

## THE LUMINOSITY OF THE NOSE

### D. Graham Burnett

“The Dong with a Luminous Nose” is a verse ballad of one hundred and three lines authored by the eccentric Victorian illustrator, lyricist, and polymorphous sufferer Edward Lear (1812–1888). The poem dates to the mid-1870s. The tone is madcap-moody—a griffin of twee hijinks and misshapen anguish, the sort of odd-words-in-the-mouth sing-song surrealism that gets called “nursery rhyme” or “nonsense verse.” Lear and Lewis Carroll are often discussed together in this respect, as roughly contemporary progenitors of something like a veritable genre of English poetry for children that is perhaps not wholly appropriate for children (though children certainly seem to like it). Of the two authors, Lear is the more sentimentally lurid and the more inclined to write of distended or damaged body parts. All in good fun. The kind of good fun that emerges like a gleeful berserker out of a miasmatic swamp of pain and sorrow.

Paradigmatically, “The Dong with a Luminous Nose” recounts the ill-fated love of the eponymous “Dong” for a “Jumbly” girl who visits the Dong’s land with others of her kind in a sieve-like vessel. Jumblies have green heads and blue hands and come from far away. The Jumbly sojourn is a whirl of joy:

*While the cheerful Jumblies staid;  
They danced in circlets all night long,  
To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong,  
In moonlight, shine, or shade.  
For day and night he was always there  
By the side of the Jumbly Girl so fair ...*

But this idyll is soon clipped:

*...the morning came of that hateful day  
When the Jumblies sailed in their sieve away,  
And the Dong was left on the cruel shore  
Gazing—gazing for evermore, ...*

Within hours, hopeless pining has divested the Dong of right reason (“What little sense I once possessed / Has quite gone out of my head!”). Flushed out onto the infinite wastes of futility, the mad Dong wanders the coastal cliffs and black forests (the “great Gromboolian

plain” and the “Hills of the Chankly Bore”) piping plaintive dirges:

*...“O somewhere, in valley or plain  
Might I find my Jumbly Girl again!  
For ever I’ll seek by lake and shore  
Till I find my Jumbly Girl once more!”*

And it is here that the poem offers its immortal stroke. The gibbering Dong—exiled by desperation, haunting the nocturnal bluffs—sets to an addled stratagem: he fashions himself a large lighthouse-lantern *which he ties on his face as a prosthetic nose*. The idea is that he will use this awkward contraption as a searchlight in his doomed pursuit. The passage should be cited in its entirety:

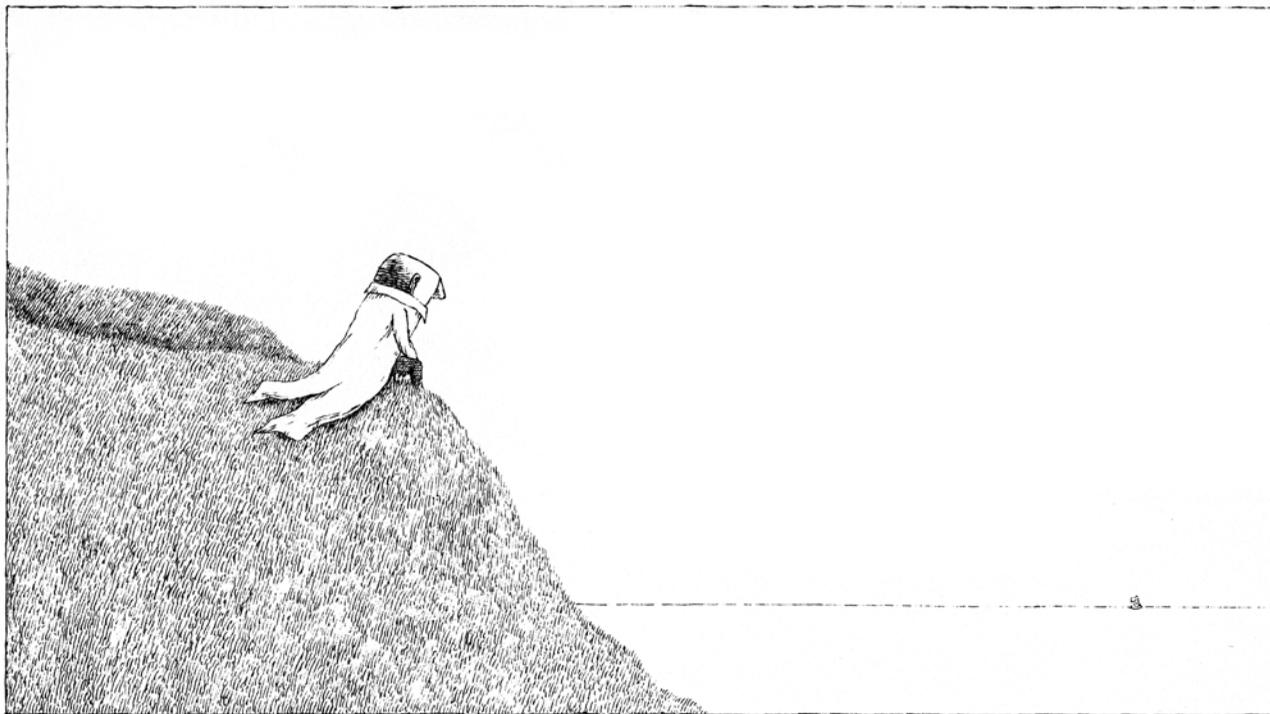
*And because by night he could not see,  
He gathered the bark of the Twangum Tree  
On the flowery plain that grows.  
And he wove him a wondrous Nose, —  
A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!  
Of vast proportions and painted red,  
And tied with cords to the back of his head.*

Thusly accoutered, the quixotic Dong lives out his life as a ghost-glow in the hills, a nightly visitation of outcast longing, a meandering beacon of unfulfilled desire:

*And all who watch at the midnight hour,  
From Hall or Terrace, or lofty Tower,  
Cry, as they trace the Meteor bright,  
Moving along through the dreary night, —  
“This is the hour when forth he goes,  
The Dong with a luminous Nose!  
Yonder — over the plain he goes;  
He goes!  
He goes;  
The Dong with a luminous Nose!”*

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To clear the way for a proper discussion of this bizarre and affecting text, it is necessary to specify that Lear’s use of the term “Dong” significantly predates the



The Dong, pre-prosthesis, looks on as his Jumbly Girl sails away.

first recorded slang usage of this word to refer to the human penis (which dates to the interwar period). Nor does the emergence of that bit of scurrilous argot in the 1930s seem in any way linked to Lear's poem. In other words, Lear neither drew on nor (as best as can be determined) contributed to the modern cock-lexicon. A vague air of smirk that unfortunately attaches to the poem among contemporary readers on account of these prurient connotations must thus be thoroughly ventilated if we are to access the original force and mood of "The Dong with a Luminous Nose."

That said, commentators on the poem have been, predictably, nearly unanimous in referencing the phallic registers of the story. And this can hardly be called wrong. It would be impossible entirely to dismiss the psychological and biographical interpretations that engage the Dong in this way. So let us make haste both to acknowledge and then to move past such considerations: yes, Lear had a complicated relationship to his sexual identity, as his biographers have documented with a scrupulousness rivaling Lear's own detailed diaries; yes, he seems to have been a "repressed" "homosexual" of an identifiably tormented-Victorian variety; yes, he experienced epileptic seizures across his life, which seizures he appears to have believed were precipitated by masturbation (and maybe other forms of sexual arousal as well); yes, he wrote and illustrated a large body of limericks, a disproportionate number of which feature characters with large, misshapen, or bandaged proboscises; yes, the prosthetic nature of the Dong's nose-thing merits attention in the context of Lear's sexual ambivalence (his own drawing of it depicts, rather suggestively, less a nose-phallus than a kind of nose-yoni); and finally, yes, castration anxieties are arguably legible in the tale as a whole, particularly when it is read against other imagery in Lear's output—both visual and textual.

And so, in the context of these acknowledgements, can "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" be read as a more or less thinly veiled allegory of Lear's abortive romantic relations with Augusta Bethell? (Lear evidently allowed himself a dalliance with the come-hither siren of a conventional married life.) Yes, it would seem such a reading must be admitted. And, going further, can the Dong be understood as a charged figure for the lonely, ostracizing flamboyance of non-heteronormative sexuality in one of its notable

performative accommodations to a (hostile) dominant culture? Yes again—to some extent, presumably.

Reductive versions of the above interpretive lines are easy to imagine. And indeed, most of them need not be imagined, as they can actually be read in what is now a rather large scholarly literature on Lear generally, and the Dong specifically. But we are also in possession of a considerable number of non-reductive treatments of the poem that inevitably cover much of the same terrain. One thinks of Thomas Byrom's lovely invocation of the Dong's "admirable, recreative courage" as he confronts the futility and failure of *mondaine* love—an interpretation echoed by Ina Rae Hark, who reads the poem as a strained and painfully self-conscious satire upon all those who cannot accommodate themselves to an existence that, in the words of Lear, can neither be "cured" nor "cursed."<sup>1</sup> In a superb essay on Lear's relationship to the Romantic tradition, Michael O'Neill detects echoes of Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in the fate of the Dong, as well as in the language Lear uses to invoke his lost worlds; in the poem's bulbous red semaphore of longing, O'Neill senses both a barely sublated "sweaty" sensuality together with the exquisite tenderness of a Romantic "send-up" that "more than shivers with a frisson of the real thing."<sup>2</sup> All of this feels quite correct.

But does any of this take the Dong's nose seriously *as a nose*? A recent line of critical literature has turned to Lear's work within the context of an emergent "rhinology," and worked to recover the nose-ness of the Dong's nose out from under nearly half a century of Freudian, Jungian, and queer-theoretical accretion. And so we have Hellen Giblin-Jowett insisting directly, in her 2014 study "Smell, Smells and Smelling in Victorian Supernatural Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*," that "despite customary interpretations of Lear's Dong's luminous nose, *it is still possible to read the Dong's nose as a nose*."<sup>3</sup> This oblique reference to the Freudian limits of Freudian interpretation ("sometimes a cigar is just a cigar") serves as the hinge by which Giblin-Jowett opens onto the history of rhinoplasty, a topic not previously dealt with in any detail in relation to the poem—but not as irrelevant as it might seem.

This new nose literature is inextricable from a larger interdisciplinary push toward the "history of the senses," where a key question has for years been the place of odor in the contested dynamics of modernism.<sup>4</sup> While a concern with smell clearly plays a significant

role in the hygienic reforms of bourgeois urban culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, some scholars have of late contrasted this strain of scent-rectitude with a decadent countercurrent—one that wallowed in olfactory extremes as a form of active resistance to the odorless norms of an emergent modernity. While the Dong's nose certainly has about it more than a whiff of priapic outlawry, it must be conceded that smell-as-such has surprisingly little place in the poem.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the notion of the Dong's seeking his beloved *by means of his nose* cannot but invoke scent trails and bloodhounds and the animal stirrings of olfactory desire. And yet, the poem would seem ultimately to sidestep any real engagement with smell itself. Indeed, we can go further. The poem can in fact be read as effecting a direct substitution of ocularity for olfaction, *replacing* a smelling nose with an appurtenance contrived to aid vision.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" must be understood to participate in, and perhaps even advance, the general privileging of opticality in the domains of sense—a hegemonic philosophical and aesthetic program that only came under real critical scrutiny in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

In a beautiful essay from 1953 entitled "Eyes and Noses," Muriel Spark quite explicitly dismissed this heavy historical torrent of eye-talk with a wave (Windows on the soul? "A fallacy; they are the windows of moods and inclinations, alarums and excursions, which act only as a magnet to more adjectives"), before electing the nose as nothing less than the probable seat of the human soul. The nose is, she declares, "our tether between spirit and substance, Heaven and Earth."<sup>8</sup> It is into the nose, more specifically into our nostrils, that the God of Genesis breathed the first breath of life: "The first thing that happened to Adam happened to his nose. Therefore the nose is an emblem at once of our dusty origin and our divine." Why do infants reach for noses? she asks. Because reflexively (in their angelic purity) "they doubt whether we have got souls, like themselves." By these lights, a false nose must be understood as nothing less than heresy, and Spark thereby indicts the Dong as a luciferous evasion.

Whether we would go so far or no, Spark's discussion helpfully elevates the Dong's nose-matters out of both the perfervid nightmare of *A Clockwork Orange* and the roadhouse doggerel of the man from Nantucket. At a stroke, we are reminded of the odd but

undeniable philosophical seriousness of noses. This goes quite beyond the remarkable alethic mythos of Pinocchio, whose nose, after all, serves as nothing less than an *actual index of veracity*—a kind of eversion of the apodictic/epistemic organ/instrument for which Descartes searched desperately from within the black vertigo of a skeptical crisis. And beyond the bent physiognomy by which Herman Melville recast the Sperm Whale's nose-less/all-nose face into a figure for God and Satan at once. We are cast back, via the nose, to the linked problems of causality, free will, and determinism—classically epitomized within the Western tradition in the philosophical set-piece of Cleopatra's notorious nose, from which was understood to hang the Western tradition as such.<sup>9</sup> Nor are these metaphysical nose-problems merely antiquarian oddments. I was quite surprised to discover a recent line of work in analytic philosophy that hinges on a set of thought experiments involving dogs with luminous noses.<sup>10</sup> At issue? Teleology itself—the hardest question of all. The one that sits at the intersection of technical metaphysics and speculative theology.

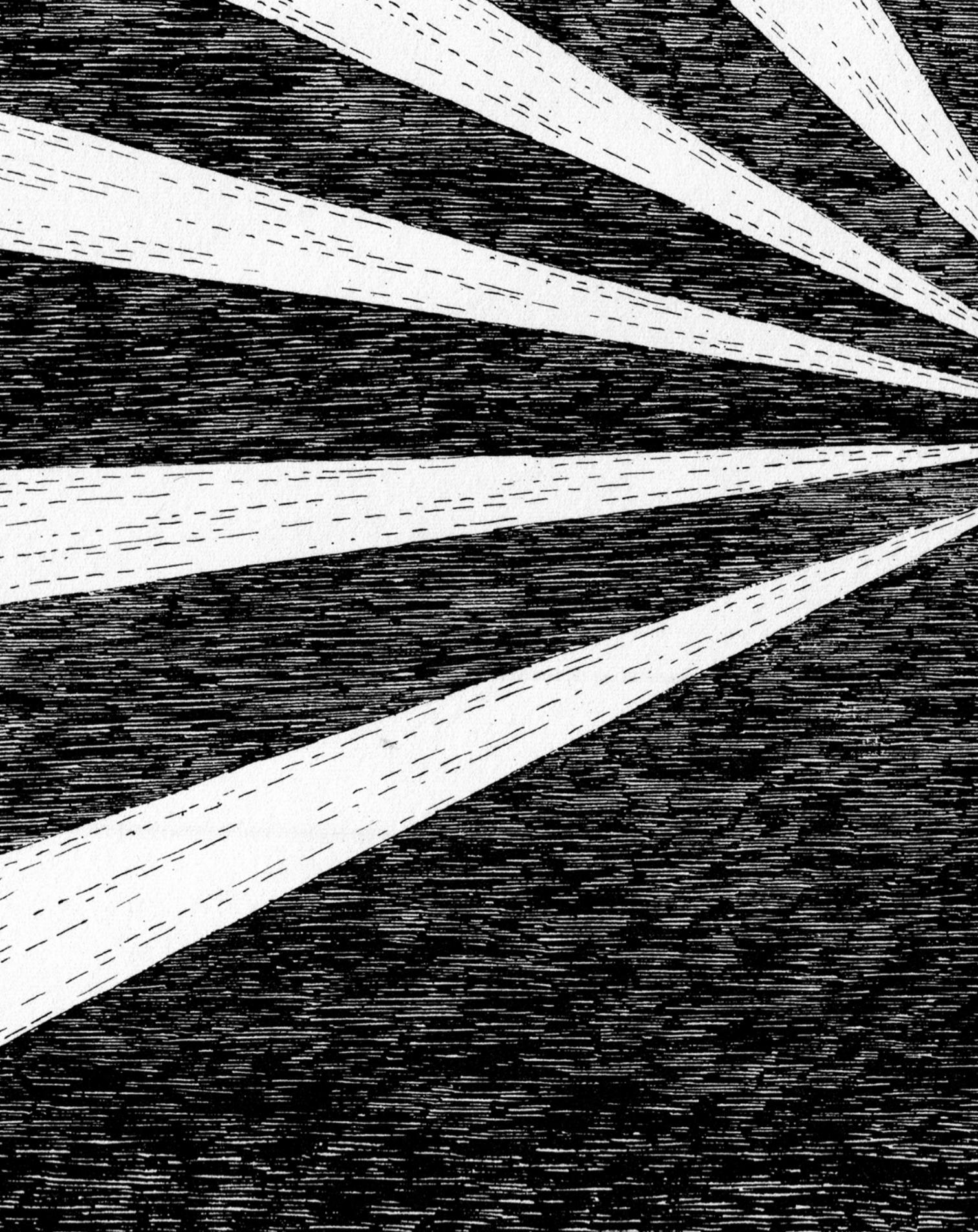
All of which is only to suggest that a more philosophically ambitious interpretation of the Dong may not be unwarranted.

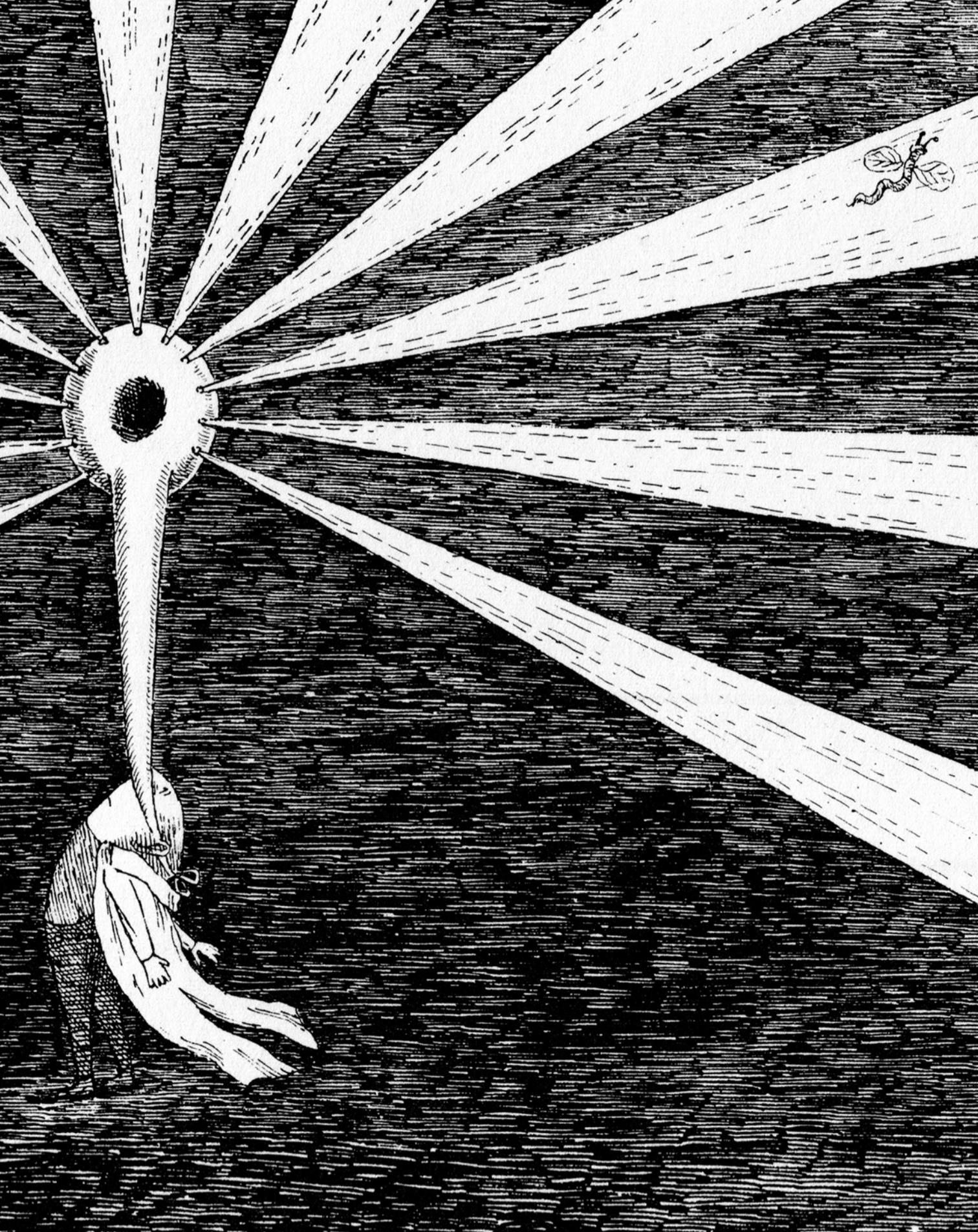
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In this context, then, permit me to suggest a direction for further consideration. I wish to propose the Dong as a tragic figure for the critical limits of critical rationality. If Pinocchio can be understood as wearing the epistemic nose *par excellence* (the nose as unflinching *truth-pointer*), the Dong's nose bodies forth the spangled delusions of all navigation by the light of reason. His is literally *the nose of no sense*. But the non-sense of this nose is by no means mere nonsense. On the contrary, it is precise. The Dong's flashing desperation-beacon offers itself as an elegantly structured allegory, figuring reason at the radiant apotheosis of its paralytic-autolytic collapse *into epistemology itself*: reason regarding reason by means of reason; the mirror held to the mirror, in (blank) reflection. Whereas Descartes's hyperbolic quest focused *la lumière naturelle* into a headlamp by which to illuminate self-evident truths, the Dong's hyperbolic quest converts his mind into its own angler-fish, fatally

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Overleaf: The Dong in full glow.





lured to the glow-worm bait at the center of its own visage. The light of reason has here been externalized, and figured as an *ignis fatuus*, equally bewitching and illusory. After all, the Dong's nose—flashing forth its disorienting rays like a laser light show; painting the looming world with streaks of dancing, incoherent luminosity—functions as a continuously blinding spectacle before his very eyes, even as it serves as a perpetual flare forever disclosing his position. Both the futility and the vanity of the involution to philosophical foundationalism would seem here to be simultaneously invoked—together with a sly nod to the notion that the narcissism of first philosophy always has its tragic origins in a displacement or compensation.

To sense the full torque of Lear's pivot on the traditional symbolic repertoire of the "light of reason," we must consider the Dong's nose in the context of two significant visual prosthetics, each of which it both signals and travesties. On the one hand, we have the whole lineage of actual head-mounted light-sources, from tongues of fire to miner's lamps.<sup>11</sup> For an English artist from the period, one very concrete and particular historical instance would have loomed large: the notorious head-mounted tallow candle said to have been worn by Michelangelo when he worked on his sculptures and paintings by night in solitude.<sup>12</sup> It is quite impossible to imagine that Lear did not hold Michelangelo's pointed pasteboard candle-cap in mind as he conceived (and depicted) the Dong's luminous accoutrement. On the other hand, we have the absolutely stereotypical head-encumbrance of every medical doctor in the nineteenth century: the "head mirror," that familiar concave reflective dish *pierced at the center* (very much like Lear's representation of the Dong's prosthetic) and used to direct light into the dark cavities of a body under investigation. Each of these devices, the head-lamp and the head-mirror, attaches to the crown of the user and extends or supplements vision: the lamp by throwing light, the mirror by reflecting it. The former, in its connection to the deep mythos of artistic representation, invokes creative power—the nocturnal demiurge that sees, and, in seeing, makes. The latter, serving as the escutcheon of medical diagnostic inquiry, invokes analytic scrutiny—the forensic gaze that will penetrate mere appearance to unveil hidden truths. Together these vision-enhancing head-devices, both the lamp

and the mirror, reify the optical aspirations of reason itself. The brilliance of Lear's patty-cake apocalypse lies in the massive leverage it brings to bear on that figural program—by means of the tiniest displacement in the fulcrum. The short move from the forehead to the nose is here nothing less than a move from insight to blindness. The Dong's is thus the nose of hysterical reason: the nose that cuts itself off to spite its face.

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That might be all. But perhaps not. This juxtaposition of head-lamps and head-mirrors brings to mind the central conceit of one of the most significant works of literary criticism in the postwar period, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. There, the American critic M. H. Abrams argued persuasively that the artistic and intellectual upheavals of the early nineteenth century were inscribed in a broad change in the dominant metaphors used to figure the mind in the canonical texts of the period: grossly speaking, out went the Platonizing image of the mind-as-mirror (which epitomized the aspirations of the mimetic paradigm itself, and with it the dream of an art that could be "true to nature"); in came the Romantic image of the mind as a shining lamp (which dramatized a new emphasis on the projective genius of the artist's vision, and with it an art of "pure expression"). The move from the mirror to the lamp was in this sense legible as a shift from a poetics of truth to one of meaning, from a readerly world of didactics to one of hermeneutics.

Abrams's central contention feels compelling and right. Right enough that one is left wondering what optical device might figure our own time—post-classical, counter-mimetic, un-Romantic, anti-hermeneutic, perfectly indifferent to didactics. Such a vehicle for our philosophical tenor would need to give us fragmentation, pixilation, vertigo, seriality, pervasiveness, flicker, hide-and-seek. If history proceeds by dialectic, we would hope for an object that can be thought of as a synthetic *Aufhebung* of mirror and lamp.

One thinks, of course, of the *disco ball*, that radiant, Dionysian planet of giddy, flashing disorientation.

And then one takes another look at Lear's depiction of the Dong's bandaged dazzle-proboscis, his flaming planetarium-prosthetic, that orbicular, ray-throwing contraption.

There is something uncanny in the conjunction.

Let me be clear: I do not wish to try to claim that Edward Lear invented the disco ball. The device, which has stimulated dance-hall swooning since the early twentieth century, has its own history. But I do wish to assert that the Dong's luminous *illinx*-beak must be understood in relation to the dominant imagery for the mind in the Western tradition, and that Lear's unsettling vision has given us an indelible figure for the cognitive euphoria-cum-derangement of modernity itself, a figure for the mind without itself, in the lonely meteor of the body. And I would like to go further. The Dong's luminous nose, I contend, is, in a very real way, still with us—hanging before our faces in every discotheque and nightclub in the world, its caterwauling rays announcing the doomed quest for both love and truth, and calling us to self-loss and abandon before the darkness.

**1** Thomas Byrom, *Nonsense and Wonder* (New York: Dutton, 1977), p. 178. Edward Lear quoted in Ina Rae Hark, "Eccentricity and Victorian Angst," *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 16, no. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 1978), p. 119.

**2** Michael O'Neill, "One of the Dumms': Edward Lear and Romanticism," in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 65.

**3** Hellen Giblin-Jowett, "Smell, Smells and Smelling in Victorian Supernatural Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*" (PhD dissertation, Newcastle University, 2014), p. 83. Italics mine.

**4** For a discussion, see *The Nose Book: Representations of*

*the Nose in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Victoria de Rijke, Lene Østermark-Johansen, and Helen Thomas (Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2000).

**5** See Victoria de Rijke, "Trompe-nez: Folk, Fairy Tale and Nonsense Noses—Long, Luminous and Lecherous as Licorice," in *The Nose Book*, ed. Victoria de Rijke et al.

**6** Many readers will here think of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, which similarly depicts a nose that functions as an optical aid. There seems to be no genealogical links between this text (authored in 1939 in the United States) and "The Dong with a Luminous Nose," despite the striking consonances that place the two stories in sympathetic vibration.

**7** The canonical discussion remains Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

**8** The essay originally appeared in the *Observer* on 18 January 1953. I am citing the republished version in Muriel Spark, *The Informed Air* (New York: New Directions, 2014).

**9** Jimena Canales discusses the trope of Cleopatra's nose in a recent essay on causality. See Jimena Canales, "Cleopatra's Nose—and the Development of World History," in *Uncomfortable Objects*, ed. Mariana Castillo Deball (Bom Dia: Berlin, 2012).

**10** The original article is Tania Lombrozo and Susan Carey, "Functional Explanation and the

Function of Explanation," *Cognition*, vol. 99, no. 2 (March 2006). Also see the recent discussion in Jacob W. Dink and Lance J. Rips, "Folk Teleology and Its Implications," in *Experimental Metaphysics*, ed. David Rose (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017), p. 227.

**11** Consider, for an overview that focuses on mining lamps, Grant Wheat, "The Story of Underground Lighting," *Proceedings of the Illinois Mining Institute* (1945).

**12** Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster, ed. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), p. 194.