

CHAPTER TWO

SENSE AND NONSENSIBILITY

While commercial interests dominated the nineteenth century, and while the novel, as a form, was at the peak of its popularity, a whole new genre was being created by two writers who wrote for a simple purpose – to have fun themselves, and to provide amusement to others. They were Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll and the genre they helped create was the genre of *Nonsense*. In this chapter I attempt to trace the nature and roots of Nonsense Literature, and attempt to see where the *Alice* books and Lear's works stand in relation to the development of Children's Literature in general. I shall also trace the factors that led to the emergence of Nonsense in the Victorian Age and present an overview of what has been said about the Nonsense works of Lear and Carroll so far.

The Word

The word *nonsense* itself refuses signification. The prefix *non* is tricky, and makes the meaning of the word all the more elusive (non + sense). If *sense* means *meaning*, then *nonsense* is all that is *not sense* – all that does not make meaning. Paradoxically, nonsense has a meaning and that is: *that which has no meaning*³⁹. The only way that the word *nonsense* can mean, is by virtue of the existence and meaning of the word *sense*. In short, *nonsense* is a non-word, which has no identity except by negating *sense*. It is the poor cousin, the weak enemy of the word *sense*. It is in short, like all other *non*-words, a *non*-entity. It is a

³⁹ The *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines *nonsense* as "words or actions that convey an absurd meaning or no meaning at all." (924)

practical demonstration of the Saussurean concept of sliding signification⁴⁰. Ironically, *nonsense* is something we can only sense but cannot dissect analytically.

The Genre

There is no evidence that Lear and Carroll ever met – but their works are inevitably grouped together. Some have called Nonsense a “fine art” (Wells 26) but most refer to it as a *genre*⁴¹. Is it possible that the Victorian Age saw the invention of a new genre? Were Lear and Carroll instrumental in introducing a new genus of English Literature into the mainstream? Wim Tigges, in *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense* agrees that it may be classified as a genre (or at least a sub-genre):

I would define nonsense, then, as a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody and representation, or a combination of these. In order to be successful, nonsense must at the same time invite the reader to interpretation and avoid the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning which can be obtained by considering connotations of associations, because they lead to nothing. (Tigges *Explorations* 27)

Later in the book, Tigges admits that “nonsense is, if not a genre, then a sub-genre, or type of literature with definite thematic and structural characteristics, a form whose methods are not isolated and erratic, but can in fact be related to a major tradition in art and thought”

⁴⁰ See Chapter Three for an overview of the theoretical concepts of the Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure.

⁴¹ While I shall present my own views about the defining characteristics of Nonsense in each of the following chapters in this dissertation, I refrain from repeating the glut of definitions that have been offered by numerous authors and critics over the last century and a half. Several are repetitive and the survey has been successfully attempted by researchers far superior to me in the past. An excellent summary of these may be found in Chapters 1 and 2 of Tigges’ *Anatomy*.

(Tigges *Explorations* 57). However, in his later work, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, Tigges decides that to categorise Nonsense as a genre would be an error because nonsensical elements are often also found in the works of authors other than Lear and Carroll. He, therefore, decides to modulate his earlier definition by adding that “it may legitimately be stated that we are dealing with nonsensical ‘devices’, or that a novel, a short story or a poem has a greater or lesser nonsensical quality. In this respect, ‘nonsense’ is like ‘satire’ in its usage, since the latter term too can refer to a genre (the Roman verse satire) as well as to a quality” (Tigges *Anatomy* 49).

What exactly is a *genre*? A useful definition of the word *genre* is provided by Fredric Jameson: “Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact. The speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deictics and pragmatics) which ensure their appropriate reception” (Jameson 92–93).

The “speech act” therefore demands that the speaker/communicator and listener/receiver, share common codes – cultural, linguistic etc. Nonsense literature is certainly based on the same premise. But its function is purely anti-institutional because it seeks to upset the reader/listener’s system of codes, through the act of reading. The *Nonsense* form of literature, therefore, is not a *genre* at all, in the accepted sense of the word, because it works against all – if any – codes it may be using. It makes the “social contract” with the reader through the use of the English language; but then proceeds to break the contract repeatedly with every reading act, refusing to “specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact.” Nonsense, thus, is neither a device nor a genre; it is a play of a moment, a contextual game that is neither a joke nor a parody, neither absurd nor surreal, neither grotesque nor slapstick. It is none of these at once and yet all of these at times. The only difference is that all of the

above have a specific purpose, a pre-determined impact on the audience that, if not effected, makes the work futile, whereas Nonsense has no fixed or final meaning. In the words of Michael Heyman, “nonsense leads us down a path of sense, only to turn aside from the expected destination at the last moment; in the end, we find we keep walking in circles – or beautiful, infinite fractals – and that the joy and *meaning* is in the journey, not the destination” (Heyman *Rasa* xxv). Nonsense has no endpoint for the reader to reach and therefore, Nonsense can *never really fail*.

The Nature of Literary Nonsense

Even though it may not be a genre in the typical sense, several intensive and extensive studies about Nonsense have been published over the years. In this section, I present a survey of the major critical works⁴² in the field and attempt to demonstrate how my study could add to the already accepted perceptions of the works of Lear and Carroll. In the process, I shall also take the opportunity to list and exemplify the typical traits of Nonsense literature that have already been identified by critics like Elizabeth Sewell, Susan Stewart, Jean Jacques Lecercle, Giles Deleuze and Wim Tigges. I present a detailed summary of their views here for two reasons: (a) The analytical depth and historical breadth of their observations are unsurpassed. (b) Their critical observations are of a nature drastically different from what I have attempted in my own dissertation and a synopsis of their books helps, to a degree, to fill whatever gaps may exist in my study.

Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Field of Nonsense* (1952) was the first comprehensive attempt to analyse the phenomenon of Nonsense. Sewell’s study has set the standard for studies in the

⁴² My focus, in this chapter, is on the books that have been published about Nonsense. There have been numerous articles regarding Lear and Carroll – their lives and works – but those are beyond the scope of this in-depth survey. However, in the chapters that follow, I have referred to several of these articles and presented their views wherever I have found them relevant.

field and is now considered an ideal text for aspiring critics in the area. Sewell first presents the different uses of the term *nonsense* and then proceeds to distinguish *Literary Nonsense* from the commonplace usage of the word. She points out that the term *nonsense* means different things in different contexts (Sewell 1): logicians use it for contradictions in an argument and scientists use it to refer to statements that go against verifiable facts (Sewell 1). Sewell points out that there are several ways of viewing Nonsense. One possible way is as “an annihilation of relations, either of language or experience, and to enjoy it as a delectable and infinite anarchy knowing no rules, liberating the mind from any form of order of system” (Sewell 4). Another way is to see it as a structure with its own rules and regulations, “a structure held together by valid mental relations” (Sewell 4). She observes that, like most games, Nonsense is “an independent system with its own brand of relationship structure” (Sewell 25) and “a construction subject to its own laws” (Sewell 5, 26). Sewell, however, prefers to see Nonsense as a *game*. She draws a parallel between the sense/nonsense dialectic and another binary opposition, order/disorder: “The game is a play of the side of order against disorder” (Sewell 46) and, interestingly, “nonsense is on the side of order” (Sewell 46). She insists that order is at the foundation of Nonsense – “the principle of organization in Nonsense” (45–46) – a point that has been debated by later critics such as Tigges (1988) and Lecercle (1994).

Notably, Sewell justifies the marginalisation of *The Hunting of the Snark* among the Nonsense works of Lewis Carroll because it “takes itself too seriously in its evocation of death and ontological meaninglessness to be successful nonsense” (Sewell qtd.in Lecercle 192). The *Snark* falls below Sewell’s (and Lecercle’s) expectations because of the “gross materiality of food” (Lecercle 192) that interferes with the poetic metaphor. Sewell also expresses her dislike the sudden instances of Homeric similes in *Snark* such as the following:

And my heart is like nothing so much as a bowl

Brimming over with quivering curds! (Carroll *Shark* 710)

In spite of the exaggerated nonsense in the lines, Sewell feels that it “breaks the rules of the Nonsense game” (Sewell 169). Sewell traces in the works of Lear and Carroll a world not of things “but of words and ways of using them” (Sewell 17) – a world characterised by *play*. The play of Nonsense, according to Sewell, is one in which the reader participates with the author, a game which, in the act of reading, forces the reader into self-consciousness because “the mind is partly the player and partly its own plaything, not alternately but simultaneously, in a mutual exchange” (Sewell 187). She indicates that, being part of a game like Nonsense, gives the reader a sense of power, for “to play, no matter at what, is to play at being God” (Sewell 187). In reading Nonsense, then, we are also creating it: we are co-authors, interacting, co-writing and generating our own semantics, tweaking language in a way that is not usually allowed; it encourages us to exercise our own power of imagination, a power which, in children, is “akin to divine creative power” (Heyman *Boshen* 190).

While Sewell’s work is a monograph, Susan Stewart (1978) moves from a text-centric study of Nonsense to an intertextual one. In a meticulously researched work on the intertextual connections of Nonsense (*Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*), Stewart stresses the contextual factors responsible for meaning-making. She argues that “any situation depends upon members coming to share a conception of the horizon of the situation, a conception of what is relevant (appropriate) to the situation in light of this horizon, and an acting with regard to an appropriate outcome of the situation. The *text* of the situation is contingent upon a notion of relevant context, that is, the horizon of the situation” (Stewart 85).

Stewart's study is divided into two parts: (a) Part I: Common sense and Fictive Universes and (b) Part II: Making Nonsense. The first section traces a detailed history of the term *nonsense* while, in the second, Stewart lists and analyses the various kinds of play that function in the production and reception of Nonsense texts. She brings to light several interesting facts, some of which I present here.

In tracing the development of the word *nonsense* and the changes in its signification, Stewart finds that "in the nineteenth century *nonsense* could mean 'money' or a 'fiasco' in slang" (Stewart 4). She draws our attention to the fact that, in daily parlance, the word is used to refer to "that which should not be there. We say 'Cut out that nonsense,' 'Knock off the nonsense,' 'Enough of that nonsense,' or 'That's just a bunch of nonsense.' Nonsense becomes that which is irrelevant to context, that to which context is irrelevant" (5). Nonsense throws our notions of *common sense* into relief, because "at the point of nonsense, common sense is scattered and dispersed, made relative to alternative systems of order" (21). Play is a form of reframing (31), a change in context. One of the ways in which writers and poets tend to reframe their content is by using a metaphor – a figure of speech – which functions by switching frames, yet keeps the action of reframing unconscious. Nonsense deflates metaphors by taking them literally. "Nonsense results from a radical shift towards the metaphoric pole accompanied by a decontextualization of the utterance" (35).

In the latter half of her book, she describes the various forms of inversions and reversals that characterise Nonsense: "(1) the symmetrical inversion of proper nouns (2) the hierarchical inversion of relationships (3) the fragmentation involved in transgressing any system of order" apart from the "inversions of classes, reversible texts, discourse that denies itself, and the inversion of metaphor" (Stewart 66). She quotes several examples from nursery rhymes as examples of inversion and Nonsense, one of which I reproduce here:

The sausage is a cunning bird
 With feathers long and wavy;
 It swims about the frying pan
 And makes its nest in gravy. (Stewart 67)

Nonsense also tends to reverse phonemes:

Great but not nady
 Med the sonkey
 Tainting his pail
 Bly skue. (Stewart 69)

On occasion, it also reverses morphemes:

Most people don't know it,
 But actually there isn't a diff
 Of bitterance between a
 Hipponoceros and a rhinopotamus. (ibid.)

Stewart shows how the play with textual boundaries can lead to forms of Nonsense.

Lullabies, counting out games, tongue twisters, performance games and sound-based rhymes are crossing points, in-between surfaces that function as “both the interface between reality and the game and the articulation of the interface between reality and the game” (Stewart 91). In short, Nonsense texts perform a dual function: (a) they act as a gateway for the reader to cross over to an imaginary realm of play and (b) compel the reader to become conscious of the gateway itself. Nonsense (and the other forms of play that Stewart has mentioned above) acts as a medium that gives us a world-view, while simultaneously revealing to us the way in which the medium itself works. The other form of play in Nonsense is the “Play with Infinity” (Stewart 116). Nonsense is characterised by the following types of play with infinity:

(i) **Nesting:** An infinite regression can be engineered in different ways, one of which, Stewart calls ‘Nesting.’ An example of nesting is the dream-within-a-dream motif in *Alice* or the play-within-a-play technique employed in *Hamlet*. Stewart shows how there could be a “nesting as quotation, a story within story” (124) as in the following example:

It was a dark and stormy night, and the captain said to the crew, ‘Crew, tell me a story.’ And the crew said, ‘It was a dark and stormy night, and the captain said to the crew . . .’” (124)

Stewart points out that certain texts tend to dissolve themselves because they function like Chinese boxes, wherein the text deflates itself by drawing attention to the writing process itself, and how what is written can end up as a whole lot of words which reach nowhere. An example of this can be found in Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704): “I have been for some years preparing materials towards a Panegyric upon the World: to which I intended to add a second part, entitled A Modest Defence of the Proceedings of the Rabble in all Ages. Both of these I had thought to publish by way of an appendix to the following treatise; but finding my common-place book fill much slower than I had reason to expect, I have chosen to defer them to another occasion” (Swift qtd. in Stewart 127–128).

(ii) **Circularity:** Texts that, instead of arriving at a conclusion, revert back to their beginnings could be said to be circular in nature. This can be found in several common children’s rhymes:

I know a man named Michael Finnegan –
He wears whiskers on his chinnegan.
Along came a wind and blew them in again;
Poor old Michael Finnegan, begin again. (Withers qtd. in Stewart 131)

The unique thing about circularity, according to Stewart is that “the circle confronts us not only in the form of paradox, but with the form of all paradoxes – a quality of limitedness and limitlessness ‘all at once’ ” (Stewart 133).

(iii) Serializing: Another way of extending a discourse into the play of infinity is by presenting “unlimited series and causal chains” (133). Jump rope rhymes and counting rhymes like *One, two, buckle my shoe* fall into this category. Another common form of this is the *chain verse* wherein one thing leads to another to end in nothing meaningful at all:

I found a silver spoon
 I gave it to my mother
 To buy a little brother
 The brother was too cross
 I sold him for a horse
 The horse wouldn't go
 I sold it for a dollar
 The dollar wouldn't pass
 I stuck it in the snow
 The snow wouldn't melt
 I stuck it in my belt
 The belt wouldn't buckle
 I put it in my knuckle
 My knuckle wouldn't bend
 Peanuts, peanuts, five cents a pack!
 Wrapt it in paper with a string around. (Heck qtd. in Stewart 140)

Finally, Stewart identifies a unique characteristic in Nonsense i.e., *Simultaneity*. She shows how simultaneity goes against three of Husserl's laws of time⁴³ and confronts the reader with "the impossibility of time being in more than one place at once" (Stewart 146). With reference to Nonsense, simultaneity can be seen in: (a) The "collapsing of time" (150) – the ambiguous or absent time references in the *Alice* books and the Nonsense stories of Lear, are excellent examples of this. (b) The Dadaist and Surrealist ways that force a "suspension of the everyday lifeworld" (Stewart 153) – like a chant, or the use of different forms of sound effects to dissociate the reader's experience of the text from its content and make her aware of simultaneous alternative worlds. (c) The simultaneity of form – an instance of which can be seen in the position of the tabulated summary of *Sylvie and Bruno* which "gives the reader an overview in both directions of all the passages in the two books where 'abnormal states occur'" (Stewart 154). (d) Discontinuity is another technique to bring about a sense of simultaneity (several instances of this will be dissected in the following chapter).

The third major critical work in the field of Nonsense is *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* by Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1994). In sharp contrast to Stewart, Lecercle undertakes an intra-textual study of Nonsense in general and the works of Lear and Carroll in particular. Lecercle uses the theories of semantics, pragmatics, logic, phonetics and morphology to dissect what Nonsense does to language and how it operates at the level of language – what he terms an "anachronic account" of Nonsense (Lecercle 2).

Lecercle attempts to demonstrate that Nonsense, as a genre, is "structured by the contradiction . . . a dialectic, between over-structuring and de-structuring, subversion and

⁴³ (1) "Different times can never be conjoint" (2) the relation between two separate moments in time is a "nonsimultaneous" one (3) each moment is a part of time past and time future (Stewart 146).

support” (3) and that “Nonsense both supports the myth of an informative and communicative language and deeply subverts it” (ibid.). Taking a diachronic view of Nonsense, Lecercle shows that it is “a by-product of the development of the institution of the school, that the texts provide an imaginary solution to the real contradiction between the urge to capture an ever wider proportion of the population for the purpose of elementary schooling and the resistance, religious, political and psychological, that such a cultural upheaval inevitably arouses” (Lecercle 4). Notably, he insists that “Nonsense is a serious genre – preserving the code is its main task” (Lecercle 34).

At the linguistic level, Lecercle identifies the following tactics in the performance and production of Nonsense:

(i) Coinages: Neologisms (like “gromboolian” or “scroobious”), portmanteau words like the ones in *Jabberwocky* (like “frumious” or “slithy”) or in some of Lear’s poems (such as “buzztential” or “fiddledum”) are a common feature of Nonsense. Lecercle observes that most nonsense coinages are not onomatopoeic like “higgledy-piggledy” or “hoity-toity” (Lecercle 39), words which are typically found in nursery rhymes that children sing. Instead, the word-formation is more of a “*regular*” (40) type because “nonsense often plays with sounds; but what it really likes to play with is rules” (40). What takes the place of the linguistic rule is not chaos. In fact, Nonsense functions by substituting “another regularity for the expected one. As we can see, subversion in nonsense does not result in the dissolution of all rules; but in the creation of new ones” (Lecercle 41).

(ii) Exploitation of Borders: Echoing Stewart’s concept of playing with boundaries, Lecercle notes that Nonsense tends to transgress rules of grammar and syntax but bounce back to reinforce the law again. As he puts it, “Nonsense breaks rules not by forgetting about them, but by following them to the letter, in a deliberately blind fashion, thus illegally

extending their rules” (Lecerle 48). He gives an example of the exaggeration of grammatical rules (“verbs ending in the same phonemes have the same past participles”):

I said, ‘This horse, sir, will you shoe?’

And soon the horse was shod.

I said, ‘This deed, sir, will you do?’

And soon the deed was dod! (Lecerle 48)

The rules that are transgressed must be replaced by new ones, while simultaneously maintaining the old rule “in the background, so that the new rule is limited in its scope, and temporary” (ibid.). Besides, each transgression is usually followed up by more, similar, ones – each transgression must be a part of a series. He concludes that, on the linguistic plane, “morphological rules are deeply respected in nonsense and, contradictorily, subverted or exploited, often by being understood literally, that is extended beyond their actual (but contingent) scope, for false (but logical) reasons” (Lecerle 49).

Nonsense, occasionally, indulges in syntactic chaos. Lecerle demonstrates this by presenting a line from *Wonderland*, spoken by the Duchess: “Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise” (Carroll qtd. in Lecerle 56). However, such syntactic aberrations are particularly rare in Nonsense texts because, as Lecerle states, “I can take any amount of semantic incoherence in my stride, but syntactic chaos, because of the centrality of syntax, provokes my deepest unease” (Lecerle 57). The adherence to syntactic regulations permits a degree of comfort to the reader, enabling a sort of preparedness of the semantic incoherence she is about to face. If Nonsense were a painting, however bizarre, it would still have a frame. Syntax frames Nonsense, making it more palatable for the reader.

Nonsense loves irrelevant details and stretches each unnecessary description to interminable lengths, filling it with precise details that add nothing to the semantic content of the text at all. Typically, the attempt of a Nonsense description is a tongue-in-cheek activity, designed to sound as serious as possible, while indulging in nonsensical detail. As an instance, I shall quote a passage from Lear which is different from Lecercle's example – a paragraph from Lear's *Nonsense Cookery*:

TO MAKE GOSKY PATTIES

Take a pig, three or four years of age, and tie him by the off-hind leg to a post. Place 5 pounds of currants, 5 of sugar, 2 pecks of peas, 18 roast chestnuts, a candle, and six bushels of turnips, within his reach; if he eats these, constantly provide him with more.

Then, procure some cream, some slices of Cheshire cheese, four quinces of foolscap paper, and a packet of black pins. Work the whole into a paste, and spread it out to dry on a sheet of clean brown waterproof linen.

When the paste is perfectly dry, but not before, proceed to beat the Pig violently, with the handle of a large broom. If he squeals, beat him again.

Visit the paste and beat the pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties.

If it does not then, it never will; and in that case the Pig may be let loose, and the whole process may be considered as finished. (Lear 250)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ This is one of the rare occasions when a term that is particularly associated with the *Alice* books can be found in the works of Edward Lear. In this case, it is the word Cheshire that immediately brings to mind Carroll's "Cheshire Cat". The involvement of a Pig in a recipe also, instantly reminds the Carroll reader of the chapter in *Alice*, titled 'Pig and Pepper'. Lear and Carroll never met, although "quite a few people shared an acquaintance with both of them" (Heath 5). It may not be significant at this juncture, but Edward Lear *did* read Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1880, in the month of October but apparently made no comment about it (Noakes *Introduction* xliii).

Lecerle goes on to explicate his point about the rules being broken for the sake of new (though incoherent and often ambiguous) ones, by using the tools of logic and giving several examples to support the point. He repeats his observation further in the book, saying that “rules of language and conventions there are, but one can only conform to them if one has transformed them, if one still transgresses them, or, to borrow a famous phrase, if one supports them, but only under erasure” (Lecerle 114). Touching upon some aspects of the theories of Derrida and Lacan, Lecerle concludes, “Nonsense, therefore, is a constant effort towards mastery, towards blocking the emergence of the radically unmeant, the true or radical nonsense of possession or delirium” (Lecerle 134). In short, Lecerle sees Nonsense as a buffer, a softer spot to fall, a technique for language-users to escape the abyss of signification – or the absence of it.

In 1969, Giles Deleuze’s *Logique du Sens* was published in French. This extremely cryptic but seminal work, which was translated into English in 1990, revealed, for the first time, connections between the philosophy of the stoics and Lewis Carroll’s nonsense works⁴⁵.

Deleuze presents his views on Nonsense as a series of *series* – each chapter expressing the kinds of unique series that constitute Nonsense (“Paradoxes of Pure Becoming”, “Propositions”, “Duality”, “The Ideal Game”, etc.). He resonates with the views of Sewall when he notices that Nonsense is characterised by *Reversals* – Reversals of (a) Time (past/present/future) (b) Voice (active/passive) and (c) Causality (cause becomes effect and effect becomes cause) (Deleuze 4–5). The stoics were the first to differentiate between – corporeal entities and their incorporeal effects and *vice versa*. They showed how incorporeal entities (like time, space, etc.) are essential for the existence of corporeal entities (bodies). Yet, stoics considered abstract entities like qualities, states of affair, etc. to be “no less beings

⁴⁵ It is practically impossible to put all of Deleuze’s views here. I shall summarize a few of his key observations and draw upon aspects of his critique in later chapters where I find it relevant.

(or bodies) than substance is; they are part of substance, and in this sense they are contrasted with an *extra-Being* which constitutes the incorporeal as a nonexisting entity. The highest term therefore is not Being, but *Something (aliquid)*, insofar as it subsumes being, existence and inherence” (Deleuze 9). Instead of prioritising *Being* as Aristotle did, the stoics realised that Being, by its very nature, is dependent on the *void*, that “something may arise from nothing” (Deleuze 304) and events occur, not in depth, but “at the boundary between things and propositions” (Deleuze 11). *Becoming* occurs at the borders between the corporeal and the incorporeal. This understanding of the phenomenon of “becoming unlimited” enabled a play on the surface of events (which are “always only effects”), which made the Stoics “inventors of paradoxes” (Deleuze 10, 11). According to Deleuze, Lewis Carroll’s texts take up the agenda of the Stoics and perpetuate it. To understand this, I shall quote a passage from *Logic of Sense*:

Paradox appears as a dismissal of depth, a display of events at the surface, and a deployment of language along this limit. Humor is the art of the surface, which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights. The Sophists and Cynics had already made humor a philosophical weapon against Socratic irony; but with the Stoics, humor found its dialectics, its dialectical principle or its natural place and its pure philosophical concept. (Deleuze 11)

Carroll demonstrates the “difference between events, things, and states of affairs” (Deleuze 11) and the first part of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* reveals precisely this – the “becoming unlimited” – as holes turn into tunnels which turn to corridors and bodies repeatedly transform themselves. He finds it significant that Carroll uses card figures, seeing this as a denial of depth. “The becoming unlimited is maintained entirely within this inverted width. “‘Depth’ is no longer a complement,” (Deleuze 12) and Alice’s rise to the surface at the end of *Wonderland* is symbolic of her understanding that events only happen on surfaces.

Her return from the underground reflects “her disavowal of false depth and her discovery that everything happens at the border” (12). Nonsense reminds us of what the Stoics understood more than sixteen centuries ago: that “Plain Superficiality is the character of speech” (Carroll qtd. in Deleuze 13).

Deleuze reminds us that every proposition has three dimensions: denotation (contextual reference), manifestation (in relation to the speaker) and demonstration (the truth value of the proposition in relation to the whole gamut of universal or general concepts) (Deleuze 18). He reiterates what the Stoics knew all along – that “Sense is the fourth dimension of the proposition” (Deleuze 24) – the *expressive* aspect of it, the way in which language is used to present the proposition. After all, “sense is that which is expressed” (Deleuze 24). According to Deleuze, Nonsense is “a word that denotes exactly what it expresses and expresses what it denotes”(79), implying that Nonsense is not the absence of sense but “that which has no sense” (83) – not an entity that is missing but an entity that is bereft of a quality.

One of the constituting elements of Nonsense is the *Paradox*. The power of the paradox lies in the fact that it reveals to us the truth about how *sense* functions, that “sense always takes on both senses at once, or follows two directions at the same time,” extending simultaneously “in the infinitely subdivided and elongated past-future” (Deleuze 88, 89). Deleuze also establishes the difference between the Nonsense of Carroll and the nonsense speech of a schizophrenic (an observation that I shall discuss in detail in Chapter Five of this dissertation). He further analyses the *Alice* books through Freudian and Lacanian perspectives (in chapters titled “Twenty-Eighth Series of Sexuality” and “Thirty-Second Series on the Different Kinds of Series”) but these observations are complex and pithy and therefore impossible to sum up here. I shall conclude my summary of this outstanding critical work with an apt quote from Heyman:

As Deleuze demonstrates, all words refer to a sense that is not in themselves, but nonsense words refer to an implied sense which does not exist. They can derive meaning only from themselves, and because, according to Deleuze, meanings can never be self-generated, they are non-sense. (Heyman *Boshen* 216)

The most exhaustive study of Nonsense is the multi-cultural study of the “genre” by Wim Tigges (1988). Tigges, in the aptly titled *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, makes a comprehensive survey of the observations of all the critics of the genre and extends them to their logical conclusions. After a review of all the definitions put forward up to 1988 (including the works of German critics), Tigges proceeds to classify the Nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll into two types of literary nonsense: folk and ornamental respectively (Tigges 85). He distinguishes between Linguistic Nonsense and Situational Nonsense (86) – i.e. the word-play of Lear (and Carroll) as against the Nonsense produced by bizarre environments (such as in Carroll’s *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*).

In his *Anatomy*, Wim Tigges covers the entire gamut of critics from G.K. Chesterton to Émile Cammaerts, and quotes from anthologists (Carolyn Wells) and unpublished dissertations (Annemarie Schöne). He presents almost every definition of Nonsense that has been given so far and then proceeds to define Nonsense by what it is not (90–137), differentiating it from humour, the nursery rhyme, comic verse, surrealism, Dadaism, fantasy, metafiction and the Absurd.

Tigges prefers to “call nonsense a form of ambiguity, as long as it is realized that this ambiguity is not between two or more related meanings, only, but between meaning and its absence” (87). Pendlebury makes a succinct précis of his analysis when she writes “Tigges ‘Nonsense Repertoire’ includes the following five methods: mirroring, imprecision, play with infinity, simultaneity and arbitrariness” (Pendlebury 44). Tigges presents the different forms

of Nonsense and related genres in an excellent visual representation which I reproduce below:

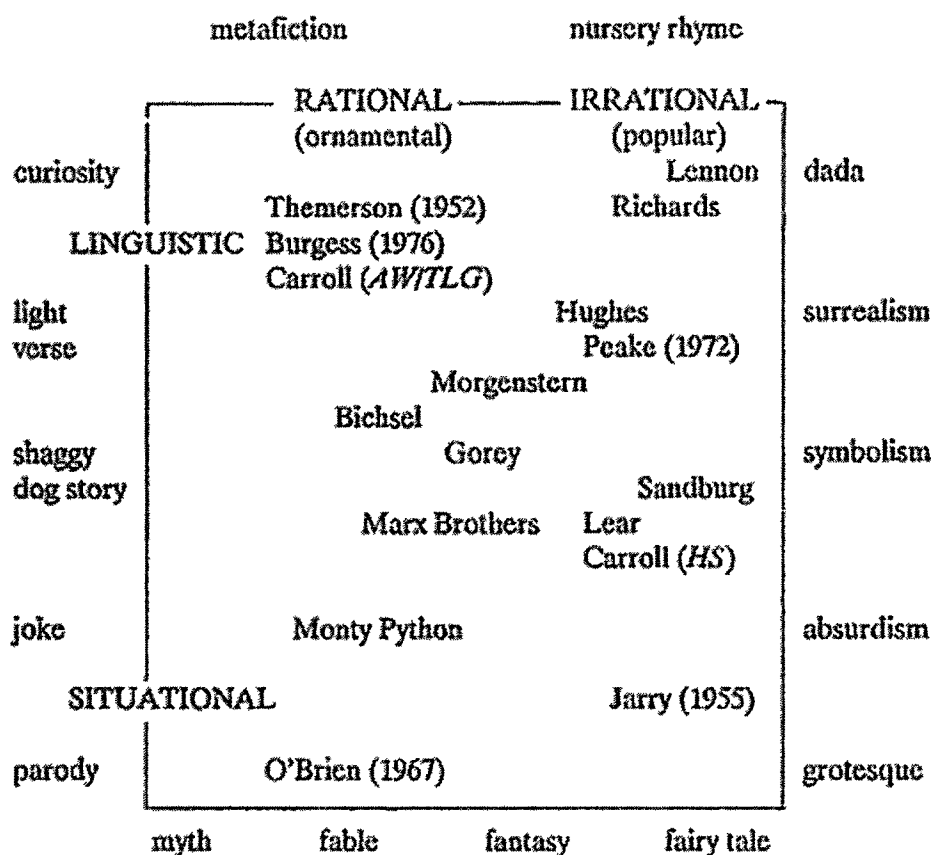


Fig. 2.1. Wim Tigges' map of the degrees and kinds of Nonsense and fantasy and where they stand in relation to one another in Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988; print; 87).

Tigges' model is an attempt to represent the forms of Nonsense in terms of degree and scale, rather than a differentiation in terms of type. Thus, while jokes rely more on circumstances, light verse is less situational and tends to make use of word play and linguistic games to a greater extent. He categorises Carroll's *Alice* books as a "rational" sort of Nonsense and finds a greater degree of irrationality in the Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* and the works of Edward Lear. The model is debatable (for example, even fairy stories are rational in their own way and parody is often based on linguistic distortions of

the original). Tigges advises us to regard the model “as a rough indication how the scales develop, rather than as a fixed and firm categorization of a handful of nonsensical authors” (Tigges 86). He further adds that ideal nonsense floats between categories, refuses to be slotted because it “does not adhere to a fixed place on any scale” (86) – and thus, parts of Nonsense works could be situational or rational while other elements could be illogical and even surrealistic.

Tigges takes over from where Susan Stewart left off discussing the nature of Surrealism and Dadaism as forms of Nonsense, examining the similarities and differences with striking examples to demonstrate his point. Surrealism, which is “a resolution of dream and reality” (Tigges 117) is different from Nonsense because Nonsense is a brutally honest acceptance of reality whereas the dream-like (often nightmarish) nature of Surrealism is non-real. He states that “surrealism may not be equated with nonsense. The dream is no denial of reality, but an extra layer of it, except of course for those who consider dreams by definition meaningless. If nonsense is a dream, it must be a dream stripped of all its symbolism – not a wish-dream, nor a day-dream or a nightmare” (ibid.). In contrast, Dadaism wishes to destroy meaning altogether (Tigges 122). Tigges disagrees with Stewart that Dadaism was “characterized by a convergence of languages and cultures” (Stewart 167) – the phenomenon, he believes, was more a sign of “growing internationality” (122) than a display of its universality and simultaneity. Tigges claims that “Dada comes closest to being nonsense of the Lear type” (123) because Dadaism is more comfortable with “the absence of meaning than is the case with surrealism” (123). At the same time, he shows that the difference between Dadaism and Nonsense lies in the fact that, Dada rebelled against “language and logic” but “nonsense does not so much revolt against language and logic as make use of their autonomous aspects” (123).

Tigges further specifies the difference in the nature of Nonsense and the “so-called Theatre of the Absurd” (Tigges 128), and the absurdist works of Kafka, Camus and Sartre. While Nonsense often seems to surface in the works of Pinter, Becket and Ionesco, there is a clear demarcation between these and the works of Lear and Carroll: “In nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (Tigges 128).

In this section, then, I have presented an overview of critical appraisals, definitions and analyses of Nonsense by the most influential critics in the field, over the last century. Apart from these, there have been numerous studies (especially of Carroll’s works) in the form of essays, blogs and articles, over the years. Constraints of space and time prevent me from indulging in a further discussion of the views of these great critics and I must end my critical review here. In the chapters that follow, I will often echo their views (especially those of Lecercle and Deleuze) and make appropriate references where necessary. Of the above, however, only Tigges and Lecercle have presented an analysis of the causes and factors of Nonsense – why and how they emerged in the Victorian Age. In the following sections, I shall outline their views and then proceed to make those connections which, I feel, they may have failed to see – and what in the socio-cultural milieu led to the epochal manifestation of a completely new way of viewing language, society and the world – by using some aspects of the theories of Foucault and Marshall McLuhan.

It’s My Own Invention

Nonsense was, by no means, invented by either Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. Apparently, it existed in several forms and as part of existing texts, in children’s games, songs, jokes, fairy tales and other stories (although it definitely never existed to the degree of consistency, the range and magnitude of output of our two authors). It was definitely a part of folk-tales before the nineteenth century (Carpenter 380). In the 1894 book titled *More*

English Fairy Tales, printed by Joseph Jacobs, an old story titled *Sir Gammer Vans* begins like this:

Last Sunday morning at six o'clock in the evening as I was sailing over the tops of the mountains in my little boat, I met two men on horseback riding on one mare: so I asked them, "Could you tell me whether the little old woman was dead yet who was hanged last Saturday week for drowning herself in a shower of feathers?" They said they could not positively inform me, but if I went to Sir Gammer Vans he could tell me about it. "But how am I to know the house?" said I. "Ho, 'tis easy enough", said they, "for 'tis a brick house, built entirely of flints, standing alone by itself in the middle of sixty or seventy others just like it." (Carpenter 380)

Lecerle gives an example from the corpus of nursery rhymes and school talk collected by Iona and Peter Opie – a parody of the typical speech given on the last day of school:

Ladles and Jellyspoons,
I stand upon this speech to make a platform
The train I arrived in has not yet come
I come before you
To stand behind you
And tell you something
I know nothing about. (Opie quoted in Lecerle 185)

Several nursery rhymes that have been part of children's games and play, can be classified as Nonsense. Tigges gives the example of another rhyme (still in vogue) that could fall into the category of Nonsense:

Hey diddle diddle
The cat and the fiddle,

The cow jumped over the moon;
 The little dog laughed
 To see such a sport
 And the dish ran away with the spoon. (Tigges *Anatomy* 101)

Chesterton reminds us that a sort of Nonsense existed even in Ancient Greek literature:

It is true in a certain sense that some of the greatest writers the world has seen – Aristophanes, Rabelais and Sterne – have written nonsense; but unless we are mistaken, it is in a widely different sense. The nonsense of these men was satiric – that is to say, symbolic; it was a kind of exuberant capering round a discovered truth. (Chesterton 29)

Lecerle finds its roots in the *distortion* that is the basis of several nursery rhymes (Lecerle 184). This distortion could take different forms: (a) a historical form (as in the rhyme “London Bridge is Falling Down”) (b) the form of extraction (quotations removed from their context), (c) censorship (children must not know that “Elsie Marley” is about an eighteenth century prostitute) and (d) absorption (the rewriting of commonly known texts to put them together in a different way).

Lecerle, in looking for contemporary connections between Nonsense and other forms of writing, notes that *transversion* – a literary gimmick in which the “high and low are fused into a single genre” (Lecerle 186) – was a characteristic of the Victorian Age. He finds examples in the works of the contemporaries of Lear and Carroll, viz. Charles Dickens (1812–1870) and Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892), or rather, a parody of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. He locates a passage of “the best Victorian Nonsense” in the following passage

from Dickens' *Little Dorrit* – a rambling speech from Flora, one of the female characters in the novel:

Though indeed, she hurried on, nothing else is to be expected and why should it be expected, and if it's not to be expected why should it be, and I am far from blaming you or anyone. When your mamma and papa worried us to death and severed the golden bowl – I mean bond but I dare say you know what I mean and if you don't you don't lose much and acre just as little I will venture to add – when they severed the golden bond that bound us and threw us into fits of crying on the sofa nearly choked at least myself everything was changed and in giving my hand to Mr. F. I know I did so with my eyes open but he was so very unsettled and in such low spirits that he had distractedly alluded to the river if not oil of something from the chemist's and I did it for the best. (Dickens qtd. in Lecercle 186–87).

Lecercle traces an example of transversion in a parody of *In Memoriam* by none other than Edward Lear (Lecercle 187). He notices the resemblance between the first few lines of Lear's sonnet (Cold are the crabs that crawl on yonder hills/ Cold are the cucumbers that grow beneath) with Tennyson's lines in section 11 of *In Memoriam* (Calm is the morn without a sound /Calm as to suit a calmer grief). The phenomenon of parodic transversion was, thus, a common feature of the literature of the time, and took a place of precedence in Nonsense literature too.

There are deeper implications (more regarding the origin of Nonsense than just contemporary literary trends), however, that seem to have been sidelined by both Tigges and Lecercle. I attempt a brief look at the origins and influences of Nonsense in the Victorian Age, in the following section, in the hope that it brings to light a more distinct provenance of the "genre".

An Archaeology of Nonsense

Michel Foucault (1926–84), the French sociologist, historian and radical thinker, in his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), showed how for every body of knowledge (discourse) – or that which is considered as true and developed into a structure of “knowledge” at a particular time or age – to exist, there must be *conditions of possibility* which allow it to surface and be sustained. This substratum, a historical *a priori*, a way of thinking, or rather, *a way of knowing*, in a particular age, Foucault called the *episteme*:

By *episteme*, we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences in so far as they belong to neighbouring, but distinct, discursive practices. The *episteme* . . . is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities. (Foucault 191)

Foucault⁴⁶ pointed out that every discourse has a *connaissance* (a visible body of truth statements – in Saussurean terms, a sort of *parole* of a particular discipline) and a *savoir* (an

⁴⁶ A footnote from Sheridan will make the distinction between *savoir* and *connaissance* clearer:

The English ‘knowledge’ translates the French ‘*connaissance*’ and ‘*savoir*’. *Connaissance* refers here to a particular corps of knowledge, a particular discipline – biology or economics for example. *Savoir*, which is defined as knowledge in general, the totality of *connaissances*, is used by Foucault in an underlying, rather than an overall, way. (Sheridan 15)

underlying set of conditions and unconscious rules of formation – in Saussurean terms, a sort of *langue* of a particular discipline, but extending to neighbouring discourses and non-discursive influences as well). While Nonsense is definitely not a scientific discourse or body of knowledge, it is definitely a *discursive entity* – one which *seems* to have erupted onto the scene, almost like Foucault's proverbial *epistemic break*. An archaeological analysis according to the method of Foucault would treat the works of Lear and Carroll as the *connaissance* of the discourse of Nonsense and the conditions of possibility – the factors that made Nonsense, as a form of literature possible – as its *savoir*. Nonsense is not a discourse, *per se*:

Foucault thinks of discourse (or discourses) in terms of bodies of knowledge. His use of the concept moves it away from something to do with language (in the sense of a linguistic system or grammar) and closer towards the concept of discipline . . . in two senses: as referring to *scholarly* disciplines such as science, medicine, psychiatry, sociology and so on; and as referring to disciplinary *institutions* of social control such as the prison, the school, the hospital, the confessional and so on. Fundamentally, then, Foucault's idea of discourse shows the historically specific relations between disciplines (defined as bodies of knowledge) and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and social possibility). (McHoul 26)

I use aspects of Foucault's archaeological method here because I find that it seems to apply to any *discursive entity* in a particular age, even one that is almost non-discursive, such as Nonsense⁴⁷. Nonsense is a radically other, subaltern discursive entity which, in spite of

⁴⁷ The growing number of studies of Nonsense being undertaken by research scholars all over the world and the numerous studies published over the last few decades appears portentous to me. I would not be surprised to see Nonsense being included in institutionalised discourse and the establishment of Departments of Nonsense in academic institutions, in the near future.

being excluded from institutionalised bodies of “knowledge”, enjoyed a wide reading public in the Victorian Age. The popularity of Nonsense signalled a new *way of knowing* the world which, though anti-institutional and characterised by *indiscipline*, could not have been possible without a range of forces (social, cultural, economic, political, historical, technological, and institutional) that allowed a minor “genre” like Nonsense to suddenly become a part of the mainstream. The reasons for the growth of any body of work (especially in terms of texts) in a particular age seem to be, I feel, subject to many of the same epistemic forces that Foucault identifies for institutionalized bodies of knowledge.

I refrain from outlining Foucault’s archaeological method here for that would make this chapter too profuse and perhaps a little repetitive. Instead, I shall use the analytic devices he suggests to study the rules of formation of Nonsense, and elucidate each them as I proceed.

According to Foucault, the simultaneous formation of four primary elements is involved in the development of a discourse: (i) Objects (ii) Enunciative Modalities (iii) Concepts (iv) Strategies. I shall take up for analysis facets of each of the as suggested by Foucault with reference to Nonsense.

Prior to the development of any body of knowledge it must first enter the perceptual field of the age – be perceived, first *as an existing object*, and then as an *object worthy of study*.

It is no coincidence that Lear and Carroll surface in the same age. For Nonsense to be accepted as a suitable form of textuality in the Victorian Age, it required a *surface of emergence* – a socio-political, historical environment that enabled Nonsense literature to be a thing worthy of being written, published and read. Several aspects of the Victorian ethos, elements which were not available in former ages, contributed to make Nonsense conceivable, providing a surface from which it could break through and show its head.

Tigges, Ede and Lecercle sketch several reasons for the emergence of Nonsense – and to these I shall add my own views wherever I feel they have left a gap in their observations. These also, I believe, constitute the *surface of emergence* – a socio-cultural environment conducive to the emergence of Nonsense:

(1) ***The Political and Economic Environment***: For a sense of humour to pervade a society, a certain degree of economic and political stability is essential. “A survey of the most important nonsense works published since the time of Edward Lear seems to point in the direction of their concurrence with periods of relative tranquillity rather than with periods of economic recession” (Tigges *Anatomy* 230). Political stability, coupled with “an inflexible social system” such as existed in the Victorian era in Great Britain “makes an ideal “substratum” (230) for the kinds of texts that Lear and Carroll wrote. No doubt, Nonsense would have been quite impossible without the “rise and development of an industrialist, capitalist economy with the concomitant consumer and welfare society” (232).

Carroll’s steady income was as much a boon to his creative output as the lack of one was a bane to Lear’s⁴⁸. Carroll earned “a salary of £300 teaching mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford. His royalty payments from Macmillan, his publisher, were about double that” (Chittenden n.p.). On a steady income and the assurance of food and shelter for the rest of his life, this Oxford don had leisure, privacy, comfort and security. All of these together prepared an ideal environment for contemplation and creative thought.

Lear survived on what little his paintings and artistic assignments brought him, going through periods of poverty and desperation several times in his life. It was Lord Derby (the 15th), one of his most generous and sincere patrons, who observed that Lear was cutting a

⁴⁸ Both Lear and Carroll were hoodwinked out of their rightful share from the profits that publishers gained from the sale of their books – a point that I shall discuss a few pages later, in this chapter.

sorry figure by being perpetually in need of money. “in the world, where nothing succeeds like success, he has done himself much harm by his perpetual neediness. An artist who is always asking his friends to buy a picture, & often to pay for it in advance makes outsiders believe that he cannot know his business: which in Lear’s case is certainly far from the truth. But he has been out at elbows all his life & so will remain to the last” (qtd. in Noakes *Wanderer* 182).

Lear primarily depended on royalty for his sustenance. In one of the most successful years of his life (1846) Lear had the first *Book of Nonsense* and his *Illustrated Excursions in Italy* published and was actually summoned by Queen Victoria herself (then 27 years old) to teach her twelve lessons of drawing (Noakes *Wanderer* 61). While not much came of this meeting, in terms of financial assurances, his contact with royalty continued. One of his first assignments was at Knowsley (the Earl of Derby’s mansion) and his lifelong connections with people in high places fetched him sporadic earnings. “As early as 1831 he had painted landscape at Knowsley” (Noakes *Wanderer* 36) and he painted several canvases there between 1831 and 1837.

The aristocracy of England rode the industrial wave by investing shrewdly in businesses. The Duke of Northumberland, for example, made a fortune from coal (Searle 180), Lord Rayleigh had a “highly successful dairy enterprise” (Searle 181) and the Earl of Leicester doubled his income from rent by supplementing it with investments in the railways, “breweries and financial companies” (Searle 181). The Earl of Derby and the Derby family – primarily received a substantial income thanks to the vestigial benefits of the feudal system, i.e. land holdings. Speaking of the depression in the British economy towards the end of the nineteenth century, G. R. Searle observes:

Large landowners with a geographical spread of estates came off best during the depression. The Earl of Derby was losing heavily during the 1890s on his Cambridgeshire properties, but breaking even in Derbyshire and doing very well in Lancashire, where he owned large tracts of land on the edge of Liverpool, Preston, and other towns. (Searle 180)

Besides, the Earl of Derby was the Queen's blue-eyed boy and, among the aristocracy, the Derbys were definitely one of the most influential families. In 1852, "when Lord John's government fell, the Tories came back into office and the Queen asked Lord Derby to form the administration" (Wilson 146). The reference here is to the 14th Earl of Derby, who was also once offered the throne of Greece by Queen Victoria, but declined the offer (Noakes *Wanderer* 166). It is no coincidence, then that Lear made several fruitful connections and friendships with people of social stature during his stay at Knowsley. It is in this web of social relationships that Lear found himself, often, to his own benefit. Had it not been for this network of economic and political relationships and hierarchies, it is possible that Lear's career as a painter might not have found a suitable launching pad at all – or might at least, have been significantly delayed.

(2) ***The Perception of the Child***: It was only in the Victorian age that the child was seen as an individual (a point I have discussed earlier in this dissertation). Lisa Ede, in Tigges' *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, points out, "a second explanation for the rise of nonsense can be adduced by pointing out the simultaneous change of views about the identity of the child, which until then had been largely regarded as an adult in miniature" (Ede 43).

(3) ***Literature for Children***: "The nineteenth century, not surprisingly, also witnessed if not quite the beginnings, at any rate, the rise and growth of children's literature, a literature, that is, written primarily for children" (Ede 43). The burgeoning quantity of literature for children

was unstoppable and the tremendous popularity of chapbooks, versions of Defoe's *Crusoe*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Newbery's myriad publications had already created an attitude of acceptance towards literature for children and an environment and market receptive to new and entertaining texts written especially for children.

Tigges, like Lecercle, mentions a connection between the "technological inventions in Victorian Britain and the accompanying tensions in a period of relative peace and prosperity, latent tensions which affected the relationship between employers and (un)employed, labour and leisure, private life and collective life, children and adults, men and women" (Tigges *Anatomy* 232)⁴⁹. However, he does not devote much attention to these and proceeds to look for connections between Nonsense, children's literature and the literature of the Romantic Movement (1798–1832) that came after the Victorian Age (*Anatomy* 235–236)⁵⁰.

Lecercle (198–199) identifies three parallel discourses (points 4, 5 and 6 below) – which Foucault would term *Fields of Concomitance* – in the age, which could have led to the precipitation of Nonsense as a "genre":

(4) *Etymology*: The historical quest for the meaning of words was already a common field of study at the time, a fact that enabled Carroll and Lear to see words as separate entities of study.

⁴⁹ Tigges refers to these influences, quoting from a German analysis of Nonsense by Kreutzer Eberhard. While this is inaccessible to me (for the obvious reason that I do not know the German Language), I hope to indicate other sources and causes of the development of Nonsense in the Victorian Age in section that follows.

⁵⁰ I shall discuss the impact of technology later in this chapter.

(5) **Anglo-Saxon Phonology:** A wave of interest in the Anglo-Saxon history of England surfaced in the Victorian Age⁵¹, leading to a renewed exposure to the phonological aspects of this language, which is one of the formative elements of English as we know it today.

Lecercle points out that *Jabberwocky* was “first published by Carroll under the title ‘A Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry’” (198).

(6) **Dictionaries:** There was “a Victorian preoccupation with the making of dictionaries”

(199). Alice Liddell’s father was a lexicographer, responsible for co-writing a Greek Lexicon

(*Liddell and Scott’s Lexicon*, with Robert Scott, in 1843). This allowed Lear and Carroll to

dabble in coinages, neologisms, “for which a dictionary definition will have to be provided”

(Lecercle 199). The surge in the writing and publication of dictionaries allowed what

Foucault terms the “formation of enunciative modalities” (Foucault 50) and taught the British

a new way of looking at language and a *new way of speaking about speaking*. For the first

time, a new subject-object position was possible: words as objects, language as substance,

and signifiers as specimens that could be dissected under the microscopes of both the

diachronic researcher and the maverick linguist.

(7) **Logic and Human Understanding:** Lecercle helps us understand that Lear and Carroll

lived in an age when the thought of Locke (1632–1704) and Leibniz (1646–1716) was

influential, thereby enabling them to understand the logic of human thought in a manner that

would have been impossible before. “Nonsense hesitates between Locke and Leibniz

Wonderland is a blueprint for an imaginative possible world,” and Nonsense is “a true

product of the venerable tradition of British empiricism” (Lecercle 200).

⁵¹ “Anglo-Saxon history . . . was popular again in the Victorian period, as an important element in constitutional history and a theatre for national heroes and empire-builders.” (Cannon n.p.)

Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear turned logic on its head. Their concept of inverted logic could not have been imagined without the writings of Leibniz – the explications of the rules of formal logic – which preceded them. As Foucault points out, in order to formulate a discourse, the concepts of the discourse must undergo a formation, a process in which a particular sequence of thought is involved, which Foucault calls *forms of succession* (Foucault *Archaeology* 57). Philosophers of Logic had already presented the “order of inferences, successive implications, and demonstrative reasonings” (Foucault *Archaeology* 7). The writers of Nonsense, and particularly Lewis Carroll, simply inverted these, to create entirely new concepts in their own private discourse – the discourse of Nonsense.

(8) **Schools:** Lecercle identifies another factor that may be seen as a cause of the emergence of Nonsense in the Victorian era: schooling. Greater literacy led to a greater hunger for reading material and “book production was keeping pace with the potential reading market” (Weedon 50). The spread of education and the growing presence of schools made several sections of Carroll’s *Alice* possible – the lessons (or lessens) in Chapter IX, the rhymes and mathematics that Alice attempts at various stages of the book, all reflect a proliferation of institutional education without which a large part of the humour of the *Alice* books would fall flat. After all, one of the few ways for children to cope with the rigours of school is to parody their lessons, as a result of which, “the school is one of the places where nonsense is produced” (Lecercle 216). Institutionalised education provided the substrate that Foucault called a *field of memory* – a historical awareness that permitted the formation of the concepts of Nonsense in *this* particular way and no other.

On a personal level, it must be noted that both Lear and Carroll could look at school and the process of schooling with a more critical eye, because they had both gone through highly unpleasant experiences there. Instead of being *subjects* – since they had both been subjected to the evils of the institution – they perhaps began to see the school itself as an *object*. About

Lear. Noakes notes that “he was briefly, and unhappily, at school, and had little to do with boys of his own age, but though he would always regret his lack of formal education, he felt that it left him poised ‘on the threshold of knowledge’, eager to discover more” (Noakes *Introduction* xx). Carroll, too, spent a few unhappy years being bullied and mocked at at Rugby from 1846 to 1850 (Carpenter 98). As a reaction, Carroll lampooned school procedures repeatedly in the *Alice* books and Lear produced *Alphabets* which would have been altogether too entertaining to have found a place in the staid and disciplinarian academic environments of the age.

(9) **Railways:** I endorse Lecercle’s observation that “it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the changes brought about by the railways to the daily life of the British people in the course of the nineteenth century, so it is only natural that this should have been ‘reflected’ in the literature of the times” (Lecercle 210)⁵². He mentions Carroll’s childhood creation of a “family railway system in his father’s garden” (Lecercle 210) and how Alice suddenly finds herself in a railway carriage in Chapter III of *Through the Looking Glass*. However, Lecercle fails to see that the *Alice* books and the works of Edward Lear would not have been what they were if the railways had not existed. James Watt developed the steam engine from 1763 to 1775. Since then, the use of the steam engine in the railways changed the landscape of England irreversibly – “2000 miles of line in 1843, 5000 by 1846” (Lerner 195) and by 1850 “there were 10,000 miles of British railway” (Wilson 351).

In the words of Marshall McLuhan, “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 8). Carroll and Lear grew up in an era when a huge upheaval was occurring: the disciplining of large

⁵² One of the great children’s books is E. Nesbitt’s *The Railway Children* (1906), “a much loved book among British children” (Townsend qtd. in Carpenter 441) which narrates the story of three little children who live near a railway line and the adventures and experiences they go through there.



populations was being slowly engineered through the railways, and by consequence, through the timepiece. The *message* of the railways was (1) a sudden sense of proximity with far away places and (2) a new feeling of oneness among British citizens because, no matter where they were in the country, they shared the same *time*. Thanks to the railways, travel time was greatly reduced (Wilson 493) and “England had become smaller” (Lerner 196).

A general perception of a united, homogenous and uni-lingual country made itself felt as remote corners of the island began to become accessible. The travel became more tolerable – for even the old railway carriages were significantly more comfortable than the rough and rocking movements of the stage coach. “The growth of railways, combined with the growth of free time,” (Wilson 409) was a heady combination and holidaying became a way of life for the bourgeoisie. Both Carroll and Lear indulged in travel – Carroll in repeated sea-side excursions in quest of little girls to befriend and Lear in his perpetual wanderings around Europe “for the sake of his health” (Carpenter 305). While Lear used all modes of travel during his lifetime (including ships, camels and horses), it was the train that took him around when he visited India from 1872 to 1875. To extend McLuhan’s point, the railways had an effect that was unconscious, a cultural ripple that made the world seem different to the British, an accessible, controllable, sequential world. One of the consequences of this was a change in the perception of time.

In 1840, for the first time in the history of England, all the clocks in the country were synchronised, with the introduction of “Railway Time,” making all of England irrevocably one unit forever. Here is a passage from *Dombey and Son* which describes the transformation of once rural populations because of the railways:

As to the neighbourhood which had hesitated to acknowledge the railroad in its struggling days, that had grown wise and penitent as any Christian might in such a

case, and now boasted of its powerful and prosperous relation. There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses; railway-plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes and time-tables . . . *There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in.* (Dickens *Dombey and Son* 241 – emphasis mine)

The Victorian obsession with time can be seen in *The Mad Tea Party* where the Hatter is compelled to continue having tea just because it is always “tea time.” Needless to say, if there hadn't been the railway, Carroll probably wouldn't have been able to envisage such a fastidious stickler for time as the Hatter – or for that matter, the fretting White Rabbit, looking at his watch and perpetually wondering whether he is late⁵³.

We must remember that Lear and Carroll were both outsiders in several ways, ways which I shall dwell on in detail in the chapters that follow. At this point, it should be enough to remind ourselves that both suffered from ailments that made them self-conscious for life – Lear was epileptic and Carroll had a stutter. It is therefore, natural, that both authors reacted to this streamlined, homogeneous and sequenced concept of time. They reacted to the linearity in the perception of time enforced by the railways, by making their works cyclical in nature. The *Alice* books are divided into chapters which are in no progressive order and the limericks of Edward Lear always return to their beginnings. Thus, Nonsense writers

⁵³ A recent study of more than 2000 Britons by the watch retailer *WatchShop.com* has shown that the British obsession with time still exists: “Sixty two percent of Brits agree that being late is inexcusable with 83% stating that our obsession with punctuality is something that is uniquely British” says the report. Incidentally, the timekeeper of the organization, Mr. Kishore Naib goes on to add, “You could say that Lewis Carroll touched on the very heart of the British nature with his worrying, time obsessing White Rabbit character.” (*Brits are Obsessed with being Punctual* n.p.)

satirised the linearity of Victorian chronology by presenting texts that were more natural, more attuned to the senses of children and to the movements of nature in general.

(10) **Photography:** Susan Sontag wrote that “a photograph is only a fragment” (71) and that “paintings invariably sum up” (166). While Lear was trying to sum up the world, Carroll was trying to fragment it. In a way, both Lear and Carroll found themselves in an activity which involved the *framing* of reality – Lear as a painter of birds and landscapes and Carroll as a photographer of human subjects. In 1838, Louis Daguerre announced the discovery of the first successful photographic method – “the invention of a workable process that he modestly called daguerreotype” (Batchen 33). In 1855, Carroll’s uncle brought “his photographic paraphernalia to Croft,” and Carroll, in his early twenties, saw “the new medium as a vehicle for artistic expression” and went on “to become one of the foremost Victorian portrait photographers” (Talbot 46).

It is essential to put the invention and quick spread of photographic technology in the Victorian Age into perspective. “Clearly it was only possible to think ‘photography’ at this specific historical conjuncture; photography as a conceptual economy thus has an identifiable historical and cultural specificity” (Batchen 183). As McLuhan points out, “the logic of the photograph is neither verbal nor syntactical, a condition which renders literary culture quite helpless to cope with the photograph” (McLuhan 214). A picture may be worth a thousand words but no quantity of words could replace a photograph. No wonder Carroll – an outcast of the spoken world on account of his stutter – turned to photography with an unparalleled enthusiasm and “created about three thousand negatives during twenty-five years of photographing” (Marien 91).

Photographs could freeze time. If the medium is the message (McLuhan 7), then, with the advent and growing ubiquity of the camera, the world and all its individual units

(including language) began to look different. Things, material and abstract, were all seen through a lens, in a rectangular frame, characterised by “uniformity and repeatability” (McLuhan 206), taking “the step from the age of Typographic Man to the age of Graphic Man” (ibid.).

McLuhan draws attention to the fact that even fantasy in literature was a repercussion of photography because “the novelist could no longer describe objects or happenings for readers who already knew what was happening by photo” and so “art moved from outer matching to inner making” (McLuhan 211).

This is precisely why Lear, a fairly talented artist, found it more and more difficult to sell his landscapes as he grew older. Photography, in one *stroke*, made realist painting redundant. Which painting could match the detail and accuracy of a photograph? “The painter could no longer depict a world that had been much photographed. He turned, instead to reveal the inner process of creativity in expressionism and in abstract art” (McLuhan 211). Even the mimetic attempts of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood tapered off by the end of the nineteenth century. Lear, who started off as a popular painter of landscapes, found in 1861 that one of his best paintings, “a nine-foot-long oil painting of the Cedars of Lebanon” remained unsold in London in spite of having been “highly praised” earlier at an exhibition in Liverpool. (Noakes *Introduction* xxix). Lear was facing the effects of a world infected by photography.

Foucault speaks of the *formation of enunciative modalities* – how one is allowed to speak or express oneself in a particular discourse, a part of which is “the positions of the subject . . . that it is possible for him to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects” (Foucault *Archaeology* 52). Whether the subject is the “questioning”, “listening”, “seeing” or “observing” subject determines the way in which the particular discourse will be expressed. I believe that photography changed this subject-object position permanently – a change which

enabled the likes of Lear and Carroll to look at abstract entities like linguistic interactions as photographs. The medium of photography, being a fast-spreading technology, permitted them to see even language as a framed slice of space and time – a flat arrangement of parts which can be viewed and reviewed without emotion. Photography, in short, changed the human perceptual system for ever, objectifying everything around us. It is not “a happy coincidence that many of the authors had excellent visual perceptions” (Cleaver 132) in the Victorian era. Photography prioritised the visual, thrusting into European culture a fetish for the birds-eye-view. Lear and Carroll saw language for what it is and produced *snapshots* of linguistic play in the form of episodes in a dream or as *flashes* of poetry called limericks.

(11) ***The Publishing Industry***: Before Lear or Carroll could think of publishing, there had to be a professional publisher to do it for them. Foucault would categorise the publishing industry as another *field of concomitance* (Foucault 58) that enabled Lear and Carroll to form the very *concepts* they were writing⁵⁴. Macmillan, one of the established and most respected publishers of the time, first published the *Alice* books in 1865, ensuring their saleability among the bourgeoisie of the age. The first edition of Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* was published by Thomas McLean in 1846 – but eventually found its way to the major publisher, Routledge in 1861.

Capitalist greed had already contaminated publishing by the time of Queen Victoria. Lewis Carroll’s meticulous and obsessive penchant for documentation won him the ire of the publisher, particularly when he realised that he was being fleeced by Macmillan:

⁵⁴ It is worth noting at this point, that the process of colour lithography used India rubber and “during the 1860s and 1870s the vast majority of natural indigo was imported from the British colony of India into London and Liverpool” (H. Skelton n.p.) to be used as a colour pigment in the printing process.

Then there was his correspondence with Macmillan's, beginning in 1875, after he'd analysed the "Alice" accounts. "On every thousand copies sold" he complained, "your profit is £20.16s 8d, mine is £56.5s 0d, and the bookseller's £70. 16s. 8d. This seems to me altogether unfair . . ." After bombarding Macmillan with letters, Dodgson finally began fixing the sale prices of his books himself in order to secure a larger profit, thereby earning himself the deep enmity of all booksellers, and enhancing his reputation for financial sharpness. (Woolf *Hunting* n.p.)

Lear wrote his Nonsense "to cheer himself up" (Levi 185) but found that it was immensely popular quite soon after it was published (by McLean) and went through two editions by 1855 (Levi 185). Lear's lack of business acumen left him without the financial returns which he deserved and which would have made him a rich and relaxed man for the rest of his life. In a complex sort of deal with his publishers, which included lithographs, woodcuts and his Nonsense works, Lear ended up losing rights to his own works. I quote a passage from Levi in its entirety to describe this unfortunate episode accurately:

To him [McLean] in October 1861 he offered ten or twelve drawings of Corfu to lithograph; he was to pay Lear so much for the use of them, providing he gave up all his rights on the earlier nonsense publications. McLean wisely turned this scheme into Lear's *Ionian Islands*, the most desirable of all his books. So Lear went off to Routledge, who offered to buy 1000 copies of the *Nonsense*, but refused to buy the book as a package. Three shillings and sixpence a copy he felt might be the right price. Lear went at once to Dalziel as a printer and made them a down payment for the first 1000 copies, and published them at Christmas 1861. By June 6000 were printed and 4000 sold, but Routledge had not paid Lear a penny for any of them, while Dalziel was understandably pressing to be paid. On 1 November 1862 Routledge did at last agree to buy the book outright, paying £125 in all. Edward was

relieved to be free of the whole business and pleased with his winnings. Yet he must have been owed at the very least £500 or £1000, and the copyright of course was worth many thousands. The firm was Routledge and Warne, which is how this became a Warne's book a little later. There were nineteen editions within Edward Lear's lifetime with no profit to him. (Levi 185)

In one stroke, then, Lear lost his royalty rights to his most significant works – *Views in the Seven Ionian Isles* (to McLean) and his Nonsense works (to Routledge).

(12) *Opinions of Prevailing Ideologues*: Foucault also points out that, for each body of knowledge to surface, *authorities of delimitation* are necessary – people in power who determine what may be said and how it may be said within a particular discourse. In the case of the *Alice* books it was none other than George MacDonald (1824-1905), writer of children's books who first went through *Wonderland* and advised Carroll to publish it. His friend, Canon Duckworth, who accompanied him on his boating trip, advised him to employ John Tenniel as an artist for the book. Tenniel himself was already an established cartoonist of *Punch* magazine and influenced several changes in the texts before they were finally published⁵⁵.

All of these factors contributed, to a less or greater extent, to making the phenomenon of Nonsense take shape during the Victorian era.

The Road Ahead

In this chapter I have, thus, attempted a concise survey of (a) the nature of Nonsense; (b) Nonsense works before the Victorian Age; (c) critical views of Nonsense (and of Lear and Carroll) over the years and (d) the underlying causes of the surge of Nonsense in the

⁵⁵ On Tenniel's suggestion, Carroll removed a chapter titled *A Wasp in a Wig* from *Through the Looking Glass*.

Victorian Age. Notwithstanding the socio-historical factors that may have influenced and enabled the writing of Nonsense, the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll seem to have transcended the limitations of thought of their era and become prescient texts. The *Alice* books and Lear's limericks and stories seem to have demonstrated in practice what revolutionary thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Feminist theorists were to propound almost a century later. In the next chapter (which I have been compelled to divide into two parts on account of sheer size), I attempt to show how their texts intuitively act out the theoretical tenets of Jacques Derrida and his agenda of Deconstruction. Their works are all the more exceptional because they deflate and deconstruct themselves, simultaneously as they progress, pre-empting any Derridean attempts to find out where they falter. How this occurs, will be discussed in Chapter Three (Parts One and Two) in the pages ahead.