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Edward Gorey was not a poet, but published dozens of picture books written in verse or limerick form and illustrated by his own hand. He was not a children’s author, though produced much work that seems perfectly suited to young readers, who devour it despite protestations from critics that it is too macabre. Nor was he universally accepted as a card-carrying nonsense writer, due to his chilling tone and violent drawings. Yet I maintain that his oeuvre, spanning five decades, is an ideal route into an exploration of children’s nonsense verse and, furthermore, that his work represents a significant progression in the genre, sitting, as Wim Tigges upholds it does in *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, “in the very centre of the field of nonsense” (1988: 184).

Nonsense literature dates back further than the Victorian writers who made it famous; Noel Malcolm’s *The Origins of English Nonsense* (1997) specifically credits lawyer Sir John Hoskyns with its invention in 1611. But it was in the nineteenth century that, according to Hugh Haughton in *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (1988), “nonsense poetry as such came into its own, thanks to the genius of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll” (16), and it is the work of these ‘godfathers of nonsense’ with which Gorey’s corpus shares so many characteristics.

There are numerous definitions of nonsense, but perhaps the most pleasing, matter-of-fact summary is by William Cole in his *Nonsense Literature for Children* (1989) foreword: “How do people write nonsense? Well, for myself, I think up opposites or ‘upside-downness’ [...] but nonsense must have one foot on the ground. Or at least a toe” (x). This interpretation spotlights the wordplay – puns, neologisms, oxymorons, juxtaposition – central to all nonsense. By pushing words beyond the boundary of sense, nonsense turns meaning on its head and “rejoices in the misfit of language and the world, allowing words – especially the sound of words – a freer rein than usual” (Haughton: 8). It is no wonder that nonsense appeals to children; pleasure in playing with words and even inventing them is surely rooted in infancy. Such wordplay is perhaps most evident in the poems of Lewis Carroll,

whose “Jabberwocky” (published in *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1871) is full to the brim with invented terms like “brillig” (1), “slithy” (1) and “mimsy” (3). These neologisms, though, are always rooted in sense, and Carroll later explains the logical origins of his portmanteaus. As Cole’s definition suggests, although the genre delights in subversion, it must still have some link with sense and order – chaos and disorder are futile in a world with no rules, and “the very notion of topsy-turvy implies that there is a right side up” (Anderson and Apseloff 5). Though the dictionary defines nonsense as meaningless, this analysis in a literary context is dismissive and derogatory. Again, Cole puts it best when he says: “Nonsense is not the absence of sense but a clever subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning” (5). Nonsense literature is never meaningless; rather it is full of meaning if only the reader will look for it. Despite its topsy-turvy nature, or rather because of it, nonsense verse tends to adhere strictly to regular rhyming patterns and meter, and generally favours rhyming couplets. This (typically nonsensical) paradox allows the verse to keep the connection with poetic convention and seriousness that it needs in order to underline the absurdity of its content. Similarly, nonsense writers often rely on traditional techniques like alliteration, assonance, repetition and sensory tropes like metaphor and descriptive language.

Of course, the conventions of nonsense do not govern only language and form, but theme and behaviour too. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, as quoted by Anderson and Apseloff (4) defines a nonsense world as one which “operates according to its own laws and into which sane people can never really penetrate”. One has only to recall Carroll’s “jam every other day” in *Through The Looking Glass*, or Lear’s Jumbles sailing to sea in a sieve, to appreciate that world.

In Gorey’s rhyming picture book *The Doubtful Guest* (1957), an unidentified, disruptive creature enters a family’s home uninvited and refuses to leave. That the family never try to remove the stranger by force or call for help is unrealistic and typical of the genre, but it is the guest’s behaviour that really highlights Gorey’s place within the nonsense tradition. The guest commits small acts of disorder that prove relatively harmless but convey a

world of chaos: “Every Sunday it brooded and lay on the floor / Inconveniently close to the drawing-room door” (17-18). Alison Lurie believes the guest represents a young child having “temper tantrums” (qtd. in *Shortsleeve*: 29), but this interpretation undermines the nonsense element somewhat. On the title page, we are presented with Gorey’s distinctive illustrative style, which underlines the eerie, unsettling mood of his stories. The impressive black and white crosshatched drawings create an almost three dimensional effect, injecting more realism and motion into the illustrations than the soft, flat shapes of a typical children’s picture book. The intricacy of the lines, varying in width and weight to create texture and tone, produces such a sophisticated, imposing collection of images that they feel at odds with the ridiculous tale they tell. Through this technique, “illustrations can contradict the text and subvert it, thereby creating another kind of nonsense” (Anderson and Apseloff: 178). By filling almost every available space with black lines, Gorey adds a heavy, dark atmosphere to each page. In some vignettes, such as on page nine, the style could even be said to reflect fictitious ‘psychic photography’ in which just the subjects’ energies or auras are captured.

Also striking on that first page is the freeform shape of the panel. Where we might expect a picture book to frame scenes with uniform, geometric shapes (usually rectangular), the irregular contours of Gorey’s outline suggests we are only seeing part of the story; what are we missing beyond those curved corners? As well as playing with the conventions of a picture book, Gorey is perhaps underlining the muddled, nonsensical nature of the titular character by adjusting the shape of each vignette. Skipping forward to the first page of text, we see that Gorey is writing in anapestic tetrameter, a regular metre that highlights a verse’s melodious, lighthearted quality. This conflicts with the unsettling, chaotic tone of the verse and illustrations, as does the “running and galloping” metrical foot (*The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Cuddon) used to suggest action, since the guest never appears very dynamic. It also brings to mind one of the most well-known instances of anapestic tetrameter, “Twas The Night

Before Christmas”¹. In fact, even the second line of *The Doubtful Guest*, “there was no one expected – and no one in sight” (2), is reminiscent of the second line of the Christmas rhyme, “not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse” (Moore 1912), and Gorey’s alliterative “wild winter night” (2) is certainly on par with a snowy Christmas Eve. Was Gorey parodying this oft-quoted 20th century verse? Parody is certainly a key ingredient of nonsense literature (its origins firmly rooted in the seventeenth century fustian tradition of parodying misuse of new Latin vocabulary), and if the guest is really a caricature of Santa, the melancholy tone of the picture book is all the more absurd.

The guest meets the criteria of a nonsense creature as outlined by Anderson and Apseloff (145). The text never describes or defines it (like Lear’s monsters, its gender is not specified); it is clearly an animal, yet it wears shoes and a scarf. It exists in an “absurdly inappropriate environment” (145), wreaking havoc on a calm, quiet household, and it acts in a ridiculous, inexplicable manner, eating plates, tearing pages from books and hiding in tureens. And, just like many nonsense creatures, it is not dangerous but merely irritating. It turns the family’s world upside down with minor, inconvenient offences and, after 17 years, “has shown no intention of going away” (28). Interestingly we rarely see the guest on the same level as his host family within the illustrations: it stands atop an urn looking down, leans against a wall while the family watch from the stairs, sits or lies on the floor, or rests in a tureen on the counter top. This is perhaps Gorey’s way of setting the guest apart as different from the family, or underlining its nonsensical characteristic of ‘topsy-turviness’ – it is never quite where it should be. In the fourth double page spread, the narrator tells us that “all at once it leapt down and ran into the hall” (5), but this sudden action is juxtaposed with the motionless illustration of the guest, standing quietly and calmly. In fact, throughout the book the guest’s actions look slow and gentle, despite words like “wrenched”, “leapt” and “fits of bewildering wrath”. This particular panel contains a great

¹ *Twas the Night Before Christmas* is used as an example of anapestic tetrameter in The New York Times’ *Smarter by Sunday* ebook

deal of nonsense in just one illustration. We see the creature standing with his nose to the wall, yet if we look closely we spot his eye is watching the family. What could his intentions be here? Each family member faces a different direction, underscoring the chaos and absurdity of the situation. Their understated reaction to the guest – watching him from behind a curtain and discussing their next move, rather than removing him from the house – is equally ridiculous and improbable. The line, “where it chose to remain with its nose to the wall”, emphasises the control the guest has: it makes a decision and the family do not challenge it.

Gorey diverges from many nonsense writers here in that there is little experimentation with language throughout *The Doubtful Guest*, though the atypical words he chooses to rhyme with – tureen, urn, gramophone, flues – are playful and break up an otherwise simple, traditional rhythm. Of course, Émile Cammaerts would say that Gorey’s less inspired rhyming, like “hall” with “wall”, or “said” with “bed”, is in fact conventional nonsense practice. In *Nonsense and Poetry* (1925), he maintains that the nonsense writer, a slave to rhythm, rejects the maxim that good poetry should be “suggestive and original... [and that] all his words must obey his inspiration, without being subservient to it” (40). For a nonsense writer, says Cammaerts, meaning is secondary to rhythm. If a verse “moves to the tinkling sounds of bells” (39), it does not matter if the chosen words are suitable, remarkable, correctly spelled or even real. He remarks that Humpty Dumpty’s song in *Alice through the Looking-Glass* “contains a collection of deliberately poor rhymes such as ‘fish’ and ‘wish’, ‘thump’ and ‘pump’” (43).

In *The Wuggly Ump* (1963), Gump further aligns himself with nonsense traditions by peppering his verse with ludicrous neologisms. In fact, refrains like “jigglepin [...] jogglepen” and “glogalimp [...] glugalump” are remarkably reminiscent of 17th century nonsense lines, like “glumpaty, glumpaty, glump” in Henry Carey’s “Roger and Dolly” (printed in Haughton: 140) and “lolloping, trolloping, galloping, lollop” in Jonathan Swift’s “A Cantata” (Haughton: 136). The first vignette presents three children frolicking in a field, singing “tirraloo”, “tirralay”. With these lyrics so reminiscent of the famous Irish Lullaby’s “too ra loo ra loo ral” (Shannon 1914), Gorey suggests gentleness

and security; even the line “The Wuggly Ump lives far away” (2) doesn’t jolt us from our comfort zone, since what could be more innocent than childhood songs about mythical creatures from faraway lands? Soon the pictures show us an enormous beast in a cave, flashing a toothy grin. We could be forgiven for comparing the ridiculous Wuggly Ump who eats “gunny sacks” (3) to Lear’s innocuous, “fantastic cornucopia of characters” (Styles: 138), but it becomes clear that he is closer to Carroll’s Jabberwock with “jaws that bite, the claws that catch!” (6) – we even learn about his jaws and claws later in the book – or even his “Little Crocodile” in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, who cheerfully “welcomes little fishes in, with gently smiling jaws” (7-8). Though while he looks threatening, Wim Tigges described the Wuggly Ump’s victims as “blissfully unaware of any danger” in *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (1988: 52), and so he may take his rightful place as a nonsense monster. His figure running across the hills as the oblivious children make daisy chains and climb trees could unnerve readers, but the nonsensical elements of the text distance us from the story, thus suspending any real emotional involvement. As the Wuggly Ump is “hurtling” across the hills, the children eat “bowls of milk and bread” (14) and “sing twiddle-ear, sing twaddle-or” (19). So far, the monster is farcical – he eats strange things, looks unlike any real animal and fails to instill terror in the children, who worry about him occasionally but don’t lose sleep. This is typical of nonsense villains: their ferocity is undermined by exaggerated physical traits, silly names and strange actions. Consider again the Jabberwock with “eyes of flame” as it burbles and whiffles through the wood. Dangerous though it seems, it is defeated. And Lear’s potentially fearsome “Dong with a Luminous Nose” (1846), who creeps in the “gloomy dark” (8), is rendered ridiculous by his red woven nose. But in *The Wuggly Ump*’s conclusion we find the children still singing, from “deep inside the Wuggly Ump” (28). Gorey defies nonsense conventions and inflicts real harm on his heroes, but the tuneful lilt of the verse, sound devices – note the assonance in Wuggly Ump and “gunny snacks” – and absurd neologisms (could Wuggly even be a portmanteau of ugly and wiggly?) cut the emotional chord. The final illustration shows the grinning monster with three children, still whole, seemingly floating inside his body, spread across his legs, arms and neck rather than confined just to his stomach, diluting the peril with a reminder

that this world is very different to our logical, right-side-up one.

In *The Osbick Bird* (1970), we meet another eccentric creature, reminiscent of those strange birds that nest in beards and dance with men in Lear's famous limericks. The 14 rhyming panels tell the story of an osbick bird (another neologism) who perches on the head of Emblus Fingby and strikes up a friendship. This unlikely pairing is typical of nonsense verse; Haughton points out the "topsy-turvy coupling" (2) so central to "Hey Diddle Diddle", which is described in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951) as "probably the best known nonsense verse in the language." Just as that rhyme couples a dish with a spoon, and Lear later couples an owl with a cat, so Gorey connects an old-fashioned gentleman with an oversized bird. The pair's activities throughout the story employ more nonsense tropes: playing the flute and lute together (evocative of the dog's flute in early nonsense ballad *The World Turned Upside Down*); taking tea on top of a tree (a play on high tea, perhaps?); double solitaire (surely the ultimate nonsense game) and wearing galoshes in winter (despite, of course, a bird's feet not requiring protection from the rain). What again separates Gorey's tale from better-known nonsense is that his protagonist dies, leaving the bird alone. While Carroll and Lear hint at unhappy endings, they are rarely explicit and their heroes usually survive.

Nonsense illustrations are often vital to the interpretation of a text, since "sometimes the graphic representation heightens the humour and makes the nonsense more obvious" (Anderson and Apseloff: 198). The similarities between Gorey's drawings and those used by Lear (whom Gorey greatly admired and later honoured by illustrating his poems) and Carroll are significant. But Kevin Shortsleeve, former Chair of the Children's Literature Association's International Committee, tells us in his journal article "Edward Gorey, Children's Literature, and Nonsense Verse" that Hendrick van Leeuwen claimed it was Gorey's pictures, in part, that precluded him from the genre altogether, as he felt they were too "extreme" and that "text and picture diverge technically" (35), so weren't in keeping with the nonsense tradition of informal, hurried doodles. Though Tigges describes the typical Gorey page as "a picture story in which text and illustration are indissolubly linked" (184), van

Leeuwen sees the illustrations as adding too much irrelevant detail and detracting from the text. Certainly Lear's pictures were more simplistic and it is true that Gorey's lend an extra layer of meaning to his stories. But it is this layer that many academics believe is vital to nonsense. Shortsleeve compares John Tenniel's illustration of Alice floundering in the water, to Gorey's *The Sinking Spell* panels. In both, the characters "stare in horror" (35) at something out of shot which is never identified, creating an eerie tension between text and image. And of course we can see Tenniel's influence – particularly his intricate black and white crosshatched woodblock engravings – in Gorey's drawings.

There are discernible shadows of the Victorian nonsense poets in Gorey's work, from Lear's fantastical creatures echoed in the *Wuggly Ump*, *Osbick bird* and *Bahhumbug*, to Lewis' trick of saying "the most wild and unnatural things as if they were normal" (Styles: 144) inspiring Gorey's deadpan style. But it is not enough to establish this link, or to determine that much of his work is easily classified as nonsense verse. We next need to determine why this classification is significant: why Wim Tigges felt that Gorey played such a central role in the genre, and why Shortsleeve believes that Gorey's work "represents a valuable advance in nonsense literature" (27). Firstly, it is evident that Gorey's picture books are distinctive in tone from Carroll and Lear. There is a far more violent, gothic edge to stories like abecedarian book *The Gashleycrumb Tinies* (1963), where the horrific deaths of 26 children are described and illustrated in graphic detail: "S is for Susan who perished of fits / T is for Titus who flew into bits / U is for Una who slipped down a drain / V is for Victor squashed under a train" (19-22). In fact, the text and illustrations, as in all of his picture books, carry a distinct air of Victorian London, from the antiquated children's names (Clara, Ernest, Prue) and clothing, to the gloominess of the black and white drawings. Ironically, despite Gorey being an American writing in the 20th century, his work is far more evocative of a bleak 19th century Britain than that of his Victorian predecessors.

Though they did not avoid violence and gore altogether (Lear's limerick characters are frequently "smashed", "knocked about" and "drowned", while few readers would like to bump into Carroll's *Jabberwock* or *Boojum* on a dark

night), Gorey's treatment of dark themes is far less gentle. He strongly believed that children relished the macabre in literature, and should not be shielded from the violent realities of life – clearly a philosophy shared by the authors of those early nonsense verses “Jack and Jill”, “Humpty Dumpty” and “Ring Around the Rosie”. In fact, Gorey thought cheerfulness had no place in nonsense: “If you're doing nonsense it has to be rather awful, because there'd be no point. I'm trying to think if there is sunny nonsense. Sunny, funny nonsense for children – oh how boring” (qtd. in *Shortsleeve*: 32). *Shortsleeve* thinks nonsense purists such as Elizabeth Sewell would agree: “The presence of optimism in a work of nonsense precludes its inclusion in the genre by the strictest definition of the term. Monsters, violence, and anti-social behaviour are among the most common themes in nonsense” (32). By refusing to sugarcoat death and destruction in his rhyming picture books, Gorey celebrates the darker traditions of nonsense in a manner more overt than Carroll and Lear, whose own nonsense feels breezier and optimistic by comparison. This contrast is underlined when we compare the poets' delivery. While Lear and Carroll's verse has a typically frenzied, excitable air, with exclamations like “Callooh! Callay!”² and “we don't care a button! We don't care a fig!”³ ringing melodically in the readers' ears, Gorey's narrators remain deadpan and detached. A popular YouTube video⁴ features a female voice slowly reciting *The Gashleycrumb Tinies* with little inflection or emotion in her voice. The result is haunting, and highlights the difference between Gorey and the godfathers of nonsense. Who could read “The Hunting of the Snark” or “The Owl and the Pussycat” – poems that practically roll off the tongue in a jovial, singsong cadence – with such nonchalance? That Gorey can bring such a measured eeriness to his nonsense without neglecting the conventions of the genre marks tremendous skill and a great advance in the field.

It is his trademark gothic, ghoulish verse that earns Gorey's work Wim Tigges' title of “black nonsense” (195) and this, coupled with his unique, somber illustrative style, remains his legacy. Several 21st century household

² From Carroll's “Jabberwocky” (23)

³ From Lear's “The Jumblies” (9)

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymnsV5CQcc4>

names readily admit to being influenced by Gorey, including author Daniel Handler (AKA Lemony Snicket) and writer, animator and film director Tim Burton. Reading through Burton's book of poems, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy* (1997), it is clear that Burton has followed in Gorey's footsteps with grotesque, absurd tales such as, "The Boy with Nails in his Eyes" (23), "Brie Boy" (74) and "Jimmy, the Hideous Penguin Boy" (101). The first poem in the collection, "Stick Boy and Match Girl" (1), introduces several nonsensical elements that can be traced back to Gorey's work: the absurd romantic coupling of a match and a stickman; the personification of inanimate objects; the playfulness of puns like "he thought she was hot" (4) and "could a flame ever burn..." (6), and crude rhymes like 'lot' and 'hot', 'stick' and 'quick'. Certainly the poem's gloomy conclusion in which Stick Boy burns alive is reminiscent of the sad, gruesome ends met by many of Gorey's heroes. Turning to his longest poem, "The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy" (29), it is Burton's illustrations that first strike us as evocative of Gorey; the stark black and white crosshatched drawings could have been lifted straight from the pages of *The Doubtful Guest*. Again there are classic nonsense components within this poem, such as the title character's half human, half oyster body, and puns including "come out of his shell" (34), and "something smells fishy" (51). In fact the very premise of this tale is reminiscent of so many Gorey picture books that make light of parents desperate to dispose of their children. The traditions of Gorey's black nonsense continue to live on in the phenomenally successful films of Tim Burton, such as *Frankenweenie*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Corpse Bride* and, significantly, his 2010 adaptation of that nonsense literature landmark, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

In conclusion, that Gorey played a pivotal role in the development of nonsense verse and represented a "valuable advance in children's literature" is irrefutable. By carving out the subgenre of black nonsense which so many writers would later embrace, and by calling into question whether eeriness and violence have a place in children's nonsense at all, Gorey continued to honour the traditions of Carroll and Lear whilst still – as one would expect from a master of nonsense – pushing the boundaries and playing with readers' expectations.

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