PILAR ORERO

EDWARD LEAR'S WELLERISMS

1. Edward Lear

Edward Lear (1812-1888) was born in London on 12 May 1812 – the same year as Charles Dickens (1812-1870) – and he was the twentieth child of a family of twenty-one. Soon after his birth his father, a stockbroker, who was a fairly well-to-do man of business in the city of London, ran into serious financial problems and by the age of 15 Lear had to start earning his living. He was commissioned to make ornithological drawings and his life as an artist took off from there. He even gave lessons to Queen Victoria. While painting the menagerie which was kept the Earl of Derby in Knowsley Hall, he started writing nonsense poems and alphabets which were accompanied by his own nonsense drawings. Lear's verse was published as *A Book of* Nonsense (1845; enlarged 1861, 1863, 1870), *Nonsense Songs, Stories ,Botany and Alphabets* (1871), *More Nonsense, Pictures Rhymes, Botany, etc.* (1872), and *Laughable Lyrics, a Fresh Book of Nonsense Poems* (1877). He was an indefatigable traveller writing travel journals which contained his own water colour landscapes of places like Albania, Sicily, Italy, Corsica, Calabria, etc.

2. Edward Lear and Charles Dickens: Two Victorian Geniuses

Edward Lear and Charles Dickens are two literary geniuses. If Charles Dickens is considered the best novelist of Victorian England, Edward Lear is the best representative of Nonsense Literature. Both writers are still being published in the 21st century. Their work has achieved the status of a classic.

Against much speculation about Lear and Dickens having ever met,[1] Vivien Noakes confirmed they never did,[2] though they shared many biographical notes such as: being born in the same year, being one of many children of a large family, both Dickens' and Lear's fathers stayed at Marshalsea prison for debt. Both were shocked by the early encounter with the working class

they found in the prison. They were also class observers and were haunted for life by a sadness which was intermingled – or overcome – by humour (Gray 1966-7). Both had read and appreciated *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen* (1822), and in particular the "old man of Tobago" limerick attributed to R.S. Sharpe and illustrated with a cartoon thought to be by Robert Cruikshank (Bibby 1978: 18):

There was a sick man of Tobago
Liv'd on rice-gruel and sago;
But at last, to his bliss,
The physician said this –
"To a roast leg of mutton you may go."

Edward Lear himself stated so in the introduction to *More Nonsense Pictures, Rhymes, Botany &c.* (1872), where he wrote "in the days when much of my time was spent in a country house, where children and mirth abounded, the lines beginning, 'There was an Old Man of Tobago', were suggested to me by a valued friend". We can see it also in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5, ch. 2):

> 'Now, Mortimer,' says Lady Tippins, rapping the sticks of her closed green fan upon the knuckles of her left hand - which is particularly rich in knuckles, 'I insist upon your telling all that is to be told about the man from Jamaica.'
> 'Give you my honour I never heard of any man from Jamaica, except the man who was a brother,' replies Mortimer.
> 'Tobago, then.'
> 'Nor yet from Tobago.'
> 'Except,' Eugene strikes in: so unexpectedly that the mature young lady, who has forgotten all about him, with a start takes the epaulette out of his way: 'except our friend who long lived on rice-pudding and isinglass, till at length to his something or other, his physician said something else, and a leg of mutton somehow ended in daygo.'
> A reviving impression goes round the table that Eugene is coming out. An unfulfilled impression, for he goes in again.
> (Penguin English Library edition, pp. 53-4.)

It is also interesting to point out the relationship between George Cruikshank (1792-1878) and Charles Dickens, since it was the former who illustrated Dickens' writings *Sketches by Boz* (1836-7) and *Oliver Twist* (1839). As this article shows, Edward Lear – as most Victorians, given its popularity – must have read *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) and enjoyed Sam Weller and one of his traits: wellerisms.

3. A Short Note on Wellerisms

Wolfgang Mieder and Stewart A. Kingsbury's classic *A Dictionary of Wellerisms* is the best source for information for this

type of proverb, whose main feature is the structure. It consists of three parts, as in the wellerism "Prevention is better than cure, said the pig, when it ran away from the butcher". The first part is a statement (often a proverb or a part of one): "Prevention is better than cure". The second part identifies the speaker "said the pig", and the third part is the identification of the situation which gives the expression an ironic or humorous twist, often in the form of a pun: "when it ran away from the butcher". Some more examples:

> "After you," said the chaser to the whiskey.
> "We'll have to rehearse that," said the undertaker as the coffin fell out of the car.
> "I'm not doing this on my own account," said the forger, as he passed over the check.

Traditional wellerisms had the clear purpose of upsetting the exemplarity and moral embedded in the traditional proverb through humour. Artificial wellerisms – such as those created by Charles Dickens or Edward Lear – are intended to subvert and criticize current social values: "The wellerism embodies the dilemma and its bitter comment on a society which piously demands virtue, yet, by its own actions in the name of righteousness, perpetuates vice" (Williams 1966: 93 or Kingsbury and Mieder 1994: xi):

> Revelatory comments regarding social issues, political problems, and human nature in general are hidden behind these short, formulaic phrases. Wellerisms thus frequently serve as indicators of the value system of the society in which they were coined and used, folkloric mirrors of everyday attitudes and popular culture.

The intention of the third part of the artificial wellerism is manifold, and it may vary in its degree of sophistication and intentionality. First it challenges the moral enunciated by the proverb in the first part. Second, it provides a social context where the comment is applied. Third, it is the point where any pun, if there is one, from the first part acquires meaning, and last it is here where the comic effect occurs.

4. A List of Edward Lear's Wellerisms

Edward Lear, as Charles Dickens, is still in print and new editions of his works are published regularly. In 2001 Vivien Noakes, who is regarded as the leading Lear scholar, published a new edition of *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*. On pages 461-464 appears a list of what she describes as "Nonsense Similies" though they have both the structure and intention as the wellerisms created by Charles Dickens for Sam Weller.

The description by Vivien Noakes of these wellerisms as "Nonsense Similies" must have been inspired by wellerism no. 18 (see below), where Edward Lear himself described this type of construction as such.

Edward Lear's wellerisms follow both the formal aspect of the wellerism with its typical three part structure and also its intentionality: with an ironic rhetorical value. A characteristic in Edward Lear's wellerisms is his preference for animals as speakers for the second part.

All these wellerisms are found in his letters which Lear himself thought of as quite valuable "I believe they would be quite as fit to read 100 years hence" (Noakes 1988:xi). This comment, which was written in a letter to Chichester Fortescue, does not mean Lear wrote for posterity, since as Noakes (ibid) points out in her introduction to *Edward Lear Selected Lettes*, "he regarded his letters as an art form. They were a communication with his friends, and it is the unselfconscious setting down of his response to what he saw and experienced, his delight in beauty and friendship, his admissions of loneliness and failure, and his frequent lapses into the absurd".

The list is as follows:

1. What *is* the use of all these revolutions which lead to nothing? - as the displeased turnspit said to the angry cookmaid. Letter[3] to Chichester Fortescue 16.x.1847.
2. Now I am at the end of replying to your letter - & a very jolly one it is. So I must e'en[4] turn over another stone as the sandpiper said when he was alooking for vermicules. Letter to Fortescue 12.ii.1848.

3. I find my effort vain - all vain - as the mouse said when she climbed up as far as the top of the church steeple. Letter to William Holman Hunt 16.i.1853.

4. Now my dear boy I must close this as the Cyclopses used to say of their one eye. Letter to Fortescue II.i.1857.

5. ... that is quite uncertain, as the tadpole observed concerning his future prospects and occupations, - when his tail fell off and his feet came forth and he was altogether in a spasmodic rhapsody of arrangement fit to throw him into a fever. Letter to Emily Tennyson I2.ix.1857.

6. Cheer up - as the limpet said to the weeping willow. Letter to Fortescue 6.i.1860.

7. I'll make up for lost time as the Tadpole said when he lost his tail & found he could jump about. Letter to Fortescue 29.iv.1860.

8. ... it can't be helped as the Rhinoceros said when they told him he had a thick skin. Letter to Tennyson 15.viii.1860.

9. ... my thread of thought is broken as the spider said to the housemaid. Letter to Fortescue I4.iv.1862.

10. Never mind. They will be useful when I am dead - those pictures; - as the reflective & expiring bear thought when he considered that his skin would become muffs. Letter to Bruce 3I.vii.63.

11. Concentrate your ideas if you want to do anything well & don't run about - as the Tortoise said to the Armadillo. Letter to Fortescue I4.viii.1863.

12. ... as the obstinate spider said when the amiable Bee offered to make part of his web, - 'I *must* do it myself.' Letter to Prescott 17.xi.1863.

13. This is my tale as the pertinacious peacock said aloud when he spread his in the radiant sumbeans. Letter to Bruce 8.ix.1866.

14. I must stop, as the watch said when a beetle got into his wheels. Letter to Fortescue 26.xii.1867.

15. I am in a very unsettled condition, as the oyster said when they poured melted butter all over his back. Letter to Fortescue 13.ix.1871.

16. ... my eyes ache my Isaac! - as Rebekah said when she had the opthalmia. *Diary* 28.v.72.

17. ... there is as yet but little advance made in this affair, as the snail said when he crawled up the Monument. Letter to Edgar 21.vii.1878.

18. It is unpleasant to feel prickly spiny pains in one's eyelids, as the - o dear! - I had such a beautiful nonsense simile - but the excellent cat Foss has just most improperly upset the biscuit box (I believe with a view of gain in the scramble) & all has gone out of my head. Letter to Miss Penrhyn ii.xi.1879.

19. What will happen to me, as the oyster said when he very inadvertently swallowed the gooseberry bush, nobody can tell. Letter to Marianne North 16.ii.1880.

20. I do not know what I may do, as the Oyster said when they asked him if he could fly. Letter to Fortescue 5.iv.1880.

21. Time will show as the Lobster said when they assured him he would become red if he fell into the boiler. Letter to Fortescue 4.ix.1880.

22. O cricky! - here's a go! as the Flea said when he jumped into the middle of the plate of apricots & found nothing to eat. Letter to Hallam Tennyson 16.ix.1880.

23. I will leave off talking as the frog said when the pike swallowed him. ibid.

24. ... truth is truth, as the Guinea pig said when they told him he had no tail, & he didn't care a button whether he had or not. Letter to Drummond 13.x.1880.

25. I have had so much to be thankful for in a longish life, that one ought to check any tendency to growl- as the well-bred cat said to her irascible kitten. Letter to G. W. Curtis i.i.1881.

26. On the whole, as the morbid & mucilaginous monkey said when he climbed up to the top of the Palm-tree & found no

fruit there - one can't depend upon dates. Letter to Fortescue 12.ii.1882.

27. I suppose everything will come right some day, as the Caterpillar said when he saw all his legs fall off as he turned into a Chrysalis. Letter to Emily Tennyson 12.iii.1882.

28. I have a vast deal to be thankful for as the tadpole said when his tail fell off, but a pair of legs grew instead. Letter to Fortescue 30.iii.1882.

29. ... regarding this matter there seems a little misunderstanding between us, as the fly said to the spider when the latter bit 4 of his legs off. Letter to R.R. Bowker 16.vi.1882.

30. So after all one has much to be thankful for as the Centipede said when the rat bit off 97 of his hundred legs. Letter to Fortescue 2.vii.1882.

31. When you have fully digested my proposal - as the stag said when he offered to jump down the Boa Constrictor's throat - please let me know. Letter to Selwyn 22.viii.1882.

32. Che so io? as the fly said - he was an Italian fly - when the Hippopotamus asked him what the moon was made of. Letter to Fortescue 14.x.1882.

33. ... what is done is done as the tadpole said when his tail fell off. Letter to Selwyn 15.x.1882.

34. Let us hope for 'lucidity' as the Elephant said when they told him to get *out* of the light, because he was opaque. Ibid.

35. I am glad to find you writing in better spirits. It is a good thing to be in spirits, as the wise but spotted Lizard observed when they put him into a bottle of spirits of wine and shunted him onto the 45th shelf of the 8th Compartment in the Natural History Gallery at Pekin. Letter to F. T. Underhill 14.xii.1882.

36. …all is well as ends well, as the tadpole said when he became a phrogg. Letter to Selwyn 19.xii.82.

37. I feel better, as the old Lady said after she had brought forth twins. Letter to Fortescue 25.xii.1882.

38. …it was not my turn - as the cartwheel said to the Vindmill, - for I wrote last. Letter to Selwyn 9.iv.1883.

39. I will now look over your last letter & make ozbervatims on its points, as the monkey said when he casually sate down on the pincushion. Letter to Selwyn 17.v.1883.

40. I have done well to come to a new place, & that 1 find it 'agrees with me' as the snake said when he swallowed the ox. Letter to Evelyn Baring 19.viii.1883.

41. It has just come into my head - as the little charity boy said of the unexpected advent of an undesirable parasite. Letter to Fortescue i.1884.

42. …sufficient to the day is the weevil thereof, as the hazelnut said when the caterpillar made a bale in his shell. Letter to Selwyn I.i.1884.

43. 'Een in our hashes live their wanted fires' - as the poetical cook said when they said her hashed mutton was not hot enough. Letter to Fortescue 16.iv.1884.

44. I am not sure as the Tadpole said when the mouse asked him if he were going to walk or swim. Letter to Fortescue I.v.1884.

45. I suppose however, as the Caterpillar said when he became a Chrysalis, time will show what will barren. Letter to Fortescue 13.ix.84.

46. Hence onward, my letter will be confused & indicative of my mucilaginous & morose mind - all more or less queer & upside down as the mouse said when he bit off his grandmother's tail - having mistaken it for a Barley Straw. Letter to Fortescue 30.iv.1885.

47. I can't write much. Am all over eduneyyers in my AT illustrations, which I hope to bubblish some day - in a series of 10 or 20, but to be had separately, - as the centipede said of his 100 legs when they kept dropping off as he walked through the raspberry jam dish and the legs stuck in the juice. Letter to Mundella 27.x.1885.

48. As for myself, I am sitting up today for the first time - partly dressed as the cucumber said when oil & vinegar were poured over him salt & pepper being omitted. Letter to Fortescue 18.i.1886.

49. I may not have thyme later, as the busy bee said when the snail urged him to lie in bed. Letter to Selwyn 19.v.86.

50. ... one oughtn't to judge harshly, as the chaffinch said when he heard the snail call the Hedgehog a cursed old pincushion. Letter to Selwyn 7.vii.1886.

51. I fear I have only the alternative before me of beginning & executing the whole 200 over again, or of giving up my 40 years work, altogether a disgust & humiliation 1 shrink from, as the snail said when they showed him the salt cellar. Letter to Fortescue 22.v.1887.

5. Conclusion

Though Edward Lear and Charles Dickens never met, as we have seen in this article, it is possible they read and admired each other. Looking at the publication dates for *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) and the popularity of wellerisms towards 1840 to about 1880 (Mieder & Kingsbury 1994: xv) we can see how Edward Lear was aware of this subversive proverbial form and extended his creativity to wellerisms. Likewise, looking at publication dates we can assume Charles Dickens had read some of Edward Lear's *Nonsense Books*. It is also important to remember some biographical details of Charles Dickens. He had many children and – originally – it was for children that Edward Lear's *Nonsense Books* were written and published, hence it is possible that Charles Dickens' children had read Lear's nonsense. It is also interesting to remember that both writers are considered as representatives of Victorian writing and classics: they are still on print. Though none of them are the originators of one of their many literary features – wellerisms and limericks – they are largely responsible for the popularisation and long lasting effect of both forms.

Notes

[1] See Levi 1995: 11.
[2] In a personal e-mail.
[3] See Noakes 1988 for a selection of Lear's letters.
[4] Lear's spelling and punctuation has been maintained throughout.

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