

Edward Lear's lines of flight

Chatterton Lecture on Poetry
read 1 November 2012 by

MATTHEW BEVIS

Abstract: 'Verily I am an odd bird', Edward Lear wrote in his diary in 1860. This article examines a range of odd encounters between birds and people in Lear's paintings, illustrations, and poems. It considers how his interest in birds—an interest at once scientific and aesthetic—helped to shape his nonsense writings. I suggest that poetic and pictorial lines of flight became, for Lear, a means of exploring the claims that art might make on our attention.

Keywords: Edward Lear, poetry, painting, flight, birds, Charles Darwin, nonsense, evolution, Alfred Tennyson.

until now I never knew
That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.
Wallace Stevens, 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle' (1918)

'If you cannot tell me how the shadows of the blessed jackdaws will fall I don't know what I shall do', wrote Edward Lear to William Holman Hunt in 1852.¹ The poet's feeling for the life of things was often enhanced by his regard for their fleeting effects. 'Myriads of pigeons!', he later exclaimed, 'And when they fly, their shadows on the ground!'² Notwithstanding the lessons of Plato's cave, shadows, for Lear, inhabit the realm of the knowable; they are not simply a mistake, or a deception, or a diversion from the real. At once copies and reanimations, shadows may also stand as an analogue for art. Tennyson played on this association in his tribute 'To Edward Lear, on His Travels in Greece', the following lines from which are on Lear's gravestone:

all things fair
With such a pencil, such a pen,
You shadow forth to distant men,
I read and felt that I was there.³

¹Noakes (1991: 62).

²Lear (18 Aug. 1867), unpublished diaries (MS at The Houghton Library, Harvard).

³Tennyson (1969: 993).

The lines imagine the movements of the artist's hand, but rather than, say, 'picture forth', 'shadow forth' could imply that something remains undisclosed. The phrase captures the odd mixture of the reticent and the resolute in Lear's work, his attraction to portraying objects or movements not wholly transparent yet at the same time clearly seen and savoured. In his *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* (1870), Lear wrote that '[my] life's occupation is travelling . . . adding fresh ideas of landscape to both mind and portfolio', before quoting Tennyson's 'Ulysses' in support: 'all experience is an arch, wherethrough | Gleams the untravell'd world, whose margin fades, | For ever and for ever when I move'.⁴ Like Ulysses, the artist has a searching gaze in both senses of that term—directed and in need of direction.

Ulysses is about to begin the journey Dante described in *The Inferno* as the 'mad flight' ('folle volo').⁵ Lear's itinerant life and art involved flights of many sorts, and he often saw words themselves as unsettled flying objects. He apologised to one correspondent: 'In vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird, which means obscurely that this sheet was begun to be written on directly I got yours of the 28th. Dec., but although that blank paper has laid on the table ever since, the bird has never settled on it.'⁶ And when words do finally settle, the letter-writer ascends:

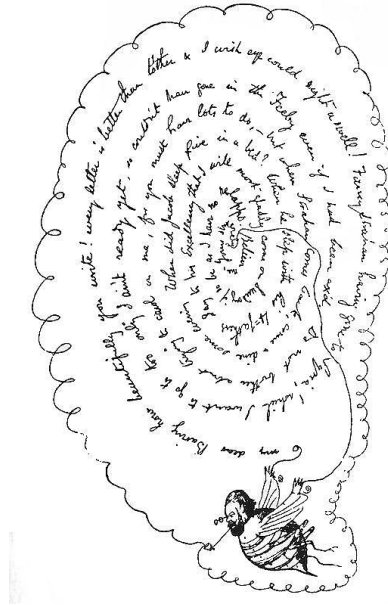


Figure 1. Edward Lear, letter to Evelyn Baring (4 February 1864).⁷

⁴ Lear (2005: 309). Lear slightly misquotes Tennyson's lines.

⁵ Dante (1971: 326).

⁶ Lear (1909: 161).

⁷ Lear (1988a: 193).

Hands are joined to wings, and wings to words; lines of print modulate into lines of flight. Lear's poetry shares this relish for improbable combination, and although he conceded that he was a writer of 'bosh', he added: 'not but that bosh requires a good deal of care'.⁸ To dwell on the care that goes into bosh is to risk saying too much; it sometimes feels as though a truly intimate encounter with Lear's poetry involves not trying to get too close to it. And yet the poems seem so open to anything, so hospitable towards readers who might wish to try things out⁹:

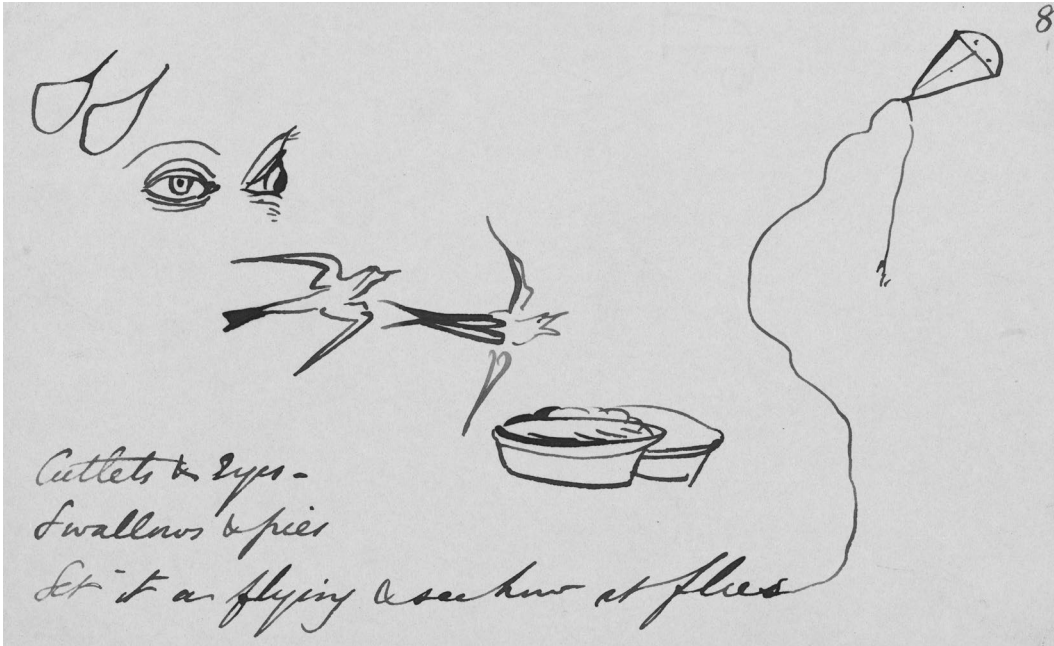


Figure 2. Edward Lear, 'Cutlets & eyes' (c.1850)
(MS Typ 55.14 (50), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

The non-epic catalogue is an invitation to play. 'Swallows' are birds, but you can swallow a pie; a pie is made to be eaten, but a pie can be a bird (a magpie or a close relation). Like other kites in Lear's poetry, the 'it' set a-flying here also has eyes (two little dots), perhaps because a kite is sometimes a bird of prey rather than a plaything. Image consorts with text to encourage readers to set many things a-flying, including the verb 'set': to set as one might set words to a melody, or to set as one could 'place a thing in a certain setting . . . to frame a picture' (*OED*). As 'flies' brings the horizontal lines of the poem's tune to an end, the vertical line rising from the word implies

⁸ Lear (1988a: 228).

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the poems come from Lear (2006).

that the end is just the beginning. The last line can be heard in two ways: either the poet is in the grip of a fervour of his own making ('set it a-flying *and see* how it flies!'), or he is just passing over responsibility to us with a shrug of the shoulders ('see how it flies' meaning not 'see how impressive it is!', but rather 'see how it goes . . .'). The mood is something akin to a moment in *David Copperfield* (1850) when Mr Dick introduces his kite: "There's plenty of string . . . and when it flies high, it takes the facts a long way. That's my manner of diffusing 'em. I don't know where they may come down. It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth; but I take my chance of that."¹⁰

David is unsure whether he should be taking the speaker seriously, and Lear's verse also seems aware that you could claim a lot or a little for this sort of fun. When in doubt, critics have often plumped for the latter option, envisaging nonsense verse as merely flighty, or as a shadow of poetry's true self. Yet Lear's writing has been cherished by poets themselves (by W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, John Ashbery, Elizabeth Bishop, and others). Responding to her collection *Questions of Travel*, Robert Lowell wrote to Bishop: 'I have been rereading Lear whom you like so much. I guess it would be far-fetched to find his hand here; yet I think he would have enjoyed your feeling, your disciplined gorgeousness, your drawing, your sadness, your amusement.'¹¹ This is fine criticism of Lear as well as of Bishop; the poem Lowell refers to ('Brazil, January 1, 1502') draws on many Lear-like ways of seeing and thinking, entertaining not just questions of travel, but questions about what poems and pictures see in each other, and about the kinds of alliance that amusement might form with sadness. Bishop's speaker admires a Brazilian landscape 'fresh as if just finished | and taken off the frame', yet inhabited by things only half-understood: 'perching there in profile, beaks agape, | the big symbolic birds keep quiet'.¹²

Those birds have been perching for a long time—not just symbolic in poems, but symbolic of poetry. In Plato's *Ion*, discussion about Homer leads Socrates to describe the poet as a 'winged thing'¹³ and behind this lies the Homeric epithet *epea pteroenta*, 'winged words'. Some commentators have argued that poetic utterance is winged on account of its elegance, its bird-like grace of movement. Others suggest that the metaphor conjures up the feathers of an arrow in flight; brooking no deviation, the utterance has a target.¹⁴ So to imagine words as winged may be to accentuate either their beauty or their utility, to oversee a taking off or a taking aim. Or both. In 'Haymaking', Edward Thomas celebrates 'the fierce glee' of the swift by observing

¹⁰ Dickens (2008: 198).

¹¹ Bishop and Lowell (2008: 307).

¹² Bishop (2008: 72–3).

¹³ Plato, quoted in Murray and Dorsch (2000: 5).

¹⁴ See Boitani (2007: 227).

'wings and tail as sharp and narrow | As if the bow had flown off with the arrow.'¹⁵ This is an arch defence of the poetic word not only as a blithe spirit, but also as something that flies true.

Lear's poetry has been laughed with (and sometimes laughed at) for being all wings and no arrow, but his own take on Homer's winged words offers pause for thought:



There was an Old Person of Cromer,
Who stood on one leg to read Homer;
When he found he grew stiff, he jumped over the cliff,
Which concluded that Person of Cromer.

Figure 3. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1861).

The image says more than the poem—or allows us to glimpse what the poem might be thinking without quite saying. The Old Person stands heron-like on one leg, coat-tail turning into a wing, nose edging its way towards beakhood. It is noteworthy that he jumps ‘over’ the cliff, not ‘off’ it (like the cow who jumped over the moon); the *person* is ‘concluded’, then, but perhaps only in the sense that person morphs into bird, rather than plummets to his death. Or maybe he stiffens into an arrow. This could be read as a nonsensical allegory about the effects of reading poems (poems like this one, not just poems like Homer’s). The idea that reading encourages an escape or flight from reality is certainly flirted with, but reading can also be a catalyst for a new form of life. It looks as though the old man might even try to flap the pages of the book as a makeshift pair of wings to get him going. The B-words chosen by Lear for his many nonsense alphabets are apt in this regard: bird, bee, bat, butterfly, broom, book.¹⁶ Given that broomsticks usually fly in the poet’s work, and that all the other entries have wings, it would seem that books are associated with some kind of lift-off.

¹⁵ Thomas (2008: 95).

¹⁶ Lear (2006: 492).

* * *

Before his reincarnation as a nonsense-poet, Lear was an ornithological illustrator, and the disciplined gorgeousness of his writing is indebted to this past life (See Plates 1 & 2). Lear's book was the first of its kind to be devoted to a single species of bird, and the first to adopt the large folio size that would later become standard. He was also the first bird-artist to work from living models whenever he could rather than stuffed skins, and was one of the first to take advantage of lithography to render the textures of the plumage in such exquisite detail.¹⁷ The day after the book's publication, the eighteen-year-old Lear was nominated as an Associate of the Linnean Society (he would go on to illustrate books by John Gould and Charles Darwin, and in 1846 he was appointed as Queen Victoria's drawing-teacher). Preparatory sketches show the artist's rigour as he maps out the contours of wings and the geometry of beaks (Figures 4 & 5).

'Parrots are my favourites', he said.¹⁸ He drew them in the cages of the parrot-house at the newly founded London Zoo. The Zoo's initial mission was to promote scientific research; in its 1825 prospectus, its founders claimed that one of its goals was 'to introduce new varieties, breeds . . . which may be judged capable of application to purposes of utility'.¹⁹ Lear's birds are judges as well as judged; in one letter he writes:



Figure 4. Edward Lear, bird sketches
(MS Typ 55.9 (20 & 69), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

¹⁷See Hyman (1980); Reade (1949); Lear (2009).

¹⁸Quoted in Levi (1995: 43).

¹⁹Quoted by Peck (2011: 6).

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 1



Plates 1 & 2. Edward Lear, *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (1830–2) (Typ 805L.32 (A), plates 7 & 8, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 2





Figure 5. Edward Lear, bird sketches
(MS Typ 55.9 (20 & 69), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

‘a huge Maccaaw is staring me now in the face as much as to say—“finish me”’.²⁰ The comment could exude pride in the idea that his images have a life of their own, but another implication is that acts of looking and drawing may be predations. To finish off the painting is to finish off the bird by putting it out of its misery.

Later, Lear will present exhibit P:

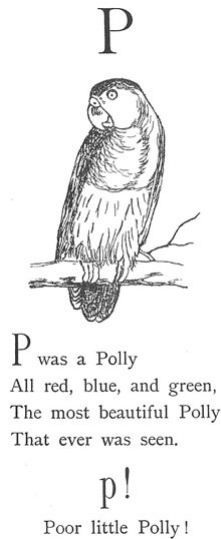


Figure 6. Edward Lear, *Nonsense Alphabets* (1870).

²⁰ Lear (1988a: 14).

Why ‘poor’ if so beautiful? Because beauty can expose you to risk. The next letter of the alphabet shows how one little thing can lead to another:

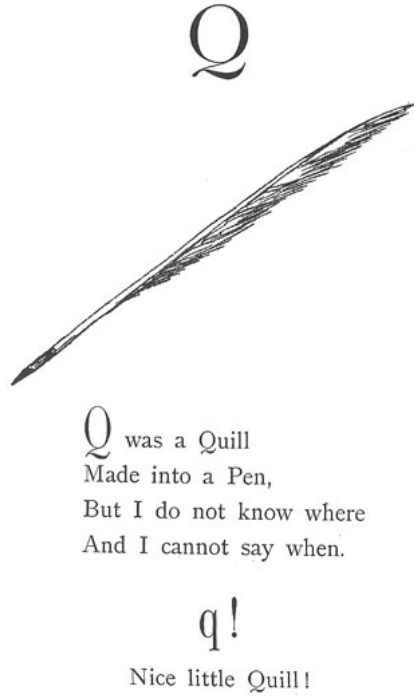


Figure 7. Edward Lear, *Nonsense Alphabets* (1870).

Parts of birds go into the making of the implements that help artists to represent them (in pictures or in print), so Quill hints at a past, a where and a when, in which Polly may have some involvement.²¹ (The root of the word ‘pen’ is the Old French, ‘penne’, a ‘long wing-feather of a bird’ (*OED*)). The lines are minding their Ps and Qs, but what they do not quite say is still palpable (See Plate 3).

Lear spent many years in menageries and zoos, themselves markers of a colonial tourism on which he would cast an increasingly sceptical eye.²² The sketches in his notebooks envisage acts of looking not so much as a confirmation of privilege, but as a medium for unnerving exchange (See Plate 4). ‘What you look at hard seems to look hard at you’, Gerard Manley Hopkins observed.²³ Lear’s parrots often do that; you sense that you have caught *their* eye, and that they are considering how far you yourself are ‘capable of application to purposes of utility’. At once biddable and

²¹ For another suggestive image in this respect, see Lear (1975: 181)

²² On zoos and the imperial project, see chapter 5 of Donald (2007).

²³ Hopkins (1959: 204).



Plate 3. Edward Lear, 'A Feather and the Artist's Business Card' (1827).



Plate 4. Edward Lear, *Visitors to the Parrot House* (c.1830–2)
(MS Typ 55.9 (60), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 5 overleaf

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 5

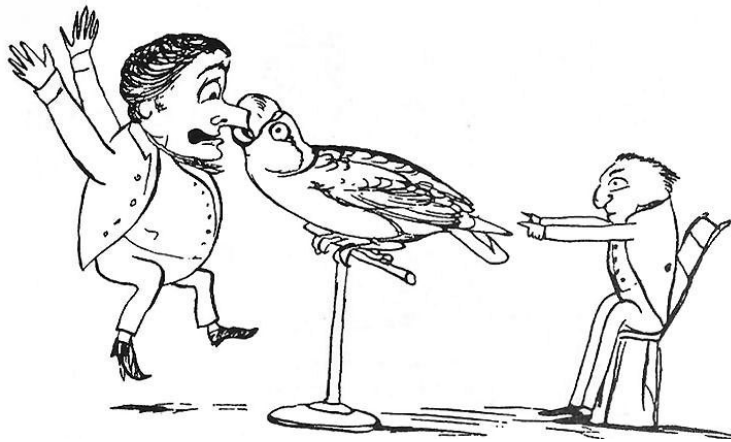


Plate 5. Edward Lear, sketches in the parrot-house (c.1830–2)
(MS Typ 55.9 (8), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

unreachable, the birds have one eye on the artist or the viewer, and the other venturing further back into the picture-plane as if considering what on earth the spectators think they are doing here (See Plate 5).

A salient, unusual characteristic of Lear's parrots in verse is that they do not talk very much. The parrot is celebrated for talking, but it only talks in captivity, which prompts consideration of why we need the creature to speak at all. Paul Carter argues that 'when we put parrots in cages and teach them to talk, it's a fantasy of communication with ourselves that we indulge . . . what is at stake here is not expression as such but our desire to cultivate a kind of talk-talk answering to our own straightened idea of communication'.²⁴ Indeed, many good parrot jokes imply that it is humans who are the mimickers and repeaters of things, and that parrots, when they echo our words, get more out of our words than we bargained for. (Tennyson recalled the parrot from his childhood; whenever the poet's father sat the family down to pray, the pet bird would murmur from the corner 'Oh God').

The parrot haunted Lear's imagination because in it he recognised a self-portrait: an exhibitionist who felt that he was sometimes humoured merely *as* an exhibit, caught in a process of reproduction and repetition that did not always suit him. 'Parrot-learnt', 'parrot learning', 'parrot teaching', 'parrot-fashion': the terms are, according to the *OED*, all 19th-century coinages, but Lear's poetry is full of creatures who refuse to be taught. In nonsense, as in jokes, parrots bite back:



There was an Old Man of Dunrose,
A parrot seized hold of his nose;
When he grew melancholy, they said, 'His name's Polly,'
Which soothed that Old Man of Dunrose.

Figure 8. Edward Lear, *More Nonsense* (1872).

²⁴Carter (2006: 12, 113).

The intrepid matter-of-factness of Lear's poetry can sometimes distract attention from the strange behaviour of his smaller words. The syntax here follows the image's lead: as the man flaps himself into flight, the third line blurs the distinction between man and beast. Who, exactly, is being named Polly? One possibility is that the man is placated because he can put a name to the cause of his pain; another is that 'he' is himself labelled as a 'she' of sorts on account of being so melancholy (cooed over as 'poor little polly', effeminised on account of his being so sensitive to things). Perhaps he is soothed by being put in touch with a half-secret version of himself. Nonsense gives you permission to be something more than *only* an old man of Dunrose.

T.S. Eliot noted that Lear's 'nonsense is not vacuity of sense: it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it'.²⁵ The parodic is the parrotic—a repetition of words so as to catch meanings that common sense may hide. Parrots speak a language that they do not really understand, but in doing so they point out that we sometimes understand what words mean *too quickly*. Lear's poem is casting a glance back to Linnean structures of taxonomy, and hinting that name-calling need not always clarify things:



Pollybirdia Singularis.

Figure 9. Edward Lear, *Nonsense Botany* (1870).

²⁵ Eliot (1957: 29).

For Lear, the 'poly' is the call of the many from within the one. Nonsense is an arch reminder that, even when sense is on its best behaviour, sense itself is polyphonic, and polyglot. When 'They said, "His name's Polly"', language spoke through them as a reminder of just how singularly odd the singular can be.

* * *

Lear is entranced by the slipperiness of the straightforward. As their feet leave the ground, many of his odd couples become harder to read:

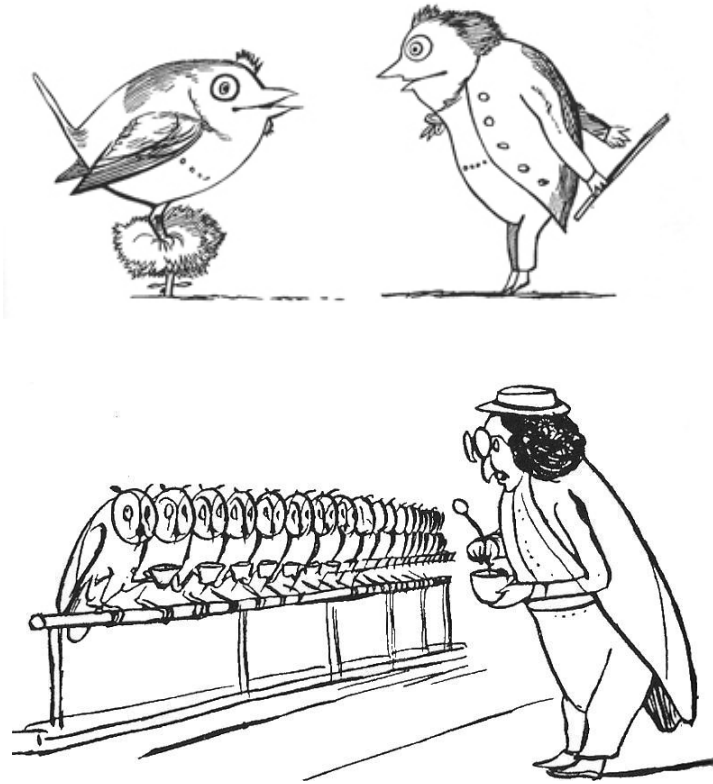


There was an Old Man of Whitehaven,
Who danced a quadrille with a Raven;
But they said—'It's absurd, to encourage this bird!
So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven.

Figure 10. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1861).

It is not clear whether they smash the old man for resembling a bird, or for being one. The *OED* charts new senses of the word 'bird' in this period: 'An exceptionally smart or accomplished person (freq. ironical)' (1839), and 'jocularly, a man, a "cove"; esp. in *old bird*' (1852). These meanings would accord the old man wisdom as well as folly, and the image lends support to both possibilities. The protruding nose again bespeaks an avian approach to life (and ravens, along with parrots, are the smartest of birds), yet the contours of the figures—and the lines along the ground—suggest that the bird could be a shadow cast by the old man's imagination. 'Verily I am an odd bird',²⁶ Lear once confessed, and he often imagines man and bird absurdly encouraging each other:

²⁶Quoted in Noakes (1991: 22).



Figures 11 & 12. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1861) & *More Nonsense* (1872).

These drawings feel like riddling allegories on the nature of spectatorship. What are these figures meant to be learning from each other? To get some way towards an answer, picture six scenes: a peacock showing off his finery before poultry and pigs; birds of paradise congregating in a tree to hold a dancing-party; magpies celebrating a ‘great magpie marriage’; a partridge befriending a cat; a turkey and a dog hailing each other as ‘old friends’; and a blackbird and thrush falling in love and setting up home.²⁷ These vignettes come not from Lear’s work, but from Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871). Ruskin was one of many scoffers; in *Love’s Meine* (1873–81), he commented: ‘we might even sufficiently represent the general manner of conclusion in the Darwinian system by the statement that if you fasten a hair-brush to a mill-wheel, with the handle forward, so as to develop itself into a neck by moving always in the

²⁷Darwin (2004: 444, 446, 457, 466, 407).

same direction, and within continual hearing of a steam-whistle, after a certain number of revolutions the hair-brush will fall in love with the whistle; they will marry, lay an egg, and the produce will be a nightingale'.²⁸ Darwin had himself admitted early on that 'I draw my own conclusions, and gloriously ridiculous ones they are, I sometimes fancy'.²⁹ Ruskin's version of Darwin's world of unlikely couplings and amorous shape-shifters hams up the ridiculous and ignores the glorious, but Lear's poetry is more sympathetically inclined towards the incongruous force of this style of seeing.

Vivien Noakes claimed that Lear almost certainly contributed illustrations to Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* volume,³⁰ and Darwin consulted Lear's scientific illustrations during the 1840s and 1850s.³¹ Recent evidence has also come to light to suggest that the two men shared the same lodgings in the late 1830s.³² Birds played a crucial role in the developing theory of natural selection, but in a brief section in *The Origin of Species* (1859) Darwin also tentatively aired his theory of sexual selection, in which male birds performed 'strange antics' by showing their plumage 'before the females . . . choose the most attractive partner' according to 'their standard of beauty'.³³ In *The Descent of Man*, this theory is fully elaborated (discussion of the birds takes up more space than mammals and humans combined, and 'strange antics' now become 'fantastic antics'). Darwin's comments address a debate not just about the relations between birds and humans, but about the sources and value of aesthetic achievement:

Birds appear to be the most aesthetic of all animals, excepting of course man, and they have nearly the same taste for the beautiful as we have. This is shewn by . . . our women, both civilised and savage, decking their heads with borrowed plumes, and using gems which are hardly more brilliantly coloured than the naked skin and wattles of certain birds. In man, however, when cultivated, the sense of beauty is manifestly a far more complex feeling, and is associated with various intellectual ideas.³⁴

This has Darwin's characteristic blend of provocation and politeness. 'Both civilised and savage' is loaded (in his diary Darwin was more blunt, referring to 'the polished savages in England').³⁵ The comment touches on similarities across as well as within species: notwithstanding the provisos—birds have '*nearly* the same taste', man has 'a

²⁸ Ruskin (2007: 16).

²⁹ Darwin to Henslow (March 1834): see <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-238>>. For further reflections on the comic inflections of Darwin's writing, see Levine (2011).

³⁰ Noakes (1979: 29); Hyman (1980: 35) agrees. In a later diary entry, Lear notes enthusiastically: 'fancy! Langton is a nephew of DARWIN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' (10 Jan. 1869).

³¹ See <<http://blogs.royalsociety.org/history-of-science/2012/08/31/darwin-and-lear/>>.

³² Nugent (2009: 233).

³³ Darwin (1996: 74).

³⁴ Darwin (2004: 407–8).

³⁵ Quoted in Desmond and Moore (1994: 120).

far more complex feeling’—the implication is that the aesthetic sense is sexual in origin. Darwin is probing what intellectual cultivation is attempting to hide, not simply offering man cause for congratulation about his ability to rise above the birds and the bees.

Darwin’s theory imagines that female birds are in charge because they do the choosing (the plumes and displays come from males, and the females select accordingly), but his analogy reverses the rhythms of this exchange: if ‘our women, both civilised and savage’ take on ‘borrowed plumes’, then our men decide by exercising the privilege of aesthetic judgement. So an ambiguity emerges about what, exactly, he is saying about human female sexuality. Feminine desire could be naturalised when seen through the lens of female choice in the animal kingdom; but it could be neutralised by swapping the roles in *Homo sapiens* and suggesting that female display is more demure than aggressive.³⁶ From early on, Lear was also skirting around the edges of this tricky territory. His sketches of bird’s heads led him to doodles of women’s headgear (See Plate 6).

In his first nonsense book, we meet the following character:



Figure 13. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1846).

Lear’s draughtsmanship makes her seem weighed down yet also light on her feet—caught between take-off and constriction. In this respect, the peacock’s feather in the bonnet opens up another line of enquiry. Darwin would have trouble with the peacock’s tail: bedazzlingly attractive, yet also an encumbrance to flight (and so making it harder for the bird to escape predators), the tail appeared to put natural and

³⁶See Munro, in Donald and Munro (2009: 288), and also Dawson (2007).

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 6



Plate 6. Edward Lear, sketches.
(MS Typ 55.9 (52), Houghton Library, Harvard).

sexual selection at odds with one another. Many modern biologists now subsume sexual under natural selection by situating any talk of beauty within an adaptationist narrative: the peacock's tail is read by the female as a coded indicator of male 'quality', so aesthetic considerations are seen to be in the service of reproductive utility.³⁷ But at certain points Darwin offers a less economical account of why creatures do what they do. In *The Descent of Man*, he celebrates 'the powers of imagination, curiosity, an undefined sense of beauty . . . love of excitement or novelty'—novelty, he insists, 'for its own sake'.³⁸ He observes male birds singing just 'for their own amusement' after courtship is over, and sees birds flying simply 'for pleasure', before adding that 'mere novelty, or slight changes for the sake of change, have sometimes acted on female birds as a charm, like changes of fashion in us'.³⁹

Verily they are odd birds, and Lear's own interest in how 'fantastic antics' may—and may not—sit comfortably within instrumental accounts of action is there in his poetry:



There was a Young Lady whose bonnet,
Came untied when the birds sate upon it;
But she said, 'I don't care! all the birds in the air
Are welcome to sit on my bonnet!

Figure 14. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1861).

The birds put the lady in touch with her wilder side, but—as so often in Lear's writing—the reasons for, or objects of pleasure are not specified. Her lack of discrimination about who sits on her bonnet sounds both promiscuous and innocent—a hunger for experience just for the hell of it, maybe, or a curiosity about variety for its own sake.

³⁷ For criticisms of this approach, see Rothenberg (2011).

³⁸ Darwin (2004: 116).

³⁹ Darwin (2004: 116, 419, 554).

‘All the birds in the air’ is wonderfully greedy and charitable at the same time.

When Darwin mentioned ‘changes in fashion in us’, he was perhaps alluding to the huge expansion of the plumage trade, which reached its height in the 1860s. Others noted the development too:



Figure 15. Edward Linley Sambourne, ‘Mr Punch’s Designs After Nature. Grand Back-Hair Sensation for the Coming Season’ (*Punch*, 1 April 1871), and “‘I would I were a bird—’. Impossible, my dear: but here is a suggestion.—’ (*Punch*, 23 April 1870).

The glib double-dealing here—mocking immersion in the season’s colours, yet also mocking those who want to escape from the pressures to which such fashions subject them—is typical of *Punch*. Lear took calls like ‘I would I were a bird—’ more seriously by making a less opportunistic kind of humour out of them:



The Judicious Jubilant Jay,
 Who did up her Back Hair every morning with a Wreath of Roses,
 Three Feathers, and a Gold Pin.

Figure 16. Edward Lear, from 'The Absolutely Abstemious Ass' (August 1870).

Donning an adaptationist's hat, it could be argued that jubilation is nature's way of keeping us judicious (our pleasures are there to ensure that the right reproductive choices are made). But things do not feel as purposive as that here; the Jay may be judicious because she is jubilant, thrilled at her behaviour not because it is a means to an end or functional in any clearly defined way, but because in it she discerns that she is most herself when she puts on feathers for fun, simply because she can. Note also the bareness of the reflection in the looking-glass, which fails to spot the splendour of what happens outside it. If the mirror is meant to offer a no-nonsense gaze, then that gaze does not see the whole picture because it is not able to register the gratuitous, oddly unintelligible details that go into the making up of a life.

Darwin's thoughts on the birds were published in February 1871; in December of that year, Lear's new book of nonsense came out.⁴⁰ Although precise dates of composition for many of the limericks are not known, the 1871 collection contained nearly twice as many bird limericks as in Lear's first book. And even when birds are not mentioned, human animals recall them; this personage takes her cue from the three feathers of the jubilant, judicious Jay:

⁴⁰ Lear may have also encountered some of these ideas in other writings; see Shaw (1866), whom Darwin mentioned in *The Descent of Man*.



There was a young person in red,
 Who carefully covered her head,
 With a bonnet of leather, and three lines of feather,
 Besides some long ribands of red.

Figure 17. Edward Lear, *More Nonsense* (1872).

She is a strange sort of creature—a protest, almost, against those who might seek to account for her. The airborne ribbons suggest that she is moving fast, yet she also feels weighed down, encumbered by her appendages, perhaps even caught in a headwind. She appears to be idiosyncratic, instinctual, but also trapped in a role, ‘*carefully covered*’ (dressed in ‘borrowed plumes’, in Darwin’s resonant phrase). In this image, it is hard to decide whether or not having a feather in your cap is analogous to having your wings clipped. She is at once savage *and* civilised, and not fully at ease with being either.

These enigmatic people in Lear’s work are invitations to consider what might be missing from an account of an action (whether the action be artistic or otherwise) that sees it merely as an instance which confirms a rule or a norm. And, by extension, they invite readers to wonder what ‘adaptation’ to your environment—or, less grandly, just trying to fit in—commits you to. The need for a close relationship between social norm and the scientific truth was keenly felt by Lear’s early employer, John Gould, who envisaged his bird books as a criticism of Darwin’s emphasis on the mutability and unpredictability of species. Gould’s family portraits of birds sought to give a

reassuring picture of avian family values, an ornithological equivalent of the 'separate spheres', with nurturing female attending to the young while the male, having obtained the food, stands by.⁴¹ The year 1871 saw Lear indulging in similar fantasies, 'marrying some domestic henbird & then building a nest' . . .



Figure 18. Edward Lear, letter to Chichester Fortescue and Lady Waldegrave (25 December, 1871).⁴²

. . . or thinking about taking a turn round his new nest with other kinds of bird:



Figure 19. Edward Lear, letter to David Richard Morier (12 January 1871).⁴³

⁴¹ See chap. 5 of Smith (2006).

⁴² Lear (1911: 142).

⁴³ Lear (1988a: 229).

But these moments are always rueful jokes in Lear, reminders that neither birds nor humans are necessarily amenable to visions of domesticated bliss. Eight years earlier he had drily observed an impotent gander who led ‘a painful life of insult . . . the geese persecute him horribly . . . the melancholy Ruskin of domestic ornithology’.⁴⁴ The poems offer readers portraits like Gould’s, but embed them in narratives which hint at the whittled-down sense of possibility that Gould’s thinking may involve—both in regard to an understanding of what animals are, and in regard to what we ourselves might become. Take Mr and Mrs Spikky Sparrow, who rush to London to buy hat and bonnet:



Then when so completely dressed,
 Back they flew, and reached their nest.
 Their children cried, ‘O Ma and Pa!
 How truly beautiful you are!’
 Said they, ‘We trust that cold or pain
 We shall never feel again!
 While perched on tree, or house, or steeple,
 We now shall look like other people.’

Figure 20. Edward Lear, ‘Mr and Mrs Spikky Sparrow’, in *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1871).

Children in Lear’s poetry tend not to see the beautiful through the prism of the useful. Theirs is what Darwin would call ‘an undefined sense of beauty’, an adventurous adoration of ‘slight changes for the sake of change’. Parents are a different species: ‘We shall never feel again’, they chirp; yes, and not just pain, but also that kind of pleasure which is inseparable from the risk of pain. It then transpires that the birds’ utilitarianism (they claim to be buying headgear to keep warm) is itself a cover-story; discussion of ‘cold or pain’ gives way to status anxiety. Lear finds space in the last line to breathe a saddened sigh on account of the birds’ elation at keeping up with the Jones’s. They ‘look like’ other people not only because they resemble them, but also because they have started to see with other people’s eyes, internalised their ways of looking at life.

⁴⁴Lear (1988b: 195).

Edward Lear did not look like other people. One value of his resistance to a certain kind of knowingness was touched upon by his admirer, Elizabeth Bishop, when she spoke of the artistry in Darwin's scientific method:

Reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic *observations* . . . and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.⁴⁵

This is not to suggest that a 'perfectly useless concentration' is necessarily without its uses, but that it does not presuppose the reasons for—or the results of—its activity in advance. Lear's poetry is nourished by a similar fixity on facts and minuteness as a route to the unknown, and by a feeling for intense observation as a strange blend of self-forgetfulness and loneliness. He confided to his journal: 'A keen sense of every kind of beauty is, I take it, if given in the extreme, always more or less a sorrow to its owner, though production of good to others.'⁴⁶ That 'good' remains undefined; indeed, the lack of definition is part of the reason why it is felt to be good. There is no telling where a keen sense of beauty might lead.

* * *

Bishop's comments might be viewed through a nonsensical looking-glass: not only do heroic observers allow facts to slide off into the unknown, but unknowingness can also generate new senses of what the facts are (to recall Mr Dick's words about his kite, 'when it flies high, it takes the facts a long way'). 'I am a firm believer', Darwin wrote to Wallace, 'that without speculation there is no good & original observation.'⁴⁷ Lear's exploration of the links between the hypothetical and the percipient was developed through the art he cared about most: landscape painting and drawing. He referred to his own painting-style as 'poetical topography'⁴⁸—a blend of the visionary and the visual. His self-portrait upon learning that he had been accepted as a probationary student to the Royal Academy Schools is revealing in this respect:

⁴⁵ Bishop (2008: 861).

⁴⁶ Lear (1988b: 146).

⁴⁷ Darwin to Wallace (22 Dec. 1857): see <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2192>>.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Noakes (1985: 112).



Figure 21. Edward Lear, letter to Chichester Fortescue (20 January, 1850).⁴⁹

The clown-like figures surrounding the tearful artist bring to mind what might be termed the primal scene of Lear's nonsense: discussing his episodes of depression, he wrote that 'the earliest of all the morbidnesses must have been somewhere around 1819—when my Father took me to a field near Highgate, where there was a rural performance of gymnastic clowns . . . I can recollect crying half the night after all the small gaiety broke up—& also suffering for days at the memory of the past scene'.⁵⁰ Lear's image relieves the suffering even as it indulges in the dream of an art which may assuage it. Gymnastic clowns are part of the pantomimic world, the aerial, bird-like world of Pierrot, whose name plays on the French for 'house sparrow' and for 'parrot' (Baudelaire recalled the Pierrot of the English pantomime, adorned with ribbons 'which gave to his jubilant personage the effect that feathers and down give to birds').⁵¹ A peculiar compound of gawkiness and grace, flying and falling clowns stage physical incompetence, displaying notable skill in the very skills they parody. In this sense, they echo the style of Lear's image; he went to the Academy to improve his drawings of the human figure, so his caricatured bodies here are an admission of artistic shortcomings, and a sly commitment to a different kind of art.

Linda Colley has suggested that, whilst 'landscape is obligated to the inferred human presence' in the work of some of Lear's contemporaries, his paintings 'do not emphasize or lead back to the human form'.⁵² There is, however, another form hiding in his lonely spaces⁵³ (See Plate 7). Lear often scribbles temporary pencil notes on his canvases to remind himself what is to go where when he develops the painting later

⁴⁹ Lear (1909: 25).

⁵⁰ Quoted in Noakes (1979: 15).

⁵¹ Baudelaire (1992: 155)

⁵² Colley (1986: 46–7).

⁵³ See Hofer, plate 22 in his book.

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 7



Plate 7. Edward Lear, San Vittorino, May 2, 1845
(MS Typ 55.26 (380), Houghton Library, Harvard University).



Plate 8. Edward Lear, 'The Plains of Lombardy from Monte Generoso'
(WA1916.39, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

(‘rox’, ‘O path!’), but sometimes he leaves the pencil notes in, or even copies them in with ink, as though hoping for an image that might be allowed to speak. Here, Lear writes the word ‘Raven’ towards the bottom of that V-shaped line which eases foreground into middle ground. It’s his shorthand for a ‘ravine’, and it signals his frequent need to coax an ascent out of low-lying ground. In his Calabria journal he described the slopes of a hill ‘which spread as it were into wings on each side of the lakes’, and in Corsica he noted two mountains either side of a valley ‘enclosing it as it were with gigantic wings’.¹ From one point of view, the V-shaped line is the most birdlike of lines (See Plate 8). It is beguilingly unclear where mountain ends and the sea-like plain below begins, and then where the plain stops being plain and becomes air. Elsewhere the artist speaks of a ‘peacock wing-hued sea’, and later of a sea ‘real ultramarine like a Macaw’s tail feathers’. Feathers herald fissures in boundary-lines: ‘the sparkle of pigeons’ wings’, he marvels, ‘the pulled blue of the sea breaking beyond’.² Wherever he turns his eye, it seems, Lear is on the look-out for a malleable line of flight in landscape.³

His unpublished diaries contain a sketch that can be read as a key to a guiding rhythm of his imagination (See Plate 9). The lower half of the image is a recollection of some lines by Tennyson that Lear had illustrated around fifteen years earlier (See Plate 10). The relevant lines are from Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’: ‘a tract of sand, | And some one pacing there alone, | Who paced for ever in a glimmering land, | Lit with a low large moon’.⁴ A few weeks after the entry in his diary, Lear confessed his misgivings about his painterly life: ‘All this “Palace of Art” work seems to me but dangerous practice.’⁵ So the image was becoming associated in his mind with how artistic voyaging may shade into a hazardous solipsism; the lines read like a dark parody of that yearning in ‘Ulysses’ for the gleaming, ‘untravell’d world, whose margin fades, | For ever and for ever when I move’. And yet, the upper reaches of the sketch, seemingly on a different plane, gesture towards another realm lit by a low large moon. When he was in Egypt, Lear noted that the birds were ‘utterly impossible to describe’ before switching his attention to the boats, which ‘look like gigantic moths’.⁶ The drawing is a memory of this (Plate 11). Those impossibly indescribable birds haunt his painting in another shape. In the diary sketch, then, the bird-like boat superintends the image of the man stalking the sands; poetry and topography are dreaming up a

¹Lear (1852: 268; 1870: 139).

²Quoted in Levi (1995: 154, 216, 331).

³Elsewhere, Lear refers to the sea as ‘this long long simple line melting into air’; quoted in Byrom (1977: 21).

⁴Tennyson (1969: 404).

⁵Lear, Diary MS (30 May 1870).

⁶Quoted in Noakes (1991: 65).

(‘rox’, ‘O path!’), but sometimes he leaves the pencil notes in, or even copies them in with ink, as though hoping for an image that might be allowed to speak. Here, Lear writes the word ‘Raven’ towards the bottom of that V-shaped line which eases foreground into middle ground. It’s his shorthand for a ‘ravine’, and it signals his frequent need to coax an ascent out of low-lying ground. In his Calabria journal he described the slopes of a hill ‘which spread as it were into wings on each side of the lakes’, and in Corsica he noted two mountains either side of a valley ‘enclosing it as it were with gigantic wings’.⁵⁴ From one point of view, the V-shaped line is the most birdlike of lines (See Plate 8). It is beguilingly unclear where mountain ends and the sea-like plain below begins, and then where the plain stops being plain and becomes air. Elsewhere the artist speaks of a ‘peacock wing-hued sea’, and later of a sea ‘real ultramarine like a Macaw’s tail feathers’. Feathers herald fissures in boundary-lines: ‘the sparkle of pigeons’ wings’, he marvels, ‘the pulled blue of the sea breaking beyond’.⁵⁵ Wherever he turns his eye, it seems, Lear is on the look-out for a malleable line of flight in landscape.⁵⁶

His unpublished diaries contain a sketch that can be read as a key to a guiding rhythm of his imagination (See Plate 9). The lower half of the image is a recollection of some lines by Tennyson that Lear had illustrated around fifteen years earlier (See Plate 10). The relevant lines are from Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’: ‘a tract of sand, | And some one pacing there alone, | Who paced for ever in a glimmering land, | Lit with a low large moon’.⁵⁷ A few weeks after the entry in his diary, Lear confessed his misgivings about his painterly life: ‘All this “Palace of Art” work seems to me but dangerous practice.’⁵⁸ So the image was becoming associated in his mind with how artistic voyaging may shade into a hazardous solipsism; the lines read like a dark parody of that yearning in ‘Ulysses’ for the gleaming, ‘untravell’d world, whose margin fades, | For ever and for ever when I move’. And yet, the upper reaches of the sketch, seemingly on a different plane, gesture towards another realm lit by a low large moon. When he was in Egypt, Lear noted that the birds were ‘utterly impossible to describe’ before switching his attention to the boats, which ‘look like gigantic moths’.⁵⁹ The drawing is a memory of this (Plate 11). Those impossibly indescribable birds haunt his painting in another shape. In the diary sketch, then, the bird-like boat superintends the image of the man stalking the sands; poetry and topography are dreaming up a

⁵⁴ Lear (1852: 268; 1870: 139).

⁵⁵ Quoted in Levi (1995: 154, 216, 331).

⁵⁶ Elsewhere, Lear refers to the sea as ‘this long long simple line melting into air’; quoted in Byrom (1977: 21).

⁵⁷ Tennyson (1969: 404).

⁵⁸ Lear, Diary MS (30 May 1870).

⁵⁹ Quoted in Noakes (1991: 65).

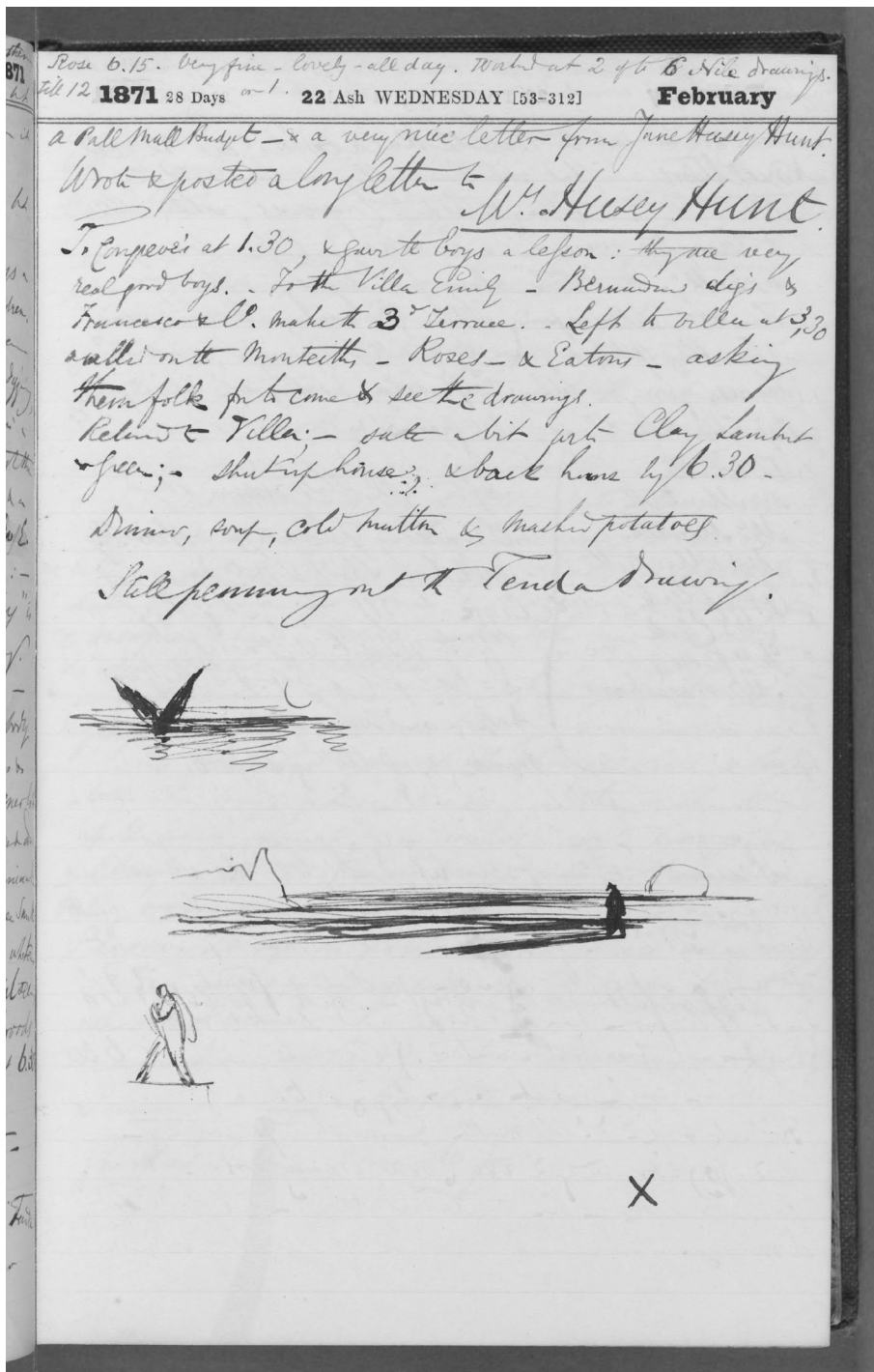


Plate 9. Edward Lear, Diary MS (22 February, 1871)
 (MS Eng 797.3 vol 14, Houghton Library, Harvard University).



Houghton Library, MS Typ 55.7

Plate 10. Edward Lear, illustration of lines from Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' (MS Typ 55.7 (36), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

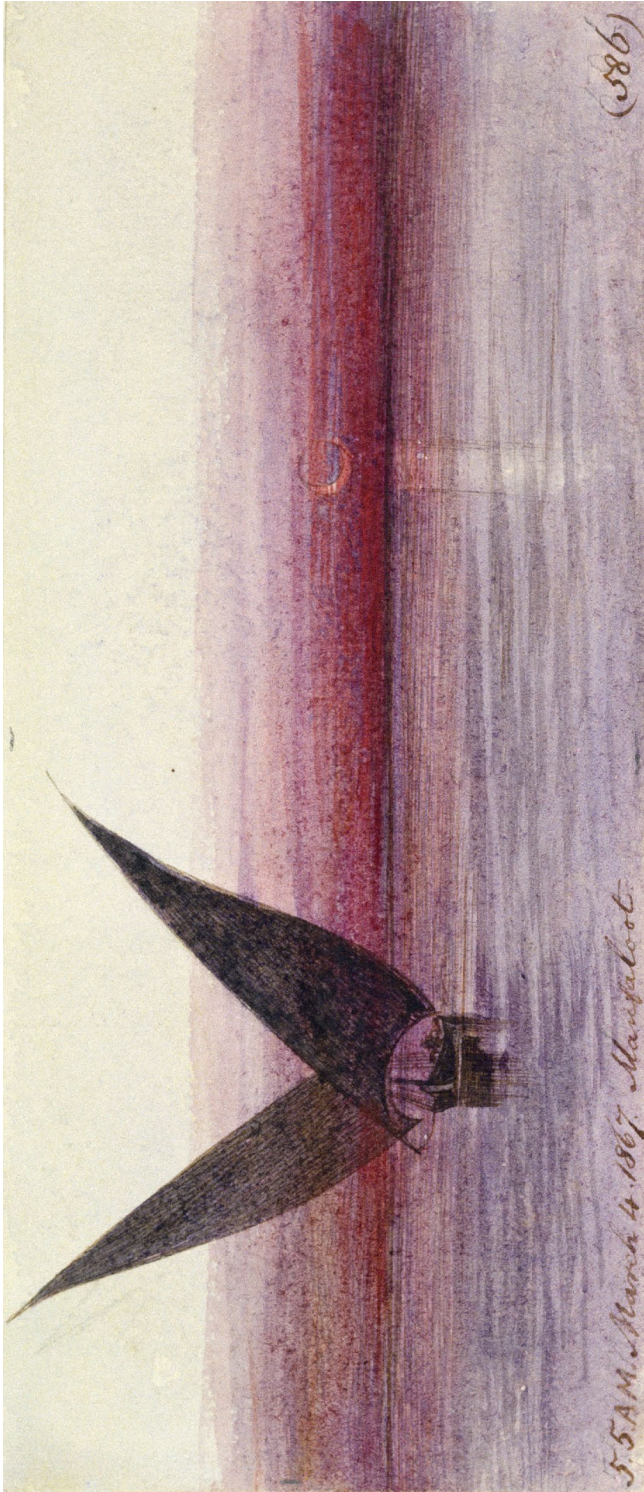


Plate 11. Edward Lear, Manfaloot (4 March 1867).

world in which pacing turns into sailing turns into flying. The habitual and the known take on a new liquidity; buoyancy is flighted as a way out of an impasse. As Bishop would put it later of her own encounter with a sea that appeared to be 'suspended above . . . the world': 'It is like what we imagine knowledge to be . . . flowing, and flown.'⁶⁰

Lear once observed that he seemed always 'to be on the threshold of knowledge'.⁶¹ That threshold is an ideal for him because he often sees knowledge itself as a way of avoiding experience; elsewhere he writes that 'we ought to know and feel the uncertainty of life continually'.⁶² Not being sure of your bearings becomes an ethical imperative, and Lear's writing is frequently peopled by characters who are all at sea—or up in the air. Poems become spaces in which to entertain counter-intuitive ways of seeing; lines of flight signal an experimental physics of the imagination:



There was an Old Man of the Hague,
Whose ideas were excessively vague;
He built a balloon, to examine the moon,
That deluded Old Man of the Hague.

Figure 22. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1846).

This folly is not without august precedent: William Herschel had planned to use the hot-air balloon as an observation platform for his telescope in order to find support for his thesis that the moon was inhabited. Sheer lunacy, perhaps, or another mad

⁶⁰ Bishop (2008: 52).

⁶¹ Quoted in Noakes (1979: 17).

⁶² Lear (1988a: 23).

flight taken by a modern-day Ulysses. Yet, like Darwin, Herschel felt that ‘seeing is in some respects an art’; he emphasised the importance of what he winningly termed ‘practising to see’ by stressing how the conjectural was a prelude to discovery as well as to misadventure.⁶³ Lear’s limerick is written in this spirit, and it offers itself as an oblique tribute not just to Herschel’s example, but also to that of Romantic poetics.

The back of the old man’s boat-like basket is supplemented by an odd shape—a shadow, perhaps, although it also looks suspiciously like a rudder. If the latter, it would be another reminder that what so often seems excessive in Lear turns out to be a form of precision: early balloonists *had* experimented with rudders in an attempt to improve steering.⁶⁴ Carlyle spoke of the balloon craze as an ‘Emblem of much, and of our Age of Hope itself’.⁶⁵ The high hopes of Romantic writers had of course been emblematised by nightingales, skylarks and other birds (“‘Hope” is the thing with feathers’, as Emily Dickinson later observed),⁶⁶ but doubts had also been raised about winged words. Hazlitt referred to Coleridge’s combination of ‘poetic levity and metaphysic bathos—playing at hawk and buzzard between sense and nonsense—going up in an air-balloon . . . and coming down in a parachute’.⁶⁷ In his notebooks Coleridge had observed ‘Starlings in vast Flights’ turn ‘from complete orb into an Ellipses—then oblongated into a Balloon with the Car suspended’,⁶⁸ and in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) he himself expressed reservations about Wordsworth’s transitions between high and low styles and subjects, complaining of ‘an awkwardness’ akin to that which ‘hangs upon the introduction of songs in our modern comic operas’.⁶⁹ Lear’s poetry is indebted to this lightly humorous, incongruously experimental side of Romantic writing, and the deluded Old Man of the Hague takes his bearings from the first stanza of Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell* (1819), where an airborne boat stands for a loopy yet cherished liberty, a feeling of thought taking wing:

There’s something in a flying horse,
 There’s something in a huge balloon,
 But through the clouds I’ll never float
 Until I have a little boat
 In shape just like the crescent moon.⁷⁰

⁶³ Quoted in Holmes (2008: 108).

⁶⁴ See Lynn (2010).

⁶⁵ Quoted in Thompson (1921: 245).

⁶⁶ Dickinson (1961: 116).

⁶⁷ Hazlitt (1930–4: XVI, 118).

⁶⁸ Coleridge (2003: 39).

⁶⁹ Coleridge (1983: II, 121–2).

⁷⁰ Wordsworth (2000: 91).

The stanza-form seems to have been invented by Wordsworth, and the tone and feel of the rhyme-scheme is close to that of Lear's limericks. These lines lay claim to a heritage via the allusion to Pegasus, whilst also acknowledging that the poet is one of those crazy modern aeronauts with his head in the clouds. What is being celebrated and gently teased here—as in Lear's limerick—is a vision of the 'excessively vague' artist as our most precious kind of inventor, somebody who creates the way reality is encountered and understood. The humour of this kind of writing does not exactly deflate the vision; in a curious way, it serves to protect it by conceding that it may sometimes be seen as laughable. For Lear, too, lines of flight are not indicative of a sublime transcendence, but of an enquiry into why anyone should feel the need to draw—and to police—firm lines between the sublime and the ridiculous:



There was an old person whose mirth,
 Induced him to leap from the earth;
 But in leaping too quick, he exclaimed, 'I'm too sick
 To leap any more from the earth.'⁷¹

Figure 23. Edward Lear, early unpublished nonsense.

He is a version of Icarus, or of one of Lear's gymnastic clowns near Highgate who cannot stay uplifted forever. Yet the picture's spatial mode arrests the poem's temporality; it cradles the figure lovingly in the moment of flight, keeping his mirth untouched by vertigo. This is Lear's way of defending a wayward levity and levitation even as he

⁷¹Lear (2006: 114).

acknowledges the need for gravity and groundedness. The poem might be read as a countersignature to a line by another lover of nonsense, William Empson: ‘The heart of standing is you cannot fly’.⁷²

The central power of Lear’s work comes from the way in which its ethical and artistic commitment to forms of wondrous uncertainty is felt as an emotional burden. Lear may have claimed that ‘we ought to know and feel the uncertainty of life continually’, but elsewhere he spoke of the sorrow of being in a state of ‘knowingnothing-atallaboutwhatoneisgoingtodo-ness’.⁷³ In this regard, the old person’s trajectory brings into view another meaning of ‘flight’ in the poetry, one that goes to the heart of what Lowell would term ‘its sadness, its amusement’. In the same year that Lear fell in love with those gymnastic clowns and saw them leave, the *OED* records its first instance of ‘flight’ as referring to ‘migration’ (1823). ‘Goingtodo-ness’ is linked in Lear’s mind with where you’re going *to*; he is a connoisseur of the flying moment, and many of his characters are caught between a desire for serendipitous adventure and a need for security—with birds very often a part of the story that needs to be told:



There was an Old Man of Dunluce,
Who went out to sea on a goose;
When he'd gone out a mile, he observ'd with a smile,
'It is time to return to Dunluce'.

Figure 24. Edward Lear, *More Nonsense* (1872).

Perhaps the goose gave the old man to understand that migration is better seen as an oscillation than as an end-point. Lear once asked, ‘Is there not a brutal balance to all satisfactions?’⁷⁴ as though satisfaction itself could leave you wanting for something . . . for Dunluce, even. This intuition hovers in the margins of his poetry as the mournful air it breathes. Indeed, ‘air’ is often partner to ‘despair’ in his writing.

⁷² Empson (2000: 69).

⁷³ Lear (1988a: 68)

⁷⁴ Lear (1988a: 215).



There was a young lady in white,
 Who looked out at the depths of the night;
 But the birds of the air filled her heart with despair,
 And oppressed that young lady in white.

Figure 25. Edward Lear, manuscript
 (MS Typ 55.1, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

On the manuscript, Lear instructed the printer: ‘N.B. I don’t mind how you do the black, so long as you keep the figure quite white and the birds grey.’ He wants the lady rendered as an outcast from another world, or from another picture; it is as if a black-and-white, two-dimensional caricature were struggling to get into a painting (she can only look ‘at’ the depths, not ‘into’ them). The poem recalls an earlier letter in which Lear claimed that his painting of trees was so good that ‘millions of sparrows are said to sit . . . on the window ledges, pining with hopeless despair at not being able to get inside’.⁷⁵ Everything, it seems, wants to be both in and out of the Palace of Art; in Lear’s universe, to be an animal—feathered or human—is to wish to be up and away. He is the great poet of elsewhere, of imagining where he isn’t.⁷⁶ ‘I am always fancying’, he confessed, ‘and fancying in vain, that something different from the life of the moment would be more endurable.’⁷⁷ Even ‘fancying in vain’ travels in two directions at once: it suggests that he cannot escape from the moment, but also that he half-senses that his imagination is leading him astray anyway (the grass isn’t really greener over there). Yet, he commits to the fancy: ‘The only real way to live here or elsewhere

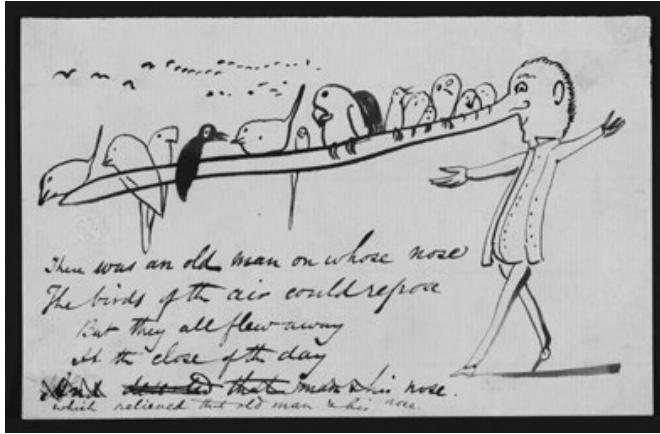
⁷⁵ Quoted in Noakes (1985: 112).

⁷⁶ See also his letter to Emily Tennyson (28 Oct. 1855): ‘I really do believe that I enjoy hardly any one thing on earth while it is present:—always looking back, or frettingly peering into the dim beyond’, Lear (1988a: 133).

⁷⁷ Lear (1911: 257).

is to make interests . . . wholly unconnected with the place.⁷⁸ In Lear's poetry, the 'real' is apprehended as an abstraction from the here and now, a fantasised perch from which to scan the horizon of the mind's imaginings, as though you are only really inhabiting your life when you feel yourself to be somehow estranged from it.

These imagined alternatives are part of the writing's secret double-life, as Lear's revisions to his manuscripts show:



There was an old man on whose nose
 The birds of the air could repose
 But they all flew away
 At the close of the day
 Which relieved that old man and his nose.

Figure 26. Edward Lear, manuscript for *A Book of Nonsense* (1861) (MS Typ 55.14 (82), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

The first version of the last line was: 'And deserted that man and his nose.' Even the poem's relief is ghosted by sorrow; being left alone may also mean simply being left. When Lear published the poem he made another change: 'The birds of the air could repose' becomes 'Most birds of the air could repose'. So some birds are unable to land in this picture and in this poem, experiencing migration as a kind of exile, or as a perpetual search. Like their creator, they live life on the wing.

⁷⁸ Lear (1988b: 191).

The nonsense songs never treat flight simply as a spur to reverie. When birds fly, time flies; abandon is frequently paired with abandonment:



Figure 27. Edward Lear, 'Calico Pie', *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets* (1871).

The refrain is what lingers in the mind's ear, but note also the unobtrusive force of the shift in tense; the second line could (and perhaps should) have ended 'the little birds flew', yet the strength of the speaker's yearning for the past sees him attempt to locate the past in the present by opting for 'fly'. Like Lear's accompanying drawing, the word hopes to bring the birds close again by freezing the poem's temporal march into a moment in which they are not going anywhere so very far away. In poems like this, birds are all the things that leave you behind—including your own life.

* * *

The different lines of flight I have been pursuing are brought together in the painting Lear was working on when he died, an image that provides eloquent testimony to the concertedness of his imagination across his scientific, artistic, and literary work. It can be approached by way of another scene (See Plate 12; see also Lear 2008 for more images).

Lear adored Philae when he visited in 1854, describing it as 'like a real *fairy*

island.⁷⁹ The image of the Island always contained a mixture of the real and the fantastical for him—at once a haven and a mirage (on another island, the pleasure he takes from the moment is both enhanced and haunted by its effervescence: ‘I seem to grow a year younger every hour . . . peace flies—as I shall too’).⁸⁰ He borrowed the Philae scene for the only occasion he opted to use a formal landscape background in his limericks:



There was an Old Person of Philae,
Whose conduct was scroobious and wily;
He rushed up a Palm, when the weather was calm,
And observed all the ruins of Philae.

Figure 28. Edward Lear, *A Book of Nonsense* (1861).

Lear’s trees usually signal a conflicted wish for take-off. Writing to Emily Tennyson, he imagines building himself a nest and flapping his arms when he feels like it (see Figure 29). He might be a reincarnation of Tennyson’s St Simeon Stylites—the emblem of a man who has taken flight while not doing so. The Philae limerick contains the first use of Lear’s now infamous adjective ‘scroobious’. A source for the word has recently been suggested by James Williams: in Albania, Muslim peasants told Lear that his drawing was a blasphemous activity: ‘the word, “*Scroo, Scroo*”, resounded from hundreds of voices’, he noted, which translated means ‘he writes’ or ‘he draws it down’.⁸¹ ‘Scroobious’, then, may recall the feeling of embarrassment that comes from being suddenly turned from a viewer into the viewed.

⁷⁹ Lear (2009: 38).

⁸⁰ Lear (1909: 235).

⁸¹ Lear (2005: 180, 185). See Williams (2008: 63–5).

Edward Lear's lines of flight — Plate 12



Plate 12. Edward Lear, Philae (31 January 1854).



Elsewhere Lear wrote of ‘the sense of the absurd so nearly akin to shame, on which you are forced to dwell if constantly reminded of your awkwardness by observation’.⁸² So as a ‘scroobious’ person, the old man seeks to escape *from* observation by retreating *into* it: ‘He rushed up a palm . . . and *observed* all the ruins of Philae.’ Yet he is now observed again in his turn, this time by us. In a later version of the poem, Lear changed the word ‘scroobious’ to ‘dubious’, which accentuates the feeling that what we are looking at here is a portrait of the artist as a questing and questionable old Man—or, as Lear referred to himself, as a ‘dirty Landscape painter’.⁸³ In Lear’s poems, the absurd is frequently tinged by shame; idiosyncrasy is seen as both a refuge and a curse. The scroobious old man is in flight from a life he remains committed to (one senses that he has rushed up and down that palm-tree many times). This is close to Thomas Nagel’s sense of the absurd, in which man is ‘full of doubts he is unable to answer, but also full of purposes he is unable to abandon’.⁸⁴ Lear is often drawn to watching how people fall into old patterns in new ways, but his poems also record an ascendancy of sorts because they imply that a scroobious art is commitment to—not merely a suffering of—your own awkwardness. Whilst ‘It’s absurd, to encourage this bird’, the poetry intimates that there is a kind of courage here too.

Philae lives on in the painting that Lear was working on from 1876 until he died in 1888: an enormous sixteen-by-nine-foot canvas (now lost) of another island-dweller, Tennyson’s Enoch Arden. Smaller versions of it at the Tennyson Research Centre in Lincoln give a sense of how it was taking shape—with some elements from the visions of Philae (the watcher, the tree, the hills to the right and the water to the left of the scene) slowly coming into focus (See Plates 13, 14). Pencil sketches have also come to

Figure 29. Edward Lear, letter to Emily Tennyson (6 May 1868).⁸⁵

⁸² Lear (2005: 178).

⁸³ Levi (1995: 109).

⁸⁴ Nagel (1979: 21).

⁸⁵ Lear (1988a: 212).

light, in which the lone watcher can be seen more clearly, bottom-right, gazing out to sea⁸⁶ (See Plate 15). Enoch, having flown the nest in a boat that took him in unexpected directions, was a castaway on his tropical island (he initially ‘purchased his own boat, and made a home | For Annie, neat and nestlike’). Yet the light that guides him back home brings with it a dark benefaction: ‘as the beacon-blaze allures | The bird of passage, till he madly strikes | Against it, and beats out his weary life’.⁸⁷ So he is another bird who draws attention to the difficulty that people have in placing themselves, and in finding themselves placed. For Lear, Enoch is also an image of the painter–poet gazing into the mixed feelings his own art would seem to embody. Like the figure described in ‘How pleasant to know Mr Lear!’, ‘He weeps by the side of the ocean, | He weeps on the top of the hill’.⁸⁸ He yearns for society (scanning the horizon for a sail, like the Dong with the Luminous Nose), but he is also a lover of untrodden spaces and faraway places. In this respect, the painting also sees the world through the eyes of two other poems: Homer’s *Odyssey*, where we first meet Odysseus pining for home, ‘shedding tears and gazing outwards over the barren sea’;⁸⁹ and Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’, where the hero is desperate to get away from his island-home now that he *has* returned.

In the archive at Harvard, there is another version of the image (See Plate 16). Lear once indulged in the odd fancy that ‘[I might] expire myself gradually in the middle of my own works’.⁹⁰ But he also conceived expiration itself as a kind of metamorphosis; when drawing parrots in the zoo, the 19-year-old artist reflected: ‘for the last 12 months I have so moved—thought—looked at,—& existed among Parrots—that should any transmigration take place at my decease I am very sure my soul would be very uncomfortable in anything but one of the Psittacidae’.⁹¹ A distant memory of what must have seemed the first of many other lives puts in a last appearance in this last picture. Two small additions are made. First, bottom-right: a parrot now overlooks the scene (Figure 30):

⁸⁶ Pitman (1988: 195).

⁸⁷ Tennyson (1969: 1131, 1147).

⁸⁸ Lear (2006: 429).

⁸⁹ Homer (1998: 58).

⁹⁰ Quoted in Noakes (1985: 135).

⁹¹ Lear (1988a: 16).



Plate 13. Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island'
(Tennyson Research Centre, Lincoln).



Plate 14. Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island'
(Tennyson Research Centre, Lincoln)



Plate 15. Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island'.



Plate 16. Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island'
(MS Typ 55.7 (200), Houghton Library, Harvard University).



Figure 30. Detail from Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island' (MS Typ 55.7 (200), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

And secondly: hidden but discernable, hiding at the base of the trees in the centre of the picture, another parrot (Figure 31).



Figure 31. Detail from Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island' (Houghton Library, Harvard) (MS Typ 55.7 (200), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

The first parrots that Lear saw and drew were not allowed to fly. Away from home and out of place, they were forever estranged from their origins. This bird could be about to take wing, to make a break for a freedom that the picture countenances but does not quite depict, or it could be already enjoying its freedom in the tropical scene we look at. It is not clear whether Lear's picture is offered as a destination or a detour—a place to escape *to*, or to take off *from*. This ambiguity is in keeping with the imaginative rhythm of his poetry: the way it leaves whatever it knows to hang in the air, and the way it experiences this suspension both as an achieved satisfaction and as a form of longing or loss. Lear's other small addition to the picture might be related to this feeling. It is his last line of flight—top-left, birds, just above the trees (Figure 32).



Figure 32. Detail from Edward Lear, 'Enoch Arden's Island' (MS Typ 55.7 (200), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

It would be hard to say whether they are coming or going. They are uncertain auguries; like the parrots and the man below, they may be looking for a place to settle inside or outside the picture.

The sensibility that informs this drawing informs Lear's last self-portrait in poetry, one that also sees him expire himself gradually in the middle of his own works. In 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket', Keats had claimed that

The poetry of the earth is never dead:
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge . . .
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever.⁹²

Lear's Uncle Arly shares this tune's take on things: 'never more,—oh! never, | Did that Cricket leave him ever . . . Chirping with a cheerious measure'.⁹³ Crickets use their wings

⁹² Keats (2009: 57).

⁹³ Lear (2006: 457).

to communicate, not to fly. They are the winged things that stay. But, for Lear, the poetry of the earth is ghosted by that of the air. He jotted down other lines about Arly that did not make it into the poem yet still form part of its mood, lines about ducks that bless him in passing 'as they flew | Through the morning sky so blue'.⁹⁴ They are the winged things that have somewhere to get to, portents of other lives that need to be lived. Given the opportunity, Arly might have joined them, '(But his shoes were far too tight)'.

Whilst at work on the Enoch Arden painting, Lear referred to it as one of his 'dreams of the future—not altogether dreams though—since the designs are already made'.⁹⁵ It is a good description of his life and art: half-designed, half-dreamt; stationed but also en route. 'No one ever finishes dreaming or thinking about a poem', Bachelard wrote in *Air and Dreams*.⁹⁶ This might be read as an invitation to take more risks when considering the thoughts that even nonsensical poems might encourage, or when considering what people can make of—and from—their wildest flights of fancy. Lear's art takes this kind of risk. He would have been sympathetic to Darwin's claim in *The Descent of Man*, a claim which may or may not be nonsense: 'even birds have vivid dreams'.⁹⁷

Acknowledgements and Permissions

I am grateful to Rebecca Knowles, Hugh Haughton, and Adam Phillips for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would like to thank the Houghton Library and the Printing and Graphic Arts Department at Harvard University for permission to reproduce images from their collections (I am especially grateful to Emilie Hardman, Caroline Duroselle-Melish, and Hope Mayo for all their help). For permission to reproduce other images, I would like to thank the Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln Central Library (Plates 13 and 14); the University of Liverpool Art Gallery and Collections/The Bridgeman Art Library (Plate 12); the National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums, Greenwich (Plate 11); the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Plate 8); and Charles Nugent (Plate 3).

REFERENCES

- Bachelard, Gaston (2011), *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Edith R. & C. Frederick Farrell (trans.) (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications).
 Baudelaire, Charles (1992), *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, P.E. Charvet (trans.) (London: Penguin Classics).

⁹⁴ Lear (2006: 550).

⁹⁵ Lear (1911: 203–4).

⁹⁶ Bachelard (2011: 252).

⁹⁷ Darwin (2004: 96).

- Bishop, Elizabeth (2008), *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters*, Robert Giroux & Lloyd Schwartz (eds.) (New York: The Library of America).
- Bishop, Elizabeth, & Lowell, Robert (2008), *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, Saskia Hamilton (ed.) (London: Faber & Faber).
- Boitani, Piero (2007), *Winged Words: Flight in Poetry and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Byrom, Thomas (1977), *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear* (New York: Brandywine Press).
- Carter, Paul (2006), *Parrot* (London: Reaktion).
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1983), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 7*, James Engell & Walter Jackson Bate (eds.), 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (2003), *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, Seamus Perry (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Colley, Linda (1986), 'Edward Lear and the Pre-Raphaelite Impossibility', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 44–9.
- Dante (1971), *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, John D. Sinclair (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press). PMID:4108316.
- Darwin, Charles (1996), *The Origin of Species*, Gillian Beer (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics).
- Darwin, Charles (2004), *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, James Moore & Adrian Desmond (eds.) (London: Penguin).
- Dawson, Gowan (2007), *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Desmond, Adrian, & Moore, James (1994), *Darwin* (New York: Norton).
- Dickens, Charles (2008), *David Copperfield*, Andrew Sanders (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics).
- Dickinson, Emily (1961), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson (ed.) (New York: Back Bay).
- Donald, Diana (2007), *Picturing Animals in Britain, 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Donald, Diana, & Munro, Jane (eds.) (2009), *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and The Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Eliot, T.S. (1957), *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber).
- Empson, William (2000), *The Complete Poems*, John Haffenden (ed.) (London: Allen Lane).
- Hazlitt, William (1930–4), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, P.P. Howe (ed.), 21 vols (London: Dent).
- Hofer, Phillip (1974), *Edward Lear as a Landscape Draughtsman* (Harvard: Harvard University Press).
- Holmes, Richard (2008), *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered The Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: HarperCollins).
- Homer (1998), *The Odyssey*, Walter Shewring (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley (1959), *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Humphrey House & Graham Storey (eds.) (London: Oxford University Press).
- Hyman, Susan (1980), *Edward Lear's Birds* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
- Keats, John (2009), *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, Jeffrey N. Cox (ed.) (New York: Norton).
- Lear, Edward, MS of unpublished diaries (The Houghton Library, Harvard).
- Lear, Edward (1852), *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria* (London: Bentley).
- Lear, Edward (1870), *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* (London: Bush).
- Lear, Edward (1909), *Letters of Edward Lear*, Lady Strachey (ed.) (London: Unwin).
- Lear, Edward (1911), *Later Letters of Edward Lear*, Lady Strachey (ed.) (London: Unwin).
- Lear, Edward (1975), *Lear in The Original: Drawings and Limericks by Edward Lear for his Book of Nonsense*, Herman W. Liebert (ed.) (New York: Kraus).
- Lear, Edward (1988a), *Selected Letters*, Vivien Noakes (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Lear, Edward (1988b), *The Corfu Years: A Chronicle Presented Through His Letters and Journals*, Philip Sherrard (ed.) (Dedham: Harvey).

- Lear, Edward (2005), *'Over the Land and Over the Sea': Selected Nonsense and Travel Writings*, Peter Swaab (ed.) (Manchester: Carcanet).
- Lear, Edward (2006), *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, Vivien Noakes (ed.) (London: Penguin).
- Lear, Edward (2008), *The Egyptian Sketches*, Jenny Gaschke (ed.) (London: National Maritime Museum).
- Lear, Edward (2009), *Parrots: The Complete Plates*, Francesco Solinas & Solphia Wilmann (eds.) (Taschen).
- Levi, Peter (1995), *Edward Lear: A Biography* (London: Macmillan).
- Levine, George (2011), *Darwin the Writer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199608430.001.0001>
- Lynn, Michael (2010), *The Sublime Invention: Ballooning in Europe, 1783–1820* (London: Pickering & Chatto).
- Murray, Penelope, & Dorsch, T. (eds.), *Classical Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Nagel, Thomas (1979), 'The Absurd', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 11–23.
- Noakes, Vivien (1979), *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer* (London: Fontana).
- Noakes, Vivien (1985), *Edward Lear 1812–1888* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson). PMCid:261282.
- Noakes, Vivien (1991), *Edward Lear: The Painter* (London: David & Charles). PMCid:1371758.
- Nugent, Charles (2009), *Edward Lear The Landscape Artist: Tours of Ireland and The English Lakes, 1835 & 1836* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust).
- Peck, Robert et al. (2011), *The Edward Lear Collection at Harvard University: Essays, a Checklist of the Incomparable Collection, and an Exhibition Catalog on the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of Lear's Birth*, in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 22 (2–3) (Summer-Fall 2011).
- Pitman, Ruth (1988), *Edward Lear's Tennyson* (Manchester: Carcanet).
- Rothenberg, David (2011), *Survival of The Beautiful: Art, Science and Evolution* (London: Bloomsbury).
- Reade, Charles (1949), *Edward Lear's Parrots* (London: Duckworth).
- Ruskin, John (2007), *Love's Meine* (Milton Keynes: Dodo Press).
- Shaw, J. (1866), 'Feeling of Beauty Among Animals', *Athenaeum* (24 November): 681.
- Smith, Jonathan (2006), *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Tennyson, Alfred (1969), *The Poems of Tennyson*, Christopher Ricks (ed.) (London: Longman).
- Thomas, Edward (2008), *The Annotated Collected Poems*, Edna Longley (ed.) (Tarsset: Bloodaxe).
- Thompson, Holland (1921), *The Age of Invention* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Williams, James (2008), *Nineteenth-Century Nonsense Writing and the Late Work of James Joyce* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge).
- Wordsworth, William (2000), *The Major Works*, Stephen Gill (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

The author: Matthew Bevis is a Lecturer in English and a Fellow of Keble College at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford, 2007; pbk 2010), *Some Versions of Empson*, ed. (Oxford, 2007), and *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012).

Contact: matthew.bevis@ell.ox.ac.uk

This article is licensed under a
 Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
 The British Academy—the national academy for the humanities and social sciences.
 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.britac.ac.uk

