On Victorian Nonsense and Postmodern Sense[1]

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"Why did I take the lodgings I have got,
Where all I don't want is: - all I want not?"

Edward Lear, "Eclogue"

Speaking of the complexity of subjectivity, the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas reminds that " our inner world, the place of psychic reality, is inevitably less coherent than our representations of it; a moving medley of part thoughts, incomplete visualizations, fragments of dialogue, recollections, unremembered active presences, sexual states, ...," all vague yet powerful interior movements reminiscent of Wordsworth's famous lines – cited by Bollas – "Those obstinate questionings/ Of sense and outward things" out of which poetry is born.[2]

And indeed, Wordsworth's Ode is conceived of as the inner rumination of a poet who asks for the sense of a life where man is doomed to loose the original bliss of childhood and compelled to imitate, willingly, pre-established social structures of sense which inevitably lead to oblivion and death. Part of the answer that arises out of the poet's puzzlement is the intuitive conclusion that life maintains an inviolable link with an absolute sense that exists outside language: " a Presence which is not to be put by" and that sense-making implies upholding this paradox without solving it [3]. For it is the mysterious dynamics of paradox itself that conveys the feeling of something absolute, instinctively known at the onset of life and capable to be kept alive through the agency of poetic language as preserver of first memories[4].

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[1] An version of this text was presented at the First Conference of Romantic Studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Oporto on the 21st of March 2002

[2] Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character. Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 47.

[3] "Ode ('There was A Time')" v.119: William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: OUP, Oxford World's Classics, 2000), 300.

[4] *Op. cit.*, vv. 144-159.

"But for those obstinate questionings

Of sense and outward things,

Fallings from us, vanishings;

Blank misgivings of a Creature

Moving about in worlds not realised,

High instincts before which our mortal Nature

Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:

But for those first affections,

Those shadowy recollections,

Which, be they what they may,

Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,

Are yet the master light of all our seeing;

Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make

Our noisy years seem moments in the being

Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,

To perish never ....."

As the poem suggests and Wordsworth's theoretical text "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" makes clear, for the Romantic poet all sense-making ultimately comes to rest in a pre-given truth that remains alive in the hearts of men, especially in those unaffected by culturally aquired values. The role of the poet is to remain in touch with the heavenly origin of first emotions and to translate their universal truths into the sacramental metaphors of poetry which is the language of "a man speaking to men", a language which opens up the gateways of belonging and homecoming, of wholeness and totality.[5]

In the "Preface", Wordsworth denominates the catalystic and integrating agency of poetic language by the word "pleasure", a word that he repeats obsessively in the text – about forty times – and that he holds to be synonymous with the whole of human faculties, indeed with the essence of man itself: " The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely

[5] "Wordsworth's Prefaces of 1800 and 1802" in R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (eds.) Wordsworth & Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd. ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 241-272, 255.

that of the necessity of giving pleasure.... Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degredation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in a spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves"[6].

According to Wordsworth, then, "the grand elementary principle of pleasure" integrates the intelectual ("*knows*") and emotional ("*feels*") dimensions of man into a unifying life-energy ("*lives*") anchored in something permanent that inspires him to love ("*moves*"). Pleasure, here, is a powerful word that restitutes the human being back to himself as a knowing, feeling and concerned creature, his epistemological, emotional and ethical dimensions all brought together into a centre of being. It is an energy which does not dissociate the sensual stirrings of the body from affections and thought: for, as Wordsworth reminds us, «thoughts are the representative of past feelings» and as such they are eroticized into an encompassing energy of love.

As the history of literature since Wordsworth shows, the task of upholding the whole-making principle of pleasure has met with many hazards: the contradictions and elusiveness of the poetic subject, its complex relation to what it thinks of as an object, and finally and inevitably the medium where all those tensions come together: language itself. The poetic trajectory of the last two centuries has revealed that in trying to uphold the notion of man as a centred being, language yields tension, fragmentation and deletion and that pleasure can be akin to pain, a possibility foreseen by Wordsworth himself.[7] As inheritors of a concept of language fundamented in ideals of unity and integration, the poets of the nineteenth century discover that language can be an obstacle instead of a link, the place of estrangement rather than of revelation. It is in this context, at the moment when poets become aware of the resistances of language and its capacity of alienating the speaking subject, that the Victorian art of Nonsense comes into being.[8]

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[6] *Ibidem*, p.257-258. See also Lionel Trilling "*The fate of Pleasure. Wordsworth to Dostoevski*" in W. K. Wimsatt (ed.) *Literay Criticism, Idea and Act* (Berkeley:: University of California Press, 1974), 189-206.

[7] "Wordswoth' s Prefaces", *op. cit.*, 258: "*We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations of pleasure.*"

[8] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), *passim* but especially, "Introduction" and "The 1860s and after. Aesthetics, language, power and high finance", 381-401.

In the second half of nineteenth-century England, when mainstream poets struggle with the limits of language in order to make it yield to the desesperation of their desire, a landscape painter by the name of Edward Lear issues a reprint of a book of illustrated verse for children he had published in 1846, and - to put it dramatically - creates a new form of art: the art of Nonsense.

Entitled *A Book of Nonsense*,[9] Edward Lear's book seemed innocent enough at the time of the first edition. Inscribed in the tradition of nursery rhymes by form and related to the topos of the world upside down through the incidents on display, the book goes rather unnoticed. From the edition of 1861 onwards, however, and through the repeated successes of more *Nonsense-books*, the everyday word "nonsense", a powerful preserver and regulator of sense, is gradually used as a positive category for all verbal play that openly flounts common sense by its humourous, fantastic or parodic nature. Edward Lear becomes an idol not only for children but also in popular culture in general[10]. So effective is the meta-communicative message inherent in the title of Lear's books, that in the eighties the term "Nonsense" comes to denote all playful use of language where the speaker is — as Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty — the absolute master. Old and familiar forms, like poetry for children, puns, society games, fairy tales, etc., all are indiscriminately called "Nonsense" by reason of their non-commitment towards reality[11]. That is the reason, incidentally, that the book of Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) self-entitled as a fairy-tale, came to be considered as a work of "nonsense". Handcuffed together through the art of Nonsense, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll are caught up in the paradox that their work can only be approached through a concept they themselves helped to propagate. And although they are very different artists and each poet needs separate ways of approach, both show how strange and surprising reality can appear when purely motivated by language.

A Book of Nonsense is a collection of illustrated *limericks*, a verse-form belonging to the oral tradition of pornography[12]. Lear skilfully entwines the tight narrative and metrical

[9] *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. by Holbrook Jackson (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 1st pr. 1947) and Edward Lear, *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*, ed. by Vivien Noakes (London: Penguin Classics, 2001)

[10] The shift of the common noun "nonsense" as negative regulator of common sense to the noun "nonsense" meaning " *a book of nonsense or nonsense verses*" is registered by the OED as having occurred in 1887 and cites Lear's Nonsense Book as example (OED, 1977, vol. VII, 200).

[11] Dieter Petzold, *Formen und Funktionen der Englischen Nonsense.Dichtung im 19. Jarhhundert* (Nurnberg: Hans Carl Verlag, 1972).

[12] G. Legman,"Introduction", *The Limerick* (London: Jupiter Books 1974).

scheme of the *limerick* with private obsessions so that their transgressive nature is wholly supported by the mechanical repetitions of the form which exempt the author of any subversive intent. By blatantly showing that mental categories are products of form and that human interaction is motivated by the iron necessity of rhyme, Edward Lear creates a new absolute: language itself. Like pornography, to which it is akin, Lear's *Book of Nonsense* escapes the Victorian predicament of negotiating between subject and object by totalizing language in such a way that the tension of the subject-object relation dissolves in the very means by which it comes to exist. Coinciding with the language that creates them, subject and object come together into the pure (non)being of fusion. Through grotesque exageration of the material supports of language, the verbal play of Nonsense exempts itself of any semantic consequence and defers all meaning to an all-embracing dimension outside language. Rather than a parody of sense, the art of Nonsense is a confirmation of the Romantic suggestion that an absolute pre-existing sense moves and inspires human language. The romantic vision of language as an integrating power is here taken to its utmost consequences and stretched until it dissolves the boundaries on which the possibility of distinction itself depends: the grand elementary principle of pleasure has been taken at its word. And thus, through the radical division between linguistic matter and its symbolic potential, the art of Victorian Nonsense confirms — with a vengeance — the great unifying power of Romantic poetry.

The deep nostalgia for totality, inherent in the art of Nonsense, is further emphasized by the context in which it comes to exist: the world of the child, which through the agent of Romantic poetry, has become imbued with notions of purity and religious longing. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the creative potentiality of the rich metaphors of childhood have exhausted themselves and the child has become sentimentalized. The strong idealization of childhood thus assures the easy gratification of 'feeling without effort' [13] and its harmlessness becomes the perfect alibi for the linguistic play with transgressions, an alibi for the authors as well for the audience[14]. Indeed, all guilt is ascribed to language, which robs the speaking subject of his free will and reduces him to a state of childish helplessness, the helplessness of laughter.

[13] The expression is Iris Murdoch's, the source of which I am unable to trace

[14] For contemporary interpretations of the nineteenth-century associations between childhood and innocence, see James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence. The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998) and Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1994).

The Victorian art of Nonsense and its self-confessed intention of innocence have been interpreted in ways that go from sentimental elegy to psycho-analytical readings of infantile regression.[15] The general, yet unfundamented opinion exists that it is a typical form of English humour and that popular artforms like Monthy Pythons, Woody Allen or Seinfeld are heirs to Victorian Nonsense .[16] The presence of Lear and Carroll also exists in canonical literature, however, and the experiments of Modernism with form, its obsession with impersonalization, its longing for the absolute art - object, all receive echoes in Victorian Nonsense.[17] Moreover, by showing how the formal and natural orders of language are at odds, both Lear and Carroll announce twentieth-century descriptive linguistics and enhance the complex realtionship between grammar and pragmatics.[18]

The "multiverse" of post-modernism, especially, with its spectacle of various and contradictory truths revealed by different language-forms and language-uses seems akin to the art of nonsense. Here, the growing awareness of the determinisms of language have shattered the transcendent ideals of Romanticism that now appear as themselves functions of language. The overarching principle that guaranteed the contrastive strength of the familiar dichotomy sense and nonsense has disappeared and both, nonsense and sense, have now become complementary.

What has changed in the time that goes from Victorian Nonsense to our days is not the nature of the language games but the dissipation of the frame that kept play and reality safely apart. The intimations of the nineteeth century art of nonsense, be they suggestions of negative theology proclaimed by Chesterton or the "marriage of language and the unconscious" as Deleuze writes, have yielded a new awareness, namely, that all sense-making must remain in the paradox of the self-referential nature of language and that therefore, it can never obtain what it so urgently seeks: a definite sense articulated in words.[19]

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[15] Cf. Wim Tigges (ed.) *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987) and Wim Tigges, *Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988)

[16] See for instance Robert Bebayoun, *Le nonsense. De Lewis Carroll à Woody Allen* (Paris: Balland., 1977) and William Irwin (ed.) *Seinfeld and Philosophy. (A Book about Everything and Nothing),* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2000).

[17] For associations between Victorian Nonsense and Modernism see Robert Phillips (ed.), *Aspects of Alice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

[18] Cf. Marina Yaguello, *Alice au pays du langage. Pour comprendre la linguistique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981) and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense. The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994)

[19] G. K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Nonsense" (1901) in G. Pocock and M. Bozman (eds.), *Modern Humour* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1940), pp. 157-161 and Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), p. 7.

And yet, this paradox, like the paradox of Nonsense itself, still yields a promise of sense: sense without a defined object or direction, perhaps, but sense as a never-ending quest of language for that which irremediably resists appropriation[20]. To quote Derrida on deconstruction: « Deconstruction gives pleasure in that it gives desire. To deconstruct a text is to disclose how it functions as desire, as a search for presence and fulfillment which is interminably deferred. One cannot read without opening oneself to the desire of language, for the search for that which remains absent and other than oneself».[21]

It is uncanny how Derrida's words echo those of Wordsworth. And yet how far removed is Derrida's notion of pleasure from "the grand elementary principle of pleasure" of Wordsworth. For the Romantic poet pleasure is the feeling which links the speaking subject to himself and to others through the integrating energy of a language anchored in a pre-given order. In such a vision, language is the "overflow" from an original sense of plenitude which brings poet and audience together. In Derrida's words, pleasure is itself a function of language and is therefore inscribed on an axis of time and space yet to be unfolded. Linked to the desire of the "search for presence and fulfillment which is interminably deferred", it is a pleasure that is always already devided from itself, and yet tenacious in the search for what of necessity must escape it.

What, one wants to ask, has happened between the 'grand elementary pleasure' of Wordsworth and the pleasure endlessly deferred Derrida speaks of? The answer, it seems to me, passes through the history and through the memory of all negotiations between sense and nonsense that literature has left us. Oriented to the future rather than to the past, the new awareness points to the possibility that, among all the potentialities of sense-making, there may exist another sense.[22] Neither the promise of an original resting-place nor the prospect of a final goal, sense may be conceived of as a never-ending vigilance, an ethical commitment that must itself create the values by which it wants to live[23].

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[20] Sense as a transcendence in immanence. For an analysis of sense as immanence, see Luc Ferry, *L´homme-Dieu ou le Sens de la vie* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1996) Translated into English by David Pellauer as *Man Made God. The Meaning of Life* (Chicago University Press, 2002).

[21] Quoted in R. Kearney (ed.), *Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers* (Manchester, Manchester Univesity Press), 126

[22] Emphasis mine.

[23] It is interesting to observe that the style of the British psychoanalist R. Winnicott, who is famous for his concept of play as the *intermediary space* for the negociation of sense, has been associated to the English tradition of Nonsense and to poets like Stevie Smith. What all authors have in common is the playful use of language as means for indeterminacy and therefore open-endedness. cf. Adam Phillips, *Winnicott,* (London, HarperCollins, 1988), 14-15.