pursuit of romantic relationships, Lear had suffered from epilepsy and depression since a very young age, which burdened him with lifelong guilt, shame, self-abasement and solitude. Like many of his contemporaries who suffered epilepsy, Lear kept his epilepsy so secret that hardly anyone knew about it until after his death. He once said, “It is wonderful that these fits have never been discovered”. During Lear’s adult life, he stuck to the habit of keeping a diary and seldom ever missed a day. The journals were honest, even with his bowel movements recorded. One part of his life, though, was never documented. Readers may occasionally stumble across an entry with the letter “X” when reading through the diaries. These are the days when Lear experienced epileptic seizures. Lear shared the belief of many of his contemporaries that epilepsy would result in brain damage and early death. He conceded phlegmatically, looking back on his life, that the Demon’s continual presence since he was a child would have prohibited happiness under any type of conditions. The fact that he had continued in this manner and had not completely descended into the awful “mad sad” is “a most merciful blessing” [7]. Later, his term for a condition of nostalgic

despondency—“The Morbids”—replaced the name “The Demon” that he had previously given to this stigma.

In most of the moments, Lear portrayed and immersed himself in his ideal world by drawing the chaos of society and uncaring nature in his own eyes, and protected the repressed self through nonsense poems in the conflict with reality. Lear tried his best to bury his secrets, and silently exerted his talents as a lonely “other”. However, *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* was an exceptional case. In this poem, the object in the center of the scene was no longer the animals that Lear had been good at depicting or narrating through, but a person who broke into a landscape. This has not been mentioned in any of the previous studies, so this article provides an in-depth analysis of this topic.

2. Being Seen as a Person Alone in a Landscape

2.1. Textual Analysis of *The Dong with a Luminous Nose*

In the first stanza, the landscape where “awful darkness and silence reigns” [8], “Through the long, long wintry nights” dashed by the “angry breakers”, manifests that this world is not empty, but hostile and forbidding: the anthropomorphized “breakers” are “angry” and the “storm-clouds brood” is as if about to devour everything. The ominous anaphora of “when” clearly points to the film strip rolling, the next scene soon coming on the screen. Also, we may pay attention to these dashes, which strongly convey a sense of oppression and haste, urging us to speed up when reading, while the air is so thick and imbued with dense thunderclouds that we almost go out of breath. All of these lines are written in accentual meter, which uses a variety of feet rather than just one (like the iamb or the trochee). Here, an erratic combination of three-beat and four-beat lines produces an emphatic but uneasy rhythm, much like the “angry breakers” crashing on the “rocky shore”. The whole first stanza serves as an overture, the finely knitted drumroll preparing the audience for the advent of the unknown.

In the second stanza, the metaphorical comparison of the Dong to “A Meteor strange and bright” implies that the Dong both breaks and blends into the landscape. The Dong is exactly part of the landscape within the observers’ field of vision, yet the dashes before and after this line again emphasize the abruptness of the Dong’s presence; he is not part of this grim backdrop, but rather an outsider who needs to be deliberately stitched together with dashes.

Slowly it wanders, — pauses, — creeps, —

Anon it sparkles, — flashes and leaps;

In the two lines above, Lear neatly arranges two groups of 3 verbs of 2-2-1 syllables and closely connects them by dashes to create a striking and sharp rhythm, which conjures a vivid and dynamic image of flickering light and dark in front of the audience’s eyes. What’s more, these lines stress that the Dong’s actions are temporally continuous even with rhythmic changes, and this coherence in outward actions shows how the Dong is overwhelmed and submerged inside — he does not have time to breathe in the intensity of his emotions. Again, Lear exploits the flexible meter for dramatic effect at the end of the third stanza, when the onlookers cry as the Dong passes by,

“The Dong! — the Dong!

“The wandering Dong through the forest goes!

“The Dong! the Dong!

“The Dong with a luminous Nose!”

The Dong is introduced with these two-beat lines that feel somber and solemn, as if his name, which sounds like a bell, is ringing out in the stillness of the “great Gromboolian plain”.

Another point to note is that Lear intentionally sets up “those who watch” in this scene — just like his landscape paintings — sitting with their backs to us, viewing the landscape just as we do.

These watchers “From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower, / Cry”, making huge noises like the “breakers”, somehow assimilated into the personified landscape. They keep their distance from the Dong; they watch curiously but also indifferently, amazed at his existence as if it is a spectacle, a wonder, a thing for entertainment; they call out his name over and over again, as to seek an encore after a show. They just exclaim at the Dong’s strange appearance and act, but they have not even asked once about the gains and losses he has experienced.

Then unfolds the story of the Dong. The mellow encounter, harmonious and resonant time spent together, and the close companionship in every moment, Lear has almost all the components of a beautiful love story here, but he finally heavily weights it with a sad ending — the Jumbly Girl sailed away fleetingly, “And the Dong was left on the cruel shore”. He is grief-stricken, inconsolable, and melancholy, driven to his insane and endless wanderings, with a strange but fervent self-transformation. In several of Lear’s nonsense poems, Lear depicts pairs of animals or made-up creatures that transcend species barriers or defy social conventions to pursue romantic relationships. In stories like *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat* and *The Duck and the Kangaroo*, this elopement leads to happiness in the end. Ironically, when it comes to two persons, the relationship between the Dong and the Jumbly Girl is doomed because of the gap between what they want rather than what they are. The Jumblies spend their whole lives on explorations and adventures, and never reach their destinations, while the Dong has his root in “the great Gromboolian plain”, by the side of “lake and forest, marsh and hills”. Presumed to have synesthesia, Lear evokes fantastic sensory experiences in readers through both sounds and imagery in the poems. The rattling and grumbling sounds of place names like the “great Gromboolian plain” and the “Chankly Bore” generate a harsh, stark and rocky landscape on the Dong’s land. But by depicting the Jumblies as “*Their heads are green, and their hands are blue*” and especially the Dong’s beloved girl as “sky-blue hands, and her sea-green hair”, Lear invents the smooth and supple but also firm and tight touch of their skins, and we can almost see the wider world reflected in their eyes. After all the true feelings and experiences, the Dong’s self-transformation is saturated with a longing for those colors and lights, as he tries to get closer to the people who once brought him joy and happiness, and determines to be a distressed but defiant wanderer against the shapeless and hollow darkness to which he belongs.

The poem ends with the repetition of the watchers and their cries. This time we may register another vague sense: these watchers all come from different places, standing in separate buildings. They are also isolated from each other, so ultimately everyone is isolated in this landscape. Just as the watchers on the canvas are usually a symbol of the observers in front of the canvas, we modern people are indeed “those who watch” too, lying on the sofa in our apartments and staring at the TV with blank eyes to see what is happening around the world outside our “cells”. It is quite difficult for people to really stand with each other, and one can never really walk in others’ shoes. This might be the very source of the utter loneliness Lear faced throughout his life.

2.2. Comparisons of the Imagery Nose Between *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* and Other Literature Works

The nose has always been the part that Lear pays much attention to when depicting mankind. In *a book of nonsense* published in 1846 [8], there are two little poems in which the wonderful characters have distinctive and notable noses.

There was an Old Man with a nose,
Who said, ‘If you choose to suppose,
That my nose is too long, you are certainly wrong!’
That remarkable Man with a nose.
There was a Young Lady whose nose,
Was so long that it reached to her toes;

So she hired an Old Lady, whose conduct was steady,
To carry that wonderful nose.

Lear also describes himself in this way in his autobiographical poems, calling his nose “remarkably big”:

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

In a scribble of Lear himself, his body is round like a ball while his limbs are slender like sticks. The only thing that attracts attention on his face is a clownlike big nose, huge round glasses and a messy beard that “resembles a wig”. Next to Lear is his beloved cat Foss, also strange enough with its eyes wide open. Lear was quite ashamed of his limp and fat nose, as W. H. Auden described in a poem devoted to Lear: “he wept to himself in the night / A dirty landscape-painter who hated his nose” [9]. The nose is the center of the face and almost the first thing people notice when looking at others’ faces. Physiognomy has a saying that the shape of the nose is like a male genital, so it generates reasonable associations when one judges the appearance of others’ noses; also, the nose is also named Jupiter on the face, which can give birth to and nourish all things, hence it represents reproductive ability. Lear’s inferiority complex about his appearance (and even the frustrated and humiliating sexuality) is reflected in his attitude toward the nose. The characters in his works are either unwilling to admit that they have a remarkable nose, or their lives are seriously affected by the overly long nose. Exceptionally, the Dong chooses to sculpt his own nose to declare his self-transformation. Although he has seen his love’s “pea-green sail” vanish over the “far horizon” and is aware that she cannot be found in his own land ever, he still acts as though he may locate her if he searches hard enough. He weaves a spectacular nose-lantern to aid in his quest, painted vivid red and “tied with cords to the back of his head”. Note that the Dong uses his nose as a lantern, not a nose; perhaps he is even muting his own capacity to smell. He chooses to go on seeking his Jumbly Girl rather than sniffing out the tragic unlikeliness of their reunion. The Dong pours his creativity springing up in response to suffering and his painstaking efforts to console and appease himself into the design and realization of his new nose, in some way like Zenchi Naigu in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s *The Nose*.

In Akutagawa’s story, Naigu was bound by his vanity and low self-esteem because he cared too much about the secular perspective and the egoism projected by others on himself. Ironically he was finally freed after once being normal to restore his nose to its original appearance. This short story bitingly reveals the hypocrisy of the crowds and their desire for superiority. After Akutagawa who was born with keen insight realized that the idea of salvation advocated by Buddhism to save people from suffering is only based on the concept of fantasy and unable to really save sentient beings, he embodied his religious skepticism in literary works, fully expressing his criticism and satire of Buddhist concept. Although the self-transformation of Naigu is also full of yearning for appeasement and relief, he never lives for himself. He is enslaved by others, and he can only stagger forward with the perceptions and judgments of others. “...he felt that his nose had come back to him. — After this, I’m certain nobody will laugh. [10]” After trying and struggling, Naigu still fails to free himself from all the mental burdens related to his nose, so he gives in and crawls back to his safe zone. In the end, Naigu accepts his “fate” and continues to live a life dominated by paranoia, insecurity, anxiety and others’ words. But the Dong’s self-transformation is determined, committed, and even a heroic, Don Quixote-like behavior. He ignores the roaring breakers and storm-clouds on the plain, ignores the joking cries and words of the people watching him, and steadfastly looks into and clings to the emotions deep in his heart. Even if the loss cannot be cured, the Dong immerses himself in the boundless pursuit, engraving his own existence with melancholy

and pain. It is also Lear's desire for an aesthetic of sadness and an idealized depiction of the self to walk alone on his journey through life but with his chin up.

3. Conclusions

Compared to other nonsense verse writers, especially the popular contemporary Lewis Carroll, Lear was almost the only one to write his emotional biography in nonsense. Carroll himself did not appear in Alice's wonderland, even in disguise: he was merely the guide, and never stood on the stage. At the same time, what he met in Wonderland did not involve himself, and what he recounted of it did not reveal anything about Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the gifted mathematical lecturer at Oxford University behind "Lewis Carroll". In contrast, Lear found a vehicle to express himself that other writers of nonsense could neither find nor need, and he wrote about himself in that form. Lear's biography has provided critics and researchers with a wealth of interpretive material that supports and proves the autobiographical elements in Lear's nonsense verses.

This article discusses *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* in depth and reveals that the Dong's melancholy tale can be seen as a metaphor for the plight of Edward Lear himself, who suffered terribly from loneliness and unrequited love. Lear's illnesses such as epilepsy and depression, as well as his dissatisfaction with his appearance, left him with a desperate desire to disguise himself in front of crowds of people, which brought about an eccentric lifelong sense of exile. But there is also another part of him that wanted to be seen thoroughly. Through the somehow "self-portrait" image of the Dong, Lear draws in his quest for the aesthetic of sadness and his own Don Quixote-like idealism and heroism. He even satisfies some of his deeply-hidden histrionic personality. In such a world where the Dong's luminous nose "flashes and leaps", Lear can walk into the landscape and stand alone there; he can see and be seen, and his story will be listened to and remembered. And that is Lear's bittersweet attempt. Above is the main analysis of this article. However, due to the limited length of the study, more works and comparisons are not presented. Future studies are encouraged to further analyze Lear's other poems' texts and provide interpretations of the same type of imagery.

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