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The Art of Self-Reference in Edward Lear's Limericks

ABSTRACT: The world of Edward Lear's limericks is a self-referential semiotic universe.

What appears to be nonsense, and hence lack of reference, turns out to be the effect of self-referential semiotic loops. Instead of referring to events and happenings in the world of Lear's century, the signs of Lear's universe rather refer to other signs within this same universe. The self-referential loops which lead the readers from signs of the poetic universe back to the same or to other signs of the same universe have the form of stereotypes, mirror images, narrative circles, and indexical or iconic returns to the semiotic point of departure.

Edward Lear's limericks have often been interpreted as the prototype of literary nonsense,¹ and Lear himself contributed to this line of interpretation when he published his first collection of verse in 1846 under the title *Book of Nonsense*. Much has been said about the degree to which there is sense or nonsense in Lear's poetry, and the present paper does not pretend to contribute to this chapter of literary semantics.² Nevertheless, the aspect to be discussed, self-reference in Lear's limericks, is not unrelated to the loss of sense in nonsense.

Self-reference is reference from the sign to itself. The word, sentence, or text does not refer to an object, event, or state of affairs, but rather to itself. The sign means nothing; it only draws attention, describes or shows to itself. The self-referential sign is an *index* which, instead of pointing somewhere else, points back to itself in a self-referential loop, or it is an *icon* restricted in its semiotic function by showing itself and revealing nothing but its own qualities.

Self-reference is opposed to reference proper (or *alloreference*), which is a main function of signs in general. We use and interpret a sign as something that stands for, represents, or refers to something else.³ Like nonsense, self-reference has to do with the loss of sense, since the self-referential loop of the sign that refers back to itself is in a way

¹ Cf. Hildebrandt 1970, Byrom 1977, Stewart 1978, Lang 1982, Tigges, ed. 1987, Colley 1988, Tigges 1988, Köhler 1989, Lecercle 1994, Ávila 1996, Esser-Hall 1997.

² For earlier contributions to Lewis Carroll's nonsense literature, see Nöth 1980.

³ Cf. Nöth 2002, 2005.

tautological. As will be seen, self-reference is one of the sources of Edward Lear's literary nonsense.

Self-referential stereotypes

Edward Lear is the author of 216 limericks.⁴ Although not the inventor of the poetic form, he raised it from the category of popular or "light" poetry to the status of a literary genre.⁵ Lear's limericks are extremely stereotypical in their metrical, syntactic, and semantic form, and there are critics who have even deplored a certain monotony in them.⁶

The metrical structure consists of five lines rhyming *aabba* in anapaestic or amphibrachic meter⁷ with three stresses in lines 1, 2, and 5 and two stresses in lines 3 and 4. (A first syllable may remain uncounted.) Lines 3 and 4 in most editions of Lear's poems are printed as two hemistiches in one line so that the five verses have four lines with the stress pattern 3-3-4-3. The metrical structure is best illustrated with an example, in which the stress pattern is marked in bold:

⁴ The standard edition is Holbrook Jackson's *Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* of 1947. It omits three limericks which Lear himself excluded from the third edition of his *Book of Nonsense* of 1861. Stemmler's bilingual edition of 1988 contains all of Lear's 216 limericks, enumerated from 1 to 215, leaving the limerick from the title page unnumbered. Nr. 1-112 correspond to pp. 3-58 in Jackson's edition, nr. 113-212 to pp. 159-208. Nr. 213-215 are the ones omitted in Jackson's edition. The quotations will be from Jackson's edition, but following Stemmler, the spelling of "Old Person / Man / Lady" etc., which Jackson has in upper case letters on pp. 3-58, but in lower case letters pp.159-208, will be unified to upper case throughout. A digital version of the 115 limericks published by Lear between 1846 and 1861 can be found on the "Edward Lear Home Page" at <http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/>

⁵ Lear's limericks follow rather closely the model of two little anthologies of popular verse published anonymously between 1820 and 1822. For details see Hildebrandt 1970: 107-111; Byrom 1977: 50; Tigges 1987: 119-120; Stemmler 1988: 227-228.

⁶ Hildebrandt (1970: 106), for example, deplores the "monotonous rhythm" in Lear's poems, but Lear's severest critic is Legman (1991: xiii), the author of an anthology of 1700 post-Learian limericks, who criticizes, among other things, Lear's last lines as a "namby-pamby repetition of the first line – very weak, even for nonsense verse."

⁷ Cf. Brogan and Preminger 1993.



*There was an Old Person of Cassel,
Whose nose finished off in a tassel;
But they call'd out, 'Oh well! – Don't it look like a bell!'
Which perplexed that Old Person of Cassel. (186)*

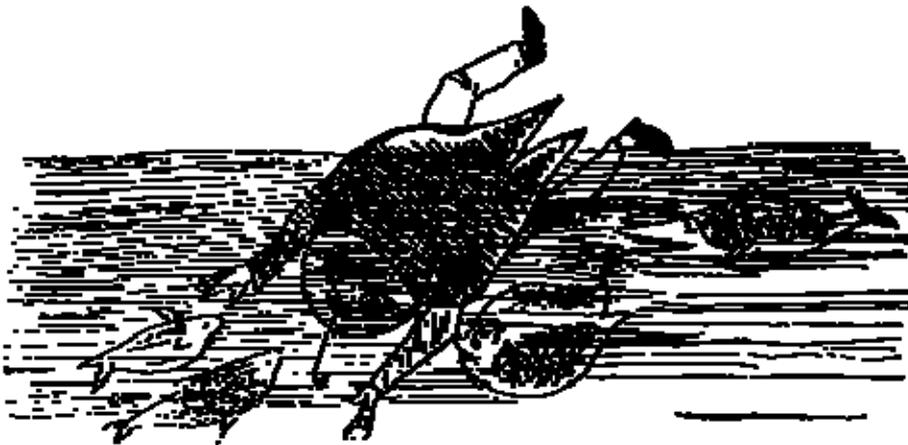
The stereotypical pattern of the syntax is even more striking. All of the 216 limericks except for the one of the title page⁸ begin with *There was*, followed by a noun phrase (NP) with the indefinite determiner (Det) *a* preceding an adjective (Adj) plus a noun (N). The adjective is either *Old* (in 178 cases) or *Young* (in 38 cases). The nouns are *Man* (91), *Person* (90), *Lady* (32), *Girl* (1), or *Sailor* (1). The grammatical gender of the noun *Person*, according to its subsequent pronominalization as *he* or *she* or, in a few cases, only according to its pictorial specification in Lear's illustration, is male in 72 cases and female in 18 cases.

After the NP of the structure Det + Adj + N, the stereotypical syntax of the first line continues mostly with a prepositional phrase Prep + N postmodifying the preceding NP in which the preposition is *of* and the noun is a place name, as in *of Cassel* (172 cases). Other prepositional phrases in this position are locative modifiers beginning with *on*, *at*, or *in* (e.g., *in a tree*, *on a hill*, *on the border*), attributive or instrumental modifiers with the preposition *with* (e.g., *with a beard*, *with a flute*) (20 cases) and a prepositional phrase with a color noun (7 cases: *in green*, *pink*, *white*, *blue*, *black*, *red*, *grey*). In 11 cases, the complement following the NP is a relative clause beginning with the possessive determiner *whose* followed by a noun that characterizes a part of the face (*whose chin*, *nose*, *eyes*) or a mental state (*whose habits*, *folly*, *despair*). In 6 cases the NP modifiers are relative clauses beginning with the pronoun *who*, followed by a performative verb of speaking or thinking (e.g., *who said*,

⁸ The first line of the limerick from the title page of the first edition of 1846 evinces the following atypical pattern: *There was an Old Derry down Derry*.

supposed, screamed out). These 17 NPs beginning with *whose* or *who* actually belong to a major syntactic stereotype of altogether 204 cases, all others of which have this pattern at the beginning of the second line, as in our first example of the *Old Person of Cassel*, *Whose nose finished off in a tassel*.

The stereotype of these 204 relative clauses can roughly be divided into two major subtypes. They either characterize the protagonist in a more detailed way as in the above example (before something happens in the next line), or they introduce an event that brings about a change in the protagonist's life as in the following dramatic example:



*There was an Old Person of Ems,
Who casually fell into the Thames;
And when he was found, they said he was drowned,
That unlucky Old Person of Ems. (56)*

After the syntactic stereotypes of the first two lines, the next locus of major stereotype is the last line. It almost always echoes the NP of the first line after *There was an* and has the following stereotypical beginnings: (1) an apposition consisting mostly of a relative pronoun plus an adjective, as in *That unlucky Old Person of Ems* (87 cases), (2) a pronoun, mostly *which*, and a verb in a relative clause that refers back to the contents of the preceding lines, as in *Which perplexed that Old Person of Cassel* (44 cases), (3) a complete sentence beginning with a pronoun and a verb followed by the NP as the object of this construction, sometimes with a conjunction at the beginning of the line (68 cases), as in this example:



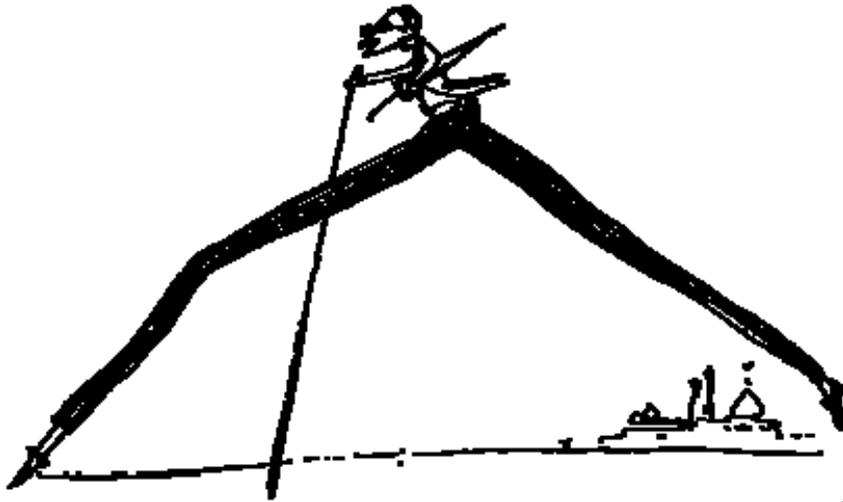
*There was an Old Man of Berlin,
Whose form was uncommonly thin;
Till he once, by mistake, was mixed up in a cake,
So they baked that Old Man of Berlin. (47)*

From the point of view of semantics, it is interesting to note how much the protagonists introduced in the first line, despite their eccentricities, are characterized in a stereotypical way. None of them has a proper name, and nothing in the verbal characterization of the 165 males and 51 females lets them appear as particularly male or female, although, in case of doubt, the illustrations always provide the information necessary for the recognition of their gender. Nor is it particularly relevant to the plot of the narrative (or pseudo-narrative) whether the agents are old or young, although it may be that some of the eccentric modes of behavior combine better with senility or immature youth.⁹ The protagonist introduced in the first line is predominantly an *old male* (in 150 cases). Among the *Old Persons*, only 14 are females (9 *Old Persons* and 5 *Old Ladies*). When the protagonist is a female, she is predominantly *Young*. All 9 *Young Persons* are females, and of the 32 *Ladies*, only five are *Old*.

A particularly interesting structural slot in the stereotypical pattern of the limerick is the attributive adjective of the appositional relative clauses of the last line. Very often it simply contributes to the redundancy of the echo line as a whole, as in *That unlucky Old Person of Ems*. The adjective *unlucky* in this line epitomizes the contents of the preceding lines whose topic is bad luck. A similar example of an adjective of this kind is the attribute *surprising* in a limerick which describes a man with legs several thousand miles long:¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Bouissac 1977: 6.

¹⁰ The semantics of this syntactically stereotypical adjective is more complex. For example, there is also a note of understatement in this particular adjective. The fate of the poor man of Ems is in fact more than merely unlucky; it is a tragedy that cost him his life. The understatement of calling a man with legs of several thousand miles long merely “surprising” instead of “incredible” or “miraculous” is even more striking. For other functions



*There was an Old Man of Coblenz.
The length of whose legs was immense;
He went with one prance, from Turkey to France,
That surprising Old Man of Coblenz. (37)*

Due to their high degree of metrical, syntactic, and semantic stereotypy, their almost formulaic character, Lear's limericks convey the impression of one type that repeats itself again and again in 216 tokens¹¹ with only minimal variations. The type, the poem's stereotypical structure, is a sign that leaves its mark in each poem of Lear's nonsense poetry. Again and again, and more than any other poem by other authors, Lear's limericks announce their genre and indicate unmistakably their author. Such permanent reference from the individual text to the text type to which it belongs is one evidence of a self-referential structure. Lear's limericks are self-referential poems insofar as they are the replicas of one type that repeats itself again and again.

Self-referential indices

A second mode of self-reference in Lear's poems is the self-reference of an index that instead of pointing somewhere else in time or space (that is, instead of being an alloreferential sign)

of this adjective and the semantics of the last line in general see Colley 1988: 294; Stemmler 1988: 229; Ávila 1996: 68-71; Esser-Hall 1997: 217-233.

¹¹ For the semiotic implications of the type/token dichotomy see Nöth 2000: 65, 133. According to Peirce, the type is a legisign and the token a replica of this legisign.

points nowhere and thus only to itself. In Lewis Carroll's Alice books there are classical and radical examples of empty indices which disappoint the reader's expectations because they point nowhere.¹² Lear's forms of indexical self-reference are less radical, more stereotypical, and more repetitive.

The very first word of each limerick, the word *There*, is an example of an indexical word that does not point anywhere. It is true, however, that this particular loss of indexicality is not an invention by Lear, but a result of a grammaticalization in the English language that reduces the locally deictic word to a mere grammatical dummy. Linguists have defined there-constructions of the *there is + NP* kind as "existential sentences", since such sentences express the notion of the existence of something.¹³ The first word, *There*, is the prototype of a local index, a word that indicates a place at some distance of the speaker, but in existential constructions, such local indexicality is absent since the unstressed *there* is a mere grammatical dummy word without any referent outside language.

Nevertheless, Lear's limericks in their great majority start out with other indexical gestures. The first words are not locally but existentially indexical since they affirm the real life existence of the protagonist described in the following. The past tense of the verb *was* indicates the time when this protagonist lived (although vaguely), and with the town of origin (such as in *Old Man of Berlin*) the poem presents a very precise local index.

Such a strong indexical setting at the beginning forms a sharp contrast to the lack of indices of reality that prevails in the continuation of the poems. None of the home towns of Lear's protagonists has any reality that goes beyond the mere place name. The specification of towns such as *Berlin*, *Cassel*, *Coblentz*, or *Ems* in the first lines, whose name is repeated once more in the last line, is never accompanied by any adverbial description. Nor do the pictures contain any descriptive indicators of these towns. The place names are empty indices. This emptiness is particularly striking in the case of the *Person of Ems*, who, in spite of his German hometown, simply falls into the English Thames. In Lear's verses, cities such as *Berlin*, *Cassel*, *Coblentz*, or *Ems* are without an identity. The place names do not indicate German cities but are needed as signs in a self-referential play with rhymes.

In a way, then, the place names refer (as any name has a referent) but at the same time do not refer to the towns which they designate. The place designated by its name is an empty place. The man from *Coblentz* could as well be from Hull or from Hurst. The referential emptiness of Lear's place names becomes most apparent in their poetic translations. The German translator of Lear's poems, for example, "translates" all place names by substitution.

¹² See Nöth 1980.

¹³ Lyons 1968: 389.

The Old Person of Cassel, for example, becomes a *Mann aus Laasphe*, and the *Old Person of Ems* is substituted by *ein Mann aus Peine*.

Nevertheless, there is no arbitrariness in the choice of Lear's place names. All of them have their determination not in geography but in the text itself. Instead of being determined by their referential object, their determination derives from the necessities of the rhyme. The *Old Man of Coblenz* comes from Germany only because his home town rhymes with *immense*. Both the poem and Lear's illustration make clear what is in the narrative foreground of this limerick: the hyperbolically immense length of his legs, and not the German city on the Rhine. Notice that the picture accompanying this limerick shows the outlines of a Turkish city at the end of one of the two immense legs but it does not show any townscape at the end of the other leg.

The choice of the place names only by the criterion of rhyme with another word means that these verbal signs have their referents not outside but only within the text. *Coblenz* is a geographically empty index which turns out to be a verbal icon that echoes (or announces) another word of the poem to which it refers by rhyme. In this sense, the place names of Lear's poems are textually self-referential signs. Their referents are not geographical places but speech sounds in a textual world.

Self-referential icons: Echoes and mirror images

A further type of self-reference in Lear's limericks is the self-referential circularity that results from the stereotypical partial repetition of the first line in the last line. This mode of circular self-reference from words at the end to words in the beginning of the text evinces iconicity since the repeated word is an iconic sign of its precursor. The self-reference in question is thus iconic self-reference.

It has often been pointed out that the structure of Lear's last lines differs markedly from the structure of the last lines of the limericks written in the more popular (often erotic) tradition of 19th and 20th century light verse:¹⁴ The chief tendency in post-Learean limerick poetry "has been the use of the final line for surprise or witty reversal, in place of the simply

¹⁴ The traditional limerick, as exemplified in Leman's anthology of 1700 limericks (Legman, ed. 1991), requires a "good last line" which brings the climax of a plot (cf. Tigges 1987: 103). – Hildebrandt (1970: 110) comments on the great difference between Lear's limerick and the limerick tradition after Lear as follows: "Lears Limericks dem gegenüber zu stellen, was nach ihnen kam, hieße zwei Welten mit einander zu konfrontieren. [...] Lear hat den Limerick lediglich als Form bekannt gemacht, seine Inhalte und deren Darstellungsweisen fanden kaum Nachfolger."

repeated last line of Lear's day."¹⁵ Whereas in this tradition, the last line contains a climax which brings the dénouement of a plot,¹⁶ Lear's last lines, as discussed above, are stereotypical echoes of the first lines with only minor variations. Commentators on the self-referential nature of this circular device have observed that "the last line merely duplicates the text and thus refers back to the text without any comment",¹⁷ that "Lear's limericks turn in upon themselves [...] in effect refusing [...] to leave the nonsense world"¹⁸ or that with this device, "the limerick remains self-referential in a circular way without bringing a progress of knowledge."¹⁹

A related but only occasionally occurring device of iconic self-reference is the device of the mirror image in Lear's illustrations. An image *A* which repeats itself in its mirror image *A'* is evidently a special case of iconic self-reference. The mirror images of pictures have a parallel in the rhyming echoes of verbal language. Both are forms of iconic self-reference in contiguity.

In most examples of mirror images in Lear's illustrations, animals are involved. Either the picture of the animal is duplicated or even multiplied, or the animal has its mirror image in an animal-like human figure. The illustration to Lear's *Old Man of Dumbree* limerick (184) combines both cases of mirroring: the image of the owls repeats itself in an almost endless sequence, but at the same time, the *Old Man* who is their teacher has his own striking similarities to the owls that he faces:

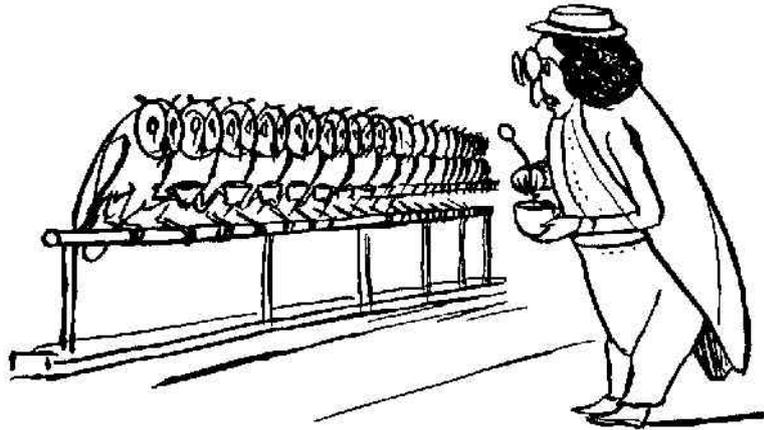
¹⁵ Brogan and Preminger 1993: 694.

¹⁶ Cf. Baring-Gould 1968: 13.

¹⁷ Lang 1982: 40.

¹⁸ Ede 1987: 116.

¹⁹ Lang (1982: 40): „Der Limerick bleibt somit zirkulär auf sich selbst bezogen, ohne dass in der Zirkularität ein Erkenntnisgewinn läge (kein progressiver Zirkel).“ Köhler's (1989: 22) comment on the following last line, "That doubtful old man of Spithead" (p. 203 in Jackson's edition), is: „Statt eines Kommentars variiert die Schlusszeile einfach den Anfangsvers, und die überraschende Charakterisierung als ‚doubtful‘ wird vom Text nicht gerechtfertigt und erscheint deshalb weder als positive noch als negative Wertung.“ Legman's harsh criticism of Lear's "invariable echoic last lines" is that they "represent a clear failure of nerve, an inability to take the obvious and final jump, and to resolve even the stated nursery situation in some satisfactory way" (Legman 1991: xiii).

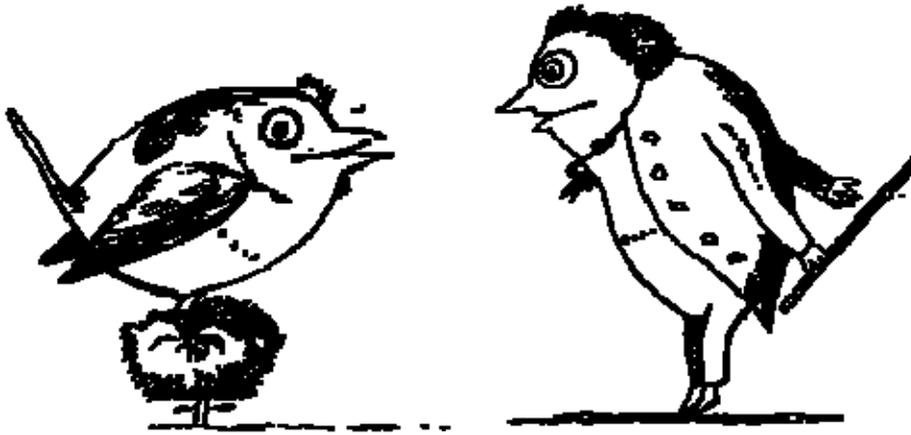


*There was an Old Man of Dumbree,
 Who taught little owls to drink tea;
 For he said, 'To eat mice, is not proper or nice'
 That amiable Man of Dumbree. (184)*

The same device of visual multiplication appears in the representation of the twenty sons of the *Old Man of Apulia* (24), of the five daughters of the *Old Man of Marseilles* (20), the *several cousins* of the *Old Person of Rhodes* (28) who are drawn in a row of more than twenty, of the twenty-five sons of the *Old Person of Sparta* (54), and in a few more.

Examples of men who appear as mirror images²⁰ of animals (or vice versa) are the *Old Man in a Marsh* (165), whose image reflects the shape of the frog with whom he is in dialogue, the *Old Man of El Hums* (180), who picks crumbs from the ground like four birds of his size and shape, the *Old Person of Skye* (189), who dances with a *Bluebottle fly* (189), the *Old Man with an Owl* (51), and the *Old Person of Crowle Who lived in the nest of an owl* (195), the *Old Person of Nice, Whose associates were usually Geese* (198), and finally this *Old Man who said, 'Hush!'* (42), whose shape is the mirror image of a *bird in a bush*:

²⁰ See also Lear's illustration of the *Old Person of Tring* who gazes at his mirror image in the moon.



*There was an Old Man who said, 'Hush!
I perceive a young bird in this bush!'
When they said – 'Is it small?' He replied – 'Not at all!
It is four times as big as the bush!'*(42)

After our evidence of self-reference in limericks in the form of stereotypical repetitions, misleading indices, mirroring, echoic repetitions, and circularities, it is perhaps not surprising to see that Susan Stewart, in her brilliant anthropological study of nonsense in folklore and popular verse, has set up a number of features of verbal nonsense that can be identified as self-referential according to our own previous discussion: reversals and inversions, misdirection (self-referential indices), discourse that denies itself, repetition and quotation, nesting, circularity, serialization, and variation in repetition.²¹ These features of nonsense can be identified in a long cultural tradition, from Rabelais to the surrealist, from carnival to travesty shows. Lear's own contribution to this tradition is rather moderate in the sense of never being radical to the utmost, but there is one respect in which Lear can be called a self-referential radical: his unsurpassed insistence on repetition in a limerick form that has become associated only with himself.

Pseudo-narrative circularities

It is a strange paradox that Lear's limericks are poems but begin like fairy tales. The set opening phrase of the type *There was an Old Man with a beard* (3) introduces the scenario of a protagonist of adventures in some indefinite past. One of the English fairytales collected by Joseph Jacobs, for example, begins very similarly with the words: *There were two men of*

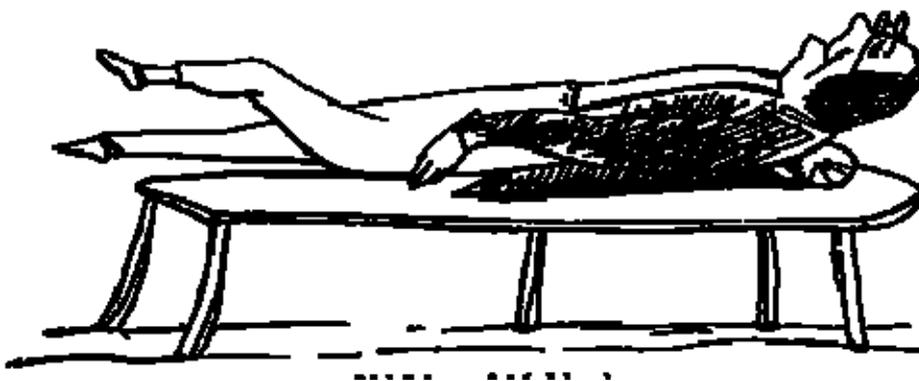
²¹ Stewart 1978: v, passim.

Gotham.²² However, in spite of their initial narrative scenario, Lear's opening phrases are rarely the beginning of a genuine narrative.

A prototypical narrative has a circular structure and it follows a logic of action and events. There is circularity insofar as the end refers back to a beginning which is either the same (in a happy ending after an initial happiness) or its opposite (in an ending that overcomes an initial state of misery or brings a final tragedy after an initial happiness). In a fairy tale, the story begins with an initial state of happiness or misery, and it ends with a return to the initial state of happiness after many adventures or with a final reversal of the initial state that brings happiness after misery or catastrophe after happiness. The ending that recuperates the beginning as well as the ending that reverses it are the two main forms of narrative circularity.²³

In Lear's limericks, there are two stereotypical deviations from the prototype of a narrative circle. The first is lack of narrative dynamics because of an initial state that does not develop at all; the second is incoherence because of the substitution of narrative causality by chance or a mere juxtaposition of unconnected events. The *Old Man of Dumbree* and the *Old Person of Cassel* are examples of the first kind. Nothing really happens after the initial scenario in which the *Dumbree Man* teaches owls to drink tea and the *Old Person of Cassel* is introduced and identified with his peculiar nose. It is true that the pseudo-narrative of the *Man of Dumbree* still evinces some traces of a narrative logic since the readers are informed of the motive of the protagonist's action; apparently he is a fanatic vegetarian, but the *Old Person of Cassel* does not act at all, he is only the object of comments.

The most radically static limerick scenario is probably the one of the *Old Man of Moldavia*. He does nothing but sleep:



²² Jacobs 1894: 204.

²³ Nöth 2000: 400-409.

*There was an Old Man of Moldavia,
Who had the most curious behaviour;
For while he was able, he slept on a table.
That funny Old Man of Moldavia. (11)*

The static effect inherent in the pseudo-narrative of many of Lear's limericks has a structural parallel in the stereotypical return of the first in the last line. Colley describes this self-referential effect of Lear's pseudo-narrative as follows: "The action continuously falls back on itself; when events in the limericks appear to be engaging in time, they are, in effect, moving neither backwards nor forwards. Like the set opening and closing lines of the verses, they return to themselves, untouched by time."²⁴

The second stereotypical deviation from the prototypical narrative is well exemplified by the limericks about the *Old Man of Berlin* and *The Old Person of Ems*. In both examples, there is a dramatic event which causes a tragic transformation from the state of life to the state of death. However, this transformation is not determined by a logic of action but *by mistake* or *casually*. The consequence of such pseudo-narrative concatenation of events, as Colley observes, is that

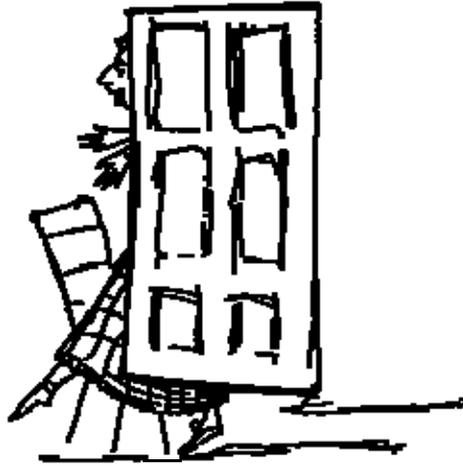
[Lear's] limericks are unoccupied by tragedy. The action and words of the text bound along, blithely inviting the reader to accept a Young Lady's purchasing 'some clogs and small spotty dogs' as a literal fact, requiring neither motive nor consequence. No slight temptation beckons the reader to consider what happens before or after the event. Because the action flows freely out of context, anything can happen, and nothing matters. [...The] verses set up a logical sequence of events which Lear's limericks subvert by only pretending to move forward from cause to effect.²⁵

Lear has quite a number of such plots which develop by chance, for example, the one of the *Lady of Norway*. Like in the plot of the *Old Man of Berlin*, the lack of narrative causality and credibility are increased by the lack of emotional involvement of the participants in the event:²⁶

²⁴ Colley 1988: 290.

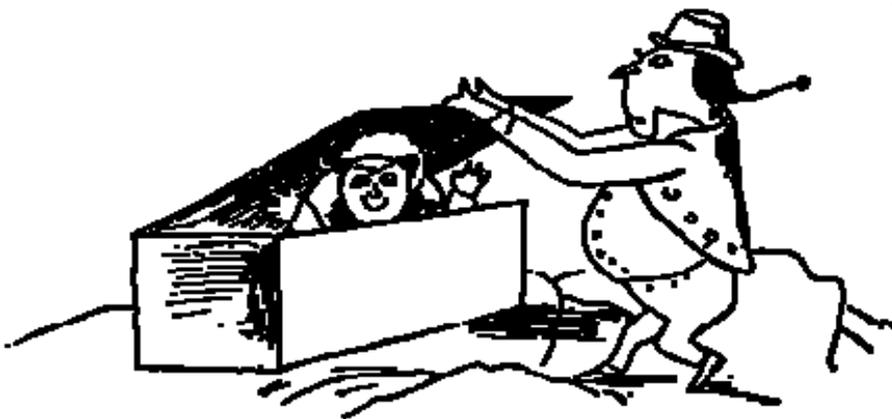
²⁵ Colley 1988: 291, 293.

²⁶ Tigges (1988: 55) defines lack of emotional involvement as one of the essential elements of nonsense literature.



*There was a Young Lady of Norway,
Who casually sat on a doorway;
When the door squeezed her flat, she exclaimed, 'What of that?'*
This courageous Young Lady of Norway. (18)

Pseudo-narrative juxtaposition results from the omission of the causes or reasons which might connect and thus explain the transformation of the initial to the final state. The limerick of *The Old Man on some rocks* is a good example. The man might have his reasons for his cruelty against his wife, but the text does not indicate them and restricts itself to juxtaposing the initial state of the wife before with the final state of the wife after her confinement in the box:



*There was an Old Man on some rocks,
Who shut his wife up in a box;
When she said, 'Let me out,' he exclaimed, 'Without doubt,
You will pass all your life in that box.' (36)*

Without narrative causality or with an initial state that remains unchanged, the plot evinces a static scenario. The resulting pseudo-narrative creates the impression of a recursive loop which, despite its initial narrative gesture, fails to move away from its point of departure. The point of narrative departure perpetuates itself in the pseudo-narrative. When it is changed merely by chance or when it changes in a way that lacks credibility, the pseudo-narrative refers back to its initial state and conveys the impression that there has been no narrative development at all.

Further perspectives: Self-reference, literature, and life

Self-reference is by no means restricted to literary nonsense. Instead, it is a distinctive feature of literature and even of life in general. At the biological level of life, self-reference is a necessity for survival. Any organism must be able to distinguish between itself and other organisms; otherwise it is threatened by auto-destruction.²⁷ At the social and cultural level of human life, the complementarity of the self and the other are prerequisites of social and cultural development.²⁸ In literature and art, self-reference is evident in the aesthetic principle of *l'art pour l'art* and of the poem “written solely for the poem’s sake,” as Alexander Pope put it.²⁹ Repetition in its many forms and variations is one of the chief characteristics of a poetry indebted to this aesthetics. Lear’s repetitive stereotypes come close to tautologies,³⁰ as we have seen, but tautologies are Janus-faced. They can be a stylistic *vitium* or a source of monotony, but they can also be a source of poetic delight, according to the eternal principle *repetitio delectat*.³¹

Self-reference is a recurrent feature in Lear’s limericks, as discussed so far, but Lear’s nonsense poetry has many other aspects which are highly (allo)referential. There is the grotesque hypertrophy of the protagonists’ bodies (long noses, beards, fatness, long legs, etc.³²) with occasional sexual connotations,³³ there are the metamorphoses of humans into

²⁷ Cf Nöth 2004.

²⁸ Cf. Nöth 2001.

²⁹ Cf. Nöth 2000: 426, 453, 458.

³⁰ Tautology is closely related to paradox (cf. Luhmann 1987: 170-171), and paradox to both nonsense and humor (Stewart 1978: 28-31, 36-38). – On the affinities between tautology and art, see Plumpe 1990. The most relevant philosophical statement in this context is by Friedrich Schlegel: „Eine Philosophie der Poesie würde mit der Selbständigkeit des Schönen beginnen, mit dem Satz, dass es vom Wahren und Sittlichen getrennt sein *solle*, und dass es mit diesem gleiche Rechte habe; welches für den, der es überhaupt nur begreifen kann, schon aus dem Satz folgt, dass *Ich = Ich* sei.“

³¹ Cf. Koch 1982.

³² Stemmler (1988: 229) sees autobiographical evidence in these drawings: „Lears physische Merkmale tauchen hier grotesk übertrieben wieder auf: gewaltiger Bart, große Nase, dünne Beine, rundlicher Körper.“

animal-like beings and of animals into quasi-human beings, and there is always the theme of cultural transgressions permitted under the guise of nonsense and popular verse. The frames of reference in the verbal and pictorial representations of such transgressions are conformity to (and deviation from) a bodily norm and the rules of culture.³⁴ But even in these transgressions there is the topic of the self. The self appears in the form of the protagonist when he or she is confronted with the others who appear in an anonymous group referred to as *they*. *They* criticize the *Old Person of Cassel* for his long nose, *they* comment on the drowning of the *Old Person of Ems*, and *they* even kill the *Old Man of Berlin*. In such scenes, the nonconformist and anticultural self appears in confrontation with a cultural other in power of the cultural codes that determine and stigmatize the deviations of the self. The self outside of the cultural codes turns out to be the reversed mirror image of the other that determines its deviations from this code.

NOTES

1. Cf. Hildebrandt 1970, Byrom 1977, Stewart 1978, Lang 1982, Tigges, ed. 1987, Colley 1988, Tigges 1988, Köhler 1989, Lecercle 1994, Ávila 1996, Esser-Hall 1997.
2. For earlier contributions to Lewis Carroll's nonsense literature, see Nöth 1980.
3. Cf. Nöth 2002, 2005.
4. The standard edition is Holbrook Jackson's *Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* of 1947. It omits three limericks which Lear himself excluded from the third edition of his *Book of Nonsense* of 1861. Stemmler's bilingual edition of 1988 contains all of Lear's 216 limericks, enumerated from 1 to 215 leaving the limerick from the title page unnumbered. Nr. 1-112 correspond to pp. 3-58 in Jackson's edition, nr. 113-212 to pp. 159-208. Nr. 213-215 are the ones omitted in Jackson's edition. The quotations will be from Jackson's edition, but following Stemmler, the spelling of "Old Person / Man / Lady" etc., which Jackson has in upper case letters on pp. 3-58, but in lower case letters pp. 159-208, will be unified to upper case throughout.
A digital version of the 115 limericks published by Lear between 1846 and 1861 can be found on the "Edward Lear Home Page" at <http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/>
5. Lear's limericks follow rather closely the model of two little anthologies of popular verse published anonymously between 1820 and 1822. For details see Hildebrandt 1970: 107-111; Byrom 1977: 50; Tigges 1987: 119-120; Stemmler 1988: 227-228.
6. Hildebrandt (1970: 106), for example, deplors the "monotonous rhythm" in Lear's poems, but Lear's severest critic is Legman (1991: xiii), the author of an anthology of 1700 post-Learian limericks, who criticizes, among other things, Lear's last lines as a "namby-pamby repetition of the first line – very weak, even for nonsense verse."
7. Cf. Brogan and Preminger 1993.

³³ Paul Bouissac, in an e-mail comment on the present paper observes: "I read many times these limericks many times in the past, as well as other nonsensical poems by Lear. Every time I was struck by the impression that they may be palimpsests, poems written over other limericks less 'clean' than the ones he published. [...] My impression remains that these limericks are clever rewritings 'ad usum delphini', but without losing any of their transgressive contents. For instance, [...] 'tassel' is children talk for 'penis' and naturally 'bell(s)', under any other form, stands in many languages for 'testicles'. But also 'tassel' and 'bell' belong to the vocabulary of the church and the school. It may be indeed that the name of the city is always totally arbitrary, or rather determined by the rhyme, but I am not entirely sure."

³⁴ According to Bouissac (1971: 2-3; see also Rodde 1994: 141), the limerick is a place of metacultural discourse for the manipulation of cultural codes. As Bouissac (*ibid.*: 7) points out, the transgressions are not only shown, but often also denounced. The one who transgresses the rules or deviates from the norm is at the same time denounced and excluded from the group.

8. The first line of the limerick from the title page of the first edition of 1846 evinces the following atypical pattern: *There was an Old Derry down Derry*.
9. Cf. Bouissac 1977: 6.
10. The semantics of this syntactically stereotypical adjective is more complex. For example, there is also a note of understatement in this particular adjective. The fate of the poor man of Ems is in fact more than merely unlucky; it is a tragedy that cost him his life. The understatement of calling a man with legs of several thousand miles long merely “surprising” instead of “incredible” or “miraculous” is even more striking. For other functions of this adjective and the semantics of the last line in general see Colley 1988: 294; Stemmler 1988: 229; Ávila 1996: 68-71; Esser-Hall 1997: 217-233.
11. For the semiotic implications of the type/token dichotomy see Nöth 2000: 65, 133. According to Peirce, the type is a legisign and the token a replica of this legisign.
12. See Nöth 1980.
13. Lyons 1968: 389.
14. The traditional limerick, as exemplified in Legman’s anthology of 1700 limericks (Legman, ed. 1991), requires a “good last line” which brings the climax of a plot (cf. Tigges 1987: 103). – Hildebrandt (1970: 110) comments on the great difference between Lear’s limerick and the limerick tradition after Lear as follows: “Lears Limericks dem gegenüber zu stellen, was nach ihnen kam, hieße zwei Welten einander konfrontieren. [...] Lear hat den Limerick lediglich als Form bekannt gemacht, seine Inhalte und deren Darstellungsweisen fanden kaum Nachfolger.“
15. Brogan and Preminger 1993: 694.
16. Cf. Baring-Gould 1968: 13.
17. Lang 1982: 40.
18. Ede 1987: 116.
19. Lang (1982: 40): „Der Limerick bleibt somit zirkulär auf sich selbst bezogen, ohne dass in der Zirkularität ein Erkenntnisgewinn läge (kein progressiver Zirkel).“ Köhler’s (1989: 22) comment on the following last line, “That doubtful old man of Spithead” (p. 203 in Jackson’s edition), is: „Statt eines Kommentars variiert die Schlusszeile einfach den Anfangsvers, und die überraschende Charakterisierung als ‚doubtful‘ wird vom Text nicht gerechtfertigt und erscheint deshalb weder als positive noch als negative Wertung.“ Legman’s harsh criticism of Lear’s “invariable echoic last lines” is that they “represent a clear failure of nerve, an inability to take the obvious and final jump, and to resolve even the stated nursery situation in some satisfactory way” (Legman 1991: xiii).
20. See also Lear’s illustration of the *Old Person of Tring* who gazes at his mirror image in the moon.
21. Stewart 1978: v, passim.
22. Jacobs 1894.
23. Nöth 2000: 400-409.
24. Colley 1988: 290.
25. Colley 1988: 291, 293.
26. Tigges (1988: 55) defines lack of emotional involvement as one of the essential elements of nonsense literature.
27. Cf. Nöth 2004.
28. Cf. Nöth 2001.
29. Cf. Nöth 2000: 426, 453, 458.
30. Tautology is closely related to paradox (cf. Luhmann 1987: 170-171), and paradox to both nonsense and humor (Stewart 1978: 28-31, 36-38). – On the affinities between tautology and art, see Plumpe 1990. The most relevant philosophical statement in this context is by Friedrich Schlegel: „Eine Philosophie der Poesie würde mit der Selbständigkeit des Schönen beginnen, mit dem Satz, dass es vom Wahren und Sittlichen getrennt sein *solle*, und dass es mit diesem gleiche Rechte habe; welches für den, der es überhaupt nur begreifen kann, schon aus dem Satz folgt, dass *Ich = Ich* sei.“
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