

Edward Lear: man of letters

JOANNA RICHARDSON

EDWARD LEAR has come into his own as an admirable draughtsman and as an accomplished landscape painter. There is no need to extol him as the creator of the dolomphious and the borascible, of the Dong and the Quangle-Wangle. His gusto and his humanity, his richness of invention, set him far above his contemporary in nonsense, Lewis Carroll. But in the last few years, the re-appearance of some of his travel books, and the publication of his *Indian Journal* have reminded us of Lear, the man of letters. Perhaps one may choose this moment to assess him.

Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania, etc., first appeared in 1851, but they cannot be called a work of literature. For all the admiration which Tennyson expresses in his poem 'To E.L., on his travels in Greece', they remain strangely ponderous to the modern reader. They reveal a verbosity, a sameness, a lack of the 'spongetaneous', which is certainly surprising in their author. They lack the gusto and warmth of the letters, they almost entirely lack the humour which penetrates the correspondence and irradiates the nonsense verse. They have a very low literary vitality. They have little about them which marks them, clearly, as the work of one of the greatest humorists in the English language. In short, the *Journals* lack both style and humanity.

They are, however, just what they profess to be, the diaries of a man absorbed in painting: 'an artist's mere tour of search among the riches of far-away Landscape'. They are the diaries of a man for whom the visual world very vividly exists.

You have majestic cliff-girt shores; castle-crowned heights, and gloomy fortresses; palaces glittering with gilding and paint; mountain passes such as you encounter in the snowy regions of Switzerland; deep bays and blue seas with bright, calm isles resting on the horizon; meadows and grassy knolls; convents and villages, olive-clothed slopes and snow-capped mountain peaks --- and with all this a crowded variety of costume and pictorial incident such as bewilders and delights an artist at each step he takes.

Lear has an artist's eye for landscape: for colour, line and composition, for the effects of light and shade, and, above all, for the Romantic spirit of the scene. He has an eye for the picturesque which would have satisfied Gilpin, a sense of pleasing gloom which would have earned the sympathy of John Martin. He sees the outline of Olympus in the distance, 'then the nearer hills, with their russet smoothness and pard-like spots of clustering forest groups'; he rides to Berat, while 'the river rolls furiously below and heaps of purple and golden-edged clouds hang over the shaded base of Tomóhrit'. And, as he makes his way to Vunó, 'the bright orb went down like a globe of red crystal into the pale sea and the fiery-hued wall of jagged Acroceraunian mountains above us on our left grew purple and lead-coloured'. Twice, as he travels by the Acheron, Lear quotes Tennyson; and the quotations are not surprising, for many of the landscapes he describes might have found a place in *The Palace of Art*. 'The route lay at first along the shore,' he writes of his journey to Kaváya, 'with a green and troubled sea breaking on the sounding sands.' It is a Tennysonian line, which confirms that Lear was not only an artist, but a poet.

And, though he lamented 'my little skill in figure-drawing', the Greek and Albanian landscapes are peopled by vivid, Romantic figures. There is a Mohammedan on a latticed terrace, 'looking in his blue and yellow robes very like an encaged macaw.' There are 'Jewesses, their hair tired up in long, caterpillar-like green silk bags, three feet in length'. There is a Bolubáshi, or head of a military bodyguard, 'a refulgent Bolubáshi, glittering like a South American beetle, in purple and gold'. And in the foreground of these Greek and Albanian landscapes there are 'carts drawn by white-eyed buffali', and 'countless kestrels hovering in the air or rocking on tall thistles'. 'Irascible female buffaloes, . . . with their porcelain-white eyes,' guard their calves, 'strange little beasts, motionless except the twinkle of their ears, and lying crouched together like bits of hairy Indian rubber on the grass.' More than once there are savage dogs. As he tries to draw on the bridge at Monastír, Lear keeps them away by a pocket-full of stones; 'yet they fairly beat me at last,' he writes, 'and gave me chase open-mouthed, augmenting their detestable pack by fresh

recruits at each street corner.' On the southern side of the Beratino, 'concealed dogs rushed out with unpleasant abruptness from innocent-looking bushes.' At Khimára, 'some thirty immense dogs . . . bounced out from the most secluded corners and would straightway have breakfasted on me had I not been . . . aptly rescued'. It was an alarming experience.

But the *Journals* record much more of Lear than the routes he followed, or his artist's eye, or his poetic instinct: much more than his visual Romanticism. They record his remarkable physical courage. For a man who was not only short-sighted but subject to asthma, bronchitis and epilepsy, these travels seem little short of heroic. Night after night, Lear suffers from inadequate, broken sleep in conditions of exceptional squalor; morning after morning, he is up before dawn to paint, or to set out on another lap of his journey. 'Ten hours' riding is as much as you can manage,' he writes, in the introduction to his *Journals*, 'if any sketching is to be secured; but I generally found eight sufficient.' Those eight hours he spent doubled up on his horse, for 'Turkish stirrups were short; and, as he once confessed, 'galloping in short Turkish stirrups is not refreshing to the gastronomic muscles, nor is a small cup of coffee sufficient support from 4 a.m. to 4 p.m.' His food was nearly always primitive, it was always irregular, and it was often remarkably inadequate. Travelling in Albania, he writes, 'has, to a landscape painter, two alternatives: luxury and inconvenience on the one hand, liberty, hard living, and filth on the other; and of these two I chose the latter, as the most professionally useful, though not the most agreeable'. He not only lived hard; he accepted conditions of extraordinary danger. Once, as he skirted an abyss near Dirocchio, 'eight inches of slanting earth were all the foot had to depend on'; as he went on horseback 'along the ironrocks of Acroceraunia', he found that 'the ledges along which one went slowly now wound inward, skirting ravines full of lentisk and arbutus, now projected over the bald sides of precipices, so that, at certain unexpected angles, the rider's leg hung sheer over the deep sea below'. In a sudden and furious storm in the mountains near Dukádhës, he and his guide 'were knocked down more than once, and towards the summit we could only advance by clinging from rock to rock'. To keep

a full and regular journal at the end of such a day meant determination of no mean order.

Determination, courage, energy: Lear showed them all in abundance. Nothing but the fear of fever (perhaps his epilepsy) prevented him from setting out on a journey. There is, perhaps, something desperate about this constant moving, this perpetual restlessness. It is a sign of Lear's immense unhappiness. 'If you have a wife or are in love with a woman,' he had written to his friend, Chichester Fortescue, 'then you may stay in any place and in any circumstance . . . But if you are absolutely alone in the world, and likely to be so, then move about continually, and never stand still.'

Lear himself was rarely still. In 1852, the year after his *Albanian Journals* appeared, he published *Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria and in the Kingdom of Naples*. This new book was his account of his travels with Lord John Proby in the autumn of 1847. Like Lear's accounts of his travels in Albania and Greece, it shows a sobriety, a self-conscious, ponderous manner which comes strangely from the vital letter-writer, the author of the irresistible nonsense. It is — as it purports to be — the journal of an artist who is explaining and enriching his pictures; it is a verbal description, less eloquent than the pictures themselves, of the wildly Romantic landscapes, the gloomy castles and picturesque townships of a largely unexplored part of Europe. As Lear went through the streets of Palizzi, he reflected, probably with justification, that 'no Englishman perhaps had as yet described them'. Lear's visual sense is certainly more apparent than any other; he sees everything, if not through an optic glass, at least as a potential subject for his pencil and his brush. At Gerace he notes the 'white or delicate fawn-hued cliffs, and gray or dove-coloured buildings coming beautifully off the purple of mountains'; and at Bova, from the eagle's-nest of the Marzano Palazzo, he observes Sicily 'floating on the horizon's edge, with a most imposing grandeur — and just where a painter would have put it'. Occasionally, here and there, Lear suddenly touches poetry: in Palizzi he is surrounded by 'perfectly naked, berry-brown children, . . . a gathering crowd of mahogany Cupids'; and, as he walks across the plain to Oppido, he passes villages,

'hamlets, faintly seen among the tremulous moonlit olives'. Occasionally there is a pale suggestion of Lear's nonsense: the fear of eating moth tarts at Stáiti, the voluble, inconsequential monologue of Count Garrolo, the oratory of grandfather Ascitti: 'Does a mullet plough? Can a prawn give milk? Has a tunny any wool? No. Fish and birds were therefore created to be eaten.' But, again, Lear's Italian journals are sadly disappointing: he gives his itinerary, he catches the air of suspense and suspicion on the eve of the Risorgimento, he impresses the reader yet again by the constant energy, the unremitting toughness he displays. But he remains self-conscious, formal: not the warm, endearing, spontaneous Lear of the nonsense and the letters. He observes carefully and he writes dutifully, but he is not completely himself.

In 1870 there followed the *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica*; and many of the same criticisms might be made of it. In 1953, sixty-five years after his death, his *Indian Journal* was published: the account of his two-year tour of India and Ceylon. For the first time, Lear had been a privileged traveller. When he set out on his journey in 1873, he had done so at the invitation of his friend, Lord Northbrook, who had just been appointed Viceroy of India.

Towards the end of November 1873, he had arrived in Bombay. 'O new palms! O flowers! O creatures! O beasts! Anything more overpoweringly amazing cannot be conceived. Colours and costumes and myriadism of impossible picturesqueness.' He set off for Cawnpore ('What parrot-coloured people and dresses!'), where he was duly impressed by the monument to victims of the massacre, and, to his confusion, discovered that his luggage had been mislaid. The glamour of viceregal life, a military parade, and even a durbar during the next few days were spoiled for Lear by his 'miserable luggagelessness'. One may sympathize with him, for throughout his Indian travels he was to be hindered by inefficient transport, disappointed by uncomfortable lodgings and inadequate food, and disturbed by depression and his own erratic ill-health.

Fortunately these discomforts were unsuspected when, after a stay at Calcutta, he left 'the scarlet and white brilliance of Government House' and travelled by primitive train to Sahibganje,

breakfasting off cold mutton and wine *en route*, and the misfortunes of travel were handsomely compensated by such moments as that in which he first came upon the Taj Mahal. Only the brush could suggest the splendour of the women's saris, the white-clad men in purple and scarlet shawls, and, in the centre of the picture, the vast, glittering temple; to Lear the experience was almost spiritual. 'Henceforth, let the inhabitants of the world be divided into two classes — them as has seen the Taj Mahal — and them as hasn't!'

Alternately, with brush and pen, he continued to record the sights of India: the Himalayas rising above the date groves, Bangalore in twilight, and the mountains like purple crystal in Mahé. Entertaining natives and Anglo-Indians pass in procession through his *Journal*: the fidgety Rajah, the garrulous Mrs Cracroft with her 'fizzy champagne manner', and old Mrs Willoughby Osborne, the Colonel's wife, whose charm was enough to make even Lear forget a bad dinner of raw pork and onions. Supreme was the very deaf lady whose ear trumpet was mistaken for a sort of glass by the native servant. 'He instantly poured into it and her ear a deluge of iced champagne.' The lady, Lear records, was distraught, and threw it all back on her host's worked satin waistcoat. Vast confusion ensued.

It is at times like this that we recognize the familiar Lear; and it must be admitted that the Lear who reprimands a 'blacky Indian' for impertinence in the station waiting-room and finds that he is addressing a mighty Mussulman potentate, is a more endearing figure than the traveller who records his journey like Bradshaw or a pedestrian Mrs Beeton.

There is much in this *Journal* which does not illumine Victorian India or increase our understanding of Lear himself; but the cumulative effect of the book is strong. Lear travelled widely, and his *Journal* reveals much of the animated, multicoloured life of India just before the days of Empire. The Mutiny is still fresh in mind, but already we are aware of the supremacy of the Victorian raj. The officers' wives, and Lear, too, sing 'Tears, idle tears', by Lord Tennyson, and the Indian Army, bearded and Kiplingesque, parade in the torrid heat. The small trains

chuff through the landscape, and occasionally the window frames the poetic countryside:

A wood of palmyra palms, their crisp, hard fans rattling in any breeze, and their ringed, broad, columnar trunks rising from an undergrowth of young coco-trees. Beyond the village all is green until it gradually becomes sandy to the sea-shore where the ancient pagoda stands in complete loneliness above the fretting waves.

Lear can touch heights in prose; the *Indian Journal* confirms it. And yet, to my mind, perhaps the happiest passage in the *Journal* is an Indian poem:

She sate upon her Dobie,
To watch the Evening Star,
And all the Punkahs as they passed,
Cried 'My! how fair you are! . . .

Almost any educated traveller might have written the bulk of the *Journal*; but *The Cimmerbund*, which first appeared in *The Times of India*, and graced the Bombay breakfast tables in July 1874, is, like the best of Lear, inimitable.

There remains Edward Lear the letter-writer; and Lear's correspondence was massive. 'Every human being,' he wrote, 'capable of writing ever since the invention of letters must have written to me, with a few exceptions perhaps, such as the prophet Ezekiel, Mary Queen of Scots, and the Venerable Bede.' The number of his correspondents puzzled him. 'Either all my friends must be fools or mad; or . . . there must be more good qualities about this child than he ever gives or has given himself credit for possessing.' The fact was that he was immensely endearing. It *was* pleasant to know Mr Lear, and to receive a letter in his 'meandering mashpotato manner'; and so the volume of correspondence was such that in 1864 Lear declared: 'I abhor the sight of a pen, and if I were an angel I would immediately moult all my quills for fear of their being used in calligraphy.'

Lear's letters are inimitable, and he was an industrious writer. It is strange that there are only two published volumes of his correspondence. But since they cover forty years of his life (1847-87), and since the letters are nearly all addressed to Chichester Fortescue, 'one of the few', wrote Lear, 'who understand this queer child', they bring us very close to the writer.

They reveal, more than anything else, Lear's constant loneliness. 'I think,' he wrote to Lady Waldegrave in 1870, 'as I can't help being alone it is perhaps best to be altogether, jellyfish-fashion caring for nobody.' The remark, made in desperation, did not ring true. For the letters, which show us Lear's loneliness, also make it plain that he was intensely affectionate. 'I am coming to England fast as I can,' he wrote to Fortescue:

Why are you coming say you? Because I can't stay here any longer — without seeing friends & having some communion of heart & spirit . . . And I want to see my sister . . . And *you*. And my dear Daddy Holman Hunt, & other people. So I'm off.

Lear was a deeply serious man; and the letters he wrote to Fortescue (then Lord Carlingford) on the death of his wife show the complete, affectionate sympathy he was capable of feeling. However, he did not enjoy any one complete relationship; he was never supremely important to another human being. And this ultimate lack of love was the bane of Lear's life. Time and again, in his correspondence, he bursts out in depression: 'I must leave off. I feel like 5 nutmeg-graters full of baked eggshells — so dry & cold & miserable.' 'For all I write cheerfully I am as savage and black as 90,000 bears.' Sometimes he seeks refuge from his loneliness in his books and correspondence.

I am writing this from Certosa del Pesio, a Mountain Pension twenty-four hours above S. Remo, to which . . . I have come for a week or two to be out of the great heat by the sea-shore, to complete my child's nonsense-book for Xmas, and to write letters, and a fair copy of two Egyptian journals, 1854 and 1867, for future publication.

Sometimes he attempts to forget his loneliness in his painting, working long hours in his studio, or tramping miles to record a landscape. 'Did I tell you of my visit to Oudesh, vulgarly called Gozo?' he asks Lady Waldegrave in 1866. 'I drew every bit of it, walking fifteen or twenty miles a day.' And then, again, Lear attempts to be philosophic about his solitude:

As I grow older, I as it were prohibit regrets of all sorts, for they only do harm to the present and thereby to the future. By degrees one is coming to look on the whole of life past as a dream, and one of no very great importance either, if one is not in a position to affect the lives of others particularly.

It was a brave but futile attempt to pretend indifference.

But though Lear's letters are still permeated with sadness, they are far from being a mere record of natural grievances. They have an unmistakable style; only Lear could have written them. They are intimate, fluent, vivid, discursive, and, as he would say, spongetaneous. One of the most spongetaneous was addressed to George Grove (later Sir George), then working on his *Dictionary of Music*. Grove had developed a sudden interest in toadstools:

Oatlands Park Hotel,
Walton on Temms, Surrey
15 Nov^r 1860.

Dear Grove

I hasten to inform you that in a wood very near here, there are Toadstools of the loveliest and most surprising colour and form: — orbicular, cubicular and squamingular, and I even thought I perceived the very rare Pongchámibinnibóphilos Kakokreasópheros among others a few days back. You have therefore nothing better to do than come with Penrose and hunt up and down St George's Hill for the better carrying out of the useful and beastly branch of science you have felt it your duty to follow. Provided also that you bring your own cooking utensils you may dine off your gatherings though I won't partake of the feast, my stomach being delicate . . .

If you let me know — shall I send out and gather toadstools in hampers for you? You can sit and pick them in the large hall . . .

Goodbye.

Yours,

EDWARD LEAR.

Whether or not there were toadstools, the invitation was irresistible. On 5 December, Grove recorded: 'Down to Lear at Oatlands Park Hotel to dinner, & slept there. We had a snug dinner alone in the coffee room, & a bottle of champagne.'

Lear's letters are not only intimate and spontaneous. Here and there, in his correspondence, when he is particularly moved, he finds himself, suddenly, writing poetry. Like many sensitive people, he tries to hide his feelings under a cloak of flippancy, but his feelings carry him away. In Damascus, on 27 May 1858, he sits down to write to Lady Waldegrave, and to tell her about his visit to Jerusalem. He is moved to write one of the finest of his letters:

There is enough in Jerusalem to set a man thinking for life, & I am deeply glad I have been there. O my nose! O my eyes! O my feet! How you all suffered in that vile place! for let me tell you, physically Jerusalem is the foulest and odiouslest place on earth. A bitter doleful soul-ague comes over you in its streets. And your memories of its interior are but horrid dreams of squalor & filth, clamour & uneasiness, hatred & malice & all uncharitableness. But the outside is full of melancholy glory, exquisite beauty & a world of past history of all ages: — every point forcing you to think on a vastly dim receding past, or a time of Roman war & splendour, (for Ælia Capitolium was a fine city) or a smash of Moslem & Crusader years, with long long dull winter of deep decay through centuries of misrule. The Arab & his sheep are alone the wanderers on the pleasant vallies & breezy hills round Zion: the file of slow camels all that brings to mind the commerce of Tyre and other bygone merchandize . . .

Poetry lay deep in Lear: a sense of significance, of the natural music of writing. He had a strong sense of colour, too; and the landscape-painter's letters are punctuated with bright little pictures: like the verbal watercolour of the way to Ramleh, 'through one almighty green lovely cornfield', with 'the long unbroken line of blue-lilac hills'. 'Nubia delighted me,' he writes from Cairo. 'Sad, stern, uncompromising landscape, dark ashy purple hills, piles of granite rocks, fringes of palm and ever and anon astonishing ruins of oldest temples: above all wonderful Abou Simbel, which took my breath away.' 'Imagine 16 worlds of gardens rolled out flat,' he writes to Lady Waldegrave, 'with a river and a glittering city in the middle, & you have a sort of idea of what the Damascus pianura is like.' And then, sitting in Trieste in November 1861, he tells Fortescue: 'All the traffic of Trieste is like gold & silver set in lapis lazuli & emerald, & the air is as lovely as the wision & spectacles . . .'

For with this sense of poetry, this sense of form and colour, went a sense of humour: sometimes gentle, sometimes wild, and at times disguising some profound affection or depression:

Villa Tennyson, San Remo.

16 November 1884.

My dear Lord Aberdare,

. . . I have not written earlier . . . because I saw by various pamsidilious papers that you were very busy about public matters . . .

San Remo is the bebomination of dissolution — nobody being

here, and no-one, as I know of, being about to come. This, however, makes but little difference to me, who cannot now walk and talk much, and to whom solitude is a necessity, if not a repose, in these latter days . . .

Beneath the nonsense in Lear's letters, as beneath his nonsense verse, there is sometimes unexpected gravity.

Kama Sutra

This is a book for the specialist
or the enthusiast. It is for those
for whom the yoni and the lingam are
the adored objects of constant delight
and continuous research.

It is for those who find nail and teeth marks,
the many kisses and artificial devices,
no less absorbing than the eight stages
of oral congress, the sixty-four arts
and the eighty-four postures.

This book is not for the half-hearted,
for those who like everything easy.
It is not for the ethereal or over-modest,
for those who lack dedication or have
little taste for the subject.

Nor is a great deal of it, my darling,
now that we have grown a little fatter
and slightly more lazy than the gods
prescribe, for you and me.

RAYMOND TONG