

Edward Gorey, Nonsense, Surrealism and Silent Matter

This paper is culled partly from the upcoming release of a chapter I have written for the edition, *Gorey's Worlds* (Princeton University Press, 2018). At his death Edward Gorey bequeathed a lifetime of collected art to the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum in Hartford. An exhibition of these works runs from February 10 to May 6, 2018, and *Gorey's Worlds* is the exhibition catalog.

For the last year and half I have been helping the museum interpret the art Gorey collected, focusing my commentary through the lens of children's literature, and in particular, via what Gorey's termed, his "Great Simple Theory About Art." In that theory Gorey posits that beyond the surface meaning found in any great work of art (or literature) there is the sense that the work is "really about something else entirely." He describes it as "the extra something in a good work that you find you cannot pin down."ⁱ Gorey explains his own work in similar terms to Stephen Schiff in *The New Yorker*,

... the way I write, since I do leave out most of the connections, and very little is pinned down, I feel that I'm doing a minimum of damage to other possibilities that might arise in the reader's mind.

Both nonsense poems, (Gorey's most significant influence), and Surrealism, (the art Gorey collected), are especially good at leaving out "the connections." This paper explores that "something else... that you... cannot pin down" - the silent matter left dangling in the back of your mind when you read Gorey, or view the art he collected.

Among the items considered is a landscape by Edward Lear, *Hagar and Sislsilus*, and its connections to the art created in Gorey's edition of *The Dong With a Luminous Nose*, and one of Gorey's favorites of the art he collected, a nineteenth century engraving of a dragon reminiscent of John Tenniel's Jabberwock. The paper will also crib from (and update) my 2002 article on Gorey for the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, and my 2001 interview of Maurice Sendak, in which we discussed Gorey at length.

ⁱ Ibid., 201.