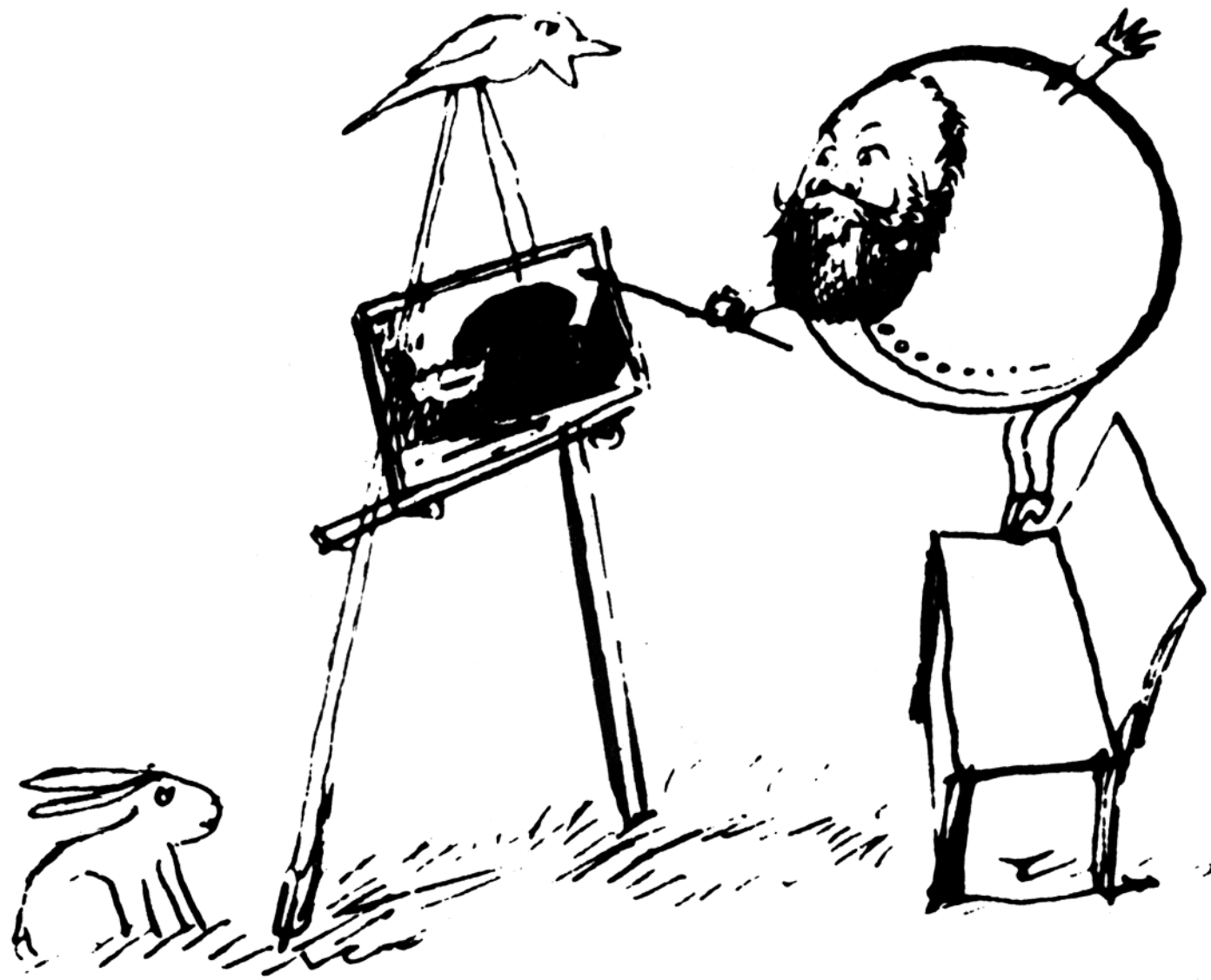


# MOVING LINES

As he encountered foreign landscapes, Edward Lear recalled lines from the poems of Tennyson, which in turn came to haunt his art – and which spurred him to begin an obsessive project that he would never be able to complete

By Jasmine Jagger



1. Self-portrait by Edward Lear (1812–88) in a letter to Frances, Countess Waldegrave, in 1860

Writing to Frances, Countess Waldegrave in 1860, the landscape artist and nonsense poet Edward Lear (1812–88) sketched a precarious self-portrait of himself at work (Fig. 1). Nonsensical as it may seem, its composition captures a number of truths about Lear's career. As a painter, he set himself atop an uneasy yet humdrum perch. Despite having been taught how to turn drawings into oils by William Holman Hunt (whom he nicknamed 'Daddy'), Lear was always aspiring to the pedestal on which he placed Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites. Moreover, Lear often felt his paintings to be too heavy in mood and lacking in motion. Peering intimidatingly back at him from above and below his canvases, his subjects' animation proved difficult to capture in paint, and the challenge of rendering temporality proved an ongoing torment. This is perhaps most curiously expressed in the 'failure' of his 'Poetical Topographical' project to illustrate 300 of Alfred Tennyson's poetic lines. Ultimately realising the joke that he might 'expire myself gradually in the middle of my own works', Lear died with the unfinished Tennyson canvases strewn around his studio.

Lear enjoyed a 37-year friendship with Alfred and Emily Tennyson, which remained loyal and intimate but which occasionally suffered strain from his personal differences with Alfred. The landscape painter most celebrated for 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat' and 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose' was introduced to the couple in 1850, the year that Alfred was made poet laureate, and the newlyweds took an interest in his passion for travel and for the kinship of verbal and visual art. Though scholars have tended to fixate on the souring of the relationship between the painter and poet in 1869, an examination of the complete correspondence proves that the friendship recovered and remained affectionate to the end of Lear's life. The Tennysons would come to own all of Lear's landscape journals and nonsense books as well as a number of his original artworks. Emily would write, 'We long to see your pictures', and 'We thought how beautiful you would make that beautiful plain with

the hills beyond'; Lear would reply from Grecian peaks, Italian seas and Arabian sands: 'this sheet of paper [...] hath travelled with me to Epirus, Thessaly, & Salonica, & all the way to Athos, whence I had intended to send it to you (& had I gone to the top of the holy mountain I meant to have written a line from it to Alfred).' Reluctant to make such adventurous voyages himself, Tennyson enjoyed the armchair travel afforded by Lear's pictures, enticed by the imaginative opportunity to scale a Syracusan quarry or sail quietly down the Nile.

Tennyson's celebrated response to Lear's landscapes, in 'To E.L., on His Travels in Greece' (1853), is engraved on Lear's tombstone:

Tomohrit, Athos, all things fair,  
With such a pencil, such a pen,  
You shadow forth to distant men,  
I read and felt that I was there:

The poet remarked that Lear's landscapes afforded 'something of the glory of Nature herself looking upon them', and his lines in 'To E. L.' are concerted attempts at ekphrasis, drawing on Lear's illustrated scenes as they themselves drew on nature. Yet the venerating lines 'You shadow forth to distant men, / I read and felt that I was there' subtly echo the poet's earlier impression of poetry as 'tender-pencilled shadow play' in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), suggesting art as merely a ghost or glimmer of a livelier original. As we read the latter of these two lines, for a moment 'read' flickers into the present tense because of 'shadow' in the previous line, before resolving itself into the past tense to accompany 'felt' – a temporal ambiguity that reflects art's own equivocation between motion and stillness. The critic Christopher Ricks observes that lyricism (no matter how good) is always an exercise in how to fail better: 'An analogy might be the success of the sculptor whose work seeks to capture birds in flight – seeks both to convey this and at the same time



honestly to acknowledge the uncapturability of such a thing.' As Lear embarked on his project to illustrate Tennyson's 'landscape lines & feelings' – lyrics in flight across the page or through the air – he would become all too aware of this temporal disparity between the real and the representational.

There are a number of reasons why Lear's project has all but faded from view. The first is that it was never finished: as Lear wrote to Tennyson in 1880, 'during some 30 years of more or less study on the subjects, – a great number of these drawings have come to be – (– through their egg, caterpillar, & Chrysalis state, –)'; yet Lear's progressing blindness and rheumatism in old age had made the project increasingly difficult: 'If a man has but one eye, & that one weak: – & no proper thumbs to hold pencils, & if all his working light is spoiled by a diametrical damnable blazing 5 Story Hotel, verily his work – or his attempts to work, – is or are not easy.' The second reason for the near disappearance of Lear's 'poetical topography' is that it proved unpublishable in a way that could do justice to Lear's textures. The only attempt to disseminate the work before the publication of the 'eggs' (the smallest drawings, inscribed with quotations from Tennyson and place names; Figs. 4 and 6) in the late 20th century, was just after Lear's death, in a selection of the illustrations pushed through by the Tennysons themselves: Tennyson's *Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Illustrated by Edward Lear* (1889). However admirable the effort, the print blunted the delicacy of Lear's monochrome. The third reason for the obscurity of Lear's project is that it has been split up – the complete collection of 'eggs' owned by the Tennysons was dispersed by the Tennyson Research Centre in 1980, and the only complete collection of 'chrysalises' (each measuring approximately 17 × 26cm) remains at the Houghton Library, Harvard. Apart from the unfinished *Enoch Arden* picture that was on Lear's easel when he died, the whereabouts of the few 'butterflies' (large oil-on-canvas landscapes) made for the Tennyson series is unknown, and we are left with only Lear's drafts and remarks to piece together their design.

Lear and Tennyson's close mutual friend, Frank Lushington, wrote of the former's art: 'It might be said that Tennyson was always in his mind, and was there not as outside his own craft.' This phrase captures the way in which, even before 1851, Tennyson's lines were embedded within Lear's emotional memory, and had become inseparable from his artistic process. As Lear wrote to Emily: 'There have been but few weeks or days [...] that I have not been more or less in the habit of remembering or reading Tennyson's poetry,' the lines of which had 'mixed with [his] existence'. Lear and Tennyson spent time roaming the Compton Downs and uttering verses aloud (near the Tennysons' second home on the Isle of Wight). This imprinting or embedding of poetic lines upon or within landscapes would become part of Lear's technique for his Tennysonian works, reflected in wandering pencilled lyrics that ghost the backgrounds and margins of his drafts. John Hollander writes that lyrical echoes 'constitute a kind of underground cipher-message for the attentive poetic ear [...] a private melody or undersong hummed during composition by the poet'; in Lear's diaries and notebooks, Tennyson's lyrics appear like ghosts of auditory memory recalled during times



2. *Quarries of Syracuse*, 1847, Edward Lear, pencil, sepia ink and watercolour on paper, 35.4 × 50.3cm (image). Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

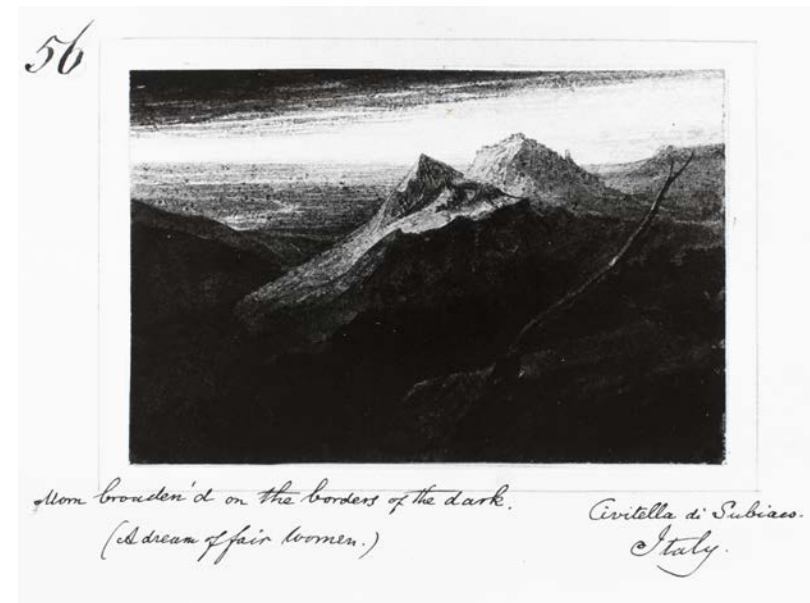


3. *The Quarries of Syracuse*, 1852–53, Edward Lear, oil on canvas, 122 × 185.4cm. Private collection

of emotion. The palimpsestic overlaying of poetic and landscape lines in Lear's art, in turn, is characteristic of the artist's peculiar melancholic tone, and invests his landscapes with a ghost-like quality of happiness past and looked back upon from present emptiness.

Setting about illustrating 200, then 100, then 120, then 250, then '300 memories tied to 300 poetries' at different moments in his life and in different mediums (from sketches to 'good sized watercolour drawings') the evolution of Lear's project is almost impossible to trace. He never proposed 300 large-scale oils, but the existence of a number of these works is recorded in his letters. Lear did not wish for his pictures to be replicas of Tennyson's scenes, but rather 'Painting-Sympathizations', reflecting how both word-landscapes (in paint) and word-painting

Fig. 2: courtesy Walker Art Gallery



4. 'Morn broaden'd on the borders of the dark', c. 1884–85, Edward Lear, pencil, ink and grey wash with white heightening, approx. 9.5 × 14.6cm. University of Bristol Library Special Collections



5. *Civitella di Subiaco*, n.d., Edward Lear, gouache on paper, 10 × 17.5cm. Gunby Hall Estate, Lincolnshire

(in poetry) could be notionally open to a kind of synaesthesia. Imagining the whole as his 'Liber Studiorum', Lear's design was:

to show that Alfred Tennyson's poetry (with regard to scenes –) is as real & exquisite as it is relatively to higher & deeper matters: – that his descriptions of certain spots are as positively true as if drawn from the places themselves, & that his words have the power of calling up images as distinct & correct as if they were written from these images, instead of giving rise to them.

Lear describes a kind of holographic relationship between places, words and images of places, imagining Tennyson's lyrics as 'written' from life as opposed to writing of life. Gifting an oil painting of *The Quarries of Syracuse* to the

Tennysons in 1854, Lear included a 'description' that busies his landscape with 'a million of' imagined Tennyson lines, filling it with lyrical life (this scene became a painting that included a reclining figure in the foreground; Fig. 3):

I hope you & Alfred may like the little picture. I wish he could take up the subject for a poem: – turn himself into one of the Greek soldier or sailor captives, & write a million of lines. Why not the whole siege, with episodes of love madness melancholy etc. – at his own pleasure? [...] some of the captives certainly sang & were poetical –

Lear's supplementary narrative betrays a feeling that his painting may be in some way dependant on these imagined lyrical lines to live and breathe; and in a watercolour draft of the quarries made in 1847 (Fig. 2), scribbled words animate the lines of his drawing. This was a form of aide-memoire for when Lear revisited his sketches to turn them into paintings but it also allowed for impressions of colour and mood to be inscribed on the landscape at the moment that they were caught by the artist's eye. In one sketch at the Houghton Library (of Kudhës, Albania, in 1848), Lear has scribbled a half-remembered line from Tennyson in the bottom-right ('Lotus eaters – they saw the inner river'), suggesting how a scene might evoke Tennyson's words and in turn influence Lear's composition.

Though Tennyson's lyrics were already informing his art, Lear officially began the project in 1852 and sold his first 'large "Tennyson Landscape"' (oil on canvas) in 1855; it hung in the buyer's drawing room in Stoke Newington, reaching over half the height of the door and over double its width, and was one of the few 'butterflies' (large oils) to hatch from Lear's project. In November, he sent the Tennysons a sketch of this painting, 'Morn Broaden'd', which drew on a line from Tennyson's 'A Dream of Fair Women'. Writing to the Tennysons, Lear provided a 'little' description of three pages long, explaining how this 'single line' of 'that greatest of Word=landscape=painters, Alfred Tennyson, has placed a well known scene once before me [...] in the almost reality of recollection':

When I first read the words, 'Morn broaden'd on the borders of the dark', they seemed to me to describe exactly what I had so often watched in other days, – that Darkness, – edged with broadening light which I had seen through so many Summer and Autumn months during years of Italian wanderings, and most of all from the neighbourhood of Civitella, a village near Subiaco, about 40 or 50 miles from Rome.

The large landscape is missing, but a gouache-on-paper colour study of the composition is held by the Gunby Hall Estate in Lincolnshire (Fig. 5). It is a haunting portrait of darkness and stillness, barely stirred by flickers of light attempting to break through cold lines. Dark green-black foliage creeps up and around an oppressive foreground eventually interrupted (as our eye roves from left to right) by the splintered stump and reaching arms of a dead tree catching the first light. Beyond Lear's jagged peak are indigo blues and purples fading into sea as they meet with a luke-warm, pale blue-yellow horizon. The sun lies out of sight above the scene, its red rays breaking through the clouds at the picture's edge, promising to bleed into the cold silence. Lear paints a present 'darkness' haunted by a future warmth,



and we think of him 'watch[ing]' on in that strange hour, longing for an end to the night. Horizons were a point of heartache for Lear as they often were for his nonsensical alter-egos, such as "The Dong with a Luminous Nose":

And the Dong was left on the cruel shore  
Gazing – gazing for evermore, –  
Ever keeping his weary eyes on  
That pea-green sail on the far horizon, –

That interminable line, where the dark earth meets the pea-green sail, was where Lear would sketch lines scribbled with the names of colours to be gradated later, as though attempting to catch a precise moment of yearning.

A similar feeling of melancholy permeates Lear's description of Mount Athos for the Tennysons the following year:

I never saw any more striking scenes than those forest screens  
& terrible crags, all lonely lonely lonely: paths through them  
leading to hermitages where these dead men abide, – or to the  
immense monasteries where many hundred of these living  
corpses chaunt prayers nightly & daily: the blue sea dark dark  
against the hard iron rocks below

The living corpses of the monasteries 'chaunt prayers', filling the scene with an eerie music. Echoes of Byron's 'Oh! – my lonely – lonely – lonely – Pillow!' and Tennyson's 'Break, break, break / On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!' also ghost Lear's vision, as though the poetic perception turns the lines of the landscape into feelings. Lear's oil painting of this scene (*The Monastery of Stavroniketes, Mount Athos, 1861*) also features a golden, glimmering horizon – but as our eye wanders, we notice a dark figure in the left foreground, burdened and pacing with its back against the light. Though never explicitly described by him as a 'Tennyson Landscape', Lear included versions of this composition in his 'egg' and 'chrysalis' collections, so the oil may have been a 'butterfly' of sorts. Either way, the lines from Tennyson's 'To E. L.' must have resounded in his ear as he painted ('Tomohrit, Athos, all things fair [...]').

This figure crops up elsewhere in Lear's Tennysonian, and seems freighted with meaning. Perhaps the finest example of Lear's poetry-painting can be found in the works he made of Pentedattilo (five fingers rock) in southern Calabria, Italy, illustrating a stanza from 'The Palace of Art':

6. 'One seemed all dark & red a tract of sand', c. 1884–85, Edward Lear, pencil, ink and grey wash with white heightening, approx. 9.5 × 14.6cm. University of Bristol



7. *Pentedattilo, Calabria*, n.d., Edward Lear, watercolour on paper, 9.8 × 19.7cm

One seem'd all dark and red – a tract of sand,  
And someone pacing there alone,  
Who paced for ever in a glimmering land,  
Lit with a low large moon.

We have just opened the picture case – & both my Father & myself exclaimed 'How magnificent!' It is an extraordinarily fine realisation of the stanza [...]. We shall put Pentedaletto at Aldworth, and I shall always count it as one of my most precious possessions.

Tennyson's lines again play with time: the present participle of 'pacing' in the second line shifts to 'paced' in the third immediately followed by 'for ever'. Lear's sketches of the scene all depict the same lonely figure pacing across the shore with Pentedattilo in the background. His horizontal tract is temporally suggestive too: past, present, and future are being paced out as we might pace out a consoling metrical line when left entirely alone with our thoughts (Fig. 6).

'Depression', writes Daphne Merkin, is like wandering 'in a moonscape bleached of reliable human connection'. The 'glimmering' of time is caught in the shadowy lines which appear as if they had just written themselves upon the moon. Lear's final 'butterfly' painting of this Tennyson stanza is missing; but in June 1884, he wrote to Emily about his pride in the large 'poem-painting':

Only just lately I have finished a rather large picture of the 'tract of sand, with someone pacing there alone', which I wish you could see. – It was to have been put up for sale at Christie's, but all their sale-days were already bespoken, so it is on show at 129, Wardour Street. If a single head by Millais is bought for £1200, – collections of a single Watercolor Artist for 8000£, this child cannot be outrageous when he asks £315 for a picture which all who see it approve of as a poem-painting.

Two years later, Lear gave 'Someone pacing there alone' to Hallam and Audrey Tennyson as a wedding present, and Hallam's unpublished letter of thanks suggests that Tennyson adored the poem-painting:

There are multiple versions of this design, from a diary sketch of the shore in 1846 to the final oil painting, which Lear described in a letter as suffused with 'red and black'. In each version, that anonymous figure (whether cloaked or burdened) paces slowly, silhouetted with its back against the moonlight.

Perhaps the closest surviving version to the final 'butterfly' is a watercolour, undated and inscribed 'Pentedatilo' (lower left), distinctive for its red and dark blue colour scheme (Fig. 7). Yet in this version there is no figure – only the distant speck of a hunched-over heron kept company (or perhaps haunted) by its own shadow. The moon is now barely perceptible, suggesting the passage of time, and the dark lines over the sky have just faded. While Lear's self-described 'odd bird' soul remains in the landscape, the 'reliable human connection' has been removed, and it is hard to say which composition is the more haunting. These later compositions are, strikingly, all heavily weighted to one side, as though leaving space for someone or something that never arrives. Whether poetry, painting, or both, their design is poignant: instilled with the moving lines not only of the landscape before Lear, but those recalled by his own nostalgic eye-view. <sup>A</sup>

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