

Who's Speaking? The Voices of Dennis Lee's Poems for Children

PERRY NODELMAN

- I'd like to be a lighthouse . . .
- If I had a hundred dollars to spend, . . .
- I flew my kite . . .
- If little mice have birthdays . . .
- If the moon shines . . .
- If you should meet a crocodile, . . .
- I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me, . . .
- I have a white cat whose name is Moon; . . .
- I have been one acquainted with the night. . . .¹

This section of the "Index of First Lines" of a typical anthology of poetry for children ends with the first line of a famous poem by Robert Frost not originally intended for children:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

.....

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by.²

If I were asked just who, exactly, is acquainted with the night – just who is speaking here – my answer would be, Robert Frost or someone a lot like him; someone male, American, and grown up. I know that poets do not necessarily write autobiography, and that Frost was probably more interested in establishing an attitude than in revealing his own problems in relating to his peer group; but since lyric poetry is highly personal in form if not in intention, I do what most readers do: unless it contains clues that suggest otherwise, I guess the speaker of a poem is someone very like the poet.

Even if we didn't know that Frost wrote these words, most of us would probably assume that the person speaking them was adult; to assume the speaker is a child would seriously change our response to the poem. If the speaker is adult, then he is describing an attitude he wants us to share; he seems to be reaching for a general truth about life, or at least about one aspect of life. But if he is a child, then he is clearly a special case. He is out alone after dark, solitary, unprotected, homeless, deprived of the security and love we assume children deserve. We have no choice but to respond to the poem as a character sketch and to feel sorry for the poor orphan.

But most of the speakers implied by the other first lines in the index I quoted seem to be children. Few grownups would admit to a desire to be lighthouses; few really care all that much whether or not mice have birthdays. Nevertheless, these poems were written by grownups – grownups who are either suffering from a bad case of arrested development, or who are laden with a burdensome nostalgia and like to pretend they are children – or who are simply trying to capture the voice of a child.

The last of these possibilities is the most likely. But how do readers – especially young readers – know that the person acquainted with the night is supposed to be someone as mature as the poet, while the person who wants to be a lighthouse is supposed to be at least a few years younger than the poet? How do we know that we should not feel sorry for the homeless orphan walking in the rain, or even sorrier for the mentally deficient middle-aged lady who'd like to be, she says,

scrubbed and painted white
.....
And stay awake all night
To keep my eye on everything
That sails my patch of sea;
I'd like to be a lighthouse
With the ships all watching me.³

I suspect we postulate a speaker for a poem who is *not* a special case unless we cannot possibly do so. As I learn anew each time I teach freshman literature, few human beings doubt the absolute sincerity of the words in a poem. My students are so convinced that writing poetry is an act of total self-absorption that they don't even think of separating the speaker implied by the words from the poet. Knowing how to identify a narrative voice is a learned competence.

Yet most children's poetry written in this century is by grownups who adopt a child's viewpoint and imply a child speaker. I suppose we

teach children the competence necessary to understand these poems simply by giving them access to the poems. But many children say they dislike poetry, and I suspect they do so at least partially because they are confused – or even more likely, annoyed – by the voice it often implies.

If you assumed that the person speaking these words by Karla Kuskin was actually a middle-aged woman like Karla Kuskin, you might take them quite literally:

People always say to me
“What do you think you’d like to be
When you grow up?”
And I say, “Why,
I think I’d like to be the sky
Or be a plane or train or mouse
Or maybe be a haunted house
Or something furry, rough and wild . . .
Or maybe I will stay a child.”⁴

This dithery-brained incompetent has indeed stayed a child, much to her cost, poor thing.

Kuskin’s poem expresses the conviction that children are quite unlike grownups, for it is obviously trying to evoke the ways in which they think differently and feel differently. Presumably, children are inevitably and unanimously gentle, ingenuous, imaginative, optimistic, and spontaneous. Kuskin’s gentle and ingenuous speaker gleefully contemplates the same damn question everytime it is asked – and any child knows it is asked a whole lot. Being imaginative, the speaker considers all sorts of wonderful impossibilities, and being optimistic, he considers no ugly ones; and he innocently speaks with an absolute absence of irony, as if his choices were actually possible. He is spontaneous enough to feel strongly and deeply, to live a profound life of the senses unhampered by reason. In fact, it is his ability to move beyond the boundaries of so-called mature reason that defines him as a child; for it is his spontaneous creativity that he seems to want to keep forever if he forever stays a child.

While I must admit to a low tolerance for this sort of whimsical cutesie-poo, I don’t think the poem’s problem is its unrealistic idolatry of ingenuous childishness. I think the problem is that a consciousness of the virtue of such childishness requires a consciousness of something different. The poem could not be said by someone who is merely innocent, for the wish to stay a child implies a knowledge of other possibilities beyond the ken of innocence. So both poet and

speaker share the conviction that grownups do indeed think and feel differently.

As grownups, we can only really appreciate this theoretically ingenuous child's wish to be a plane or train or mouse if we know the wish to be impossible – if we share the poet's wider experience and realize the limitations of the child speaker's knowledge. We cannot respond to the poem by saying, "Hey, that's a neat idea. I'd like to be a mouse too." We must say, "Hey, that's right – that's just the way children think. Aren't they cute?" In other words, we must read the poem with quotation marks around it, in the context of our larger experience, not as a lyric but as a dramatic monologue, not as a description of some interesting possibilities but as a poet's attempt to capture a voice quite different from her own – and more limited than her own. For despite the claims of innocence, experience always knows more and better; by definition, experience *is* knowing more, even if it means knowing things we don't like.

Since the voice speaking the poem is more innocent than ourselves as adult readers, we have two choices. We can assume an irony; that is, we can believe that the poet wants us to see the distance between the voice of the poem and our own understanding of reality, and that the poem is commenting either positively or negatively on the virtues of innocence. As adult readers, we do just that with poems like Blake's *Song of Innocence*; we supply our own experience, and read more into a situation than the child speaking to us perceives. But Kuskin, who provides no parallel poem of experience, clearly intends no negative comment on innocence.

For readers who know more than the speaker of the poem, however, she does imply a positive one. Our second choice is to see the poem as an attempt to work within those limits in order to make us feel nostalgic about something we once had and lost. The nostalgia is rather fruitless, for innocence once lost cannot be had again. In any case, we expect poets to reveal to us more than we know; but this sort of children's poem seems intent on deliberately telling us less than we know and making us like it. It praises ignorance.

But what if we don't know more than the poem implies? For such poems are written on the assumption that their audience is children, that children are innocent and do not share our vaster adult knowledge, and that they therefore need and will like poems which show them the world as they actually see it. Most people who talk about children's literature in general and children's poetry in particular assume that children are egocentric and ignorant, and in need of literature they can, as the saying goes, "relate to" – or, as the

other saying goes, "identify with." Children's poets write poems in which they pretend to be children so that the children reading the poems will have something to find themselves in.

Some children might sincerely like these poems. More might claim to like them in order to satisfy a grownup's conscious or unconscious urging that they do so, for children do try to please grownups. But many children do not like them at all. I suspect they do not share the so-called "childlike" attitude expressed by the speakers of such poems. For these children, it is not childlike at all, but merely the expression of an adult philosophy that never mirrored the facts. The child-worship of many Victorians is still around. Many people – not many of them blessed with the daily experience of being parents – actually believe that children are delightfully innocent, charmingly untrammelled by the harsh brutality of the ugly world in which they live. This attitude implies such a revulsion for the world we all experience that I find it suspicious; and my experience with my own children tells me that they are not exclusively or even particularly innocent, at least not in the sense that they are perennially, joyfully, optimistically, imaginatively ignorant of adult values. Even more important, my children do not particularly like the extent to which they are childish, and hate to have it thrown in their faces. They want us to believe they are like grownups, not different from us. A poem about how great it is to be childishly dumb and childishly unrealistic may irk them almost as much as it irks me.

Even worse, the many poems like the one by Kuskin try to sell children a bill of goods quite different from all the other merchandise we want them to buy. We tell them to behave like grownups, hold their forks like grownups, keep their clothes clean like grownups, talk grammatically like grownups, get their homework done on time like grownups – and then we give them poems about how neat it is to not be grownup. We even tell them, as a well known children's poet does, that poets themselves aren't very adult; Edwin Muir only echoes countless other comments about children and poetry when he says, "A child's world is as a poet's . . . When he is most lucky, the poet sees things as if for the first time, in their original radiance or darkness; a child does this too, for he has no choice."⁵ This perverse praise for the presumed deficiencies of both children and poets separates both from the serious business of life.

I assume that most children don't much value the qualities that separate them from grownups; what then, can they make of poems written by grownups who are pretending to be children? If they have the literary competence to perceive the adoption of a persona – or, I grudgingly admit the exceedingly unlikely possibility, if they are so

egocentric that they “identify” with everything and think *every* utterance, poem or not, is spoken by someone just like themselves – then they will hear praises for attitudes they actually aspire to transcend. And if they do *not* perceive the mask, then they will hear a silly grownup pretending to be childish; and even children who don’t mind children acting childishly find it obnoxious in grownups. As well they might. It *is* obnoxious.

Dennis Lee has written a poem similar to Karla Kuskin’s which avoids that trap:

They never stop asking me,
“What will you be? –

.....

When I grow up I’m going to be a Child.
I’ll Play the whole darn day and drive them Wild.⁶

A child speaks here; but Lee understands that being childish is not just a matter of being angelically joyful. While Lee’s child is not acting maturely, his childishness is a matter of indulging in the anarchy and vulgarity grownups claim to despise, penetrating through the stupidity of grownups, feeling a profound resentment for their power over him, and treasuring the idea of possible revenge. It is not so much ignorance of grownup thought or behaviour as a quite understandable dislike for them. Furthermore, his egocentricity is not so much a matter of self-involvement as it is self-love; he knows he can change, but he does not particularly want to.

I find this sort of childishness more recognizable than the kind Karla Kuskin depicts. I find it more recognizable partially because I am a parent of small children – and partially, I am proud to say, because I am not beyond it myself. If children can sometimes act maturely, then grownups can certainly act childishly. As a grownup, I can respond quite readily and sympathetically to the attitudes expressed in Lee’s poem; while I don’t have the imaginative spontaneity to enjoy imagining myself becoming a house, I *do* resent it when people expect me to declare my adherence to their narrow values and “stop being me.” And my first response to such people is to dump on them, exactly in the unrestrained, vulgar, childish way Lee’s child wants to “dump on Silly Questions in the road.” Unlike Kuskin, Lee does not assume that children act one way and grownups another; rather, he implies that both are capable of acting both ways and of feeling torn between them.

As I tried to show in an earlier discussion of Lee’s children’s poems, Lee sees the anarchy of childhood as a positive quality.⁷ His respect

for that supposedly immature need to be impolite and unrepressed and energetic allows him both to see its inadequacies and to praise it, and to write excellent poems that please both children mature enough to know they are not exclusively childish and grownups mature enough to know they are not exclusively mature.

Lee has said that "one of the governing dreams of my generation – perhaps *the* governing dream – has been the liberation of repressed energies," and that many of his children's poems "raise the question, *Can we sustain play, or joy, or any of the deeper and more vibrant modes of being which tantalize us?*"⁸ Or in other words, can we do as grownups what the child in the poem threatens to do, "Play the whole darn day and drive them Wild"? The answer is, probably not; in a wonderful poem for grownups, Lee talks about how he has lost even the wildness of his early maturity:

Well: I used to be young and –
sensitive?! hoo boy, you know I
lay awake all night and dreamed of dying,
like any young man should. Felt
good. Keep the sheets dry.
But now I trim my beard in a rumour of white,
and my body starts muttering earlier in the day,
and I would not be young again for a finished Ph.D.
.....
and I, being lately recovered, choose never
in thought or word or deed
to shuffle back to the kingdom of the young.⁹

Ironically, the kingdom of the young here is a "yen for absolutes," a restraint that kills the exuberance of childhood; what we usually call maturity is an immature retreat from one's total humanity. Lee's identification of childishness with that humanity associates childishness with presumably respectable adult goals and lets Lee write in a "childish" voice with great respect for childishness, with great energy, and with an absolutely convincing sincerity.

That is not to say he always does so. Lee's three books of children's poems contain a wide variety of poems spoken by a wide variety of implied speakers. Some of these poems are excellent, some merely competent, and some unredeemably awful. Significantly, however, the awful poems tend to be ones in which the speaker expresses a childlike attitude that could not possibly be shared by a grownup; the best ones tend to express the sort of childish attitude that is possible in people of all ages.

Sometimes Lee's poems even imply a speaker who is an adult acting

childishly. Activity poems like “Singa Songa” suggest and are meant to accompany childish games grownups can play with children:

Singa songa sea
I've got you by the knee
Singa songa sand
I've got you by the hand
Singa songa snail
I've got you by the tail
Singa songa seat
And it's time to eat.

The speaker here is not any specific grownup. These words are ritual utterances like the orders of religious service, and they are impersonal enough to allow sincere repetition by anyone who cares to repeat them sincerely in the proper situation with the proper childlike attitude.

Another small group of Lee's poems implies a more specific speaker who is probably not a child. While Lee's illustrator Frank Newfeld has depicted the protagonist of “Inspector Dogbone Gets His Man” as a young girl, the poem itself doesn't demand that. Inspector Dogbone, who has a job most children don't qualify for, arrests himself when he runs out of other suspects; he or she is either an absurd variation of Inspector Clouseau and therefore grownup, or else a child fantasizing about himself or herself as the Inspector, and therefore a child pretending to be a grownup. Other poems are spoken by wizards, saints, and goofuses, specific grownups in specific situations, and the title of “The Last Cry of the Damp Fly” implies an even less childlike speaker.

A surprising number of Lee's unsuccessful poems are spoken by children, and imply the sort of quotation marks around themselves that Karla Kuskin's poem implies. From an adult point of view, the main point of these poems is their attempt to evoke the way children feel and think as opposed to the way grownups feel and think. Perhaps the most revealing thing about them is that they all sound as if they were modelled on nineteenth century poems by poets like Eugene Field – smarmy poems originally intended to be read by sentimental grownups who found the limitations of children charming, in literature if not in life. Consider how charming is the speaker of “The Special Person”:

I've got a Special Person
At my day-care, where I'm in.
Her name is Mrs. Something
But we mostly call her Lynn

.....
I guess I'm going to marry Lynn
When I get three or four,
And Lynn can have my Crib, or else
She'll maybe sleep next door.

We have no choice as grownups but to find the speaker's language and logic "cute" because they do not match our own more mature language and logic; children who don't see how limited the speaker's perceptions are will only have their own ignorance confirmed.

In *Garbage Delight*, Lee's latest volume of children's poems, there is what begins to seem like an endless series of similar poems, in which a child tells us of his supposedly exciting experiences with his stuffed toys. He calls them "aminals":

When you walk inside the kitchen
very kindly do not shout:
Poor old Hannah's getting mended
Cause her stuffing all came out.

.....
And we never bash old Hannah
On the floor, except today,
And my Mom has found her needle
And she thinks she'll be OK.

While there tends to be more psychological subtlety here than in "The Special Person," this poem so successfully evokes a typical child's typical experience that it fails to be very interesting; it offers nothing but an implied delight in and sympathy for the immature logic of children. Such a poem could conceivably be of use to a grownup trying to help a child to deal with a similar problem. But therapeutic value is not necessarily literary value; in fact "The Operation" may be a bad poem simply because it tries to be good for its readers. A child could benefit from it only if he saw himself in the speaker's situation – and he could do that only if, as happens to be the case, the speaker were drawn vaguely enough to allow that identification. The child here is so typically childlike that he lacks a specific personality.

The inadequacies of "The Operation" become particularly clear in comparison with another quite different poem about stuffed toys. In "The Big Blue Frog and the Dirty Flannel Dog," the speaker is not necessarily a child; the experiences he imagines for the toys are interesting enough to draw attention to themselves instead of to the person who imagined them:

Then the big
 blue
 frog
And the dirty flannel dog
Said, "It's time to go to sea
On the good ship *Hollow Log*."
First they sailed to Saskatoon,
Where they stole the harvest moon
 And they strung it as a headlight on the log.

Some of Lee's children do speak more convincingly than the one who has "aminals." The attitudes they express are not exclusive to children, and the experiences they describe are dramatic enough to be interesting:

. . . sometimes my dad
Gets *terriffickly* mad,
And he says, "Don't you drink from that cup!"
But he can't say it right
Cause he's not very bright -
So I trick him and drink it all up!

While the rhythms are late Victorian, this child is not as stupid as the one who owns "aminals" seems to be. That unfortunate child seemed to actually believe the stuff his mother told him to make him feel better; *this* child knows his father is manipulating him, knows his father knows he knows it, but goes along with the game because it's fun. This speaker puts his own quotation marks around his innocence, so that we cannot possibly feel superior to him.

Like "Tricking," many of Lee's poems contain specifying details, like references to parents, that identify their speakers as children. But they express the sort of childish attitude grownups share - various kinds of restlessness, anarchy, and rebellion. Lee clearly finds this sort of childishness liberating. The poems that contain it are some of his strongest, and the strongest thing about them is their cathartic use of imagination. Poems like "Going Up North," "I Have My Father's Eyes," and "The Bratty Brother" do not describe the actual behaviour of children; their energy comes from their imaginative descriptions of escape from actual behaviour:

I dumped the bratty brother
In a shark-infested sea;
By dusk the sea was empty, and
The brat was home with me.

Most of Lee's poems express the same anarchic attitude without identifying the person who expresses it as a child. These poems fall

into three groups: those spoken by an uninvolved storyteller, those spoken by a person of indeterminate age in praise of childishness, and those which do not so much praise the anarchy of childishness as they indulge in it.

The storyteller in the first group of poems is an apparently uninvolved bystander who expresses no feelings about the anarchic behaviour he describes. For instance, his description of how a girl gets rid of a monster in "I Eat Kids Yum Yum!" is perfectly matter-of-fact:

The monster ran like that!
It didn't stop to chat.
The child went skipping home again
And ate her brother's model train.

Sometimes, the speaker even self-righteously insists on his distance from the behaviour he describes. The person who tells about "Psychapoo", who "brushed his teeth / with apple juice" and "drank his hair / And combed his tea" insists:

It isn't me,
It isn't you,
It's nutty, mutty
Psychapoo.

This speaker obviously relishes Psychapoo's refusal to conform as much as the other speaker enjoyed the girl's defeat of the monster; he just doesn't want to admit it. A storyteller's delight in anarchy is also clear in "Oilcan Harry," for despite Harry's apparently deserved death, the storyteller engenders and obviously delights in the awful puns that describe Harry's awful behaviour:

The day she died, just on a hunch
Harry had his mum for lunch.
Now he can't sit down to sup
Without bringing Mother up.

Oilcan Harry met his doom
Building bombs in the living room:
When he saw he'd made a goof,
Oilcan Harry hit the roof.

The apparent distaste for anarchic behaviour expressed in "Peter Rabbit," who turned into "a spotted goon . . . Because he *would* not / Use a spoon," is clearly tongue-in-cheek. The horrendous pun which expresses the presumed message of the poem tells us how much respect we should give it:

Well, that's the story.
Here's the moral:
'Hare today
And Goon tomorrow.'

The apparently adult attitude hides another childish one; the reverse is true in the "aminal" poems.

In many poems there is no deception at all. The speaker, who could be a grownup or a child, a male or a female, takes an obvious delight in immaturity and impoliteness – a delight, as the title poem of one of Lee's collections suggests, in "garbage." "Garbage Delight" describes a confirmed anti-nutritionalist who

can stare in the eyes
Of a Toffee Surprise
And polish it off with one slurp,

and who could be any age; but at any age we would say that his pleasures are childish ones.

While the speaker of "Goofy Song" is also acting childishly, he seems almost to disappear into a freewheeling, quite impersonal delight in pure anarchy:

Well I'm going down the road
And I look like a toad
And I feel like Plasticine,
And the dust between my toes
Is like a tickle in my nose,
But the puddles make them feel real clean –
HEY!

So far, the speaker has a personality of sorts; but he soon seems to disappear into the excesses of his own language:

And the hammer with the stammer
Is a dentist in disguise,
And the flyer on the wire
Is a wren.
And the pizza that I'll eat's a
Little skimpy on the meat, so
I shall have to lay an egg
Or eat a hen –
YO!

The same things happen even more excessively in "On Tuesday I Polish My Uncle," in which a simple expedition to a park gets progressively wackier:

So my dad he got snarky and barked at the shark
Who was parking the ark on a mark in the dark.

The “I” here is a ritual voice – whoever happens to be speaking the poem becomes the person who speaks so wackily. In doing so, he ceases to be himself but becomes neither child nor grownup. He is merely a conveyor of delightfully anarchic words, words that subvert language itself because their sounds and their patterns matter more than their meanings.

Lee’s best known poems, like “Alligator Pie” and “Bouncing Song” and “Rattlesnake Skipping Song” are recited by children who have never seen his books; their masterful control of sounds and patterns has made them as memorable as the artifacts of popular culture they were originally modelled on. In all of these poems, the speaker is impersonal enough so that anyone can say them; and anyone who says them becomes an anarchist with a childlike delight in subverting the normal uses of language.

Lee also expresses his pleasure in intricate rhythms and sounds for their own sake in more literary forms, like the spoonerisms of “The Big Molice Pan and the Bertie Dumb” and the tongue-twisters of poems like “The Sitter and the Butter and the Better Batter Fritter”:

Now my sister has a bitter
Butter fritter sitting in her,
And a sitter in the bitter
Butter fritter since it ate her,
And a better batter fritter
Sitting in the silly sitter
In the bitter butter fritter
Sitting in my sister’s tum.

Words like these are clearly intended to be spoken aloud. The speaker they imply is merely whoever happens to be speaking them. But whoever speaks them with pleasure takes on something of a personality, does express certain characteristics: an anarchic pleasure in the way language can subvert itself and refuse to express meaning, a sheer physical pleasure in using one’s mouth in interesting ways, a resolute faith in the significance of triumphantly useless competences such as blowing big bubbles, or rubbing your head and patting your stomach at the same time, or saying tongue-twisters. All of these are childish in the best sense – exuberant, not just purposeless but triumphantly opposed to purpose, involved with being alive. Lee’s best poems express these qualities. They are childlike qualities no grownup should lose sight of; the extent to which Dennis Lee still has

them is obvious even in some of the most adult of his poems for grownups:

There goes the phone a -
gain, 's OK, just some
new-life huckster flogging a
biodegradable pyramid? & jeez,
what *is* this?
Sometimes I don't believe this civilization
Sorry, love, where were we?
.....

*the Sonnets were never like this.*¹⁰

The sonnets never *were* like this, for sonnets are small, restrictive spaces. Dennis Lee's best poems, whether for children or for grownups, move energetically past such limitations; and his best children's poems triumphantly deny the idea that childhood itself is limiting.

NOTES

¹*Piping Down the Valleys Wild*, ed. Nancy Larrick (New York: Delly Yearling, 196), p. 234.

²In Larrick, p. 61.

³Rachel Field, in Larrick, p. 182.

⁴In Larrick, p. 13.

⁵"A Child's World Is as a Poet's," *Children's Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Virginia Haviland (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1973), p. 269.

⁶"What Will You Be?" *Garbage Delight* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 41. Other poems by Dennis Lee I refer to later can be found in *Alligator Pie* and *Nicholas Knock and Other People* (both Toronto: Macmillan, 1974).

⁷"The Silver Honkabeest: Children and the Meaning of Childhood," *Canadian Children's Literature* 12 (1978), 26-34.

⁸"Roots and Play: Writing as a 35-year-old Children," *Canadian Children's Literature* 4 (1976), 50.

⁹"Not Abstract Harmonies But," *The Gods* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 18.

¹⁰"After Dinner Music," *The Gods*, pp. 26-7.

Perry Nodelman teaches children's literature and recent literature at the University of Winnipeg. He is Associate Editor of the Children's Literature Association Quarterly. A version of this paper was presented at a Triennial Conference of the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Languages and Literatures.