

One Very Nonsensical Collection

In Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* there is one peculiar character named Plyushkin, a compulsive hoarder, who collects everything that crosses his path. Well, I fear I might be a book Plyushkin. As a child I collected fairy tales and animal encyclopaedias. When I was at school, I started collecting different editions of Shakespeare's sonnets. At the University, my attention turned towards collecting French decadent poets and editions of Wilde's *Salomé*. But then I came across a strange-looking book called 'A Book of *NON*sense. English Absurd Poetry Translated by Grigory Kruzhkov' (2003). At that time, I knew nothing about Edward Lear or Spike Milligan, or what is the difference between nonsense and the absurd, but I was intrigued by its cover and contents, which would set me upon a different path: researching nonsense poetry at Oxford. Just a few months ago in my local Oxfam I came across two Russian children's nonsense books from the 1990s (1989 and 1991 to be precise) signed by that very same Grigory Kruzhkov. The circle has been closed.

As a professional translator, I am interested in the problems of translating Lear's nonsense into Russian, that is why I have every possible edition of Lear's works translated into my mother language. Lear's nonsense represents an interesting literary and visual challenge for translators. Fortunately, this does not deter the admirers of the 'untranslatable,' and attempts at new collections of translations continue to appear, making my collection bigger with each year. In general, my nonsense collection can be divided into two strands. The first strand is devoted to the books by and about Lear, including various biographies, selected letters, translations, etc. The second is what I call 'nonsense in context' as it includes nursery rhymes and various collections of limericks.

When researching nonsense, it is important to have a look at the original editions and to get the first-hand experience of the Victorian reader. I was lucky enough to acquire as my period

source two oblong¹ volumes beautifully bound in a dark green cloth – *The Book of Nonsense*, 1896 (the thirty-first edition with 110 black-and-white illustrations), and the third edition of *More Nonsense*, printed in 1889, just a year after Lear’s death. The latter has 104 black-and-white illustrations, with some of them having been later water-coloured (most probably by a child), which significantly reduces the value of the book. However, to me it increased its research value as it shows the presence of the reader: not only did the child take the time to do the colouring, they actually engaged in a game started by Lear. Thus, in the limerick *There was an Old Man in a Marsh*, which depicts one of Lear’s odd couplings – a frog and a man who looks just like a frog – the child stressed their similarity by drawing dots all over the human character:



Although limericks can be difficult to translate, nonsense alphabets are almost impossible due to the simple reason that English and Russian alphabets have different number of letters (26 against 33). Lear created several nonsense alphabets (usually for children of his friends), one of them was reproduced by V&A Museum (*A Nonsense Alphabet*, 1962) in the form of a small orange book with Lear’s famous cat Foss on the front cover. It represents a facsimile of drawings discovered in 1951. The drawings are printed on a special paper, suitable for water-colours, and therefore can be used by children for colouring.

Another orange book in my collection is *Nonsense Songs* set to music by Dudley Glass in the 1930s: it consists of ten songs accompanied by the original pictures by Lear. A keen musician,

¹ The first books of nonsense/limerick verse were all oblong to accommodate their three or four-line format; they remained oblong for a time even after the format was stabilised at five lines.

who played several instruments, Lear also composed music for poems – his own, and for the works of famous Victorian poets (musical settings of Tennyson’s poems are probably best known). Lear’s nonsense was profoundly musical, and it is no wonder that many of his works were also set to music by other composers.

Lear’s admiration of the Poet Laureate was not limited to only musical settings. Lear’s plan to illustrate Tennyson’s poems had been in his head since before their first meeting. In an 1852 letter to Emily Tennyson he wrote that ‘no-one could illustrate Tennyson’s landscape lines & feelings more aptly than I could do.’² He started working on this project in 1852 and worked intermittently on it until 1887, when due to his sight deterioration he abandoned any hope of a successful outcome. The best account of this ambitious project is given in Ruth Pitman’s book *Edward Lear’s Tennyson*, 1988, which includes a set of 200 illustrations (which had not been published before), Tennyson’s poems, as well as a selection from Lear’s letters, diaries and journals.

The illustration theme is continued by the next book in my collection – *The Dong with a Luminous Nose* (2010, first published in 1969) illustrated by Edward Gorey. Illustrating a book is always a challenge. To re-illustrate the original self-illustrated book is a double jeopardy, especially when certain illustrations have become inseparable from the work and its creator. Gorey has a unique artistic style, which blends elements of the macabre with humor and whimsy, just as Lear favoured for his own works.

Gorey was not the only one to embark on such a risky enterprise. John Vernon Lord, a highly successful and prolific illustrator and a distinguished lecturer and teacher of illustration, boldly attempted at creating his own version of Lear’s nonsense universe (*The Nonsense Verse of Edward Lear*, 1986) and even explained in detail his approach to illustrating Lear’s nonsense in his inaugural lecture, which was later printed as a separate book *Illustrating Lear’s Nonsense*,

² Edward Lear; Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear 1812-1888*. London: Royal Academy of Arts in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985, p. 132.

1991. In my Master's dissertation I am analysing different editions of Lear's nonsense works illustrated by various artists, both British and Russian, trying to pin down, among other issues, how translations might affect illustrators' decisions and approaches and how it affects the reader's perception.

Although Lear is best known for his nonsense, he was also determined to establish himself as a serious landscape painter. But it was not until 1985, when the Royal Academy of Arts held the first major exhibition devoted to Lear's artwork, that he was finally afforded the recognition of accomplished artist that had eluded him during his lifetime. The exhibition catalogue *Edward Lear 1812-1888* brings together the full range of his artwork. In addition to the many illustrations, the catalogue includes three introductory essays, a chronology, and bibliographies. In my copy of the catalogue there were two leaflets containing the exhibition programme, public lectures, gallery plans and other helpful information.

When talking about Lear, nonsense and illustrations, it is impossible not to mention Lewis Carroll (I must confess I am also collecting various illustrated editions of *Alice* books, but that is a topic for another essay). My latest addition to the collection was a rather quirky edition of Carroll's poems illustrated by Arthur B. Frost and Henry Holiday with a provocative title *Rhyme? And Reason?* (1901). Apart from already known poems such as *Phantasmagoria* and *The Hunting of the Snark*, it also contains four previously unpublished poems (the first edition was published in 1883), accompanied by Frost's fresh and original illustrations, which I find truly ahead of his time.

The rest of the books fall under the so-called category 'Nonsense in Context,' which includes both books that anticipated the appearance of nonsense and that were influenced by Lear.

I will start with first edition of *Pages and Pictures from Forgotten Children's Books* brought together and introduced to the reader by Andrew White Tuer (1898-99). This is the most interesting collection of small excerpts from antique children's books read by children of the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and chosen for their unconscious quaintness with a particular focus on amusing illustrations, the number of which amounts to 400. It also features some illustrated limericks from the anonymous *History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women* (1820-21), which might have inspired Lear. Compare, for example, the picture of the limerick *There was an Old Woman named Towl* and Lear's famous illustration of the Owl and the Pussy-Cat:



Next item is the beautiful edition of *The Nursery Rhyme Book* by Andrew Lang (1897), which gathers together more than 300 rhymes, including old favourites such as 'Mistress Mary, quite contrary' and 'Sing a song of sixpence,' as well as less familiar gems accompanied by over 100 black-and-white line drawings by Leonard Leslie Brooke, a leading children's book illustrator of the period, who also illustrated Lear's Nonsense Songs.

In his book *Mother Goose: The Old Nursery Rhymes* (c. 1918) Arthur Rackham put together not just the best-known nursery rhymes, but the ones he liked best in his own nursery days and provided them with his dazzling colour and black-and-white illustrations. My copy of this edition was dedicated and presented to little Oliver by his uncle for 'Xmas 1918' and, apparently, he liked his gift very much indeed, as the book is missing several colour plates and tissue-guards and has some childish doodling on the front and rear end paper.

Speaking about anthologies, my collection would not be complete without *The Complete Limerick Book*, 1925, compiled by Langford Reed, who at his time was known as 'the limerick's only historian and principal anthologist.' The book has a subtitle 'The Origin, History and

Achievements of the Limerick, with about 350 selected examples' and includes some limericks by Lear illustrated by H.M. Bateman, who according to Cyril Bibby³ even managed to improve some of Lear's original illustrations.

Last, but not the least is *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (c. 1936), a delightful little book of cheerfully cruel verse by Harry Graham with numerous black-and-white illustrations. Graham's verses were described by *The Times*, in an editorial that compared him to Lear, Carroll and W. S. Gilbert, as 'that enchanted world where there are no values nor standards of conduct or feeling, and where the plainest sense is the plainest nonsense.'⁴

To summarise, my collection demonstrates that nonsense is a unique genre, which straddles the blurred line between literature and art and has inspired successive generations of writers, poets and artists.

I would love to add the following five books to my collection to make it even more nonsensical:

1. Lear, Edward; Liebert, Herman Wardwell. *Lear in the Original: Drawings and Limericks*. New York: H. P. Kraus, 1975.
2. Lear, Edward; Strachey, Lady. *Queery Leary Nonsense: a Lear Nonsense Book*. London: Mills & Boon, 1911.
3. Reed, Langford. *Mr. Punch's Limerick Book*. London: Cobden-Sanderson, [1934].
4. Brooke, Leonard Leslie. *Ring O'Roses: A Nursery Rhyme Picture Book*. London: Frederick Warne & Co., Ltd., 1930s.
5. Kernahan, Mary Jean H.; Ludovici, Tony. *Nothing but Nonsense*. London: James Bowden, 1898.

First on my list, *Lear in the Original* represents a facsimile of Lear's earliest holograph nonsense manuscript, part of which became *A Book of Nonsense*. It provides manuscript drawings

³ Cyril Bibby, *The Art of the Limerick*. London: Research Publishing Co., 1978, p. 131.

⁴ *The Times*, 31 October 1936, p. 13.

and limerick texts, as well as other unpublished nonsense drawings, which is a must for any nonsense researcher. Edited by Lady Strachey, *Queery Leary Nonsense*⁵ contains some of Lear's letters with his humorous sketches and, most importantly, *The Bird Book* – a book of twenty drawings of coloured birds, including the Scroobious and the Runcible birds, prepared by Lear for Lord Cromer's eldest boy when he was about three years old to teach him some knowledge of colour. *Mr. Punch's Limerick Book* puts together about 200 of the best *Punch* limericks illustrated by one of *Punch's* best-known artists G. S. Sherwood and would complete another Reed's volume in my collection. *Ring O'Roses* needs no introductions. This classical nursery rhyme exists in many versions and variants, but I am particularly interested in the edition with coloured plates and black-and-white drawings by L. Leslie Brooke. Finally, *Nothing but Nonsense* is an illustrated book of nonsense verses, which will probably be the most interesting addition to my collection as it is written by a female author Mary Kernahan, sister and co-author of Coulson Kernahan, an English novelist and the copy-editor of Oscar Wilde's 1891 version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to *The Spectator*, '[t]here are many attempts at this kind of thing year after year at this time, but few are so successful as *Nothing but Nonsense*.'⁶

In 1954, when Mervyn Peake was giving a talk on the BBC about his illustrations for Carroll's *Alice* books, he said that nonsense 'can take you by the hand and lead you nowhere.'⁷ In my case, nonsense eventually led me to study in one of the best universities in the world and interact with such nonsense experts as Matthew Bevis, Hugh Haughton, Michael Rosen and Jenny Uglow. The downside is that my personal library is piling high and overwhelms my student room. Having arrived at Oxford with just two suitcases, I now have to figure out how I am going to ship it all back to Russia.

⁵ Lear wanted to call one of his nonsense books 'Queery Leary Nonsense,' but he decided against it.

⁶ *The Spectator*, 3 December 1898, p. 26.

⁷ Quoted in Mervyn Peake, *Complete Nonsense*. Manchester: Fyfield Books/Carcenet, 2011, p. 4.

Word Count: 2,250

Described Items: 16

Essay Bibliography (not the full collection list):

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2. Carroll, Lewis; Frost, Arthur Burdett. *Rhyme? And Reason?* London: Macmillan and Co.; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1901.
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4. Gorey, Edward; Lear, Edward. *The Dong with a Luminous Nose*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, Inc., 2010.
5. Kruzhkov, Grigory. *A Book of NONsense. English Absurd Poetry*. Translation and Introduction by Grigory Kruzhkov. Moscow: B.S.G.-Press, 2003.
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