Only Connect

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Strict and Loose Nonsense: Two Worlds of Children's Verse

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Often in discussions of children's literature, the term *nonsense* is slung around haphazardly. Without much worrying about it, writers and publishers casually pin the name of nonsense on things not nonsensical at all, but merely funny or silly. As far as I know, this situation has yet to cause librarians to organize protests, nor to inspire a Society for the Rightful Nomenclature of Nonsense; and this reckless and irresponsible lack of concern strikes me as justified. After all, you can't worry about everything.

As a sometime nonsense writer, I remain happy with the present confused and indulgent state of affairs. I'm grateful that the name of nonsense is bestowed so freely. I wouldn't want my product denied the label just for making too much sense. It would be a shame to withhold the cheerful and appetizing designation of nonsense from works not clearly descended from Lewis Carroll, yet manifesting zaniness, such as Nikki Giovanni's engaging poem:

> Yolandé the Panda
> sat with Amanda
> eating a bar-be-cue rib
> They drank a beer
> and gave a big cheer
> 'Hooray! for women's lib'

(That last line may date this work a little, but somehow it remains young and sprightly.)

Labelled as nonsense, too, are all of Edward Lear's limericks, even though some of them might easily happen in reality, if public lunacy were tolerated.

Let me propose a working definition: Nonsense in a children's book is an account of anything that isn't likely to happen, whether or not it conceivably could. In the hope of being useful to anyone wishing to plumb this bottomless subject, let me propose two labels for two leading varieties of nonsense: *strict* and *loose*.

Strict Nonsense

Strict nonsense is a highly specialized game: clear-cut, distinct, and easy to recognize. In its best-known and most elaborate form, we find it in the classics: in Lear's verse and in some of Lewis Carroll's, in the Alice books, in certain Mother Goose rhymes. 'There is nothing more inexorable than a game,' remarks the English poet and novelist Elizabeth Sewell, author of *The Field of Nonsense* (London, 1952)—the most brilliant critical book I know, one that deserves rediscovery. Sewell confines herself to the kind of nonsense I'd call strict, and she cuts through a great deal of critical clutter.

Pioneering critics of Lear and Carroll had thought their nonsense merely lunatic and disorderly; Sewell instead finds the worlds of both writers fearsomely reasonable. Lear and Carroll think like those children observed by Jean Piaget who imagine a strictly logical universe controlled at all times by cause and effect. In asking 'Why?' questions (Why do robins have red breasts? Why is snow cold?), the child sensibly expects everything to occur for a reason—never simply by chance or for the heck of it.

In the world of *Through the Looking Glass*, every event has a cause, with few exceptions. The looking glass world is planned with a ferocious thoroughness, with the logic of a game of chess—the inverted logic of a chess game played in a mirror. *Looking Glass* is, I think, the strictest work of strict nonsense ever made. Yet in both Alice books, Alice keeps bumping against arbitrary rules, as in the Mad Tea Party that obliges guests to change their seats in frequent rotation. The Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts are reasonable persons whose reason has gone to insane excess, and it remains for the sensible Alice—without whose saving presence these nonsense worlds might seem monstrous and oppressive—to give them their final come-uppance: 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'

Sensibly, Elizabeth Sewell refuses to stretch Lewis Carroll upon the couch of psychoanalysis, despite her sensitive understanding of what went wrong with him. Evidently the Reverend Mr Dodgson fell prey to a growing temptation to play God, even Supergod, striving to design universes neater and better ordered than the Almighty's own. Because he came more and more to violate his own unstated rules for the game of strict nonsense, he produced at last that disappointing work *Sylvie and Bruno*—in which, as Dr Sewell remarks, 'the game dies, and instead the reader is left with a dreary, odious, and pretentious mixture of false sentiment, preaching, and whimsy.' About all that can be said in defence of *Sylvie and Bruno*, I think, is that it includes a few imperishable bits of self-contained nonsense verse.

Suspending the Laws of Nature

What then are the rules behind the game of strict nonsense? First of all, in strict nonsense, the laws of nature must be suspended, replaced by new laws which the author decrees. The result is a new world extremely systematic and, in its goofy way, eminently reasonable. Such a new world comes with its own animals, birds, insects, and plants; and in this department the inventiveness of nonsense poets is wonderful to behold.

Lear gave us a whole zooful of imagined beasts and even invented a 'Nonsense botany'. Often a nonsense writer seems to parody the natural world, as does that fecund designer of new birds, William Jay Smith. In 'The Baybreasted Barge Bird', Smith invents a creature who lines her nest with labels from old tin cans and feeds her young on rusty cooking utensils. In 'Gooloo', Shel Silverstein invents a bird which, because it has no feet, is unable to land, and so has to lay eggs in midair. Thus one nonsensical fact will lead to another.

As such madcap ornithology demonstrates, it is characteristic of strict nonsense to monkey around with the natural world and combine it with unnatural and artificial ingredients. Thus Christina Rossetti in 'Sing-Song Verses' gives us fish who carry umbrellas to protect themselves from the rain and lizards who shade themselves with parasols. Another living animal made partly artificial is Hilaire Belloc's bison:

> The Bison is vain, and (I write it with pain)
> The Door-mat you see on his head
> Is not, as some learned professors maintain,
> The opulent growth of a genius' brain,
> But is sewn on with needle and thread.

Carrying on this great tradition, the interesting new children's poet J. Patrick Lewis in his 1990 collection, *A Hippopotamusn't*, crosses pelicans

and canaries to produce 'Pelicanaries', who live among the nomadic Kurds:

> They fill their bills with pitted dates
> and Kurdled cheese from paper plates,
> then sit beside the Kurds and weigh
> the heated issues of the day.

Those 'paper plates' seem to me a touch of truly Learian strictness. The reverse of artificializing nature, I suppose, is to personify a manufactured object, as Lear does in 'The Broom, The Shovel, The Poker, and The Tongs'—characters who all take a drive in the park. Theodore Roethke, too, observes this custom in my favourite among his nonsense poems, 'The Ceiling':

> Suppose the Ceiling went Outside
> And then caught Cold and Up and Died?
> The only Thing we'd have for Proof
> That he was Gone, would be the Roof;
> I think it would be Most Revealing
> To find out how the Ceiling's Feeling.

In a strict nonsense world, then, a writer invents new scientific laws, but usually we can recognize this world without even needing to figure out which laws its author has revised. Right away, we will know it by certain familiar signs. One indication of its fierce rage for order is the author's love of numbers and systems and alphabets. Myra Cohn Livingston has shown her devotion to Lear in her own *A Lollygag of Limericks*, notably in these lines:

> Cried a man on the Salisbury Plain,
> 'Don't disturb me—I'm counting the rain;
> Should you cause me to stop
> I might miss half-a-drop
> And would have to start over again.'

John Ciardi, too, in his late work *Doodle Soup*, observes the tradition of carefully numbering things:

> There was an old lady in Bumbletown.
> She had three black cats and five were brown.
> She had two red cows and three were blue.
> Which is rather strange, but so are you.

That final surprise, incidently, is characteristic of Ciardi, who loves to keep a reader from feeling smug.

Power of Repetition

Fond of things in sequences, strict nonsense is marked by repetitions, refrains, and rigmaroles. Carroll's song with the chorus 'Sing Beans, sing Bones, sing Butterflies!' seems a typical nonsense refrain, and who can forget Lear's alphabetically-minded Mrs Discobbolos, who keeps crying 'Oh, W, X, Y, Z!' over and over? Rigmaroles, a form widely found in folk verse, develop in an orderly fashion, making amazing leaps over bridges of association. Recall the jump-rope jingle, 'My mother gave me a nickel / To buy a pickle, / The pickle was sour / So I bought a flower,' and so on for as long as the jumper desires.

Some of the stricter nonsense verse I know is the work of Canadian poet Dennis Lee, whose debt to the classics is evident in his tribute to the Lesser Glunk:

> Alas, he is a Tearful Thing
> And sobs at almost anything,
> Such as the root of πr^2 . . .

There is a classical Learish or Carrollian ring to these lines, not only in Lee's allusion to mathematics but in the creature's tearfulness. Notice that the Glunk cries, but the poet doesn't.

A further rule of strict nonsense is that the writer has to maintain a tone of emotional detachment. Although Lear's characters are sometimes given to blubbering and Lear himself is said to have wept over his pen as he chronicled their miseries and frustrations, no matter. On the page, no teardrops must show. The writer may not directly express personal feelings, and can betray neither affection nor kindness.

Because Lear plays the game, some find an apparent cruelty and indifference in those limericks wherein poor old characters are humiliated, publicly ridiculed, beaten, and even put to death like the 'Old Person from Tartary / Who divided his jugular artery.' Why don't we hold Lear accountable for the violent, psychotic behaviour of his characters? Is the following limerick to be blamed, as we might blame a televised police show, for portraying and even glorifying violent destruction?

There was an old person of Newry
Whose manners were tinctured with fury;
He tore all the rugs
And broke all the jugs
Within twenty miles distance of Newry.

Now the more you think about that, the more unlikely it gets. Imagine this old person conducting a search of every house and flat within exactly 20 (the number is in itself nonsensical) miles of Newry and confiscating and destroying people's rugs and jugs—nothing else!—while the homeowners look on, appalled.

One difference between Lear and a violent TV show may be that, while the TV show strives for reality, Lear strives for total unreality. He banishes his characters to a nutty world all their own, and he stakes out the boundaries of that world by writing in bouncing metre and jog-trot rhyme. Besides, each poem comes with a loony drawing. The pictures are meant to be one with the poems, for Lear depended on them (so he told a friend) to show that he wrote of unreal things.

Like Lear, incidentally, Shel Silverstein also has insisted that his poems and his pictures form units not to be put asunder. As editors compiling an illustrated anthology, Dorothy M. Kennedy and I recently had to omit Silverstein because of his insistence that anyone who reprints one of his poems must reprint the illustration too, for we couldn't have worked his pictures into our book.

Verse as a Game

Verse form to Edward Lear, and indeed, to any writer of strict nonsense, advertises the fact that a poem is a game. (I don't know of any strict nonsense written in free verse.) Write in rhymed stanzas with a romping rhythm and you say, 'I'm kidding; don't believe a word of this.' I suspect that it may be those elements of rhyme and metre that allow us to tolerate, even enjoy, those turn-of-the-century 'Little Willie' rhymes originated by Harry Graham in *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (1899), with their blithe hard-heartedness. The old masterpiece of the genre must be this poem by Anonymous:

Little Willie from the mirror
Licked the mercury all off,
Thinking in his childish error

It would cure the whooping cough.
At the funeral, weeping Mother
Sadly said to Mrs Brown,
''Twas a chilly day for Willie
When the mercury went down.'

Imagine how terrible, how revolting, those lines would be if they didn't rhyme. If they didn't end in a pun, if they didn't bounce along so cheerily to a rambunctious beat. The form, at odds with what is said in it, produces an effect of irony. Such a nonsense poem is like an animated cartoon: its very medium prevents us from taking it seriously.

Certain features of language in a strict nonsense poem also can proclaim its unreality. This proclamation is loud and clear when a writer makes up a whole new vocabulary, as Carroll does in 'Jabberwocky' or as Lear does in his many playful coinages: the wondrous new adjectives *mucilaginous* (a 'mucilaginous monkey', 'I have pretty well made up my mucilaginous mind'); and *scroobious* ('the Scroobious Snake', 'scroobious dubious doubtfulness').

In recent America, no doubt the most conspicuous practitioner of strict nonsense is Dr Seuss, who (like Lear) writes in swinging measures, tells stories, draws pictures, and coins new words galore. *On Beyond Zebra* even invents a new alphabet. I hold Seuss in higher regard than many do: his cartoons may look drawn with his foot, but he is a brisk and brilliant versifier, and I stand in awe before his powers of invention.

For reasons of ignorance, I have confined my examples of contemporary nonsense to those written on this side of the Atlantic. But it strikes me that one intriguing difference between classic English nonsense and the North American product is the latter's debt to our tradition of the tall tale. Dennis Lee's 'The Big Blue Frog and the Dirty Flannel Dog' may start out like the story of an ocean trip by the Jumblies or the Owl and the Pussycat, but it is shaped by the poet's native Canadian geography. After Frog and Dog go to sea on the good ship *Hollow Log*—

First they sailed to Saskatoon,
Where they stole the harvest moon
And they strung it as a headlight on the log.

Compare Mark Twain's account (in *Life on the Mississippi*) of the bragging keelboatman who claims, 'Smoked glass, here, for all! Don't attempt to look at me with the naked eye, gentlemen! . . . I put my hand on the sun's

face and make it night in the earth; I bite a piece out of the moon and hurry the seasons.' Dennis Lee's grandiose moon-stealing seems the kind of thing that might happen in a tall tale about Mike Pink or Paul Bunyan. Coincidentally, it seems echoed by Shel Silverstein in 'Moon-Catchin' Net', in which a child vows to hunt for the moon, with butterfly net in hand, with Bunyan-like aspirations.

Like a tall tale is that American folksong for children, 'The Frisco Whale', another revision of nature. Here is a composite version, roughly singable to the tune of 'Dixie':

> In Frisco town there lives a whale
> And she eats porkchops by the pail,
> By the pill-box, by the bathtub,
> By the washtub, by the schooner.
> Her name is Sarah, and she's a peach,
> But you can't leave food within her reach
> Nor nursemaids, nor babies,
> Nor chocolate ice cream sodas.
> She eats a lot, and when she smiles
> You can see her teeth for miles and miles,
> And her adenoids, and her tonsils,
> And things too fierce to mention.
> Now what can you do in a case like that,
> What can you do but step on your hat,
> Or your grandfather, or your toothbrush,
> Or anything else that's helpless?

Loose Nonsense

Well, what about loose nonsense, the kind that declines to play such an elaborate, strictly rule-bound game? Defined loosely, it is any old nonsense that isn't strict. Loose nonsense is the kind most of us writers settle for, but let me not imply that just because it is freer than the classic game of *Through the Looking Glass*, it is inferior and no-account. It too can offer satisfactions.

Most loose nonsense is comic writing about a single unlikely event. It surprises us by defying convention and routine. It may not give us a whole systematic world, but it can make much out of a square foot of nuttiness. Where strict nonsense suspends all scientific laws, permitting a cat to fiddle and a dish and a spoon to elope, loose nonsense settles for a single

defiance of nature—permitting only, say, the cow to jump over the moon. Or if the cow merely jumps over a barn, that is enough for loose nonsense. A single exception to nature takes place in Shel Silverstein's 'Stop Thief!'

> Policeman, policeman,
> Help me please.
> Someone went and stole my knees.
> I'd chase him down but I suspect
> My feet and legs just won't connect.

In any nonsense world, by the way, the human body endures all sorts of harmless if unnerving change—as Alice finds in Wonderland, shrinking and growing and having her neck stretched long as a giraffe's.

Sometimes loose nonsense verse will crack a single joke, as in Jack Prelutsky's portraits of children with monstrous appetites, like 'Pumperly Pott's Unpredictable Niece', who devours a whole automobile, steel-belted radials and all, or 'Herbert Glerbett', who ingests 50 pounds of lemon sherbet and turns into a puddle of green goo. The relative simplicity of this kind of thing may be seen by comparing it with stricter and more complicated nonsense such as Eve Merriam's 'I Scream', in which a boy, before eating the one dish of ice cream he's allowed, gets his mother to let him choose the dish. This wonderful dish is large enough to hold a dolphin and a kangaroo, ten tall ships, and more besides. Merriam goes into a whole classical rigmarole in detailing its possible contents.

Not all the verse I write for children is nonsense—only some of it turns out that way. And I don't ever set out to write loose or strict nonsense deliberately and methodically. Writers, I suspect, do best to work unselfconsciously, not too fully aware of what they're up to. If they cogitate too much beforehand, or while they work, they risk becoming like the centipede in the anonymous jingle, who was going along, doing fine, until a malicious toad asked her, 'Pray, which leg comes after which?'; whereupon 'This raised her mind to such a pitch / She lay distracted in a ditch / Considering how to run.'

While my stuff is taking shape on the page, I don't stop to analyse it, I'm too busy trying to get the lines to rhyme and the rhythm to keep moving and to get a story told. It seems that in regard to nonsense I have vacillated between loose and strict, more often loose. Sometimes a poem will start out as a loose, joking kind of thing, then grow into stricter nonsense. This happens in an item called 'Family Genius'—mainly just a catalogue of somebody's uncle's odd inventions. It begins with frozen

spinach on a stick: unlikely enough, but possible to make in your freezer if you want to. But as the catalogue goes on, it becomes more wildly implausible: Uncle constructs a paper airplane nine miles long, designs a pair of wooden shoes for a one-legged stork and a gadget for removing King Kongs from Empire State Buildings. In this fashion, a small unlikeliness will sometimes lead to larger ones.

Sometimes a poem—looser nonsense, I suppose—repeals a single law of nature. Such, I reckon, is an item called 'Backyard Volcano' in which a smoking crater, belching lava, crops up in a suburban neighbourhood. Uncle cheerfully goes swimming in it, shouting before he dives, 'Last one in is a old molten stone!' At least one usual law of nature is set aside, I think: the law that hot things can burn you.

I believe that the hippity-hop rhythm and tinkly rhymes of those lines may help tell the child, 'This is only kidding—don't go jump in any volcanoes like that.' But while no child I know of has yet had this problem, I have found that some adults have trouble distinguishing between nonsense and reality. Here is my only nonsense item to have been banned by censors, 'Mother's Nerves':

My mother said, 'If just once more
I hear you slam that old screen door,
I'll tear out my hair! I'll dive in the stove!'—
So I gave it a bang, and in she dove.

Now most children do not need to be told that any mother who behaves that way is loony. The rhyme and metre, too, brand the piece as a work of artifice, not faithful reporting. But the school board of North Kansas City did not see it that way when they removed an anthology containing it, William Cole's *I'm Mad at You!*, from their school library shelves, charging this and other innocuous works with 'subversion of parental authority'. (A protest mounted by some North Kansas City librarians, bless them, succeeded in getting the book out of jail.)

Whenever a piece of verse turns out to be strict nonsense, I'll have to admit, I develop a soft spot in my heart for it. Such is an item called 'What We Might Be, What We Are', in which two geographically distant and ill-matched things fall in love:

If you were a scoop of vanilla
And I were the cone where you sat,
If you were a slowly pitched baseball

And I were the swing of a bat,
If you were a shiny new fishhook
And I were a bucket of worms,
If we were a pin and a pincushion,
We might be on intimate terms.
If you were a plate of spaghetti
And I were your piping-hot sauce,
We'd not even need to write letters
To put our affection across.
But you're just a piece of red ribbon
In the beard of a Balinese goat
And I'm a New Jersey mosquito,
I guess we'll stay slightly remote.

I'd be thankful if anyone were to find in that plaintive lament a little echo of the sadness in Lear's tales of poor thwarted old characters with long noses, whom nobody loves.

In conclusion, I have an awful hunch that, like the Teutonic scholar who wrote a dissertation on poems beginning with the word 'and', I have dwelt more earnestly on my subject than was necessary. Let me claim, though, that both varieties of nonsense can have valuable and salutary effects. Loose nonsense challenges our sense of what is real and proper, the better to define reality and propriety. Strict nonsense builds a whole new and different world, thus refreshing and illuminating our notions of the world we know. Once in a while, with any luck, both can cast new light on old reality. Like Andrew Jackson in the traditional rhyme, I may be full of beans—

Old Andy Jackson
Was part Anglo-Saxon,
He was so full of beans
That he took New Orleans.

Still, let me trust that, like a caramel pillow, some of this mucilaginous rigmarole may stick to your head.