

“E is for Ernest who choked on a peach”: food, death, and humour in the works of Edward Gorey

Nikola Novaković

University of Applied Health Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia
nikola.novakovic@zvu.hr

Abstract

*In Edward Gorey’s numerous scenes of breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and afternoon teas, food and drink often feature with more or less prominence and are sometimes even found in the titles of his books, such as in *The Fatal Lozenge* (1960) or *The Unknown Vegetable* (1995). Their seemingly innocent appearance is often tied to violence or death: a head is discovered in a breadbox, a woman murders her husband by lacing his tea with atropine, a boy dies of exposure after being punished for “splashing his soup”, and several characters are consumed by more or less fantastic creatures. And yet, throughout all such gruesome events, Gorey’s characteristically playful and absurd humour adds levity to scenes of food-related death, misery, downfall, and even murder. Whether much attention is drawn to such events (such as in *The Unknown Vegetable*, where the entire story revolves around the discovery of a giant turnip-like vegetable that leads to a woman being buried alive) or whether they are merely mentioned in offhanded comments, Gorey couches them in a frame of the ridiculous and the nonsensical. It is therefore the aim of this paper to explore how Gorey achieves this curious combination of the grotesque and the humorous in scenes revolving around food, and how this approach extends to a general confusion of tone in his darkly funny, seriocomic creations in which any manner of horror may be lurking in peaches, cakes, crackers, boiled turnips, a recipe for fudge, a family picnic, or under a haunted tea cosy.*

Keywords: food, Gorey, humour, nonsense, picturebook.

1. Introduction

Food is a frequent verbal and visual motif in the works of American illustrator and author Edward Gorey (1925-2000), whether as a minor element or prop or, on the other hand, as a particularly prominent feature around which entire books or individual poems revolve. The former is very common: many of Gorey’s characters are depicted as engaged in the consumption of food during breakfast, lunch, dinner, picnic, or teatime. Conversely, they might also be shown desiring or lacking nourishment, sometimes to the point of near starvation. Gorey’s verbal humour is often food-based, for food and drink are commonly found in the names of his characters, places, objects, and even in the titles of his books, such as *The Fatal Lozenge* (1960),

The Vinegar Works (1963), *The Blue Aspic* (1969), *The Iron Tonic* (1969) or *The Unknown Vegetable* (1995). Food also features in the titles of Gorey's fictional works, for instance in "The Romance of a Soda Cracker" (*The Other Statue* (1968)), the aria "Una tazza di cacao" ("A cup of cocoa", *The Blue Aspic*), or the absurdly titled mystery novels "The Toastrack Enigma" and "The Blancmange Mystery" from *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* (1972), itself a comical deconstruction of the mystery novel genre. Fictional locations are sometimes named after food: there are the Celery Room and the house called Mustard Token from *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* (given the playful attitude towards genre in that work, the latter is a possible reference to Colonel Mustard from the popular murder mystery game *Cluedo*); a theft occurs in Condiment House in *The Broken Spoke* (1976), and the same book also contains a scene set on Mt Radish, an image of "Major O'Twiddy, the hero of Falling Forks", and "[t]he Cycle Cemetery near Dingy Cruet, Blots" (a cruet is a small container for salt, pepper, oil, or vinegar, but the word can also refer to a vessel used to hold wine or water for the Eucharist); in *The Willowdale Handcar: or the Return of the Black Doll* (1962), the three main characters travel on the Turnip Valley Express and visit Chutney Falls and Gristleburg. Some of Gorey's characters are also named after food: *The Broken Spoke* includes a cycling episode from the Crumpet-Fanlight Expedition; Lord Onion and Charles Toast are mentioned in *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy*; and la Reine des Asperges (the Queen of Asparagus) appears standing on a giant aubergine in a scene from the ballet "La Triomphe végétale" ("The Plant Triumph") in *Scènes de Ballet* (1976), while another panel from the same collection of absurd ballet productions features a dancer called Hortense Pasta-Frobenius. Even this brief overview suffices to show that food appears in a variety of forms in Gorey's works. Interestingly, this seemingly innocent motif is often tied to violence or death: one of Gorey's limericks from *The Listing Attic* (1954) is about a head discovered in a breadbox; in another limerick from the same book, a boy dies of exposure after being punished for "splashing his soup"; in *Neglected Murderesses* (1980) we hear of a woman who murdered her husband by lacing his tea with atropine; and several characters are consumed by animals or other, more fantastic beings, such as the eponymous creature from *The Wuggly Ump* (1963). And yet, in Gorey's depiction of such gruesome events his characteristically playful and absurd humour adds levity to scenes of food-related death, punishment, misery, and even murder.

Gorey's approach to the construction of humour in general is complex and varied. He is probably most famous for his employment of parody, and perhaps most of all for *The Gashlycrumb Tinies: or, After the Outing* (1963), an alphabet book "parodying the line of children's literature beginning with *The New England Primer* (c.1688), whose illustrated rhymed couplets imparted a stern Puritan worldview" (Yaros Lee 2020: 29). But Gorey's parodies involve other forms and genres as well. In works such as the *Tinies* or *The Hapless Child* (1961) and *The Insect God* (1963) Gorey plays with the "trope of Victorian childhood death" within his signature genre blend of "Victorian melodrama mixed with violence, and with enough humor to qualify it as black comedy" (Hoffman 2016: 62). Indeed, black comedy is very common in Gorey's work, and George R. Bodmer's description of the resolution of *The Hapless Child* as a darkly comical explosion of the reader's expectations and "an exaggerated and extreme case, making fun of happy endings" (Bodmer 1989: 117) is easily applicable to many of Gorey's books. Bodmer himself broadens his assessment to encompass more than one title by Gorey, pointing out that "while Gorey is using the appearance of children's books he is actually satirizing the genre" (116). In this satirical approach Gorey frequently relies on self-referentiality, drawing attention to both the form of his works and the presence of the author, as in his memorable entry for the troublesome letter X in *The Eclectic Abecedarium* (1962), which reminds the reader of the numerous xylophones populating alphabet books: "The letter X / Was made to vex". Gorey's humour often results from the level of reader involvement that his works invite through the employment of ellipsis and non sequitur (Wilkin 2009: 24), simultaneously urging the reader to recognize the humour in taking responsibility for certain assumptions; *The*

Curious Sofa (1961) (advertised as a “pornographic work” on its cover) relies on this effect to a great extent in its “parody of Victorian porn” (Dery 2018: 135). Commenting on that book in one interview, Gorey himself suggested that it was a satire of the erotic novel *Story of O* (*Histoire d’O*, 1954) (Dahlin 2001: 39), indirectly pointing out an important aspect of his dark comedy: intertextuality. Indeed, what connects all of the techniques outlined above is the wide-ranging reach of Gorey’s connections with other texts and authors (most importantly with Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll in the domain of comic nonsense), and the humorous effect is often realized through the reader’s recognition of a particular title or genre reworked within Gorey’s ludic reconfigurations.

However, it should be emphasized that one of the central characteristics of Gorey’s dark comedy is precisely its undecidability of tone. As others have already noted, even when confronted by more “egregiously dismal” scenes created by Gorey and despite their “dark markers of anarchy”, our response is mirth: “And yet we laugh. We laugh and laugh. It’s wonderfully funny” (Smee 2011: n.p.). As Erin Helmrich put it in her review of an exhibition of Gorey’s work, “Gorey’s humor is dark, clever and at times make [sic] you feel uncomfortable, but you may also find yourself smirking with knowing glee at the black humor and the dangerous places he fearlessly takes his audience” (Helmrich 2016: n.p.). In the interview mentioned above, when asked about *The Curious Sofa*, Gorey himself created a humorously unexpected confusion between the comic and the macabre by commenting on his experience with reading pornography, more specifically *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* (1904) by Marquis de Sade: “I got so bored; I was ready to blow my brains out after wading through that” (Wilkin 2001: 39). While Gorey’s reaction to the brutality of de Sade’s work is darkly amusing, and while it may mirror a potential reaction to Gorey’s utterly un-pornographic “pornographic work”, it also reminds us of the incongruity of tone inherent in *The Curious Sofa* itself. Although its constant innuendos seem to imply “charmingly naughty” sexual liaisons occurring just outside the borders of the illustrations, Maria Popova points out the sinister element added by Gorey to this amalgamation of tones by calling the book “delightfully dark” and “quasi-horror” (Popova 2011: n.p.). Interestingly, Gorey frames this incongruity between the comic and the macabre within scenes that visually or verbally involve food. The book begins by introducing a woman called Alice “eating grapes in the park” (panel 1)¹, and from that point on the grapes are rarely absent from the illustrations, appearing either in bunches or as individual grapes held delicately between two fingers, sometimes hardly distinguishable from the dense floral patterns of the characters’ clothing. As (supposedly pre- and post-coital) scenes of breakfasts, dinners, teas, and “elevenses” accumulate, the fruit comes to act as a visual substitute for the sex suggested by the text but absent from the illustrations. And, importantly, it becomes inextricably linked with the comically elided but heavily implied perversity and outrageousness of the liaisons, involving everything from potential bestiality and wooden legs used for “entertaining tricks” to “a terrible thing” performed on “Elsie with a saucepan” (panel 20). The effect of “quasi-horror” is reinforced visually by a black outline added to the eyes of each character, thus evoking the sultry dark eyeliner worn by actors and actresses of the silent era that often gave them a distinct Gothic look. When the titular sofa is finally introduced, we are told that “Alice felt a shudder of apprehension”, dropping a grape that she had held up to her lips, and once “everyone is crowded into the room” and the “machinery inside the sofa” (panel 29) is started up, the book ends in a manner reminiscent of Gothic horror: “When Alice saw what was about to happen, she began to scream uncontrollably...” (panel 30). Are these screams of pleasure, laughter, or agony? We are confronted with a final panel emptied of everything except a bunch of grapes and one edge of the (sexy? terrifying?) sofa, and left to wonder about our own

¹ Since the pages of Gorey’s books are usually not numbered, I reference panels instead of pages, starting from the first panel after the cover.

responses to this enigmatic scene. Are we to laugh or remain silent and disturbed? Or are we perhaps urged to do both, and at the same time?

In an attempt to explore this tonal undecidability often revolving around the motif of food within Gorey's work, this article will take for its focus those of Gorey's books where food is found on the intersection between the comic and the tragic or frightening. Following an explanation of how and why the characteristics of what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik have termed "comic Gothic" (Horner & Zlosnik 2005) may help us to understand the continuum between humour and horror in Gorey's work, the article compares Gorey's play with food against the traditional use of that motif in children's literature, another genre on which Gorey draws heavily in his creation of what Stephen Schiff has called a "subversive imitation of the children's book" (Schiff 1992: 87). The third section offers a reading of Q.R.V., one of Gorey's most unusual creations and one that assumes a multitude of meanings, some of them connected with food. The section first explores the hybridity and fluidity of Q.R.V.'s identities and compares this substance or phenomenon to real yet similarly protean miracle products; secondly, it examines the disturbing implications about Q.R.V. that arise from such comparisons, complicating the humorous tone of Gorey's work. The final section focuses on Gorey's picturebook *The Unknown Vegetable* and the roles that food plays in its intertextual and metafictional network within the framework of literary nonsense.

2. Food, comic Gothic, and children's literature

While it would certainly be misleading to claim that all works by Gorey fall firmly within the Gothic, many do contain elements of that genre while also incorporating the "fragile boundary" (Horner & Zlosnik 2013: 122) between the serious and the comic that Horner and Zlosnik identify in the Gothic. Importantly, the authors show how what they term "the comic turn in Gothic" is "not an aberration or a corruption of a 'serious' genre; rather, it is intrinsic to a mode of writing that has been hybrid since its very inception," indeed ever since Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Horner and Zlosnik are careful to stress that they are not referring to "humour inadvertently evoked by the use of outworn devices that simply repeat" but to the "exploitation of the stylized theatricality of the Gothic device, which is always teetering on the edge of self-parody" (Horner & Zlosnik 2005: 12). Comic Gothic is a genre in which parody can be a key component, which functions either by "parodying previous Gothic texts or [...] more generally parodically appropriating Gothic tropes and devices" and therefore "invit[ing] a conscious, self-reflexive engagement with the Gothic mode" (Horner & Zlosnik 2005: 13). Much of what Gorey produced can be read as exhibiting both the liminality of tone of comic Gothic and its preoccupation with intertextuality. Occasionally, Gorey employs food in his parodic appropriations of the Gothic, for instance in the picturebook *The Disrespectful Summons* (1973), where Miss Squill suddenly becomes a Faustian acolyte of the devil after he suddenly visits her one day and bestows upon her certain evil powers. However, instead of presenting this experience as violent or horrific, Gorey's tale exhibits "a lack of the anxiety associated with the fin de siècle Gothic", while "the expected madness and weird sexuality are instead subverted by Miss Squill's happiness at the domesticity she finds when accompanied by her familiar, Beëlphazoar" (Lackner 2015: 157-158). Instead of using her otherworldly connections to wreak havoc, Miss Squill engages in petty mischief, cindering toast, curdling milk, and using her familiar's recipe to make "fudge [o]f pounded pencil-stubs and sludge" (Gorey 1973: panel 5).

Another example of Gorey's play with the Gothic is *The Haunted Tea-Cosy: A Dispirited and Distasteful Diversion for Christmas* (1997), which reads as a parody of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), itself a Gothic tale with elements of humour. In Gorey's version, the

protagonist called Edmund Gravel is visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve while accompanied by the Bahhumbug, a human-sized beetle-like creature that one day leaps out from under a tea cozy. One of the spirits, comically named “the Spectre of Christmas That Never Was”, shows Gravel “Affecting Scenes”. These are not only unaffecting but also invariably nonsensical, and include mention of wallpaper that mysteriously vanished from the walls of a room, a disagreement about whether a clock is running fast or slow, and a strange food-related incident: “In the cottage next to the post office Alma Crumble broke her wrist stirring batter, at which the Bug declared in a minatory tone ‘That was enough of that’ (panel 13). The Bahhumbug’s name is, of course, a reference to the catchphrase “Bah! Humbug!” of Dickens’ Scrooge, but this intertextual tie may hide another self-referential layer. Since “humbug” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “1. A hoax; a jesting or befooling trick; an imposition”, “2. A thing which is not really what it pretends to be; an imposture, a deception, fraud, sham”, and “3. Deception, pretence, sham; used interjectionally = ‘stuff and nonsense!’”, this recalls the air of “fakery” that Horner and Zlosnik ascribe to comic Gothic: “The Gothic’s emphasis on fakery in the representation of extremes of feeling and experience inevitably invites the ludicrous excess of further layers of fakery in the form of parody” (Horner & Zlosnik 2005: 11). Gorey’s text replaces Dickens’ scenes of emotional anguish with either largely inconsequential occurrences (such as a misplaced Bible or a sprained ankle) or events that retain only some of the signifiers of the Gothic, but without the excesses of emotion, such as eerie locales (a cemetery; an open grave) and a child “abstracted from the veranda by gypsies” (Gorey 1997: panel 17). Gorey’s text thus both parodies *and* draws attention to itself as parody, finally culminating in an “extreme of [...] experience” at the end of the story. This moment is both imitative of the denouement of *A Christmas Carol*, in which Scrooge good-heartedly joins his nephew Fred for dinner, and utterly nonsensical: when Gorey’s Gravel returns home after his journeys with the three spirits, he decides to organize a party for “everyone in Lower Spigot and others from elsewhere” (Gorey 1997: panel 28) which includes a cake that was “taller than anything else in the room, a conflation of Chartres Cathedral and the Stupa at Borobudur iced in dazzling white sugar; inside was a quarter-ton of fruitcake” (Gorey 1997: panel 29). This parodic extreme serves to remind us, once again, of Scrooge’s “Humbug!” in the above cited third sense of the word: “stuff and nonsense!”

Gorey’s approach involves food in a similarly playful way when his works rely on a parodic dialogue with genres or concrete “pre-texts” (Dentith 2000: 15, as quoted in Horner & Zlosnik 2005: 11) more obviously borrowed from children’s literature. His nonsensical version of a choose-your-own-adventure type of book, *The Raging Tide: or, The Black Doll’s Imbroglia* (1987) contains scenes set in surreal landscapes marked by typically Gothic signifiers (dark and stormy skies, raging seas, imposing statuary, and oppressive, densely textured interiors) in which four toy-like characters with fittingly nonsensical names (Skrump, Naeelah, Figbash, and Hooglyboo) perform various mischievous acts against each other. A variety of food items (cracker crumbs, golden syrup, cookie cutters, a lump of suet, wet tea leaves, stewed prunes, boiled turnips, and piecrust dough) are used as props in Gorey’s rendition of the pie-in-the-face confrontations reminiscent of the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, or the Three Stooges, although the disturbing settings (with giant human fingers emerging out of the ground) add an unnerving quality to the illustrations. When Gorey’s work is considered against the background of the uses and depictions of food in the tradition of children’s literature, it becomes apparent that this is a field in which food is typically a source of enjoyment. As Carolyn Daniel points out, since “the pleasures or thrills produced by the literary feasting fantasy are pleasures of embodied subjectivity—visceral pleasures produced by intellectual activity”, food has often been considered “the sex of children’s literature” (Daniel 2006: 6-7). In Gorey’s work, this approach is undermined at the visual level, for Gorey’s illustrations of food are rarely particularly appetizing. His food is seen from a distance (if it is seen at all), drawn small, and

his black-and-white style of heavy crosshatching usually leaves no room for the suggestion of the richness of taste or the colourful range of ingredients. In *The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation on the False Millennium* (1999), the sequel to *The Haunted Tea-Cosy*, one panel shows a man laboriously scrubbing the floor with a dark, cube-shaped object, while the stanza under the panel informs us how the food left over from a party was disposed of: “Fruitcake was sawed in blocks and sent / To Havens for the Indigent, / Where it was used for scouring floors / And propping open banging doors” (Gorey 1999: 29).

Throughout his work, Gorey repeatedly subverts the common uses of food in children’s literature, including such instances where Gorey refers to the tradition of pedagogic instruction. As Eden Lee Lackner shows in her detailed analysis of Gorey’s ludic poetics, his approach regularly rests on the removal of a crucial element of a given genre: his melodramas lack sentimentality, his Dickensian narratives have “exceptionally bleak, nihilistic endings that provide little or no social commentary”, his mystery and detective fiction “ignores any pretence of decoding the central mysteries”, his Gothic horror “engenders no fear”, and the genres and forms he borrows from children’s literature replace all pedagogical function with opportunities to “luxuriate in sound and linguistic form” (Lackner 2015: 3). Food is occasionally employed in such manipulations with genre expectations, for instance in Gorey’s collection of limericks, *The Listing Attic*. In limerick 37, the nonsensical humour of this form, which is commonly used to depict rude or violent behaviour, also functions as a vehicle for a parody of a Dickensian narrative about an abused child. The illustration shows a small, underdressed boy crouched on the doorstep of a building shrouded in shadows, with snow thick on the ground, while a man wearing a top hat and a long, black coat with its collar upturned is seen passing by. The limerick reads: “Augustus, for splashing his soup, / Was put for the night on the stoop; / In the morning he’d not / Repented a jot, / And next day he was dead of the croup”.² As is common in Gorey, the combination of light, rhyming verse together with a surplus of pathos and tragedy leads to a humorous effect. Even if one attempted to read this as a cautionary tale, the form of the limerick is too short and its rhyme too jaunty to elicit sympathy, and the usual tropes of the genre are all comical misfires: the punishment for splashed soup is too great, there is no repentance, and the outcome is not a correction in behaviour but death. However, Gorey’s grim illustration does, in fact, fit the parodied genre of a Dickensian narrative and we could imagine it illustrating such a tale. This ability of Gorey’s work to function at several different tonal levels results from its oscillation between the serious and the comical within the gap between the visual and the verbal. A similarly playful approach to form, food, and death occurs in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963), a mock-moralistic alphabet book with each letter represented by the name (and death) of a small child. We are told that “E is for Ernest who choked on a peach” and “Z is for Zillah who drank too much gin” (panels 5 and 26), but even here the connection between food and death is made nonsensical due to Gorey’s manipulations with genre. As Emily Petermann has shown, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* seems to work within the tradition of the cautionary verse tale, but any sort of context that would allow the reader to sympathize with the children is removed, the agent of death is often impersonalized or lacking, and the entire book prioritizes form over content by rigidly following the procession of short pieces from A to Z (Petermann 2018). This also applies to any sort of a moral message that may be attached to food, such as a caution against overeating or consuming certain types of food or drink, since Gorey’s book inherits the genres of the cautionary tale and the alphabet book but simultaneously reworks them in a nonsensical key. Instead of serving a moral purpose, food and drink here underline the absence of a moral

² Gorey’s Augustus, whose table manners are apparently questionable, may also be a reference to Hilaire Belloc’s Charles Augustus Fortescue, “Who always Did what was Right, and so accumulated an Immense Fortune” (*Cautionary Tales for Children: Designed for the Admonition of Children between the ages of eight and fourteen years* [1906]), although in an inverted way, for we are told of Charles Augustus that he was so incredibly neat and proper that “In eating Bread he made no Crumbs” (Belloc 1997: 71).

message, which is replaced with laughter at the absurdity and overwhelming pointlessness of the children's deaths.

The Izzard Book (2007), another example of Gorey's parody of an alphabet book, contains illustrations of 21 words, each of which begins with the letter "z". One of the entries is for the zwieback, "a kind of biscuit rusk" (Gorey 2007: panel 11). The tiny, dry biscuit sits on a plate offered by a formally dressed female servant to a small child in a herringbone suit, seen reaching tentatively for the barely visible zwieback. On the wall behind the boy looms an enormous portrait of a man which is too large to fit within the frame of the panel, so that the man is only visible from the waist down. The portrait (reminiscent of Jakob Seisenegger's 1548 portrait of Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, the son of Ferdinand I, the Holy Roman Emperor) shows a man dressed in 16th century-style clothing, presumably one of the boy's ancestors, with his codpiece drawn precisely above the boy's head and his right foot positioned behind the plate with the zwieback, as if it were about to step on the biscuit. The little boy's gesture of reaching for the snack is arrested in a moment and space so absurdly oppressive to his enjoyment that it becomes comical: the suffocating confines of the room, drowned under a sea of densely patterned carpet, wallpaper, and multiple different fabrics, combined with the looming threat of tradition and ancestry represented by the portrait, turn the small, dry, distant, unappetizing-looking biscuit into anything but "the sex of children's literature". The sex is certainly present, but in the form of comically oppressive masculinity and virility symbolized by the codpiece positioned directly and dominantly above the boy's head. To circle back to comic Gothic, if the partially visible man in the portrait is one of the boy's ancestors, then this may also be a reference to the ancestry of Gorey's own work, steeped as it is in Gothic signifiers. Additionally, the unspoken communication between the boy and the portrait reminds us of the self-reflexivity present everywhere in Gorey's work. For just as the figure in the portrait seems to be stepping on the boy's moment of pleasure and disrupting the boy's own portrait with his prominent codpiece, so too does the little boy's comically quotidian gesture of reaching for a piece of food function as a parody of a portrait, thus disrupting his ancestor's carefully choreographed pose. The self-reflexivity of this dialogue between the two portraits invites the reader into the conversation, commenting both on the act of gazing/reading and on the genre heredity of the whole piece that Gorey is playing with.

3. Q.R.V. is good for me?

Gorey's texts frequently exhibit an ambiguity between the sinister and the comical, a continuous erection and collapse of boundaries between the two aspects of his work. Crucially, this occurs within the framework of nonsense. As Kevin Shortsleeve convincingly shows, "Gorey worked solidly in the tradition of nonsense literature, his verse inspired by the nonsense rhymes of Lear, Carroll, and Hoffman" (Shortsleeve 2002: 27). If nonsense is, according to Susan Stewart, "characterized by a multiplicity of meanings" and "perhaps the most multiply-meaningful of fictions", while simultaneously being "the least meaningful of fictions in everyday life terms" (Stewart 1989: 35-36), then Gorey's manipulations with food, tone, and meaning certainly reflect this. Perhaps nothing else in Gorey's fiction is so humorously infused with multiple and contradictory meanings and connotations as his Q.R.V.³, a fictitious miracle substance whose exact characteristics and effects are endlessly shifting and elusive, although it is clearly intended

³ As Lackner explains, "'Q.R.V.' is one of a series of Q-Signals used by wireless telegraph operators, and later amateur radio enthusiasts, to transmit short, standardized messages. This code was created and popularized at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1909, by the British Postmaster General. Depending on whether or not an interrogative symbol appears at the end, Q.R.V. means 'All right now, everything is in order,' or 'Is everything in order?'" (Lackner 2015: 76).

for consumption in some of its incarnations. This unusual concoction appears in *Q.R.V. The Universal Solvent* (1990), a miniature book written in a series of short stanzas whose meter and rhyme pattern parody Isaac Watts' *Divine and moral songs, attempted in easy language for the use of children, with some additional composures* (1715), a collection of didactic poetry. Here is one example from Watts' Song XVIII, subtitled "Against Scoffing and Calling Names": "Our tongues were made to bless the Lord, / And not speak ill of men; / When others give a railing word, / We must not rail again" (1850: 43). In Gorey's *Q.R.V.*, each stanza appears under an accompanying illustration and advertises the usefulness of *Q.R.V.*, but without revealing its true nature or what the letters of the acronym represent. *Q.R.V.* might be some sort of food or a type of tonic but could just as well be a building or an ointment. While one page praises its effect on those engaged in athletic endeavours ("It is a shame / you lost the game / by 17 to 3; / We would have / won, had you begun / by taking *Q.R.V.*"), another claims it has quite different properties ("It clears up rashes, / makes moustaches / grow thicker / rapidly; / It also numbs / arthritic thumbs - / huzzah for *Q.R.V.*!"), with one even suggesting that *Q.R.V.* might be intended for children's consumption ("At two he knew the / Bible through, an / infant prodigy; / His parents cried, / 'Our joy and pride / we've raised on *Q.R.V.*'").

Interestingly, *Q.R.V.* also appears elsewhere in Gorey's work, such as his collections of postcards,⁴ which pair images of disturbing hybrid creatures, objects, and arrangements of parts of human and animal anatomy with very ambiguous verse. Several of these contain more questions rather than direct imperatives, further parodying Watt's didactic original: "Do you suppose God *really* knows / What he has done to me? / Yet if it's true, what can I do / But take to *Q.R.V.*?" (Gorey 1996). *Q.R.V.* also appears in panel 21 of Gorey's *The Headless Bust*, where the acronym is seen on a floating aubergine, with the accompanying verse stating the following: "Then high above the rural scene / Appeared a giant aubergine / On which were limned for all to see / The mystic letters *Q.R.V.*" Echoing René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929) and, to an extent, *The Son of Man* (1946), Gorey's version of the "treachery" and the ambiguity between the hidden and the obscured inverts the painter's famous "Ceci n'est pas une pipe", turning negation into endless inclusion of objects within the rubric of "*Q.R.V.*", as if the image were saying "This too is a *Q.R.V.*!" Ambiguity taken to extremes is a typical characteristic of nonsense, and in the case of *Q.R.V.*, where one of the pleasures of the text comes from Gorey's unexpected transformations of the substance's identity, we could indeed imagine an endless string of such variations. This effect of potential endlessness is yet another feature of nonsense, whose surplus of meaning, as Stewart puts it, "threatens infinity" by providing "an unlimited amount of significance" (1989: 100). However, because of the multiplication of its meanings, Gorey's *Q.R.V.* is at the same time conspicuously emptied of the crucial information of what it actually is, therefore forcing to the forefront of the reader's attention *Q.R.V.*'s particular "deficiency of signification": "The reader is confronted with a significance that is not available, that has been made absent" (Stewart 1989: 103-104). In other words, *Q.R.V.* is both anything at all and nothing concrete, an utter (and utterly comical) paradox.

Despite the exuberant optimism of *Q.R.V.*, some subtle and very dark connotations are simultaneously suggested. The acronym *Q.R.V.* and the style used in the brief, advertisement-like stanzas establishes a connection with once widely used and heavily advertised household pesticide products such as "Rough on Rats", often referred to as ROR, developed by Ephraim Wells in the USA in 1872.⁵ Wells also sold other products with similar names, targeting a variety

⁴ *Q.R.V. Unwmkd. Imperf.: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards and Q.R.V. Hikuptah: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards* (1996).

⁵ Another popular product from the early 20th century was Pesky Devils Quietus or P.D.Q., sold in packaging that sported the smiling face of the devil. Under an ominous (and very Goreyesque) subheading "LOOK FOR THE DEVIL", one of its advertisements from 1914 reminded its readers how to identify the product: "Look for the devil

of common problems with his “Rough on Corns”, “Rough on Itch”, “Rough on Toothache”, and “Rough on Piles”.⁶ ROR was even advertised in a “Rough on Rats” jingle from 1882, with lyrics that are both humorous and macabre, as evinced by the chorus: “R-r-rats! Rats! Rats! Rough on Rats, hang your dogs and drown your cats; We give a plan for every man to clear his house with Rough on Rats.”⁷ Advertisements for ROR claimed that it was effective against a broad range of pests, including flies, roaches, ants, bed-bugs, beetles, mice, gophers, and even chipmunks. The fact that it was an arsenic-based pesticide can certainly account for its amazing effectiveness, although this also provoked controversy and fears about its potential harm in case of accidental human consumption, intentional poisoning, or suicide. An article from the Observer from 1885 warned of an alarming number of suicides by means of ROR, claiming that the “deadly bane known as ‘Rough on Rats’” is “becoming ‘rough on men’” (Observer 1885: 3). A string of other articles warned of “Self-destruction” (Marlborough Express 1905: 4), “Suicide and crime increasing” (Northern Advocate 1893: 4), and even “The suicide mania” (Auckland Star 1894: 3). Apparently, “Rough on Rats” became so synonymous with suicide by poison that a cartoon⁸ was published in the New Zealand newspaper “Free Lance” in 1906 showing a Scotsman conversing with a chemist:

Customer: Twa pen’orth o’ “Rough on Rats.”

Chemist: We only sell it in sixpenny packets.

Customer: What, saxpence? Then I’ll change ma mind; I’ll no commit suicide the noo.

(Free Lance 1906: 15)

Furthermore, considering the propensity of Gorey’s comicality to have macabre implications, the incredible range of properties and applications of Q.R.V. implies at least two other dark connections. One is DDT, a well-known insecticide and pesticide once hailed as a miracle product in advertisements bearing such appealing titles as “DDT is good for me-e-e!” (Time Magazine, June 30, 1947⁹), whose harmful effects on human health and the environment later led to restrictions of its use. The second, and perhaps even more sinister connection, is between Q.R.V. and radium. After the discovery of this chemical element in the late 19th century, the public at large soon developed a fascination with radioactivity and a belief in its curative properties. The element began to be used as a cure-all incorporated in numerous products (Blaufox 2019) and “hailed as a panacea for everything from blindness to hysteria” (Orci 2013). According to the “Radium Historical Items Catalog”, a compilation and description of products containing radium, “[i]n the years following the discovery of radium-226 in 1898 by Madame Curie, radium became a novelty product used in everything from medicinal ‘cures’ to children’s toys” (Buchholz & Cervera 2008: viii). The catalogue identifies 171 different products that incorporated radium in some form, with the section for “Consumer Products/Foods” containing such items as “Radium Butter”, “Radium Beer”, “Radium Cigarettes”, “Radium Cigars”, and “Radium Pastillen” (radium candy in a tin). The belief that radium posed negligible risks changed once its hazards were discovered, “and the use of radium in consumer products was

heads on every package of P.D.Q. – then you’ll have the genuine – the kind that is endorsed by the hospitals and medical profession generally” (South Bend News-Times 1914: 6).

⁶ History Nebraska. <<https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/rough-rats-and-biles-and-piles-and-corns>> Accessed 10 June 2021.

⁷ Boston, W. A., Juniper, J. 1882. *Rough on Rats*. Jersey City: E. S. Wells. The sheet music for the song has been preserved in the Library of Congress and is available on its website: <<https://www.loc.gov/item/sm1882.06076/>> Accessed 10 June 2021.

⁸ Available on the website of *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*: <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/cartoon/26439/rat-poison>> Accessed 10 June 2021.

⁹ Available at the webpage of the Science History Institute: <<https://digital.sciencehistory.org/works/1831ck18w>> Accessed 29 July 2021.

gradually phased out, with the last common consumer application being in luminescent timepieces during the 1960s” (Buchholz & Cervera 2008: viii). With this connection in mind, Gorey’s effusive proclamations about the many miraculous uses of Q.R.V. may evoke the misguided laxity in the use of radium, thus simultaneously throwing a foreboding shadow over the unconditional optimism regarding Q.R.V.

While Gorey’s approach to the celebration of Q.R.V. certainly replicates the unbounded enthusiasm of the product descriptions from the 1910s and 1920s,¹⁰ his own product is so absurdly protean and its true nature so elusive that any questions about its identity necessarily remain unresolved, transforming instead into a focus on the form and inventiveness of Gorey’s brief “advertisements”. In this way, Q.R.V. actually comes to represent Gorey’s work in miniature, for so much of it is concerned not with providing answers but with posing questions, not with eliciting emotional responses but with directing our attention to the laying-bare of Gorey’s procedures and the conventions of the broad range of genres that he chooses to play with.

4. Consuming the unknown

The final example that I wish to examine in the context of food at the intersection of humour and horror is Gorey’s *The Unknown Vegetable*. The story is seemingly very simple: a woman named Filda goes for a walk on the outskirts of a heavily industrialized city and comes across a vegetable growing out of the ground at an incredible speed. After managing to pull the enormous plant out of the earth, she prepares it in her kitchen and consumes it over the course of several meals. Soon she experiences a dramatic change, returns to the outskirts where she discovered the vegetable, digs a large hole, jumps into it, and is then accidentally buried alive. The final panel shows a headstone erected for Filda on the site of her live burial, with vegetable stalks growing out of her grave. “La Triomphe végétale” indeed. Despite the apparently straightforward nature of the story, its verses and illustrations engender much ambiguity.

Having in mind Filda’s consumption of the vegetable as the central event of the narrative that, apparently, leads to her demise, we may first ask why Filda behaves the way she does. Although we could certainly interpret this event within the framework of Gorey’s favourite form of nonsense, Filda’s dietary decisions may also be read as somewhat more complex and, in fact, even culturally subversive. Filda exists in an environment visually dominated by an almost literal wall of factories, which are present in the background of every panel of the book. Interestingly, the factories continuously change from panel to panel and are never depicted in an identical arrangement, as if they themselves existed on a sort of conveyor belt. Although this is not explicitly suggested, some of the factories may conceivably be dedicated to the work of processing and packaging food, which would mean that taking a vegetable directly from the ground and preparing it in one’s kitchen may be construed as an act of resistance to dietary conventions involving convenience food. As Daniel shows, in children’s literature eating has connections with transgression: “Food narratives in children’s stories are often ‘grounded in playfulness’ and transgressive of adult food rules, not just in terms of ‘foodbungling tricks’ but also timing, sequence, quantity, and quality” (2006: 12). Filda’s decision to eat what was apparently grown naturally, without human intervention, may therefore be read as transgressive of food conventions in an industrial society. In fact, she is already positioned as potentially going against the grain, living as she does outside the heavily industrialized city (or at least on its

¹⁰ From our contemporary perspective, some slogans used to promote products containing radium may strike us as peculiarly Goreyesque, perhaps nowhere so grotesquely as in the case of the “Radium Hand Cleaner” from 1915, which was advertised using the following motto: “Takes Off Everything But The Skin”. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <nuclearmuseum.org>

outskirts), in a house whose one visible window, with its quaint curtain and roughly textured wooden frame, seems to evoke an isolated, perhaps even rural lifestyle. Filda's clothing and fashion accessories, however, appear incongruous in such a setting, for she bears signifiers of urbanity: she wears her hair in a neat bun, always has her handbag with her, and is invariably shown wearing sleek black high heels, stylish trousers, a patterned shawl, and dangling earrings. With this in mind, we would sooner expect to see Filda going to the opera instead of struggling to pull an enormous root vegetable out of the ground. This humorous incongruity between Filda's appearance and her attempt at a rural life away from the city seems to be underlined by the view of the factories from her kitchen window. As we watch her prepare and eat the vegetable, the presence of industry remains unshakeable, the tiny curtain positioned at the very bottom of the window entirely ineffectual at obscuring the distant wall of factories. Even more importantly, within the frame of the window the factories are positioned above the curtain, thus dominating over Filda's weak signifier of a cosy rural lifestyle.¹¹ It would appear that the reach of industry is at least visually inescapable.

However, once Filda consumes the vegetable, the events that follow suggest that industry is not merely visually omnipresent. The first sign of a change in Filda appears immediately after the taste of the vegetable's "flesh" "went down into her toes" (panel 8), seemingly completely pervading her body. We then observe Filda returning to the barren, white plain, where she "made depressions with a handy spade" (panel 9). After this, she returns home and, since "there was nothing else to do", "ate the last bits [of the vegetable] in a stew" (panel 10). In the very next panel, we see that Filda has again returned to the empty field, where she proceeds to dig a large hole and jump straight into it, still comically clutching her handbag. The penultimate panel shows the pile of earth sliding to cover Filda's hole, and yet the horrifying idea of being buried alive is modified by a tiny, easily missed detail: a small calling card left on the pile of earth. This authorial sign of Edward Gorey¹² is strewn across countless other panels in his works, and here it seems to humorously prod the reader in the ribs, as if to say in the author's own voice: "I did that, you know." Despite this minuscule attempt at metafictional comedy, the final panel suggests that Filda has not returned from her sudden descent: it shows Filda's headstone, apparently erected over the location of the hole, where fresh stalks of another unknown vegetable appear to be growing. If we assume that there is a causal link between Filda's nonsensical behaviour and the consumed vegetable, then another link may exist between the pollution spread by the factories (implied by the persistently dark sky above them) and the vegetable's influence on Filda. After all, both the descriptions and depictions of the vegetable are suggestive of unnatural properties: its stalks grow at an incredible speed, they vibrate "strangely in the air" and their veins are "purple, black, and red" (panel 3).¹³ Once Filda manages to pull the vegetable out of the earth, we are told that "[i]ts like she had not ever seen; / The skin was brownish pinky green" (panel 6).¹⁴ And, peculiarly, it is a massive thing. Although this makes it reminiscent of the turnip from the tradition of children's stories about the farmer who

¹¹ In fact, apart from the stove, kitchen table, and chair, the window is the only visible part of Filda's home. Without even a line to indicate a floor, these elements, together with Filda herself, hover in the blank whiteness of the panel, and are thus reminiscent of the blank white fields where Filda finds the plant. The boundary between the inside and the outside seems very tenuous.

¹² Borrowed, along with certain other visual elements, from the series of French movies about the fictional character Fantômas. For more on this detail, see Novaković (2020).

¹³ Are these peculiarities a result of some more drastic genetic disturbance? Taking into account that the book was published in 1995, the story could be read as Gorey's reworking of concerns over nuclear annihilation following the Chernobyl disaster of 1986.

¹⁴ It may be useful to note that at this point all time references vanish from the story. Whereas earlier events were temporally separated using such expressions as "next time", "[n]ext day", and "[n]ext week", Filda's meals (as well as other events) now begin to blur together, making it unclear how much time passes between them. This blurring of time may, in a sense, be a foreshadowing of other blurred boundaries discussed here.

tries to pull an enormous specimen out of his field, gradually employing the help of an increasing number of characters until the plant is finally unearthed, such a comparison is undermined from the very first depiction of the “unknown vegetable”, as seen on the front cover. This dark, crosshatched image of the plant is nothing like the turnip from children’s brightly coloured picturebooks, and the description of its unusually coloured flesh (“yellow tinged with rose”) reinforces this effect (as does the fact that the colours of the vegetable are mentioned so often in a black-and-white picturebook, employing the reader’s imagination in constructing this strange, multicoloured object). And while such a wide variety of colours found in a single vegetable is certainly nonsensical, a strong and varied coloration may also be suggestive of the vegetable’s potentially poisonous effect, perhaps an inescapable legacy of the pollution spread by the factories. In other words, Filda’s return to a more natural lifestyle and a plant-based diet seems to be haunted by her civilization’s past transgressions against nature. After all, the continually shifting factories are present in every panel of *The Unknown Vegetable*, perhaps as a silent reminder that the type of return we would like to imagine has become unimaginable even in fiction: the only return we can expect is the return of the consumed, used up, discarded, and forgotten but never entirely erased – it is the return of the repressed, and at great cost.

By thus embodying both comical and menacing characteristics without establishing any clear demarcation between the two, the unknown vegetable (consumed by Filda) ultimately functions as a symbol for Gorey’s *The Unknown Vegetable* (consumed by the reader), which in itself plays with blurring tonal boundaries. Such a self-referential circling-back does not lock the text within its own frame, for its intertextual gesturing invites comparisons with other influences, apart from the aforementioned tradition of the tale about the enormous turnip. Firstly, Filda’s apparently voluntary leap into the hole at the close of the story is suggestive of Alice’s descent down the rabbit hole, although reworked in a parodic key: unlike Alice, Filda does not return from her plunge, since her version of the rabbit hole as a magical portal has been converted into a much more prosaic, yet also darkly humorous, site of live burial. Another possible link between Carroll’s and Gorey’s texts may be the physical appearance of the vegetable itself, more specifically its pattern of light and dark stripes, which may suggest a connection with the Cheshire Cat. Like the Cat, which can appear with only its head showing, the vegetable is seen only partially within the story itself, and only in a single panel. As one edge of that panel obscures most of the vegetable’s bulk, it is left to the reader to compensate for this lack by reconstructing the suggested fantastic difference in size between Filda and the vegetable. By thus inviting the reader to participate in the construction of the relationship between its visual elements, the text necessarily establishes a level of ambiguity, one that is reinforced by the vegetable’s alignment with the Cheshire Cat. And as the vegetable physically vanishes from the story, having been converted into Filda’s meals and incorporated into her own body, what remains of the perplexing Cat/vegetable is, in a way, its menacing/comic grin: the madness that Alice encounters everywhere around her is apparently ingested and embodied by Filda, with fatal results.

Other comparisons with Carroll’s work are also possible. While Alice changes in size as a result of her experiments with food and drink, Filda’s change seems to occur on the psychological plane, for we are told that she decides to dig her own grave after becoming “beset by something in her soul” (panel 11). And while Filda does not grow or shrink, the leafy stalks emerging from her grave in the final illustration seem to suggest that a type of “growing” does occur in the end, and that Filda’s body has served as a vehicle for the vegetable’s seeds. In fact, the end of the story coincides with the unfinished process of growing and renewal, unfinished because we have seen that the stalks can grow much higher than their current form in the last panel. This suggestion of further growth points beyond the end of the story, contributing to a tension between the text and the illustration, which raises certain questions. The first and most obvious one is whether Filda has not truly died but instead somehow morphed into a vegetable,

thus positioning Gorey's picturebook within the tradition of tales about transformations, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Furthermore, we may wonder whether another passer-by will come across the new vegetable grown from Filda's grave and pull it out of the ground with the aim of consuming it, therefore re-enacting Filda's own decisions. And, perhaps most importantly, there remains the grim question of whether the first vegetable, unearthed by Filda, was once grown from another vehicle, another (self-)buried person who suffered a fate similar to her own, having consumed a different iteration of the same hybrid human/vegetable seed. And if Filda is only one in a string of such hybrids, how far back can we trace this line of eaters who transform into that which will (or at least can) be eaten? The final panel thus serves as anything but an ending, erupting out of the narrative borders (just as the stalks break the surface of Filda's grave) and pointing both forward (to future metamorphoses) as well as backward (to the implied lineage of eater/eaten hybrids), while also potentially alluding to cannibalism, that dietary practice which occupies the very top of our cultural and culinary taboos.¹⁵ Such suggestions would certainly fit within Gorey's nonsense, a form so often concerned with collapsing boundaries (Stewart 1989: 85), since cannibalism "unsettles discrete categories and blurs oppositions. It dissolves the difference between the eater and the eaten, between the human as subject and the human as object, between inside and outside, [...] allure and horror" (Daniel 2006: 162). If by breaking such taboos "the eater is seen to be somehow changed by what they have consumed, to have become less than human" (Daniel 2006: 15), then Filda's implied transformation into a vegetable is an absurd literalization of this cultural concept. Simultaneously, Gorey's story literalizes the idea that "certain foods impart certain qualities to the eater" (Daniel 2006: 25) (or, to put it plainly, that one is what one eats), but in an ambiguous way: both in the sense that one becomes what one eats and, in a much more macabre notion, that one may already belong to the category of what one eats.

Finally, the closing couplet of Gorey's text seems to urge us to situate it in one specific literary tradition. The couplet reads: "There is a moral to this fable / Of an unknown vegetable" (panel 14). In yet another metafictional gesture, the couplet refers back to the text as though it were an example of children's moral tales but does so in a self-aware manner. The awkward rhyme (fable/vegetable) causes the reader to stumble, suggesting an incorrect pronunciation of the word 'vegetable' in order to fit the requirements of the rhyming pattern, therefore comically undermining the couplet's attempt to convince us of the existence of some sort of "moral" in Gorey's "fable". By thus emphasizing the disjunction between the content and the form of the book, Gorey's text performs as typical nonsense, taking "the traditional division between content and form (technique), with its hierarchical weighing of content over form, and invert[ing] statuses to present form *over* content" (Stewart 1989: 76, emphasis in the original). Formal disharmony represented by the strained rhyme trips up the implied harmony of the content. We could, indeed, recreate some sort of a moral from the components of the story, but whether that should be profound (a retelling of the Paradise myth of eating the forbidden fruit) or something entirely prosaic (a warning not to go around eating strange, vibrating vegetables) remains unclear. The "fable" does contain some elements of the Biblical story of the fall of man, but the literal nature of Filda's fall, as well as its intentionality – we are told that she "jumped" – seems to subvert such a reading. Furthermore, the lack of any transgression that could have led to the (self-)punishment and a very indifferent attitude (both that of the text and of the heroine herself) toward Filda's demise all work towards undermining the view of the "fable" as a morality tale. The final couplet's attempt at injecting a moral message is certainly reminiscent of Carroll's Duchess' conviction that "[e]verything's got a moral, if only you can find it" or, even more pertinently, her convenient (and thoroughly comical) avoidance tactics: "I can't tell

¹⁵ Which may be reminiscent of the famous example of a plant-based metaphor in Billie Holiday's song *Strange Fruit* (written by Abel Meeropol in 1937), there used to comment on another taboo subject, lynching.

you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit” (Carroll 1998 [1865]: 131).

In the case of Gorey’s tale, are we, the readers, the ones who are supposed to remember the moral “in a bit”, after we have finished turning the pages back and forth, scouring the panels in search of some moral instruction we may have missed? Or should we instead reflect on our expectations and laugh at our attempts at reinstating something that was never there in the first place? If by insisting on a (non-existent) moral message the text urges us towards reading it in the tradition of cautionary tales, Gorey’s withholding of that genre’s pivotal element serves to outline its conventions. As Lackner shows with regard to other works by Gorey, “[t]hese expectations [...] are undermined as Gorey removes any understood literary endgame – the work appears in all respects to be an accurate representation of the chosen genre, yet is missing the central, moral heart present in the nineteenth century genres on which he draws” (Lackner, 2015: 9). Instead of attempting to pick apart Gorey’s text in search of the supposed moral message, we are invited to focus on what remains once we recognize that the pedagogical or didactic core has been excised. As Lackner puts it, “[w]hen genre is stripped of its meaning, [...] what is left?” (Lackner, 2015: 28).

5. Conclusion

What is left is nonsense, a form which invites at least two types of interaction with Gorey’s text: on the one hand, joy in the engagement with language, specifically Gorey’s verse (what Lackner calls “prioritization of pleasure over education” (Lackner, 2015: 103), and on the other, active reading within a “transformative space in which the form becomes as important as any moral or pedagogical core” (Lackner, 2015: 106). In his play with the hierarchical relations between form and content, Gorey employs the motifs of food and death and achieves an overarching tension between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, a state typical for nonsense. In Gorey’s world, “tragedies happen without reason or moral purpose” (Lackner, 2015: 15), and some of these tragedies result from mishaps connected with eating and drinking. His characters “are at the mercy of their circumstances, which are most often the results of random chance and coincidence, entirely outside of the scope of controllable actions” (Lackner, 2015: 83). Is Filda’s death voluntary or an act that she is guided toward through the effects of the ingested vegetable? We do not know. As Wim Tigges puts it, nonsense “balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning”, and to achieve this effect it must “invite the reader to interpretation” while at the same time avoiding “the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning which can be obtained by considering connotations or associations, because these lead to nothing” (Tigges, 1987: 27). Intertextual links and parodic echoes considered in the preceding paragraphs certainly invite us to various interpretations of *Q.R.V.*, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, *The Listing Attic*, and *The Unknown Vegetable*, but Gorey’s persistent ambiguity between sense and nonsense and logic and illogic disturbs any neat closure. The same is true of the tone of Gorey’s works, which Shortsleeve terms “humorously macabre” (2002: 34). Ambiguity in Gorey is often cruel to such an extent that it transforms into dark comedy, with the characters themselves remaining so subdued or passive in the face of total tragedy that their incredibly restrained reactions only enhance this humorous effect. Filda herself appears quite nonchalant as she digs her own grave, and this is a typical reaction among Gorey’s characters: “As disasters overtake them, the principals themselves seem as oblivious as the indifferent gods” (Harvey, 2014). When faced with Gorey’s strange, food-related aporias, perhaps the only other option available is to accept the “prioritization of pleasure over education” and laugh: at Gorey’s elliptical tales, the absence of a moral system underlying them, the indifferent gods that toy with his bemused characters, and, ultimately, at ourselves and our genre-bound expectations. If Filda becomes

infected or “beset by something in her soul” after her meal, then perhaps neither can we as readers remain unaffected by the infectious absurdity of *The Unknown Vegetable* after consuming its “fable”: the Cheshire Cat’s grin, slashed amid the stripes of the unknown vegetable, may just persist beyond the turning of the last page on our own faces.

References

- Auckland Star. (1894). ‘The suicide mania’. 25 (84), April 9, p. 3. Available at <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS18940409.2.26>> Accessed 10 June 2021.
- Blaufox, M. D. (2019). ‘Radioactive artifacts: Historical sources of modern radium contamination’. *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences* 50 (4), Supplement 1, pp. 3-17.
- Belloc, H. (1997 [1906]). ‘Cautionary tales for children: Designed for the admonition of children between the ages of eight and fourteen years’, in Belloc, H., *Cautionary Verses*. London: Everyman's Library Children's Classics, pp. 3-75.
- Bodmer, G. R., (1989). ‘The post-modern alphabet: Extending the limits of the contemporary alphabet book, from Seuss to Gorey’. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14 (3), pp. 115-117.
- Boston, W. A., Juniper, J. (1882). *Rough on Rats*. Jersey City: E. S. Wells. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://www.loc.gov/item/sm1882.06076/>
- Buchholz, M. A.& Cervera, M. (2008). *Radium Historical Items Catalog*. Oak Ridge: Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education.
- Carrol, L. (1998 [1865]). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Chicago: VolumeOne Publishing.
- Dahlin, R. (2001 [1977]). ‘Conversations with writers: Edward Gorey’, in Wilkin, K. (ed.), *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*. New York: Harcourt.
- Daniel, C. (2006). *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Dentith, S. (2000). *Parody*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dery, M. (2018). *Born to be Posthumous: The Eccentric Life and Mysterious Genius of Edward Gorey*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1954]). ‘The Listing Attic’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, np.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1960]). ‘The Fatal Lozenge’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1961]). ‘The Curious Sofa: A Pornographic Work by Ogdred Weary’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1961]). ‘The Hapless Child’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1962]). ‘The Willowdale Handcar: or the Return of the Black Doll’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1963]). ‘The Gashlycrumb Tinies: or, After the Outing’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1972 [1963]). ‘The Insect God’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1975 [1969]). ‘The Iron Tonic’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Too*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1975 [1973]). ‘The Disrespectful Summons’, in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Too*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, n.p.

- Gorey, E. (1983 [1962]). 'The Eclectic Abecedarium', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Also*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1983 [1969]). 'The Blue Aspic', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Also*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1983 [1972]). 'The Awdrey-Gore Legacy', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Also*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1983 [1976]). 'The Broken Spoke', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Also*. New York: Congdon & Weed, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (1996). *Q.R.V. Unwmkd. Imperf.: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards*. Author.
- Gorey, E. (1996). *Q.R.V. Hikuptah: A Dozen Dogear Wryde Postcards*. Author.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1968]). 'The Other Statue', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1976]). 'Scènes de Ballet', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1987]). 'The Raging Tide: or, the Black Doll's Imbroglia', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1990]). 'Q.R.V. The Universal Solvent', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1995]). 'The Unknown Vegetable', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1997]). 'The Haunted Tea-Cosy: A Dispirited and Distasteful Diversion for Christmas', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007 [1999]). 'The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation on the False Millennium', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Gorey, E. (2007). 'The Izzard Book', in Gorey, E., *Amphigorey Again*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, n.p.
- Harvey, R. C. (2014). 'Edward Gorey and the Eccentric Macabre'. *The Comics Journal*. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <http://www.tcj.com/edward-gorey-and-the-eccentric-macabre/>
- Helmrich, E. (2016). 'Review: Unsettled: The work of Edward Gorey'. Retrieved November 10, 2021 from <https://cranbrookartmuseum.org/2016/11/06/review-unsettled-the-work-of-edward-gorey-pulp/>
- History Nebraska. *Rough on Rats (and biles, and piles, and corns...)*. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/rough-rats-and-biles-and-piles-and-corns>
- Horner, A, and Zlosnik, S. (2005). *Gothic and the Comic Turn*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoffman, A. R. (2016). "'A wonderful horrid thing": Edward Gorey, Charles Dickens, and drawing the horror out of childhood death', in McCourt, J. R. (ed.), *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 61-89.
- Lackner, E. L. (2015). *Genre Games: Edward Gorey's Play with Generic Form*. PhD thesis. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.
- Marlborough Express. (1905). 'Self-destruction'. 38 (29), February 4, p. 4. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MEX19050204.2.41>
- New Zealand Free Lance. (1906). 'Death too expensive'. September 8, p. 15. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://teara.govt.nz/en/cartoon/26439/rat-poison>
- Northern Advocate. (1893). 'Suicide and crime increasing'. July 15, p. 4. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NA18930715.2.21>

- Novaković, N. (2020). 'The laughter of other places: Humour and heterotopias in the works of Edward Gorey'. *Libri & Liberi* 9 (2), pp. 313-333.
- Observer. (1885). 'Rough on rats'. 7 (232), February 21, p. 3. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TO18850221.2.4.8?items_per_page=10&query=rough+on+men&snippet=true
- Orci, T. (2013). 'How we realized putting radium in everything was not the answer'. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-we-realized-putting-radium-in-everything-was-not-the-answer/273780/>
- Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (2009). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Petermann, E. (2018). 'The child's death as punishment or nonsense? Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) and the cautionary verse tradition.' *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 56 (4), pp. 22-30.
- Popova, M. (2011). 'The Curious Sofa: A pornographic 1961 horror story by Edward Gorey'. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved November 1, 2021 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/12/the-curious-sofa-a-pornographic-1961-horror-story-by-edward-gorey/249261/>
- Schiff, S. (1992). 'Edward Gorey and the Tao of nonsense'. *The New Yorker*, November 9, pp. 84-94.
- Shortsleeve, K. (2002). 'Edward Gorey, children's literature, and nonsense verse'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 27 (1), pp. 27-39.
- Smee, S. (2011). 'Gorey fun'. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved November 1, 2021 from http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/02/18/elegant_enigmas_captures_edward_goreys_feel_for_literary_and_visual_macabre_and_melancholy/
- South Bend News-Times. (1914). 'Pesky bed bugs'. 31 (254), September 4, p. 6. Retrieved June 10, 2021 from <https://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=SBNT19140904&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->
- Stewart, S. (1989). *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tigges, W. (1987). 'An anatomy of nonsense', in Tigges, W. (ed.), *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 23-46.
- Watts, I. (1850 [1715]). *Divine and Moral Songs, Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children, with Some Additional Composesures*. Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union.
- Wilkin, K. (2009). *Elegant Enigmas: The Art of Edward Gorey*. Warwick: Pomegranate Communications Inc.
- Yaros Lee, J. (2020). 'American humor and matters of empire: A proposal and invitation'. *2020 Quarry Farm Symposium: "American Humor and Matters Of Empire"*. [Symposium program]. Retrieved October 31, 2021 from <https://marktwainstudies.com/events/2020-quarry-farm-symposium/>
- Zlosnik, S., & Horner, A. (2013). 'Comic gothic', in Hughes, W., Punter, D., & Smith, A. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 122-26.