

Cadence and Nonsense: Dennis Lee's Poems for Children and for Adults

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In a number of his poems for adults, Dennis Lee talks about how many different selves he has: "My troop of scruffy selves" (*Kingdom of absence*, 30) "new selves erupting/ messianic daily" (*Civil elegies*, 21), "new selves . . . tramping through me like a/ herd of signatures (*Civil elegies*, 15), "those hectic unreal selves/ I made up year by year/ and found I could not shed them when I tried to" (*The Gods*, 45). And readers of this journal will recall Lee's description of himself (himselves?) in an article about his children's poems as a "thirty-five-year-old children." That there are many different Dennis Lees is confirmed by *Tasks of passion: Dennis Lee at mid-career*, a collection of articles about Lee and his work as a poet, a theorist, and an editor.

For most Canadians, and for most readers of this journal, the best known of Lee's selves is a poet for children — purveyor of "Alligator Pie" throughout the classrooms of the land, and the last remaining North American to wear in public those groovy loud shirts we all bought in 1968 to celebrate the dawn of a New Age. For this joyous children's poet, as for no-one else in North America — and certainly not for any of the other Dennis Lees, who tend to be brooding, pipe-smoking types — the New Age doesn't seem to have ended yet. Peace still guides the planets, all you need is love (and a loud shirt), and one can unabashedly write poems about pussies on pumpkins and exploding cows. This is the Lee that *Maclean's* magazine, the CBC, and my own three children know and love.

Yet in *Tasks of passion*, there are only two brief discussions of Lee's children's poetry, and these occupy a mere fifteen pages of a long book. Meanwhile, no fewer than nine important writers discuss Lee's editing, and no fewer than seven lengthy and repetitive articles represent his work as an adult poet and theorist. The people who put together this book clearly consider Lee, the children's poet in the tacky clothing, unimportant — even a little embarrassing. It's the scruffiest of his selves, the one Serious People would rather not think about, my dear.

The embarrassment reveals itself in various ways. While Sheila Egoff's article is called "Dennis Lee's Poetry for Children" and Alison Acker's "Dennis Lee's Children's Poetry," these are almost the only times that the word "children" is mentioned in relation to these poems throughout the book. The "Preface" speaks of Lee's "nonsense verse." Sean Kane, the one essayist beside Egoff

and Acker who even mentions Lee's children's poetry, also refers to it as "nonsense verse"(122) — although later in the essay, he does call it "children's verse," apparently so that he won't repeat himself when he says that it is about "the nonsense of words"(133). Even Sheila Egoff's article is subtitled "The Tradition of Nonsense and Light Verse"(41). The Great Thinker as a provider of shallow silliness for mere children? Never. No, let us call it "nonsense verse" instead of "children's poetry"; that way, we can forget its childish elements, and maybe justify the shallowness of its contents also — it's non-sense, not just sensible in a distressingly childlike, distressingly non-intellectual, distressingly unserious way. Maybe if we close our eyes the loud shirts will go away too.

Even worse, while the sections of the book containing discussions of the really important stuff are portentously labelled "The Poetic Voice," "The Prose Voice," and "The Role of the Poet," the section about children's poetry is condescendingly entitled "Dennis the Kid" — not even "Dennis the Kid's Poet." The implication is obvious. It's no part of Lee's real craftsmanship or genius that he writes poems for children; rather, writing such silly stuff is merely a retrograde bit of childishness — like Shakespeare skipping rope, maybe, or Emmanuel Kant blowing bubbles. Embarrassing, but one must forgive genius its lapses. In her short but sensitive discussion of Lee's work for children, Alison Acker quite rightly says that "Disney, TV or perhaps our own wacky ideas about the joys of childhood have encouraged us to think all children's literature and especially poetry has to be funny, and those who write it slightly loony, too"(48). Loony "Dennis the Kid" is a self that has nothing to do with the serious selves represented elsewhere in the book.

Well, I wonder about that. I wonder if Lee's children's poetry is so separate from the rest of his work that the two can't be discussed together, if his children's poetry really does have nothing to do with the brave and intricate theories about poetry and cosmology and cadence discussed so singlemindedly by these critics of Lee's adult poetry. I wonder if Dennis the children's poet is loony at all. I even wonder if Lee's children's poetry can accurately be called nonsense — at least as nonsense is defined in *Tasks of passion*.

Sean Kane speaks of the "nonsense of words" as equivalent to their "self-refuting substitutability," that is, to their inherent lack of fixed meaning. Similarly, Egoff claims that "nonsense is generally defined as no-sense. Nonsense verses do not contain any sparkling jests or parodies or ironies, or wit or wisdom. Still less do they contain any noble thoughts. They are sheer nonsense and must be read as such"(41). Well, it wouldn't take much work to find poems that make sense in Lee's work for children — as Egoff admits when she says that he also writes "light verse," even though she doesn't carefully distinguish between her two categories. Egoff also tells us that Lee "is more concerned with the inner world of childhood than were his predecessors"(46), which suggests something more than no-sense — unless the inner world of

childhood is a total confusion? In fact, many of his poems describe quite ordinary episodes in the ordinary lives of children — they are silly, sometimes, these events, but they do make sense.

But one doesn't even have to look past the examples Egoff herself quotes as nonsensical to show how much sense they make. Egoff sees the poem in *Garbage delight* about how McGonigle's tail came off as nonsense because Lee distorts a word in it: "It come off again, cause he swang on the rail." Well, if Dennis Lee invented that common grammatical error of young children, then I'm the Dong with a Luminous Nose. In fact, this not particularly distinguished poem is a sentimental evocation of the way we would like to believe children really do think about their stuffed toys; to call that nonsense is to be distressingly dismissive of the fancies of childhood.

Egoff also sees the title poem of *Garbage delight* as nonsense, because it has musicality: "if one of the essential tasks of the poet is to make music with words then nonsense poetry at least must rank first in its appeal to the ear"(45). The logical flaw here is obvious: this poem is musical, and nonsense poems are musical, and therefore this poem must be nonsense. By the same token, all the mellifluous works of Tennyson must be nonsense, and all the mellifluous works of Robert Herrick and Algernon Swinburne. In any case, the music of "Garbage Delight" underscores a quite rational description of someone who likes to eat a lot — again, it's fun because it makes sense, not because it is no-sense.

The trouble, I think, is that unless we call all funny and/or fantastic verse for children nonsense, not much of what Lee writes could genuinely be called nonsense. The one universally accepted example of a nonsense poem is Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." What makes it nonsense is that it describes, in what appears to be ordinary and therefore quite comprehensible English grammar, a series of beings and actions that we have never heard of before. The grammar suggests it ought to make sense; even the shapes of the words make them seem like English words. Yet the words are unknown to us. So the poem tantalizes us with an apparently orderly and meaningful structure that contains no actual or recognizable content.

If that's a possible definition of nonsense — and I believe it is — then few of Lee's children's poems are nonsensical. Most of them are, rather, absurdist fantasies: not evocations of objects and actions we've never heard of, but strange mixtures of known things in odd combinations. We've heard of "alligator" and we've heard of "pie"; we've just never heard of one being made into the other before. Almost the entire contents of *Jelly Bellj*, Lee's recent collection of Mother-Goosish rhymes, is, like the original rhymes of the Good Mother herself, a matter of combining known entities in odd ways. People live in shoes, shopping carts dance, and fleas on a trapeze do somersaults.

Even though Lee does put ordinary creatures, like beavers and garbage men and Atilla the Hun, in strange situations, he has few previously unheard-of

creatures like Carroll's "mome-rathes" and "toves": a Grundiboob, a Silver Honkabeest, a Dinklepuss and a Twinkletoes and a Chuck-Me-Under-the-Chin, and a few others. Furthermore, Lee's Grundiboob, far from mysteriously gyring and gimbling, can be comforted with something so obvious as sugarcubes, just like a normal horsie; and the Honkabeest, odd creature though it is, interacts with the recognizably human Nicholas Knock in a story that will make good sense to anyone who has ever thought about what it means to have an imagination. In other words, he is a symbolic representation of things we understand, not a creature who makes no sense at all. As for Dinklepuss and Twinkletoes and Chuck-Me-Under-the-Chin, not only do they take a quite ordinary childish pleasure in running under a garden hose, but Juan Wijngaard's illustrations show them to be quite ordinary looking children.

Most of the oddity — and the pleasure — in Lee's children's poetry comes from its anarchic inversions of acceptable behavior. "Psychapoo, the silly goose," is so far from nonsensical meaninglessness that he does the exact opposite of what he's supposed to be doing, with mathematical preciseness. He brushes his teeth with apple juice, he eats his plate, he walks on water and swims on land. If this were nonsense, we couldn't understand it; in fact, it makes perfectly good sense as a reversal of ordinary behaviour, and despite Egoff's claim that no irony is present in Lee's children's poems, it is an ironic reversal. It can be called nonsense, as she defines nonsense, only if we believe that anything unusual or abnormal or different is without sense.

Why then, this insistence in *Tasks of passions* that Lee's children's poetry is without sense? Part of the answer can be found in Egoff's just comment that "much of Lee's success in his poetry for children is due to the fact that he is a traditionalist"(46), and in Alison Acker's equally just comment that "Lee's world is still a very nice WASP world somewhere between Honest Ed's and Casa Loma"(50) — a safe place. In other words, Lee's children's poems make far too *much* sense, and are far too conservative in style and in substance, to satisfy the reading of Lee these admirers of his adult work would like to believe in. They have no choice but to say it makes no sense, for it contradicts the sense they have made of the rest of his work.

But Lee himself does not mark the boundary between his adult poems and his children's poems as firmly as these critics do. In fact, the first poem in his adult volume *The Gods* is "1838," a poem that originally appeared in the children's volume *Nicholas Knock and other people*. Not only does that suggest that Lee himself sees connections between the two different kinds of poems, it also makes it clear that at least this one poem is not senseless — in fact, it's about the Mackenzie rebellion, a rather nonsensical event that nevertheless actually did take place.

The conception of Lee's adult work that runs through *Tasks of passion* and dismisses his children's poetry is almost singleminded — a vision of Dennis Lee that, with some small variations, is shared by a sizable number of critics.

The single mind most responsible for it is Dennis Lee. For these various critics depend astonishingly on Lee's published statements about his own work — in particular, on the article "Country, Cadence, Silence," which is referred to far more frequently than any of Lee's poems. Lee's concept of cadence is worth exploring, for it might in fact suggest why all these critics are wrong to separate his adult poems from his children's ones; and his own article in *Tasks of passion*, "Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation" is as good a statement about it as he has made.

"Cadence" is Lee's word for the ideal of poetry he strives for. In terms of dictionary definitions, "cadence" refers to a rhythmic flow of sounds; for Lee it represents the flow of various rhythms that he strives for in his own work: "the polyphonic shift from inflection to inflection, the clash and resonance of vocal timbres from one moment to the next" (85). In terms of poetic technique, the specific expression of cadence that Lee says he strives for is a continuous flow of different rhythms — not the orderly patterns of traditional verse or even the apparent absence of patterns found in much contemporary verse, but rather, a constant shifting from one pattern to another, from one voice to another: "you discover that the space of cadence keeps changing its texture continuously, and with all sorts of unexpected mutations" (92).

While not many of Lee's children's poems contain such changes in voices and patterns, a few do. The last poem in *Nicholas Knock*, "You Too Lie Down," is built around the sort of hesitant semi-pauses that characterize Lee's cadential poetry for adults:

Over every elm, the
 half-light hovers.
Down, you lie down too.
Through ever shade of dusk, a hush
 impinges.

A poet less interested in creating changing textures would not have dropped the word "impinges" down to the next line. But Lee more often expresses something like cadence in his children's poems by combining different traditional patterns in the same poem. In *Alligator pie*, "On Tuesdays I Polish My Uncle" contains at least two different rhythmic patterns, as does the similarly constructed "Goofy Song" in *Garbage delight*. But the children's poem that most expresses cadence is the title poem in *Nicholas Knock*, a compendium of sound patterns borrowed from poets as various as Gerard Manley Hopkins — "Frisky, most silver, serene — /bright step at the margins of air, you/ tiny colossus" — and A.A. Milne:

Snort! went the
Court clerk, and
Pounded on the table top.
"Stand!" cried a
Bailiff with a
Steely-eyed glare.

Lee strives after cadence because it represents an escape from the two things he finds most repressive. The first repression is a consciousness which sees everything as a part of itself, imposes its own voice on all things, and blots out the possibility of communion with anything beyond itself; if oneself is everything, then there is nothing left to commune with. As Lee says in *Savage fields*, if "man must invent himself A man has limitless scope to be anything at all — and nothing at all to be"(100). The second repression is any artificially imposed form — whether it be a rhyme scheme in a poem or the creed of a religious faith. Such "heady perfect systems" (*The Gods*, 18) are stultifying both of the realities they distort and of the self.

Somewhere between these two means of blotting out consciousness of anything other than oneself is cadence — not just a poetic voice which is neither singlemindedly oneself nor repressively artificial, but also an expression of that which is — the reality that flows in and behind all things; the thing Lee calls "the deep ache and presence and sometimes the joy of what is" (*Civil elegies*, 57) or "the gracious ache of the real" (*The Gods*, 28). "Cadence is something given, far greater than my own mind or craft, intimate, other, which compels my awe . . ." (*Tasks*, 95). "It's there, that's all. It's *here* Not just to sponsor poems; that much I'm sure of. And I know, if you could somehow screen out the literal meaning of words in the finished poem, their polyphony would still enact the gestures of cadence. The sheer dance of voices. On its own"(90). In other words, the rhythmic flow that Lee strives to capture in his adult poems, far from being merely a poetic technique, is meant to evoke something beyond normal reality: "The swivel and thrum I sense as perpetual, that I hear all the time like a subsonic throbbing, or the sea — even when I don't know I'm hearing it — I call "cadence"(95).

Less sees cadence as what he strives for in poetry that he calls "meditative" — and in fact, almost all of his poems for adults are poems which describe a mind thinking its way through to a conclusion. Paradoxically, then, his adult poems, which are about escaping the prison of selfhood, are highly personal, spoken by a thoughtful, sensitive, and highly engaged "I" who often sounds very much like Dennis Lee himself.

But while many of Lee's children's poems are spoken by an "I," that "I" is rarely meditating — and rarely like what we might imagine Lee himself to be. "If I don't get some I think I'm going to die," says one "I"; "I've got a Special Person/ At my day-care, where I'm in," says another. These poems

are clearly intended to be dramatic monologues — as I suggested in an earlier article in this journal, “Who’s Speaking? The Voices of Dennis Lee’s Poetry for Children,” their speakers are various children or various childlike beings. The closest they get to the mature, philosophical Dennis Lee is the one who says,

I’m thinking in bed
Cause I can’t get out
Till I learn how to think
What I’m thinking about.

But even this confused child is happy to just “Get up and be me,” something the poet himself does not find so easy.

If Lee’s adult poems approach cadence by means of a self-enclosed consciousness, the children’s poems seem to avoid both consciousness and cadence, to replace the thinking self with dramatic depictions of others, and to replace the search for polyphony with highly organized, highly repetitive patterns. It is for these reasons that the serious readers of Lee’s serious adult poems wish to call these poems nonsense. They make so much ordinary, impersonal sense, in such ordinary, traditional sound patterns, that they seem to contradict the central messages of Lee’s work: that ordinary sense is repressive and senseless, and that what makes real sense, cadence, transcends easily perceptible patterns. Yet Lee himself says, “All my poetry is a response to cadence”(99). Unless he doesn’t think of his work for children as part of all of his poetry, it’s possible that it might in some significant way be a response to cadence also.

The fifth of Lee’s “Civil Elegies” contains one of the very few references he makes in his adult poetry to children. In that poem, Lee meditates on the comforts of order and regularity, the way in which they numb one’s consciousness to those things which ought to disturb it. The children who run across Nathan Phillips Square disturb the poet’s lethargic wish to be complacent, both because of their noisy energy and because they represent that which he must feel responsible for:

It would be better maybe if we could stop loving the children and their delicate brawls, pelting across the square in tandem, deking from cover to cover in raucous celebration and they are never winded, bemusing us with the rites of our own gone childhood; if only they stopped mattering, the children, it might be possible, now while the square lies stunned by noon.

In these lines, children themselves come to represent something like cadence. They possess a joyous anarchy, not insignificantly expressed in “raucous” sound, a cadence that cuts across the regular patterns of the square and disturbs what Lee calls, in the next elegy, “barbarian/ normalcy.” Their presence forces him to meditate both upon the horrors of civic complacency and upon its effects on children: “a man who/ fries the skin of kids with burning jelly is a/ criminal.”

While these thoughts are not pleasant, they are liberating; they free the meditator from his wish for numbness, and not surprisingly, he expresses his aroused horror in a series of shifting rhythmic patterns that clearly signal the presence of cadence.

I'd like to suggest that the image of childhood Lee evokes throughout his four volumes of children's poems is itself a representation of cadence. As I pointed out in an earlier article in this journal called "The Silver Honkabeest: Children and the Meaning of Childhood," the joyously anarchic figures that Lee describes throughout these poems represent two apparently contradictory things. From the viewpoint of normalcy, they possess a distressing anarchy: bad manners, disrespect for grownup regulations, disregard of the rules of ordinary language. The person who pigs out on "Garbage Delight" would be the despair of Emily Post; and Psychapoo's mother must be constantly telling him that beds are not for riding bicycles in. But the point, of course, is that, from the point of view of individuality, anarchy is freedom both from the repression of rules and from one's ordinary self, both from doing what one is told to do and doing what one usually does.

In "The Gods," Lee asks,

Who now can speak of Gods —
their strokes and carnal voltage,
old ripples of presence a space ago
archaic eddies of being?

He suggests no-one can, any longer, that we are too deadened by "taxonomies, equations, paradigms" to speak of divine beings. But he does speak of them himself, in his children's poems; for what are Mr. Hoobody and Psychapoo and Atilla the Hun and the sleazy Oilcan Harry — and above all, The Silver Honkabeest that both delights and disturbs Nicholas Knock — what are they but "godforce," "dimensions of otherness" that is to be both sought after and feared?

In "Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation," Lee says, "When cadence sifts through you, the invitation has already occurred. 'Come and be part of me . . . Sit still, and be me.'" That, I think, is exactly what the anarchic figures that appear so frequently in Lee's poems say to his young readers — and even to his older ones. Be Psychapoo. Be Peter Rabbit, who tells his parents to shut up. Be a person saying a tongue-twister about a babysitter that almost defeats the communicative purposes of language, and thus allows unrepressing disorder in. Enjoy that which is unruly; find it possible to express that thing within you which your growing sense of self-consciousness and your grown consciousness of normalcy and of the right way to do things are gradually killing within you. In the fifth Civil Elegy, Lee spoke of how children bemuse adults "with the rites of our own/ childhood;" they remind us of something we once felt, and

feel now apart from. For Lee, clearly, children are close to cadence and in the process of growing away from it. And adults have lost contact with cadence and therefore must be in the process of finding it.

I believe that explains the differences between Lee's children's poems and his adult ones. The children's poems merely describe cadence, and because they have contact with it, can afford to describe it in the orderly patterns of traditional verse; the adult poems seek cadence by wooing it in its own tongue.

In her discussion of nonsense, Elizabeth Sewell suggests that "Nonsense words, by the usual nonsense methods, play against the mind's tendency to oneness, the tendency toward poetry and dream, but they have equally to make sure that the Nonsense words do not make a nothingness in the mind. Either form of infinity is dangerous to nonsense" (383). By poetry or dream Sewell means those ways in which we integrate and explain the world to ourselves; our tendency to do that helps us to find some meaning in nonsense at the same time as nonsense disturbs our usual categories of meaning. Nonsense becomes a doorway past the ordinary, a way into something more than real but not quite understandable, not a repressive taxonomy. Seen in this way, nonsense is quite different from no-sense, and seen in this way, much of Lee's children's poetry might be considered nonsense after all. It describes images of cadence, and cadence, too, disturbs our usual categories of meaning and replaces them with much more than just nothing.

Lee's children's poems are an important part of his work as a whole. As does "1838" in the context of *The Gods*, these poems become part of the polyphony, the totality of Lee's multi-voiced poetic endeavour. And Dennis the Kid's Poet is a self that matters as much as all those other more serious selves, a voice that speaks as truthfully, and in the long run, as seriously, as the others — in spite of its funny clothes. That Lee can describe that which transcends the ordinary in traditional regular rhythms is as significant as the fact that the orderly logic of his adult meditations woos a transcendence of orderly logic: if the adult poet thinks against thought (the phrase is Lee's, in *Savage fields*), then the children's poet gives orderly evocations of disorder. Both those paradoxes are important, both for those who would understand Lee as a serious thinker about poetry and life, and for those who enjoy and admire his children's poems and would like to understand some of the sources of their power.

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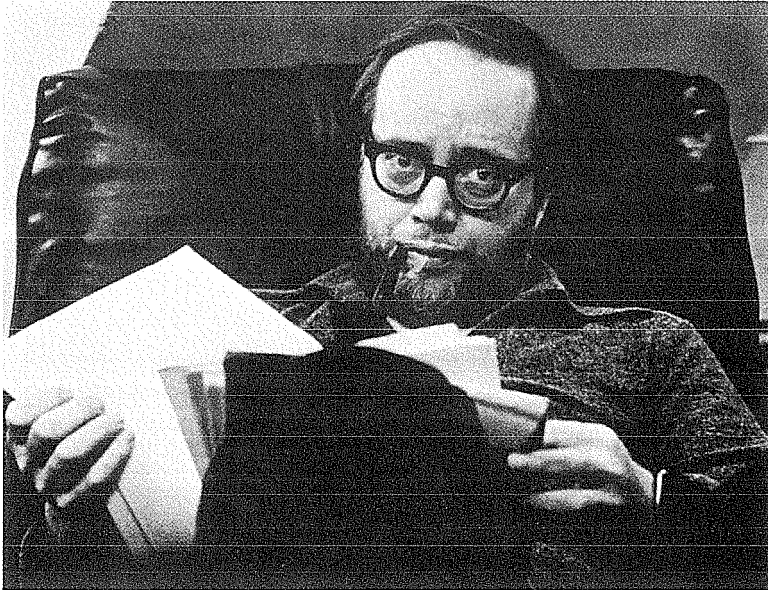
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Dennis Lee