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For the Snark was a Boojum.
Towards a Positive Aesthetics of Literary Nonsense

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ABSTRACT. Literary nonsense plays an uncomfortable role within the systematization of aesthetics: either excluded from the field altogether or forcibly fitted within some other well-established theories, it seems not worth considering on its own. Th aim of my contribution is to take up this challenge by setting up a preliminary positive, and autonomous aesthetics for nonsense. I will discuss the empirical and theoretical reasons for dealing with nonsense on its own and attempt to answer the infamous question "why should we care", by individuating a shift from a logical-semiotic conception to a more fitting and more complex literary one. Then, throughout an analysis of the available definitions, I will draw some formal features that a general definition of nonsense ought to have. In the conclusions, it will become clear that the role of readers, along with their interpreting acts, is crucial in order to assess nonsense both as a genre and as a mode. The primary literary example for my research would be a less known poem by Lewis Carrol – *The Hunting of the Snark* (that was indeed a *Boojum*).

1. Introduction

> As to the meaning of the *Snark*? I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense! Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I'm very glad to accept as the meaning of the book.[295]

The general aim of my paper is to initiate the construction of an aesthetics for literary

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[294] E-mail: martino.manca@unito.it
[295] Comment by Lewis Carroll about the "meaning of the *Snark*", quoted in *The Annotated Snark*, p. 17.

nonsense.[296] Attempts in this direction have already been made, either by incorporating nonsense into more established aesthetic theories or by focusing on the negative aspect of "discomfort".[297] I wish to differentiate from these two approaches by proposing an aesthetics that is both autonomous and positive – the reasons for this will become clear in my discussion. Specifically, I will attempt to answer the following questions, one in each paragraph of my paper.

Why should we care at all? It may seem that nonsense can be dismissed as aesthetically irrelevant since it literally just does not make sense. In the overall conception of aesthetics – in its two forms of philosophy of *aisthesis* and philosophy of art – there may be room for ugliness, disgust, and other negative feelings in relation to a work of art. However, discussing something that, at least at a first glance, completely denies the possibility of aesthetic engagement by breaking the basics of the semiotic triangle, seems pointless. I claim, however, that there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to address this matter.

Why is a definition of nonsense necessary to describe an aesthetics of it, and what should this definition entail? In fact, many discussions about nonsense begin with the cautious claim that "one must not define nonsense" or even the "nonsense cannot be defined at all". This leads to some confusion about what nonsense is and what it is not, creating an *ad hoc* mixture of nonsense, obscure language, invented languages, *roman à clé*, gibberish, paradoxical literature, and so on – with the sole aim to support a specific definition rather than others. For this point, I will propose to start with the clear canon of literary nonsense as a *genre* and then move (and expand) towards nonsense as a *mode*. The proposal for a definition is beyond the scope of this paper, but I still want to show the formal features that such a definition should include.

From the sketch of a "form of a definition", it will become clear that nonsense shift the

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[296] I am aware that nonsense is not exclusively literary. However, as it will be clear, is primarily and originally literary, both as a genre and as a mode of shaping language.

[297] This is the operation done by two different authors publishing in the same journal two different papers with the same title *Nonsense* in the spawn of few years – respectively Haight, 1971 and Charlton, 1977 on the "British Journal of Aesthetics". The focus on discomfort emerged instead in a recent special issue of the journal "Translation Studies" (see Lukes, 2019) which focuses on the difficulties of translating nonsense, featuring a variety of contributes (including one by Lecercle himself), all above the general direction set up by Lukes with her incorporation of nonsense within a more general "aesthetics of discomfort". There are several specific studies on the corpus of nonsense – i.e., on Carroll and Lear – most of them lacking a specific analysis of nonsense aesthetics, so not worth considering in this context (a good example being Fordyce & Marello, 1994).

weight of the "game of literature" onto the readers' end. This leads to my final question: how is the reader's experience of a nonsense text? I will attempt to answer this in my conclusion, referring to the general empirical reader (rather than the ideal one) with a descriptive stance (rather than a normative one), showing that a non-trivial understanding of nonsense allows readers to challenge common-sense assumptions about language and meaning by exploring unconventional forms and styles.[298]

Since the topic is literary, I will choose my corpus referring to the literary canon (Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear). The scope of the paper is primarily philosophical; therefore, I will avoid lengthy discussions about the context of the chosen texts.

2. The Unbearable Lightness of Nonsense: why Snarks matter.

A defence of the relevance of nonsense must begin with a simple consideration: philosophers have rarely studied nonsense in any depth. At first glance, it may appear that the problem is not interesting enough to spark one of the intricate debates that philosophers often relish.

The initial conceptualization of nonsense in philosophy came from the philosophers of language, starting with the idea of sense. Sense (*Sinn*), as in Frege's original conception, is the general attributed *expression* (or *mode of presentation*) to a singular term. A term may lack a reference (a real referred object) but still possess a sense, as is the case with fictional characters (Frege, 1948). The simple dualistic Fregean conception of sense was swiftly challenged by Bertrand Russel. While discussing the logical status of sentences involving fictitious or non-existing object, Russel notably simplified the fuzziness of *Sinn-Bedeutung* distinction, proposing a logical analysis of this kind of sentences that makes it much simpler to decide whether they are true or false (Russell, 1905). For Russell, the notion of sense – and its negation – was already superfluous for a logical analysis of language. Another area of philosophy that

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[298] I must confess my own philosophical roots: when I will be talking about readers, what I have in mind is the refined phenomenology of reading proposed by Wolfgang Iser and Robert Jauss and, in general, by the so-called "Constance school". The setting is therefore hermeneutical, with a strong attention towards the readers' end. However, since those references are not specifically relevant for the question here discussed, I will not be dealing further with them. The only disclaimer I think is necessary is that I will be referring primarily to singular empirical readers (as those discussed by Iser and Jauss, but also by Umberto Eco) opposed to the textual structure of the ideal/implicit reader; I will not be referring to interpretive communities and collective groups of readers (as in Stanley Fish).

dealt with the notion of sense differently is semiotics. In the well-established "triangle" theory of language (with various proposals by different authors regarding the vertices of this triangle), sense is associated with the entire proposition rather than a singular name. A sentence "makes sense" if it is possible to perform a semiotic translation of it – i.e., if it is possible to move freely among the three vertices of the triangle. A nonsense sentence is one lacking in either the symbol, the referent (the object), or the mental representation.[299]

However, there is another approach, one I am more sympathetic to, that avoids the confusion between sense and nonsense that occurs in logic: returning to literature. Language is shaped by how we use it, and while attempting a general and universal description may seem appealing, one must always consider linguistics *practices* and *usage*. This point is well-established by the evolution of Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought and, I argue, is relevant for my analysis of nonsense. Starting with what Wittgenstein wrote about nonsense in his first major work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, there is a clear distinction between *sinnlos* (senseless) propositions and *unsinnig* (nonsensical) ones. The second kind are those propositions that cannot possibly be understood, as no sense can be attributed to them (TLP, p. 4.003; 4.461; 4.464; 5.525). Note that this still closely related to the logical-semiotic conception: these propositions *lack* something (as it is clear in the *Preface* as well). Wittgenstein's perspective, however, underwent a significant change in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, where he introduced the concept of *Sprachspiel* and engaged more directly with literature (for nonsense, particularly the work of Lewis Carroll). Nonsense is no longer just a poorly formed language but one of the many language games with equal standing. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's aim in the PI is to "teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (PI, §464). His philosophical approach is an operation of clarification, intending to present the "patent nonsense" of long-standing philosophical problems in an organized and surveyable manner, providing a common ground for different individuals.

Returning to the question of why we should care about an aesthetical analysis of nonsense, even though it has been largely ignored in recent decades, the distinction between a

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[299] It is worth noting that in some formalization the mental representation *is* called sense; there is much confusion in the terminology, but it will become sufficiently clear when switching to a literary point of view.

"philosophical" concept of nonsense (in logic, philosophy of language, semiotics, etc.) and a "literary" approach becomes crucial. In the former case, the problem is non-existent: nonsense is merely *lacking* something, and the question is to determine precisely what that is. In the latter way, nonsense arises from a linguistic practice still employed in our everyday lives. Its usage implies intentionality and the possibility of a positive analysis, the one I aim to establish in my paper. Nonsense, with its mirror concept of sense, deserves an aesthetical analysis for the simple reason that it is used in certain language games. It is not an accidental deviation from the norm, but involves an intentionality that should be considered, at the very least, on par with the one attributed to other "negative" aesthetic concepts like ugliness and disgust, if not more so, as will become clear in the next paragraph.

So, these are the empirical reasons for addressing the subject. Now, for the theoretical reason, which is somewhat elusive and will be alluded to throughout. There is a prevailing meta-philosophical notion that problems in philosophy should be tackled directly. This seems so trivial that it is rarely questioned. The standard argumentative approach is as follows: I have an idea about something, and I start from something else to demonstrate or persuade that my idea about that something is correct, or at least the best fit. Few philosophers would refrain from taking a stance on "big problems" and developing their own theories and ideas around those subjects.

However, I want to try a different approach here. I want to start from the margins, not because I claim that these margins are indeed the centre or that I seek to methodically perform an epistemic or methodological inversion. I want to begin from the margins – in this case, the negativity expressed in the concept of nonsense – simply because these margins are understudied and unexplored. If something interesting and novel is to emerge in the cartography of a concept, it should not come from another examination of the core, but rather from an exploration of the uncharted borders. This exploration presents new questions: How do these border areas relate to other regions?[300] What are the connections that link these border areas to the core? In this case, investigating the unexplored borders calls for a change in perspective, even in methodology. While philosophy might readily dismiss "something stupid" as nonsense, literature must engage with a clear corpus, a tradition, some formal rules, etc. I

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[300] The cartographic metaphor is again from Wittgenstein, as in PI, §18.

believe this approach may shed new light on some old problems for language, but it is a gamble, and there is no certainty that an extensive study of nonsense will definitively clarify the relationship, for example, between truth and language.

3. "A Sham Corbel that supports Nothing": the Form of a Definition.

So, what is nonsense? I could claim that a definition of nonsense is simply not possible, as Haight suggests. Or I could delve into a lengthy distinction between logical, grammatical, and factual forms of nonsense, as Charlton did. Alternatively, I could attempt a definition of what nonsense *does* since it is a linguistic practice. There are numerous ways to approach the problem: a good sylloge of various proposed definitions is available on the website of one of the few individuals both studying and practicing this matter – Michael Heyman. Among the quoted authors in this compilation are Wim Tigges, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Heyman himself. A significant advantage of the collected definitions is that they all consider the literary aspect of the problem.

I intend to start from these definitions to outline a path for the quest to find a definition for nonsense. I do believe that a definition is possible, and I do not want to avoid the point, as it is crucial. As John Locke narrates in the "Epistle to the Reader" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, there is no point in discussing a matter if there is no common agreement on a shared definition, since "the greatest part of the Questions and Controversies that perplex Mankind depending on the doubtful and uncertain use of Words, or (which is the same) indetermined Ideas, which they are made to stand for". A definition is, therefore, essential. A significant portion of my research is precisely devoted to this quest. While I cannot expect to solve the problem here, I will suggest a few formal coordinates of the definition.

Form is relevant for nonsense to the extent that all the definitions in Heyman's collection (and even others not considered) shared some common formal features. However, apart from this very specific reason, I truly believe that the quest for a definition derives its value from the fact that any proposal of a construction (since a description is always a construction) *requires* it. Returning to Wittgenstein again: "Remember that we sometimes demand explanations for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the explanation a kind of sham corbel that supports nothing." (in brackets in PI, §217). Being

formal about a definition means acknowledging the formality of the required definition in the discussion. And, perhaps, a definition of nonsense should be *only* formal and *nothing more* than formal, as we are talking about a language game.

Before listing the common formal features, there is another point to address. As seen, the research field lies within the literary domain – i.e., the direct engagement with a nonsense corpus, rather than the pure logical one. This is because practices precede theory, and literary nonsense is primarily a practice. When discussing literary nonsense, it can be useful to distinguish between (i) the practices as they evolved over decades, creating a sense of "participation" in a *literary genre* and (ii) the practices as a theoretical way of doing something (this seems like a short-circuit), i.e., literary nonsense as a *literary mode*. In the first case the bibliography is rich: starting from the "literalization" of the first logician bound to deal with nonsense in a more analytic way – Ludwig Wittgenstein – to one of the few truly literary philosophers of contemporary times – Gilles Deleuze – who engages with nonsense within his more general theory of the event. Up to the most recent studies on Victorian nonsense – the studies of Susan Stewart, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Wim Tigges.

What all these works have in common is the constant reference to a precise *literary canon* written in a *specific language* at a *specific time*. Specifically, the works of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, written in English during the Victorian Age. Of course, there are remarkable differences between the two and it may be interesting to study different iterations of nonsense literature, but I will not cherry-pick when referring to either author. My primary example here will be one of the Carroll's later works: *The Hunting of Snark* (published in 1876 by Macmillan) – not to be talking again about the over-abused *Jabberwocky*.

Now, let's delve into the common formal features of a definition of nonsense:

1. Nonsense is not the opposite of sense. While it is lexically generated by its negation, in Wittgenstein's words, *sinnlos* (without-*sinn*, the opposite of *sinnvoll*, i.e., what has no meaning) is different from *unsinnig* (nonsensical). The field of sense encompasses both sense and non-sense: nonsense makes sense as long as it is the convergence point of the "series" where paradoxes are resolved by defying a binary logic of true and false. Nonsense lives and operates in its dual contradictory position of being both *prima facie* without sense and capable of "giving" sense to

its objects. Nonsense can be seen as the virtual pre-thetic field of possibilities where senses are constructed. For example, the Snark can be a Snark or a Boojum. This does not mean that two types of Snarks exist but simply that, at least in the case narrated by Carroll, "the Snark *was* a Boojum". Simple as that: a *different* logical principle of non-contradiction (versus the typical one where something is either A or not A, and of course a Boojum is not a Snark). The world created by nonsensical fiction is precisely coherent in respecting its own paradoxical rules (although it does not *simply* negate some logical rules).

2. Nonsense is set within a context that readers can somehow apprehend and creates a balance in contradiction by exaggerating some formal elements of language while nullifying others. This is well established by Lecercle and Tigges, with Lecercle referring to it as a "conservative-revolutionary genre". Pure gibberish is not nonsense, but gibberish framed within a context that provides some rules for the language game can be nonsense. Lecercle focuses on the description on how nonsense plays with phonetics, morphology, syntax, and semantics by highlighting how canonical nonsense is as syntactically rigorous as it can be – avoiding solecisms – while being semantically unconventional.[301] The way of hunting a Snark is the following:

You may seek it with thimbles – and seek it with care
You may hunt it with forks and hope;
You may threaten its life with a railway-share;
You may charm it with smiles and soap – (Carroll, 1962, p. 56)

The "recipe" for the hunt is described with such syntactical precision that it leaves no space for a semantic freedom: the categorial confusion in the paring of objects

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[301] Lecercle specifically refers to a double way for exploiting the formal elements of language in nonsense: *blanking* and *proliferation*. The most common form of nonsense works by proliferating syntax in order to compensate and expose the blanking in semantics (i.e., incoherence, contradictions, inversions, pastiches, etc.). See Lecercle, 2016, p. 60: "The formal excess of syntax compensates for a semantic (material) lack, or incoherence".

has to be taken as true, since it is precisely clear that for that specific action (seeking, hunting, threatening its life, charming) you do need respectively those things and in that precise parings (thimbles, forks and hope, a railway-share, smiles and soap). The freedom resides in the interpretation: how can someone use "forks and hope" to hunt a creature? The reader is therefore invited to take part in this highly linguistic game.

3. Nonsense is genuinely literary. This seems obvious, but it is always a possibility to analyse something in unexpected ways, referring to other forms of aesthetics and other principles. However, with nonsense, one cannot escape its purely literary nature. Lecercle writes extensively about how a nonsense writer should possess a deep knowledge and understanding of the structures of language to create "good" nonsense. Deleuze also delves into linguistic reflections when dealing with nonsense and paradoxes because "the whole problem lies in knowing whether language itself would be working without those entities" (LdS, XII series, my translation) and focuses much on singular words – *portmanteau* words or exoteric words. Nonsense should be constructed as a concept (i.e., *philosophically* as pointed out by Deleuze and Guattari) starting from a practice (i.e., *literary*). In this sense, as also pointed out by Lecercle in his analysis of Humpty Dumpty's theory of language, the literary practice anticipates (both logically and chronologically) the development of some theoretical philosophical problems.

4. There is a narrow technical definition of nonsense and a broad general one. The narrow definition, as stated before, refers to nonsense as a genre with a specific reference to the canon, allowing a distinction not only from gibberish but also from several nuanced forms of "confusing" literature – such as *littérature à clef*, obscurity, aphasia, surrealism, fictional languages, etc. The general definition hints at a definition as a mode, proposing a kind of "gradient for nonsense" that should encompass all those nuances. A good definition should be clear and informative without being overly narrow, making it useful for the construction of a typology.

Those are the formal traits that appear to be necessary for constructing a definition of nonsense. The construction of such a definition is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to emphasize a common trend in the approach to dealing with nonsense, especially evident in the first two points. It seems that nonsense may be resolved on the readers' end rather than on the writers'. The keywords mentioned in the definitions are "rules", "game", and "interpretation", indicating that the field is inherently hermeneutical. Therefore, a promising direction for the analysis may be to explore how readers participate in this language game. This participation is not a matter of emotion, as different forms of nonsense may elicit various emotions in the readers based on the contexts (e.g., Victorian nonsense for social critique, others for satirical or comical reasons, etc.). It is also not solely a matter of construction, as even gibberish can become nonsense in the right context, just as "Snark" is gibberish if we are not aware of 1876 Carroll's book. I will summarize this direction in my conclusion.

4. Conclusion: a Game of Nonsense

Reading nonsense is not a linguistic reading but rather a *lalangue*-istic reading (to use a Lacanian concept): it is neither a "private" language nor a fully public structured language. It has a link with our everyday language (conversation, child's play, etc.)[302], yet it poses some threats to the classical theories of communication (cooperative Gricean theory)[303]. What emerges is a "new order", i.e., a new reality. A reality in which we know (we get the meaning, i.e., we understand what it is said) that it does not mean what is uttered. It is not the case that we read what the author means (since it is *nonsense*), and the author does not mean what they say (since there is a shift between the sign and the referent, which in nonsense is unamendable). It seems that, in true nonsense, we read what the author *did not* mean: i.e., we are reading something else.[304]

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[302] This is very clear when studying the origins of nonsense poetry, going back to the orality of nursery rhymes and children lallation: nonsense language shows something primitive, pre-thetic and pre-representational (this being the very reason why nonsense authors do not like metaphors). This "language" is outside the language laws, it is indeed de-territorialized, and it does re define new borders and new rules.

[303] For this see Lecercle, 2016, ch. 2 "The Pragmatics of Nonsense", where he opposes the agonistic form of nonsense speech (based on the *violence* of language) to the Gricean conception of cooperative conversation.

[304] Interpretation of nonsense shows the characteristics of a negation which is indeed an affirmation of something else, somewhere else, on a different dislocated level or on different incompatible and incoherent levels at the same time (as in paradoxes). Interpretation of nonsense (as the lucid explanation of the Jabberwocky made by Humpty

Nonsense is therefore *non-representational*: there is no hierarchy between text and reality.[305] However, something is *arranged*: reading and interpreting nonsense is as much an act of arrangement as writing it, and this arrangement is rhizomatic (images-objects are blurred together and branched together) and defies the rules of the typical literature by bringing elements of incompatible levels of being into contiguity/co-presence: this is close to what Deleuze and Guattari call "minor literature", i.e. the "revolutionary conditions of any literature" (Deleuze, Guattari, 2016). For literary nonsense, we can again use one of Deleuze's expressions: it de-territorializes language, by proliferating interpretations and always offering *an alternative* to an interpretation. The common territory of language is abandoned. What counts are the links, not the knots, the connections, even if they are not rational, conceptual, etc. Interpretation, always plural, is *required* from nonsense to the reader: one must interpret nonsense and cannot avoid it. However, this interpretation has the same fluid dynamic of a ghost, of a hallucination, based on pure de-territorialized language and made by pure ungrounded and fluid interpretation. A new game of interpretation, with its own set of rules, which immediately follows the first passive-negative moment of discomfort.

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Dumpty) is no more than *our* common-sense interpretation *gone mad*, distorted in a mirror image, since it is required from the text, but it is actually impossible to obtain throughout our everyday hermeneutical processes. It is somehow tragic: one must interpret a nonsense text and cannot avoid it, even if it is a *struggle*, a fight against the text, to look for such an interpretation.

[305] The general idea when such a hierarchy is postulated is that the text may be seen as a trace, an absence, a simulacrum, of reality.

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