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

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 (i had 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 uncapitualarity of such a thing.' As Lear embarked on his project to illustrate Tennyson's 'landscape lines & feelings'—lys 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, cataplasm, & Chrysalis state,–) yet Lear's progress in the process was incredible and the manuscript in old age had made the project increasingly difficult: 'If a man has one eye, & that one weak: – & no proper thumbs to hold pen-cils, & if all his working light is spoiled by a diarnetrical dambling blaze 5 Story Hotel, very urt 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 (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 1989, and the only complete collection of 'chrysalises' (each measuring approximately 17 × 26cm) remains at the Houghton Library, Harvard. Apart from the unfinished Einach 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.

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and we think of him ‘warch[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’:

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. Asimilar 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 & terrestial crags, all lonely lonely lonely paths through them leading to hermitages where those dead men ailed, – or to the immense monasteries where many hundred of those living corpses chant prayers nightly & daily: the blue sea dark dark dark.

The living corpses of the monasteries ‘chant prayers’, filling the scene with an eerie music. Echoes of Byron’s ‘Sea!’ also ghost Lear’s vision, as though the poet’s perception turns the lines of the landscape into feelings. Lear’s oil painting of this scene (The Monastery of Staroniketes, 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 of 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 Tennysonia, 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’:

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