

Nonsense as the Artist's Identity Quest in Mervyn Peake's *Letters from a Lost Uncle*

Vanessa Bonnet
Université Côte d'Azur, Nice, France

Abstract. This paper explores the use of nonsense in Mervyn Peake's *Letters from a Lost Uncle* (1948). It aims at shedding a light on how nonsense highlights the character's quest for identity which ultimately reflects the author's own quest as an artist. The figure of the author is shown as struggling to get a firm grasp on language while compensating through drawing, which gives him back some control. Parody and exaggeration allow Peake to take a step back on his own work and depict artistic creation as an endless quest for the unreachable.

Keywords. Mervyn Peake, 20th century, nonsense, parody, language

Mervyn Peake is one of the most fascinating and yet underrated authors of the 20th century. Indeed, his work, has often been deemed “too peculiar”, and, as such, very difficult to classify, and to find on library shelves (See Sedgwick) [1]. Although many commentators have tried over the years to give a more precise generic definition of Peake's work, the key to understand his many strange stories might be the presence of nonsense in it, both a mode and a genre which is very difficult to circumscribe and categorise in turn. According to Edmund Milly, who considers Peake's nonsense to be above all a style, “the genre of Peake's work is often unclear where nonsense techniques are present” (Milly 38 – 39). Nonsense tends to be spontaneously associated with childish and inconsequential writing in the minds of readers. However, as Sophie Aymès-Stokes states in her study of Peake's children book *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, “far from being a minor form of artistic activity or “mere side-lines”, the practice of nonsense illuminates Peake's work” (Aymès-Stokes 145). *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, which is the focus of the present paper, is an illustrated children storybook which was published in 1948. The story is presented as a series of fourteen letters from an “uncle”, whose name is never mentioned, to a hypothetical “nephew” he has never met. The letters are all accompanied by drawings enabling the main protagonist to narrate his daily life and his past. In a tale made of endless digressions, the uncle manages to tell the story of his childhood, early adulthood and failed marriage which ultimately prompted him to escape and cast off for adventure. His main goal is to find the legendary White Lion, which leads him to faraway polar regions with a “turtle dog” named Jackson as his only companion. To G. Peter Winnington, the plot follows a quest pattern which is to be found in many of Peake's other works: “the independent youth who runs away, crosses water, encounters man-like animals or animal-like men, meets and either acquires [...] or kills [...] the animal object of his quest and then returns” (Winnington 228). The story is laced with nonsensical references and features: the uncle is an eccentric and solitary character who crosses the sea on a wooden plank he uses as a boat, and, during

his journey, he regularly comes across nonsensical creatures such as snow-snakes and turtle dogs. Finally, his companion, Jackson, is a hybrid between a man and an animal who never speaks (see Tigges 77 – 80) [2]. All these elements are reminiscent of Edward Lear’s nonsense as well as Peake’s own nonsensical poetry. In Lear’s “The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World”, children sail to strange countries with a creature called a Quangle-Wangle as their crewmate while in Peake’s nonsensical poem “All over the Lilac Brine!”, a man and his wife sail on a table “of rare design” towards islands peopled with literal Catfish. The underlying meaning of *Letters from a Lost Uncle* has led to many conjectures over the years. Sophie Aymès-Stokes interprets it as “a form of eccentric autobiography, a parody of first-person Victorian exploration narratives” (Aymès-Stokes 140-141). Alice Mills and Katherine Langrish both underline the parody and subversion of the colonial relationship between master and slave (Mills 115) or “White man and Native” (Langrish 166) which the power dynamic between the uncle and Jackson evokes. As for Milly, who agrees with Mills on the matter, he states that “the bounteous innuendo” in the work “outlines an implicit, though ambiguous discourse on gender and sexuality.” (Milly 26) As both an alternative and a complement to these readings, this paper aims at exploring the use and effect of nonsense in *Letters from a Lost Uncle* in relation to the quest for identity. Indeed, nonsense in this work could be used by Peake as a means to simultaneously cover up and illuminate his attempt at defining the poet’s own quest for identity and meaning through artistic creation.

Letters from a Lost Uncle as a Nonsensical Work

A Nonsensical Character with no Identity

The question of identity, which is at the heart of the story, is announced from the very title. The only piece of information we get from it is that the main protagonist does not have a name, and that he is lost. Furthermore, most of the letters he writes are not signed, except notably for the last one which only reads, in a rather ironic way, “from your lost uncle”. In addition, we do not have access to the answers his potential nephew might have sent him back. He therefore remains nameless, joining the long list of “uncles” from Peake’s nonsensical universe, as well as Lear’s “Uncle Arly” whose identity, in a very clever pun, is all but clear. In one famous nonsensical poem by Peake entitled “Aunts and Uncles”, the identity of each “aunt” and “uncle” is reduced to one predominant flaw or personality trait which leads to their transformation into a specific animal that rhymes with their name. A similar fate befalls the uncle from *Letters from a Lost Uncle* whose leg has been chopped off by a swordfish and then replaced with the same fish’s nose. It turns the uncle into a hybrid being whose identity is both blurred and made rigid. Sophie Aymès-Stokes notices that: “the rigidity [is] characteristic of the true eccentric who is able to resist the homogenizing influence of social convention” (Aymès and Mellet, qtd. in Aymès-Stokes 143). While in “Aunts and Uncles” the transformations are likely to be caused by the others who kept pointing out their relations’ flaws until they ended up literally reducing them to this (See Maslen 8) [3], in *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, the uncle had to flee his relatives who represent

a norm he rejects. Thus, by isolating himself from almost any relationship with other people, the uncle might have become as rigid as they were. As a result, he might have lost his own humanity, hence the loss of his name in the process.

As the uncle is said to be “lost” and felt the need to escape from his oppressive family, one may wonder about the status and purpose of the letters he is writing. Is there a real recipient to them (aside from the reader) or is it rather a means for him to express himself and therefore regain both his humanity and identity by reaching out to the social world he has shunned? (See Mills 113) [4]. These letters – which would be difficult to reply to since the uncle is lost and therefore does not seem to have any valid address, although these types of consideration do not seem to matter too much in a nonsensical world (See Mills 112) [5] – are closer to pages from a diary, as the uncle himself puts it. Thus, they can be read first and foremost as a long, self-introspective monologue. The unnamed “nephew” is nothing more than a mirror image of the “uncle” who, at the beginning of the story, is an empty signifier waiting to be given substance. The question is whether this actually ever happens at all.

Nonsensical Writing: Loss of Control over Language

Prolonged solitude can lead to madness, the kind of madness found in nonsense, which leads, in turn, to the sort of odd digression found in *Letters from a Lost Uncle*. However, this nonsensical digression which is the expression of a “lovely madness”, as Peake would put it, could paradoxically be a means for the character to avoid going completely mad.

The uncle explains in his first letter that he is not used to writing. Indeed, this quiet, social activity clashes with the ideal, albeit parodic, version of strong masculinity that the uncle embodies. Nevertheless, he proves to be extremely chatty as he writes about anything that comes to his mind. His writing seems very erratic and messy at first: he is documenting the most trivial aspects of his life, keeps repeating himself, misspells or crosses out words and frequently spills liquids on the page. This last detail, which betrays a lack of control over his movements, could be seen as a reflection of his lack of control over language and, more generally, over the codes of conversation.

In this aspect, the “lost uncle” fits the very definition of a nonsensical character. Indeed, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle reminds us “Nonsense does not seek to express the writer's emotions” (Lecercle 35), which is what the character here, who has turned into a writer, tries hard not to do from the very start. To emphasise both his virility and carelessness, the uncle draws his hand holding a harpoon and leaves a thumb mark on the first page. He also regularly chides himself with exclamations such as “pickle my blubber!” to counter any display of sentimentality. Furthermore, instead of giving meaningful information and making his message as clear as possible, which is what one would expect from a letter, the uncle has a tendency to give out useless and prosaic details that he sometimes uses as an excuse to draw. Thus, at the end of the first letter, the uncle literally comments on himself simply “filling up the space”: “To fill up the space above, I'll draw the sea-elephant I skinned a week or so ago.”[6] In the second letter, he decides to draw what he sees at the exact moment he is writing, that is,

his feet, before commenting on the stuffy atmosphere in his igloo: “For instance, from where I sit I can see my right foot perfectly, and my leg-spike too, with the inside of the igloo, beyond – so as an example, I will make a drawing of it, before I continue.” These are but a few examples of many digressions found in the text, which are often interrupted by drawings that seem much more consistent than the text, despite remaining two-dimensional by nature (See Winnington 228) [7].

One can notice a striking unbalance between the uncle’s control over his pen when he is drawing, and his lack of control over the words when he is typing. All in all, he appears as a flat character on the page whose babbling seems to lead nowhere. This impression is confirmed with him being “on a piece of floating ice the size of Kent” which is going “in the opposite direction to where [he] want[s] to go”, before drifting back to its starting point. As such, the narration, just like the icefloe the uncle is on, all but seems to stagnate. However, the uncle manages to leave the piece of ice by embarking on his kayak.

Thus, as a true nonsensical work, *Letters from a Lost Uncle* is characterised by a paradoxical excess of signs on the page, while simultaneously seeming to lack content. Indeed, there is not a space on the page which is not filled up with the uncle’s typing, drawings, afterthoughts added with a pencil or stains and smudges left either by him or his “turtle dog” companion Jackson. The page becomes a completely anarchical space where the form takes over the meaning. One may well wonder at this point whether the uncle has any sort of control over language.

As a nonsensical character, the uncle shares many similarities with the characters from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, who, according to Lecercle “like to listen to the sound of their own voice” (Lecercle 71) and are generally driven by a “selfishness” principle or what linguists call a “Me-First Orientation” (See Lecercle 103) [8]. Such characters simply forego the rules of politeness altogether, as does the uncle in the letters he writes, since their intended recipient is almost never mentioned or alluded to. As it is, the uncle only ever talks about himself. What he writes is even duplicated with images in which he represents himself as often as fifty-eight times, sometimes even showing the same image from a different angle or perspective. Furthermore, his letters do not seem to have proper endings as they are almost never signed, which gives the impression of one endless letter, alternating between words and images. Once the uncle starts writing, he cannot seem to stop, and it is as if the language he does not have a secure grasp on is taking over. Indeed, his writing and drawings could both be seen as “compulsive” (See Milly 33) [9]. Some nonsensical, idiomatic phrases such as “blubber” or “pickle me!” keep being repeated in an almost mechanical way, which reminds us of the “tap-tap-tapping” of the typewriter the uncle is using. In the first part of the story, the uncle’s language is as stiff as his spike-leg. These sentences punctuating his tale are used to “fill the blanks”, just like his drawings seem to be. All of this may be interpreted as the uncle’s lack of grasp over language as well as an attempt to regain it by giving himself something to say. Moreover, just like the uncle cannot seem to refrain from repeating the same words over and over again, drawing appears to be a necessity he cannot go against either. Thus, at some point during his fourth letter, he interrupts his typing to draw a beetle he sees crawling on the floor, stating, once he is done “I feel very much better now that I have finished the beetle”. What seems paradoxical is that he adds a lot of unnecessary, prosaic details or involuntary interjections because he is not

comfortable with written language, while he simultaneously fills his pages with drawings because, conversely, he is extremely comfortable doing them.

According to Lecercle, a platitude, which is close to the obvious and prosaic facts the uncle writes about, has a "solid obviousness that allows easy recognition and avoids mental stress" (Lecercle 63). It therefore partakes in a "the speaker's fantasy of absolute control over his language." (64) This effort at controlling one's language may also be observed in the way the uncle goes over his typing again and corrects the many mistakes that are bound to occur every time someone speaks or writes. However, these corrections give way to more text added with a pencil in the margins, showing how language always slips from our grasp and proliferates on its own. In one of these margins, the uncle adds between brackets, "(I'd forgotten that I'd already drawn a sea-elephant - not that it matters. Oh no! It was an elephant seal)." This addition is nonsensical on several levels: it gives a useless information which is explicitly said to be useless ("not that it matters") and points at a language incoherence because why would the same animal be called both a sea-elephant and an elephant seal? It should be two different animals altogether. Is the uncle making a joke or is he aware both nouns refer to the same creature?

The added remarks and the many drawings that fill the blanks around the typed pages are proof of the uncle's unstoppable babbling, which sharply contrasts with his companion's silence. Indeed, not only does Jackson never talk, but he is also the very embodiment of both the uncle's fantasy of complete control over language and his violence on it. Jackson is a true nonsensical creation which could be seen as a "portmanteau" (See Carroll 192) [10] for several reasons. First, he is a "turtle dog", a new type of animal which would be both slow and loyal, combining the two animals' main characteristics. This strange combination may also appear as a bit contradictory, since who would want a slow companion as an assistant in the Arctic? Secondly, he is literally used as a coat rack (a "portemanteau") by the uncle who has "hammer[ed] nails into his back to hang things on". This could actually explain the choice of a turtle who literally lives inside its house, which would add an inside joke. Finally, Jackson is also used as an easel so that the uncle can draw the landscape around him by putting his canvas on his back. One can notice the violence the uncle shows against Jackson, who is nothing more than a means for the main protagonist to express himself, as well as a convenient foil. Indeed, the uncle keeps complaining about him being useless, clumsy, apathetic or not clever enough. Besides, Jackson has no control whatsoever over his identity, as he is always either drawn or described by the uncle who sometimes even forgets his name. At some point in the story, Jackson becomes Johnson and then simply J. The only times Jackson regains some control over his identity are when he involuntarily leaves traces of himself on the page by either spilling gravy or coffee or stepping on the blank page, leaving a footprint which prevents the uncle from writing or drawing on the soiled paper. However, one may wonder whether Jackson truly exists or if he is nothing more than a projection of the uncle's imagination, born out of his extreme solitude. To Alice Mills, who notices that "The turtle-dog's plight also echoes the Uncle's past", the uncle's name should even symbolically be Jack, as in "Jack's son". (Mills, 115). Being able to maintain complete control over this purely linguistic creature

therefore clearly looks like a metaphor for the uncle's attempt at maintaining his grasp over language, and ultimately over his own identity.

On the other hand, the uncle compensates his poor language skills with drawings that efficiently complete his writing, and sometimes replace it altogether. In *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, the images are not used as mere illustrations for the text, it is rather the text which is used as a caption for the pictures. It allows the uncle to be clearer and much more precise than he is with words. Unlike the many useless details he tends to add in his text, nothing seems extraneous in his drawings, which highlight his humour and wittiness. As a result, he appears as a much more human and likeable character. All along the letters, the uncle states several times his predilection for drawing over writing, for example in the second letter where he specifies "As I can explain things better by making drawings as I go along". The statement is confirmed and made explicit in the following pages, in which he tells about his encounter with an "Arctic wolf": "For instance, last Monday when an Arctic ~~polar~~ wolf sprang at me, skinny with hunger and his teeth shining, I had only to do this: - and all was over." The text shows traces of hesitations and correction, since the word "polar" is crossed out, showing how the uncle has tried to find the most suitable adjective before ultimately deciding that the word "polar" did not add anything more to the adjective "Arctic". This correction shows how the character tries to be less wordy and more straightforward, so that he can make his point in a more efficient way. It therefore clarifies why the uncle abandons words altogether and replaces them with a simple picture of himself impaling the wolf on his leg-spike. The drawing is inserted just after the dash and interrupts the text, so instead of telling the reader, the character decides he'd rather show what he did. He might have continued his text by completing his sentence with something along the lines of "I only had to kick him with my leg-spike, which easily went through him." However, the words lack the immediacy of the image, as well as the many details that have been added to it. The reader can see the wolf dangling from the uncle's leg with his jaws open, while the main protagonist, who is shown as calmly smoking his pipe, looks as if he had simply stepped on the animal. The way the event is presented is very witty and makes the reader smile.

Thus, the uncle is never as good with words as he is with pictures. His drawings do more than just filling up blank spaces, they give meaning and depth to his words. When he does use words, he perpetrates the same kind of violence on them he does with Jackson by crossing them out, misspelling them or cutting them randomly. It is his way of imposing his will and therefore his identity on them. The question of identity is once again central to the story, as the many self-portraits that invade the space confirm. This may be read as the uncle's way of forcefully imposing himself and moving from the geographical margins of society in which he had no way to express himself – the Arctic regions are at far ends of the earth – to the centre of the page.

The Artist's Quest for Identity

An avatar of the author

Just like Jackson may be read as an avatar of the uncle, the uncle may in turn be read as an avatar of the author himself. Thus, the difficulties the characters encounter with language might simply mirror the author's own loss of control over it. *Letters From a Lost Uncle* could therefore be the author's own attempt at regaining some control by taking a step back through nonsense and parody.

Just like Peake, the uncle is particularly gifted at drawing, but instead of being a maverick artist, he is a nonsensical, distorted version of Captain Ahab who is no longer after a white whale, but a White Lion. This superimposition of the figure of the artist and of the nonsensical character is made obvious from the drawing on the front page. It represents the uncle's open diary held by Jackson on an ice floe, with a pencil on top of it. The pencil is right in the middle of the diary as well as in the middle of the page, which creates a *mise-en-abyme* effect. It also seems slightly disproportionate compared to the diary, which emphasises its importance. The pencil's sharp lead points down at a fish coming out of the water, as if to skewer it. On the next page, which corresponds to the beginning of the first letter, one can only see the drawing of the uncle's hand, holding up a giant harpoon that might come in handy to hunt the polar bear drawn in the background. Both tools are very similar in shape and ultimately serve the same purpose: to catch and pin creatures on the page. As such, the uncle becomes a nonsensical avatar of the artist himself. The conjecture is confirmed by some biographical elements Peake has disseminated in the story, using nonsense as a clever way to hide and expose them at the same time. Firstly, as numerous biographers and scholars have pointed out, Peake parodies the many adventure novels he has read and loved as a child, paying them homage by appropriating them and distorting them for his own pleasure (See Yorke 181-82) [11], as well as later on, his sons'. Indeed, in his biography of the author, G. Peter Winnington explains that while living on Sark "he built an igloo for them in the garden, complete with a drawn Eskimo in the window". To Winnington, "it would be natural to assume that these activities coalesced into his illustrated storybook, *Letters from a Lost Uncle (from Polar Regions)* had not John Watney assured [...] that [Peake] had 'originally written and illustrated [it] in 1945" (Winnington 227-228). At any rate, this anecdote shows how both fiction and reality overlap.

The uncle, who feels that the ending might be near, tries to leave a trace of himself by attempting to explain and show who he truly is in the best way he can. He therefore draws a "full-length portrait" of himself in the first letter, adding ironically that "This is what artists call [it]". As a way to abide by the rules of autobiographical writing, the uncle endeavours at some point to briefly describe his birth, childhood and early adulthood, which ultimately led him to be stranded in the Arctic. The biography is of course peppered with nonsensical facts: the one-week-old uncle ran away from his cradle and had to be strapped to it. He also drank so much ink during his first day at school that he was ill for a very long time. All these facts could be interpreted as instances of literalisation of metaphors. Indeed, the first anecdote might be a way to mean that right from the start, the

uncle had caught the travel bug. As for the ink-drinking, it could be pointing at the uncle's fictional existence. However, one can spot clever allusions to Peake himself, since, as told in the author's biographies, although he could draw very well from the start, he had a tendency of misspelling words and making mistakes while writing (See Winnington 43) [12]. Furthermore, once he moved from China to England and began attending Eltham College, he did not do as well as his brother at school but was once again praised for his drawing abilities (54 – 55). As for the boat the uncle embarks on, it is called the "S.S. Em", an obscure name which is an in-joke from Peake's years at Eltham (See Winnington 228) [13].

Staging the Self

Nonsense gives Peake great freedom to explore the act of creating. Indeed, it allows him to ponder serious aspects of his work while seemingly remaining playful. First and foremost, in *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, Peake deals with the act of representation by parodying and therefore questioning both autobiographical works and exploration tales. Autobiographies are supposed to be accounts in which the authors commit to be as truthful as possible. Thus, the description they make of themselves and of the events that happened to them should be as accurate as possible. In Peake's book, the uncle tells the reader right from the start that his self-portrait might not be accurate at all: "I think I look like this but as I broke my only looking-glass twelve years ago you must remember it is from memory only." The uncle's self-portrait is therefore more of a fantasy projection of what he wishes he would look like rather than a portrait one should take at face value. Besides, as the uncle says he has not looked at himself properly for twelve years, he is either showing the reader what he looked like twelve years prior to the drawing or trying to age himself as best as he can. In any case, since the uncle is the one holding the pencil, he is also the one controlling his own image. This discrepancy between reality and representation is something inherent to the act of creating itself, however, as nonsense allows Peake to exaggerate as much as he wants, he puts a magnifying glass on it. This is why he further plays with the codes of autobiographic accounts and invents an improbable past to the uncle which starts in the fourth letter. However improbable, this past is completely valid in the nonsensical universe the uncle finds himself in. In fact, he is a character in a nonsensical universe he describes and therefore creates. Indeed, as long as he is the master of the game (See Carroll 190) [14], everything he draws and documents is true. Thus, the many creatures he does not simply represent, but rather presents to the reader are all true, as long as they are given any sort of life through the uncle's pencil, which, of course, has been Peake's pencil all along. The uncle's harpoon that is also the artist's pencil, turns from a deadly weapon into a life-giving tool. It catches the reader's imagination and transports them in a world which is a distorted, enchanted version of their dull reality. In the uncle's universe, simple beetles become exquisitely carved, detailed creatures and snow-serpents can take a week before dying on someone's leg-spike. This blank land on which everything is possible is not only a fantasy version of the faraway Arctic regions, but also a metaphor for the artist's blank page. It explains why *Letter's from a Lost Uncle* does not present itself as a well-structured, completed book but as a perpetual work-in-progress. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of this story is that

it stages the act of creation to make it look more real, while the use of nonsense ostensibly points at it being a distortion of reality. However, what remains true is the power of artistic creation which is celebrated by the author in this surprising tale. Thus, Peake has fun making his book look like dirty pages from a manuscript. He adds all sorts of stains and smears and purposefully misspells and crosses out words as a joke, since nonsense frees him from any constrictive rule. One can look at it as nothing more than a representation of what it looks like to create, and therefore, a deception. However, by doing so, Peake lifts the curtain on what creation is all about, since the uncle's true quest might not be the White Lion per se, but rather what it symbolises for the artist.

The artist's quest for the unreachable

One might find it odd that Peake should choose a character such as the "Lost Uncle" to embody the figure of the artist. But one must remember that at some point in his life, Peake was seen walking around dressed as a pirate as a way to "affirm his separate identity and freedom" (Winnington 82 - 83) [15]. Thus, through the character of the uncle, the author presents the artist as a marginal and misunderstood figure who is seen as fundamentally different from the rest of society. Society is represented in the story by the family of the uncle's wife. However, the uncle's seeming madness is no more than a reflection of the others' madness (See Lecercle 109) [16]. This puts the whole notion of normalcy and eccentricity into question, since in Peake's universe, everyone is odd and does not fall into any pre-established category, even though none of his characters seems to realise it. As it is, the uncle certainly does not appear to think he is mad or abnormal but simply wishes to be free to be himself.

As an avatar of the artist, the uncle sets out on a quest to find a seemingly legendary creature called the White Lion. Finding the White Lion should mark the end of his journey, and therefore, the end of the story he is writing. The White Lion could, to some extent, also represent what Peake as a writer was after at the time, which kept eluding him: finding a suitable ending to his stories. Indeed, Peake had no problem creating extraordinary universes and characters but had troubles saying goodbye to them properly (Winnington 94, 128) [17]. This inability to find closure for his creations might explain why Peake felt most comfortable writing nonsense. Indeed, just like Lear's limericks that have no point and are characterised by a circular structure, it is not so much the ending that counts rather than the linguistic games that are at play. Thus, *Letters from a Lost Uncle* is less about finding the White Lion than about the writing journey itself. This may be observed in the way the uncle starts to enjoy writing about his adventures more and more, as he himself states: "Isn't it wonderful – I'm beginning to enjoy writing to you?". In fact, the closer he gets to the White Lion, the smoother his writing becomes. From a clumsy, digressive, prosaic tale, his writing turns into a much more organised, and sometimes even poetic text. In the thirteenth letter for instance, the uncle evokes a "sepia-coloured darkness" which "began to close around [him]" as well as "an ice-field with nothing else for miles". One can hear in this extract the internal rhyme created with the words "ice" and "miles" (See Langrish 169) [18]. At this point, the uncle and Jackson walk in a world of pure

white which leaves them “exposed and alone”. It might be the same feeling the artist is experiencing while staring at his blank page before inspiration strikes him. Inspiration, as well as the ultimate truth the artist is seeking in spite of the language aporia, is symbolised in this story by the White Lion: a legendary animal which is supposed to be uncatchable. The uncle does find it at the end, only to see it die before his eyes, which means his only way of truly catching it is to write about it and draw it. (See Langrish 170) [19]. Here lies the paradox of artistic creation: it is presented as nothing more than an illusion, a poor attempt at controlling language and catching an elusive truth, and yet it is a vital quest.

Letters from a Lost Uncle is a true nonsensical work which combines Peake’s favourite devices. It is both a parodic tale and a playground for linguistic and visual games, which, as a result, can leave the reader “lost” in turn as to what its true meaning might be. Children might not embarrass themselves with finding an in-depth meaning to it and simply enjoy the main character’s quirkiness. However, as often with Peake’s work, nonsense and parody could also be his way of trying to find a way to depict at best the paradoxical figure of the artist who is both celebrated and yet dismissed by society as nothing more than an eccentric. The artist’s journey might be akin to the uncle’s singular adventure in the polar regions, struggling to reach the unattainable with a spike-leg or a harpoon as his pen and a curious portmanteau character representing linguistic inventiveness by his side. But of course, as the story is nonsensical after all, its meaning will remain unreachable.

Notes

[1] To Marcus Sedgwick who deals with the lack of more substantial success for such a novel as *Titus Groan*: “for some people it is just too peculiar, but even those that may like it may never come across it simply because it defies classification and easy journalism”.

[2] Tigges makes a list of the themes and motifs found in Nonsense, among which “the nonsense voyage or quest”, the “common motifs of animals and things that are personified, or living creatures that are treated as objects”, “verbal invention” and “ill-assorted or nonexistent pairs”.

[3] “These presumably unmarried and childless family members [...] have become defined by the things their nephews and nieces say about them, locked into the limited frame of reference provided by teasing, rumour and gossip; and most of them seem either indifferent to or positively delighted by the fantastic metamorphoses to which they have become subjected.”

[4] To Mills, “The choice of a nephew to address his letters to, especially a nephew whom he seems to know only through his imagination, is an ambiguous one. Choosing his hypothetical nephew as a reader, the Uncle wavers between wanting and not wanting to make contact with his family.”

[5] On this subject, Mills adds that “The typewriter that he has managed to transport across oceans and jungles, and the unlikelihood of a delivery service in the unpeopled Arctic of his travels, send up the epistolary convention; so too, does the Uncle’s initial lack of enthusiasm for his self-imposed task.”

[6] The edition used does not provide page numbers.

[7] G. Peter Winnington notes that “The Story of the Lost Uncle’s search for the polar White Lion, the Emperor of the Snows, is the pretext for many superb pencil drawings, but the storyline is weak and fizzles out when the Uncle encounters the White Lion [...]”

[8] “The Politeness Principle operates on the basis of a linguistic and pragmatic You-First Orientation [...] But the characters themselves hardly ever conform to the maxims of politeness. They seem to follow a Selfishness Principle, which is the mirror image of its polite counterpart.”

[9] According to Milly “The Uncle's elliptical prose style is more than merely comical or a signifier of a dim wit; his prose exemplifies his psychological pattern of compulsive repetition.” The character’s ‘stuckness’ identified by Mills is a sign of trauma to him.

[10] In *Alice Through the Looking-glass*, Humpty-Dumpty explains what a portmanteau word is to Alice: “You see it’s like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word.

[11] “A children’s writer often creates the kind of tales he or she would like to have read in their own childhood and in *Letters from a Lost Uncle* Peake includes all the elements he’d enjoyed in Stevenson, Ballantyne, Defoe, Melville and other writers of adventure yarns [...]”

[12] “[...] Mervyn was not a scholarly child and never distinguished himself at school. In the books that reproduce his handwriting, such as *Captain Slaughterboard*, or his typing, such as *Letters from a Lost Uncle*, his spelling is erratic and he invariably misplaced the apostrophe in such contractions as ‘don’t’.”

[13] “The ship the Uncle sails on is called the S.S. Em, which recalls the pre-1912 name of Eltham College, ‘School for the Sons of Missionaries’. At school matches, the boys would support their team with the chant, ‘Ess-ess-emmm!’ The Uncle points to the joke by adding, ‘Whether her name was short for Empire or Emu I never found out.’”

[14] As Humpty Dumpty puts it: “The question is [...] which is to be master – that’s all.”

[15] Winnington also quotes Eric Drake who was quoted by Watney: “He wore his hair long and flowing, had his right ear-lobe pierced, and wore a gold ‘pirate’s ring in it. To this he added a cape à la Augustus John, lined with scarlet (and thoroughly enjoyed the sensation caused among both down-to-earth peasants and fisherman and respectable middle-class residents)”.

[16] To Lecerclé “Lear’s eccentrics are as alienated as the ‘they’ that smash them. Their being alienated in and by their eccentricity of madness is the mirror image of the stupid common sense of the ‘they’.

[17] For example, Winnington writes about the ending of *Mr Slaughterboard*, a short story by the author: “The brief final chapter records the captain’s stoic reaction to the shipwreck and ends with a two-word paragraph: ‘The Silence.’ To me it sounds like a frank confession of what happens when a writer cannot get his story going and gives up on it.”

[18] Langrish also notes about the drawings that “the Lost Uncle pictures are lyrical and magical, using swirling lines and blurred soft pencil shading to evoke the wonder of the natural world [...]”.

[19] Langrish reminds us that the uncle does not wish to kill the White Lion, but simply photograph it. Therefore, to her “the White Lion stands for the unattainable, the ungraspable moment of enlightenment and joy which is like a lightning flash – there and gone.”

Works Cited

Primary Source

Peake, Mervyn. *Letters from a Lost Uncle: from Polar Regions*. London: Pan Books, 1948 (1977)

Secondary Sources

Aymès-Stokes, Sophie. "Eccentricity in Mervyn Peake's Work". *Miracle Enough, Papers on the Works of Mervyn Peake*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Unabridged edition, 2013.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's adventures in Wonderland and Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1865, 1871 (1991).

Langrish, Katherine. "Exchanging Certainty for Uncertainty: Mervyn Peake Explores the Realms of Children's Fiction". *Miracle Enough, Papers on the Works of Mervyn Peake*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Unabridged edition, 2013.

Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy of Nonsense: the intuitions of Victorian nonsense literature*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

Maslen, R.W. Introduction to *Complete Nonsense*. Manchester: Fyfield Books / Carcanet, 2011.

Mills, Alice. *Stuckness in the Fiction of Mervyn Peake*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Milly, Edmund. *Nonsense and Trauma in the Works of Mervyn Peake*. MA Research, 2013.

Sedgwick, Marcus. "What makes Gormenghast a masterpiece?" *The Guardian*, 16/08/2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/aug/16/gormenghast-masterpiece-mervyn-peake> (visited on 15/12/2021).

Tigges, Wim. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi B. V., 1988.

Winnington, G. Peter. *Mervyn Peake's Vast Alchemies: the Illustrated Biography*. London; Chester Springs, PA: Peter Owen Publisher, 2009.

Yorke, Malcolm. *Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold: A life*. London: Faber Finds, 2009.