

21 THE SADNESS AND MADNESS OF FUNNY OLD NONSENSE (March 2020)

I've always enjoyed the sheer *nonsense* of nonsense. This from my prep school Latin:

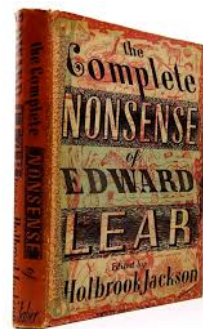
CAESAR ADSUM JAM FORTE:
POMPEY ADERAT.
CAESAR SIC IN OMNIBUS,
POMPEY SIC INAT.

Or the Latin limerick I can still quote verbatim:

IN HORTULO MARCUS SEDEBAT,	(Marcus was sitting in the garden)
POST CENAM ET SOMNUS URGEBAT;	(After dinner and sleep was urging itself)
HOC SEXTUS CONSPEXIT,	(This Sextus spied)
SELLAMQUE DEVEXIT;	(And overturned the chair)
SUPINUS TUM MARCUS IACEBAT.	(Then Marcus was lying supine...!)

Last month I was wondering about TS Eliot's "The Waste Land" and conjecturing that it was a sort of diversionary 'nonsense', hiding within its startling array of allusions and literary references many fractures of twentieth century instability, both socio-political and personal. It's perhaps a truism, but the nonsense of pure 'Nonsense' may hide far more unease than the humorous playfulness it purports to offer. I grew up with Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd, not so far removed from the absurdity and madness of "King Lear", and I want to pursue the idea of Edward Lear's child-friendly, good-humoured and whimsical 'nonsense' being rather more modernist and disguised in its strategies than it seems at first glance. Nothing I'm going to write here is very original, but these are just my responses as I remember and reread what I thought of at the time as just humorous, silly ...*nonsense*.

When I was about 8 or 9, I was given one of those standard hardback copies (second-hand) of "A Book of Nonsense" by Edward Lear, who has somehow come to be regarded as the 'Father' of Nonsense, along with the far more devious and sinister Lewis Carroll, whom I've considered elsewhere (Pre-2018). But, of course, British nonsense goes back a lot further than these two.



Edward Lear (1812-1888) is also one of my very *favourite* Victorian painters. Describing himself later as a "topographical artist", he started professionally as a painter of birds and animals and ended up travelling widely in Europe, often in quite dangerous locations in southern Greece, Macedonia and Albania. He also travelled widely in Egypt and India and finally made his home in Sanremo on the Ligurian coast of Italy (at Villa Tennyson). I adore his rather quaint (but beautifully fashioned) watercolour sketches and paintings of 'picturesque' views of the era. There is an extraordinary serenity to his art, which contrasts oddly with the unhappiness that is so evident in much of his nonsense, particularly the later songs. He was also very musical, and until now I was unaware of his musicianship and the fact that he set some of his songs to music, and also poems by Tennyson, a friend of his.

The 20th child of a family of 21, Edward Lear had a difficult childhood. His father was a stockbroker and fell on bad times (he may even have served time in a debtor's prison). Lear's



mother couldn't cope and was forced to rent out their home in Holloway. Ann, the eldest sister was settled cheaply in lodgings and charged with bringing up Edward, which she did very faithfully, looking after him like a mother for the rest of her life. But, when the family fortunes became better, Lear's mother never invited them back to the family home, now in the wealthier suburbs south of the river, while he and Ann stayed cheaply in lodgings off Gray's Inn Road. This maternal rejection marked him for life. Besides this, Lear suffered from frequent epileptic fits from an early age. Hidden from outsiders, these were a source of shame and terrible embarrassment. He was also asthmatic, and his eyesight was very poor. As a teenager, however, Edward showed talent as a painter, of birds among other things, and, encouraged by Ann, he started working for the Zoological

Society, and more importantly, perhaps for Lord Stanley, the Earl of Derby's son, at Knowsley Hall where he was engaged to paint the animals of the 'menagerie'. He ended up staying there, on and off, for 5 years (1832-37). There, he started composing humorous limericks (he was not in fact the originator of the form) and illustrating them in a quirky fashion, for his patron's children. These were finally printed under the pseudonym 'Derry Down Derry' in 1846, but it wasn't until 1861 that the well-known Third edition 'by Edward Lear' was printed just in time for Christmas.

Lear has always had a bad press for his limericks; his final lines are, admittedly, a bit bland for the modern taste which likes a snappy last line with a different rhyme. However, I always found his limericks whimsically charming (sometimes violent!) and buoyed up by the ebullience of the illustrations. He was not the inventor of the form, which was first seen in print in 1822, but he popularised it and was a little perplexed that he eventually became more famous for his limericks and nonsense, rather than for his art work.



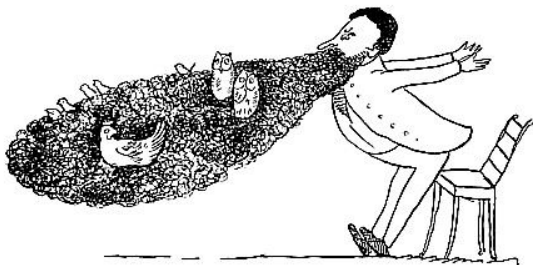
The nonsense verse of his, however, that more engages my imagination, is haunted by sadness and melancholy. Lear was quite unhappy for most of his life. His troubles with his eyes meant he had to switch from the minute exactitude of bird and animal studies, and this set him on the road, so to speak, of scenic views, travel and an art linked to 'tourism' – picturesque tourism, even though, by then, the 'picturesque was a bit old-fashioned. He was unlucky, too, as far as romantic attachments were concerned; his most serious attachment, which was sadly

unreciprocated, was with a lawyer, Franklin Lushington, whom he met on his tours in Malta in 1849 and with whom he toured in southern Greece. Lear stayed in touch with him all his life, but Lushington was not interested in the intimate relationship poor Lear craved for.

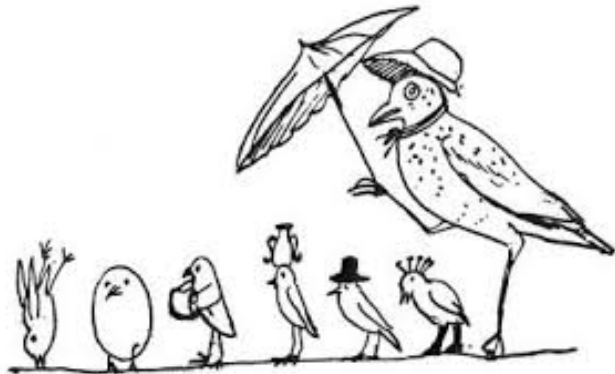


He came very close, however, to marrying the one eligible woman he ever maintained a long-term friendship with, the Honourable Augusta “Gussie” Bethell of London, whom he had met in the early 1840s when she was a child (she was 26 years younger than him). But in 1866, when he was 54 and she was 28, he unwisely consulted her sister Emma, apparently, about the advisability of a proposal. Emma firmly discouraged him saying it would be absurd, and he never approached Gussie, who by all accounts *would* have accepted him! It must have been a hard blow and he converts it all into the most painful of jokes in the next poem.

I’m making no claims for these late songs as great verse, but I think that by trying to joke about and laugh away his unhappiness, and by using Tennysonian metrics in a parodic way Lear creates quite a modernist form of expression to exorcise his sorrow, guilt or shame, and thereby transcends the genre of whimsically humorous or nonsensical poetry. This is far more a ‘waste land’ of the soul and heart.



There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, “ It is just as I feared ! —
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard.”





The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo

On the Coast of Coromandel
 Where the early pumpkins blow,
 In the middle of the woods
 Lived the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 Two old chairs, and half a candle,
 One old jug without a handle--
 These were all his worldly goods,
 In the middle of the woods,
 These were all his worldly goods,
 Of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Of the Yonghy-Bonghy Bo.

Once, among the Bong-trees walking
 Where the early pumpkins blow,
 To a little heap of stones
 Came the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 There he heard a Lady talking,
 To some milk-white Hens of Dorking--
 "'Tis the Lady Jingly Jones!
 On that little heap of stones
 Sits the Lady Jingly Jones!"
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.



"Lady Jingly! Lady Jingly!
 Sitting where the pumpkins blow,
 Will you come and be my wife?"
 Said the Yongby-Bonghy-Bo.
 "I am tired of living singly--
 On this coast so wild and shingly--
 I'm a-weary of my life;
 If you'll come and be my wife,
 Quite serene would be my life!"
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.

"On this Coast of Coromandel
 Shrimps and watercresses grow,
 Prawns are plentiful and cheap,"
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 "You shall have my chairs and candle,
 And my jug without a handle
 Gaze upon the rolling deep
 (Fish is plentiful and cheap);
 As the sea, my love is deep!"
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.

Lady Jingly answered sadly,
 And her tears began to flow--
 "Your proposal comes too late,
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 I would be your wife most gladly!"
 (Here she twirled her fingers madly)
 "But in England I've a mate!
 Yes! you've asked me far too late,
 For in England I've a mate,
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!

"Mr. Jones (his name is Handel--
 Handel Jones, Esquire, & Co.)
 Dorking fowls delights to send
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 Keep, oh, keep your chairs and candle,
 And your jug without a handle--
 I can merely be your friend!
 Should my Jones more Dorkings send,
 I will give you three, my friend!
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!



THE COURTSHIP OF THE YONGHY-BONGHY-BO.



"Though you've such a tiny body,
 And your head so large doth grow--
 Though your hat may blow away
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 Though you're such a Hoddy Doddy,
 Yet I wish that I could modi-
 fy the words I needs must say!
 will you please to go away
 That is all I have to say,
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!
 Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo!"

Down the slippery slopes of Myrtle,
 Where the early pumpkins blow,
 To the calm and silent sea
 Fled the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 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!"
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.

Through the silent-roaring ocean
 Did the Turtle swiftly go;
 Holding fast upon his shell
 Rode the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 With a sad primeval motion
 Towards the sunset isles of Boshen
 Still the Turtle bore him well.
 Holding fast upon his shell,
 "Lady Jingly Jones, farewell!"
 Sang the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 Sang the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.



From the Coast of Coromandel
 Did that Lady never go;
 On that heap of stones she mourns
 For the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.
 On that Coast of Coromandel,
 In his jug without a handle
 Still she weeps, and daily moans;
 On that little heap of stones
 To her Dorking Hens she moans,
 For the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,
 For the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo



Most of these saddest songs are set in remote, exotic locations, just the sort he so calmly painted. As a writer, Lear doesn't approach the sheer *wiliness* of Lewis Carroll, I think, nor does he approach Carroll's essentially sadistic nature. We all remember "Jabberwocky" with affection, passing lightly over the violence and horror of that encounter, with its beheading of the beast - and there is the humorous cruelty of the Walrus and the Carpenter eating up the innocent little oysters they have taken for a stroll. Lear's poetry shows none of that unpleasantness and finds delight more in simple wordplay and rhythms; here the trochaic, rather than iambic, measure that has a plangent, ruminative quality.

Many of these later sad poems deal with loss. There are theories that Lear might have felt guilty about masturbation, which he might have linked to his epileptic fits - he may also, apparently, have been abused or aroused at a young age by a cousin - whatever... It's clear that he was very unhappy deep down, and here is another classic of that haunting unhappiness. The Pobble, like the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, is of course Edward Lear searching eternally for companionship, for mother or father figures, perhaps, or just "runcible" cats! At the end of his life, his most constant companion was his cat Foss (about whom, more below).



The Pobble Who Has No Toes

The Pobble who has no toes
 Had once as many as we;
 When they said "Some day you may lose them all;"
 He replied "Fish, fiddle-de-dee!"
 And his Aunt Jobiska made him drink
 Lavender water tinged with pink,
 For she said "The World in general knows
 There's nothing so good for a Pobble's toes!"

The Pobble who has no toes
 Swam across the Bristol Channel;
 But before he set out he wrapped his nose
 In a piece of scarlet flannel.
 For his Aunt Jobiska said "No harm
 Can come to his toes if his nose is warm;
 And it's perfectly known that a Pobble's toes
 Are safe, -- provided he minds his nose!"

The Pobble swam fast and well,
 And when boats or ships came near him,
 He tinkledy-blinkledy-winkled a bell,
 So that all the world could hear him.
 And all the Sailors and Admirals cried,
 When they saw him nearing the further side -
 "He has gone to fish for his Aunt Jobiska's
 Runcible Cat with crimson whiskers!"

But before he touched the shore,
 The shore of the Bristol Channel,
 A sea-green porpoise carried away
 His wrapper of scarlet flannel.
 And when he came to observe his feet,
 Formerly garnished with toes so neat,
 His face at once became forlorn,
 On perceiving that all his toes were gone!



And nobody ever knew,
 From that dark day to the present,
 Whoso had taken the Pobble's toes,
 In a manner so far from pleasant.
 Whether the shrimps, or crawfish grey,
 Or crafty Mermaids stole them away -
 Nobody knew: and nobody knows
 How the Pobble was robbed of his twice five toes!

The Pobble who has no toes
 Was placed in a friendly Bark,
 And they rowed him back, and carried him up
 To his Aunt Jobiska's Park.
 And she made him a feast at his earnest wish
 Of eggs and buttercups fried with fish, -
 And she said "It's a fact the whole world knows,
 That Pobbles are happier without their toes!"

We may conclude that the finale suggests, if not a happy ending, at least resignation and a good (?) meal. But at its heart, there is a deeper (Freudian, no doubt) fear, on which we shall not dwell too long. The poem sits alongside "The Dong With A Luminous Nose", another painful elegy of loss.



Perhaps all of this is just an excuse on my part to enjoy Lear's pictures! Whether finished studio paintings or sketches made on the spot, they show us visionary lands in a way that makes us want to go and explore them ourselves. Unlike some painters of "exotic" landscapes at the time, Lear's vistas don't try to overstate the 'drama' with what has come to be known as 'orientalism' and its excitement over the "otherness" of ruins, palaces and exotic views. Lear gives us great distances (the 'sublime') with simplicity and restraint. His perspectives are always tied to the essentially human interest and the finished paintings are nearly always peopled with the ordinary folk of the area.

Let's have one more mournful poem (again, notice the plangent Tennysonian trochaic metre in the same stanzaic form as for "The Lady of Shallot") before we turn to other matters:

Incidents In The Life Of My Uncle Arly

O! My aged Uncle Arly! -
 Sitting on a heap of Barley
 Through the silent hours of night,-
 Close beside a leafy thicket:--
 On his nose there was a Cricket,--
 In his hat a Railway-Ticket,--
 (But his shoes were far too tight.)

Long ago, in youth, he squander'd
 All his goods away, and wander'd
 To the Timskoop-hills afar:
 There on golden sunsets blazing,
 Every morning found him gazing,--
 Singing -- "Orb! you're quite amazing!
 How I wonder what you are!"

Like the ancient Medes and Persians,
 Always by his own exertions
 He subsisted on those hills;--
 Whiles, -- by teaching children spelling,--
 Or at times by merely yelling,--
 Or at intervals by selling
 "Propter's Nicodemus Pills."

Later, in his morning rambles
 He perceived the moving brambles--
 Something square and white
 disclose;--
 'Twas a First-class Railway Ticket;
 But, on stooping down to pick it
 Off the ground, -- a pea-green Cricket
 settled on my uncle's Nose.

Some incidents in the life of my Uncle Arly.
 O! my aged Uncle Arly! 79
 Sitting on a heap of Barley
 Through the silent hours of night,
 Close beside a leafy thicket,
 On his nose there was a Cricket,
 In his hat a Railway-Ticket,
 (But his shoes were far too tight.)

2
 Long ago, in youth, he squander'd
 All his goods away, and wander'd
 To the Timskoop-hills afar:
 There, on golden sunsets blazing,
 Every evening found him gazing,
 Singing, "Orb! you're quite amazing!
 How I wonder what you are!"

3
 Like the ancient Medes and Persians,
 (Always by his own exertions,
 He subsisted on those hills;--
 Whiles, -- by teaching children spelling,
 Or at times by merely yelling,
 Or at intervals by selling
 "Propter's Nicodemus Pills."

4
 Later, in his morning rambles
 He perceived the moving brambles
 Something square and white disclose,
 'Twas a First-class Railway Ticket,
 But in stooping down to pick it
 Off the ground, a pea-green Cricket
 Settled on my uncle's nose.

5
 Never, -- never more -- oh! never,
 Did that Cricket leave him e'er,
 Dawn or Evening, day or night,
 Clinging as a constant treasure,
 Chirping with a cheerful measure,
 Wholly to my Uncle's pleasure;
 (Though his shoes were far too tight.)

6
 So, for three and forty winters,
 Till his shoes were worn to splinters,
 All those hills he wander'd o'er,
 Sometimes silent; -- sometimes yelling,
 Till he came to Barley-Melling,
 Near his old ancestral dwelling,
 And he wander'd thence no more.

7
 On a little heap of Barley
 Died my aged Uncle Arly;
 And they buried him one night;
 There, -- his hat and Railway-Ticket,
 There -- his ever faithful Cricket;
 (But his shoes were far too tight.)

Velia Tennyson. Sanremo.
 11 March. 1886.

Never -- never more, -- Oh! never,
 Did that Cricket leave him ever,--
 Dawn or evening, day or night;--
 Clinging as a constant treasure,--
 Chirping with a cheerious measure,--
 Wholly to my uncle's pleasure
 (Though his shoes were far too tight.)

So for three-and-forty winters,
 Till his shoes were worn to splinters,
 All those hills he wander'd o'er,--
 Sometimes silent; -- sometimes yelling;--
 Till he came to Borley-Melling,
 Near his old ancestral dwelling;--
 (But his shoes were far too tight.)

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.)

[from *The Complete Nonsense Book*,
 edited by Lady Strachey, 1912, p. 395.
 This poem first appeared in *Nonsense Songs and
 Stories*, edited by Sir Edward Strachey, 1895.

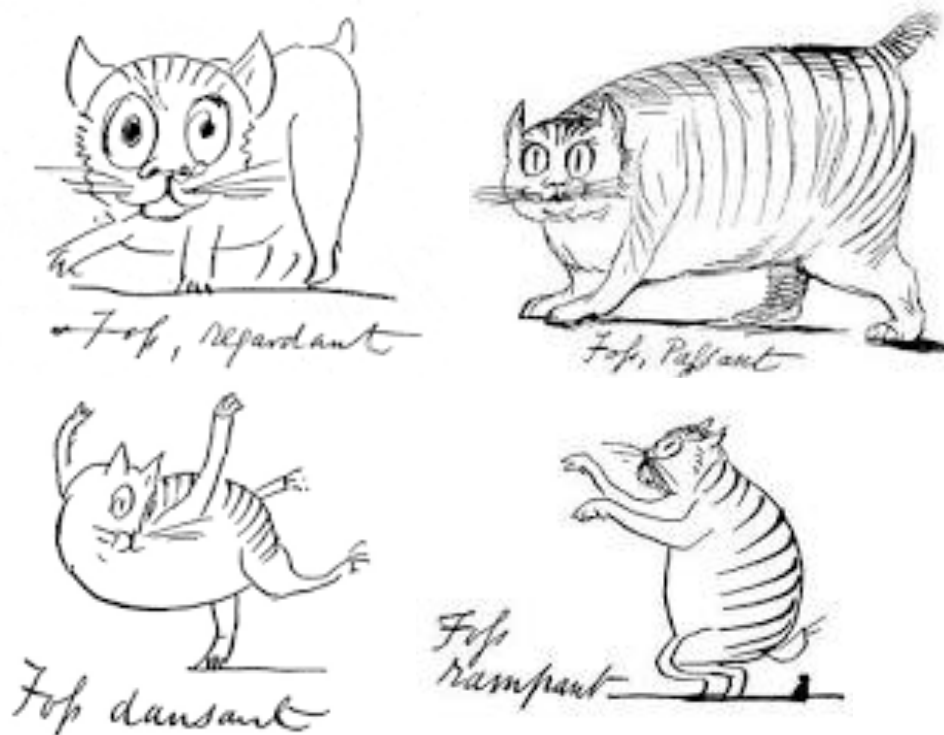
When the original (here included) went to auction recently, these were the auction notes:

LEAR'S LAST POEM. 'Some incidents in the Life of My Uncle Arly', which is in the metre of his friend Lord Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', is full of autobiographical references, most obviously to Lear's life as an incessant 'wanderer'. It was also his own obituary. Drafting it over a period of thirteen years, partly on the endpapers of The Letters of Horace Walpole in 1873 and of Addison and Steele's The Spectator in 1885, he completed it on 1 March 1886 and sent presentation copies to at least thirteen friends. These included Wilkie Collins, whom Lear said he resembled so closely that he was often mistaken for him; Collins considered it Lear's best poem. Another copy went to John Ruskin ('Roughskin'), the great art-critic and Utopian, after he had written in the Pall Mall Magazine: 'I really don't know any author to whom I am half so grateful, for my idle self, as Edward Lear. I shall put him first of my hundred authors'. In his letter to Ruskin on that occasion Lear esteemed it 'a thing to be thankful for that I remain as great a fool as ever I was.'

The present manuscript Lear sent to Mary, the wife of Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820-1877), architect, Secretary of the Great Exhibition and first Slade Professor of Fine Arts in Cambridge. It is dated 11 March 1886, ten days after Lear recorded he had finished writing the poem. Lady Wyatt ('Dear Mrs Digby') was the recipient of a number of enchanting phonetic letters from Lear, in one of which he sent verses written with a 'lithp' ('O Thuthan Thmith! Thweet Thuthan Thmith...'), explaining that 'my teeth have thufferred tho mutth, & it themeth to me that it will produthe a thenthation in the muthical thphereth...' (see also Roy Davids Collection Part II lot 295).

The notable differences between the present manuscript and the printed version are in the title, line 10 [he is consistent in dotting 'i', otherwise the third minim of the 'm' in Timskoop might have been assumed to be an 'i'] the alternative reading for line 42 and the omission in the manuscript of line 46 of the printed version, doubtless just by mistake since there is no reason to assume that the seventh stanza should be the only one without seven lines. Lear began line 27 by writing 'Off' indented as if it were the last line of a stanza and, realising his error, immediately smudged it and started the line again correctly aligned. The paper is a little foxed; Lear is writing with something very akin to printers' ink.

Lear was, as we know, very attached to his cat Foss



And it is Foss who is surely the inspiration of his most famous (and equally haunting) love-song to end all love-songs: "The Owl and the Pussycat".

THE OWL AND THE PUSSY-CAT

I

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
 In a beautiful pea-green boat,
 They took some honey, and plenty of money,
 Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
 The Owl looked up to the stars above,
 And sang to a small guitar,
 "O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
 What a beautiful Pussy you are,
 You are,
 You are!
 What a beautiful Pussy you are!"



II

Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant
 fowl!
 How charmingly sweet you sing!
 O let us be married! too long we have tarried:
 But what shall we do for a ring?"
 They sailed away, for a year and a day,
 To the land where the Bong-Tree grows
 And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
 With a ring at the end of his nose,
 His nose,
 His nose,
 With a ring at the end of his nose.

III

"Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
 Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."
 So they took it away, and were married next day
 By the Turkey who lives on the hill.
 They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
 Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
 And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
 They danced by the light of the moon,
 The moon,
 The moon,
 They danced by the light of the moon.

Not 'high verse' perhaps, but Lear's verse-world has a certain magic to it.

Another poet, back in the eighteenth century, who is not usually referred to in terms of nonsense, also found solace in his cat, Jeffrey. This was Christopher Smart (1722-71),

Poor 'Kit' Smart, a friend of Dr Johnson and Henry Fielding, among others, was considered mad (from religious fervour) and was confined, possibly because of debts, by his father-in-law, the publisher John Newberry (whose name is more associated nowadays with the modern

American literary prize). Newberry was the first to make good money printing books for children, but a “Commission of Lunacy” was taken out against Smart, and he was admitted to St Luke's Hospital for Lunatics on 6 May 1757 as a "Curable Patient". It was there that he wrote the two works with which his name is chiefly remembered today, “A Song to David” and “Jubilate Agno”, in which we have this wonderfully nonsensical tribute to his cat. In the circumstances, I find it deeply moving, as well as very funny. In the Appendix below, I have attached my Smartian tribute to our own beloved Twist (2011-2019 RIP). Saved from an early death by George, our son, in Saudi Arabia, Twist became well-known in our village at Houdetot and was much loved by friends and family alike.

Here is Christopher Smart, and this is just an extract from a longer poem taken from his **Jubilate Agno (Fragment B4)**. You can find the original at

<http://www.pseudopodium.org/repress/jubilate/agno-b3.html>

For I will consider my Cat Geoffrey

For I will consider my Cat Geoffrey.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.

For is this done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

For he rolls upon prank to work it in.

For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.

For this he performs in ten degrees.

For first he looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean.

For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.

For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the fore paws extended.

For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.

For fifthly he washes himself.

For Sixthly he rolls upon wash.

For Seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.

For Eighthly he rubs himself against a post.

For Ninthly he looks up for his instructions.

For Tenthly he goes in quest of food.

For having consider'd God and himself he will consider his neighbour.

For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.

For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it chance.

For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.

For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.

For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.

For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.

For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life

For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.

For he is of the tribe of Tiger.

For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.

For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in goodness he suppresses.

For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.

For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good Cat.

For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.

For every house is incompleat without him and a blessing is lacking in the spirit.

For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.

For every family had one cat at least in the bag.

For the English Cats are the best in Europe.

For he is the cleanest in the use of his fore-paws of any quadrupede.

For the dexterity of his defence is an instance of the love of God to him exceedingly.

For he is the quickest to his mark of any creature.

For he is tenacious of his point.

For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery.

For he knows that God is his Saviour.

For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.

For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion.

For he is of the Lord's poor and so indeed is he called by benevolence perpetually --
Poor Jeoffry! poor Jeoffry! the rat has bit thy throat.

For I bless the name of the Lord Jesus that Jeoffry is better.

For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in compleat cat.

For his tongue is exceeding pure so that it has in purity what it wants in musick.

For he is docile and can learn certain things.

For he can set up with gravity which is patience upon approbation.

For he can fetch and carry, which is patience in employment.

For he can jump over a stick which is patience upon proof positive.

For he can spraggle upon waggle at the word of command.

For he can jump from an eminence into his master's bosom.

For he can catch the cork and toss it again.

For he is hated by the hypocrite and miser.

For the former is afraid of detection.

For the latter refuses the charge.

For he camels his back to bear the first notion of business.

For he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly.

For he made a great figure in Egypt for his signal services.

For he killed the Icneumon-rat very pernicious by land.

For his ears are so acute that they sting again.

For from this proceeds the passing quickness of his attention.

For by stroaking of him I have found out electricity.

For I perceived God's light about him both wax and fire.

For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast.

For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.

For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.

For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadrupede.

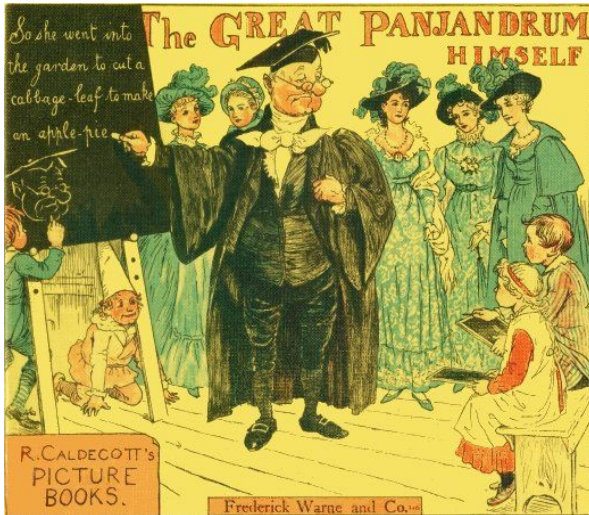
For he can tread to all the measures upon the musick.

For he can swim for life.

For he can creep.

Does this pass muster? Can it be allowed into the canon of Nonsense? I hope so, for there is something... all right... *obsessive* and downright nonsensical, about this ecstatic eulogising of his cat, but the language and rhythms are also playful and life-affirming. There is no doubting his love for Jeffrey.

A few years earlier, again in London, Samuel Foote, a sometime dramatist who produced nothing else of much interest, came up with this piece of nonsense that is often cited as 'early nonsense'.



So she went into the garden to cut a cabbage-leaf to make an apple-pie; and at the same time a great she-bear, coming up the street, pops its head into the shop. "What! No soap?" So he died, and she very imprudently married the barber; and there were present the Picinnies, and the Joblillies, and the Garyulies, and the grand Panjandrum himself, with the little round button at top, and they all fell to playing the game of catch-as-catch-can till the gunpowder ran out at the heels of their boots.

I've always known this piece in the context of pure nonsense, but I didn't know that Samuel Foote wrote it in 1754 as a challenge for the actor Charles Macklin, who had boasted that he could recite any text after hearing it only once. It is nowhere recorded whether the actor succeeded in the challenge or not, but you can try this famous piece of nonsense out on your friends as a test of their (if they are anything like me) failing synapses. You can find it beautifully illustrated by Randolph Caldecott here :

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18417/18417-h/18417-h.htm>

It is true that it sails rather close to the p.c. wind, with its reference to the 'Picinnie's', though read in the context of its time it is not entirely damnable just for that.

Reaching even further back, most of us have come across this piece, which is a good contender for being the very FIRST proper nonsense poem (though of course many of the nursery rhymes like "Three Blind Mice" reach far back as well and could equally count as pure nonsense). What is clever about this one is that if you read the poem from the middle of each line, of course, it makes pure sense.

I Saw a Peacock, with a fiery tail,
 I saw a Blazing Comet, drop down hail,
 I saw a Cloud, with Ivy circled round,
 I saw a sturdy Oak, creep on the ground,
 I saw a Pismire, swallow up a Whale,
 I saw a raging Sea, brim full of Ale,
 I saw a Venice Glass, Sixteen foot deep,
 I saw a well, full of men's tears that weep,
 I saw their eyes, all in a flame of fire,
 I saw a House, as big as the Moon and higher,
 I saw the Sun, even in the midst of night,
 I saw the man, that saw this wondrous sight.

Anonymous (before 1665)

And here, for your quiz question this month, for big BONUS points, is the following:

Which famous poet wrote this piece of nonsense??

There was a naughty boy
 There was a naughty boy
 A naughty boy was he
 He would not stop at home
 He could not quiet be —
 He took
 In his knapsack
 A book
 Full of vowels
 And a shirt
 With some towels —
 A slight cap
 For night cap —
 A hair brush,
 Comb ditto,
 New stockings
 For old ones
 Would split O!
 This knapsack
 Tight at's back
 He rivetted close
 And followed his nose
 To the north
 To the north
 And follow'd his nose
 To the north—

There was a naughty boy
 And a naughty boy was he,
 For nothing would he do
 But scribble poetry —
 He took
 An ink stand
 In his hand
 And a pen
 Big as ten
 In the other
 And away
 In a pother
 He ran
 To the mountains
 And fountains
 And ghostes
 And postes
 And witches

And ditches
 And wrote
 In his coat
 When the weather
 Was cool
 Fear of gout
 And without
 When the weather
 Was warm —
 Och the charm
 When we choose
 To follow one's nose
 To the north
 To the north
 To follow one's nose to the north!

There was a naughty boy
 And a naughty boy was he,
 He kept little fishes
 In washing tubs three
 In spite
 Of the might
 Of the maid
 Nor afraid
 Of his granny-good —
 He often would
 Hurly burly
 Get up early
 And go
 By hook or crook
 To the brook
 And bring home
 Miller's thumb,
 Tittlebat
 Not over fat
 Minnows small
 As the stall
 Of a glove
 Not above
 The size
 Of a nice
 Little baby's
 Little finger —
 O he made
 'Twas his trade
 Of fish a pretty kettle
 A kettle — a kettle

Of fish a pretty kettle
A kettle!

There was a naughty boy,
And a naughty boy was he,
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see —
There he found
That the ground
Was as hard
That a yard
Was as long,
That a song
Was as merry,
That a cherry
Was as red —
That lead
Was as weighty
That fourscore
Was as eighty
That a door
Was as wooden
As in England —
So he stood in
His shoes
And he wonder'd,
He wonder'd,
He stood in his
Shoes and he wonder'd —

Answer at the very end (below).

You will have spotted that I haven't discussed the 'nonsense' (?) of William Blake, who was thought even by his friends to be 'mad'. It would take too long to consider his poetry here, I think. Luckily, he wasn't put away, like Christopher Smart, and his poetry is strange and idiosyncratic, but one hesitates to bracket it with 'nonsense' poetry as such. I love, however, his 'nonsensical' (?) or mad (?) painting of "The Ghost of a Flea", which John Varley claimed flew in at a window and engaged him with conversation.

John Varley – an artist, astrologer and close friend of Blake – reported in his Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy (1882) that Blake once had a spiritual vision of a ghost of a flea and that 'This spirit visited his imagination in such a figure as he never anticipated in an insect.' While drawing the spirit it told the artist that all fleas were inhabited by the souls of men who were 'by nature bloodthirsty to excess'. In the painting it holds a cup for blood-drinking and stares eagerly towards it. Blake's amalgamation of man and beast suggests a human character marred by animalistic traits. (Gallery Notes)

THE GHOST OF A FLEA

So, I think we shall leave it there for Nonsense - sad, mad, or just bad! It is NOT an inferior genre of verse, and it does what all verse aspires to, whether 'high' or 'low'. It plays with words and rhythms to create complicated effects which expand our imaginations. It can also, like high verse, subvert our expectations, strategically revealing as much as concealing. Tricky stuff!

APPENDIX

For Twist
RIP
2011-2019

For I will consider Our Cat, Twist (2015)

“For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer”
(Christopher Smart from **Jubilate Agno**)

For I will consider our cat, Twist;
For he is blessed above all other Cats,
For he is a Saudi Arabian Orphan (but not a Jihadist, Allah be praised),
For he was saved by George from the Bowels of his School in Riyadh.
For he was a Runt and very small;
For he arrived by Plane at Charles de Gaulle Airport, with all his Papers and Inoculations in order,
For he also has an electronic tag without which he couldn't get through the Cat-Flap,
For it is very up-to-date;
For George couldn't take him to his next school in China,
For therefore he was bequeathed to us in Normandy (a mixed Blessing, or so we thought then);
For he is ginger and white and very well-proportioned with a sweet Face, and much bigger than when he arrived;
For he can run and interrupt Croquet Balls, even when they're hit hard;
For he delighteth in leaping and climbing,
For he loveth high places – like Trees,
For he does not know he is not a Squirrel,
For he is also quite stupid,
For he gets stuck sometimes, though this doesn't deter him;
For he also leaps and twists in mid-air trying to catch Flies,
For he enjoys crunching up the Few he manages to catch,
For he is also very circumspect when it comes to Wasps;
For he also loves Mantelpieces and Tables,
For they furnish him with Things to push over the Edge,
For he then looks at them blankly as they fall – and sometimes break,
For he is quite stupid;
For he adores Water, being Saudi Arabian, perhaps,
For he drinks freely from the Bidet, the Sink and the Bath,
For he cares not if I am in the Bath or the Water is hot,



For he is quite stupid;
 For he knows not his Name, which is Twist, after Oliver and
 For he also has a Twist at the end of his Tail,
 For somebody must have trodden on it when he was very young;
 For now he Pranks upon Twist (cf Kit Smart's weird Words) and drives us round the Twist too;
 For he is very loving, so we are not as exasperated as we might otherwise be;
 For he seeks Caresses and Attention all Day long,
 For we throw him out to fend for himself each Night,
 For he is quite vociferous the next Morning to be let in,
 For he is really very happy, though he likes to complain as much as possible;
 For he wins at Fights with other Cats,
 For he may not fight quite according to Queensbury Rules but Saudi ones instead;
 For he disdains mere Mice, but attacks Balls of Wool instead;
 For he helps us with the Gardening by climbing Trees, and hiding under Bushes, and leaping out to surprise us;
 For he drinketh no Milk, but only Water,
 For he eateth only Cat Biscuits, which he likes (and Fish as a great treat),
 For which he is always grateful and kisses us after with a fishy Nose;
 For he liketh to sleep during the Day,
 For he wandereth at Night, (Allah only knows where),
 For he is neutered, though he beareth no Grudges,
 For he thinketh he is Human,
 For he is quite stupid;
 For he utterly ignores the White Clockwork Mouse I bought him,
 For he likes to curl up in a Bicycle Basket,
 For he likes the Woodburning Stove in the Kitchen, and the Sofa,
 For he is very gentle and well behaved,
 For he is loving and liketh to be loved (or stroked, which comes to the same for him),
 For he has never scratched or bitten (except playfully) and doesn't abuse Soft Furnishings too much;
 For he fails to recognise George on Skype, though I make him waggle his Paw and George is very happy;
 For he is inconsolable when we go away and cries bitterly in next door's Farmyard,
 For he is ecstatic when we return, but we have to suffer an Hour of Reproaches first,
 For then he cleans himself and then falls asleep, preferably on someone's Lap;
 For many of the Pupils on our Courses have fallen in love with him,
 For Alex eg. (age 11) took over one Hundred and Twenty Pictures on his Phone;
 For a few People are allergic to him, including our Daughter Nell, which is sad,
 For she would like to cuddle him lots but must make do with Duncan instead;
 For even her Twin, Caspar, likes Twist, though he usually has Issues with Animals;
 For only one of our Pupils has been genuinely phobic;
 For Vicki says that he tones in with our Curtains, which is an Added Bonus;
 For we paid meet Adoration to all our Household Cats, but Twist Taketh the Biscuit,
 For this is a fair and true Picture of our Beloved Twist,
 For Life wouldn't be the same without Him.

The British wordplay and recreational mathematics expert Leigh Mercer (1893–1977) devised the following mathematical limerick (strictly UN-nonsensical):

$$\frac{(12 + 144 + 20 + (3\sqrt{4}))}{7} + (5 * 11) = 9^2 + 0$$

A Dozen, a Gross and a Score,
 plus three times the square root of four,
 divided by seven,
 plus five times eleven,
 equals nine squared and not a bit more.

And here, for the hell of it, is one of the loveliest paintings Lear made, of Mount Kinchenjunga seen from Darjeeling. Utterly ‘sublime’!



QUIZ ANSWER - John Keats