Nonsense and Other Senses

Nonsense and Other Senses:
Regulated Absurdity in Literature

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

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PREFACE

This collection comprises the proceedings of the conference *"Between Peterborough and Pentecost": Nonsense Literature across Space and Time*, which took place at the University of Warwick on 12-13 May 2006. It gathers together most of the papers given at the conference, plus three additional contributions, by Florian Mussgnug, Elisabetta Tarantino, and Giuseppe Antonelli, the latter serving as Introduction to the volume.

As can be seen from the Table of Contents, our idea of representations of nonsense in literature is inclusive and eclectic. By this we do not mean to extend the definition of what constitutes nonsense, or indeed to attempt any kind of definition. Our purpose was to offer a gallery of "nonsense practices" in literature across periods and countries, in the conviction that insights can be gained from these juxtapositions. In most cases, we are dealing with linguistic nonsense, but in a few instances the nonsense operates at the higher level of the interpretation of reality on the part of the subject—or of the impossibility thereof.

After the Introduction by **Giuseppe Antonelli**, which addresses the question of the historical rationale of nonsense, and places the Italian contribution within the European context, the book is subdivided into five sections, which are partly chronologically and partly thematically based. While we hope that readers will be drawn to trace their own pathway through the essays offered here, some connections and recurring ideas came to our minds with particular force.

In relation to the medieval and early modern period, one major issue was how the representation of nonsense could serve as an identifier of the dividing line between a "medieval" and a "modern" way of thought—the two terms being intended in a descriptive rather than strictly chronological sense. In fact, a view of nonsense as the outward sign of a theologically and ethically faulty attitude is exemplified, in our first section, not only by Dante, but also by sixteenth-century English morality plays.

Simon Gilson's analysis, in the first chapter, concentrates on the response of Dante's early commentators to Pluto's notorious line in *Inferno* 7:1, and on what this reveals about the commentators' differing cultural positions. One shared tendency is the attempt to translate Pluto's exclamation into organized speech, thus undermining its expressive force;

however, commentators concur in finding a strong emotive element in the line, which comes across very clearly as an expression of pained astonishment. Interestingly the theological and ethical issue, often mentioned in modern criticism, is ignored by Dante's first readers, who also avoid comparative discussion of the three instances of incomprehensible language in the *Comedy*, in *Inferno* 7, *Inferno* 31, and *Paradiso* 7. However, Gilson shows how reference to Priscian's views on "vox" and its articulation helps to distinguish the rationale behind the different modalities of the three occurrences, the one in the *Paradiso* being characterized by semantically ordering structures which are lacking in the infernal instances.

Two passages from the New Testament seem to have acted as a particular put down on any form of idle or nonsensical language. One is St. Paul's exhortation to limit one's speech to five intelligible words in 1 Corinthians 14, and is referred to in Simon Gilson's essay. The other, the indictment of idle language in Matthew 12, is mentioned in **Elisabetta Tarantino**'s discussion of nonsense in early modern English morality drama as being explicitly invoked in one of the earliest and most paradigmatic examples of the genre, the fifteenth-century play *Mankind*. Tarantino's analysis, however, focuses on the late morality plays of William Wager and on their use of traditional theological doctrine on the one hand, such as the classification of sins, and of traditional forms of dramatic entertainment on the other. While reference to the former strengthens the credentials of the Protestant religion, the latter are being evoked as linguistic and visual manifestations of the evil to be rebutted— which does not prevent Wager from giving us some of the finest and most extensive nonsense passages in the morality genre.

Like everything else, even St. Paul's pronouncements on rationality in human communication could be subjected to a change of perspective by emphasizing a different passage from 1 Corinthians, namely verse 12: "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty". A more or less messianic revaluation of the apparently foolish or nonsensical (which of course found its paradigmatic text in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*) implicitly marks the difference between the texts discussed in our second section and those in Section 1.

We begin with a genre which may stake some claim to be considered at the origin of European nonsense. **Michelangelo Zaccarello**'s chapter deals with Italian fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *frottole* and cognate "extra-canonical" genres. These poems are characterized by a particularly strong emphasis on formal, non-semantic elements. Zaccarello examines

the linguistic devices deployed in these poems, and their relationship with similar genres, and concludes that it is the interruption of logical discourse by means of these formal elements, rather than any specifically "nonsensical" contents, that identifies these as nonsense genres.

Our next two chapters are concerned with forms of nonsense in early modern France. In her essay, **Barbara C. Bowen** identifies four categories of nonsensical language within the books of the Gargantua and Pantagruel saga: the commingling of French and Latin (or Latinate) language; deliberately ambiguous or Sibylline French, or nonsense which looks like sense; made-up words; made-up languages. Although a more serious satirical purpose can be detected in several of the cases taken into consideration, we are ultimately urged to relish their sheer comic effectiveness, since this would have been the driving force behind the author's deployment of these linguistic practices.

Hugh Roberts's chapter focuses on the nonsensical prologues of seventeenth-century French comedian Bruscambille, which were used to silence the boisterous crowds of the first public theatre in France before the main play was performed. Roberts addresses issues related to the form of Bruscambille's *galimatias* as a deliberate language game couched in terms of free-association imaginings, seeking to establish whether it is more closely related to forms of low or high culture. At the same time, Roberts sounds a note of warning against both the interpretative and the teleological fallacy in the study of nonsense texts, whereby these are either suspected of hiding some higher meaning, or are seen as precursors of more modern, and therefore "more important" literary forms.

It is interesting that both Tarantino and Roberts document the use of nonsense speeches as different kinds of introductory pieces in relation to drama. Although the investigation of specific lines of diffusion of nonsense elements can be tricky—not least because of the great part played by oral transmission—in the case of Renaissance culture we feel that Giuseppe Antonelli's call for greater efforts in this direction is particularly justified (see the Introduction below).[1] One of the results of this kind of comparative investigation across different periods and countries could be that of problematizing Noel Malcolm's claim that "the

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[1] In the case of the nonsense speech being used by the Vice in Tudor plays as an introductory self-advertisement and by Bruscambille as a preamble to other forms of dramatic entertainment in early seventeenth-century France, one may be tempted to see a missing link in the record of a payment made at Bungay in 1566 "to Kelsaye, the vyce, for his pastyme before the plaie, and after the playe, both daies, ijˢ" (Chambers 1903, 2:343; cf. Happé 1981, 25).

origins of English nonsense" were fundamentally literary and period-specific (cf. Malcolm 1997).

In reading Shakespeare alongside his predecessors in early modern English drama one is struck by two things (besides the obvious leap in artistic quality): the high degree of continuity in forms and materials; and Shakespeare's revolutionarily modern outlook. It is the latter characteristic that he most fundamentally shares with the much more openly rebellious figure of Giordano Bruno, whose philosophical dialogues were published in England some fifteen to twenty years before the appearance of the great Shakespearean tragedies. Most significantly for us, an important part of that shared outlook was a sense of the often paradoxical relationship between "truth" and accepted discourse.

Accordingly, **Hilary Gatti**'s chapter uses a parallel with the figure of Momus in Giordano Bruno to highlight the special function of the Shakespearean Fool as conveyor of a truth that cannot find a place within the confines of ordinary political discourse. Thus the Fool's apparent nonsense reveals itself to be "sense in reverse", a form of knowledge more directly allied to the laws of rationality and nature than certain perverted social and political constructs. The Fool is thus able to become an actor in the establishment of a Truth seen as unfolding in time and participating in an eternal "play of vicissitude". The latter part of Gatti's essay deals with the cryptic prophecy speech by the Fool, which is only found in the 1623 Folio edition of *King Lear*, as another kind of speaking "as if in a game".

The relationship between *frottole* and prophecy is also part of the analysis carried out in Zaccarello's chapter, and it may be worth investigating the points of contact and specular oppositions between nonsense and prophecy, i.e. between a prominently "sub-real" and a prominently "hyper-real" form of discourse.[2] One literary image (clearly alluded to by Rabelais—see chapter 4) may serve as a useful starting point in this respect: that of the Sibyl in *Aeneid* 3 writing her oracle on leaves which end up scattered, turning the ardently sought-after truth into (apparent) nonsense.

Surreal modes of discourse are the subject of our third section, devoted to modernist nonsense. Their connection with what many would regard as "nonsense proper" is highlighted by **Neil Allan**, who lists a series of parallel situations experienced by Carroll's Alice and Kafka's protagonists. While stressing throughout the difference between the two

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[2] A further element which may then appear in the light of a "missing link" could be the conjunction of nonsense and prophecy in the speech of the Vice, Haphazard, in the anonymous play *Appius and Virginia* (1567).

authors (most noticeably the absence, in Kafka, of a framing world providing a paradigm for normality), Allan identifies a common vision based on recurrent "ruptures of logic". He discusses Kafka's contacts with the philosophical milieu of contemporary Prague, underlining the relevance of Alexius Meinong's analysis of the equal treatment of fantastic and real objects in language, and how this philosopher's thought could "be used to map the paradoxical worlds of both Carroll and Kafka".

Willard Bohn highlights how Apollinaire's "nonsense", as expressed in his "Quelconqueries", derives from a heightened perception of the banalities of everyday life coupled with that of the artistic value of ordinary objects. Bohn discusses Apollinaire's special brand of offbeat humour, which is linked to his aesthetic of surprise, offering examples alongside an elucidation of the origin of some of the more curious images and expressions, and he shows how Apollinaire's attempt to liberate the language of poetry from traditional poetic constraints is to be seen as "doubly subversive".

One recurring theme which applies especially, though certainly not exclusively, to the modernist period is how nonsense and absurdist forms of expression become a favourite artistic modality in a politically or socially oppressive reality. On the one hand, this puts in place a mirroring strategy reproducing the deforming effect of pressure on the social environment. On the other, as was also discussed in the case of *King Lear*, absurdist speech paradoxically becomes the only sane form of response to a world which has intrinsically lost its sanity. In analyzing Dada's use of nonsense in response to the catastrophe of World War I, **Stephen Forcer** looks at Dada's output as texts characterized by a "polyvalent quality", and finds layers of textual meaning beneath the insisted claim of "signifying nothing", as well as a ludic attitude revelling in the metalogical capabilities of language. Indeed, Dada's "meaninglessness" can then be seen to offer a "half-way" solution between the inadequacy of conventional speech and complete silence.

The expressive capabilities of nonsense are also stressed in **Magnus Klaue**'s chapter, which discusses the influence of Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1901-2) on the poets of the German avant-garde. Mauthner highlighted how nonsense and absurdity can help produce a "mystical" language, emancipated from the constraints of conventionality, and Klaue shows the importance for early twentieth-century German poetry of the contrast between the "mechanization" of language and a utopian view of its mystical freedom.

Julia Genz's contribution also reads an aspect of early twentieth-century German literature in philosophical terms, though with reference to

a later thinker, as she applies the categories of "the ban" and "the state of exception" recently explored by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben to an analysis of the interaction of banality and nonsense in the work of Kurt Schwitters. This allows Genz to explore the specific relationship in Schwitters between abstract art and a conservative aesthetics, as the banal elements in Schwitters's works, and indeed in other avant-garde art, interact dialectically with the "feudal" order of the work of art itself.

Staying within the same literary period, but moving to a different continent as well as to a different genre, **Alisa Freedman**'s essay deals with the third element in *ero*, *guro*, *nansensu* (erotic, grotesque, nonsense), terms which identified types of literary and visual artefacts portraying aspects of Tokyo life at a time of economic and social transformation. This kind of artistic production exposed the absurdity of the times by highlighting a series of incongruous scenes within the realistic background of the life of the salarymen, an emerging class of mid-level corporate workers. In particular, the chapter focuses on the novels and short stories of Asahara Rokurô (1895-1977), one of the co-founders of the New Art School, a short-lived movement most directly associated with modernist *nansensu* literature.

One of the questions raised in Antonelli's Introduction is how the label "nonsense" is being stretched by—well, critical works like the present volume. In fact, our Section 4 does deal directly with the Victorian manifestations of the genre, and with some of its most "legitimate" and recognizable offspring across a fairly wide geographical and chronological spectrum.[3] In the section's first chapter, however, the focus is still on "nonsense" as a label: here **Marijke Boucherie** discusses how this word became an autonomous critical term after the success of Edward Lear's eponymous work, and examines the paradox of a literary production which invites a critical approach that uses a term it has itself helped to propagate. Boucherie also argues that, despite its intuitions about the subversive potentiality of language, Victorian nonsense literature preserves the

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[3] The section title, "Take care of the sounds", derives from a series of (mis)appropriations, being a reversal of the injunction by Alice's Duchess to "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves", which in turn is a parodic adaptation of a well-known English proverb, "Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves" (cf. Lecercle 1994, 123ff.). The Duchess was also echoing the Latin saying "rem tene, verba sequentur"—a formula whose own reversal, with its potential for defining the poetic process in general, has enjoyed a certain fortune (see, in chapter 14, Katajamäki 2005).

Romantics' faith in its ultimate capacity to relate to reality, especially through its affective and emotional significance.

Although rooted in Victorian England, Lear's model branched out far and wide, as is demonstrated, for instance, in **Sakari Katajamäki**'s diachronic and synchronic analysis of the Finnish limerick. After tracing the history of this poetic form, from its arrival from Sweden in the 1920s to the appearance of the specifically Finnish genre of the "rimelick" in 2001, Katajamäki describes how the limerick's basic structures were adapted to the prosodic characteristics of the Finnish language, in accordance with "the genre's general tendency towards transformation and self-reflection".

With **Florian Mussgnug**'s chapter the question of the referential capability of nonsense again looms large, though we move away from Victorian poetry to a different time, place, and medium. The widespread assumption that the writings of Italian novelist Giorgio Manganelli (1922-1990) are based entirely on the principle of the self-referentiality of art is supported by the author's own literary manifesto on "Literature as Lie", which reveals a fascination with nonsense as an antidote to the ideological tyranny of common sense. However, Mussgnug argues, on the one hand, that radical views of language and art as totally self-referential are intrinsically flawed, and, on the other hand, that the thematic dimension remains an important element in Manganelli's works. This chapter consequently advocates a more balanced approach to the study of this author, based on both formal and thematic principles.

The next two chapters in this section are devoted to two other late twentieth-century authors whose foregrounding of the ludic aspect in their work is rooted in their general view of the relationship between literature and life. Born of mixed Italian and British parentage, Fosco Maraini continued to cross cultural divides throughout his life, first making his name as a travel writer. While at the same time reflecting on the general issue of the translation of humour, **Loredana Polezzi** shows how Maraini's nonsense, which the author called "metasemantic poetry", could be viewed as an attempt at "intercultural translation". In this way, Maraini's production, like Dada's nonsense, seeks to bridge the gap between the untenability of conventional discourse and the purely unsaid (because unsayable), thus affirming, in Polezzi's words, "the power of nonsense as an interpretative paradigm capable of mediating difference without essentializing it". This common point of arrival in the analyses of Polezzi and Forcer highlights an important universal element in both modernist and post-modern nonsense.

Like Maraini, Michael Ende is not known principally as a nonsense writer, being most often categorized as a fantasy author or writer of children's literature. In her chapter, however, **Rebekka Putzke** stresses the importance of Ende's use of nonsense both as a central concern in his works (particularly in his poems) and as "ornamental nonsense" within his novels. This aspect is given further prominence by being related to other important characteristics of Ende's work, such as the emphasis on wordplay and on the idea of the "game".

Our final section explicitly addresses an issue which has emerged as an important *Leitmotif* throughout the present volume: the use of nonsensical or absurdist forms of writing as an instrument for social and political critique. In an important departure from a formalist view of nonsense, such as that adopted in his own seminal study on *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, **Jean-Jacques Lecercle** draws on different traditions of interpretations of nonsense in order to investigate the relationship between nonsense and politics, offering two case studies: Gianni Rodari's Marxist *filastrocche*, examined in the light of Antonio Gramsci's theory of language as simultaneously reflecting and constructing the speaker's (or reader's) worldview and their perception of what constitutes "common sense"; and the contrast between Mrs Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, drawing on Raymond Williams's concept of the *structure of feeling* which is embodied in all texts, including nonsense ones.

Federico Appel's chapter also deals with a beloved Italian children's author, though we step back some forty years in time, as he discusses a series of cartoons published in a children's newspaper in Italy in the 1920s. Each episode of the *Vispa Teresa* series was based on the parodic repetition of the events in a well-known nineteenth-century children's poem, with the intent of emptying the model of its moralistic meaning. The discussion of Sergio Tofano's cartoons allows Appel to identify the close connection existing between nonsense and an intertextual and parodic mode, and between nonsense and the critique of bourgeois society in Italy in the 1920s, a trait which is further intensified by some of the authors in question having belonged to avant-garde movements.

The connection between an absurdist mode of writing and politics is particularly strong and explicit in the case discussed in the final chapter of this volume, in which **Jane Duarte** examines the nonsensical or absurdist aspects of Václav Havel's plays as a strategy for coping with life under a totalitarian regime. The nonsense in these plays is then seen as a form of "inferential communication", in which meaning depends on ostensive

elements above and beyond the linguistic ones. By letting his audience actively seek to make sense of absurd situations, Havel demands that they shake off the benumbing passivity that characterizes life under a totalitarian regime.

These, then, are our "scattered leaves", which we shall now allow to speak for themselves. It is our conviction that at least one pattern will emerge from their being assembled here: that what distinguishes literary nonsense, the speech of the literary "fool", as opposed to that of the idiot—what makes it in fact a last-ditch attempt to snatch order from the jaws of chaos—is that it should be somehow deliberate, and regulated (cf. Lecercle 1994, 68, 204, and *passim*). It is this kind of post-Derridean retrieval of *choice* as the defining element in semantic transactions which is perhaps the most important insight bequeathed by the study of nonsense to the analysis of poetry and literature as a whole. It may certainly be that *n'est pas fou qui veut* (Lecercle 1994, 115). But in the case of artistic nonsense, as in any other semantic realm, *il faut bien le vouloir*.

Elisabetta Tarantino

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INTRODUCTION

THE NOSE OF NONSENSE[*]

GIUSEPPE ANTONELLI

> For by the word Nose, throughout all this long
> chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work,
> where the word Nose occurs—I declare, by that
> word I mean a nose, and nothing more, or less.
> —Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of
> Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

The Science of Nonsense

Making sense of nonsense can be a risky enterprise. And that applies whether one is attempting to find the absolute constants on which literary nonsense is founded, or whether one has been rather more modestly drafted in—as in the present case—to describe the shared core of interests in two recent conferences which looked at nonsense literature from different times and places.[1]

A few years ago, Umberto Eco published a *divertissement* in which he subjected one of the best-known nursery rhymes in the Italian tradition (*Ambarabà ciccì coccò, tre civette sul comò*) to a learned analysis which pretended to be making use of the most refined, and most fashionable,

[1] The two conferences are: *"Between Peterborough and Pentecost": Nonsense Literature across Space and Time*, University of Warwick, 12-13 May 2006, the proceedings of which are gathered in the present volume, and *"Nominativi fritti e mappamondi". Il nonsense nella letteratura italiana*, Università degli Studi di Cassino, 9-10 October 2007. The proceedings of the latter conference, which dealt specifically with the Italian nonsense tradition, are to be published shortly by Salerno Editrice, Rome. The programme, abstracts, and the provisional text of some of the conference papers can be found at www.dfs.unicas.it/nonsense.

critical tools of the time. Textual philology, with the establishment of the original text, and of its French, German, and English translations ("There were three old Owls of Storrs");[2] structuralist semiotics, highlighting semantic symmetries and phonological oppositions, as well as instances of parallelism and alliteration; Lacanian psychoanalysis; Chomsky's transformational linguistics: "the WP *ambarabà ciccì coccò* (where WP stands for 'What? phrase,' from 'What?!?' the exclamation of Dwight Bolinger when he was exposed, as native informant, to the utterance of the verse itself)" (Eco 1998, 149).

The effect of nonsense to the power of two that is produced by this kind of parody (which is all the more effective in that the original text itself is without meaning or relevance) ought to function as an alarm bell.[3] The essence of nonsense will not be captured by a purely scientific reading: in fact, the science of nonsense can easily turn into nonsense(ical) science.

Even so, "The Science of Nonsense" was precisely the title given to one of the first critical studies of our topic. In an anonymous essay by that title published in the *Spectator* on 17 December 1870, Lear's verses were declared to be "a trifle nearer to the grave talk of an idiot asylum, than to the nonsense of sane people". In fact, Lear's nonsense had presented itself as something totally new within the English literary panorama of the time, and especially within the realm of children's literature:[4]

> When Lear's first work appeared, the children's literature market was in a fairly dire state, being dominated on one hand by utilitarian efforts at edification and on the other hand by moralistic and didactic religious works. To the children and adults forced to read such works, Lear's nonsense must have displayed a remarkable freshness and originality. (Heyman 1999, 271)

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[2] See Eco 1998, 145. In the original Italian essay, the English version of the nursery rhyme begins "There were three old Owls of Cochoers" (cf. Eco 1992, 165).

[3] At least one attempt has actually been made to reconstruct the etymology of the nursery rhyme in question, by positing a Latin original *HANC PARA AB HAC QUIDQUID QUODQUOD: "as a matter of fact, the Latin rhyme does not make much better sense than the Italian: but that is what usually happens with nursery rhymes" (Brugnatelli 2003).

[4] It is interesting to note that *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1869), one of Lear's best-know works, which features a bird of the same species as the *tre civette* in the nursery rhyme dissected by Eco, has also recently been the object of a parodically exoteric reading: "the poem by Edward Lear might not have been just nonsense. Is it possible that beneath this innocent poem lurked a dark and sinister tale?" (Ward, n.d.)

The Nose of Nonsense

It is well known that Edward Lear, who had often travelled to Italy, chose to spend the final years of his life on the Ligurian coast, where he died, in Sanremo, in 1888. Italy had only been a unified country for a couple of decades, and the undisputed hero of the fledgling nation's children's literature was a puppet by the name of Pinocchio (first edition 1873) endowed with a nose that gave away any attempt at lying on the part of its owner. Despite the story's comical and fantastical setting, this punishing disfigurement had an obviously moralistic and pedagogical function. Collodi's interest in the *Verfremdung-Effeckt* of the accentuated or isolated facial feature comes across even more clearly in his 1880 collection of sketches, *Occhi e nasi*: "this is not a gallery of full-length figurines. It is rather a small collection of eyes and noses, only just sketched and then left there like that, unfinished" (Collodi 1980).

Disproportionate noses are also of course a recurring feature in Lear's limericks (Izzo 1935, 217). However, in the case of those happily outrageous appendages, "deformity is never a problem"; on the contrary, "grotesquely overgrown body parts are often proudly on display" (Caboni 1988, 110):

> There was an Old Man with a nose,
> Who said, "If you choose to suppose
> That my nose is too long,
> You are certainly wrong!"
> That remarkable Man with a nose.
>
> There was a Young Lady whose nose,
> Was so long that it reached to her toes;
> So she hired an Old Lady, whose conduct was steady,
> To carry that wonderful nose.
>
> There was an Old Man, on whose nose,
> Most birds of the air could repose;
> But they all flew away, at the closing of day,
> Which relieved that Old Man and his nose.
>
> (Lear 2001, 158, 91, 178)

One cannot help wondering whether Lear's creations may not be behind one of the many interpolations in Disney's *Pinocchio* (cf. Bernardinis Pellegrini 1994). In fact, the well-known image of the little birds perching on Pinocchio's nose has no equivalent in Collodi's original.

What we do find there is a much darker, characteristically admonitory scene: "from time to time some blundering nocturnal birds, flying across the lane from hedge to hedge, would beat their wings against Pinocchio's nose, and jumping back a step in fright he would shout 'Who goes there?'" (Collodi 1996, 40)[5]

One would have to wait exactly a century for nonsense to become officially part of Italian children's literature. One of the chapters in Gianni Rodari's *Grammatica della fantasia* (Grammar of the Imagination, first edition 1973) is, in fact, entitled "Come si costruisce un limerick" (How to Build a Limerick). However, current studies (see, most recently, Boero and De Luca 2007) have highlighted the existence of a line of nonsense leading from Collodi to Rodari himself, via writers and comic strip authors Antonio Rubino (who was born in Sanremo in 1880, just a few years before Lear died there) and Sergio Tofano, through to the fantastical works of Italo Calvino (Schwarz 2005, 29).

To gain an idea of the concept of humour against which Italian nonsense was to measure itself, one could turn to Francesco De Sanctis's seminal history of Italian literature (first published in 1870-71), and in particular to his pronouncement contrasting "the irony of moral outrage" characterizing eighteenth-century poet Giuseppe Parini with Boccaccio and Ariosto's "irony of common sense".[6]

It will come as no surprise, then, that at the same time in which the important studies on nonsense by Edward Strachey and G. K. Chesterton were being published in England (respectively, "Nonsense as a Fine Art" in 1888, and "Defense of Nonsense" in 1901), Pietro Micheli's *Letteratura che non ha senso* (parts of which had previously been published as journal articles in 1895) should ignore both Lear and Carroll, to concentrate on Verlaine's symbolism:

> when these allitterations, these repetitions of sounds, do not correspond to the concept, we end up with a play on words [*bisticcio*]; when they suppress the concept entirely, what we have is nonsense [*non senso*].[7] (Micheli 1900, 77-78; cf. Castoldi forthcoming)

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[5] "[A]lcuni uccellacci notturni, traversando la strada da una siepe all'altra, venivano a sbattere le ali sul naso di Pinocchio, il quale facendo un salto indietro per la paura gridava:—Chi va là?" (Collodi 1983, 41-42)
[6] "[L]ì era l'ironia del buon senso, qui è l'ironia del senso morale" (De Sanctis 1958, 2:912).
[7] The link with symbolism will remain a constant at least until half-way through the century. In his 1950 *Antologia burchiellesca*, Eugenio Giovannetti could still remark that "symbolism, ultimately, is nothing other than a refined or formal

Almost half a century later, Carmelo Previtera's *La poesia giocosa e l'umorismo* (first published 1939-42) still makes no reference to Carroll or Lear, or to the concept of *nonsense*, despite including a fairly extensive overview of English literature, reaching as far as George Bernard Shaw. Previtera does remark however, with typically fascist terminology, that "many believe *humour* to be an exclusive characteristic of the English or at least of the Anglo-Saxons: a native plant which flourishes in the mists of Albion" (Previtera 1953, 1:36). One may well be tempted to agree with the diagnosis put forward by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in one of his English literature essays (1953-54):

> The literature of Italy is the most serious in the world. There are virtually no Italian books that can be said to be well-written and funny at the same time. We are expected to fall over ourselves with laughter at the description of Manzoni's Don Abbondio, and to find Ariosto absolutely hilarious . . . In England *comic* writers have been practising *nonsense* for about one hundred years, producing written texts which are totally devoid of sense, ostensibly cobbled together from a jumble of associations which bring up a series of disparate images, to sometimes strongly comical effect . . . Those who are not moved to laughter by a *limerick* stand little hope of ever understanding England and its literature: England is the home of the irrational, in which logic has little currency . . . In our own country, *nonsense* will never be very successful. To borrow France's words, "nous sommes sérieux comme des ânes". (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1995, 1167-69)

However, if we look at the history of Italian literature from a slightly different point of view we realize that a kind of erosion or voluntary eclipse of meaning has manifested itself at various times, perhaps even centuries apart, revealing the existence of an undercurrent of nonsense beneath the dominant code. As pointed out by Alessandro Caboni,

> [a]lthough it has generally been regarded as scarcely inclined towards the fantastic, the Italian literary tradition is far from being totally devoid of nonsense: one need only think of the rich repertory of medieval jesters, the burlesque poetry of Burchiello and Berni, the popular *capriccios* of baroque poets like Giulio Cesare Croce and Anton Francesco Doni, or Giambattista Basile's far-fetched metaphors. This tradition survived for centuries within popular culture, eventually attaining mainstream recognition with the renewed fortune of "minor genres": for instance, in the mysterious nursery rhymes to be found in Aldo Palazzeschi's pseudo-

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version of Burchiello's techniques", while "the riot of wordplay [*gazzarra parolibera*] which we have witnessed in recent years" is just "truculent Burchiellism" (reviewed in an article now in Cecchi 1958, 34).

symbolist poetry, in Petrolini's crypto-satiric nonsense and in Achille Campanile's comical-surreal poetry, or in Tommaso Landolfi's sophisticated and obscure paradoxes. Finally, contemporary authors such as Nico Orengo, Antonio Porta, and Toti Scialoia have produced nonsense poetry directed at its original children's audience. (Caboni 1988, 15)

The high-water mark of Italian nonsense could be identified in the experiences of the neo-Avantgarde of the 1960s, with their heightened awareness of these expressive modalities. Alfredo Giuliani's *Poema Chomsky* (Chomsky Poem; 1979) grabs the theoretical question by the horns by producing poetic variations on the phrase famously adduced by Noam Chomsky as a model of nonsense, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously": "furiosamente verdi dormono idee senza colore | tra rosee zampe a becco furiosamente il prato | dorme del verde fuori alato corpo d'acqua pietra" (cf. Bartezzaghi 1997, 17-32). The titles chosen by Edoardo Sanguineti for his two collections—*Bisbidis* (1987) and *Il detto del gatto lupesco* (The Sayings of the Wolfish Cat; 2002)—seem to come deliberately full circle, looking back to a medieval production which is characterized, as discussed below by Michelangelo Zaccarello, by "a non-sense effect".

Within Italian literature, then, nonsense exists like the panther of the medieval bestiaries, its sweet scent being everywhere, but the beast itself remaining elusive.

The Tense of Nonsense

We are now among those "approximations to nonsense" (Afribo 2007, 1), frequent in late twentieth-century Italian poetry, or—to refer to the other end of the chronological scale—in the field of what Paul Zumthor has called the "relative nonsense" of certain medieval poems.[8]

On the other hand, the concept of literary nonsense soon took on metahistorical and metanational traits. From the standpoint of Victorian nonsense (to which the rather paradoxical appellation of "institutional" or "orthodox" nonsense might be said to belong by rights) one started to project the definition back to previous historical periods, thus conjuring up for the nineteenth-century nucleus a complex genealogy of antecedents and successors, whose relationship with "nonsense proper", i.e. Victorian

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[8] Cf. Zumthor 1975, 77, and, more recently, Molle 2004.

nonsense, has been called into question.[9] The lifespan of the genre has therefore been extended to include centuries of nonsense *ante litteram*.

According to the OED, the first recorded occurrence of the word *nonsense* as a generic term "used exclamatorily to express disbelief of, or surprise at, a statement" (s.v. §1a) dates from 1614, while the specific usage "A meaning that makes no sense" (§4) is first attested in 1650. The adjective *nonsensical* is first found in 1655.[10]

In French, the first mention of *nonsense* dates back to 1672 (*Le Spectateur*, ed. 1737), while the adapted form *non-sens* is used by Voltaire before 1778 (TDF s.v. *non-sens*: "le comp. *Nonsens* existait, au sens de 'deraison, sottise', en a. fr."); however, Voltaire himself was still using the form *nonsense* (in italics) in 1769 (Klajn 1972, 120-21). The actual Anglicism enters into common usage in French only from the late twentieth century: in LGR s.v. *nonsense* it is dated to 1962, with the qualification: "une fois en 1829, Jacquemont, avec la valeur *non-sens*: 'Caractère absurde et paradoxal, en littérature'".

In Italian, *nonsenso* is attested for the first time on 15 April 1754, in a letter written by Giuseppe Baretti from London to Canon Giuseppe

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[9] For instance, it has been argued that "the relatively greater fame of French medieval nonsense genres [compared to their Italian equivalents] is probably due more to the fortune these poetic forms enjoyed with the twentieth-century Surrealists than to their actual importance within the medieval scene" (Berisso 2007, 1). On the dangers of this kind of retrospective reading see also Molle 2004, 136-37.

[10] The abbreviations used in this section refer to the following dictionaries: DEI = Carlo Battisti and Giovanni Alessio, *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (Florence: Barbèra, 1950-57); DELI = Manlio Cortelazzo and Paolo Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, ed. M. Cortelazzo and M. A. Cortelazzo (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1999²); Devoto Oli = Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, *Il Devoto-Oli 2008. Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, ed. L. Serianni and M. Trifone (Florence: Le Monnier, 2007); Fanfani Arlìa = Pietro Fanfani and Costantino Arlìa, *Lessico dell'infima e corrotta italianità* (Milan: Carrara, 1882²); GDLI = *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* founded by S. Battaglia (Turin: UTET, 1961-2002), with the *Supplemento 2004*, ed. E. Sanguineti (2004); GRADIT = *Grande Dizionario Italiano dell'uso*, ed. T. De Mauro (Turin: UTET, 2007²); LGR = *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française* (Paris: Le Robert, 1985¹²); OED = *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989²); Panzini = Alfredo Panzini, *Dizionario moderno* (Milan: Hoepli, 1942); Sabatini Coletti = Francesco Sabatini and Vittorio Coletti, *Il Sabatini Coletti. Dizionario della lingua italiana 2008* (Florence: Sansoni, 2007); TDF = *Trésor de la langue française. Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-94); Zingarelli = *Lo Zingarelli 2008. Vocabolario della lingua italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2007).

Candido Agudio (cf. DELI s.v.).[11] After that, the term appears regularly
from the early nineteenth century, though none of the occurrences listed in
GDLI refers to nonsense literature. DELI defines *nonsenso* as an "English
loan word", following on from Fanfani Arlìa, where it is described as an
"Anglo-Italian idiom". On the other hand, GDLI believes it to have
reached Italy via France, thus accepting Panzini's derivation: "from the
French *non-sens*, a term used as a noun, which the French have in turn
derived from the English *nonsense*". Also DEI, s.v. *non*, gives the origin
of the term as being "from the French *non-sens*, English *Nonsense*", and
generically dates *non-senso* from the nineteenth century.

   Nonsense and *nonsensical* appear for the first time in an article in the
Conciliatore dated 13 September 1818 and signed by Grisostomo
(Giovanni Berchet): the terms are spoken by an English milord who "has a
perfect understanding of the Italian language but does not speak it quite as
well, and has a habit of interspersing his speech with English words".[12]
However, the full English term did not take up roots until much later: the
GDLI Supplement, s.v. *nonsense*, lists only one passage, by Giorgio
Manganelli (1986), in which the noun refers to a literary piece; Zingarelli
dates it from 1985, without giving any instances, GRADIT from 1975, and
Devoto Oli and Sabatini Coletti from 1967.

   The first Italian translation of Lear's limericks, by Camilla del Soldato,
appeared in 1908 in *L'enciclopedia dei ragazzi* (Milan: Cogliati), an
Italian translation of *The Children's Encyclopaedia*.[13] There the
translator's introduction glosses "nonsense" as "little foolish things":
"sciocchezze" (as in its heading, "Le sciocchezze di Edoardo Lear"), or
"ciuccherie". Even the first complete translation into Italian (ed. Carlo

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[11] "Della poesia ne faccio molto moderato uso; e una tenebrosa meditazione di
Sherlock o di Young sopra la morte o una filosofichissima dissertazione morale di
Tillotson o di Johnson, ti dico il vero, calonaco, mi comincian a quadrar più che
non tutto il *nonsenso* del Petrarca e del Berni, che un tempo mi parvero il *non plus
ultra* dell'umano intelletto" (Baretti 1936, 1:98). On the influence of the serio-
comic poetry of Francesco Berni (1497-1536) on Baretti, see Bàrberi Squarotti
1999.
[12] Apart from frequently bursting out into cries of "*All nonsense!*" (in one case:
"*What a positive token of nonsense!*"), the milord condemns as "*a very nonsensical
petulancy*" the way in which the ladies of Milan are constantly abusing the terms
"classical" and "romantic": "how would you feel if your beloved was one of those
nonsensical creatures I just mentioned?" (Branca 1965, 1:62-70; the phrases in
italics are in English in the original).
[13] On the fortune of Edward Lear in Italy, cf. Rinaldi 1994, which includes further
bibliographical references. On the *Enciclopedia dei ragazzi*, see specifically pp.
196-204.

Izzo; Vicenza: Il Pellicano, 1946; repr. Venice: Neri Pozza, 1954) appears under the title of *Il libro delle follie* (The Book of Crazy Things), becoming *Il libro dei nonsense* only in 1970 (Turin: Einaudi; the new Einaudi translation, by Ottavio Fatìca, 2002, now carries the title *Limericks*). However, in his lecture "L'umorismo alla luce del *Book of Nonsense*", published in 1935, Izzo had used the term "nonsense", always in quotation marks, in various contexts and to different uses.[14] In the afterword to his 1946 translation he employed the term *nonsense*, in italics, while in a 1938 article Mario Praz had referred to *nonsense verse*, again in italics.[15]

The English term *nonsense* enters the various European languages at different times. Because it refers to a specific literary genre, it tends to maintain an autonomous existence from the adaptations and loan words which had been previously derived from it (Fr. *nonsens*, It. *nonsenso*, but also Ger. *Unsinn*, Sp. *sinsentido*).[16] In some critical traditions, however, this category has been extended to include devices which used to be considered part of traditional rhetorics, such as the paradox, the oxymoron, the adynaton.[17] As a result, the area of "near-nonsense" (Heyman 1999, 1) has kept expanding and has become increasingly populated with "circanonsensical satellites" (Afribo 2007), creating what one might call a nebula of the nonsenselike.

This may partly be due to the fact that a far greater number of studies are concerned with the anachronic aspects of nonsense (Lecercle 1994, 2) than with its diachronic dimension. Instead of searching for the chronological and geographical links that might illustrate the development of a specific tradition characterized by shared elements, such as the existence of common sources,[18] efforts have concentrated on the

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[14] For instance: "la letteratura del 'nonsense', del non-senso, dell'assurdo" (Izzo 1935, 213); "è il 'nonsense' schietto umorismo?" (ibid.); "è risibile: un 'nonsense'" (217); "addito nel 'nonsense' il sale di cui sarebbe condito l'umorismo" (218).

[15] *La Stampa*, 4 June 1938; now in Praz 1945, 92-95 (at p. 93).

[16] For instance, "in German scholarship on the subject, a useful distinction is made between *Unsinn* (in Hildebrandt's terms: folk and ornamental nonsense) and *Nonsense* (literary or 'pure' nonsense)" (Tigges 1988, 18).

[17] On the fortune of these rhetorical figures in ancient and modern times, see Cocchiara 1963.

[18] See, for instance, Serianni 2007, 5 n. 23, which reports how both Michelangelo Zaccarello and Giuseppe Crimi had identified an antecedent for Toti Scialoja's Greek-speaking magpie ("la gazza fragorosa | che fa gli stridi in greco") in Burchiello's "gazza che parlava in Greco" (poem XVIII in Burchiello 2000): "Crimi has also pointed to an instance in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (London:

classification of nonsense as a universal, i.e. timeless and spaceless, notion. In a further step, this approach verified the extent to which the definitions could be applied at the level of real historical cultural products. An inductive methodology was thus substituted for a deductive one, paradoxically blurring precisely those distinctions which one had sought to define more clearly, in a constant game of recognition and rejection: "unfortunately, there are as many definitions of sense, nonsense, and literary nonsense as there are critics" (Heyman 1999, 203).[19]

The Renaissance of Nonsense

This critical tradition has been founded primarily on texts written in English and, secondarily, on French and German texts. Until recently, little attention had been paid to the "nonsenselike" strand in Italian literature, and to its contribution to the formation of literary nonsense as such. One thinks, first and foremost, of Burchiello and his role in the development of Italian Renaissance nonsense. As amply shown in Crimi 2005b, Burchiello's model (itself only partly derived from medieval antecedents) had a profound influence on Italian Renaissance poetry, as exemplified in particular by its impact on Luigi Pulci, Lorenzo de' Medici, and on Baretti's beloved Berni. Surely the same model would have spread to other European countries as well.

To the best of my knowledge, the fortune of Burchiello outside Italy is a subject still awaiting systematic study. According to Noel Malcolm, however, the originator of seventeenth-century literary nonsense in English, John Hoskyns, must have been well acquainted with the work of his Italian predecessor:

Penguin, 1996), obviously unrelated to Burchiello, which would indicate that this motif had enjoyed wider circulation across Europe: 'A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words . . .' (p. 28)." I too am indebted to Giuseppe Crimi for pointing out to me some analogies between Edward Lear and Burchiello, as for instance in the image of studious birds: "There was an Old Person of Hove, | Who frequented the depths of a grove; | Where he studied his Books, | With the Wrens and the Rooks"—cf. "e le civette studiano in gramatica" (VIII, 17 in Burchiello 2000).

[19] A century's worth of efforts in this respect are reviewed in the first chapter of Tigges 1988, and, in a less systematic but equally effective manner, in Michael Heyman's doctoral thesis (Heyman 1999), which forms the indispensable premise for his Introduction to Heyman, Satpathy and Ravishankar 2007, entitled "An Indian Nonsense Naissance".