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The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating

The Cultural History of Eating
in Anglophone Literature

In cooperation with Klaus Scheunemann

With 7 figures

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Don't Play with Your Food? – Edward Lear's Nonsense Cookery and Limericks

A lobster wooed a lady crab,
And kissed her lovely face.
"Upon my sole," the crabbess cried,
"I wish you'd mind your plaice!"
(*A Nonsense Anthology* 28)¹

Edward Lear is famous for his nonsense poems, especially for his limericks. In quite a few of his limericks, food and eating habits figure, and this is certainly the major topic of his *Nonsense Cookery*, first published in the *Nonsense Gazette* in August 1870. Lear's treatment of food is not serious, and the recipes in his *Nonsense Cookery* are not really meant to be instructions to cook. The basic ingredients in his nonsense cooking as well as in his limericks concerned with food and eating are language and wordplay: he combines words and phrases, and the outcome is a delightful dish² that is, however, inedible – one literally can only 'eat the words' and digest them.³ Although it is commonly considered to be dangerous, or, at least, odd, to analyse jokes, an attempt will be made to find out how his nonsense cooking works and how he treats food in his limericks, i. e. in how far food contributes to their being nonsensical.⁴

1. Nonsense Cookery

Lear's *Nonsense Cookery* contains three recipes, preceded by an introductory comment that presents them as written by Professor Bosh:

Our readers will be interested in the communications from our valued and learned contributor, Professor Bosh, whose labours in the fields of Culinary and Botanical

1 WELLS, Carolyn (ed.). *A Nonsense Anthology*. Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2006 [1910].

2 See also "dish" as a book title, e. g. in MACDONALD, George. *A Dish of Orts*. Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1996 [1893].

3 Cf. the essay by Matthias Bauer in this volume. The very word 'game' indicates a relation to food.

4 It is somehow surprising that food in Edward Lear has not yet been considered as a topic: there are no results for the search entries "Edward Lear" and "food" in the MLA database.

science, are so well known to all the world. The first three Articles richly merit to be added to the Domestic cookery of every family; [...]. (Lear 123)⁵

Although Professor Bosh is introduced as learned and famous, his name already gives away that his contribution is not to be taken seriously by the readers. The three articles mentioned in the introductory note, “Three Receipts for Domestic Cookery”, confirm this suspicion through their titles: “To Make an Amblongus Pie”, “To Make Crumbobblious Cutlets” and, finally, “To Make Gosky Patties”. The recipes are thus based on the creation of nonsense words that are combined with well-known dishes; there is nothing extraordinary about pies, cutlets, and patties. Their attributes, however, are newly-invented words derived from wordplay that takes place on a morphological level.

The word “amblongus” seems to be a strange combination of “amb-” + Latin “longus”. The initial syllable “amb-” occurs in words like “ambage”, “amble” and “amblosus”. One of these alternatives, “ambage”, refers to language, “roundabout or indirect modes of speech”, “[d]ark and obscure language”⁶; a phenomenon that occurs in Lear’s recipes that are likewise “obscure” and somehow “indirect” as far as their meaning is concerned. This reading leads to another one of MacDonal’s wordplays: amblongus is a derivation from ‘ambiguous’, and ambiguous contains ‘big’, the opposite of which is ‘long’. He mixes various morphemes, plays with them, and thus creates a new word – he uses several (linguistic) ingredients and treats them as in a recipe.

If one goes on reading the recipe, one finds a further possibility of interpretation: after more than twelve hours of careful cooking, all that is left to be done with the result of the endeavour is to “Serve [it] up in a clean dish, and throw the whole out of the window as fast as possible” (Lear 124). Given this context, the reference to “amblosus”, “amblotic”⁷ as a potential meaning or connotation becomes also possible, as something that is being ‘aborted’, namely the outcome of the cooking.⁸ Lear thus plays with connotations and possible meanings that morphemes evoke and that are not entirely without sense, but neither are they being attributed a definite meaning.

The second recipe, “Crumbobblious Cutlets”, is similar to this. “Crumbobblious” is a so-called portmanteau-word – Lewis Carroll liked to use them, e.g. in “Jabberwocky” – consisting of “crumbly (or crummy) + bobbish”⁹ and

5 LEAR, Edward. *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*. Edited by Holbrook Jackson. London: Faber & Faber, 2001 [1947].

6 Cf. *OED ambage* I.; I.2.

7 Cf. *OED amblotic*, a. “1839 Hooper, *Med. Dict.*, *Amblotic*, having the power to cause abortion”; *amblosus*, n.

8 Cf. *OED abort*, v. 2.a. “to bring to a premature end; to terminate without result or success”.

9 Cf. KEYSER, J.D. “The Stuttering of Lewis Carroll.” In: Yvan Lebrun and Richard Hoops (eds.). *Neurolinguistic Approaches to Stuttering: Proceedings of the International Symposium on*

something like “bilious” or “edulous”¹⁰; both words, bilious and edulous, are one way or another connected with food and digestion and have rather negative connotations (and both were already in Lear’s lifetime more or less obsolete). The word “gosky” reads like blending of “gos” + the suffix “-ky”. “Gos” could refer to both the short form of “goshawk” and “a diminutive species of geese”,¹¹ both animals that might be eaten. Lear thus creates nonsense words that have the appearance of being nonsensical at first glance but show some reference to the semantic fields of eating and to the recipes that follow.

Whereas in the titles of the recipes, the nonsense stems from the combination of a ‘nonsense’ adjective with a familiar noun, in the recipes themselves, the nonsense is rather produced by inappropriate ingredients and procedures. “To Make Gosky Patties” reads as follows:

Take a pig, three or four years of age, and tie him by the off-hind leg to a post. Place 5 pounds of currants, 3 of sugar, 2 pecks of peas, 18 roast chestnuts, a candle, and six bushels of turnips, within his reach; if he eats these, constantly provide him with more. Then procure some cream, some slices of Cheshire cheese, four quires of foolscap paper, and a packet of black pins. Work the whole into a paste, and spread it out to dry on a sheet of clean brown waterproof linen.

When the paste is perfectly dry, but not before, proceed to beat the Pig violently, with the handle of a large broom. If he squeals, beat him again.

Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties.

If it does not then, it never will; and in that case the Pig may be let loose, and the whole process may be considered as finished. (Lear 124–25)

The first ‘joke’ lies in the fact that the pig is not being stuffed with or roast in the ingredients given – i.e. currants, sugar, peas, roast chestnuts, turnips – but is being fed with them; one wonders whether the candle is simply put before the pig or whether it is supposed to eat that as well as pigs were kept as ‘domestic animals’ especially because they were known for eating all sorts of rubbish.¹²

To make the paste, after the pig has been provided with a constant refuel of the ingredients enumerated in the recipe, in the next step, cream is needed as well as

Stuttering (Brussels, 1972). Paris: Mouton, 1973. 32–36. 35. As the third component, Keyser offers “delicious”, which does not make sense. – “Bobbish” means “[w]ell; in good health and spirits” (see *OED*).

10 Cf. *OED bilious*: “Of, pertaining to, or connected with, the bile; [...]. Obs.”; *edule*: “edible [...] So also edulous.” By having the word end on -lious, Lear chose one of the least common suffixes for adjectives; all in all there are only 64 entries for adjectives ending on -lious, most of them have been out of use since the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

11 Cf. *OED gos* and *goslet*.

12 JAMES, Allison. “Piggy in the Middle: Food Symbolism and Social Relations.” In: Gerald Mars and Valerie Mars (eds.). *Food: Culture and History*. London: The London Food Seminar, 1993. 29–48. 32.

Cheshire cheese; then foolscap paper and black pins are added, and these ingredients, after having been worked into a paste, need to dry, after which the pig has to be beaten. Not only is the mixture of ingredients most unusual – the cream and the cheese do still make sense – but the foolscap paper and the needles are not only inedible but in the latter case even dangerous.¹³ Why the pig has to be beaten is not clear either; usually a pig is considered to be an ideal food source and hence is *eaten*, not *beaten*.¹⁴ But not here: eating the pig seems to be out of the question; beating it becomes part of the recipe, and that has to be done alternately with visiting the paste, and it must be done with the handle of a large broom. The point probably is that the pig is to be ‘buffeted’: usually this would refer to its being served on a buffet, which is here being misunderstood intentionally and transformed into the notion of beating, as “to buffet” also means “to beat, strike”.¹⁵ The meaning of the word “buffet” that is related to food is set aside and substituted by another meaning of it, namely ‘beating’, which is then translated into another word.¹⁶

Although the recipes are nonsensical, their apparent exactitude fulfils the requirements of the genre. If one takes a closer look at the amounts of ingredients that are (mostly) given in very exact numbers, one finds, however, that these are simply enormous, e. g. five pounds of currants, four cauliflowers, four gallons of sauce. What is not very exact and, in fact, unidentifiable, are some of the ingredients, as “amblonguses” that, however, need to be “fresh”. Sometimes the author diverts from his exact directions and tells his readers to add “any number of oysters” (Lear 124) or does not want to set a definite number as in the case of amblonguses: “Take 4 pounds (say 4 $\frac{1}{2}$)” (Lear 123). In a ‘real’ recipe, this may lead to confusion and, in some cases, even to failure.

Despite some deviations from precise information as to numbers, the recipes are mostly very exact, they are even exaggerated in their exactitude, for instance, when it comes to the treatment of ingredients (as we have seen already in the case of the pig): “Crumbobblious cutlets” are made as follows: “procure some strips of beef, and having cut them into the smallest possible slices, proceed to cut them still smaller, eight or perhaps nine times” (Lear 124). This sounds like tiresome work but can be considered still to be perfectly reasonable within a recipe. The

13 One might read an allusion to DICKENS’ *Great Expectations* here, where sometimes a needle gets, unintentionally, into Pip’s bread-and-butter: “My sister had a trenchant way of cutting our bread-and-butter for us, that never varied. First, with her left hand she jammed the loaf hard and fast against her bib – where it sometimes got a pin into it, and sometimes a needle, which we afterwards got into our mouths.” (*Great Expectations* 10)

14 JAMES. “Piggy in the Middle.” 32.

15 *OED buffet*, v. 1. Cf. Matthias BAUER’s essay in this volume.

16 Furthermore, the English vocabulary comes into play here again, to be more precise, the Germanic/Roman distinction between the animal name and the name of the food: one can beat pork (the butcher, for examples, does) but not pigs.

real nonsense, after this introductory hyperbole, starts when the cook is asked to “brush [the minced meat] up hastily with a new clothes-brush” and to then “stir it round rapidly and capriciously with a salt-spoon or a soup-ladle” (Lear 124). There is no reason whatsoever to brush up minced meat “with a new clothes-brush” as this will certainly spoil both the meat and the brush. What is moreover conspicuous is the instruction to stir the meat “capriciously” with either a salt-spoon or a soup-ladle. Both instruments are part of the usual equipment of kitchen-tools, they differ, however, very much in size; a soup-ladle is far bigger than a salt-spoon. This means that, after a rather decent beginning of the recipe, it starts to turn into nonsense through the use of tools that have nothing whatsoever to do with cooking or by the random choice of tools. And how to stir anything “capriciously” is not explained either.

Yet it is above all the combination and treatment of ingredients that make the recipes appear so strange and without sense. In the case of “Gosky Patties”, after several days, the whole procedure does not end in throwing everything away, but the recipe says that the mixture eventually may, or may not, turn into Gosky Patties. We cannot even be sure that there will be an outcome, which seems to be characteristic of Lear’s *Nonsense Cookery*. His recipes are, after all, not meant to result in serious cooking but rather to entertain the readers as they are based on language-play.

On another level, Lear’s *Nonsense Cookery* also parodies recipes and thus follows a literary tradition that goes way back to the Middle Ages, e. g. the *Buoch von guoter spise* in Middle High German, and the Middle English *Cooking Book, Liber cure cocorum*, which was re-published in 1862.¹⁷ An example quoted in Melitta Adamson’s *Food in the Middle Ages* shall illustrate the genre: “A tasty little dish. Finally prepare a tasty little dish of stickleback stomach, and flies’ feet, and larks’ tongues, titmouse legs, and frogs’ throats. This way you can live a long and carefree life”.¹⁸ Like in Lear’s nonsense cooking, strange ingredients are combined and they sound anything but “tasty”: they “range from realistic to tiny, disgusting, and absurd”,¹⁹ which reveals the parodic intention of the recipe. At the same time, the outer form of the text corresponds to the genre of ‘culinary recipe’ and suggests seriousness – readers and cooks may actually rely on the correctness and the exactitude of the recipe –, while the content plays with

17 Cf. ADAMSON, Melitta Weiss. “The Games Cooks Play: Non-Sense Recipes and Practical Jokes in Medieval Literature.” In: Melitta Weiss Adamson (ed.). *Food in the Middle Ages. A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland, 1995. 177–95. 190 n1. See also CURTIUS, Ernst Robert. *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*. Tübingen: Francke, 1993. 431–33 for the tradition of humorous recipes in the Middle Ages.

18 ADAMSON. “The Games Cooks Play.” 177.

19 ADAMSON. “The Games Cooks Play.” 180.

different conventions of the genre, e. g. the disruption of the exactitude and the fact that there will be no outcome to our cooking efforts.

These recipes are typical of Lear's handling of food, not only in his *Nonsense Cookery* but also in his limericks where strange cooking, the wrong use of food and overfeeding are referred to.

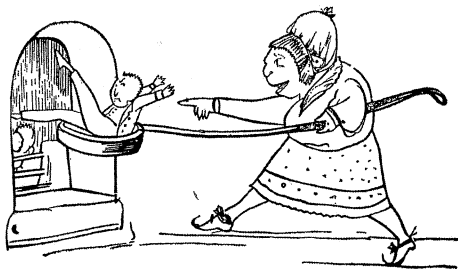
2. Strange Cooking, Wrong Use of Food and Overfeeding

Although Lear's limericks mainly refer to eating habits whenever they deal with food, there are also two examples of cooking behaviour that may be linked to his recipes in *Nonsense Cookery*:

There was a Young Lady of Poole,
Whose soup was excessively cool;
So she put it to boil by the aid of some oil,
That ingenious Young Lady of Poole. (Lear 26)

There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who watched his wife making a stew;
But once by mistake, in a stove she did bake,
That unfortunate Man of Peru. (Lear 28)

The first example astounds by its 'normality': the lady's soup is cool, that's why she boils it "by the aid of some oil", which, however, she would not use *in* the soup but to kindle the flames, – and is hence "ingenious". In the second example, however, we are confronted with a piece of 'real' nonsense, especially if we also consider the illustration that goes along with it:



We can see the wife shoving her husband into the oven in a huge pan. Although the limerick itself says she did bake him "by mistake", the picture shows her

pointing at him: it looks as if the baking of her husband were an intentional act.²⁰ While she is laughing, her husband raises his arms as in an attempt of self-defence; she, however, only laughs. Another instance of nonsense in the illustration are the size relations: the husband is so small that he fits into the pan that the woman can easily handle, and the wife is far taller than him; he is under-sized (like a child) while all other proportions seem to be appropriate. The preparation of a dish, stew, here becomes the trigger for a limerick that differs from the illustration that comes with it; this means that not only the content of the poem is nonsensical but also the text-picture-relation is incoherent.

Quite a few of Lear's limericks deal with the topic of food in the way of eating too much, overfeeding, and making fun of this:

There was an Old Person whose habits,
Induced him to feed upon Rabbits;
When he'd eaten eighteen, he turned perfectly green,
Upon which he relinquished those habits. (Lear 19)

Like in so many of Lear's limericks, it is an Old Person who behaves strangely; in this case, the nonsense of the poem derives from the hyperbole of eating not only a few but "eighteen rabbits": the Old Person becomes sick afterwards, which makes him change his habits. Eating too much, however, may also be fatal:

There was an Old Man of Calcutta,
Who perpetually ate bread and butter;
Till a great bit of muffin, on which he was stuffing,
Choked that horrid old man of Calcutta. (Lear 37)²¹

If one considers that Lear's first and foremost audience were children, one soon discovers one possible source of the fun in this poem²²: the old man overeats

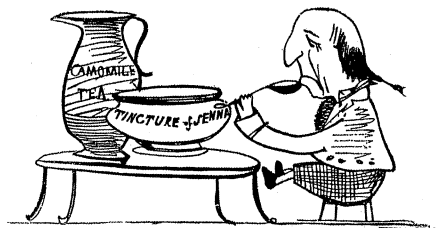
20 One is reminded of "Hansel and Gretel" when the witch wants to bake Gretel in the oven and asks her to crawl in there. See GRIMM, Jacob and Wilhelm GRIMM. "Hansel and Gretel." In: Maria Tatar (ed.). *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*. New York: Norton, 2004. 72–85.

21 Further cases are that of the "Old Man of the South": "There was an Old Man of the South, / Who had an immoderate mouth; / But in swallowing a dish, that was quite full of fish, / He was choked, that Old Man of the South" (LEAR 32); and the "Young Person of Kew": "There was a young person of Kew, / Whose vices and virtues were few; / But with blameable haste, she devoured some hot paste, / Which destroyed that young person of Kew" (LEAR 179).

22 Lear wrote his poems for children mostly and only published them after having presented and dedicated them to a particular child. *The Book of Nonsense*, for example, was originally written for the grandchildren of the Earl of Derby; cf. FINLAY, Nancy. "A Gift of Nonsense: An Edward Lear Manuscript." In: *Bibliion: the Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 7,1 (1998): 5–19. – Children are fond of play, and they like to play with food. Cf. HOLMES, Robyn M. "Play During Snacktime." In: *Play & Culture* 5 (1992): 295–304; MARS, Valerie. "Parsimony amid Plenty: Views from Victorian Didactic Works on Food for Nursery Children." In: Gerald and Valerie Mars (eds.). *Food: Culture and History*. London: The London Food

himself on something that children like to eat very much. His overfeeding is turned into children's play²³: he is "horrid" and has to choke (as a sort of 'punishment' even); eating is part of the "imaginative play of children",²⁴ and it may even become part of their role-playing: "Whatever way the limericks may have functioned for Lear, they can be coherently understood as extending to the child reader an invitation to imaginative role-playing. The dramatic game they open up refers to basic areas of socialization – eating, dressing, grooming, speaking, and so on – and to the kinds of tensions inherent in familial relationships".²⁵ Thus, violence and 'death' in the limericks are never shocking, but are part of the games Lear plays.²⁶ Although it may appear to be violent that the man chokes on the muffin and the woman bakes "[t]hat unfortunate Man of Peru," she at least, and the readers as well, seem to have fun.

Lear also shows that the overuse or 'wrong' use of food need not necessarily be fatal, and has some good advice and even medicine at hand:



There was an Old Man of Vienna,
Who lived upon Tincture of Senna;

When that did not agree, he took Camomile Tea,
That nasty Old Man of Vienna. (Lear 18)

There was an old person of Fife,
Who was greatly disgusted with life;
They sang him a ballad, And fed him on salad,
Which cured that old person of Fife. (Lear 159)²⁷

In these limericks, Lear has people eat and consume the strangest things. The old man of Vienna lives on tincture of senna, which works as a purgative²⁸ and is replaced with camomile tea, when it no longer agrees with him – which is a natural consequence of senna. The habit does not seem to be too pleasant if one looks at his facial expression in the illustration. But Lear also introduces the strangest causal relations: the old person of Fife is cured from his disgust of life because a ballad is sung to him and he is being fed on salad.²⁹ In this limerick, the combination of the two, ballad and salad, leads to an internal agreement: first of all within the line, as they are rhyming words, but also with regard to the person of Fife, who feels better and with whom this treatment 'agrees'. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton does indeed recommend music as a remedy against being disgusted with life,³⁰ "salad", however, is counted among those things that should not be eaten.³¹ It is therefore basically the language which determines the treatment of the person of Fife here: the agreement of words and their sound is all that counts.

Eating is therefore often introduced in Edward Lear's limericks for mere linguistic reasons. As regards content and the playful mode that is so typical of his writing, food and eating habits may also serve as signs of oddity:

27 Further examples include the following limericks: "There was an Old Person of Leeds, / Whose head was infested with beads; / She sat on a stool, and ate gooseberry fool, / Which agreed with that person of Leeds" (LEAR 12); "There was an old person of Pett, / Who was partly consumed by regret; / He sate in a cart, and ate cold apple tart, / Which relieved that old person of Pett" (LEAR 182).

28 OED "senna": "2. Pharm. The dried leaflets of various species of *Cassia*, used as a cathartic and emetic."

29 With reference to Fernando FERRARA's study *Aspetti e tendenze della poesia vittoriana* (Naples: Liguori, 1962), PONTEROTTO remarks that "nonsense uses normal logical schemata but deforms the situation, obtaining a contrast between structural and formal seriousness on the one hand and absurdity of content and incongruity of detail on the other" (PONTEROTTO, Diane. "Rule-Breaking and Meaning-Making in Edward Lear." In: *Revista Alicanta de Estudios Ingleses* 6 (1993): 153–61. 155).

30 Cf. BURTON, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Edited by Nicolas K. Kiessling, Thomas C. Faulkner and Rhonda L. Blair. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990. II.2.6.3: "Musicke a Remedy" (2: 112–16).

31 "Some are of opinion that sallets breed melancholy mood" (BURTON. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* I.2.2.1 (1: 215)). "Sallet" was a variant spelling of salad until the nineteenth century; cf. OED "sallet, salad(e)".

Seminar, 1993. 29–48; and MECHLING, Jay. "Don't Play With Your Food." In: *Children's Folklore Review* 23,1 (2000): 7–24.

23 MECHLING ("Don't Play With Your Food." 7) describes eating and playing as "two powerful human practices" that are usually dealt with by anthropologists in a serious way, as can be seen in Allison JAMES's article "Confections, Concoctions and Conceptions." In: *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 10 (1979): 83–95. – See also BIMBERG, who likewise finds food and drink to be very important in books for children (BIMBERG, Christiane. "The Importance of Eating and Drinking in British Children's Classics." In: *Inklings* 17 (1999): 10–34).

24 MECHLING. "Don't Play With Your Food." 11.

25 RIEDER, John. "Edward Lear's Limericks: The Function of Children's Nonsense Poetry." In: *Children's Literature* 26 (1998): 47–60. 54.

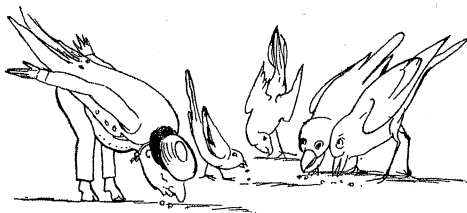
26 The violence in Lear "is that of a Tom & Jerry cartoon" (MORINI, Massimiliano. "'How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear!': Edward Lear and the Sympathetic Reader." In: *RSV* 4,8 (1999): 93–109. 97); cf. also THOMAS, Joyce. "'There was an old man...': The Sense of Nonsense Verse." In: *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 10,3 (1985): 119–22. – "We face then two peculiarities of play: (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent" (BATESON, Gregory. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." In: Gregory Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine, 1972 [1952]. 177–93. 183).



There was an old person of Dean
Who dined on one pea, and one bean;
For he said, "More than that, would make me too fat,"
That cautious old person of Dean. (Lear 187)

As opposed to the Old Persons who overfeed themselves in some of the examples, Lear now introduces another "old person" who hardly eats at all and is extremely thin.³² The illustration emphasises the absurdity of the person's behaviour: Even if he ate much more, his anxiety of growing fat is irrational and ridiculous given his outer appearance, even more so as "one pea, and one bean" are virtually fat-free.

A person also is what he eats. This becomes most evident in the following limerick:



There was an old man of El Hums,
Who lived upon nothing but crumbs,
Which he picked off the ground, with the other birds round,
In the roads and the lanes of El Hums. (Lear 180)

From his eating crumbs and picking them off the ground, the old man of El Hums has become just like the birds: his nose resembles a beak, his arms and his coat look like wings, and his whole appearance and movement is an imitation of the birds. He has metamorphosed into a bird through his eating behaviour.³³

32 The idea might go back to the proverb "He that eats least eats most", which means that eating less at the occasion will lead to a longer life, so that one eats more that way eventually; cf. ODEP 216.

33 Thomas BYROM comments on this phenomenon of metamorphosis in the images (BYROM,

This is certainly one of the instances when "old" is used not necessarily as a literal reference to age only but also as a slightly "disparaging term".³⁴ Furthermore he is an old bird, i. e. in the jocular use for a man, 'a cove'.³⁵ The concept that eating has an effect on a person's outer appearance, i. e. whether someone is thin or fat, is here extended to a concept of 'sympathy'³⁶: one adopts a whole set of attitudes and even one's looks through the food one consumes.

Strange behaviour in the realm of food can furthermore consist not only in eating but also in feeding:

There was a young lady of Corsica,
Who purchased a little brown saucy-cur;
Which she fed upon ham, and hot raspberry jam,
That expensive young lady of Corsica. (Lear 191)³⁷

As she feeds her dog upon ham and hot raspberry jam, this young lady is no longer simply a "young lady" in the last line but changes into an "expensive lady", which mirrors her peculiar, even eccentric behaviour and entails at least some degree of value-judgment.³⁸ Something very similar can be seen in Lear's depiction of the "old person of Bray":

Who sang through the whole of the day
To his ducks and his pigs, whom he fed upon figs,
That valuable person of Bray. (Lear 192)

He is a "valuable" person as he sings all day, but perhaps even because he feeds his pigs upon figs. In this case, the form of the limerick and the genre of nonsense rhyme allow for and lead to the introduction of edibles: pigs rhyme with figs.

Thomas. *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear*. New York: Dutton, 1977. 133–38).

34 See OED *old* S5.a.

35 See OED *bird* I. 1.e

36 For the notion of "sympathy" see, e.g., KRANZ, M. and P. PROBST. "Sympathie." In: Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (eds.). *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. 13 vols. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998. Vol. 10: 751–56.

37 See also the following example: "There was an Old Man of Apulia, / Whose conduct was very peculiar / He fed twenty sons, upon nothing but buns, / That whimsical Man of Apulia" (LEAR 24).

38 This variation of the adjective in the first line is typical of Lear, although sometimes he even uses adjectives that seem to be out of context, e.g. when he suddenly calls an "old man" "intrinsic": "Lear's wildly inappropriate adjectives are paradigmatic instances of one of the fundamental activities the limericks perform: the world of Lear's nonsense is a playground" (RIEDER. "Edward Lear's Limericks." 49). – BYROM reads this limerick as follows: "Her [the young lady's] relation with the creatures nearly always involves food or eating, but there is no oral gratification for her. Rather, the association of animals and eating gives her anxiety. She has a strange demonic dog which she must appease" (BYROM. *Nonsense and Wonder*. 114). This interpretation, however, overlooks the fun and playful mode that is characteristic of Lear's writing.

They form a minimal pair, as we know from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where the Cheshire Cat asks Alice whether the baby she carried away from the Duchess' kitchen has changed into a "pig" or a "fig".³⁹ Their phonological resemblance is the reason why the "valuable person of Bray" feeds the pigs with figs and not with apples or anything else.

The constraints given by the form, i. e. that a limerick has to follow a certain pattern, thus likewise determine what is being eaten and by whom:



There was an old man who screamed out
Whenever they knocked him about;
So they took off his boots, And fed him with fruits,
And continued to knock him about. (Lear 171)

Having his boots taken off and being fed with fruits actually seems to delight this old man; it is therefore all the more surprising that some critics actually read this limerick seriously: "In one exceedingly strange limerick, They punish him, and at the same time, to his masochistic glee, provide him with a salve for the pains They inflict".⁴⁰ That Lear's limericks are supposed to be fun and depend on (linguistic and also conceptual) play seems to be out of the question: "[The] agitation of the verse is quietened in the cartoon, which presents a more ambivalent state of affairs. [...] the image calms the word".⁴¹ Such a reading does not at all consider that words are the basic components of Lear's nonsense and that they are employed for their own sake, not to make statements about 'the world': nonsense, although it can be very serious,⁴² is usually supposed to be fun.

39 "Did you say 'pig' or 'fig'?" said the Cat" (CARROLL, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Edited by Roger Lancelyn Green, illustrated by John Tenniel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 59).

40 BYROM. *Nonsense and Wonder*. 95. Cf. also DILWORTH, who categorises this limerick as "what may be the most fascinating of the limericks of social accommodation. [...] Accommodated in these ways he is verbally and visually high, 'elated', though the beating continues" (DILWORTH, Thomas. "Society and the Self in the Limericks of Edward Lear." In: *The Review of English Studies* 45 (1994): 42–62. 57–58).

41 BYROM. *Nonsense and Wonder*. 114, 123.

42 Cf. HOLLANDER, John. "The Poetry of Nonsense: Lewis Carroll's Quest Romance." In: John

Apparently, "fruits" are only introduced to rhyme with "boots".⁴³ The choice of words thus gives the impression of being random, "approximate sounds of the rhymes draw objects together".⁴⁴ As Rieder explains with regard to content, "the limericks tend to expose the arbitrariness or artificiality of convention rather than laying down the law. The limericks on eating, for instance, include stories of starvation and gluttony, of 'old men' who sink into alcoholic depression and of others who enjoy pleasantly recuperative snacks, of accidental cannibalism but also of miraculous cures".⁴⁵ But, what is even more important, Lear's limericks are mainly based on language: those dealing with food are not so much about describing or even sanctioning eating behaviour; this is only part of the fun. Their major ingredients are words and the play with words.

3. Wordplay

Whenever the language of Lear's nonsense writing is considered by critics, they refer to its apparent arbitrariness: the choice of words is declared to be random and to follow merely a pattern of rhyme.⁴⁶ This, however, makes the choice already less random, if not on a semantic, then at least on a phonological level. And as we can see in the context of his *Nonsense Cookery*, especially the titles "Amblongus Pie", "Crumbobblious cutlets", and "Gosky Patties" have semantic connotations that are not utterly 'nonsensical' in the sense of being without any meaning. Although none of the modifiers in these compounds exist, they can be traced back to some origins that attribute meaning to them. Thus Lear combines known food – pie, cutlets, patties – with neologisms and apparent non-words: "The Lear formations are word-like non-words, since they activate neither two meanings nor new meanings but several potential meanings".⁴⁷ These potential

Hollander. *The Work of Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 200–09; KÖHLER, Peter. *Nonsens: Theorie und Geschichte der literarischen Gattung*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1989; LECERCLE, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. London: Routledge, 1994; SCHÖNE, Annemarie. *Untersuchungen zur englischen Nonsense Literatur unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Limericks und seines Schöpfers Edward Lear*. Bonn: Diss. 1951.

43 An alternative would have been to feed him with 'roots'. This, however, would not have changed the nonsensical combination of events in this limerick.

44 COLLEY, Ann. "Edward Lear's Limericks and the Reversal of Nonsense." In: *Victorian Poetry* 26 (1988): 285–99. 294.

45 RIEDER. "Edward Lear's Limericks." 52. This is actually the only reference I have found about Lear's treatment of food in his limericks.

46 Cf. HEYMAN, Michael. "A New Defense of Nonsense; or, Where Then Is His Phallus? and Other Questions Not to Ask." In: *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 11,3 (1985): 187–93. 191.

47 PONTEROTTO. "Rule-Breaking and Meaning-Making in Edward Lear." 156.

meanings can be derived from single morphemes that are put together into apparent 'non-words'. One is hence able to form a certain idea about the ingredients as all these words are pronounceable, they "phonetically fit their context",⁴⁸ and they are recognized as having some similarity to English words.⁴⁹

'Phonetical fitting' seems to be very important in Lear's limericks because of the rhyme that defines the genre. In the following example, however, his wordplays goes even further:

There was an Old Person of Chili,
Whose conduct was painful and silly,
He sate on the stairs, eating apples and pears,
That imprudent Old Person of Chili. (Lear 6)

"Apples and pears" is an expression from Cockney rhyming slang that originated around 1840⁵⁰ and which means 'stairs': the original word is replaced by one that rhymes with it, i. e. pears; these are combined with apples because apples are not pears – which makes this sound very nonsensical (other combinations with apples are e. g. apple and banana – piano; apple pie – sky).⁵¹ What we find here is a sort of doubling which points to the "painful and silly" conduct of this person who actually has misunderstood the dialect. The word stairs and its synonym "apples and pears" are not recognized as synonymic, and hence results the action of the old person: he sits down and eats the very thing that, in a non-literal sense, signifies the object he is sitting on.

Very often the whole content of Lear's limericks thus relies, as we have already seen, on the combination of words that fit phonetically and that rhyme:

48 HEYMAN. "A New Defense of Nonsense." 191.

49 "[...] meaningful nonsense syllables were attributable in large measure to the degree to which the novel stimulus in question accorded with or departed from the rule structures of syllable and word formation in English (for English speaking subjects)" (JENKINS, James J. "Nonsense Syllables: Comprehending the Almost Incomprehensible Variation." In: *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 11,3 (1985): 455–60. 456). – PONTEROTTO calls them "well-formed but meaningless" (PONTEROTTO. "Rule-Breaking and Meaning-Making in Edward Lear." 157); this, however, seems to be slightly simplistic given the complexity with regard to the combination of lexical and morphological units.

50 See MATTHEWS, William. *Cockney Past and Present: A Short History of the Dialect of London*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972 [1938]. MATTHEWS calls Cockney "the most creative form of English" (xv), a judgment that certainly explains Lear's use of it. Lear is, however, not mentioned by Matthews, nor is Cockney an issue in Lear criticism. "[I]t was originally the language of ballad-sellers [...] [and] seems to have begun as a secret language" (132). Lear probably adopted elements from it because of its basic playfulness. Around the 1950s a whole variety of dictionaries of modern slang appeared in England (cf. MATTHEWS. *Cockney Past and Present*. 130–33).

51 In a shortened version, stairs are merely called "apples" in Cockney; cf. PERKINS, Derek and Joan PERKINS. *Cockney Rhyming Slang*. Illustrated by Anthony James. Swansea: Domino Books, 2002. 9. – "The expert use of rhyming slang consists in the abbreviation of the terms by the omission of the rhymes" (MATTHEWS. *Cockney Past and Present*. 152).

There was an Old Person of Rheims,
Who was troubled with horrible dreams;
So, to keep him awake, they fed him with cake.
Which amused that Old Person of Rheims. (Lear 33)

The man is troubled with nightmares – "horrible dreams" as they are called so that they rhyme with the city of "Rheims"⁵² – and the only possible remedy is to keep him awake: if he does not sleep at all, he will not dream badly. The reasoning of this is rather doubtful, but Lear moves in the realm of nonsense anyway. This goes even further as "awake" needs a rhyming word that also fits the context semantically. Hence, the Person of Rheims is fed with cake so that he will not sleep, simply because "awake" rhymes with "cake". He is "amused" at the therapy, and it does seem quite tempting; luckily, "awake" rhymes with something delicious. This is not the case with another "old person" that the reader meets in Lear's limericks:

There was an old person of Bromley,
Whose ways were not cheerful or comely;
He sate in the dust, eating spiders and crust,
That unpleasing old person of Bromley. (Lear 201)

He is less fortunate than the old person of Rheims: as he sits in the dust, there is nothing left for him but to eat "spiders and crust". Instead of being amused or happy, he is described as being "unpleasing"; whether this is a result of his eating behaviour or whether his eating habits result from this is not explained and, one might presume, irrelevant. Lear's limericks are not primarily about logical causal relations but they are concerned with and based on language and wordplay.

The apparent horrors of eating in some of the limericks and also in Lear's *Nonsense Cookery* turn out to be expressions of linguistic pleasures. Lear's wordplay is part of the overall playful mood of his writing. There are quite a range of examples in his limericks where he bases his nonsense texts on strange eating habits, overfeeding and dietary cures for ridiculous behaviour. Food in Lear thus very often serves as a means to make a text nonsensical, by the combination of words that do not fit in content (but, for instance, in regard to sound) and make the mere action of eating ridiculous, as well as by the invention of new words that are combined with elements of food. Very often these culinary elements are merely introduced for the sake of rhyme. By mixing all these different bits and pieces together and stirring them carefully, Lear succeeds in presenting his readers with very palatable nonsense texts that ought not to be taken seriously but understood and interpreted as sheer fun.

52 Rheims is pronounced [ri:mz] in English.

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