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Nonsense and sensibility: the brilliant and conflicted mind of Edward Lear

Jenny Uglow's *Mr Lear: A Life of Art and Nonsense* illuminates the poet and painter's life through his work.

BY
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“How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear!” is a comical self-portrait by Edward Lear, the Victorian poet of nonsense. This Mr Lear “has written such volumes of stuff!” His nose is “remarkably big”, his body “perfectly spherical” and his face, ineffectively hidden by an immense, bushy beard, “more or less hideous”.

Born in 1812, Lear lived much of his life abroad and eventually built himself a house above the sea in San Remo, north-western Italy. By 1879, when he wrote this poem, he had become a “crazy old Englishman”, who once could sing but now was “one of the dumms”. Lear relays this comedown with mild tolerance. A self-portrait by his imitator T S Eliot is harsher. In “How Unpleasant to Meet Mr Eliot!”, the author’s mouth is prim and his grimness and precision are forbidding.

Both poets appear to toss off jingles, yet invite us to pick up a signal: beckoning through thickets of words towards what they secrete.

Jenny Uglow's *Mr Lear* explores an "oblique" mode of confession behind the nonsensical mask. To read it is like walking behind a detective's searchlight trained on the lines. The strength of this biography lies in this illumination of the life through the work, including Lear's drawings and paintings. The approach expands on the explorations of Vivien Noakes in *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer*, first published in 1968 and lasting through three editions. Both draw us into the purview of a guarded Victorian. Lear slips two unfunny lines into his pleasant self-portrait: "He weeps by the side of the ocean,/He weeps on the top of the hill."

There is a dark history from early childhood. By the time Edward Lear came along, his mother already had 12 children (and several more who had not survived; the total varies between 17 and, as Lear claimed, 21). His asthma and epilepsy did not endear him to her, and when he was four, his mother handed him over to her eldest daughter, Ann, aged 25. This sister became, in effect, a mother. He told Ann later that he didn't know what would have become of him had she not taken him on. But the hurt of abandonment remained.

Epilepsy was thought to be caused by masturbation – what the Victorians called "impurities". For a while, he shared a room with a sister, Harriett, who undertook to police him. There would have been an atmosphere of blame and stigma. The aura that precedes an epileptic attack gave him time to hide himself and the boy became adept at secrecy. His illness never showed in public. In his diary, it's called "the Demon" and marked with an X followed by a number to denote its severity; his depressions are "the morbids".

Shortly before his tenth birthday, a cousin did him an “evil” – too bad to name and taken to be sexual abuse. He detested the school where he went briefly at the age of 11. There are few facts but Uglow knows that a crying little boy who likes poetry was bound to be bullied. Becoming a “jester” could have been a way to survive. Jokes would provide a screen behind which a vulnerable boy might conceal himself.

Neither intrusive nor distant, Uglow keeps her subject’s miseries in sight, but her prime intention is to mark greatness. She shows us a man seeking places to inspire his art. Although illness and depression were never to leave him, Lear could surmount them through travel.

When this bachelor stayed in tourist places such as Nice, Rome and Corfu, he came into contact with friends’ children. Each morning at breakfast in a fashionable hotel on the Italian Riviera, he gave the seven-year-old Daisy Terry and her younger brother Alfred a new rhyme accompanied by a comic drawing. These he collected for publication, one of four successive volumes of “nonsense”, delighting young and old. We hear the music of weird creatures: the Fimble Fowl with a corkscrew leg, the Pobble who has no toes, and the famous Dong with the luminous nose. Humans break out in violent antics, including a suicide with a knife in his hand, looking absurdly like Lear with his fat belly and solemn specs: “There was an Old Person of Tartary,/Who divided his jugular artery...”

Lear’s horror is “often offset by smiles” and morals are absent. It takes a gifted reader such as Uglow to prise open these verses, often limericks, which she sees as metaphors for states of mind: anger, curiosity, foolishness and the despair that would make a man lie with his head in a sack. Such judgement as there is “resides with the telling adjectives”, such as “unlucky” in another limerick about suicide:

There was an Old Man of New York,
Who murdered himself with a fork;

But nobody cried – tho' he very
soon died, –

That unlucky Old Man of New York.

Lear's final lines are not dull repetition, we learn: the adjective reflects back on the character. "Unlucky" is a disturbingly glib definition of a man who craved sympathy and could not induce it even by the hurt he inflicted on himself.

Nonsense was a sideline to the serious business of art. To sell, Lear had to cultivate grandees such as the earl of Derby to be his patrons. Derby kept a menagerie of kangaroos and other exotic animals at Knowsley Hall (near Liverpool) and invited Lear to draw them, which he did with exquisite accuracy.

In an age when photography was taking off, one review in the *Times* warns Lear against the danger of pictorial imitation. Yet the landscapes reproduced in the biography show how misplaced that warning was. Beachy Head, the suicide's cliff in East Sussex, looms over the allure of a night sea: all white and silver, it's a mood more than a place. Paintings such as *Suli* (depicting a castle in Albania) lift the spirit, as the viewer's eye winds upwards through dangerous terrain towards the topmost crags of a mountain. The awe is akin to a psalm about lifting up eyes unto the hills from whence cometh help. Though Lear, like many thinkers of his generation, lost his faith, his soul was alive. A masterpiece is *Kinchenjunga from Darjeeling*, looking towards the winter purity of the Himalayas rising far off.

Lear travelled to remote places to find such allegorical scenes: India, the Holy Land and Mount Athos, a centre of eastern Orthodox monasticism on a peninsula in north-eastern Greece. The Monastery of Zografu, which he painted, turned out to be a hermitage for "living corpses". It struck Lear as perverse, not holy, for men to cling on in a mountainous landscape not suitable for human habitation. He was repelled by the misogyny of their order, and he gave vent to an alliterative outburst with a violence worthy of his wilder characters: a Turk or a Jew, he said, would be more pleasing to God than these

“muttering, miserable, mutton-hating, man-avoiding... morose, & merriment-marring, monotoning... mocking, mournful, minced fish & marmalade masticating Monx”.

Uglow detects an uneasy kinship in this protest. Might it relate to his less extreme detachment from ordinary life? Certainly Lear differed from these particular monks in his liking of women and taste for Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot.



Kinchenjunga from Darjeeling (1877) by Edward Lear. Picture:

National Museum and Galleries of Wales

A lifetime of travel makes for multiple stories, largely anecdotal. Fullness of documentation expands this biography to almost 600 pages and some readers might prefer the narrative momentum of the Noakes book, which is half the length. Others will be carried by the unflagging enthusiasm that Uglow brings to each trip, with its fruit in sketches and paintings. The central thread (along with the onward tread of chronology) is the unfolding of an artist's gifts.

Uglow excels in insight and sympathetic delicacy, aware that the fascination of this life lies less in event than in character – not only the character of her subject but also his own fascination with character. His beady eye, like that of his gorgeous green parrot, is fixed on curious specimens of human nature, linked often with animals (a connection that his contemporary Darwin made in *On the Origin of Species*). One of Lear's drawings turns him into a creature of the air amid the birds, a little ridiculous with specs perched on his nose but otherwise blending with another species on course towards some objective we can't see. This is not the spherical man who bounced around in society entertaining all with jests and songs. Here we glimpse the purposeful inner bird.

Packed into this biography are the people who swarmed around Lear on his return visits to England. The faces come and go (a viceroy of India, the earl of Derby) – people in high places, who both matter and don't matter. As a young artist at Knowsley, Lear is neither guest nor servant. As an employee, he uses the back door of the great house and dines with the housekeeper; but then he is summoned upstairs to be "one of us". Yet he never was "one of us", aware that people were civil to him for Derby's sake.

Here is material for drama, but other relationships clamour for inclusion. *Mr Lear* sweeps by the likes of Lady Ashburton (who, as Kathy Chamberlain's biography of Jane Carlyle reveals, was a clever woman in her commanding manipulations) and

Franklin Lushington, whom Lear loved in suppressed silence. Society for Lear, despite his insider status, was not as fertile as solitude.

Uglow is alert to the gaps in the record when it comes to a reticent Victorian. She marks these with questions. One is why Lear did not marry. His homosexual longings are clear, particularly a perhaps one-sided attraction to Lushington, with whom he travelled in Greece in the 1850s. But what can't be known is why he didn't follow other gay men such as his friend John Addington Symonds, who married and fathered four daughters. Now and then, Lear thought of the comforts of marriage: a caring angel in the mould of his empathic friend Emily Tennyson. His wants, he joked, were puddings and sharpened pencils, but a more romantic dream may be found in "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat", whose protagonists sail away in a pea-green boat, for a year and a day, then marry and dance by the silvery moonlight.

During the 1860s, he dreamed of Augusta Bethell ("dear little Gussie"), the daughter of Lord Westbury, the rather bullying Lord Chancellor. Lear engaged in a "dithering dance" of approach and retreat until at length Gussie married an older man. She was "happy enough", her sister told Lear. A poem pictures a tiny, round-faced Mr Bò who takes a fancy to Lady Jingly and feels tired of living singly. But then it's too late: the lady weds Mr Jones, and Mr Bò takes to travelling on the back of a turtle:

Through the silent-roaring ocean

Did the Turtle swiftly go...

"Lady Jingly Jones, farewell!"

Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò,

Said the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò.

That repetition speaks of lone resolve. Lear kept people at arm's length, yet had the knack of friendship. It's the kind of friendship E M Forster characterised as peculiarly English, epitomised by a wych-elm in *Howards End*: at root sturdy and

in its tendrils tenderness. Lear had the “only connect” compulsion: he connected with the nobility (sometimes “a norful bore”); he enjoyed small dinners with his own kind, the cultured middle class; and when he died in 1888 he was buried in San Remo beside a servant, Giorgio Kokali from Corfu. For thirty years Giorgio had tended Lear, cooking with flair and securing him a suitable chamber pot at hotels. When Giorgio retired, he asked if he might kiss his master. It’s not thought to have been a sexual tie, but they are buried, as Lear planned, side by side like a couple who have shared their lives. These images of the visible Lear are mere “cut-outs”, his biographer declares with admirable boldness. So Uglow sets herself the challenge of seeking out “the pip”. The word comes from a late poem, “The Scroobious Pip”, and the accompanying sketch shows a multiform made up of man-beast parts, who could take any shape. We are left with this convincing image of mutability at the creative core. All the Pip will say for himself is “Plifatty flip – Pliffity flip”. He hides himself, his biographer discerns, “as Lear hid his inner being, his desires, his epilepsy, his loneliness”. |

“Outsiders: Five Women Writers Who Changed the World” by Lyndall Gordon is published by Virago on 26 October

Mr Lear: A Life of Art and Nonsense

Jenny Uglow

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