

# С РАБОЧЕГО СТОЛА МОЛОДОГО УЧЕНОГО

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## К ВОПРОСУ О ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ ПОЭТИКИ НОНСЕНСА В АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ XX В.: ЛЬЮИС КЭРРОЛЛ И ДЖОН ЛЕННОН

*Аннотация.* В настоящей статье автор анализирует художественную прозу всемирно известного музыканта Джона Леннона с точки зрения литературного направления нонсенса. Несмотря на общепризнанное и неоднократно упомянутое критиками и исследователями влияние на творчество Дж. Леннона текстов Л. Кэрролла, настоящая статья ставит целью найти существенные отличия в прозе Дж. Леннона и Л. Кэрролла и таким образом ответить на вопрос, является ли художественная проза музыканта продолжением традиции английского «чистого» нонсенса, трансформирует ли она данную традицию или представляет собой совершенно отличное литературное направление. В рамках компаративного анализа сравниваются жанры и формы, сюжеты, персонажи, стиль, приемы словотворчества, а также пространственно-временные хронотопы произведений Л. Кэрролла и Дж. Леннона. Автор статьи учитывает также и то, что определение понятия «нонсенс» имеет свою сложную историю и проблематику, а также в целях анализа обращается к творчеству Д. Хармса, в связи с чем автор не исключает возможности изучения прозаического творчества Дж. Леннона в рамках литературного направления абсурда. Несмотря на то, что Леннон был вдохновлен творчеством Кэрролла и неосуществившейся мечтой его жизни было написать аналогичную детскую сказку, литературные опыты музыканта не ограничиваются приемами нонсенса и представляют собой уникальный литературный феномен, который некоторые исследователи сравнивают с романом Дж. Джойса «Поминки по Финнегану», в связи с чем в статье уделяется внимание и оригинальному художественному стилю музыканта, который называют «эрративным нарративом», «поэтикой ошибки», «бессмысленным правописанием» или «вербальным нонсенсом».

*Ключевые слова:*  
проза; рок-музыка;  
рок-музыканты;  
нонсенс; абсурд; ан-  
глийская литература;  
английские писатели;  
литературное твор-  
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## TRANSFORMATION OF ENGLISH VICTORIAN NONSENSE IN THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: LEWIS CARROLL AND JOHN LENNON

*Abstract.* The author of this article analyzes the fiction by the world famous musician John Lennon from the perspective of the literary nonsense. Despite the fact that the influence of L. Carroll's texts on the works by J. Lennon is universally recognized and frequently mentioned by critics, this article aims to explore significant differences between the prose by J. Lennon and L. Carroll and thus answer the question whether the musician's fiction is a continuation of English "pure" nonsense tradition, whether it transforms this tradition or represents a completely different literary genre. Within the framework of the comparative analysis, the author compares genres and forms, plots, characters, style, word creation technics, and chronotopes of texts by L. Carroll and J. Lennon. The author takes into account the fact that the definition of the concept of "nonsense" has its own complex history and several interpretations. In addition, for the purposes of the analysis, the author refers to the oeuvre of D. Kharmas and, in this connection, concludes that it is possible to study J. Lennon's prose in the framework of literary absurd. Despite the fact that Lennon's texts were inspired by Carroll's books and the unfulfilled dream of his life was to write a similar children's fairy tale, the musician's literary work is not limited to nonsense techniques and represents a unique literary phenomenon, which is comparable to J. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In this connection, the author pays attention to this distinguished style, which is called "erratic narrative", "poetics of mistake", "nonsensical spelling", or "verbal nonsense".

*Keywords:*  
prose; rock music; rock  
musicians; nonsense;  
absurd; English liter-  
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A whole century separates the publication of the first Alice story and John Lennon's literary debut. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was prepared for publication in 1864 and published in 1865, and a hundred years later, English nonsense incarnated in a new and unexpected way in the books by J. Lennon *In His Own Write* (1964) and *A Spaniard in the Works* (1965). However, is the fiction by J. Lennon really a continuation of English nonsense tradition? How much did the oeuvre of L. Carroll influence the musician's writing style? This article aims to answer these questions.

Many of Lennon's biographers mention the tale of Alice as one of Lennon's favorite books in his childhood [Studencheskiy meridian 1991: 9]. The reviewers, translators and researchers repeatedly mention influence of Lewis Carroll's stories on Lennon's fiction. Writing about the first publication of Lennon's books and the striking contrast that they made with the lyrics of *The Beatles*, J. Savage notes: "Here he could find an outlet for his obsession with the Goons and Lewis Carroll" [Lennon 2010: ix]. In the preface to the Russian edition of Lennon's collections, the translator A. Kurbanovsky summarizes: "All reviewers noted that the word-making technique and images of the stories betray the influence of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear..." [Lennon 2003: 10]. It is a well-known fact that the portrait of Professor C. L. Dodgson is on the cover of *The Beatles* concept album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* [Novak 2016: 31]. For the album's collage, the band members independently compiled lists of those famous personalities that they would like to see on the cover [Goldman 2000: 243]: "Lennon insisted on the photo of his favorite writer" [Novak 2016: 31]. Moreover, Lennon himself noted the influence of Carroll's works. Biographers, including A. Goldman, often quote his confession about the history of the song *I Am the Walrus* – a direct reference to the text of *Through the Looking-Glass*: "Only later I realized that the Walrus was a big capitalist that ate all the bleeping oysters" [Goldman 2000: 266]. There is one curious coincidence connected with this song. Lennon wrote it, "having inserted a sheet of paper into a typewriter, on which from time to time, when he was inspired, typed one or several lines" [Goldman 2000: 264]. Let us compare it with the description made by J. Pudney, who, telling about the creation of the poem *The Hunting of the Snark*, cites the author himself: "<...> and so by degrees, at odd moments during the next year or two, the rest of the poem pieced itself together <...>" [Padni 1982: 96]. Leaving no doubt for philology researchers, Lennon told about the song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*: "These were the images from the book *Alice in Wonderland*. The imagery was Alice in the boat" [Sheff 2014: 213].

The experience of analyzing Carroll allusions and his influence on Lennon's work already exists in Russian literary studies: these works are devoted to the musician's songs and poetic works (depending on the terminology used by a researcher). Thus, the author of the complete collection of *The Beatles* songs in Russian I. Poluyakhtov points to references to Carroll's works and gives a detailed analysis of them in the comments to the translation of the songs *I Am the Walrus* and *Cry, Baby, Cry* [Poluyakhtov 1996, 2: 60, 124]. He also notes the influence of nonsense poetry in the song *Norwegian Wood* [Poluyakhtov 1996, 1: 254]. A researcher from Samara E. V. Morozova devotes a paragraph of her dissertation *The Poetic Works by J. Lennon and P. McCartney*

1960-1970 to this issue, where, despite the title, there are also fragments of the analysis of Lennon's prose [Morozova 2009: 93-114]. In the article, we analyze only the influence of the Alice dilogy, since, according to Lennon himself, he was not familiar with other Carroll's works [John Lennon Interview].

Certainly, between the life of the humble honorable Oxford Professor of the 19th century and the life of the world famous and eccentric rock musician of the 20th century (Lennon's collections were published at the peak of the Beatlemania), any similarity is unlikely. Nevertheless, one can draw several curious parallels. Like C. L. Dodgson, Lennon "published" his first literary experiments when he was a child [Demurova 1979: 16]. Like the hand-written magazines of the young Dodgson, so the self-made magazines by Lennon were of a humorous nature. Carroll dreamed of becoming an artist [Demurova 1979: 20], and Lennon enrolled at an art college: both authors had their books illustrated and the illustrations play an important role in the understanding of the text [Galanov 1990: 204]. Carroll loved children and spent a lot of time with them. It is also a well-known fact that the stories about Alice happened thanks to Alice Liddell, the middle daughter of the Dean of Christ Church [Padni 1996: 14-18]. In 1963, Lennon became a father and, in this connection, some critics suggest that children's poems and fairy tale motifs in his collections owe their appearance to his son Julian [Shabanov 2009]. However, in contrast to this opinion, some biographers believe that during this period Lennon neglected his parental responsibilities [Goldman 2000: 135]. Therefore, it is likely that children's poems and fairy tales were not addressed to children.

A comparative analysis of Alice stories and the works by Lennon presents a certain difficulty because their forms and genres are significantly different. If in one case we are dealing with two "literary tales" (according to N. M. Demurova), then in the second one there are so-called "miniatures"<sup>1</sup> [Lennon 1988: 182], [Lennon 1983: 229]. Critics, translators, and researchers when referring to Lennon's prose often use this term since his collections represent a significant genre diversity: prose, drama, and poetry, which, however, because of their small size can hardly be considered stories, novels or plays. Nevertheless, in this connection I would like to add that some researchers of Carroll's oeuvre note the "discreteness" of the fairy-tale narrative, pointing out that Alice's encounters do not have strict causal relationships and can change places without serious damage to the plot [Demurova 1979: 144]. At the same time, Lennon's miniatures, despite their genre diversity, represent a stylistic unity.

An analysis of the studies indicating Carroll's influence on Lennon's prose has led me to several conclusions. First, most of them note only similarities, ignoring the problem of the development or transformation of the nonsense literature techniques, second, they innumerate same several resemblances. These are above all the portmanteau words: compare *slithy* (*lithe* + *slimy*) in Carroll, *safairy* (*safari* + *fairy*), *singularge* (*singular* + *large*), *ellifitzgerald* (*elementary* + *Ella*

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, due to the significant similarity of form and content, one can borrow the term from studies on D. Kharms' stories (e.g. "сценки", Eng. *little scenes*).

*Fitzgerald*) in Lennon and соскрючились (соскучились + скрючились), пассакалия (пасквиль + вакханалия), упадание (упадок + падение) in D. Kharms. However, one cannot limit oneself to such a comparison since Carroll uses many other devices (a literal interpretation of a phraseological unit, puns, neologisms, a personification of English folklore images). Lennon favors some devices, while rarely or not at all using others. We believe that this attitude to language is one of the fundamental differences. Apparently, Carroll's *writhing* instead of *writing*, *ambition* instead of *addition*, *Laughing* and *Grief* instead of *Latin* and *Greek* inspired Lennon in his literary experiments much more than other techniques. If one borrows the terminology by V. Nabokov, used in the analysis of the works by J. Joyce [Nabokov 2015: 368], then Carroll's books will be considered "transparent" compared to the texts by Lennon. T. Schultheiss ironically noted in the preface to the book *The Literary Lennon*: "Of the many who doubtless know that Lennon wrote two<sup>1</sup> books, a small percentage have perhaps read them through (with still fewer understanding what they read) <...>" [Sauceda 1983: x]. Lennon replaced the clear, logical, and open Carroll's narration with the so-called "erratic narrative"<sup>2</sup>: an abundance of spelling and punctuation errors, the use of similar sounding words and homophones, imitation of Cockney Rhyming Slang, and the distortion of words often make it difficult to understand the text. Once again one notes the similarity to the works of the OBERIU writers: there is an abundance of mistakes in Kharms' texts, who used the concept "poetics of mistake", and especially his early poems were highly vague and absurd [Kharms 2009].

Many researchers do not differentiate between the concepts of "nonsense" and "absurd", not to mention the concept of "pure nonsense" [Tigges 1988: 126], [Charskaya-Boyko 2009]. Nevertheless, I believe that for our research the distinction between these concepts is fundamentally crucial, because this could help to understand what the most important differences between *Alice* stories and Lennon's prose are. Morozova argues that "unlike E. Lear, who softens or even successfully resolves the conflict between the protagonist and the society, J. Lennon reveals a contradiction and, as a rule, ends the story tragically" [Morozova 2010: 95]. It is the abundance of tragedies and unmotivated cruelty in Lennon's books that makes it difficult to identify his prose with nonsense. Again, one cannot but notice the similarities to the works of Kharms, where the characters tear off each other's hands and ears, pull out the old women's jaws, and suggest throwing out children into the cesspool, etc. [Kharms 2009]. Following the opinion of G. M. Krushkov, who believes that nonsense is a bright joyful game, while absurd points to the meaninglessness of life and the world, the similarity with the 20th-century avant-garde is more obvious [Krushkov 2005]. In other words, "in nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality" [Tigges 1988: 128]. On the one hand, we see an abundance of eccentric characters (according to Demurova, "madmen, aberrations, monsters") and their "eccentricities", but, on the other hand, it turns out that Lennon's prose is a Wonderland

without Alice, without the "romantic ideal", that rational and reasonable character who would contrast with the surrounding absurdity [Demurova 1979: 142]. Returning to the indicated above problem of the form and genre of Lennon's prose I would like to remark that some stories of the collections relate more to nonsense (*I Sat Belonely*, *The Fat Budgie* according to W. Tigges [Tigges 1988: 172]), while others to absurd (*Randolf's Party*, *Araminta Ditch* and *Last Will and Testicle* according to N. Cornwell [Cornwell 2006: 299–300]).

However, let us dwell a bit more on the phenomena of the "poetics of mistake" and "errative narrative". I consider these deviations from the language norms solely as a creative writing device and would like to abandon emotion tinged epithets with negative connotations, which are often used, albeit unintentionally, for informational purposes, when analyzing Lennon's prose. To characterize and define the author's original and at the same time deeply rooted in English literary traditions style researchers use the following phrases: e.g., "ill-formed sentences", "un-English forms", "distorted English" [Deweese 1969: 290], "odd and inconsistent spelling" [Tigges 1988: 171]. I believe that one should view these so-called "errors" precisely as "tools" and "mechanisms", each having its own expressive functions in the text, and therefore such expressions as "nonsensical spelling" and "verbal nonsense" are more appropriate [Tigges 1988: 172]. For example, J. Dewees in his article *Ill-Formed Sentences* analyzes the errors formation mechanisms and provides with their detailed classification: distortions at the graphemic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels. It is very remarkable that the article pays attention to the functions these techniques have in the text, which are black humor, satire, and parody. In addition, in the article, Dewees comes to a very curious, though perhaps not fully justified conclusion: since Lennon is a native speaker, the deviations from the norms in his prose are superficial from the point of the grammatical structure and sentence construction. In other words, native language intuition prevents the author from experimenting with the deeper levels of grammar. The author of another article analyzing Lennon's stories also uses the word "*warped*" and develops the disease metaphor, saying that Lennon's text is "sick" and "contagious" (*a malady of language* instead of *a melody of language*) [Kaplan 1990: 530]. However, this description fits in the author's dwelling on the nature of a pun and his conception of Lennon's story *Araminta Ditch*. According to this conception the main character of the story, a "distorted" language of the story, and its author are insane and oppose the authoritarianism of the crowd opinion, well-formed grammatical language, unambiguity and canon [Kaplan 1990]. These articles represent two approaches to the study of Lennon's style: a strict linguistic analysis within the framework of grammar and literary-philosophical analysis within the framework of the established concepts and traditions. In my opinion, they perfectly complement each other. An example of such combination is W. Tigges' interpretation of the spelling in the story *Araminta Ditch*. Thus, he argues that the consistent spelling of the main character's name and her laughing disease (*larf*, *larfing*) is a sign of her "stolid personality" as opposed to the society (*people*, *peofle*, *peokle*, etc.) which is considered to be "a vague and fickle crowd" [Tigges 1988: 76].

<sup>1</sup> Since the book was published in 1983, it considers only collections of stories published antemortem.

<sup>2</sup> My term based on the concept of "errative" by G. Guseynov.

Let us compare space and time chronotopes, one of which Demurova analyzed in detail in her book *Lewis Carroll. Essay on Life and Works* [Demurova 1979: 96–144]. As for Lennon's collections, one notes that the two most typical types of time indicators are the usual "morning" and the fairy-tale "once upon a time". The most unbelievable, unexpected, fantastic and absurd things happen exactly on an ordinary morning: "There were no flies on Frank that morning", but this did not prevent the character from killing his wife later that day so that she would not see him "like this <...> not at all fat" [Lennon 2010: 11, 13]. Another character wakes up "one fat morning" to find out that a pleasant company in the person of a "fat growth friend" grew up on his head [Lennon 2010: 18]. Another type of time indicator introduces an obvious fairy-tale element into the structure of the narrative, stylistically, together with other elements, transforming a miniature into a short fairy tale: "One upon a tom a far off distant land ..." [Lennon 2010: 20].

In connection with the analysis of chronotopes, one cannot but mention such an important motif of Carroll's stories as a dream. The *Alice* dilogy is based on the protagonist's dreams. The author immerses a reader into Alice's dream discreetly and unobtrusively: the readers learn that they witness a child sleeping not until the end [Carroll 2015]. We see the exact opposite in Lennon's books: the characters of his stories, on the contrary, do not fall asleep but wake up. The nonsense and absurdity that occur in the miniatures are not a dream but the reality surrounding the characters, the reality of life and society. If we assume that the respectable and dogmatic Victorian society lacked the "childish" attitude and abstract humor akin to children's imagination and dreams, then, probably, in the second half of the 20th century there was no longer a need to fall asleep. For the society on the threshold of globalization and the emergence of popular culture to see a "topsy-turvy world", it was enough to look around.

Nevertheless, I consider it important to mention a few more resemblances between the texts by Carroll and Lennon. Demurova, dwelling on the impact of Charles Dickens on Carroll, compares an excerpt from *Our Mutual Friend* with Carroll's letter and discovers the usage of the same technique – the "alphabetic alliterative" enumeration of proper names; Carroll in his letter, which is a short story in the spirit of nonsense, calls the same person by different names [Demurova 1979: 68–69]. Lennon used this technique, but with a different function, in the miniature *The Singular Experience of Miss Anne Duffield*: the pastiched popular quote

attributed to Sherlock Holmes "elementary, my dear Watson" changes several times – "ellifitzgerald, my dear Whopper", "harrybellafonte, my dear Whopper" [Lennon 2010: 98]. A very curious fact is that, though this technique is used in a different function in the original, the translator F. Urnov used it in his translation: "Комплементарно, Ваксон", "Нет, Навигатсон, не угадалее!", "Алиментарно, Позватсон!" [Studencheskiy meridian 1991: 43], while another translator A. Kurbanovsky translated as close as possible to the original: "эллэфитцджеральдно", "гаррибеллафонтабельно" [Lennon 2003: 120–122].

I would like to draw another curious parallel between *Pig and Pepper*, the sixth chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*, and *I Sat Belonely*, a poem from Lennon's first collection. In both texts, the writers surprise a reader: unexpectedly the characters who, according to their description and actions, would have to be a child (Carroll) or a beautiful fairy (Lennon), suddenly turn out to be pigs. I assume that this image may have folklore roots and is probably associated with English idiom *a pig in a poke* (Rus. «кот в мешке», «подложить свинью»).

There is no doubt that Lennon's fiction is no longer the "childish", so to speak, "innocent" nonsense of the Victorian era (although some researchers especially note that sometimes Carroll and Lear's "pure nonsense" can be cruel) and is not its stylized imitation, either. Taking into account that many researchers associate this literary phenomenon exclusively with the 19th century, one cannot relate Lennon's works to nonsense; however, even using the broader interpretation of the term, one cannot but notice distinctive and significant differences. On the other hand, one also cannot deny that Lennon's works are imbued with the spirit of Carroll's stories, and undoubtedly are inspired by the images and language of Alice's adventures. Thus, one can regard the works by Lennon as a revival of English literary nonsense tradition in the 20th century, but in a new vein, with their own distinctive face and character, prompted by the new England, the 20th century and by the rapidly changing world. Further analysis of Lennon's prose, as well as a comparative analysis of his works in relation to other writers of the 20th century, set up promising research objectives. Lennon's experimental books, despite the fact they are under a strong influence of the literature of English nonsense and other English literary traditions, however, do not imitate but rather transform in the new cultural environment of the 20th century, and once again prove a unique author's style that is hardly amenable to any strict categorization.

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