The Silver Honkabeest: Children and the Meaning of Childhood

PERRY NODELMAN

The world is behind me,
The wild times are through.[1]

Believing that "one of the governing dreams of my generation -- perhaps *the* governing dream -- has been the liberation of repressed energies,"[2] Dennis Lee tells us that in *Nicholas Knock and Other People* "I no longer wrote just playful verse. Many of the poems raised the question, *Can* we sustain play, or joy,or any of the deeper and more vibrant modes of being which tantalize us?" ("Roots and Play," 50) For grownups, the most interesting quality of these poems is their ability to simultaneously evoke the playfulness of childhood and investigate its meaning. For our own "wild times" are through also; our distance from and nostalgia for our own childhoods is echoed in Lee's attempt "to reanimate repressed feelings and play by writing children's verse" ("Roots and Play," 46).

But we might wonder why children should be interested in such obviously adult concerns. Surely one needs to have repressed childlike feelings before he becomes interested in reanimating them. Furthermore, the mere fact that these poems discuss *ideas* defies the common assumption that poetry for children ought to appeal primarily to the senses. Lee himself suggests that his poems may be too theoretical: "I spent so much energy just clearing a way towards rooted play . . . and so little time making its poems" ("Roots and Play," 58).

Nevertheless, children do enjoy *Nicholas Knock,* and I suspect they do so because of the poet's intellectual concerns and not in spite of them. For children are as interested in thinking about what it means to be child-like as adults are.

Childhood is not seamless. Children do not continuously and consistently see the world in the same innocent way until suddenly, one morning, they wake up mature, repressed, and conscious of having lost their playfulness. As Piaget's investigations reveal, "mental development . . . . may be likened to the assembly of a subtle mechanism that goes through gradual phases of adjustment."[3] The growth toward maturity is a long and complicated process, and children *know* it is a long and complicated process. As their consciousness of themselves develops, they obviously think about the various manifestations of their own childishness, and try to come to terms with it.

Paradoxically, then, the poems in *Nicholas Knock* may best evoke the spirit of childhood by questioning its meaning. Lee's willingness to present such

questions to children suggests how much he understands and respects their intellectual concerns; many of his poems depict the growth toward maturity in childhood as a growing consciousness of the nature and meaning of childhood itself.

As Lee presents it in these poems, a child's understanding of the meaning of childhood passes through a number of stages. In the first stage, the child simply indulges in childlike behaviour, without any consciousness that he is doing so. In the second, he becomes aware of it as one of many possible ways he might behave and as one that gives him pleasure, but he is also aware that such pleasure is not regarded with favour by grownups and that he can only indulge in it by pretending not to approve of it himself. In the third stage, the child indulges wholeheartedly in childlike behaviour *because* it implies defiance of adult values. And in the fourth and final stage, childlike behaviour becomes both more difficult to indulge in and more desirable for its own sake. The child sees playfulness as the very thing he needs to help him cope with the adult world, but the "wild times" are through, and he can only mourn their loss.

The poems in *Alligator Pie,* which Lee intended for younger children, rarely move beyond the first stage. Their high spirits mirror the freewheeling exuberance of childhood:

> Someday I'll go to Winnipeg
> To win a peg-leg pig.
> But will a peg-leg winner win
> The piglet's ill-got wig?[4]

Lee says that poems like this one are "just kibitzing - just play" ("Roots and Play," 47). But the pleasure they offer derives from their disruption of ordinarily meaningful patterns of language; what Lee calls "play" is enjoyable because it is not conventional and does not follow the strictures of common sense.

Grownups tend to dislike the expression of such high spirits in children; as children quickly learn, grownups call such behaviour "childish". Not surprisingly, some of the poems in *Alligator Pie* do not just express a childlike playfulness; instead, they contain playful (and unconventional) characters, clearly different from the speakers of the poems, toward whom the speakers express attitudes. And the attitudes expressed are highly ambivalent -- these characters are both delightful and disgusting. Psychapoo, for instance, is called a "silly goose" and a "melonhead":

> His mother said,
> "Sit down and eat!"
> He swallowed the plate
> And left the meat.

But significantly, the pleasure one takes in Psychapoo's defiance of ordinary behaviour is balanced by the poem's conclusion:

> It isn't me,
> It isn't you,
> It's nutty, mutty
> Psychapoo.

The implication is that such disorderly behaviour can be enjoyed only when one distances it from oneself. The young child who agrees that Psychapoo is "nutty" will not openly admit his enjoyment; he is very conscious of adult interpretations of such behaviour.

In "The Friends," a different form of immature behaviour is discussed, but it is still a kind of behaviour grownups call "childish". The child who speaks this poem cannot afford to believe that such behaviour is "nutty" because he wants to indulge in it himself. His invention of an imaginary companion allows him to act in ways that he knows are unacceptable to grownups without feeling responsible for it himself:

> When Egg and I sit down to tea
> He never eats as much as me.
> And so, to help him out I take
> A double share of chocolate cake.

Not only that, but the speaker is able to blame Egg for his childish pleasure in mud and his need for a light to make his dark room "friends again"; in inventing an imaginary character more childish than himself he has found a way of expressing aspects of his character of which he knows grownups do not approve.

The speakers of these poems have realized that acting childishly, like Psychapoo or Egg, is just one of a number of possible ways of behaving. Acting childishly can no longer be taken for granted just because one is a child; it has become a moral choice. Should one accept adult judgements and call unrepressed high spirits "nutty"? Or should one give in to oneself, act naturally,and defy adult values? Apparently the latter is possible only if one pretends to the former.

Lee especially takes advantage of such distancing of childish behaviour in "Peter Rabbit." The main thrust of this poem is the sheer thrill of Peter's defiance of his parents: " 'Shut up, dear parents,' Peter cried." But after he ignores their instructions, eats without a spoon, and turns into a Spotted Goon, just as they said he would, he reforms:

> And pondering
> His piteous plight
> He roared, "My Dad
> And Mum Were Right!"

It seems that child-like defiance has been repressed, and that adult values have triumphed. But the ironic intentions of this poem are obvious -- it parodies parental repression more than it supports it. By seeming to defend the adult values it attacks, this poem once again distances childishly immature behaviour enough to make enjoyment of it possible.

Lee's habit of inventing "some odd, menacing, lyrical or otherwise extraordinary figure" (' Roots and Play," 50) to represent the unrepressed energies and desires of childhood continues in *Nicholas Knock,* but the attitudes expressed towards such figures are quite different in these poems for older children. We have entered the third stage, and we no longer need to be told "it isn't me, it isn't you" before we are allowed to enjoy childlike behaviour. Grownups may

indeed call such behaviour "childish", but maturing children come to suspect such repressive attitudes. The admiration these poems express for their protagonists echoes the growing willingness of older children to identify custom with repression and to enjoy anarchic behaviour as an act of defiance.

In fact, one character stands out simply because his anarchy is too complete to allow thoroughgoing admiration. "Oilcan Harry" is the most unregenerately anti-social of all Lee's poems, and the pleasure we take in Harry's nastiness flirts dangerously with our desire to be just as nasty ourselves:

> Oilcan Harry, feeling bored,
> Tied his sister to a Ford.
> Harry chuckled at the gag.
> Sister found it quite a drag.
> Oilcan Harry used to cram
> His brothers underneath the tram.

And so on. Harry indulges in more than terminal sibling rivalry -- he does away with his father, his uncle, and his mother also. Furthermore, the horrifying puns in this poem disrupt the order of language just as much as Harry disrupts the order of his family. But apparently his self-indulgence goes too far to be approved in the long run; Harry is the only "bad" character in all of *Nicholas Knock* who in punished, and it is no accident that he is, quite literally, hoist on his own petard:

> Oilcan Harry met his doom
> Building bombs in the living room
> When he saw he'd made a goof,
> Oilcan Harry hit the roof.

Most of the "bad" characters in *Nicholas Knock* are not as self-indulgent as Harry. Their disorderly conduct hurts nobody; it is simply "childish" enough to offend the forces of repression. Furthermore, they frequently act too deliberately to be called "nutty"; they revel in unacceptable behaviour, not because it is silly, but simply because it is unacceptable. In *Nicholas Knock,* vulgarity becomes a virtue, a deliberate defiance of repressive adult proprieties.

Mr. Hoobody, for instance, is "a grubby sort of fairy/ With the manners of a pig," and it is his piggishness that makes him admirable: "he's fat and fun and famous/ And he doesn't wash his socks." Mr. Hoobody would not engage the admiration of somebody who did not feel put upon because he had to change his socks every day. Similarly, the disgraceful manners shown at the dinner of "The Poodle and the Brundiboob," which ends with the eating of the one by the other, are enjoyable because they so wholeheartedly defy convention.

In "A Child's Song," vulgarity in defiance of adult values is directed particularly toward the falsely romantic ideas some adults have about the tastes of children. Anyone, child or adult, who has had Rose Fyleman's syrupy poems inflicted on him will enjoy the sheer crudity of:

> There are midgets at the bottom of my garden.
> Every night they come and play on violins.
> One is named Molly, and one is named Dolly
> And one has diarrhea, and grins.

And the repressive tendencies of the establishment are clearly represented by the ever-so-Canadian "beaver with the bagpipes in the basement," who insists at the end of this poem that those unmannerly midgets "don't exist."

The mere possibility of such an allegorical interpretation implies one of the most interesting qualities of these poems. They may be read, presumably by children, as discussions of the parental repression of child-like freedom; or they may be read, presumably by grownups, as discussions of the political and social repression of individual freedom. Lee's genius is to have seen that the two forms of repression are similar and that consciousness of the first leads to a growing awareness of the second.

Furthermore, Lee's discovery of his own intellectual biases in the inevitable loss of childhood show how much he is a traditional Romantic; like the poet Blake, he believes that childhood innocence is a particularly desirable form of existence; in fact, one of his poems for grownups identifies mature thought with "the slot of single vision,"[5] a peculiarly Blakean phrase. And because that is true, even Lee's poems for children seem surprisingly melancholy, despite their delighted indulgence in child-like playfulness. For we only come to understand the joy of being child-like when we can no longer wholeheartedly give ourselves to it, and even some of the obviously quite youthful speakers in *Alligator Pie* view child-like playfulness from an at least partially uninvolved distance.

Furthermore, playfulness may be turned into something much less innocent by the actions of those who oppose it. Some of the poems in *Nicholas Knock* imply that enjoyment of anarchic behaviour results from attempts to repress mere high spirits. "The Cyclone Visitors," for instance, are not particularly bad characters to begin with; we first meet Attila the Hun quietly "eating a bun/ At the corner of Yonge and Bloor." But when someone tries to stop him from doing something so harmless simply because it is unmannerly, he becomes heroically defiant:

> I tell him "Behave!
> Now go get a shave!"
> But he pushes me in the sewer,
> The boor,
> And saunters up Yonge Street, cocksure.

Attila's transformation has been engendered by the insistence that he behave according to the repressive standards of mature society.

Attila has no positive virtues; he is praised only because he so exuberantly bypasses ordinarily acceptable behaviour. But one of the "cyclone visitors" does in fact suggest that there is some positive value in anarchy, that it has a meaning beyond mere defiance:

> Rasputin the Monk
> Is dancing, dead drunk,
> On the top of the New City Hall.

Rasputin's behaviour is significant only because it is echoed by the actions of characters in other poems. The saint who laments his "salvation chills" in "The Saint's Lament" tells us that his troubles began when he "gave up the dancing";

"Wellington the Skeleton" defies death when he "gets up and does the Twist." And Ookpik, who appears in one poem in *Alligator Pie* and in three in *Nicholas Knock,* is best characterized by his ability to dance:

> He can whistle and dance on the walls.
> He can dance on Niagara Falls
> . . . . . .
> He dances from morning to night.
> ("Ookpik," *Alligator Pie*)

Obviously dancing is an important metaphor for Lee. Its meaning becomes clear in a brief survey of the Ookpik poems.

These poems recapitulate the attitudes expressed toward the spirit of childhood in other poems. The "Ookpik" of *Alligator Pie* is unadulterated playfulness; like Psychapoo, "he has nothing at all on his mind." He dances instead of thinking. But when Ookpik first appears in *Nicholas Knock,* in "Ookpik and the Animals," he *does* have something on his mind. As he takes the animals out of their cages, he becomes an active force against repression:

> Ookpik had a thing to do.
> OOkpik marched around the zoo
> . . . .
> And soon the whole resounding zoo
> Was dancing off in retinue
> Behind the tiny whirling form
> Of Ookpik.

In this allegory, the once-free spirit has become concerned that others do not share his freedom; his dancing is a defiant response to inhibiting circumstance.

In order for that to happen, though, its meaning must be explained. In "Ookpik Dancing," Lee repeats and then defines Ookpik's ability to "dance on Niagara Falls"; this poem is a repetition of the poem in *Alligator Pie,* with the addition of some explanatory metaphors. When Ookpik dances, it is "like a muscle that sings in the dark." Ookpik is pure, instinctual energy, the energy that Lee tells us we have repressed: "the relative atrophy of that instinct in adulthood seems to me one of the disaster areas in our civilisation" ("Roots and Play," 45). As a muscle that sings, Ookpik so clearly represents this instinctual energy that he becomes a figure of mythic potency, a thing to be believed in and adored -- almost a deity. Not surprisingly, the last poem he appears in is a prayer addressed to him:

> Ookpik,
> Ookpik
> Dance with
> Us,
> Till our
> Lives
> Go
> Luminous
> . . . .
> Ookpik,
> Ookpik

By your
Grace,
Help us
Live in
Our own
Space.

Ookpik, who started out representing childhood itself, has turned into a quality desired but no longer available -- the freedom to do what one wants to do and to be what one wants to be. Ironically, his mythical stature stems from his unavailability.

While the differences between the various stages I have discussed show why that happens, the title poem in *Nicholas Knock* shows how it happens. "Nicholas Knock" is Lee's most subtle analysis of a child's relationship to his own childishness.

To begin with, Nicholas Knock is quite happily and quite unconsciously playful: "Nicholas Knock went doodling/ Through summer and winter and spring." At this point, he expresses an *Alligator Pie* playfulness - delight without knowledge of the sources of delight. But inevitably he matures, and as he does so, he grows into a consciousness of his own childishness. Lee is astute enough to know that then, and only then, can he meet the "silver Honkabeest," the figure who comes to be his own symbol of his own child-like qualities. Paradoxically, his consciousness of the honkabeest's existence is the first sign of his growing up.

At first Nicholas does nothing but enjoy the honkabeest's presence; he *chooses* to enjoy him, just as Psychapoo's nuttiness is enjoyed. But ironically, as soon as Nicholas's playfulness has become a separable entity, a way of behaving he consciously chooses over other ways of behaving, it can be repressed:

"Nicholas Knock!"
His parents hissed,
"That Honkabeest
Does not exist!"

And then the trouble begins; the battle between "dancing" and "salvation chills" has been joined. For Nicholas, the honkabeest is addressed in language that sounds enough like Gerard Manley Hopkins to imply divine worship:

Frisky, most silver, serene -
bright step at the margins of air, you
tiny colossus and
winsome and
master me, easy in sunlight, you
gracious one come to me, live in
my life.

The honkabeest is like Ookpik -- a deity representing everything he desires. But his parents think Nicholas is indulging in a "wierdo dance," a "delusion." And the result, of course, is deadlock:

The more they told him
"Kill it dead!"
The harder Nicholas
Shook his head.

And so, once more, it is the repressive forces that turn playfulness into mere anarchy. Like Attila the Hun, Nicholas becomes an angry spirit of avenging anarchy in defence of his right to be himself:

He rolled them up in table-cloths,
He dumped them in the sink,
He covered them with prune-juice
Till their eyeballs ran like ink.
He hung them from the curtain-rods,
He slathered them in foam
And told them, gently, "leave the silver
Honkabeest alone."

But the paradoxes are not over yet. For once Nicholas has successfully defended his own childishness by expressing its most violent and least playful tendencies, it disappears; Nicholas "couldn't find his friend." The dark underside of Ookpik is the malevolence of Oilcan Harry; having expressed the malevolence, Nicholas loses contact with the joy. It is almost as if his total immersion in the spirit of the honkabeest has shown his growing adult consciousness the deficiencies of that spirit. Despite his own efforts, perhaps even because of them, he has grown up.

Nevertheless, Nicholas does not turn into the enemy and become a repressive defender of custom; even though he cannot find the honkabeest,

neither could he give it up
(And this is what was queer),
For every time he started to,
The thing would reappear.

Nicholas has had his final transformation. He has turned into Dennis Lee, a grownup made melancholy by what once delighted him and now only tantalizes. As Lee says in one of his poems for more mature readers;

It would be better maybe if we could stop loving the children
. . . . . .
bemusing us with the rites of our own
childhood.[6]

But Lee "cannot stop caring" ("Civil Elegies 5") any more than Nicholas Knock can give up the honkabeest. That the disappearance of the honkabeest is so inevitable seems to account for the underlying melancholy of all of Lee's poems -- and particularly his poems for children.

If children enjoy these poems, it can only be because they share the sadness and are themselves conscious of what they are giving up as they turn into grownups. Few writers for children understand that sadness as well as Dennis Lee does. In fact, the only one I can think of is A. A. Milne, who allows a very

young Christopher Robin to look forward to the mature life outside the "enchanted forest" of his nursery, and still feel pain for the pleasures he must leave behind him: "Pooh, *promise* you won't forget about me, ever. Not even when I'm a hundred . . . . Pooh, *whatever* happens, you *will* understand, won't you?"[7] For Christopher Robin, Pooh is turning into a silver honkabeest. The loss Christopher Robin experiences, and that Dennis Lee so poignantly expresses in his poems, must be felt as intensely by children when it happens as it is by adults who remember it.

NOTES

[1]Dennis Lee, "The Saint's Lament," *Nicholas Knock and Other People* (Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1974).

[2]Dennis Lee, "Roots and Play: Writing as a 35-year-old Children," *Canadian Children's Literature,* 4 (1976), 50.

[3]Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies,* trans., Anita Tenzer, ed., David Elking (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 4.

[4]Dennis Lee, *Alligator Pie* (Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1974).

[5]Dennis Lee, "Cities of the Mind Interred," viii, *Kingdom of Absence* (Toronto: Anansi, 1967). Lee's phrase recalls Blake's: "may God us keep/ From single vision and Newtons sleep", (Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802).

[6]Dennis Lee, "Civil Elegies 5" *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972

[6]Dennis Lee, "Civil Elegies 5" *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).

[7]*The House at Pooh Corner* (New York: Dell Yearling, 1974), p. 179.

Perry Nodelman teaches children's literature at the University of Winnipeg. He has also written five plays and How to write an Essay, *an undergraduate manual.*