

Essay title: Romantic Poetry and Victorian Nonsense Poetry: Some Directions of Travel

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Abstract: This essay explores links between Victorian nonsense poetry and poetry of the Romantic period, with a focus on narratives of quest, voyaging and escape. It discusses brief instances from various writers of the two periods and moves on to a more developed comparison between Wordsworth and Edward Lear, centring on ‘The Blind Highland Boy’. The comparison between periods leads to an argument that self-critique and scepticism were quite robustly in place from the start in the romantic period, and that obstacles to sense could at times be experienced not just as perplexity but as enjoyment shared with an audience. It also points to a further appreciation of some of the less canonical works by the most canonical writers, and suggests a tradition in which romantic aspiration was often coolly linked to a sense of absurdity.

Keywords: romanticism, nonsense poetry, quests, voyages, romantic Victorianism

Romantic Poetry and Victorian Nonsense Poetry: Some Directions of Travel

Peter Swaab

We are used to asking what was Victorian about nonsense writing, but this essay takes the slightly different approach of asking what was Romantic about it. Various thematic and generic links suggest themselves as possible approaches. First, we might say that nonsense brings a cooling comic self-consciousness to many of the dramas of romanticism – for instance those involving childhood, isolation, utopian dreams, travel and imperialism. In exploring sublimity, nonsense always grounds it in absurdity, chiefly the absurdity of love in Edward Lear, and of meaning in Lewis Carroll. Second, the links between nonsense writing and children make it an inheritor of romantic debates about the twin states of innocence and experience. Third, if romanticism can be seen as Harold Bloom once proposed as the ‘internalization of quest-romance’¹, then nonsense writing is its re-externalisation. It is an externalisation in the mock-heroic mode, with the rider that the mock-heroic does not only mock the heroic but re-imagines it too. Fourth, as a departure from our norms nonsense is always a form of travel literature. In setting out from the normal world nonsense is a

¹ Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), 3-24.

genre in which, as Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*, ‘the light of sense / Goes out’.² However, it goes out not completely but ‘in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world’. William Empson suggested in his seminal essay on ‘sense’ in *The Prelude* that the metaphor implied a lighthouse’s intermittences of illumination: ‘Wordsworth induces his baffling *sense* to become a lighthouse occasionally flashing....The ecstasy both destroys normal sense and fulfils it.’³ Fifth and lastly for now, nonsense writing is sceptical about the entire project of making sense. It assumes that we may be up to something important and worthwhile when we stop making sense. In this we might see it as an escalation of Keatsian negative capability, ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—’.⁴ Nonsense resides in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, it makes these its imaginative ground. It is a genre that acknowledges by its name that its capability in relation to sense is a negative one. It doesn’t make a song and dance about these limitations on understanding except by making them the matter of song and dance. Nonsense writing, to conclude these opening thoughts, should not be seen as the opposite or abolition of sense but as partial sense – a negotiation about where and how far we can get with being sensible. Ambivalences around that idea enrich nineteenth-century writing across the sometimes unhelpful period bridge dividing romanticism and Victorianism.

² ‘In such strength / Of usurpation, in such visitings / Of awful promise, when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode’: *The Prelude* (1805 text), VI. 532-6.

³ *The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951), 294-5.

⁴ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Rollins (2 vols, Harvard, 1958), i. 193; to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 December 1817.

Romanticism and nonsense are each large, disputable and multiform categories. This essay is an attempt at relating the two, at thinking about some of the dimensions and implications of what feels like a rich area of affinity and influence. Its perspective on transporting is twofold. First, on how some of the ideas and methods of the romantic period were carried over to the heyday of nonsense writing; second, on the representation in each of quests, outings and voyages. I start with a range of representative instances from major writers of the romantic period, and then focus on a comparison of Wordsworth and Edward Lear before some concluding thoughts.

The first is from William Blake, from one of the songs in the early ‘An Island in the Moon’, in which the baby of corruption is imagined giving some kind of monstrous incestuous birth.

And as he ran to seek his mother
He met with a dead woman
He fell in love & married her
A deed which is not common⁵

The ‘marriage hearse’ of ‘London’ is in prospect here, a nightmare world of generation turned upside down. When so much of what governs the world is against the rules of sense in such ways, then a rude overturning of conventional moral norms can be progressive as well as contrary. Blake sometimes imagines such reversals in exuberant and comic spirit, most notably in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. When we hear of Ezekiel who ‘eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side’ and Isaiah

⁵ *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth, 1977), 64.

who went ‘naked and barefoot three years’ (*Poems*, 187), we are not far from the world of Edward Lear’s limericks. In the penultimate ‘Memorable Fancy’ of the poem the angel conducts the narrator on a journey of revelation that also turns the world upside down: ‘down the winding cavern we groped our tedious way till a void boundless as a nether sky appeared beneath us. & we held by the roots of trees and hung over this immensity’ (*Poems*, 190).

The second instance comes from the other end of the period, from Hemans’s anthology piece ‘Casabianca’.

The boy stood on the burning deck,
Whence all but he had fled;
The flame that lit the battle’s wreck,
Shone round him o’er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
As born to rule the storm;
A creature of heroic blood,
A proud, though childlike form.

The flames rolled on – he would not go,
Without his father’s word;
That father, faint in death below,
His voice no longer heard.⁶

⁶ Felicia Hemans, *Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Princeton, NJ, 2010), 428-9.

Spike Milligan was one of many goaded into adapting or parodying the poem. ‘The boy stood on the burning deck / Whence all but he had fled — / Twit’.⁷ What sense is there, the poem wonders, in adhering to a code of conduct when it leads to death? Is it glory or idiocy? This is a question that will echo into such Victorian works as “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ and *The Hunting of the Snark*. The fourth stanza of the poem, indeed, sounds like an exchange from Lewis Carroll, from *Alice in Wonderland*’s ‘Father William’.

First Hemans:

He called aloud – ‘Say, father, say
If yet my task is done?’
He knew not that the chieftain lay
Unconscious of his son. (Hemans, 428)

And then Carroll:

‘You are old, father William,’ the young man said,
‘And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head —
Do you think, at your age, it is right?’

‘In my youth,’ father William replied to his son,

⁷ Spike Milligan, ‘Casabazonka’ in *The Magical World of Milligan*, ed. Norma Farnes (London, 1999).

‘I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again.’⁸

These are a couple of father-son exchanges that are going nowhere. Hemans’s questions about heroism and absurdity linger on into *The Hunting of the Snark* (1872), in which all the crew members, as if adhering dutifully to the alliteration of the boy on the burning deck, begin with the letter B (Bellman, Baker, Beaver, Butcher etc). A further but more direct afterlife of Hemans’ poem comes in ‘Casabianca’ by Elizabeth Bishop, one of the twentieth-century poets most interestingly inspired by nonsense, along with Auden and Stevie Smith. Her version deepens Hemans by seeing the story of grand compulsion as a story of love.

Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite ‘The boy stood on
the burning deck.’ Love's the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down.

Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors, who
would like a schoolroom platform, too,

⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense: Collected Poems*, ed. Gillian Beer (London, 2012), 91.

or an excuse to stay

on deck. And love's the burning boy.⁹

A brief example from Shelley, at the end of 'The Sensitive Plant', supplies a perspective from which the story that comprised the poem was all nonsense.

but in this life

Of error, ignorance and strife—

Where nothing is— but all things seem,

And we the shadows the dream,

It is a modest creed, and yet

Pleasant if one considers it,

To own that death itself must be

Like all the rest, — a mockery.¹⁰

Nonsense sometimes overlaps with such truths of wisdom literature, in which human life is seen as a mockery. The modesty of the creed can be heard through the modesty of Shelley's rhyme 'and yet / Pleasant if one considers it', with a feeling of what a relief it can be to let it all go, to relax into mockery.

⁹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York, 2011), 7.

¹⁰ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), 218.

Romanticism sometimes offered an invitation to visit places in which the sense of something far more deeply interfused could sound like no sense at all. ‘The Child is father of the Man’, wrote Wordsworth.¹¹ ‘Really?’, answered Hopkins.

‘The child is father to the man.’

How can he be? The words are wild.

Suck any sense from that who can:

‘The child is father to the man.’

No; what the poet did write ran,

‘The man is father to the child.’

‘The child is father to the man!’

How *can* he be? The words are wild.¹²

The charm of Hopkins’ poem lies in how it preserves a respect and affection for the original (albeit misquoting it slightly). The joke works both ways; sturdy common sense has its own preposterousness converting everything to its own optics. ‘No; what the poet did write ran, / “The man is father to the child”’. It did not take Nabokov to show that textual editors can run mad too. What most often gets called nonsense has no monopoly on the ridiculous.

¹¹ ‘My heart leaps up when I behold’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 246.

¹² ‘A Trio of Triolets. No 3 — “The Child is Father to the Man” (Wordsworth)’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 1986), 157-8.

It would not be difficult to multiply suggestive examples from other major writers of the period. Of those not yet mentioned perhaps Coleridge and Byron have the richest literary dealings with the limits and bafflement of sense, together with the freedoms and perils of taking leave of it. However, for the rest of this essay I will focus my attention on a more extended comparison, looking at the great inaugurative figure of Wordsworth as a precursor to Edward Lear.¹³

One way to see Wordsworth's 'Idiot Boy', Johnny, is as a hero of nonsense, asserting a world turned upside down as he makes answer to his mother's questioning:

And thus, to Betty's question, he
Made answer, like a traveller bold,
(His very words I give to you),
'The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold.' —
Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel's story.¹⁴

'And that was all his travel's story': we can hear 'that was all' in two ways, the glory and integrity of 'that was the whole thing' or the shrugging concession of 'that's your lot'. The turn of phrase comes back a generation later at a moment comparably suspended between revelation and disappointment:

¹³ Wordsworth is perhaps more frequently juxtaposed with Lewis Carroll, prompted by the parodic relation to 'Resolution and Independence' of the White Knight's song 'I'll tell thee everything I can'; see *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense*, 215-7.

¹⁴ *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London, 1992), 169.

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹⁵

Is the urn uttering the achievement of knowledge or its frustration? And is there a hint of something absurd about a vocalising pot, as there would be 40 years later in Fitzgerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, where we overhear a group of pots philosophising by night?

Shapes of all Sorts and Sizes, great and small,
That stood along the floor and by the wall;
And some loquacious Vessels were; and some
Listen’d perhaps, but never talk’d at all.

[....]

Whereat some one of the loquacious Lot—
I think a Súfi pipkin—waxing hot—
‘All this of Pot and Potter—Tell me then,
Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?’¹⁶

¹⁵ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, in *Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London, 1970), 537.

¹⁶ Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford, 2009), 86; 1879 version, stanzas LXXXIII and LXXVII.

That's the 1879 version; in 1868 what Fitzgerald called the 'Pot-theism' of the 'Súfi pipkin' had sounded more exasperated, more urgent, and perhaps more nonsensical: 'Who makes—Who sells—Who buys—Who *is* the Pot?'¹⁷ The poet as pot, perhaps.

Alongside 'The Idiot Boy' Wordsworth's other great comic poem of 1798 is 'Peter Bell'. If the Idiot Boy narrator could be teasing, then, David Bromwich suggests, the narrator of 'Peter Bell' appears to 'fret very little about the needs of an audience'; he is 'a dotard teller whose hints we must screen out to read through'.¹⁸ There is a sense in the poem that not fretting may be the way to make it work for the audience; it is an experiment in insouciance. And some of the time we need not read *through* this narrator; his mode is his message. Telling the story so simply, helplessly, unhurriedly to the poem's audience of children is a way of giving permission to fantasy. It might really for instance make little folks merry. INSERT FIG 1 [ie 'There was an old Derry down Derry, / Who loved to see little folks merry; / So he made them a Book, / And with laughter they shook / At the fun of that Derry down Derry!'¹⁹] There's happiness to be had and given in taking such leave of your senses, as Lear's drawing shows. This was a permission Wordsworth afforded himself for a brief while in such poems as 'The Two Thieves', 'The Idiot Boy' and 'Peter Bell'.²⁰

¹⁷ 'Pot-theism' is Fitzgerald's coinage, in a note added to the poem in 1872; see Karlin's notes in *Rubáiyát*, 92.

¹⁸ *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago, 1998), 127, 126.

¹⁹ *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*, ed. Vivien Noakes (London, 2001), 71.

²⁰ For valuable discussions of Wordsworth's comic mode see Donald Davie's essay 'Dionysus in "Lyrical Ballads"' in *Wordsworth's Mind and Art*, ed. A.W. Thomson

The prologue to 'Peter Bell' begins by seeming to bring the poet back from his sky balloon, back down to earth and a village scene, from a deep romantic land that this poem calls 'fairyland'.

There was a time, a time indeed,
A time when poets lived in clover.
What boots it now to keep the key
Of Fairyland? for, woe is me!
Those blessed days are over.

There is a party in the Bower,
Round the stone table in my garden;
The squire is there, and as I guess,
His pretty little daughter Bess,
With Harry the church-warden.

They were to come this very evening,
They know not I have been so far,
I see them there, in number nine,
All in the bower of Weymouth pine,
I see them, there they are.

(Edinburgh, 1969), 110-39, and two essays by Matthew Bevis, 'Wordsworth at Play', in *Essays in Criticism* 61 (2011), 54-78, and 'Wordsworth's Folly' in *The Wordsworth Circle* 43 (2012), 146-51.

And there's the wife of Parson Swan,
And there's my good friend Stephen Otter.
And, ere the light of evening fail,
To them I must relate the tale
Of Peter Bell the Potter.²¹

With Parson Swan and Stephen Otter in the party we might be forgiven here for thinking we are in the world not of Peter Bell but Beatrix the Potter. The story features an ass – a donkey ass not a silly ass – and the telling conjures a magical human kinship with the world of animals. For all that it leaves behind ‘those blessed days’ and affirms the solid claim ‘I see them, there they are’, the prologue does not simply renounce the world of the sky balloon. Instead it changes one kind of enchanted world for another, at least until ‘the light of evening fail’, a phrase eloquent of the knowledge in such poems that the illumination they utter is temporary.

Wordsworth matched but reined in his visions of a comic world in ‘The Idiot Boy’ and ‘Peter Bell’ in a sequence of comic narratives spanning the decade from the *Lyrical Ballads* to the first drafting of *Benjamin, the Waggoner* in 1806 (like *Peter Bell*, it remained unpublished until 1819). Among the most interesting is ‘The Blind Highland Boy.’ This poem, which is very seldom discussed by critics, was published in 1807 in *Poems, in Two Volumes*. It tells in 41 five-line stanzas the story of a blind boy, blind from birth, who sets out on the dangerous waters of Loch Leven in a washing tub. He is rescued and brought home. Wordsworth’s Fenwick note tells us that ‘The story was told me by George Mackereth for many years parish-clerk of Grasmere. He had been an eye-witness of the occurrence. The vessel in reality was a

²¹ *Peter Bell*, ed. John E. Jordan (Ithaca, 1985), 212-3.

washing-tub, which the little fellow had met with on the shores of the loch.²² Like ‘Peter Bell’, it starts with a prologue, though this time an abbreviated one of just two stanzas establishing it as ‘A Tale told by the Fire-side’.

Now we are tired of boisterous joy,
We’ve romped enough, my little Boy!
Jane hangs her head upon my breast,
And you shall bring your Stool and rest,
This corner is your own.²³

How does the setting differ from ‘Peter Bell’? First, the narrator is female not male, a mother as against the ‘Peter Bell’ narrator whose family ties the poem leaves unmentioned. Second, she is more recognizably instructive. ‘Now we are tired of boisterous joy’ is something parents say to children who show no sign at all of being tired of boisterous joy, but need a reminder that they *ought* to be. The ‘we’ is wishful and didactic. ‘Wisdom doth grow with children round her knees’²⁴ here; the parental bond was a wilder thing in ‘The Idiot Boy’. Where Betty Foy sent Johnny out on his perilous journey for mysterious loving reasons of her own, the mother here offers a safer home.

²² Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes’ and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, 1983), 420.

²³ *Poems, in Two Volumes’ and Other Poems*, 221. Wordsworth first added the subtitle to the manuscript versions of the poem for its 1807 publication in book form.

²⁴ See Wordsworth’s sonnet, ‘I grieved for Buonaparte, with a vain’, line 9;

Wordsworth: The Major Works, 267.

The voyage away from land, safety and sense is figured as a compensatory joy, answering the blind boy's yearning to go to the far places he's heard of in stories. His rescuers pursue him.

With sound the least that can be made
They follow, more and more afraid,
More cautious as they draw more near;
But in his darkness he can hear,
And guesses their intent.

'Leigha—Leigha'—then did he cry
'Leigha—Leigha'—most eagerly;
Thus did he cry, and thus did pray,
And what he meant was, 'Keep away,
And leave me to myself!' (*Poems, in Two Volumes*, 227)

Wordsworth resorts to italics and repetition and Erse to convey the boy's desire in this uncanny thrilling way. He calls it both a cry and a prayer and glosses it in the imperative voice: 'leave me to myself!'²⁵

²⁵ Wordsworth's first manuscript version in his Commonplace Book was 'Lega, Lega' (*Poems, in Two Volumes*, 498). He consulted Walter Scott about the word for what he called 'a highland story told me by an eye witness; the man was an Englishman and the Erse word sounded in my ears like Lega....signifying—"beware", keep away, let me alone'; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*,

It is the link here between a crazy voyage and somebody finding their sole self that especially anticipates some of Edward Lear's figures. Many of the nonsense selves are wedded to self-sufficiency. His loners have no love interests, no sons and daughters, no visible relations. They like it that way and guard their isolation fiercely. This is the other side of Lear's delight in pretended extended families, something we see in such poems as 'The Scroobious Pip' and 'The Quangle Wangle's Hat' and in many of the limericks. INSERT FIG 2 AND FIG 3 [ie 'There was a Young Lady whose bonnet, / Came untied when the birds sate upon it; / But she said "I don't care! all the birds in the air / Are welcome to sit on my bonnet!"; and 'There was an Old Person of Bree, / Who frequented the depths of the sea; / She nurs'd the small fishes, and washed all the dishes / And swam back again into Bree.' (*Complete Verse*, 159, 337)]

As against these visions of harmony, the limericks often show us undivided selves, perversely untouchable and strangely triumphant. INSERT FIG 4 [ie 'There was an Old Man of Kildare, / Who climbed into a very high chair; / When he said, – "Here I stays, – till the end of my days," / That immovable Man of Kildare.' (*Complete Verse*, 107)²⁶] The situation seems permanent partly because the 'When' that starts the third line leads, ungrammatically, nowhere. But this Old Man looks contented enough, with his pipe and his immobility and his distance from the

Part 1, 1806-1811, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), 123-4; to Walter Scott, 20 January 1807.

²⁶ I draw some of the comments on Lear in this paragraph and the previous one from my essay "'Some think him....queer": Loners and Love in Edward Lear', in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, eds Matthew Bevis and James Williams (Oxford, 2016), 89-114.

telescope-using watcher below. Some of the other limerick figures also take self-sufficiency to extremes that are both adroit and grotesque. INSERT FIG 5 [ie ‘There was an Old Person of Spain, / Who hated all trouble and pain; / So he sate on a chair, with his feet in the air, / That umbrageous Old Person of Spain.’ (*Complete Verse*, 175)] Gazing at his own kneecaps, this mysterious person comprises his own support, back-rest and outlook.

One way the light of sense may go out is in blindness. ‘The Blind Highland Boy’ is one of several Wordsworthian alignments of blindness and insight – ‘In his darkness he can hear’ – often in relation to Homer and Milton, and most grandly in the passage about the blind beggar in *The Prelude* (1805 text, VII.111-40). Lear’s figures, too, sometimes look blind, or at least differently visioned. INSERT FIG 6 [ie ‘There was an Old Person of Grange, / Whose manners were scroobious and strange; / He sailed to St Blubb, in a waterproof tub, / That aquatic Old Person of Grange’ (*Complete Verse*, 359)]. Perhaps the Person of Grange found the waterproof tub on the shores of Loch Leven.²⁷ A helper animal can steer the limerick hero safely away when he seems unsighted himself. INSERT FIG 7 [ie ‘There was an Old Man whose despair / Induced him to purchase a hare; / Whereon one fine day, he rode wholly away, / Which partly assuaged his despair.’ (*Complete Verse*, 329)] The hare seems a kindly attentive creature, a counterpart to the little dog who seems to understand the

²⁷ *Poems, in Two Volumes’ and Other Poems*, 225, 421. Wordsworth bowed to Coleridge’s pressure and replaced the washing tub in later editions with an exotic ‘Turtle-shell’. Lear may have re-enlisted Wordsworth’s turtle-shell for the ending of ‘The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò’: ‘Through the silent-roaring ocean / Did the Turtle swiftly go; / Holding fast upon his shell / Rode the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò’ (*Complete Verse*, 327).

blind boy in a way beyond everybody else in the poem (*Poems, in Two Volumes*, 222, 228; lines 36-40, 186-90).²⁸ Sometimes the protagonist has no wish to look in the right direction. INSERT FIG 8 [ie ‘There was an Old Man of Messina, / Whose daughter was named Opsibeen; / She wore a small wig, and rode out on a pig, / To the perfect delight of Messina.’ (*Complete Verse*, 371)] Nonsense allows this perspective to be a ‘perfect delight’ widely shared whereas for the blind boy ‘the triumph of his joy’ is temporary.

The conjuring in ‘The Blind Highland Boy’ of the boy’s distance from the kind often echoes ‘Elegiac Stanzas on Peele Castle’, but it does not end in drowning.

Thus, after he had fondly braved

The perilous Deep, the Boy was saved;

And, though his fancies had been wild,

Yet he was pleased, and reconciled

To live in peace on shore. (*Poems, in Two Volumes*, 228)

Is nonsense poetry an art of being ‘reconciled’? or even of being ‘pleased, and reconciled’? It has sometimes been conceived in opposite terms, as a poetry of protest, for instance by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell.²⁹ But this is only one possible emphasis. Nonsense often articulates protest while also narrating or implying acquiescence. In *Lear*, for instance, there are several stories in which getting away

²⁸ *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 222, 228; lines 36-40, 186-90.

²⁹ Aldous Huxley, ‘Edward Lear,’ in *On the Margin* (London, 1923), 167–172; ‘Nonsense Poetry’, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (4 vols, Harmondsworth, 1970), iv. 64-8.

from it all leads to getting back to it all. The man of Dunluce goes out to sea, for reasons undisclosed, and then returns, also for reasons undisclosed. INSERT FIG 9 [ie ‘There was an Old Man of Dunluce, / Who went out to sea on a goose; / When he’d gone out a mile, he observ’d with a smile, “It is time to retrun to Dunluce.”’ (*Complete Verse*, 335)]. That seems to do the trick. The Jumblies go to sea in a sieve, they do, but twenty years later they all come back. ‘The Table and the Chair’ go to town for a walk, which is difficult because their legs are stiff, but then get lost and go back home (*Complete Verse*, 253-6, 277-8). Are they pleased and reconciled to be back? Maybe. Has a deep distress humanized their souls? Unlikely, because they’re pieces of furniture. The stoicism of nonsense can be lighter in tone because further from the world of all of us. Possible the Man of Dunluce and the Table and the Chair realize, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, that there’s no place like home. That may of course have been exactly why they wanted to get away from it. ‘No place’ is somewhere you can *think* of getting to and it can become like home to the imagination. ‘No place’ could translate into Greek as ‘utopia’, with the prefix ou (οὐ) meaning ‘not’ followed by topos (τόπος) meaning ‘place’. We could say of nonsense poetry what Maddalo says to Julian in Shelley’s poem: ‘You talk Utopia’ (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 117; ‘Julian and Maddalo’, line 179).

These comparisons, in conclusion, might lead us to see a Romanticism in which self-critique and scepticism were quite robustly in place from the start. They might also illuminate the awareness in writings of the romantic period that obstacles to sense can at times be experienced not just as perplexity but as enjoyment shared with an audience, uncovering a mutuality in limitation and producing a comedy of forbearance in the recognition of ordinary levels of creaturely incompetence. The comparison might also point us to a further appreciation of some of the less canonical

works by the most canonical writers. For Blake, ‘The Island in the Moon’ alongside *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; for Wordsworth, a line that goes from ‘Peter Bell’ and ‘The Idiot Boy’ through to *Benjamin the Waggoner*; for Shelley, more salience to the poems that Donald Davie once discussed and admired under the heading of ‘Shelley’s Urbanity’, including ‘Julian and Maddalo’, ‘Peter Bell the Third’ and ‘The Sensitive Plant’³⁰; for Keats, some of the comic verse together with ‘Lamia’ and ‘The Cap and Bells’. And the larger picture could give more centrality to Byron, with his Popeian conviction that man in all his absurdity is ‘the glory, jest and riddle of the world’, and that poetry should aim above all else for the state of being ‘a moment merry’.³¹

In a 1948 essay T.S. Eliot proposed a line of influence and affinity from Poe to Valéry, from American romanticism to the waning days of French symbolism.³² A parallel line, Anglocentric as against Franco-American, might be from Blake to Lewis Carroll, or Wordsworth to Lear. The destination of Romanticism might then resemble not the faded Shelleyanism that Stephen Dedalus has to reject before he can become a properly Joycean Modernist artist, but something more coolly self-conscious – not a dispensable fin-de-siècle lassitude but a further romantic flourishing in figures such as Housman and Auden, for whom romantic aspiration is always rather coolly linked to a sense of absurdity – or indeed to the T.S. Eliot of *Sweeney Agonistes* and the two ‘Coriolan’ poems. These are outsize conclusions for a brief essay, but I hope they will

³⁰ Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London, 1952), 133-59.

³¹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II, line 18; *Don Juan*, IV. v. 39.

³² T.S. Eliot, ‘From Poe to Valéry’ (1948), in *To Criticize the Critic* (London, 1965), 27-42.

suggest ways that talking nonsense can give some pointers to the directions of travel of romantic period writing.