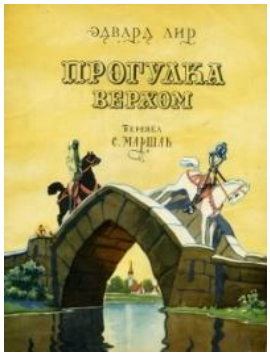
Russian Illustrators of Edward Lear

Nonsense is often considered as a purely English phenomenon, embedded with a particular sense of humour, based on the subtext, irony, and wordplay, which highlight an important facet of English culture. While it is true that the nonsense tradition is deeply rooted in Anglophone cultures, the popularity of translations of Carroll's and Lear's works demonstrates that it can be enjoyed in other countries as well.

The first Russian translations and visual interpretations of Lear's works appeared in the 1920s. Once introduced to the Russian reader, Lear's works gained immediate popularity and have never been out of print. Starting from the middle of the twentieth century, Lear's works have been constantly re-translated and re-illustrated: at least 30 different Russian translators and over 20 illustrators have tried their hands at interpreting and representing Lear's vast legacy. In this review, I will briefly look at some of the most interesting (at least, in my opinion) illustrated editions.

The Adventures of the Table and the Chair
1924

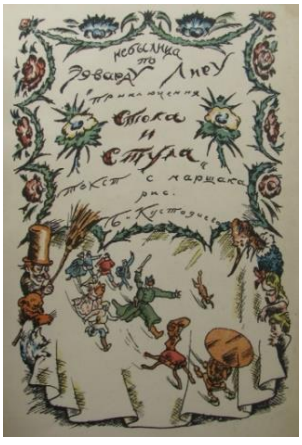
The Adventures of the Table and the Chair
1928



The Horseback Journey
1956

The Horseback Journey and Other Poems
1962

The Table and the Chair was the first poem by Lear to be translated into Russian. Well, not exactly 'translated' but rather adapted by the famous Soviet children's writer and poet Samuil Marshak (1887–1964). The original forty lines turned into a whole new poem titled *The Adventures of the Table and the Chair* consisting of 126 lines in the first version and 154 lines in the second, each illustrated by a different artist. These first two editions of *The Adventures of the Table and the Chair* represent a vivid example of the changes in the style of illustration and look of early Soviet children's books.

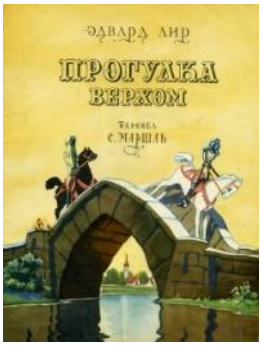


The 1924 edition (5,000 copies) was illustrated by the esteemed Russian painter Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927), known for his portrayals of the daily life of peasants and provincial merchants, but who also enjoyed illustrating children's books. His drawings are filled with fun and quirky details, a kaleidoscopic change of scenes and characters, and a mischievous eccentricity that even animates everyday objects. The title page (on the right) is especially remarkable, with detail heaped upon detail and hand-drawn letters almost blended in with other decorative elements creating a single ornamental pattern. According to the progressive critics of the time, Kustodiev and other artists, who had reached artistic maturity before 1917, outside of the Constructivist strategy, 'were guilty of all the anthropomorphizing and fantasizing'[1]. Although Kustodiev's illustrations might look a bit sentimental and old-fashioned, they perfectly captured the absurdity of the situation and the mess caused by it.

Published in 1928, the second edition of *The Adventures of the Table and the Chair* was illustrated by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky[2] (1889–1965), one of the leading experimental Soviet filmmakers, book illustrators, and animators. This period saw a major change in the visual arts, including illustrative book art, which resulted in a bold and dynamic depiction of the post-revolutionary world and its machine cult. Tsekhanovsky, with his acute and progressive understanding of the moment, knew exactly how to embrace this new visual culture. Starting from the mid-1920s, the most popular genre of Soviet children's books was the 'production' book covering a variety of industrial themes, including factories, locomotives, steamers, tramways, and other techno-Constructivist marvels. Just like Tsekhanovsky's illustrations for *The Table and the Chair*, illustrations to such books were characterised by their painstaking geometric precision, frontal orientation and a complete lack of environment: the object was stripped of its habitat and placed one-dimensionally on the white field of a page, showing no or little perspective or depth. Devoid of elaborate details, vignettes or any other visual complications, the images now relied upon simplified shapes and outlines inspired by the Cubist tradition. This new aesthetics is also reflected in the use of the typeface (see the cover above, which by the way no longer mentions Lear's name). All the letters of this blocky, stencilled typeface are of equal height, with no serifs or other decorative effects – a splendid example of less doing more.

Tsekhanovsky works with a limited palette of colours – mustard yellow, white, red, blue and black – all vigorously deployed against one another creating an avant-garde poster effect. Packed with movement and graphic rhythm, his illustrations have a cinematic quality to them. Moving to filmmaking and animation was a natural progression for an artist like him.

Although significantly re-imagined and extended by the translator and then by the illustrator, the mere existence of this edition (issued in 30,000 copies) can still be seen as a homage to Lear's genius, even though his name is not acknowledged – an unfortunate common Soviet practice at the time.



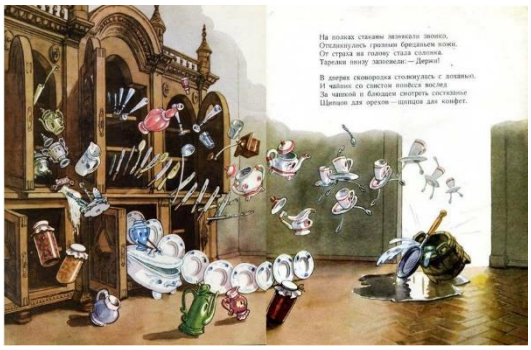
The next illustrated edition of Lear appeared decades later, in 1956, under the translated title *The Horseback Journey.* It featured just one poem – *The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs* translated again by Marshak[3]. This time the translator was more faithful to the original text, although he still managed to omit four lines. The illustrations were provided by Evgeny Galey (1927–1996), a talented Soviet artist, book illustrator, art director, and costume designer. The overall book design was developed by Dmitry Bisti, one of the leading Soviet graphic artists, book illustrators, and printmakers. Together they collaborated on quite a few children's books, which today are highly sought after by collectors.

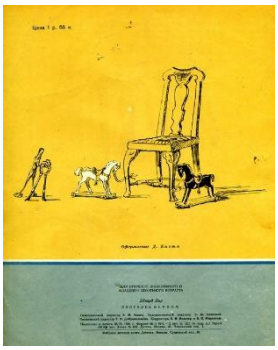
By the late 50s, Soviet book art, including children's books, has undergone yet another significant change of direction which is generally associated with de-Stalinisation and a relative liberalisation of cultural life, known as 'The Khrushchev Thaw', wherein artists had more freedom to create work without fearing repercussions. Soviet artists were finally able to unleash their creative potential, free from the previous faceless uniformity of the artistic concept, which eliminated any trace of individuality. Soviet publishing now regarded the book as a whole entity rather than the sum of disparate parts. Illustrations were now developed

alongside with the overall design and look of the book. Children's book illustration of this period was also characterised by the return to the decorative and imagination-liberating illustrations, hand-drawn fonts (see above) and an increased openness to the Western tradition. Very much an artist of his time, Evgeny Galey reflected all these changes in his works.

Almost Disneyesque in their execution, Galey's illustrations for *The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs* insert the anthropomorphised characters into the colourful scenery inspired by the European countryside with its jettied timber-framed houses. The objects are no longer scattered disjointedly around a white page. Instead, they are carefully placed over a panoramic double spread, creating with other illustrations a dynamic sequential storyline. The cover image (see the previous page) introduces the comical element as it tricks the reader into thinking that the Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs are riding real horses, while according to Galey's reinterpretation they are just wooden toy horses. The realistic and highly detailed depiction of the household and the crockery reinforces the comical effect. One cannot help but notice the similarity between Galey's owl-shaped Nutcrackers and those by L. Leslie Brooke in his 1910 illustrations for the same poem (on the left).[4] It is impossible to say whether Galey was familiar with Brooke's works, but this style of lever nutcrackers was not uncommon in the USSR at that period, therefore such visual conversion was only logical for an artist with a knack for personifying the inmate. Aimed at nourishing children's imagination rather than feeding them the state-approved morals, Galey's illustrations immediately transport the reader into the warm and cosy atmosphere of a nursery, where all kinds of magic can happen, and a simple chair can become the stables from which Lear's escapee couple takes the horses.

Created during the Thaw, issued in print runs of 100,000 copies, and included in the lists of books recommended for pre-school reading, this propaganda-free edition enabled little comrades a taste of the fantasy that has become a shared foundation with children's books in the West.

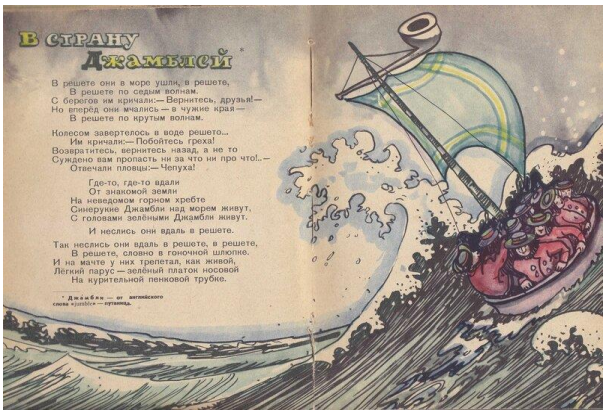




Six years later, in 1962, the first collection of Lear's translated poems with a short biographical introduction was published. Illustrated by the famous Soviet painter, book illustrator, and theatrical scenic artist Leonid Zusman (1906–1984), *The Horseback Journey and Other Poems* featured eight poems in Marshak's translations,[5] including the already familiar *The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs.* Initially, Marshak was hoping that illustrations would be provided by Vladimir Konashevich,[6] another distinguished Soviet artist, who had illustrated most of Marshak's works. Due to the lack of information, it is difficult to say what stopped their collaboration, but knowing that Konashevich died in February 1963, we can assume that his ill health may have been a factor.

Issued in a large format with a dust cover and an initial print run of 110,000 copies, *The Horseback Journey and Other Poems* was well received both by readers and critics, who described it as ‘a real event in poetry for children’.[7] Indeed, this edition can be considered as one of the milestones in popularising Lear’s nonsense in Russia.

According to the reviews, the book was ‘tastefully designed’, while Zusman’s illustrations were described as ‘colourful and inventive’, ‘bright and exquisite’. Having studied art at the Leningrad and Moscow Schools, as well as under Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Zusman, like many other Soviet artists, eventually shifted his focus onto book illustration, particularly children’s books. Deliberately simplistic and sketchy, at first glance, his pen and ink illustrations with a watercolour wash create the effect of a colouring book coloured by an impatient child. But when we look closer at the images, we recognise some curious allusions to the renowned masterpieces of the world’s art. Thus, the wave in the illustration to *The Jumblies* was most certainly inspired by Hokusai’s *Great Wave* (on the right below), while the crockery’s faces in the illustration to *The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs* bear some similarity with Matisse’s ‘face’ drawings.



Recalling his work on this edition, Zusman remembers how thorough Marshak was in specifying all the details of the book layout, especially the interaction between the illustrations and Lear’s imagery. He insisted on ‘the strictest correspondence between the pictures and the letter and spirit of the poems’.[8] Although it is impossible to stay true to ‘the letter’ of the poem since it has been translated, Zusman successfully managed to capture the melancholic whimsy of Lear’s works.

The very same *Horseback Journey* was re-issued in 1981 with new illustrations provided by the same artist. Published in a print run of 100,000 copies, the new edition was printed on thick white paper bound in a glossy hardback. Due to the expanded format (103 pages versus 32), each poem now received a separate title page with its characters depicted as silhouettes against bright monochrome backgrounds, as well as numerous full-page and double-spread illustrations. Having more space to work with, the illustrator significantly developed some of the previously used themes and images to make them more detailed and dimensional (see the comparison below). Some of the characters though were completely reworked to look more realistic. The colour palette itself became richer and more nuanced compared to the previous edition. But despite all that, many readers still preferred the 1962 edition as they were brought up with those 'original' illustrations and accept them as the definitive ones. According to them, the new illustrations seem to have lost their charm and quirkiness and look just like any other illustrated children's book of that period. Taste differences aside, the 1981 edition of *The Horseback Journey* constituted yet another important chapter in Lear's Russian odyssey.


Ведь так богат у вас наряд,
Как зеркало, блестящий,
Что двор, наверно, был бы рад
Вас принимать почаще.

Средь мрамора и хрусталя
Вы увидали б короля.
А рядом королева
Сидит на троне слева.

Сияет золотом их трон,
Она — в зелёном, в красном — он.

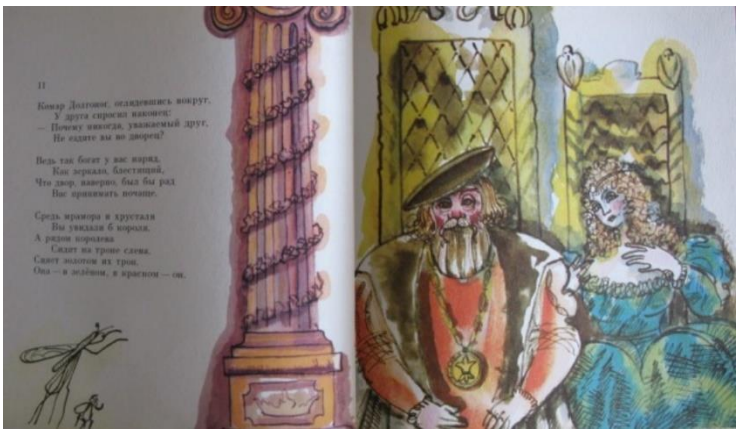
III

— Нет,— Зум-зум-зум сказал в ответ,—
Бывать в там не мог.
Я вам открою свой секрет:
Всё горе — из-за ног!

Богат и пышен мой наряд,
Да ноги коротки.
Об этом в свете говорят
Все злые языки.

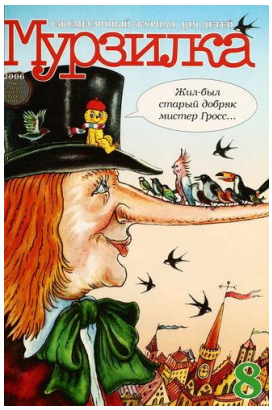
И, если я пойду в чертог,
Мне не простят коротких ног.
Король и королева
Сойдут с ума от гнева.

И, верно, скажет мне король:
„Ты, Муха, выйти вон изволь!"

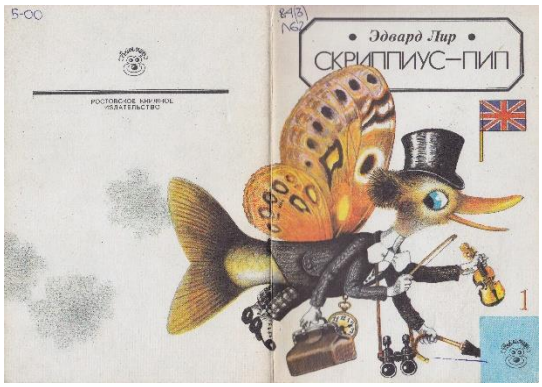


1962 *1981*

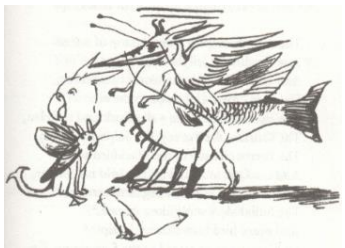
Starting from the 60s and up to early 2000s, selected works by Lear were mostly published either in popular children's magazines such as *Kostyor*, *Pioner*, *Veselye Kartinki*, *Kolobok*, and *Murzilka* (on the left) or in various anthologies of fairy tales or nonsense poetry by British authors. Magazine publications were often accompanied by floppy vinyl records with poems read by beloved Soviet actors which are still fondly remembered today. In 1977 the *Melodiya* record company released a record titled *The Horseback Journey* featuring poems by British poets including Lear. The cover design is quite unique as it depicts the Sugar-tongs as female, hinting at the possible romantic relationship between the characters. The poem's gender ambiguity, which was further reinforced in Russian translation by the descriptions of the Sugar-tongs as 'shiny' and 'delicate', allowed the illustrator to steer away from previously adopted visual patterns.

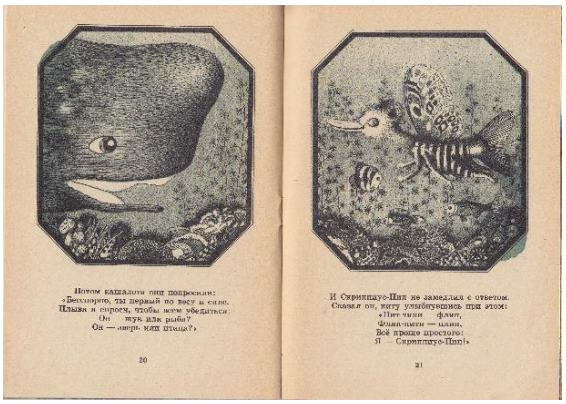


As for stand-alone illustrated editions of Lear's works, there were just a few editions published during this period, the most interesting probably being the 1992 edition of *The Scroobious Pip* translated by Mikhail Yeremin[9] and illustrated by Vladimir Vtorenko. The talented graphic artist, book illustrator, and filmstrip artist, Vtorenko (1950–2006) illustrated over 150 books and was known for his detailed watercolour and tempera illustrations capable of creating a dreamy atmosphere of fantasy. Still a child at heart, he was especially attracted to children's books with their 'jokes, fantasies, and colorfulness'.[10]



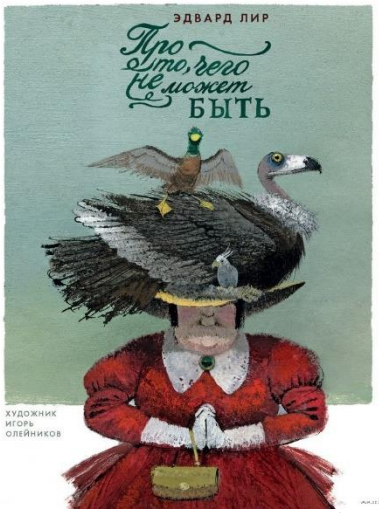
According to the artist's widow Tatiana Vtorenko, Lear's limericks were often read and thoroughly enjoyed by all the family. That's why his decision to illustrate Lear's poem *The Scroobious Pip* did not come as a surprise. The task was obviously quite challenging: how does one depict something that looks like 'Fish or Insect, or Bird or Beast'? As usual, Vtorenko started his work with research in order to immerse himself in the author's biography and previous visual interpretations. Indeed, it seems that the illustrator used Lear's original image (on the left) as his reference, although Vtorenko's Scroobious Pip is elegantly dressed in a fancy suit with a white bow tie and top hat. A true embodiment of an eccentric Victorian gentleman, he is also equipped with a pocket watch, an umbrella, a violin, binoculars, and a leather Gladstone bag. As we flip through the pages, we see that Scroobious Pip has quite a collection of outfits, including a tropical explorer's outfit with a pith helmet and a stripy bathing suit (on the right). Well, of course, how can one even think of going into the sea without a proper swimsuit?



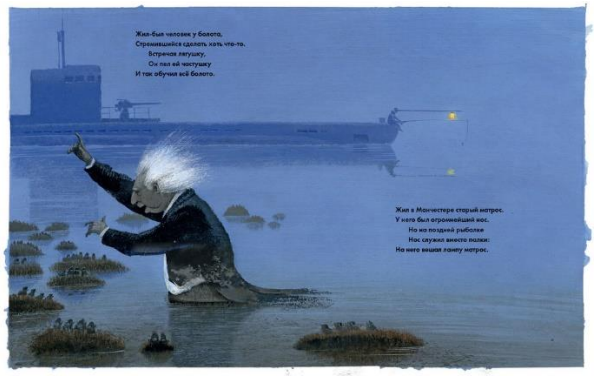


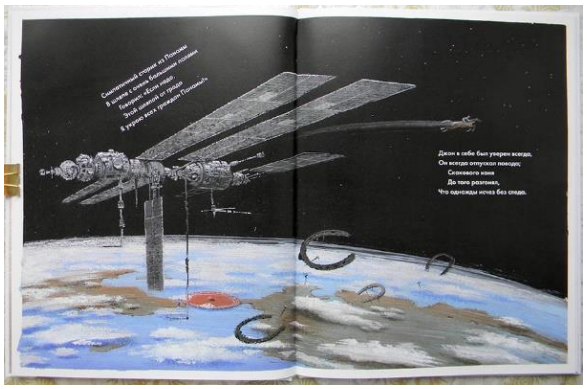
Decorated with elaborate endpapers, the book itself is cleverly designed with the front cover concealing Scroobious Pip's fish tail, thus intriguing the reader. The illustrator did a tremendous work as each of 31 pages has its own framed illustration creating the effect of both a photo album and filmstrips coming to life with each turning of a page, a sort of a flat-surface Victorian zoetrope if I may. Drawn in a cross-hatching technique, Vtorenko's soft and gentle illustrations are filled with various animal species and amusing details for children to spot and enjoy. A rare gem, this delightful edition was a pleasant change from the colourful and tasteless glut of the children's books produced in Russia during the 'wild' 90s.

In recent years, there seems to be a new wave of interest in Lear's works, which started with the 2014 edition of 28 selected limericks translated by Genrikh Vardenga and illustrated by the award-winning Igor Oleynikov. Their book was published in a special 'modern illustration' series, and in his illustrations, Oleynikov gave Lear's limericks new sounding by using unusual angles and introducing the modern-day elements – from a Harley-Davidson motorcycle to the orbital space station.



As we can see in the illustrations below, the limericks are joined together in a single comically imaginative spread as such 'serialisation' gives the illustrator more freedom to work with. The use of a double-page spread and pairing of limericks is not a new device and was used by previous Lear's illustrators (Janina Domanska, John O'Brien, and James Wines, to name but a few). As a rule, illustrators choose texts, in which the subject matter and imagery could visually interact across two pages at a time, creating visual relationships that Lear had not proposed when he wrote his poems. In Oleynikov's illustration, the Space Station was used both to show how one hat can cover the whole country (in translation 'an Old Man of Dee-side' turned into 'an Old Man of Panama') and how far away an Old Person of Basing can get, riding his steed at full speed. By experimenting with the angle of view, the illustrator develops Lear's game of size, scale and proportions.





On the left:

There was an Old Man in a Marsh,
Whose manners were futile and harsh;
He sate on a log, and sang songs to a frog,
That instructive old man in a Marsh.

On the right:

There was an Old Man in a barge,
Whose nose was exceedingly large;
But in fishing by night, it supported a light,
Which helped that old man in a barge.

On the left:

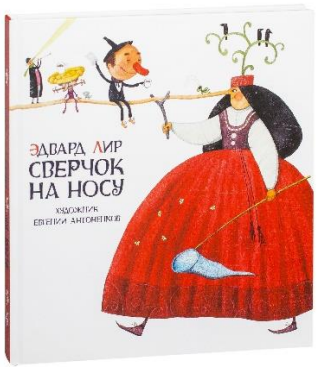
There was an Old Man of Dee-side,
Whose hat was exceedingly wide,
But he said, 'Do not fail, if it happen to hail
To come under my hat at Dee-side!'

On the right:

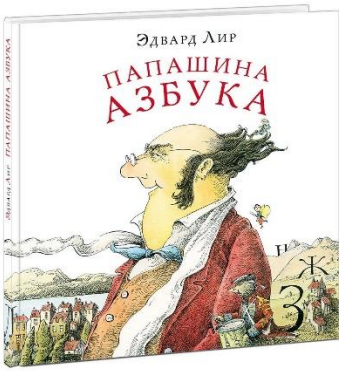
There was an Old Person of Basing,
Whose presence of mind was amazing;
He purchased a steed, which he rode at full speed,
And escaped from the people of Basing.

In their joint interview with the translator Genrikh Vardenga, Oleynikov explains his approach to illustrating Lear's limericks. Thus, for the limerick about an Old Man of Nepaul, who in translation was given the name John Wilson and was miraculously cured by a doctor, the illustrator decided 'to follow exactly what is written in the text. But to draw a man who is split in two is morbid. Therefore, John Wilson is a monument to a man who for some reason was split in two. And the doctor who glued him together is thus a welder.'[11] Although compared to Lear, Oleynikov's illustration is focused on the successful 'mending' (though he is mended back-to-front) and not on 'the terrible fall,' he managed to follow the text and at the same time introduced his own visual joke. As it turned out, in almost each illustration, there is hidden a little story from the artist, which even the author of the translation did not notice himself.

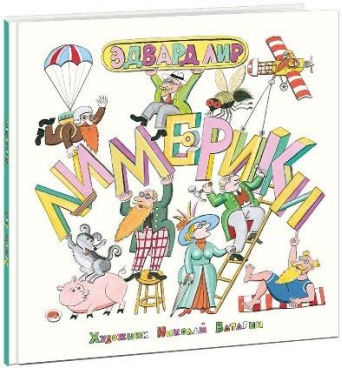
In 2017, Lear's fans in Russia were treated with a whole set of three books lavishly illustrated by different artists (same translator though – Grigory Kruzhkov): *The Cricket on the Nose, Papa's Alphabet*, and *Limericks.* All editions are accompanied by a brief bibliographical introduciton.



The Cricket on the Nose



Papa's Alphabet

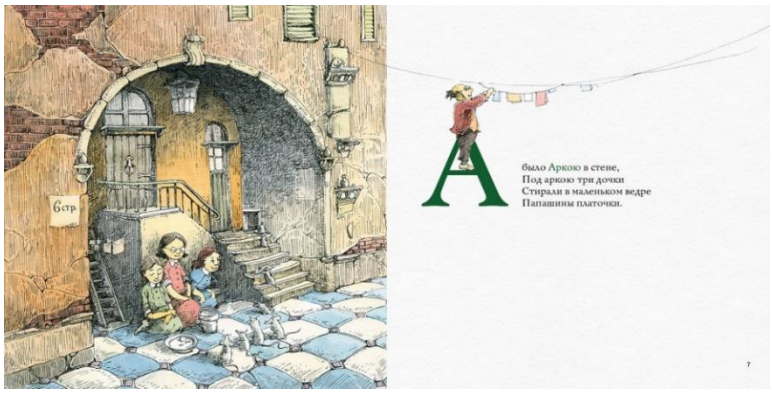


Limericks

Illustrated by one of the leading contemporary Russian illustrators Evgeny Antonenkov, *The Cricket on the Nose* includes Lear's best-known poems, such as *The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, The Dong with a Luminous Nose, The Table and the Chair, The Pobble Who Has No Toes, The Quangle Wangle's Hat* (as can be guessed from the cover illustration, which depicts a Young Lady, whose nose accommodates the beloved characters), and less familiar ones, such as *Mrs Blue Dickey-bird, At Dingle Bank, Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly,* and *Calico Pie.* There are also four limericks scattered amongst them.

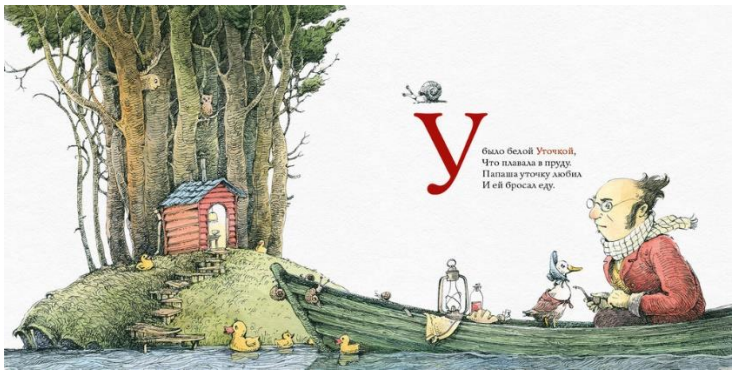
There was an Old Man of Whitehaven,
Who danced a quadrille with a Raven;
But they said, 'It's absurd to encourage this bird!'
So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven.

The world of Lear's nonsense makes a perfect match for Antonenkov's style as according to the illustrator's own words 'it is boring for me to draw pretty characters.'[12] Just like Lear, Antonenkov is fascinated with noses and generously reflects on this subject in his softly executed illustrations, which are humorous and blend an old-fashioned quality with almost naïve folk art.

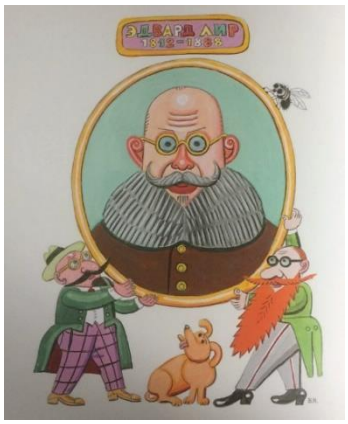


Of all Lear's creations, alphabets are perhaps the least widely known, although he produced many of them for his friends' children – some more nonsensical than others. Illustrated by increasingly popular Valery Kozlov, *Papa's Alphabet* ('A was an Area Arch') is one of Lear's most unusual alphabets, where each letter contains a reference to Papa's belongings, food habits or wishes.

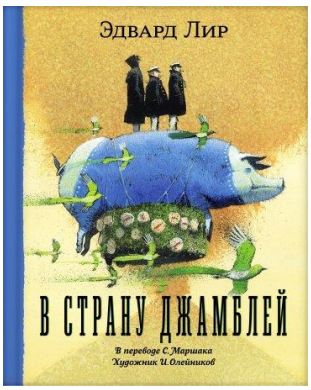
Despite the obvious dominance of the father in this alphabet, there is not a single depiction of him in the original illustrations. Kozlov, however, decided to focus on the image of Papa himslef (like the Punch artist G. S. Sherwood in his 1950s version of the same alphabet). A dedicated Anglophile, who, as a child, used to read Dickens and Galsworthy, the illustrator claims his inspiration for Lear's alphabet lay in the works of George Cruikshank. However, according to Kozlov, his Papa does not have a prototype as such, it is rather a collective image based both on Mr Pickwick and the colourful engravings of the seventeenth century with all their grotesque surrealism.[13] As a result, we see an eccentric middle-class Victorian gentleman, whose wisdom and consumerism seem to have no limits.



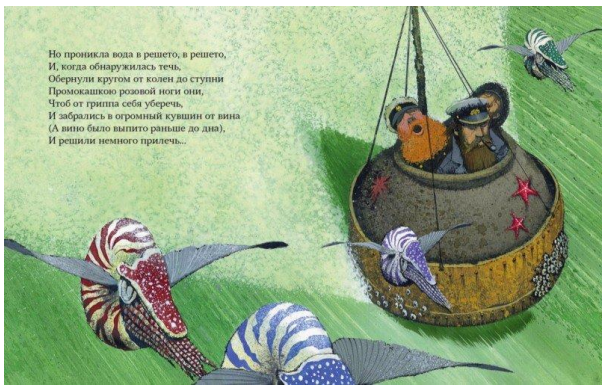
Kozlov presents each letter on a double-page spread filled with a wealth of imagination, preciseness, and an impeccable taste. Of course, we can say that by filling in the illustrative gap left out by Lear, the illustrator spoils the intrigue, however, such an approach clearly satisfies the publishers and readers, and what is more important secures further interest in Lear's works.



The last in this Lear 'trilogy' is the book of *Limericks* featuring 39 selected limericks with the illustrations by the talented painter and sculptor Nikolai Vatagin. Drawn in an exaggerated caricature style, the illustrations were part of an attempt to 'resurrect' Lear in Kruzkov's well-known translation with the help of some 'witty' textual inscriptions added by the illustrator himself. These inscriptions include, among others, quotations and catchphrases from famous books or movies, which in several cases immersed Lear's characters in the context of Russian culture. Funny as it may seem, but unfamiliar readers will be genuinely surprised by Lear's profound knowledge of Russian culture. Sometimes these quotations were slightly changed to reflect the content of the limerick, like the caption 'The Last Tango in Verona' for the limerick about an 'Old Man of Whitehaven, who danced a quadrille with a Raven', as in translation 'Whitehaven' was changed into 'Verona'.



Finally, this year brought us another edition of Lear illustrated again by Igor Oleynikov – *To the Land of the Jumblies*, an unusual and quite unexpected interpretation of the beloved Jumblies with the classic 1961 translation by Marshak. As we know, Lear accompanied his poem with a simplistic black and white line drawing, unwittingly bestowing future illustrators with an artistic licence for visual re-interpretations. Known for their green heads and blue hands, the Jumblies are usually depicted as funny little green creatures, somewhat in between elves and gnomes. But in Oleynikov's illustrations, we see real people – the three captains in proper uniforms standing quite seriously, if not dramatically, in a sieve. Although it is generally accepted that the Jumblies are the ones who embarked on this risky sea voyage, the illustrator claims that it is not quite clear from the text who exactly these travellers are, and this textual ambiguity (probably, furthered by the Russian translation) allowed him to 'give a new meaning to the familiar work.'[14] Thus, in the final and the most intriguing illustration we see the captains who upon their return have transformed into the Jumblies. To use Oleynikov's own words, 'a children's poem turned into a classical horror story.'[15]



Despite the criticism from one of the major Soviet children's authors Korney Chukovsky ('neat, accurate, but not as funny as the original text'[16]), it is thanks to Marshak's translations that Russian children of the Soviet era discovered Lear's poetry. It has become so deeply integrated in the Russian literary system that when this new edition was released, it was not uncommon to come across surprised comments from some readers, who did not realise that all this time they were reading and quoting Lear in translation, as they genuinely thought that *The Jumblies* was originally written by Marshak.

As we can see, the new illustrated editions of Lear contribute to the successful re-entrance of his works into Russian literature and culture. We can say that through this exposure Russian readers are no longer strangers to the eccentric and ridiculous world of English nonsense. Although the very character of nonsense literature is very visual, illustrating Lear does not by definition result in visual nonsense due to its complexity in terms of image-text relationship (especially in limericks). However, the above illustrators do more than provide the reader with predictable amusing images: having embraced the very spirit of nonsense, they engage in a game started by Lear, occasionally providing an extra dimension to what has been written. Despite the original double audience appeal, some of these editions are clearly more aimed at children, while others, due to the use of more subtle irony and somewhat dark imagery, can be considered as more 'adult' and intended for book collectors rather than children.

In conclusion, I would also like to note the increasing interest in Lear's works among young Russian illustrators, who have not yet had the chance to publish their works, but who eagerly share them on social media, like Katerina Peschanskaya-Tikhova (on the left) and Tatiana Laponkina (on the right). Knowing how fond Russian readers are of English nonsense, we can be certain that there will be more illustrated editions of Lear's works on the Russian market in the future.

Notes

[1] Steiner, Evgeny, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children's Books* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 124.
[2] The original sketches for *The Table and the Chair* by Tsekhanovsky are available at http://www.rgali.ru/obj/11661905 [Accessed 3 December 2019].
[3] First printed in *Kostyo*r magazine, No. 4 (1946), p. 22.
[4] Lear, Edward; Brooke, L. Leslie, *The Pelican Chorus and Other Nonsense Verses* (London; New York: Frederick Warne & Co., 1910).
[5] First printed in *Ogonyok* magazine, No. 46 (12 November 1961), pp.26-27, and No. 48 (26 November 1961), pp. 26-27.
[6] From Marshak's letter dated 26 May 1961 in *Sobranie sochinenii v vosmi tomakh* [Collected Works in 8 Volumes] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1972), Vol. 8, p. 394.
[7] From a review by Sergey Sivokon for *Semya i Shkola* magazine, No. 4 (April 1963), p 38.
[8] From Zusman's recollections printed in *Detskay Literatura* magazine No. 11 (1968), pp.46-48.
[9] First printed in *Kolobok* magazine, No 3 (1971), p. 16-17.
[10] From Vtorenko's diary quoted online at http://diafilmy.su/2073-vtorenko-vladimir-vladimirovich.html [Accessed 3 December 2019].
[11] Oleynikov, Igor; Vardenga, Genrikh. Interview in Dubna, 24 September 2014 (translation is mine). Available from http://pressdubna.ru/news_full_k.php?nid=13784 [3 December 2019].
[12] From Antonenkov's interview for *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Issue No. 120(6691), 4 June 2015 (translation is mine). Available from https://rg.ru/2015/06/04/knigi.html [Accessed 3 December 2019].
[13] A detailed account (in Russian) about the illustrator's creative process, as well as some original sketches can be found here: http://www.fairyroom.ru/?p=50155 [Accessed 3 December 2019].
[14] From Oleynikov's speech at the 36th IBBY International Congress Athens 2018 (translation is mine). Available from http://www.ibby.org/about/speeches/ [Accessed 3 December 2019].
[15] From personal correspondence, May 2019.
[16] Chukovsky, Korney, diary entry dated 28 August 1961 in *Sobranie sochinenii v pyatnadtsati tomakh* [Collected Works in 15 Volumes] (Moscow: FTM Agency, Ltd, 2013), Vol. 13, p. 316.