

HUMOR, NONSENSE, AND ABSURD.  
THE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NON-SERIOUS NARRATIVES.

by

Michele Sala

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Art

in the

English

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

[May, 2000]

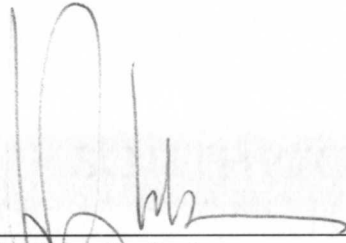


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The Linguistic Analysis of Non-Serious Narratives.

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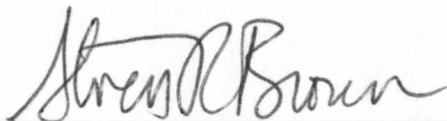
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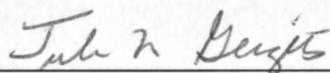
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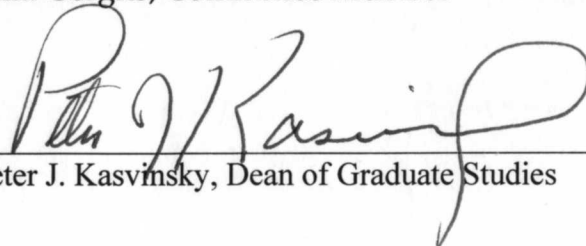
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The Linguistic Analysis of Non-Serious Narratives  
Humor, Nonserious and Absurd

**Abstract.**

The purpose of this work is to study the linguistic nature of three groups of non-serious texts, namely humorous, nonsense, and absurd texts. The method applied to this study is presented in the first chapter and is based first on the distinction of two narrative levels, namely a core narrative (i.e., the *motivations* allowing the progression of the story-line) and a surface narrative (i.e., the sequence of events that constitute the story-line); secondly, on the defining role of the resolution of incongruities at the level of the core narrative, on which the perception of humor mainly depends; and finally, on the humorous quality of the privileged points in the surface narrative that can influence and guide the non-serious reading and interpretation of a text. In the first chapter I apply this method to the study of humorous texts, stressing how in these texts the *appreciation* of humor depends mainly on the humorous resolution of some incongruity at the level of the core narrative, and only partially on the number of the local instances of humor in the surface narrative. In the second chapter I use this method to study nonsense texts, seeing how the *impression* of humor there depends mainly on some unresolved incongruity in the core narrative, and how the local instances of humor in the surface narrative depend on the eminently *playfully verbal* nature of this genre. In the third chapter the same theoretical approach is applied to the study of absurd texts, seeing how they also are based on some incongruity at the level of the core narrative, and stressing as a distinctive feature the *referential* nature of this narrative phenomenon, where the incongruity depends directly on the substance of the events narrated rather than on the way they are organized and on the choice of words used to present them.



**Acknowledgments.**

This work has only been possible thanks to the precious collaboration of many persons.

My sincere gratitude goes to all of them.

Especially I would like to thank for their guidance and extreme patience Salvatore Attardo, Steve Brown, Julia Gergits, Rebecca Barnhouse, Ginger Monseau and Iole Checcone.

For their constant support and inspiration my gratitude goes to Martine, Angela Locatelli, Isaiah Mackler, Miriam Klein and Randy Abel.

For their precious help with technicalities and foreign languages I would also like to thank Dan Demetriou and Joëlle El-Khoury.

Last but not least, for his guidance and patience, his constant support and inspiration, his precious help in all sorts of fastidious matters in the course of the last two years, my deep and sincere gratitude goes to Christian F. Hempelmann.

And for similar reasons, even if not directly related to this work, my gratitude also goes to my parents and my sisters, for all the times that I forgot to thank them, as I should have.

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to thank Don Domestico and Josie El-Kromly.

For their precious help with technicalities and foreign languages I would also like  
Goswami, Ismail Mueckler, Miriam Klein and Randy Abel.

For their constant support and inspiration my gratitude goes to Martin, Angela  
Chesone.

Arturo, Steve Brown, Julia Oerter, Keressa Benbowe, Singer Monahan and Iole

Especially I would like to thank for their guidance and extreme patience Zoltane  
My sincere gratitude goes to all of them.

This work has only been possible thanks to the precious collaboration of many persons

Acknowledgements



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## **Introduction.**

The goal of this paper is to study the linguistic nature of a specific type of narrative that can be very broadly defined as *non-serious*.

For the purpose of this work the term *non-serious* is taken simply to distinguish this group of narratives from those that can be easily recognized as *serious* ones. In other words, the term *non-serious* does not refer to an inferior literary (or philosophical, or moral, etc.) value of such works, but it is simply used to designate those narratives that are meant to read somehow *funny* and *amusing*.

The distinction between *serious* and *non-serious* texts has been a major subject of study and research. Without going into much detail, the partition first proposed by Aristotle between tragedy and comedy and re-elaborated in modern times by Frye (1957) who further distinguishes among myths, romances, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic narratives, is still useful and effective. According to the definition given in these studies, in *serious* texts (i.e., tragedies, or myths, romances, and high mimetic), we have narratives that revolve around characters (morally or intellectually) superior than the average, confronted with circumstances that inspire or require the employment of high human qualities (such as courage, loyalty, compassion, commitment, sense of responsibility, etc.). In *non-serious* texts (the case of most comedies and low mimetic texts, and especially the case of ironic texts), we are presented with narratives where the characters are not superior than the average, if not at all inferior in power and intelligence; their situation is for the most part light, non-tragic, and even ludicrous (or at least it is presented as such), and the highest human qualities and values are of very little importance for the progression of the story.

importance for the classification of the novel.  
... it is designated as such, and the higher human qualities and virtues are of very little  
importance; their function is for the most part merely non-rational, and even judgments (or at  
least) are not subject to the same laws as the laws of the intellect in poetry and  
texts, and especially the case of poetic texts, we are concerned with particular aspects (the  
responsibility, etc.) in non-rational texts (the case of most comedies and low literary  
particular qualities (such as comedy, irony, compassion, cynicism, sense of  
humour, conditioned with circumstances that involve or require the employment of high  
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and other scholars. Without going into much detail, the function that proposed by

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works, the term non-rational does not refer to an inferior literary (or philosophical) or  
the group of particularities from those that can be easily recognized as rational ones. In other

For the purpose of this work the term non-rational is taken simply to distinguish  
can be very broadly defined as non-rational.

The goal of this paper is to study the linguistic nature of a specific type of particularities that

**Introduction**

This distinction is not exhaustive, operative and workable in itself; in fact, not all *non-serious* texts are similar: some of those are openly and clearly humorous (i.e., farces, burlesque and grotesque stories, satires, parodies, comedies of manners, of errors, of intrigue, etc.), whereas the level of humorousness of some other texts is not that obvious. If in texts like Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" the presence of humor can hardly be questioned, narratives like Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* or Beckett's *Molloy* are not so easily defined. As a matter of fact, there are critics who consider *Alice in Wonderland* a masterpiece of humor (Alexander 1951, Hildebrandt 1962, Sutherland 1970, Hofstadter 1982), while there are many others who claim that the text is too complex or too dread-inspiring to be dismissed as simply humorous, still acknowledging its humorous inspiration (Breton 1939, Henkle 1980, Polhemus 1980, Rakin 1991). Similar considerations may apply to the case of *Molloy*, which has also been considered as a masterpiece of humor (Nadeau 1951, Topsfield 1988) and as a tragedy, as "an epic of disaster" (Nadeau 1951/1965: 33) and of physical and intellectual consummation.

The main focus of this work is to propose a distinction between the different kinds of *non-serious* texts, basing our study on linguistic and narratological grounds. As we will see, it is possible to identify three different types of *non-serious* narratives, namely humorous, nonsense, and absurd narratives. As we will also see, the *perception* of humor in the case of humorous narratives ("Lord Arthur Savile's Crime") depends on the awareness of some incongruity that is eventually resolved, whereas in the case of nonsense (*Alice in Wonderland*) and absurd (*Molloy*) the *impression* of humor depends simply on the awareness of unresolved incongruities. What allows a further distinction between these last two groups (which are otherwise very similar) is the role played by

between these last two groups (which are otherwise very similar) is the role played by  
simply on the awareness of unresolved incongruities. What allows a further distinction  
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awareness of some incongruity that is essentially resolved, whereas in the case of  
in the case of humorous narratives („Lord Arthur Savile's Crime“) depends on the  
humorous, nonsense, and absurd narratives. As we will also see, the description of humor  
will see, it is possible to identify three different types of non-serious narratives, namely  
of non-serious texts, raising our study on linguistic and paralinguistic grounds. As we

The main focus of the work is to propose a distinction between the different kinds  
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This distinction is not exhaustive, operative and workable in itself, in fact, not all



language: “nonsense uses the excess of the signifier over the signified” (Schwab 1996: 49), and all incongruity is created by language, whereas absurd literature simply narrates facts and events that are incongruous in themselves, independently of the way they are presented.

This work will be organized in three main chapters, each of which will focus on one specific type of *non-serious* text. The first chapter, devoted to the analysis of humorous texts, also introduces the theory that I will apply to this study. This theoretical approach is based on the distinction of two narrative levels, namely a core narrative and a surface narrative, on the role of the resolution of the incongruity in the core narrative, and on the humorous quality of the privileged points in the surface narrative. The same approach will be applied to the study of nonsense narrative in the second chapter, and to the study of absurd texts in the third and final chapter.

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approach will be applied to the study of nonsense narrative in the second chapter, and to  
on the numerous variety of the privileged points in the surface narrative. The same  
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## **I. HUMOR.**

In this chapter I will discuss the linguistic nature of humorous texts.

Section I.A. will be devoted to the presentation of a review of humor theories from the classic period to the modern times. Section I.B. introduces a taxonomy of the concepts that will make the analysis of *non-serious* texts in general workable. In this section I will introduce the narratological distinction between core narrative and surface narrative (I.B.2.), the distinction between core script opposition and core script tension (I.B.3.) and the idea of privileged points (I.B.5.) as operative tools for the detection and the study of humor. With such tools I will proceed in section I.C. to the analysis of humorous narratives, distinguishing three main groups: texts substantially humorous (I.C.1.), texts superficially humorous (I.C.2.) and texts apparently humorous (I.C.3.). The last part of section I.C. is devoted to such concepts as prefiguration (I.C.5.), justification of incongruity (I.C.6.) and the distinction between referential and verbal humor (I.C.7.), as they allow further differentiation between humorous texts and texts which, if non-serious, do not fit the parameters of humorous narratives presented so far. This last group of texts will be discussed in depth in chapters II and III.

### **I.A. Survey of the Literature.**

The study of humor, as far as we know it, dates back to the classical period and through different approaches (rooted in philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, linguistic and narratology) arrives at the present days.

In this literature review we will scan the history of the theories of humor considering the most authoritative figures and, in synthesis, the most important ideas that

considering the most important figures and in addition, the most important ideas that

in this historic review we will see the history of the theories of humor  
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#### 1.4. Survey of the literature

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they allow further differentiation between humorous texts and texts which, if non-serious,

incongruity (1.C.1) and the distinction between referential and verbal humor (1.C.2) as

section 1.C. is devoted to such concepts as predilection (1.C.2), justification of

subjectively humorous (1.C.3) and texts objectively humorous (1.C.3). The last part of

variables, distinguishing three main groups: texts subjectively humorous (1.C.1), texts

humor. With such tools I will proceed in section 1.C. to the analysis of humorous

the idea of privileged beings (1.B.2) as operative tools for the detection and the study of

(1.B.3) the distinction between core script opposition and core script relation (1.B.3) and

introduce the paradigmatic distinction between core narrative and surface narrative

that will make the analysis of non-serious texts in general workable. In this section I will

classic period to the modern times. Section 1.B. introduces a taxonomy of the concepts

Section 1.A. will be devoted to the presentation of a review of humor theories from the

in this chapter I will discuss the linguistic nature of humorous texts.

#### 1. HUMOR

contributed to this research. For a more detailed review on the subject we defer to the most comprehensive literature review compiled by Attardo (1994) and by Hempelmann (2000).

Before listing humor theorists and their ideas, it would be useful to present the broad methodological tripartition along which all theories of humor can be synthesized: the *superiority* theory, the *release* theory, and the *incongruity* theory.

- The superiority theory (also known as hostility, aggression, or disposition theory) sees humor as derision, a combination of opposite feelings or sensations such as pain and pleasure, or, more precisely envy, or pity on the one hand and laughter on the other.
- The release theory maintains that humor “releases tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from, conventions or laws” (Attardo 1994: 50). Such approach considers humor directly depending “on a fixed background of conventional beliefs, attitudes, behaviour” (Monro 1951: 241), which put constraints on the individual, and “the contrast to or the neutralization of this background” (Hempelmann 2000) relieves the mind, and can be perceived as humorous.
- The incongruity theory (also known as contrast or surprise theory) sees humor as a result of the mismatching of (two) different ideas (or meanings, or frames of reference), or as resulting from a violation of expectation.

The three different approaches are not mutually exclusive, in that they consider humor under different perspectives: “the *incongruity*-based theories make a statement about the *stimulus*; the *superiority* theories characterize the relations or attitudes between



the *speaker* and the *hearer*; and the *release/relief* theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the *hearer* only” (Raskin 1985: 40).

### **I.A.1. The Classic Period. The Greek Philosophers.**

The first theorization of humor is found in Plato’s *Philebus*. The Greek philosopher considers humor mainly as derision (superiority theory) and sees it as a peculiar combination of contrasting emotion like pain and pleasure. In Plato’s opinion, humor is elicited by what is ridiculous, and the ridiculous happens to strong men or feeble ones: laughter combines with envy in the first case and with pity in the second case to create humor.

Along the same lines is Aristotle’s theory, when, defining comedy in his *Poetics*, he says that

[It is] an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sorts of fault, but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others. (in Harris 1992: 35)

This claim clearly connects Aristotle’s view to the superiority theory. But Aristotle’s ideas on humor are more complex and articulated than this. Another important passage on the definition of humor is found in his *Rhetoric*, where the philosopher, considering the humorous surprise resulting from witty metaphors or peculiar use of words, claims that this occurs when “the speaker says something unexpected, the truth of which is recognized” (in Attardo 1994: 20). The same idea is expressed in a different passage: “in all jokes, whether a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if it fits the fact” (in Attardo 1994: 20). Because of these claims Aristotle might be considered the initiator of the incongruity model.

considered the initiator of the incongruity model.

It is the fact, (in Aristotle 1994: 50). Because of these claims Aristotle might be  
all jokes, wherever a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if  
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this occurs when the speaker says something unexpected, the truth of which is  
immediate surprise resulting from witty metaphors or peculiar use of words" claims that  
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This claim clearly connects Aristotle's view to the superiority theory. But Aristotle's

(in Harris 1992: 32)

defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others  
of the ridiculous, which is a species of the ugly. The ridiculous may be  
regards any and every sort of pain, not only as regards one particular kind  
[it is] an imitation of men worse than ourselves; worse however, not as

he says that

Along the same lines is Aristotle's theory, when defining comedy in his Poetics

humor:

humorist combines with error in the first case and with pain in the second case to create  
eluded by what is ridiculous, and the ridiculous happens to strong men or heroic ones:  
combination of contrasting emotion like pain and pleasure. In Plato's opinion, humor is  
considers humor mainly as defecation (superiority theory) and sees it as a peculiar

The first recognition of humor is found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The Greek philosopher

#### 1.1.1. The Classic Period: The Greek Philosophers

psychology of the reader only. (Harris 1992: 40)

the speaker and the hearer, and the relationship theories comment on the feelings and



Aristotle is also responsible for the theoretical treatment and distinction of the classical genres of comedy and tragedy. If most of the discussion on the two genres is not important for the discussion on humor, one point is of a certain relevance: Aristotle considers comedy to be a realistic genre, deeply rooted in everyday reality. It is this closeness to everyday experience, this "imitation of men worse than average" (in Harris 1992: 35) that can be a source of humor.

Of a different opinion is Theophrastus, who introduced the comedy of characters, a type of comedy derived from the interaction of several characters, each one characterized by an exaggerated feature (usually a weakness) of his persona. In his mind comedy is an eminently fictional genre, i.e., non-realistic, far from everyday experience. The situation and the features in comedy must be uncommon, over-emphasized, abnormally exaggerated to result in funniness. Nonetheless, Theophrastus too is a representative of the theory of superiority: laughter comes from the displaying of (even abnormal) human weaknesses.

Another important text for the theory of humor is what is usually referred to as the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. For quite a long time thought of as a summary of Aristotle's lost second book, the *Tractatus* introduces the important distinction between the two main sources of humor, words and events, which give rise to two substantially different forms of humor, namely verbal (i.e., depending on the choice of the words and their displacement in a given text) and referential humor (depending on the nature of the episode or anecdote narrated). This distinction, as we will see, represents a useful and fairly commonly used tool for the analysis of humorous texts.



### I.A.2. The Latin Rhetorician.

Cicero, in his *De Oratore*, a treatise on rhetoric, expresses ideas that are not different from the ones found in the Greek theorists. Having to study the origin of humor, he claims that “turpitudinem et deformitatem quadam contenitur” (“it [humor] is contained in some kind of baseness and deformity”, in Attardo 1994: 27), echoing Aristotle’s ideas, somehow connected to the superiority theory. When dealing with a distinction of the different forms of humor, Cicero presents the same distinction that was in the *Tractatus Coislinianus* between verbal humor (*de dicto*) and referential humor (*de re*). Cicero also provides a list of the devices that belong to either groups: humor *de dicto* would include ambiguity (*ambigua*), paranomasia (*parvam verbi immutationem*), false etymology (*interpretation nominis*), literal interpretation of figurative expressions (*ad verbum non ad sententiam rem accipere*), allegory, metaphor, antiphrasy (*ex inversione verborum*); humor *de re* would include instead anecdotes (*fabella*) and caricature (*imitatio*).

A most important name among Latin rhetoricians for the study of humor is Quintilian. In the sixth book of his *Institutio Oratoria* we read

Non una ratione moveri solet: neque enim acute tantum ac venuste, sed stulte, iracunde, timide dicta ac facta ridentur, ideoque anceps eius rei ratio est, quod a derisu non procul abest risus.<sup>1</sup>

This connects Quintilian’s view to the superiority-based theories of humor already seen in Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. But Quintilian’s theory on humor goes much further. As for the *form* of humor, besides accepting Cicero’s distinction between humor *de re* and *de dicto*, he introduces six different categories of humor: *urbanitas* (urban, civilized humor),

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<sup>1</sup> It [laughter] does not come from only one reason: in effect one not only laughs about pointed or amusing sayings or facts, but also about stupid, angry, timid [facts or sayings]; and because of this very fact the reason of this is double, because laughter is not far from derision (translation in Attardo 1994: 30).



*venustum* (beautiful, ornamental), *salsum* (salty, spicy), *facetum* (pleasing, light), *jocus* (non serious, playful), *dicacitas* (based on words, verbal). As for the *targets* Quintilian claims that humor can be directed 1) toward others, 2) toward ourselves, or 3) it can be neutral.

- In the first case “*aliena aut reprehendimus, aut refutamus, aut elevamus, aut repercutimus, aut eludimus,*”<sup>2</sup> and this is the part of Quintilian’s theory on humor that is somehow related to the superiority theories.
- In the second case Quintilian considers humor that derives from a ridiculous, imprudent, or distracted behavior from the part of the speaker (or of the doer), which can be either involuntary (i.e., not meant to be perceived as funny) or intentional, this last being eminently humorous (“*si simulamus, venusta creduntur*”<sup>3</sup>).
- For the third case he claims that “*tertium est genus [...] in decipiendis expectationibus, dictis aliter accipiendis*”<sup>4</sup>, and such a claim clearly foreshadows the idea of the frustrated expectation as a source of humor. As we will see, violating expectation will be one of the central ideas of modern linguistic theories on humor.

Summarizing the nature of humor, Quintilian maintains that

Omnis salse dicendi ratio in eo est, ut aliter quam est rectum verumque dicatur: quod fit totum fingendis aut nostris aut alienis persuasionibus aut dicendo quod fieri non potest.<sup>5</sup>

With such a claim Quintilian implicitly uses the incongruity model to explain humor.

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<sup>2</sup> Either we censure others’ activities, or we refute them, or we praise them, or we react to them or we avoid them (translation in Attardo 1994: 31).

<sup>3</sup> If we fake it, it is believed funny (translation in Attardo 1994: 31).

<sup>4</sup> The third kind is [...] in the thwarting of expectations, taking differently the things said (translation in Attardo 1994: 32).

<sup>5</sup> All the meaning of making jokes is in this, that [something be] said differently than what is right and true: which is all done by [faking] either our or someone else’s beliefs, or by saying what cannot be (translation in Attardo 1994: 32).

in Vanders 1994: 35)

which is all done by [thinking] either out of someone else's reports or by reading what someone else (narration)  
All the meaning of making sense is in this: that [something is] said differently than what is said and vice:  
Vanders 1994: 35)

The third kind is [...] in the framing of expectations, taking differently the things said (narration in  
If we take it it is revealed itself (narration in Vanders 1994: 31)

from (narration in Vanders 1994: 31)

Either we compare objects, relations, or we relate them, or we relate them, or we relate to them or we relate

With such a claim Ombrian primarily uses the incongruity model to explain humor:

discrepancy model: when you compare

discrepancy: model in which differences are positive and which presupposes and

Ombrian takes discrepancy to be in so far as it differs from set routine language

Summarizing the nature of humor, Ombrian maintains that

expectation will be one of the central ideas of modern linguistic theories on humor.

idea of the linguistic expectation as a source of humor. As we will see, violating

expectations, which are ascriptions<sup>24</sup>, and such a claim clearly foregrounds the

For the third case he claims that "routine set goals [...]" in descriptions

but being sufficiently humorous ("as summarizing, routine structure")

can be either humorously (i.e., not meant to be perceived as funny) or intentionally, this

intention, or directed behavior from the part of the speaker (or of the poet), which

In the second case Ombrian considers humor that derives from a mismatch

is somehow related to the linguistic theories

representations, and structures<sup>25</sup>, and this is the part of Ombrian's theory on humor that

In the first case "which are representations, and relations, and structures, and

patterns

claims that humor can be directed 1) toward others, 2) toward ourselves, or 3) it can be

(non serious, playful), descriptive (based on words, words). As for the latter Ombrian

language (descriptive, descriptive), various (style, style), routine (describing, here), routine

### I.A.3. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The general negative view on laughter and comedies (considered among the most useless and distracting<sup>6</sup> human occupations) is certainly one of the reasons of the slowing down of the study of humor during the Middle Ages. Things changed in the Renaissance thanks to the discovery, the translation, and the commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Among the most important and insightful commentaries is Vincenzo Maggio (Madius)'s *De Ridiculis* (1550). In his treaty Maggi introduces a most important aspect for the understanding of humorous mechanisms:

Si turpitude tantum esset risus causa, ea perseverante, risum quoque perseverare necesse esset. At nulla cessante turpitudinis causa, cessamus tamen a risu; ea enim turpia quae nobis familiaria sunt risum non movent. Igitur satis constat turpitudinem ipsam tantum risus causam non existere, sed admiratione quoque opus esse.<sup>7</sup>

With this very words Maggi introduces a new model (that can easily combine with superiority and incongruity models, and that is closely related to the release model), and this model is his theory of *admiratio*, according to which one of the main sources of humor resides in surprise and in the surprising-unexpected effects elicited by some words and events.

Giangiorgio Trissino, in his *Poetica* (1562), starting from Aristotelian and Ciceronian ideas, states that humor derives from what is 'ugly,' and he provides an insightful and workable definition of what is meant by 'ugly': ugly is everything which

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<sup>6</sup> The verb 'to amuse' in Medieval Latin derives from the Classic Latin *dis-vertere*, i.e., 'to swerve away from something'.

<sup>7</sup> If ugliness alone were the cause of laughter [= the thesis of Aristotle], while it continues to exist, laughter also should continue. But, without ceasing the cause of ugliness, we nevertheless cease laughing; also those things that are ugly but are familiar to us, do not cause laughter. Therefore it is clear enough that the cause

things that are ugly and are thought to be, do not cause laughter. Therefore it is clear enough that the cause also should contain the notion covering the cause of ugliness, as nevertheless causes laughing: also those things that are ugly and are thought to be, do not cause laughter. Therefore it is clear enough that the cause also should contain the notion covering the cause of ugliness, as nevertheless causes laughing: also those things that are ugly and are thought to be, do not cause laughter.

The verb 'to laugh' in Medieval Latin derives from the Classical Latin *de-mentis* 'to become mad'

magister and working definition of what is meant by 'ugly': ugly is everything which is not beautiful, states that humor derives from what is 'ugly', and he provides an

explanation of the transition in the Poetics (1525) arising from Aristotle's and

humor resides in surprise and in the surprising-unexpected effects elicited by some words this model is his theory of *admiration*, according to which one of the main sources of surprise and incongruity models, and that is closely related to the release model, and

With this verb words Magister introduces a new model (that can easily combine with

sed admiratione hunc dicit esse  
igitur esse comitatum individualium istam rationem hunc causam non existere  
namque est, et enim ista pars hunc individualium istam non movet  
per se hunc dicit esse. At hunc causam individualium causam  
si individualium istam dicit hunc causam, et per se hunc dicit esse

for the understanding of numerous mechanisms:

(Magister's Poetics (1525)) In his treatise Magister introduces a most important aspect

Among the most important and influential commentaries is Vincenzo Maggiorani's

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The general negative view on laughter and comedies (considered among the most useless

### 1.1.3 The Middle Ages and the Renaissance



does not belong to conventional models, i.e., anything which is somehow *improper*, like “an ugly and distorted face, an inept movement, a silly word, an awkward pronunciation, a rough hand, a wine of unpleasant taste, a bad smelling rose” (in Winberg 1970, 70), Only ‘ugliness’ that violates a set of expectations about something (i.e., what would be *proper* in a given context) may be perceived as humorous.

Very similar ideas are presented by Bernardo Pino. In his *Breve Considerazione intorno al Componimento de la Comedia de’ Nostri Tempi* (1572) he also considers humor in relation to the ‘ugly,’ and provides a useful definition of ‘ugly,’ according to which everything that does not respond to given canons may be perceived as ugly:

Nè per brutto si dee sempre intendere il disonesto e l’osceno, chè per sè stesse tali parole d’osceno e di disonesto hanno sempre significato di male. Ma per brutto l’ha da prendere quel che non ha le sue parti proporzionate e corrispondenti, da la quale corrispondenza nasce la bellezza, la quale non è altro che l’ordine e la proporzione delle parti.<sup>8</sup>  
(in Weinberg 1970: 635 vol II)

Like Trissino, Pino, too, enlarges the category of the ‘ugly’ to include every kind of aesthetic, moral, and social inappropriateness as possible sources of humor.

Ludovico Castelvetro in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1570) maintains that humor may be of two kinds: 1) involuntary, deriving from deception of other people due to ignorance of customs, to madness, to drunkenness, or to boasting; 2) intentional, deriving from deception of other people due to willful misinterpretation and witty retorts, from evil and disgraces presented undercover, from references to sex. To result in humor,

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of laughter does not reside only in ugliness, but it is also the work of surprise (translation in Attardo 1994: 38)

<sup>8</sup> Neither by ‘ugly’ one must always understand the dishonest [social unacceptable] and obscene, because by themselves these words ‘obscene’ and ‘dishonest’ have always the meaning of ‘evil.’ On the contrary by ‘ugly’ one should take what does not have its parts in proportion and corresponding (to each other), from this correspondence is born beauty, which is not anything else than the order and proportion of the parts (translation by Attardo 1994: 43).



deception must be kept undercover. Because of these ideas Castelvetro's view can be considered close to incongruity-based way of perceiving humor.

#### **I.A.4. Seventeenth and Eighteen Century.**

The distinction between the three concepts of humor (superiority, incongruity and release-based theories, even though the latter was not equally common) that were implicit in many of the approaches to humor proposed by Greek and Latin theorists, and which were strengthened during the Renaissance, becomes in these two centuries much more distinct, precise, and clear-cut. If it were difficult to make Classical theorists' ideas on humor fit only one category (see Quintilian's theory fitting either the superiority and the incongruity model), it will be fairly easy to systematize sixteenth and seventeenth century concepts on humor in each of the approaches.

Thomas Hobbes, in "Human Nature" (1650) describing the nature of humor, maintains that

the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmit*y of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour.  
(1650/1966: 46)

In Hobbes' words laughter is elicited from a sense of superiority toward somebody or something. With such a statement Hobbes is one of most prominent theorist of the superiority-based approach to humor research.

James Beattie, in *On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* (1776), talking about laughter claims that



laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.  
(1776: 602)

For Beattie the perception of this semantic gap is one of the sources of humor, supporting the incongruity-based theory<sup>9</sup>.

Connected to the incongruity-based theories is also Emmanuel Kant, who in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) maintains that

in everything that is intended to arouse a lively and devastating laughter there must be something contradictory [...]. Laughter is an affection arising from sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.  
(translation in Hempelmann 2000)

An important point that allows us to distinguish Kant is that he implicitly anticipates the idea of the centrality of some *justification* for the perception of humor: “the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment” (in Attardo 1994: 48).

#### **I.A.5. The Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Century.**

Close to Kant’s idea, and close to the incongruity model, is also Arthur Schopenhauer’s theory. In *The World as Will and Idea* (1859) he claims that

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often emerges when two or more real objects are thought through ONE term and its identity is transferred to them.  
(translation in Hemplemann 2000)

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<sup>9</sup> For Beattie the experience of incongruity does not necessarily lead to humor, but could also produce “some other emotion of greater authority [which might] bear down this ludicrous emotion” (1776: 682).



More clearly than Kant, Schopenhauer expresses the nature of the humor-provoking incongruity as a temporary confusion or mismatch between different ideas, or meanings, or frames of reference at large.

A most important figure in humor research is Sigmund Freud, who systematized his ideas on laughter and humorous texts in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Freud's psychological approach to humor is representative of the release-based theory, where humor is perceived as sublimation or liberation of suppressed feelings, emotions and impulses.

Freud distinguishes between two types of humor, the tendentious and the neutral-abstract humor. His main focus is on tendentious humor, which he subdivides in three categories: the obscene, the aggressive-hostile, and the cynical. This partition could be easily related to the superiority approach (i.e., humor coming from what is ugly, inferior or inappropriate), but Freud is much more concerned with the function of this kind of humor, that is, to enable the manifestation and satisfaction of suppressed desire (the suppression being a consequence of social internalized norms of behavior). This is what produces relief and liberation. Release is also the result of neutral-abstract humor: even if it doesn't have specific motivations or targets, it is a liberating expression of playful and nonsensical mental mechanisms in contrast to logical and "all-too-sensible" (Freud 1905/1960: 46) mental procedures.

Another important point in Freud's theory is the foreshadowing of the essence of humor (at least of one form of humor) as the overlapping of opposite frames of reference: the packaging of two meanings (i.e., proper names vs. name for a thing, metaphorical vs. literal meaning, double entendre, ambiguity and double meaning with allusion, see Freud

These meanings, double meanings, ambiguity and double meaning with ambiguity, see Freud  
the background of two meanings (i.e., proper names as name for a thing, metaphorical as  
humor (at least of one form of humor) as the overlapping of opposite frames of reference:

Another important point in Freud's theory is the foregrounding of the essence of  
(1902, 1900: 40) mental processes:

non-rational mental mechanisms in contrast to logical and "all-too-rational" (Freud  
it doesn't have specific motivations or targets, it is a protecting expression of hostility and  
produces relief and protection. Release is also the result of neutral-ambivalent humor: even if  
suppression being a consequence of social internalized norms of behavior. This is what  
humor, that is, to enable the manifestation and satisfaction of suppressed desire (the  
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easily related to the subconsciously approved (i.e., humor coming from what is ugly, inferior  
categories: the obscene, the aggressive-hostile, and the cynical. This partition could be  
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his ideas on laughter and humorous texts in jokes and their relation to the unconscious.

A most important figure in humor research is Sigmund Freud, who systematized  
of frames of reference as target.

incongruity as a temporary collision or mismatch between different ideas, or meanings.  
More clearly than Kant, Schopenhauer expresses the nature of the humor-producing



1905/1960: 52) in a *tertium comparationis* is a source of humor. Such an idea is not far from the incongruity-based concept of humor, and the following passage confirms it:

We derive unmistakable enjoyment in jokes from being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one [...]. The pleasure in a joke arising from a 'short circuit' like this seems to be the greater the more alien the two circle of ideas that are brought together by the same word – the further apart they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke's technical method provides in the train of thought.

(Freud 1905/1960: 120)

A final important remark is that Freud intends humor not as an absolute concept but as a sum of different variables: among the factors that enable the perception of humor is the subjective predisposition of those who are involved in the comic situation (the speaker and the hearer):

the most favourable condition for the production of comic pleasure is a generally cheerful mood in which one is inclined to laugh and when one expects the comic, is attuned to comic pleasure

(Freud 1905/1960: 231)

Henri Bergson with his treatise *Le Rire* (1901) represents another important step in humor research. If Freud conducted his study under a psychological perspective, Bergson studies humor in connection with aesthetics, that is, with a philosophically based approach. Bergson's ideas are close to the incongruity model, and in his view what produces incongruity is mainly the gap between what is natural (or positive, i.e., typically human) and what is mechanical (or acquired, i.e., artificially constructed and conventional). But he also stresses the function of humor as a social corrective, and this relates his vision of humor also to the superiority approach, in that, the pointing or the ridiculing of what is (socially) inappropriate (i.e., ugly, inferior) is an effective way to raise awareness of the things that need to be changed. Most importantly Bergson claims



that the perception of humor needs an intellectual approach from the participants, rather than an emotional one. In other words, humor needs to be logically processed and understood. This foreshadows the necessity of a “logical imagination” (1901/1964: 32), a local logic, or a logical mechanism that disambiguates and justifies the incongruity, and on this justification humor largely depends.

#### **I.A.6. Modern Theories.**

Many have been the studies in modern times in humor research, many of them reproducing in various forms what had been said by theorists in the past. In this section we will omit such studies, and we will consider only those theories on humor that are innovative and influential.

Algirdas Julien Greimas in his *Sémantique Structurale* (1966) devotes a brief but interesting section on humorous texts, namely on jokes. Given the definition of isotopy as “a redundant set of semantic categories which makes possible the uniform reading of a text” (Greimas 1970: 188) (i.e., a broad frame of reference that allows a unity of meaning compatible with all the salient bits of information in a text, or, more simply, as *semantic interpretation* of a text), a joke is a two-stage text constituted by the establishing of a first isotopy (1<sup>st</sup> stage, or *narration-presentation*) disturbed or twisted by the sudden introduction or by the interference of a second isotopy (2<sup>nd</sup> stage, or *dialogue*). In synthesis, Greimas considers a humorous text as consisting of:

- two isotopies;
- a *camouflaged* opposition (an opposition kept undercover, see 1966: 71) between the two isotopies;



- a connecting term, which reveals the actual opposition between the two isotopies. As we will see, this analysis of jokes will strongly influence modern research on humor, especially those theories dealing with linguistics and narratology.

Violette Morin, in "L'Histoire Drôle" (1966) proposes a study of humorous texts based on the concept of *function*. A function, as defined by Propp is "an act of a character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (1928/1968: 21). According to her, a humorous text (a joke) is a combination of three functions: 1) *fonction de normalization* (normalization); 2) *fonction locutrice d'enclenchement* (interlocking); 3) *fonction interlocutrice de disjonction* (disjunction). The first function, the initial situation, establishes a narrative frame, determines a situation, a context, the characters, and all the necessary bits of information for the processing of the text. The second stage "establishes the problem to be solved, or questions" (1966/1981: 108) and necessarily creates a set of expectations. The third function concludes the narration with the switch from the serious to the humorous sense of the text. This switch is brought about by the presence of a disjunctive, i.e., an element that disambiguates the sense of the whole text. If the division in the three functions presented by Morin is not specific to humorous texts (in fact, it can be applied to all narratives at large), the idea of the disjunctive (not dissimilar to Greimas' connector, or connecting term), is instead specific and necessary to humor.

Gillo Dorfles (1968) in *Artificio e Natura* devotes a section to the semiotics of humor, and claims that humor is

a particular kind of message [...] that operates when in a determined communicative circumstance a [...] change of relationship between the sign and its referent is given [or] a kind of language [...] characterized by the negative, or paradoxical, value assumed by the sign.



(translation in Attardo 1994: 176).

Therefore, humor depends on the switch between the *natural* referent of a sign and another *paradoxical* (etimologically 'against the rule') referent, which gives a different, negative and paradoxical value to a given sign. With his study Dorflès offers a semantic explanation of the incongruity-based theories.

In 1972, Jerry Suls ("A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons"), still reflecting in his study the incongruity model, stresses the important role played by the resolution of the incongruity, without which humor is not always possible. By perceiving an incongruity we are aware of a lack of fit, of a deviation from our sense of how ideas or images are usually related. And this is not necessarily funny in itself. It is when one tries to identify a way in which it might make sense to connect those mismatched ideas and images that incongruity may easily result in humor.

Giovanni Manetti, in "Per una Semiotica del Comico" (1976) dealing with humor under a semiotic perspective, follows Dorflès's hypothesis and provides a list of the possible humorous ways in which the switching between the two senses of a sign is brought about, and this list of mechanisms consists of metonymy, metaphor, changes in the subject of enunciation, decontextualization, parallels, and deformation.

Umberto Eco, in "Il Comico e la Regola" (1981) considers humor in connection to pragmatics, and he sees a source of humor in the violation of *conventional* expectations:

There exists a rhetorical device, which concerns the figures of thought, in which, given a social or intertextual 'frame' or scenario already known to the audience, you display the variation [of the frame], without, however, making it explicit in discourse.  
(1981/1986: 272).





For Eco it is the play with this internalized set of conventions that can produce humor. For the same reason he considers the violation of Grice's conversational maxims (see Grice 1975) - especially the violation of the maxim of quantity (i.e., 'make your contribution as informative as required or as expected'), of relation (i.e., 'be relevant') and of manner (i.e., 'be brief, succinct, not obscure') – a source of humor.

**I.A.7. The Semantic Script Theory of Humor, the General Theory of Verbal Humor, and Other Related Theories of Humor and Narrativity.**

One among the most important linguistic theories of humor is the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), as described by Victor Raskin in *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985). The concept of semantic script is not original to linguistics. It comes from psychology (Bartlett 1932; Bateson 1955, Goffman 1974) and finds its way to linguistics through Artificial Intelligence theories (Shank 1975; Shank and Abelson 1977). "most definitions of 'script' agree that it contains information which is typical, such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities" (Attardo 1994: 200). A script is therefore a cognitive structure, a frame of reference, a model of coherence, an "organized chunk of information about something" (in Attardo 1994: 198). A script can be activated either by *grammatical triggers*, i.e., pronouns or deictic elements, or by *lexical triggers*, eliciting new information through their lexical meaning. Grammatical and especially lexical triggers stimulate either our lexical knowledge (information pertaining to words) and our encyclopedic knowledge (pertaining to the world), and the scripts originates as a consequence of this stimulus. Similar scripts (or related micro-scripts) can be organized either in macro-scripts (i.e., clusters of scripts chronologically organized) or in complex-script (i.e., cluster of related scripts without



chronological organization). Once that the idea of scripts is set, Raskin sees in the overlap (i.e., in the compatibility) of two scripts and in their oppositeness the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor.

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the [following] conditions are satisfied:

- i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
  - ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite
- (Raskin 1985: 99).

The oppositeness of the scripts, on a high and abstract level, is related to the opposition existing between the domains Real vs. Unreal. This general opposition can be further divided into three classes: Actual vs. Non-Actual, Normal vs. Abnormal, Possible vs. Impossible. In their turn these classes of opposition may be further subdivided in very concrete and circumstanced oppositions like Good vs. Bad, Life vs. Death, Obscene vs. Non-Obscene, etc.. The revelation of the existence of opposed scripts depends on a semantic script-switch trigger, which, in the case of jokes, corresponds to the closing punch line. The semantic script-switch triggers may provoke humor either by introducing *ambiguity* or *contradiction*: in the first case it enables two different-opposed reading of the same event; in the second case it imposes (retroactively) a second opposed reading of the whole text (either preceding or following the trigger).

One of the earliest attempt at applying the SSTH to humorous texts longer than jokes is in 1987, by Wladyslaw Chlopicki (“An Application of the Script Theory of Semantics to the Analysis of Selected Polish Humorous Short Stories”). He introduces the idea of ‘shadow oppositions’ to refer to the main script oppositions that are the core of the story (as a matter of fact, given the length of such texts, Chlopicki claims that usually there is more than just one script opposition). He also introduces the concept of a



dissipated trigger, the correspondent to a punch line in jokes, which for longer texts can consist of whole sentences, paragraphs and also chapters. Given this taxonomy, Chlopicki is able to analyze short stories using the same procedure that the SSTH applies to the case of jokes.

L.S. Kolek (1988/1990) also (in "Bricks and Blocks, or How Jokes Make up Comic Narratives") studies humorous texts longer than jokes. He introduces a meaningful distinction between two broad categories of such texts: those which are essentially *expanded* jokes (constructed according to the model setup-incongruity-resolution, that is, the tripartition proposed by Morin, and the only case considered by Chlopicki) and those which include numbers of (either interrelated or separate) jokes. In this last case what determines the degree of humor is 1) the frequency of joke patterns, 2) the degree of interposition of other (non humorous) material, 3) the rate of the passages between them, 4) qualities (connectedness, or relation) of their points.

Even if unrelated to the SSTH, a very insightful study worth mentioning at this point is Paul Lewis' *Comic Effects* (1989). If Raskin underlines the importance of a script opposition (i.e., the cause of incongruity), Lewis stresses the resolution of the incongruity as the necessary and sufficient condition for humor. In his opinion it is the attempt at a local logic that could make *some* sense of what had been briefly perceived as puzzling that "sparks a humor response" (1989: 11), whereas the lack of such a resolution leaves the text in the domain of the *incongruous*, and incongruity *per se* is not humorous.

An important broadening of the SSTH is represented by the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), as expressed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin ("Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model" 1991), and by



Salvatore Attardo in *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994), and in “The Semantic Foundation of Cognitive Theory of Humor” (1997). The main difference between the two theories is that the SSTH proposed a semantic approach, whereas the GTVH is a linguistic theory at large including other areas of linguistics other than semantics, like textual linguistics, pragmatics, and narratology. The GTVH introduces six Knowledge Resources (KR) as meaningful tools for the analysis of humorous texts: Language, Narrative Strategy, Target, Situation, Logical Mechanism, and Script Opposition.

- Language: it characterizes the surface structure of a humorous text, and it consists of “all choices at the phonetic, phonologic, morphophonetic, morphologic, lexic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels of language” (Attardo and Raskin, 1991: 298).
- Narrative Strategy: it refers to “the genre, or rather microgenre as it were of the joke” (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 300).
- Target: it refers to the *butt* of the joke, and it is an optional feature for humorous texts.
- Situation: it refers to the implicit context of the joke, and to what the joke is about.
- Logical Mechanism: is the local logic that allows the disambiguation of a humorous text and that explains the nature of the opposition between scripts in a joke (i.e., via a figure-ground reversal, via a false analogy, via juxtaposition, etc.).
- Script Opposition: it is responsible for the incongruity (the only KR considered in the SSTH).

Of all six, the most important KRs for the study of humor are the LM and the SO. The SO accounts for the incongruity perceivable in a humorous text, whereas the LM





accounts for the local logic resolving or disambiguating such incongruity, and this way it uncovers the humorousness of a text (for a more detailed analysis of LM see Attardo and Hempelmann 2000).

In 1992 Christopher Holcomb (“Nodal Humor in Comic Narrative”) attempts an interesting application of the SSTH to the case of humorous texts longer than jokes. He sees humor in a text as directly dependent to the presence, the concentration and the quality of the nodal points of humor (Nodal Point Theory, or NPT). A nodal point is a place in the narrative where humor is easily perceivable, easy to be detected, and this depends on the presence of at least one script opposition: “a nodal point of humor will contain one or several script oppositions” (1992: 234). In Holcomb’s words these script oppositions can be local (concentrated in a given portion of the text) or distant (“tied to other parts of the story” 1992: 241). The net of connections or the “correspondence” (1992: 242) among nodal points is what determines the degree of humor of a narrative text.

In 1998 Salvatore Attardo (“The Analysis of Humorous Narratives”) presents a useful theory for the analysis of humorous narratives. He starts by distinguishing between two broad categories of humorous texts: structurally humorous texts (i.e., where humor belongs to the plot, this being the case of texts built like jokes, with a main script opposition and a final punch line), and locally humorous texts (i.e., where humor is external to the plot). In the last case the perception of humor depends on the presence of punch or jab lines, the main distinction between the two being that punch lines “conclude the micronarrative they are the disjunctors of” (Attardo 1999) interrupting somehow the narration without being “essential to the macronarrative,” whereas jab lines are

variation without being "essential to the main narrative," whereas jokes are the main narrative they are the digression of. (Ariado 1988) interpreting somehow the humor of jokes, the main distinction between the two being that jokes are "conclude external to the plot). In the last case the perception of humor depends on the presence of opposition and a final punch line, and locally humorous texts (i.e. where humor is belongs to the plot, this being the case of texts such like jokes, with a main script two broad categories of humorous texts: structurally humorous texts (i.e. where humor useful mostly for the analysis of humorous narratives. He starts by distinguishing between

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“humorous turns/events which are essential to macronarrative in which they appear (i.e., they are indispensable to the development of the ‘plot’ or of the text)” (Attardo 1999), but “they do not interrupt the narrative flow” (ibidem). Another distinctive feature that allows us to distinguish between the two is that punch lines “occur virtually exclusively in a final position” (Attardo 1999) of a (micro)narrative, whereas jab lines “may occur in any other position in the text” (Attardo 1999). When they are formally or thematically related, punch and jab lines can be grouped in *strands* (when three or more instances of related lines occur in a given text), and, in their turn, strands can be grouped in *stacks* (groups of formally or thematically related strands that occur in different macronarratives, i.e., different parts of the same text, or different texts altogether). The density of jab and punch lines and the concentration of strands are the conditions of humor in narratives longer than jokes.

These ideas are also to be found in another study by Attardo (2000) where he introduces the concept of centrality or peripherality of strands. Central strands are strands that are central to a given text, that is to say, that “tend to occur throughout a significant (say, greater than 75% of the text) part of the text”, whereas “a peripheral strand is a strand which occurs only in one (or few) instance(s) in the text”. This significant distinction accounts for the salience and relevance of the instances of humor in view of the development of a plot, and provides an important tool not only to analyze the degree of humor inside a humorous text, but also a tool for the analysis of the possible humor in those narratives which on the whole are not humorous at all.



## I.B. Non-Serious Narratives (Humor in Narrative Texts)

### I.B.1. Introduction.

The features presented so far as characteristic of a humorous text, even if important, are not necessary and sufficient, or even not specific, to (long) humorous narratives.

- The tripartition setup-incongruity-resolution (Attardo 1999: 36, Attardo 1997), or normalisation-enlanchement-disjonction (Morin 1966: 108), does not explain narrative humor in that “the division into the three functions is not a specific trait of jokes, but rather is common to all narrative text” (Attardo 1994: 91) (see the three-stage pattern - *agon*, *pathos*, *anagnorisis* - which according to Frye<sup>10</sup> would shape most narratives).
- The final resolution of incongruity (or of the *asymmetry* that emerges on the semantic level, see Wenzel 1989: 55) due to a punchline is not enough to make a text humorous. All narratives sharing the identical narrative structure as jokes (like science fiction short stories - where the “pointed ending” - Wenzel 1989: 70, 55 - has the same function of disambiguating factor as punchlines in jokes) are not necessarily humorous texts.
- The violation of expectation in itself is not enough for humor, being “a broad literary device, applicable to texts that are not jokes, for example detective novels” (Wenzel 1989: 12).
- A simple incongruity (i.e., a lack of resolution) can hardly be enough to qualify a text as humorous. As Beattie (1776) and Lewis (1989) note, “not all perceived

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<sup>10</sup> 1957: 187



incongruities are amusing, that some are too frightening or too confusing to be funny” (Lewis 1989: 11). Many surrealistic or absurd novels in fact are incongruous without being humorous (Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Ionesco’s *La Leçon*, Beckett’s *Happy Days*, Roussel’s *Locus Solus*, Pirandello’s *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d’Autore*, Potoki’s *La Duchesse d’Avila (Manuscrit trouvé a Saragosse)*). Under a different perspective, Lewis discards the idea of a simple incongruity as sufficient for humor by maintaining that “it is possible not to be amused by an incongruity even in [...] a ludicrous context; indeed many incongruities fail to amuse because they [...] seem foolish or silly” (1986: 6).

- The number and the density of the instances of humor (Kolek 1988, 1990, Holcomb 1992) are not enough to turn a literary text into a humorous one: as a matter of fact biographies of comedians containing numbers of jokes are not necessarily humorous texts.

Even if each of these points has to offer some important insight to initialize the study of humor in narrative texts (longer than jokes), none of them explains humor in these texts, and especially none of them offers a basis on which to distinguish different degrees of humorousness in different texts.

Before attempting any definition, some points about the peculiar nature of narrative texts, which is different from that of a simple joke, need clarification.

### **I.B.2. Core Narrative - Surface Narrative.**

All narratives can be distinguished into two different levels: there is “an *apparent* level of narration at which the manifestations of narration are subject to the specific exigencies of





the linguistic substances through which they are expressed, and an *immanent level*, constituting a sort of [...] structural trunk, at which narrativity is situated and organized prior to its manifestation” (Greimas 1969/1977: 23). Vladimir Propp (1928), when introducing his theory of functions (according to which a story can be explained as the articulation of a given number or events-functions, the characters being simply carriers of these functions), implies the same distinction: functions are carried out on the *apparent* level of the story, but they receive their meaning by a set of what he defines “motivations” - which represent the *core* of what happens in the story - that justify and motivate on a deeper level the different functions.

Even more precise than that is the definition of the two levels given by Greimas when studying Lévi-Strauss:

The distinction made by Lévi-Strauss, since his first study dedicated to myth, between an apparent signification of the myth, revealed in the textual narrative, and its deep meaning, paradigmatic and achronic, implies the same assumption... We therefore decided to give to the structure evolved by Lévi-Strauss the status of *deep narrative structure*, capable, in the process of syntagmatization, of generating a *surface structure* corresponding roughly to the syntagmatic class of Propp. (1971: 796, emphasis added)

The same partition is in Rimmon-Kenan (1981), who, borrowing the taxonomy of Transformational Generative Grammar, defines the two levels as *deep structure* and *surface structure*. The distinction between a *core narrative* and a *surface narrative* (as we will call them from this point on) is also implied by Chlopicki when, trying an application of Raskin’s SSTH to short stories, talks about a “deeper script opposition” as opposed to “individual surface oppositions” (see Attardo 1994: 210).

„individual subject oppositions“ (see Anisfeld 1984: 310)

of Bakhtin's SSTH to show stories, take from a „deeper subject opposition“ as opposed to what can be seen from the point of view) is also mirrored by Chlebnik's view of the subject oppositions. The distinction between a *sole* narrative and a *subject* narrative (as we find in the *Translational* *Operational* *Structure*) defines the two levels as deep structure and surface structure. The same function is in Kuvshinov-Korovin (1981) who, following the taxonomy of

(1971: 380, emphasis added)  
„...the collective tendency to the epistemological class of Propp's  
category in the process of epistemological or generalizing a subject  
structure evolved by Levi-Strauss the terms of deep narrative structure“  
mirrors the same distinction. „We therefore decided to give to the  
(story) narrative, and its deep meaning, epistemological and scientific“  
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The distinction made by Levi-Strauss, since his first study decided to

when studying Levi-Strauss:

Even more precise than that is the definition of the *two* levels given by Chlebnik  
namely on a deeper level the different functions  
„...functions“ - which represent the core of what happens in the story - that highly and  
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epistemological of a given number of events-functions, the characters being simply carriers of  
introducing the theory of functions (according to which a story can be explained as the  
basis to its interpretation“ (Chlebnik 1989: 197: 33). Vladimir Propp (1958) who  
concerning a sort of [ ] „...epistemological“ as which particularly is situated and explained  
the linguistic structures through which they are expressed, and an important level

### I.B.3. Core Script Tension – Core Script Opposition.

A narrative is something dynamic and this is a result of a *tension* between different elements in the core narrative (i.e., a *core tension*), whose reactions cause events in the surface narrative to take place and develop<sup>11</sup>. The idea of the tension between different or contrasting elements as an essential feature for all narrative is introduced and explained by Greimas (1966,1970) under a narratological viewpoint, with the presentation of the “semantic square,” putting into play “two kinds of opposed semes (the ‘seme’ being the minimal unit of sense)” (Rimmon-Kenan 1981: 12), two among which are in binary opposition (‘contradictories’, i.e., Life vs. Non-Life) and two that are mutually exclusive but not exhaustive (‘contraries’, i.e. Life vs. Death) (see Greimas 1966, 1970). The explanation of the relation between these two different sets (contradictories and contraries reacting among themselves) is too complex and substantially irrelevant for the purpose of this work, once the concept of a basic tension between contrasting elements in the core narrative is set. Applying the SSTH to Greimas’ theory, the *elements* whose reaction allows the story to progress are the *scripts*, or *complex scripts* (i.e., clusters of semantically related scripts), or *macro scripts* (i.e., clusters of semantically related scripts chronologically organized).

The idea of *tension* between two scripts as the core of a literary text seems somehow to parallel the idea of an *opposition* between scripts as the core of verbal humor (jokes), but the two ideas must not be confused (otherwise, either every literary work

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<sup>11</sup> “Expected or normal events rarely stimulate the conflict or confusion necessary to the process of beginning a work of drama or fiction. Chicken Little awakes to find not that the sky is falling but that the sun is shining; Macbeth and Banquo meet not the three witches but three fishmongers; David Copperfield’s father survives and supports the lad throughout an average childhood. Without the *unusual* or the *problematic*, there is nowhere for a work to go, nothing for it to do. This explains why almost any work of

...Expects of normal events (which) ...the concept of comparison necessary to the process of

(to be) but the two ideas must not be confused (otherwise) ...the idea of tension between two scripts as the core of verbal narrative

The idea of tension between two scripts as the core of a verbally text seems epistemologically organized

semantically related scripts) or macro scripts (i.e. clusters of semantically related scripts

reaction allows the story to progress etc the scripts' or complex scripts (i.e. clusters of

the core narrative is set. Applying the 22TH to Dickens, thereby the elements whose

purpose of this work, once the concept of a basic tension between contrasting elements in

contradictions resulting among themselves) is too complex and substantially irrelevant for the

explanation of the relation between these two different sets (contradictions and

but not exclusive ('contradictions' i.e. Life vs. Death) (see Dickens 1800, 1830). The

opposition ('contradictions' i.e. Life vs. Non-Life) and two that are mutually exclusive

mutually and of sense). (Kliman-Kozan 1981: 13) two among which are in binary

...semantic space... putting into binary two kinds of opposed senses (the sense being the

1.3.3. Core script Tension - Core script Opposition.

could be read as humorous, or Raskin and Attardo's theory on humor would turn out to be a theory of narratives, not of humor). The presence of the scripts in the core narrative is a common feature for humorous and non-humorous texts, but in any non-humorous text there is simply a *core tension* rather than an *opposition*. What distinguishes a *script tension* from a *script opposition* is that in the first case the scripts activated in a text belong to the same domain (i.e., Possibility, Actuality, Normality, or, in a word, Reality) whereas in the second case the scripts belongs to different domains (i.e., Actuality vs. Non-Actuality, Possibility vs. Impossibility, Normality vs. Abnormality, or, in a word, Reality vs. Un-Reality).

In a non-humorous text there is a *tension* between two (or possibly more) different scripts, which are dramatically confronted during the climax scene (usually toward the end of the story), before being resolved, either via a gradual synthesis-harmonization<sup>12</sup> or by a reorganization or substitution of one of them over the other. Let's briefly consider Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The core tension here (as in most love stories) is between the scripts Love (i.e., passion, infatuation, attraction, etc.) vs. Non-Love (i.e., all the obstacles that disturb the lovers' story, mainly dependent on the hatred between Capulets and Montagues or on the final *play* with death). The whole story is the result of the tension between the desperate attempts of the two lovers to be together as much as possible, and the series of unfortunate circumstances that keep them apart,

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literature that depends on narrative or character development originates in an *irregularity* or *incongruity* [i.e., a Tension] which must be understood, overcome, resisted or assimilated." (Lewis 1989: 15).

<sup>12</sup> This is the case of low mimetic comedies (as defined by Frye 1957), like Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, or Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, where in the course of the story both the scripts change in ways that they end up not being 'contradictories' or 'contraries' (Greimas 1966, 1970) any more, and can combine in a final macro script which is represented by the (happy) ending.

confronted in a final, decisive scene where the two characters, by the (probable) sacrifice  
 made for the other, are not really 'confronted' or 'confronted' (Gibson 1990: 133) and even  
 the 'scene' of Gibson's 'confrontation' is 'not' in the context of the story from the scene's point of  
 view. This is the case of the 'confrontation' (as defined by Gibson 1990: 133) in 'The Machine' & 'The Machine' of  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' which is not 'confronted' or 'confronted' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 because the 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133).

as much as possible' and the scene of confrontation is not really 'confronted' or 'confronted'  
 is the result of the tension between the characters and the two worlds to be together  
 rather than Gibson and Gibson or on the other hand with Gibson. The whole story  
 Non-Gibson (i.e. all the characters that inhabit the world, story, mainly dependent on the  
 love stories) is between the scene's love (i.e. 'passion', 'intimacy', 'affection', etc.) as  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)

In a non-fictional text there is a tension between two (or possibly more)

characters as Gibson's 'confrontation' is not a 'confrontation' or 'confrontation' (Gibson 1990: 133)  
 Non-fictionally: 'Possibility' as 'impossibility', 'Non-fictionally' as 'fictionally' or 'in a world'  
 whereas in the second case the scene belongs to different domains (i.e. 'fictionally' as  
 belonging to the same domain (i.e. 'Possibility', 'fictionally', 'Non-fictionally' or 'in a world', 'fictionally')  
 tension from a scene's opposition is that in the first case the scene's scene is in a text  
 there is simply a scene's tension rather than an opposition. What distinguishes a scene's  
 common feature for fiction and non-fiction texts, but in any non-fiction text  
 a scene of 'possibilities' not of 'impossibility'. The presence of the scene in the scene's scene is a  
 could be read as 'fictionally' or 'fictionally' and 'fictionally' scene on 'fictionally' world that can be

culminating in the tragic climactic scene where the script Non-Love (Death) triumphs over Love, by substitution.

An important clarification needs to be made at this point. The core tension provides the motivations for the development of the story, but does not fix or predetermine *one only* and *necessary* course to the narration: it only influences the direction and the orientation of the events in the plot without necessarily determining specific events to happen. In other words, the core tension in *Romeo and Juliet* might as well have explained a perfectly happily-ending love story, instead of the actual tragedy that the reader is presented with in Shakespeare's play<sup>13</sup>.

A core tension between non-compatible<sup>14</sup> scripts (or at least presented as such) is therefore necessary a condition for all (non-humorous) *eventful* narratives, for it provides their *raison d'être* and furnishes causality to the narration at the level of the *surface*.

In humor, instead of a simple *tension*, there must be an actual *opposition* between two scripts. It is not enough that those scripts overlap or coalesce, but the actualization of one of them must represent or enable the negation-falsification-discarding of the other. In humorous texts, as in jokes, the two scripts have to be completely separate and unrelated except for a very few points (see Attardo and Hempelmann 2000), which are compatible to both scripts and which contain or are themselves the triggers of the script switch once the first script activated becomes so incongruous that doesn't seem to hold or to be valid

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<sup>13</sup> A deeper and more detailed analysis of this point would exceed the limits of this thesis. For a useful discussion of narrative possibilities see also Brémond (1966).

<sup>14</sup> Non-compatible scripts are scripts which cannot combine even though belonging to the same domain, i.e., Love vs. Non-Love for love stories; Disorder vs. Order for detective novels, or, combined with Inexperience vs. Experience, for adventures in general; Good vs. Evil for fairy tales and romances, etc..





anymore. This switching resolves the incongruity and can be (intuitively) explained through a Logical Mechanism (see Attardo and Hempelmann 2000)<sup>15</sup>.

Chlopicki (1987), trying an explanation of humorous texts (Polish short stories) according to the SSTH, introduces the idea of a *core script opposition*, which in his words becomes a "shadow opposition": "the 'shadow oppositions' are the deeper script oppositions whose scope encompasses the entire text and which are responsible for the overall perception of humor, rather than for the individual surface oppositions" (1987:19). He also introduces the idea of the *dissipated trigger* (see also Wenzel 1989: 54), where "not any single word, but the formulation of the whole phrase or two, or even the whole text of the joke is responsible for causing the script" (Chlopicki 1987: 14) and, consequently, the script switch. Even though Chlopicki's theory is not perfectly functional<sup>16</sup>, the introduction of the idea of core script opposition (and also that of dissipated trigger) will be very useful to understand the nature and the degree of humorousness in some literary texts.

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<sup>15</sup> The understanding of the nature of the incongruity - the Logical Mechanism - is an unavoidable step in order to recognize a text as humorous. A reader who wouldn't understand the nature of the incongruity in Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (ominous cruelty of the proposal vs. serious, detached and convincing way of presenting it) as ironic, would probably take the text as a foolish manifestation of a disturbed mind, not so different from the Nazi documents preparing the Final Solution, and not at all as a humorous text. Similarly, a reader who wouldn't understand the nature of the incongruity in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (reality vs. literary conventions of realism) as (metafictively) parodic, would probably consider the work as an obscure, unfocused and purposelessly long text, rather than humorous.

<sup>16</sup> Chlopicki's theory, in fact, "obliterates the differences among texts that can all be reduced to the same set of binary oppositions; for example, nobody would claim that a short story is equivalent in every way to a joke, yet, according to Chlopicki's extension of the SSTH, they can both be described in almost the same terms" (Attardo 1994: 210).



#### **I.B.4. Surface Script Opposition – Surface Script Tension.**

The idea of core tension (for non-humorous texts) and of core opposition (for humorous texts) leaves room or implies by analogy the existence of a *surface tension* and *opposition* as well.

The idea of *surface opposition* can already be found in Chlopicki (1987), when he distinguishes between ‘shadow oppositions’ (i.e., core oppositions), which encompass the whole text and are responsible for the overall perception of humor, and individual surface oppositions, which are the different local instances of humor (i.e., jokes) in the corpus of a text. This is the same idea that underlies Attardo’s (1989) theory of *jabs* and *punch lines*, where jab lines are defined as (non-disruptive and non-conclusive) instances of humor in a macro-narrative, while punch lines are “self-contained micronarratives (i.e., jokes) embedded within the larger narrative” (Attardo 1999: 66). As in the case of verbal jokes, humor in both jab and punch lines depends on a resolved script opposition.

At this point we can define surface oppositions as all the instances of humor (i.e., all the jab and punch lines) in a text. Two cases are now possible:

- When we deal with a humorous text (i.e., core script opposition) predictably we will have at least some surface oppositions that reflect the core opposition; at the very least, only one surface opposition needs to be related to the core one, functioning as the trigger (or the dissipated trigger) that allows the recognition of the opposed scripts and the switch between them (working like the punch line in jokes). This is the case of Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale” (see I.C.7.b.), or the case of the “Shipman’s Tale”, which is based on the core oppositions Love vs. Money, Fidelity vs. Adultery and Cleverness vs. Dullness, all of which combine in the final pun-punch line (surface

Cleanness vs. Dirtiness, all of which comprise in the first run-runer line (surface which is based on the core oppositions Love vs. Money, Fidelity vs. Adultery and of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," (see F.C.T.P.) or the case of the "Shipman's Tale," and the switch between them (working like the punch line in jokes). This is the case the trigger (or the disguised trigger) that allows the recognition of the opposed scripts (and) only one surface opposition needs to be related to the core one' functioning as base at least some surface oppositions that reflect the core opposition' at the level.

When we deal with a humorous text (i.e. core script opposition) predictably we will find the top and punch lines in a text. Two cases are now possible:

At this point we can define surface oppositions as all the instances of humor (i.e. jokes, humor in both top and punch lines depends on a resolved script opposition (jokes) embedded within the larger narrative" (Amadio 1999: 66). As in the case of verbal humor in a macro-narrative, while punch lines are "self-contained micro-narratives (i.e. jokes)" which top lines are defined as (non-disruptive and non-conclusive) instances of a text. This is the same text that underlies Amadio's (1999) theory of top and punch oppositions, which are the different local instances of humor (i.e. jokes) in the course of whole text and are responsible for the overall perception of humor, and individual surface designations between "shadow oppositions" (i.e. core oppositions), which encompass the

The idea of surface opposition can already be found in Slobin's (1987) when he says well:

texts leaves room of surface by analogy the existence of a surface tension and opposition the idea of core tension (for non-humorous texts) and of core opposition (for humorous

1.3.4 Surface Script Opposition – Surface Script Tension

opposition) that resolves the whole text (for a more detailed analysis of this text see Hempelmann, 2000).

- Also in non-humorous texts (i.e. core script tension) there can be surface oppositions, represented by jab and punch lines and strands, which can be either completely independent from the core tension or related to it.

The relation between *surface oppositions* and *core tension* needs further explanation. As mentioned above, an opposition is between scripts belonging to different domains (Normality vs. Abnormality, Possibility vs. Impossibility, Actuality vs. Non-Actuality, or Reality vs. Unreality) whereas tension is between scripts of the same domain (Normality, Possibility, Actuality, or Reality). To be perceived as humorous, a surface instance of humor must (temporarily) *modify* the actual relation of the scripts and present the scripts of the tension as if they were opposed, as if they belonged to different domains (Normality vs. Abnormality, etc.). Let's consider the episode in *Romeo and Juliet* of Mercutio teasing Romeo (Act II, scene I). After Romeo jumped a high wall and climbed a tree to see and possibly to meet Juliet, Mercutio imagines Romeo simply sitting on a tree hopelessly wishing that Juliet were a meadlar and himself a pear. Here the joke is on the scripts Love vs. Non-Love – the core tension of the story - but in this case the script Non-Love is temporarily modified so as to include Romeo's Ineptitude-Fear-Lack of Courage, which is instead a Non-Actual and Abnormal possibility if imagined related to somebody who has already risked so much and who is already in danger of life by the simple fact of being inside the Capulets' walls.

The surface tension, finally, is the interplay at the level of the surface narrative of those scripts that do not belong to the core narrative (either in the case of humorous and

those scripts that do not belong to the core narrative (either in the case of humorous and

The surface tension, finally, is the interplay at the level of the surface narrative of  
changes of the plot by the simple fact of being inside the Characters, walls.

imagined related to somebody who has already asked so much and who is already in  
Fazio-Lack of Courage, which is instead a Non-Actual and Unnormal possibility if  
case the script Non-Love is temporarily modified so as to include Romeo's inscription -  
the joke is on the script Love vs Non-Love - the core tension of the story - but in this  
thing on a free objectively wishing that Juliet were a merchant and himself a bear. Here  
climbed a tree to see and possibly to meet Juliet. Mercutio imagines Romeo simply  
After of Mercutio teasing Romeo (Act II scene I). After Romeo jumped a high wall and  
domains (Normally vs Unnormality, etc.). Let's consider the episode in Romeo and  
present the scripts of the tension as if they were opposed, as if they belonged to different  
surface instance of humor that (temporarily) modify the actual relation of the scripts and  
domain (Normally, Possibility, Actually, or Reality). To be perceived as humorous, a  
Actually, or Reality vs Unusually) whereas tension is between scripts of the same  
domains (Normally vs Unnormality, Possibility vs Impossibility, Actually vs Non-  
explanation. As mentioned above, an opposition is between scripts belonging to different

The relation between surface oppositions and core tension needs further  
independent from the core tension or related to it.

represented by top and punch lines and strands, which can be either completely

Also in non-humorous texts (i.e. core script tension) there can be surface oppositions

Hempelmann, 2000)

opposition) that resolves the whole text (for a more detailed analysis of this text see

non-humorous texts). A surface tension, in other words, is every micronarrative that revolves around local (non-core) scripts. A clear example of surface tension is the episode in *Romeo and Juliet* where Friar Laurence tries to console Romeo after he killed Tybalt (Act III, scene III): the scripts involved here are Wisdom vs. Desperation, unrelated to the core tension Love vs. non-Love.

For the scope of this work surface tension is of a very marginal importance, whereas the definition of surface oppositions as local instances of humor will be useful when dealing with the analysis of humorous text.

#### **I.B.5. Surface Privileged Points.**

Inside a text some parts are more important than others. These “privileged positions” (Rabinowitz 1987) offer the guidelines along which to read and interpret the whole story. This is where important scripts are activated.

The idea of ‘privileged positions’ is clearly introduced by Marianna Togovkic (1981) when she says that “it is difficult to recall all of a work after a complete reading, but climatic moments, dramatic scenes and beginning and ending remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole” (1981: 3-4). Rabinowitz radicalizes this idea by saying that these privileged points not only ‘shape our sense of a novel’ after its reading, but influence and guide the interpretation of a text while reading it (“not only [they] guide our reading process by telling us where to concentrate; they also provide a core around which to organize an interpretation,” 1987: 61).

Rabinowitz also distinguishes between two groups of privileged points: those which are such either because of their *physical* position (i.e., *structural* privileged points,





such as “titles, beginnings and endings (not only of a whole text, but of subsections as well - volumes, chapters, episodes), epigraphs, and descriptive subtitles” 1987: 58), and those which are privileged points because of the relevance of the subject matter/material they present (i.e., *rhetic* privileged points - see sections I.B.6. - introducing important bits of information such as “climatic moments ([...] peripeties, discoveries, revelations, recognitions”, but also “threats, warning, and promises [which] are almost always noticeable because of the role in predicting the shape of the text” 1987: 64).<sup>17</sup>

As Rabinowitz implies, privileged points are those parts of the text where important scripts are activated<sup>18</sup>.

When a novel’s cover proclaims *Pride and Prejudice*, we are immediately alert to certain contrasts. While the book incorporates a number of other oppositions as well (young/old, male/female, mother/father, rich/poor, light/dark, city/country), no reading could ever control them all. And Austen’s choice of title makes it clear where she wanted us to put our attention first  
(1987: 60)

“All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” so begins *Anna Karenina*, and from the very beginning, the authorial audience is encouraged to pay more attention to family life than, say, to politics, which in the novel is subsidiary to individual action. The reader is further advised to see the novel in terms of a basic opposition between ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’, and, more explicitly, to see happiness as a form of one’s unity with others and unhappiness as a form of difference

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<sup>17</sup> Rabinowitz provides a sketchy list of what can be considered as Privileged Points (in relation to their content): “1) When a character’s moral choice serves as linchpin for the development of the plot [...]. 2) When an event changes a major character’s relationship to other characters [...]. 3) When an event or a detail answers a question around which a narrative has been based [...]. 4) In addition, there are positions that are stressed only in certain genres: the meeting around the fireside at the end of a detective story, for instance, attracts our special attention” (1987: 64-65).

<sup>18</sup> Using the distinction theme/rheme proposed in the Functional Sentence Perspective Theory (Firbas 1964), where “the theme of a sentence is defined [...] as the ‘old’ information about which something is said, and the rheme as the ‘new’ information in the sentence, i.e., what is said about the theme” (Attardo 1994: 100), those here identified as *textual privileged points*, i.e. those where new bits of information are introduced, contributing to the “advancing process of communication” (Crystal 1991: 266), represent the rheme that modifies the ongoing of the story (see section I.B.6.).



(1987: 60-61).

Apparently (only apparently) similar to Rabinowitz's theory of privileged positions is Holcomb's theory of nodal points applied to humorous texts. When explaining the perception of humor in (long) texts, he makes it directly dependent on the presence (the quality and the quantity) of what he defines as nodal points. A *nodal point* is a "location in the narrative where humor is perceptibly more concentrated than in the immediately surrounding text" (1992: 294). In Holcomb's words, nodal points, which have to be "semantically tied to the entire narrative" (*ibidem*), are the result of script oppositions that can be *local* ("opposition among scripts that are both present in a given textual stretch" *ibidem*) or *distant* (tied to other parts of the story through a correspondence that "semantically connects these nodes to the rest of the narrative," Holcomb 1992: 242). This anticipates Attardo's theory of strands and stacks (i.e., jab lines scattered through the text but "thematically or formally related", Attardo 1999). The weak point of Holcomb's theory is that *nodal points* needn't be *privilege points*. A nodal point is just whatever part of a text that happens to be crammed with (semantically linked) instances of humor. This is not a sufficient condition to turn a text into a humorous one. For instance, Frank Zappa's autobiography full of funny anecdotes, Lenny Bruce's biography full of his jokes, even semantically linked one another via a local or distant correspondence, are not to humorous texts. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* provides a good example of this: even though all the parts spoken by Mercutio contain rather frequent instances of humor, and even though Mercutio himself is not a completely peripheral character in the story, the text is not humorous. As a matter of fact, besides the



fact that Mercutio's humor is not always related to the core tension around which the story is built, the sections of the plot devoted to his humor are not privileged points.

#### **I.B.6. Rhematicity of the Instances of Humor.**

Another issue directly connected to the idea of privileged points is the idea of the narrative quality of the instances of humor as one of the means to perceive a text as humorous.

Kolek (1989/90) first introduces this idea when dealing with the study of the types of comedy: among the features for a humorous text, together with the *placement* of the instances of humor, the frequency/density of joke patterns (which, as seen in I.B.1., is not necessary for humor), their frequent separation, and the slow or rapid passages between them), he lists "the *qualities* of their points" (1989/1990: 133, emphasis added). Even if Kolek does not further specify what he means by this last claims, keeping in mind the distinction between *core* and *surface narrative* presented above, we assume this idea of *quality* to mean the correlation between instances of humor and the core narrative. To better understand this point, very useful is Palmer's study on film and television comedy (1987). There, he distinguishes two different kind of instances of humor: those which "make a specificable contribution to [the narrative]" (1987: 149), and those which are "genuine interruption[s] of the narrative" (1987: 151).

He provides two clear examples of the two types of comic moments, both of them from Woody Allen's comedy *Hannah and her Sisters*.

Hannah's husband, played by Michael Caine, [...] is in love with his younger sister-in-law, played by Barbara Hershey. [...] Michael Caine says in voice-over that now that he has the opportunity to speak he is terribly embarrassed and that whatever happens he must be extremely



circumspect. Immediately after saying this he grabs her, kisses her passionately and then says he loves her madly, all to her evident bewilderment.

(1987: 147-148)

This is an example of a qualitative *noticeable/relevant* instance of humor. As Palmer notes “this careful, hilarious juxtaposition of intended circumspection and actual crassness is central to the way in which Michael Caine character develops” (1987: 148) and it reveals one of the main core tension around which the story develops (i.e. Love vs. Passion/Lust). As a matter of fact, “[the] comically inconsistent behaviour at one moment is at a deeper level an indication of a fundamental element in both [the] character and the narrative patter of the whole film” (1987: 148).

A different kind of instance of humor, which could be defined as qualitatively *non-relevant*, is the one that follows:

In a flashback in the middle of the film the Woody Allen characters and his then wife are told by his doctor that they cannot have children because he is infertile. As they walk away from the clinic the conversation turns a little acrimonious and his wife suggests that maybe he is responsible for his state, perhaps as a result of excessive masturbation. Woody replies, ‘Hey! Don’t knock my hobbies.’  
(Palmer 1987: 151).

As Palmer notes, “it is [...] clear that this gag is an interruption of the narrative [...]. It leads nowhere in the story”(1987: 151).

In other words, given the concept of *theme* and *rheme*, what Palmer defines as comic ‘contribution’ to the narrative can be considered as *rhematic* (instance of) humor, whereas *non-rhematic* (instance of) humor is what Palmer considers as ‘interruption’ of the narrative or as a simple narrative digression.

What connects the idea of *quality* of a “moment of hilarity” (Palmer 1987: 149) to the theory of the privileged points is the fact that the *rhematicity* of an instance of humor, for





its own nature (as carrier of new and relevant bits of information for the narrative to develop) *makes/generates* a privileged point. The first example mentioned above (the one about the kiss between the characters played by Michael Caine and Barbara Hershey) represents a very important revelation for the progression of the story, and, according to Rabinowitz, “when an event changes a major character’s relationship to other characters, that event is to be read as charged” (1987: 65), that is to say, as a privileged point.

### **I.B.7. Types of Humorous Texts.**

The distinctions made above provide the guidelines and the conditions according to which it is possible to interpret a text as humorous, and according to which it is possible to distinguish among different kinds of humor in narrative texts.

Summarizing what stated so far, it is possible to claim that necessary and sufficient conditions for narrative humor are, either:

- a *core opposition* and a *switch* between two scripts that disambiguates the incongruity at the level of the *core narrative*, or
- *instances of humor* placed in *privileged points* of the *surface narrative*.

As it can easily be understood, there is a big difference between the kinds of texts that generate from the combination of the two conditions above: when a *core opposition* is involved as the generator of the story, we have *substantially humorous texts*; when instead there is *no core opposition*, and local instances of humor are scattered through the privileged points of the narrative (possibly - but not necessarily - related to a core tension), we have *superficially humorous texts*; when, instead, instances of humor are



placed outside privileged positions, we have texts that are only *apparently*, or *partly*, *humorous*, but which are on the whole non-humorous or totally serious.

In synthesis, we can distinguish among the following groups of narratives:

1) Texts substantially humorous:

- where only the condition (A) is involved: i.e. Poe's "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers"; Poe's "The Sphinx".
- where the condition (A) and (B) combine: i.e. Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime"; Lodge's *Changing Places*, Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" (see Hempelmann, 2000).

2) Text superficially humorous:

- where only the condition (B) is involved: i.e. Swift's *A Modest Proposal*; Mansfield's "Feuille d'Album"; Benigni's *La Vita è Bella*.

3) Text apparently/partly humorous:

- where neither condition (A) nor (B) are involved, i.e. Zappa's *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Of course, the taxonomy used here for *substantially* and *superficially humorous texts* depends exclusively upon the definition of *core* (=substance) and *surface narrative* presented above, and doesn't have anything to do with the actual degree or intensity of humorousness of the texts belonging to those categories. As a matter of fact, as we will see, there are *substantially humorous texts* (like Poe's "The Sphinx") which can be less funny than *superficially humorous* ones (like Benigni's *La Vita è Bella*).



## **I.C. Analysis of Humorous Texts**

The distinctions made so far, beside offering parameters on whose basis it is possible to distinguish a humorous text from a serious one, allow us to distinguish different degrees of humorousness.

Not all humorous texts in fact share the same degree of humor. According to what precedes, it is possible to distinguish three main groups of humorous texts: *substantially*, *superficially* or *apparently humorous*.

### **I.C.1. Texts Substantially Humorous:**

This group of texts is represented by all those narratives where humor is:

- *salient-central* : the incongruity perceivable depends directly on the core opposition, and can be logically resolved and explained via a Logical Mechanism
- *dominant*: the instances of humor occupy privileged points of the text

Among these, we find

- 1) texts with a final resolution, and
- 2) texts with privileged points referred to the core tension.

#### ***I.C.1.a. Final Resolution of the Core Opposition.***

This group is formed by those texts that are “narratively an elaborate joke” (Attardo 1994: 265). In these texts a core script generates the incongruity perceivable throughout the whole story (or large part of it), and the disambiguating script switch in the surface narrative is in the final privileged point (the correspondent to punch lines in jokes). This is the case considered by Attardo (1994: 255) of E. A. Poe’s “The System of Dr. Tarr and



Professor Fethers”, where a group of madmen in an insane asylum manages to ‘pass’ for *normal* people (for some doctors and their patients) until the end of the story, where the arrival of the real doctors and guardians unveils the truth and explains the incongruity created by the weird behavior of those people. Linguistically speaking the script Normal-Sane that was activated at the very beginning and kept alive throughout the whole story is discarded and substituted by the script Abnormal-Insane at the very end. The dissipated trigger that allows the switching between the two scripts is the privileged point the paragraph, in this case devoted to the description of the arrival of the real doctors, which disambiguates the whole story.

Another example would be E. A. Poe’s “The Sphinx”, where a small insect on a window is mistaken by the narrator for a gigantic monster climbing the mountain beyond the window (a visual pun). Here, at the very end we have the switch from the script Monster that implies Fear-Destruction to the script Insect that implies Smallness-Harmlessness that logically explains the incongruity that increasingly mounted up to the moment of climax.

***1.C.1.b. Humorous Privileged Points Referred to Core Opposition.***

This group is formed by those texts where the core opposition is not kept undercover until the end, but is rather early perceptible in some surface privileged points, allowing the whole text to be interpreted as humorous (from that point on).

To better understand this group of texts, the idea of the core opposition needs a further specification. When reading long and complex texts, the reader is usually presented with more than one script. Some of these scripts extend through several

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### FCSP: Homologous Privileged Points Related to Core Opposition

moment of climax

Homologous - that logically explains the inconsistency that increasingly mounted up to the  
moment that implies Full-Description to the script itself that implies Simplicity-  
the window (a visual form) here, at the very end we have the switch from the script  
window is indicated by the narrator for a figure moment changing the position beyond

another example would be E. A. Poe's "The Sphinx," where a small insect on a  
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discovered and explained by the script abnormal-language at the very end. The designated  
stage that was explained at the very beginning and kept alive throughout the whole story is  
created by the main narrator of those people. Linguistically speaking the script Normal-  
arrival of the real doctors and questions involve the plot and explains the inconsistency  
normal people (for some doctors and their patients) until the end of the story, where the  
Professor Ferris," where a group of questions in an intense rhythm switches to "here, for



sentences and even through the entire text" (see Chlopicki 1987). These we will call the *main core scripts* (see Chlopicki 1987's "main scripts") of the story, which, when thematically related, gather to form complex scripts (Raskin 1985). These *complex core scripts* are the core scripts around which the whole story is organized. Complex core scripts need not be wholly opposite for the kind of humorous texts we are dealing with (as they were for the texts constructed like jokes seen in section I.C.1.a.), but they are in a relationship of simple tension (or overlap). It is enough for narrative humor that only *few* of the *main scripts* which are part of the complex core scripts be actually opposed, create incongruity and be then resolved. The fact that these few scripts are a constitutive part of core complex scripts makes their opposition a sort of core opposition, even though it does not expand to the other main scripts of the core narrative.

A clear example of this would be Oscar Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" (see Attardo 1999, 2000): during a party crowded with distinguished and aristocratic guests, a magician of fame predicts to Lord Savile that he will commit a murder; Lord Savile, desperate because of this revelation, spends the rest of the story desperately trying to make this premonition - that he feels like a Duty to be accomplished - come true. The first thing worth noticing is that, of all the contrasting scripts on which the story is based (Public Virtue vs. Private Vice/Vanity, Respectability vs. Shallowness, Honorableness vs. Wretchedness, Reasonableness vs. Superstition, etc.), most part of which activated in the privileged point of the opening scene, with the description of the Victorian aristocracy during a reception, only the pair Reasonableness vs. Superstition is actually opposed, originating the other main core opposition Duty vs. Murder (of the type Normal vs. Abnormal, as in Raskin 1985), around which the story revolves. Secondly, this opposition



is not kept undercover until the end of the story, but the switch between the two scripts Duty vs. Murder takes place quite early, in the privileged point represented by the closure of Chapter 2, when, after a night of desperation, Lord Savile becomes increasingly aware and resigned to the idea that his Duty is to commit a Murder. Thirdly, the *anticipated* script switch, does not make the text less humorous.<sup>19</sup> It only *spoils* the surprise effect, which, if fairly common, is not necessary for humorous text: instead, it provides important guidelines so as to interpret the text as humorous and to resolve humorously the eventual incongruities as soon as they are encountered.

Another interesting example would be David Lodge's *Changing Places*. The story of an academic exchange between two professors (Morris Zapp, teacher in an American University, takes the place of the shy British Professor Shallow in England, and the latter takes the place of Professor Zapp in America), which ends up changing almost entirely their lives. Here, too, there are many core tensions related to the complex script Academic World (Public vs. Private, Intellectual Genius vs. Academic Mediocrity, Seriousness-Sternness vs. Frivolousness-Lack of Moral Values, etc.), but only one core opposition that produces (and explains) incongruities, represented by the actual *misplacing* of the two professors (and the opposition can be summarized as American Way [to deal with school and life] vs. British Way, of the kind Normal vs. Abnormal, as seen in Raskin 1985). As in the case of Wilde's story, here, too, the switch takes place early in the story, in the first two chapters, where Zapp moves to England and Swallow to America. This novel, then, is particularly interesting because it shows that not only there

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<sup>19</sup> Surprise is instead one of the main feature of short humorous text, especially jokes. There, the surprise (the script opposition, the resolution of incongruity) depends on the punch line, usually positioned in the closing section.



### *I.C.2.a. Register Humor*

This category has been discussed in some detail in Attardo (1994, 1999). The incongruity in such texts is not in the core narrative, but is an incongruity “of register between the trivial events described [...] and the ‘formal’ style of the presentation” (Attardo 1994: 263): “if the label ‘high’ and ‘low’ are attached respectively to the register and the subject matter, a typical opposition is established” (1994: 263). T. L. Peacock’s *Headlong Hall*, Voltaire’s *Candide* are clear examples of this kind of humor (see Attardo 1994). Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*<sup>20</sup>, presenting as possible, feasible and perfectly sensible something absolutely abominable like the killing of all Irish children as a way to stop the famine, is another example of register humor.

Among these texts find their place all those metafictional-metanarrative texts where “the conventions of the narrative mode are violated for the purpose of humor to the point that the narrative development (plot/fabula) is hijacked by the humorous goal of the text” (Attardo 2000), like Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*<sup>21</sup>, or Alphonse Allais’s *Une Histoire Bien Parisienne*, “which ends on the total destruction of the narrative

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<sup>20</sup> “The judicious phrasing, the reasonableness, the careful calculation, the scientific objectivity of this speech create the character of the *Modest Proposer*, a learned gentleman interested in the welfare of his nation, whose unawareness that he is talking about *people* leads inevitably to the proposition, made in the most reasonable manner, that both the food-shortage and the overpopulation of Ireland can be solved at once by selling the young children of the poor for food. Pose and reality are combined perfectly here to create a smug, emotionless, completely self-centered and dangerous dunce, who can solemnly assure us, and believe, that he has ‘not the least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary Work,’ for he has no children by which he can ‘propose to get a single Penny; the youngest being nine Years old, and ... [his] wife past Child-bearing” (Kernan 1965: 89).

<sup>21</sup> “The perfect confrontation of tragic plot and comic life is *Tristram Shandy*. Poor Tristram, trying desperately to write the history of his life and opinions, wants his chronicle to fit the patterns of tragedy. He wants it to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but no matter how he tries, every event is inseparable from an endless series of trivialities going before and through it. His story has no necessary conclusion, no neat ending: the longer he writes, the more he falls behind his life. He wants his life to have dignity, and yet it is always entangled with such ludicrous minutiae as his mother asking Walter Shandy to wind the clock or the rivet in Doctor Slop’s new forceps. [...] This is the comic vision and the forms required for its expression are by necessity different from those which express the tragic vision. To measure *Tristram*



conventions (the characters described at the end are not those in the story)” (Attardo 2000)

### ***I.C.2.b. Local Instances of Humor in Privileged Points***

This category is represented by texts in which the scripts in the core narrative do not produce any incongruity (i.e., there is no core opposition but rather a simple core tension), but that present instances of humor in some privileged position, either

- in the final section, like Catherine Mansfield’s “Feuille d’Album” (see Attardo 2000), which ends with an obvious instance of humor in the privileged point of the climax scene, when the shy young artist has the courage to finally speak to the girl he is secretly in love with: “Excuse me, Mademoiselle, you dropped this” (1920: 227-228) says he, presenting her an with an egg. This pun not only is not the script trigger switch (i.e., it does not disambiguate the text, which on the whole doesn’t present ambiguity as a main feature) but also has very little to do with the core tension which regulates the whole plot (Love vs. Non-Love, or Courtship vs. Indifference-Shyness).
- scattered through the story, like Roberto Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami’s *La Vita è Bella*. This is a story of a Jewish family during the Second World War, where the father tries his best not to let his son realize and become aware of the atrocities of war and the senselessness of racism. Once they are forced in a concentration camp, the father makes his son believe that everything that happens there is just a game, the winner of which will receive a real tank as a prize. The core narrative is organized around the scripts Life vs. Death (or Danger), or, more precisely, around the

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*Shandy*, or any comedy, by the standard of the tragic plot is to miss what is there, and to ask it to do things





macroscript Love (father-son) vs. Hate (war). These scripts are not opposed: there is no switching from the one to the other, and there is no ambiguity. They just overlap. The same could be said about the other main core script opposition Concentration Camp-Tragedy vs. Game, which is central only in the second part of the text. Also in this case, even though significantly different, the two scripts are not opposed but simply (dramatically) overlapping. The high number of instances of humor positioned in the privileged point that is the whole second section of the text, either isolated or thematically related among them, are not expression of the core opposition but just a *twist* of the surface structure. Therefore, the text cannot be dismissed as *substantially humorous* (as a matter of fact, many viewers of the movie still claim that *La vita è Bella* is not a humorous text at all).

### I.C.3. Texts Apparently Humorous.

As we have already seen, this group of texts does not enter the scope of our research. For the sake of completeness, suffice to say that to this group belong those texts where humor is:

- *non salient-non central* (there is not a core script opposition to which instances of humor may be related, but simply a core tension)
- *non dominant* (the instances of humor does not primarily occupy privileged points)

Among these text we just mention those texts where instances of humor, even if many and thematically related, belong only to the surface narrative and are *accidentally* displayed in the text.



This is the case mentioned above of bibliographies like Lenny Bruce's or Frank Zappa's, full of their jokes or of funny anecdotes, scattered through the text with few narratological criteria (such as suspense, the mounting of a humorous climax, etc.).

This is also the case of another group of texts, like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*, where there are indeed instances of humor, sometimes whole sections of the text full of them, like the parts spoken by Mercutio, or by Rosencranz and Guildenstern, but they are not a manifestation of any core opposition, and they are not placed in privileged points, or, if they are, the level of rhematicity of these instances of humor is close to zero.

Another clear example of this is Lewis Carroll's unpublished short story "Sidney Hamilton". The story is very similar to the Gospel parable of the Good Son. One early morning, at dawning, young Sidney Hamilton decides to leave his father's house. After a period of troubles and humiliations, he finds the courage to get back home, where he is lovingly received by his father, who asks him never to do anything of the sort again, especially *not before breakfast*. This obvious instance of humor is actually placed in the privileged point of the closure, but is rhematically empty. All the new bits of information needed to resolve the story are introduced before that final instance of humor, whose absence, at this point, wouldn't change much the nature of the text.

#### **I.C.4. Humorous vs. Other Types of Non-Serious Texts.**

At this point, before concluding this discussion of humorous texts, three points need to be addressed, because they represent the main distinction between humorous texts and the group of those texts which, even sounding somehow funny, are not exactly humorous, that is to say, nonsense and absurd texts.



These three points are:

- the humorous *configuration* and *prefiguration*
- the importance of a *justification of the incongruity* (Logical Mechanism)
- the distinction between *referential* and *verbal humor* (which is essential for the distinction between nonsense and absurd)

### **I.C.5. Configuration. Prefiguration.**

An issue worth mentioning at this point is the *comic quality* of the privileged point as an important feature for humorous texts.

Up to this point we have considered the perception of humor (or the perception of a text as humorous) as an *a posteriori* procedure, as if humor could be grasped only after the complete reading of a text. Of course, after a reading (that is, when the fabula and the way it is presented are clear), the interpretation of a text is much easier, because of the availability of all data and of all the bits of information needed. But, for all those texts which are not structurally similar to jokes, the perception of humor, or at least, the interpretation of a text as non-serious starts before its complete reading. It starts with the reading itself and progresses with it.

To better understand this point, it is useful to introduce the concept of *configuration* and *prefiguration*. Kafalenos (1999) defines configuration as follows:

Readers construct fabulas<sup>22</sup> as they read. Each version of fabula that readers construct during the process of reading is a configuration. Readers

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<sup>22</sup> “A narrative is a representation of sequential events. The representation is a process in which events are revealed successively, one after another. Readers who perceive the represented events conceive a parallel sequence in which the identical events occur in chronological order. The Russian Formalists named the two sequences *sjuzhet* (the representation) and *fabula* (the chronological sequence abstracted from the representation. [...] a fabula is made by readers from information found in a sjuzhet.” (Kafalenos 1999: 36)



interpret events as they are revealed in relation to the configuration they have assembled at the stage in their reading. As the fabula one creates grows and extends, the configuration in relation to which one interprets events expands. Interpretations shifts as one reads *because* the configuration changes.  
(Kafalenos 1999: 53)

The *configuration* of a story, in the sense implied by Kafalenos, is a provisional and partial fabula gathered from all data available up to a certain point.

While describing *configuration*, Kafalenos mentions the fuzzy idea of interpretation as meaning either “a form of comprehension of events that have occurred” as well as of “anticipated events [...] as if they had occurred, whether or not they have occurred in one or another world [fictional or real world]” (1999: 39). I would instead distinguish at this point between interpretation and anticipation. Interpretation is the understanding of what happened and is happening in a text according to its *configuration*, whereas anticipation is the *prefiguration* (as vague and generic as it might be) of how a story would be and develop, in relation to or as a consequence of its configuration, but also according to parameters drawn from everyday experience or from narrative and literary conventions (i.e., if in a story we are presented with a character on a train, we can prefigure that he is heading to and will arrive somewhere; if we have a character waiting, we can safely assume that sooner or later somebody else will show up; if, in a fairy tale, the hero meets with a monstrous creature, we can easily imagine that he will courageously confront it rather than run away).

Of course, the prefiguration of a text (the idea of a text *a priori*) and its actual fabula (the text *a posteriori*) do not necessarily coincide, and on this gap (comic or light prefiguration– tragic fabula, i.e. *Romeo and Juliet*, and vice versa) depends much of the





aesthetic effect of a literary text. Nonetheless any prefiguration gives important guidelines as of how to at least initiate the interpretation of a story.

The prefiguration of a text as humorous (or non-serious) directly depends on the rhema introduced in the privileged points, or by the form, the style, the tone used for presenting the story (as seen in the case of register humor).

As seen above (I.B.5.), a privileged point is where:

- 1) a script is activated
- 2) new bits of information are added to an existing script
- 3) two (or more) scripts collide creating either (a) tension or (b) incongruity
- 4) the tension between two scripts or (5) their incongruity are resolved by the weakening of one script that subsides to the strengthening of another one (i.e. Death triumphing over Life/Love in *Romeo and Juliet*'s climactic scene), or by a drastic and unexpected substitution of scripts, by a the complete discarding-nullification of one script in favor of another one (i.e. humorous texts like the already mentioned "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers", with the switch Sane – Insane; thriller-horror stories like *The Sixth Sense*<sup>23</sup>, with the switch Life - Death).

At this point we can safely say that the prefiguration of a text as humorous is triggered by

- the presence of instances of humor scattered through such privileged points like (1), (2), (3.a) and (4). So, for example, if we find humor in the opening scene, the general

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<sup>23</sup> The story of a child who can see dead people. He seeks for help to a child psychologist who tries as hard as he can to help the little boy, and in the process of recovering the disturbed mind of the child he gradually loses his friends and the love of his wife. Only at the end he finds out that this lack of interest of people



idea would be that of a (possible) non-serious text. This is the case of “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, where the comic quality of first paragraph is so foregrounded that, even if it is too early for any kind of prefiguration about the actual story, one can easily prefigure a comic text.

- the recognition of a script opposition (3.b) that would produce incongruities that can be easily imagined as undergoing and influencing the development of a whole story. This is the case of the comedy of errors, where most part of the story is based on an obvious misunderstanding (a mistaking of a script for another) that is easily grasped or openly presented fairly early, if not from the very beginning, providing on the one hand the readers with reasons to anticipate possible incongruities and on the other hand providing them at the same time with the *justification* that would make sense out of these incongruities. This is also the case of many of Benigni’s comedies. In *Johnny Stecchino*, for instance, a shy bus-driver is mistaken for a dangerous member of the Mafia: since the moment the two scripts are introduced it is obvious that the script Mobster-Bad Guy doesn’t really hold (Non-Actual) whereas the script Good-Naïve Person is the Actual one, and we also know that this (already justified) lack of fit between the two scripts is a premise for some (already prefigurible) humorous episode in the course of the story. (The same idea would apply to the case of *Il Piccolo Diavolo*, where an inexperienced spirit from Hell after an exorcism decides to live with the priest who operated the exorcism, being mistaken for the priest’s *weird* nephew who decided to follow his uncle’s example; in *Il Mostro*, the manoeuvres of a pretended physical disable not to get caught and having to go to work are mistaken

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toward him and his job with the boy is because he is dead: one of the many dead people that the boy can



for the secret plotting of a dangerous rapist; in *La Vita è Bella*, especially in the second part of the movie, a concentration camp is presented as a sort of complicated playground).

### **I.C.6. Justification of Incongruity: Logical Mechanism.**

The Knowledge Resource the GTVH defines as Logical Mechanism is a necessary step for the perception of humor. Without a mechanism that logically or paralogically<sup>24</sup> connects two otherwise unrelated scripts implicit in a text, such text would simply remain incongruous.

The necessity of the resolution stage in the *incongruity-resolution* model has often been noted. Abouin (1948), studying humor under a psychological point of view, stresses the importance of this mechanism, which he calls “justification,” by saying that two incongruous objects *per se* are not necessarily funny, but in order to be perceived as humorous, the two objects have to be ‘accepted’ simultaneously (see Abouin 1948: 95), that is to say, their co-presence must be somehow legitimized. Suls (1972) re-proposes the idea of the necessity of the resolution, and this is also the core of Lewis’ theory (1989). In Lewis’ mind, if the incongruity is necessary in humor (“stripped of its incongruity, a joke is no longer a joke” 1989: 9), its resolution, the mechanism that

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see.

<sup>24</sup> According to a logic which is obviously unrealistic or wrong, but which “brings *some kind* of explanation to the incongruity’ (Ziv 1984: 90, emphasis added). A logic explanation of the incongruity would be the one that closes this joke

George Bush has a short one. Gorbachev has a longer one. The Pope has it, but does not use it, Madonna does not have it. What is it? A last name  
(in Attardo and Raskin 1991: 305-306)

A paralogical explanation would be the one that closes the tonsil joke mentioned above, where, if the pun (on the verb *take out*) would be perfectly logical in a human context, it is only paralogically (through a false analogy) relatable to the case of two “conversing tonsils” (Lewis 1989: 11).



explains the shifting from one script to a second one, is essential for “humor appreciation” (1989: 9).

To prove this point, Lewis provide a clear example:

The joke about what one tonsil says to another – “Get dressed up, the doctor’s taking us out tonight” – can illustrate this process. First there is the oddity of talking tonsils, then of their preparation for being surgically removed (taken out). When we note that the key phrase also refers to dating, the main incongruity is resolved and humor may result. The resolution-potential can be removed by rewriting the joke to end, “Get dressed up, the doctor will remove us tomorrow.” The incongruity remains, but it cannot be figured out or resolved. And the result is a loss of humor.  
(1989: 10)

Lewis goes even further by claiming that there need not be one only and correct way (i.e., one only LM) to resolve an incongruity to perceive a text as humorous, as long as there is one.

When people are asked what is funny about a particular joke, they may produce quite different resolutions. The point is that, whatever interpretation is produced, it is *the joyful click of something making sense* that had been briefly puzzling that sparks a humor response  
(1989: 11, emphasis added)

In other words, humor is possible as a consequence of the attempt to make *any* sense out of what appears to be nonsense, as a consequence of the attempt of understanding and justifying in any possible way (logically or paralogically) the incongruity.

Lewis provide at this point a useful observation:

It is true that very young children can delight in incongruity alone, and it is also true that unresolved incongruities can *amuse* adults, but research has demonstrate that most experiences of humor move from incongruity to resolution.  
(1989: 9, emphasis added)

Incongruity can amuse, but the perception of humor and the idea of amusement are two different concepts, and not to be confused. The absurd and unrealistic idea (in the





example above) of a tonsil saying to the other “Get dressed up, the doctor will remove us tomorrow” can sound amusing and strange, but does not provoke humor.

What has been said so far as referred to simple jokes applies also to those longer humorous texts where the script opposition that produces the incongruity belongs to the core narrative.

This transfer doesn't seem to need further specifications, especially in the case of those texts that are structurally like jokes. Let's consider, for example, Poe's “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers.” If the story didn't end with the unexpected arrival of the real doctors (that openly revealed the core opposition Sane vs. Insane, and entailed the shifting from the former script to the latter), but rather with the simple departure of the narrator from the mental asylum, or with the arrival of another doctor who confirmed either the validity or the counterproductiveness of Mr. Maillard's system (that allowed patients to mingle with guardians and caused the incongruities), or even with Mr. Maillard's possible remark that ‘after all, everybody is a little insane,’ all incongruity would remain unresolved, and the story wouldn't have resulted to be (so) humorous.

The justification of the incongruity has to take place also for those texts that are structurally dissimilar from linear jokes. The only main difference is that the switch between the two scripts, instead of the final position, occupies another privileged point, usually fairly early in the text. In the case of Wilde's “Lord Arthur Savile's Crime”, for example, the switch between the scripts Duty and Murder (Normal vs. Abnormal) clearly starts with the second chapter. And this click is one of the main reasons of humor: if it weren't there, if the decision of committing a murder weren't motivated by Lord Savile's



superstition (allowing the switch Normal – Abnormal), but was for example commissioned by someone else, no opposition (but rather a simple tension) would take place, undermining the perception of humor (at least in the core narrative).

**I.C.7. Referential vs. Verbal Humor: the Case of the Canterbury Tales.  
“The Miller’s Tale” and “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”**

***I.C.7.a. Premises***

When introducing the corpus of *The Canterbury Tales*, in his article “A Vocabulary for Chaucerian Comedy,” Paul G. Ruggiers suggests a very fundamental distinction among them:

If we set aside the prose tales, the saints’ lives (“Man of Law’s Tale,” “Clerk’s Tale,” “Prioress’ Tale,” “Second Nun’s Tale”), the clear romances (“Knight’s Tale,” “Squire’s Tale,” “Franklin’s Tale” [...] and the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” [...]) what remain are comic structures of one sort of another: the “Miller’s Tale,” “Reeve’s Tale,” “Cook’s Tale,” “Shipman’s Tale,” “Merchant’s Tale,” “Friar’s Tale,” “Summoner’s Tale,” “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” and the “Pardoner’s Tale”. To these we must add the “Nun’s Priest Tale” and “Sir Topas” as burlesque or parody.  
(Ruggiers 1976/1994: 42)

Beside the obvious distinction between serious and humorous texts, Ruggiers implicitly suggests another important distinction between two different kinds of humorous texts: the group of what he defines as “comic structures,” i.e. those texts that derive their humor-funniness mainly from the *situations* they depict, and the group defined as “burlesque and parody” constituted by those texts that are funny because of the *way* the story is presented, rather than its content.

The distinction proposed by Ruggiers as characteristic of Chaucer’s types of comedy is the same distinction traditionally referred to as between *situational* (or



*referential*) humor and *verbal* humor. As seen in section I.A., Aristotle first introduced the distinction between these two possible kinds of humor, and the same distinction is then re-proposed by the Greek rhetorician Hermogenes (who analyzes laughter as coming from [1] *unexpected events*, or from [2] *puns* and the *contrast between the development of the elocution and the facts*, see Plebe 1952: 26) and finally clearly stated in the *Tractatus Coislionianus* (a short Greek text held to be some sort of summary of the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which contained the philosopher's thought on comedy): "the *Tractatus* suggests two sources of laughter for comedy, from the 'things' depicted and from the diction" (Ruggiers 1976/1994: 51). The Latin rhetorician Cicero, dealing with humorous texts in his *De Oratore*, re-elaborates the same idea distinguishing between humor *de dicto* (verbal humor) and humor *de re* (referential humor), presenting an empirical test for the verbal/referential opposition:

What, said in whatever words, is nevertheless funny, it is contained *in the thing*; what loses its saltiness if the words are changed, has all the funniness *in the words* [...] because after changing the words they cannot retain the same funniness, should be considered to rely not in the thing but in the words.  
(in Attardo 1994: 28, emphasis added)

Despite doubts expressed by modern critics (see Jerry Palmer, 1987- according to whom there is hardly such a thing as a comic plot), the distinction between referential and verbal humor still holds. The point of this paper is to show how specific tales in the *Canterbury Tales* provide clear instances of these two types of humor. The "Miller's Tale" is an examples of referential humor. The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is verbal humor.



***I.C.7.b. Situational-Referential Humor: “The Miller’s Tale.”***

*The Tale’s Genre: the Fabliaux.*

In referential humor, funniness resides essentially in the plot.

According to its most elementary formulation, the plot is

the Aristotelian [i.e., introduced by Aristotle] progression made up of a series of events initiated by some ‘human frailty’ and having ‘a beginning, a middle, and an end’, which is of sufficient length ‘to admit a change of fortune... brought about by a succession, necessary or probable, of well-connected incidents’, leading to reversal and discovery.  
(Kernan: 1965: 95)

As problematic, vague, and elliptic as it is, this idea of plot is enough to understand this kind of humor: referential humor depends mainly on the *content* of the three stages (beginning, middle, end), and on the way the story changes and develops from one stage to the next. As noted by Jost, “fabliaux action typically exemplifies this type of humor [:] The action itself is ridiculous, incongruous” (Jost 1994: xxii).

Fabliau was a predominant literary genre in the Middle Ages, especially in France, and could be interpreted as a response to another dominant literary genre, the *romance*. If romance represented an idealized vision of men and everything that is typically human, fabliaux were a *trivialization* of the very same thing:

[Whereas] romance asserts the possibility that men may behave in a noble and self-transcending manner; fabliau declares the certainty that they will always behave like animals. The one portrays men as superhuman, the other portrays them as subhuman.  
(Pearsall 1986/1994: 106)

As noted by Cooper, fabliaux represented a world much closer to everyday life than romance: “the fabliaux is set in the contemporary everyday world,” its characters are common people (bourgeois, peasants, clerks), and “it generally concerns humankind’s most basic functions, mostly sex, sometimes excretion,” and “it is concerned more with





cunning and folly than virtue and evil” (Cooper 1996: 95). In fabliaux, the best human and intellectual qualities are at play to fulfill beastly impulses rather than the most noble aspirations. This inversion, this opposition of human qualities and beastly instincts, is the core around which the fabliaux originate, producing “these comedies of situation, stories of intricate sexual jokes involving coincidences, contrivances, and manipulations” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 81), complicated story lines mounting up to an unrealistic comic climax, which is often a consequence of “gratuitous elaboration” (Thro 1970/1994: 380). Fabliaux present stories where “the plots themselves are built up out of ludicrous incidents upon which the discoveries and reversal [that end the stories] depend” (Ruggiers 1976/1994: 47).

“Humor of situation was ever one of [Chaucer]’s strengths” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 81), and his “Miller’s Tale” is probably one of the best (or, at least, well known) fabliaux: “nowhere is fabliau skill of precision, punning, parody, and punch line demonstrated with such virtuoso technique as in Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale”” (ibidem).

### The Tale.

One of the minor sources of humor of the “Miller’s Tale” comes directly from its placement inside the corpus of the *Canterbury Tales*: it follows the Knight’s romance story about Palemon and Arcite’s love for Emily, and it is presented by its narrator, the Miller, as a “worthy counterpart to the Knight’s Tale “ (Craik 1994: xxi). Unaware as he is of “the contrast and the parody” (ibidem) he is making, the Miller tells his “burlesque romance” (David 1976/1994: 192):

The Miller opposes to the idealism of the “Knight’s Tale” a crude realism. His picture of two rival lovers is an effective contrast to Palamon and



Arcite and indicates an impatience on the teller's part with the exalted conduct of knights and their ladies. As Palamon and Arcite meet equivalent fates in the ideal world of chivalry, Nicholas and Absolon ignobly and unwittingly fight each other in a crudely realistic world and receive in their moment of contact equivalent checks. (Owen 1977: 104).

But the main source of humor in this tale is its content, the complex intrigue of love, sex, and trickery that is the core of the narrative.

The story is essentially a farce, with "no moral lesson" (Craik 1967: 6) and "with a farce's predominance of comic situation over everything else" (Craik 1967: 5).

Beginning with the brief introduction of the carpenter and his wife – "a traditional foundation on which to build a comic intrigue" (Craik 1967: 7) - the sequence of events can be summarized as follows:

after mention has been made of the husband, his wife, and her two lovers, the first lover conspires with the wife to deceive her husband with a pretended prophecy of flood; the conspiracy is successful and the husband takes refuge in a tub hanging in the roof, while the lover lies with the wife; the second lover inopportunately arrives, bargains with the wife for a kiss, is mocked by her, and revenges himself on the first lover who is unwisely trying to repeat the insult, thus producing the comic confusion which brings the farce to an end. (Craik 1967: 5)

What helps to create the comic setting (and the consequent comic climax) is the number of contrasts and oppositions between the characters at play here: 1) the ill-matchedness of Alisoun's vibrant physicality (see Owen 1977: 100-101) and the carpenter's old age; 2) "the gulf between the man of art and the man of craft" (Craik 1967: 11), and, namely, between the Carpenter's "belief in the safety of ignorance, superstitious dread of the unknown, and the feeling that scholars are incapable in practical matters" (Owen 1977: 105) and Nicholas' "cleverness [in conceiving] of a stratagem wholly gratuitous in its complexity to the practical needs of the situation"



(Thro 1970/1994: 381), and his ability and impressive inventiveness in plotting complicated tricks; 3) Absalon's vanity, and his being "inept and public" versus Nicholas' being "skilled and secret" (Owen 1977: 103). The story in itself revolves around a series of practical jokes (see Owen 1977: 106) – the Carpenter's hanging in his tub, Absalon's misplaced kiss, the hot poker – that are the outcome of the interaction of the above-mentioned discrepancies existing among the characters.

If we take Cicero's words about verbal and referential humor as sufficient a test to recognize referential humor, it will be enough at this point to see the impossibility of presenting a summary<sup>25</sup> of the whole story or of isolated sections of it even in the driest and most serious way, without the result being funny or, at least, without provoking a smile. A short list of summaries that, for different purposes, critics included in their works when dealing with the "Miller's Tale", would suffice to prove this point.

Stressing Chaucer's ability in situational comedy, Garbáty writes:

The old carpenter hangs in a tub from the ceiling, awaiting the deluge while the clerk is 'swyving' the wife underneath. A second precious lover, armed with a coulter to avenge a previous slight, approaches the window and is met by the bare bottom and fart of the clerk. The hot coulter is rammed, the clerk cries 'water' in anguish, the old carpenter thinks the flood is at hand and cuts the rope. [...] Not all of the fabliaux, of course, reach this supreme achievement of situational comedy.  
(Garbáty 1994: 83)

Summarizing the whole plot, Cooper writes:

The red-hot coulter is waiting for Nicholas's fart, and the carpenter, who has his moment at the centre of the stage in the middle of the tale and has been forgotten up in the ceiling while the narrative concentrates on the

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<sup>25</sup> A summary that would include all the salient and necessary details ("a misdirected kiss, a scorched rear end, a falling tub," Hagen 1994: 133), which were instead omitted or vaguely paraphrased ("the conspiracy is *successful*"; "the second lover [...] *is mocked* by her; and *revenge*s himself") in Craik's brief summary presented above.



three lovers, is brought back into the story decisively and inevitably by the cry for water.

(Cooper 1996: 99)

More concisely Ruggiers summarizes the story by saying:

A would-be lover is deceived into kissing his love's nether eye and on a subsequent occasion is farted upon by her lover.

(Ruggiers 1976/1994: 48)

Focusing on the parallels that characterize the closure of the story, Jost notes:

Carpenter John in a washtub awaiting waters of the flood, and the cuckolding Nicholas demanding water to cool his burned bum.

(Jost 1994: xix)

Robert W. Hanning, describing the comic climax, notes that:

The climax features, first of all, an inversion of oral into anal communication. Absolon, expecting to kiss Alisoun's mouth (earlier described by the Millerian narrator as "sweete as bragot or the meeth, / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth" [...]), is devastated when he kisses her arse instead.

(Hanning 1994: 304)

Tschann in a most philosophical consideration on the scatological elements in the climatic scene of the story claims that

The scatological "eyr ybroken" in the Miller's Tale ripples out from private to public, to be lost finally in a conspiracy of denial: fart leading to scalded tute, Nicholas's shouting for water, John the Carpenter's crushing down, his broken arm, the commotion, laughter and chaos stirred up within the community, and the cover-up by Nicholas and Alisoun who deny everything at the expense of the Carpenter.

(Tschann 1994: 365)

Different in tone, style and length as they are, these summaries, when it comes to describing the intricacies and the over-plotted practical joke played by the two lovers at the expense of the Carpenter, or the improvised practical jokes of Alisoun to Absalon, or Absalon's revenge towards the clerk, they end up conveying some humor, because the





three episodes, which constitute the core of the actions described, are humorous in themselves.

*Instances of Verbal Humor.*

The fact that the “Miller’s Tale” is a clear example of referential-situational humor does not prevent the story from having instances of verbal humor, too. Verbal humor is there, especially in the description of some characters. The presentation of Alisoun’s physical attractiveness using *low* animal imagery, that is, comparing her to weasels, colts, and lambs rather than to noble (or to traditionally considered as ‘beautiful’) creatures is “a beautifully observed *parody* of the conventional top-to-toe [descriptions]” (Pearsall 1986/1994: 109, emphasis added) - and *parody* (i.e. the mockery of literary conventions) is a case of verbal humor.

The same can be said about the section dedicated to the presentation of Absalon, where the description of “his innocence and his effeminacy [...] his interest in sweet smells, his censing of the ladies in church, and his preparations for the previsioned ‘feeste’ with chewing of ‘greyn and lycorys’ and holding ‘trewe-love’ under his tongue” (Owen 1977: 103) is unexpectedly concluded by the couplet “But soothe to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche dangerous”. As noted by Craik, “the last couplet, abruptly finishing his description, comes as a surprise” (1967: 12). And a humorous surprise indeed, because of its incongruous way of ending an otherwise rather serious description, and especially because of the inappropriate pairing of “fartyng” and “speche dangerous” (as if they were two comparable or similar things). The choice of such *questionable* words in such *questionable* order is another case of verbal humor.



So, verbal humor is in the “Miller’s Tale,” but it is not among its main features. It just *adds* something to the funniness of the plot rather than being the main reason for the perception of humor. In the “Miller’s Tale,” in fact, “Chaucer is concerned primarily with the telling of a farcical story” (Craik 1967: 6). As Owen notes “the bluff, sensual Miller lives in a world whose highest intellectual attainment is the practical joke” (1977: 106), and the tale he tells, “with its lip-smacking portrait, its emphasis on the bodily functions, its mockery of delicacy and squeamishness in the picture and fate of Absolon” (ibidem), is just a description of a series of practical jokes.

***I.C.7.c. Verbal Humor: “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”***

Completely different is the case of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”

The whole story is essentially a fable, a moral fable, following the model of Aesop’s beast fables, “a story with a moral in which the animals stand in some kind of exemplary relationship to humans [...], concerned with practical homely wisdom” (Cooper 1996: 340-341), the main purpose of which is to point out and to ridicule human weaknesses (rather than vices).

Humor in fables is usually not in the foreground; it is not one of the main features.

The point that MacDonald makes to maintain the opposite doesn’t seem to hold:

The comic effect of a fable of even the most primitive kind derives from the basic incongruity in the spectacle of animals behaving like humans and, in particular, using human speech; this incongruity is increased in proportion to the degree in which animals not only use language of humans but, in so doing, display impressive erudition and a mastery of rhetorical forms.  
(1966: 464)



This point is weak and easily disproved by the fact that there are many moral beast fables where there is no ‘comic effect’ at all (for example, in many of La Fontaine’s), despite the existence of animals talking and behaving like humans. The humanization of beasts is not a source of humor *per se*, but just a literary convention: once accepted the idea that animals are like men, the fact that they sound or look like humans is neither strange nor funny.

In the case of this tale, especially in the original Latin version of the tale, the only humorous part of the story is the final unexpected reversal.

It is an elementary but very satisfying reversal of situation. First the fox flatters the cock into becoming his prey, and then the cock in his turn flatters the fox into releasing him; the cock shuts his eyes when he should keep them open, the fox opens his mouth when he should keep it shut.  
(Craik 1967: 71)

This is a rather weak instance of humor depending on a reversal of fortune that re-establishes the “comic justice of ‘the biter bit’” (Pearsall 1986/1994: 103). But such *comic justice* only prevents the story from becoming a tragedy rather than turning the story into a humorous one.

What instead makes the story sound humorous is the way the story is organized and told. Garbáty notes that:

This simple story of a rooster’s dream of death, his abduction by a fox, and his subsequent rescue is the core of an extremely intricate, fascinating, and intriguing web of Chaucer’s highest art, especially since many poet’s major literary and philosophic themes are here tossed about in rapid sequence and apparent wild abandon.  
(Garbáty 1977/1994: 94)

As noted by Garbáty, it is not the story in itself that is funny (the two-line summary that he provides in the passage just quoted, serves as a test: it does not sound



funny at all), but rather the “web of literary and philosophic themes” that surround the core narrative.

The main and most noticeable of these literary devices are 1) the mock-heroic style and 2) the peculiarly unbalanced, unfocused, and obsessively digressive nature of the narration, as a parody of a linear organization of a fable.

Mock-Heroic.

The mock-epic tone in the presentation of the story – “the incongruity of register between the trivial events described [...] and the ‘formal’ style of the presentation” (Attardo 1994: 263) - is an unquestionable source of humor. “In applying the full dignity of tragedy to the fate of Chauntecleer [the story] becomes burlesque, of the highest order” (Craik 1967: 74).

Directly taken from the French original *Le Roman de Renart*, in Chaucer’s version this mockery is radicalized: in the French tale, the rooster is actually a brave and smart animal, who is only puzzled (and not terrified) by his dream, and who is not afraid of confronting the fox. The French Chauntecleer’s high opinion of himself is somehow legitimate and justified by his deeds.

In the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” things are different: on the one hand he is presented as having

a regal pride, a precision in crowing [...], a dazzling and barbed appearance, harem arrangements that a Ptolemy might envy, combined with courtly devotion to the favorite of his seven sister-paramours, [an] accurate knowledge [which] transcends his chicken nature.  
(Owen 1977: 136-137)





On the other hand, even if “Chauntecleer [seems] superior to all [...] much of the rooster’s glory is but a sham” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 90). He doesn’t rise above “his feathered frailties” (Owen 1977: 137), remaining a coward, who is equally scared by dangerous creatures as much as by simple dreams of dangerous creatures.

Chauntecleer’s words and actions don’t match. Words seem to weigh more than actions. His “faire damoysele Partelote” is fully aware of it, and her continuous remarks reveal this discrepancy: “She is present in the background to make [Chauntecleer’s] extravagances continually ridiculous. His heroic world is bounded by her stick fence and dry ditch” (Craik 1967: 77).

In Chaucer’s “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” the mock-epic is mainly played at the level of language, by combining “the lowest style of barnyard communication: ‘Out! Harrow! And weyl away! / Ha! Ha! , the fox! ‘ [...] to the highest style of noble rhetoric and lament after Chauntecleer had closed his eyes to the fox who did him ‘by the gargat hente”” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 94), or by connecting literary *topoi* like dream visions in medieval literature often seen as “possible messages from the other world” as carriers of “supernatural significance” (Hallissy 1995: 247-248) to “imbalance of the bodily fluids” (ibidem) easily cured with laxatives.

To the mock-heroic tone of the story the learned quotations or references, which turn out to be completely misplaced, also contribute.

“*Mulier est hominis confusio,*”<sup>26</sup> - says Chauntecleer to his favorite Partelote, adding his own translation of the line: “Madame, the sentence of this Latin is, / ‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis”” (Chaucer/Norton 1989: 224, lines 399-400). It



has been debated whether Chauntecleer says it on purpose to flatter the hen or if he “ingeniously mistranslated [it]” (Winstanley 1960: lxxi) because of his lack of knowledge of Latin; it has even been claimed that Chauntecleer actually gave a *psychologically* realistic or historically correct translation of the original.<sup>27</sup> Intentional or unintentional (realistic or *out-of-place*) as it might be, this ‘mistake’ sounds (and is) undoubtedly humorous.

Another *misplaced* remark made by Chauntecleer sounds as humorous:

Now every wys man, lat him herkne me;  
 This storie is also trewe, I undertake,  
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake.  
 (Chaucer/Norton 1989: 225, lines 445-448).

But of course, as Chaucer and his reader knew well, the story of Sir Lancelot is not true. Like the previous one, this is another case where “the manner may be right, but the substance is not there” (Cooper 1996: 355).

Different but similarly incongruous is what happens toward the end of the story, where the hens mourn for the temporary loss of Chauntecleer, abducted by the fox. The narrator joins in the mourning with an impeccable lamentation, if it weren’t for the mentioning of (and all the credit given to) the name of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, author of a treatise on poetry, as “the mayster soverayn” (Chaucer/Norton 1989: 228, line 581) of the art of composing pathetic lamentation “in a rhetorical elaborate style” (Norton 1989: 228, footnote). This is an unexpected and counterproductive (for a serious text) meta-narrative remark that undermines any sincerity, revealing it as nothing more than a rhetorical

<sup>26</sup> Woman is man’s confusion.

<sup>27</sup> “In fact, his translation of the Latin is in a sense correct. Because in the beginning woman was man’s joy and bliss, she was also his confusion” (Owen 1977: 137).



exercise, a purely formal device, despite the tone and the apparent profoundness of the lamentation. And this is a form of verbal humor.

[Dis]Organization of the Plot.

*The Story-line.*

The structure of the plot, the way it is organized, is a mockery of linear narrative style.

One of the characteristics of the structure of the Nun's Priest's Tale [is] the immense amount of amplification of the basic story [...]. The Nun's Priest's Tale is 626 lines long, of which only about sixty are spent advancing the story.  
(Cooper 1996: 346-347).

Not only does the story occupy a small section of the text, but it does it awkwardly, shifting from "inaction and quiet dialogue in the earlier part of the story" (Craik 1967: 85) to "the most complete confusion [full of] every imaginable outcry and uproar" (ibidem) before hastily being concluded in a few lines, and followed by a very generic admonition, which doesn't seem to have much to do with what just happened in the tale.

The introductory section, presenting the poor widow and her habits ("This widwe, of which I telle yow my tale", Chaucer/Norton 1989: 216, line 58) introduces the premises for a tale that is not there, and the whole section on dreams (which, with its 280 some lines, takes almost one half of the text) full of learned references to Cicero, Macrobius, the Bible, and Cato, are completely unimportant for the progression of the story-line, and produce instead some confusion, as far as the interpretation of the story goes. The chase after the fox and the lamentation toward the end of the story (similar to

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the mournings we find in classic Epics, like the *Aeneid*) unbalance considerably the organization/shape of the story: after some 500 lines spent presenting simple dialogues between not more than two characters at a time, we are presented with the *pandemonium* scene where Heaven and Earth seem to be equally involved:

Ducks, geese and bees are added to the other farmyard creatures in order that the most complete confusion may reign, and the fox is pursued with every imaginable outcry and uproar, both vocal and instrumental, not only by ‘this sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two’ but also by ‘many another man’.

[...]

The gods [...] are as involved in Chauntecleer’s destiny as they are in the fate of Palamon and Arcite [protagonists of the *Knight’s Tale*]. Similarly, the lamentations of the hens, which are the signal of the farmyard disaster [...] suggest [...] such classical disasters of history as the destruction of Troy, of Carthage, and of Rome.

(Craik 1967: 85)

On a strictly formal-structural level, if we take the Aristotelian idea of a plot (see above) as a tripartition of well-connected incidents into a beginning (set-up), a middle (complication), and end (resolution), and we assume Chauntecleer’s dream as the first stage (lines 116-485), the attack upon Chauntecleer as the middle stage (lines 565-575), and his escape (lines 640-650) as a final stage, the unbalance becomes visible. At this point – also given the vagueness of the final moral (see below) that traditionally needs to conclude such stories – the whole text looks like a parody of a well-established and conventional literary genre, like the beast fables.

### *The Digressions.*

Garbáty notes that “Chaucer’s birds follow a definite line of comedy. They are all very talkative [...], and they pontificate to various degrees. Thus their comedy is a verbal one” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 90). But this verbosity, this gratuitous display of words is not only





on the parts of the birds. The narrator also seems to be very fond of words. Or confused by them. This is exactly the point of the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale”: it is comedy of words. Suffice to say that one of the versions of the same tale, by Marie de France, summarizes the exact same plot in less than twenty lines; Chaucer’s version consists instead of some 650 lines: everything that is not action, is just words. What is not story-line, is simple and (for the most part) irrelevant digression.

“[The narrator] digress[es] from his story before it has properly begun at all” (Craik 1967: 71). These are digressions “without premeditation” (Craik 1967: 71), which seem to unbalance the whole structure of the story.

Craik remarks only two *noticeable* digressions:

[1] before the fox appears on the scene, Chauntecleer’s prophetic dream allows an elaborate discussion to take place between husband and wife on the causes and value of dreams; and [2] before the fox begins speaking to the cock, Chaucer reflects philosophically on destiny and cynically on the danger of following women’s advice.  
(Craik 1967: 72)

Hussey provides instead a detailed table of the summary of the plot complete with all “the different digressions and divergences” (Hussey 1965: 4)

#### Summary

##### Lines

55-115	Introduction of human and bird characters
116-141	The Tale (I): The Dream
142-175	Partelote’s interpretation (based upon Cato)
176-203	Her medical advice
204-217	Chauntecleer’s rejection of her interpretation
218-283	The first example: the murder of the pilgrim
284-296	Brief moralization upon murder and punishment
297-343	The second example: deaths by drowning
344-355	The third example: the death of St. Kenelm
356-360	The reference to Scipio’s dream
361-371	The reference to Joseph’s dreams
372-384	Citation of classical examples:
	(i) Croesus (372-374)



	(ii) Andromache (375-384)
385-390	Chauntecleer's conclusion
391-420	The Tale (II)
421-433	Astronomical interlude
434-440	Chauntecleer's fears
441-448	Digression upon rhetoric
449-459	Introduction of the Fox
460-463	Digression upon treachery
464-485	Digression upon Predestination
486-558	The Tale (III) with moralization (486-500)
559-564	Sermon upon Flattery
565-571	The Tale (IV): The attack upon Chauntecleer
572-575	Digression upon Destiny
576-580	Digression upon Venus
581-588	Digression upon Richard I
589-608	Classical lamentation:
	(i) Troy (589-595)
	(ii) Carthage (596-602)
	(iii) Rome (603-608)
609-636	The Tale (V): The Chase
637-638	Couplet upon Fortune
639-669	The Tale (VI): The Escape
670-680	The Moral
	(Hussey 1965: 4-5)

As Hussey notes, "this list may make the Tale look absurdly fragmented" (1965: 5). And the existence of "so many irrelevancies [and of] so many seeming inconsistencies" (ibidem), the presence of so many intertwined elements, is one of the reasons that (at the end of the tale) determines the fragmentation of the original moral of the tale into different (even if related) morals:

The cock, the fox, and finally the Nun's Priest feel compelled to sum up their experience in moral terms. The first feels he should keep his eyes open; the second, his mouth shut; the third finds lessons against carelessness, negligence, and trust in flattery.  
(Owen 1977: 142)

Even though perfectly sensible, none of them seem to fully conclude and epitomize the sense of the tale, so much so that the narrator envisages the existence of other possible morals, hidden somewhere, under the large amount of material presented, by saying:



Taketh the moralite, goode men.  
 For seint Paul seith that all that writen is,  
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;  
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.  
 (Chaucer/Norton 1989: 230-231, lines 674-6677)

In other words, the Nun's Priest implies that "everything that is written can be interpreted to have a moral in some way or another" (Winstanley 1960: lxxiv)

Helen Cooper explains this 'openness' this way:

Where other tales [...] tend to present arguments that support a position already taken up, the Nun's Priest's Tale argues on both sides at once. The result is very far from anything resembling syllogistic impartiality, for the thesis and antithesis are usually incapable of development into a single derive truth.  
 (Cooper 1996: 351)

The story introduces so many and different subjects, narrative digressions, moral and philosophical considerations, that, at the end it is almost impossible to make everything converge toward a unique, unequivocal, and meaningful conclusion. Considering that the essence of a moral tale is, of course, its moral, the dispersed and ambivalent one that we get at the end of the Nun's Priest's story is a reason enough to turn what could be a simple (and disorderly) beast fable, into an elaborated and clever humorous text.

#### ***I.C.7.d. Conclusion.***

In the introduction of his book on Chaucer's comic tales, Craik maintains that "it may be truly said of him (as Johnson said of Shakespeare) that 'in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature'" (1967: ix). Chaucer displays his gift for comedy in most of the tales collected in the *Canterbury Tales*.



The comedy in these texts is not of one kind only. In some of the tales, in fact, the humor depends mainly on the story itself (situational-referential humor), where “details of plot or event, apart from character or tone, are simply funny [and] the action in itself is ridiculous” (Jost 194: xxii), where the whole story is thoroughly organized so as to climb up to a comic climax as the sole (or the main) purpose of the tale. Chaucer was a master at this: as Jost notes, “Chaucer enthusiastically delights in mental gymnastics or clever constructs” (Jost 1994: xxii), and this becomes clear in many of the tales that are drawn from fabliaux, like the “Reeve’s Tale”, the “Shipman’s Tale”, the “Merchant’s Tales”, but these “ingenious and elaborate mental constructions” (Thro 1970/1994: 389) reach one of their highest points in the “Miller’s Tale,” which, with its description of three conjoined practical jokes, is “the comic celebration of creativity” (Thro 1970/1994: 390), and the “supreme achievement of situational comedy” (Garbáty 1977/1994: 83).

There is then a second (small) group of texts that are not funny in themselves, that is, because of the stories they tell, but instead they sound funny because of the way the stories are organized and presented (verbal humor). This is the case of such tales as “Sir Topas” (romance) or the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” (beast fable). As noted by Garbáty, “language in general was Chaucer’s most effective comic tool” (1977/1994: 91), and he best displays his comic genius when he manages to turn serious texts (like romances and moral-beast fables) into humorous ones through a peculiar use of language, parodying literary conventions, styles and registers:

When the word mocks the word, when language makes fun of language, then indeed our sense of humor is cerebrally challenged. And such it is with Chaucer’s amazing gift of parody. In this most literate form of comedy, Chaucer was the great innovator in English letters. (Garbáty 1977/1994: 92).





### **I.C.8. Non-Serious and Non-Humorous Texts: Nonsense and Absurd.**

#### ***I.C.8.a. Comic Prefiguration.***

There is a group of texts whose privileged points, or simply the style, the tone the story is presented, suggest a comic prefiguration. This is the case of Lear's absurd matching of human and objects and the incongruous endings of stories like the one of "The History of the Seven Families of The Lake Pipple-Popple" or the one of "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Around the World"; this is also the case of Carroll's puns and idioms, which become real objects in *Alice in Wonderland*, or of Beckett's opposition between words and actions in *Waiting for Godot*, or of Ionesco's incongruous sequencing of completely unrelated events and words in *La Cantatrice Chauve* or in *La Leçon*.

But the humorous prefiguration of these texts is not enough to make them humorous texts. After a complete reading, in fact, these narratives are hardly perceived as humorous.

#### ***I.C.8.b. No Resolution.***

Despite all the incongruities suggest a humorous reading of the texts, in the case of the narratives mentioned above there is no resolution that would turn incongruity into humor.

This might occur at the level of the core narrative, when

- the incongruity cannot be related to any core opposition or to any core tension that could explain it. This is the case of texts like *Waiting for Godot*, where the reader has not a chance to understand who the two men waiting for Godot are, what they are doing (beside waiting) and why, and who this mysterious Godot is. (Things would have been different if we only knew that the two characters are two inmates of an



insane asylum waiting for the cleaning person: even if it doesn't sound funny, we would at least have a basis, some script, on which to ground the interpretation of the whole story.)

- some scripts are there, but they are so vague and changing in so unpredictable ways that the incongruity derives directly from this. This is the case of *La Leçon*, where the script Professor shifts endlessly from Competent to Incompetent Instructor, from Patient and Good-hearted to Impatient, Mean, and even Murderer, which, despite the appearance, does not constitute an opposition (Good Person vs. Murderer) or a trigger switch: the professor doesn't murder the student; he just talks her to death, using only words, and this being a constitutive part of the lesson, given that the dead student is just one of the many who in one only day ended up dying during his private lessons.
- the core opposition or the core tension are actually resolved (or comes to an end), but this does not entail the automatic resolution of all incongruities. In the case of *Alice in Wonderland* the final switch from Dream (Non Actual) to Reality (Actual) doesn't justify the incongruities, but it merely suggests that they don't have to be justified, being just part of a dream. In the case of Lear's "Story of the Four Children" the resolution of the tension (Experience vs. Inexperience) with the return of the heroes does not justify everything incongruous that happened in the course of their adventure, but ends up representing a further incongruity (with the unjustifiable slaying of the friendly Rhinoceros).

Unresolved incongruities can also be at the level of the surface narrative. Such texts could be mistaken as belonging to the category *superficially humorous* defined



above, but this is hardly the case, given the peculiar nature of many of the instances of humor to be found in the surface narrative.

They are mainly:

- negations-contradictions between actions and words, or between words and words
- (altered) repetitions
- illogical sequences of events and words, non sequiturs

all cases of incongruities without possible resolution, incongruities that can hardly be logically or paralogically justified (via a Logical Mechanism).

#### ***I.C.8.c. Words and Events.***

These *ambiguous* texts are not all of the same kind. At this point the distinction presented above between verbal and referential humor is very helpful.

- Some other texts owe their ambiguous nature (i.e., non-serious, still not humorous) to the way the story is organized and told, and to their peculiar choice of words. This is the group constituted by nonsense texts.
- Some of the texts sound *non-serious* because of the story they tell: this is the group constituted by absurd texts, where the lack of logic in the fabula is the main feature and the main reason why they sound non-serious.

In the next two chapters I will examine in some detail these two groups of non-serious narrative - nonsense and absurd - and their peculiar connection to humor.



## II. NONSENSE.

In this chapter I will discuss the linguistic nature of nonsense texts.

Section II.A. will be devoted to narrowing down and delimiting the field of our research, distinguishing what is genuine nonsense literature from what is not. Section II.B. will be devoted to the presentation of a review of the theories on literary nonsense. The first part of section II.C. (II.C.1., II.C.2., II.C.3.) is an analysis of the characteristic narratological and linguistic features of this genre as opposed to humorous literature in general. In the last part of this section (II.C.4. and II.C.5.) we will see how the impression of humor in these texts, i.e., the awareness on the part of the reader of some incongruity, depends on a play with traditional narrative structures (II.C.4.) and especially on a play with language (II.C.5.)

### II.A. Premises: Clearing the Field

What is nonsense?

There is a basic distinction to be made. What is usually referred to as nonsense can be separated into two different levels: *everyday nonsense* and *literary nonsense*. Everyday nonsense is what occurs in our day-to-day experience when we are presented with utterances or actions not logically connected to the context in which they are performed (i.e., an answer like 'me, too' to the question 'would you please close the door?' would be a plain example of this kind of nonsense).

The definition and delimitation of literary nonsense, instead, has always been somehow blurry and problematic. Before defining this genre it is useful at this point to





see which literary figures and works have traditionally been considered somehow connected to it.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Sir Edmund Strachey (1888) trying the first history of nonsense, sees its first steps in English medieval literature and sees this literary “vein” permeating most of English mainstream literature, from Chaucer through Shakespeare to Charles Lamb, being of course best represented by Lear and Carroll. G.K. Chesterton, in one of the first studies of the genre (1901), enlarges even further its boundaries by saying that “some of the greatest writers the world has seen - Aristophanes, Rabelais and Sterne - have written nonsense” (1901: 446-447). This idea has been shared by many historians of nonsense (Schöne 1955; Benayoun 1977; Jennings 1977), so much so that Marnie Parsons, synthesizing the research up to the year 1994, says that “Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Jarry, Stein, Joyce, the Marx Brothers, and Flannery O'Connor” (1994: 16) can be considered as part of the “nonsense family.” Alfred Liede (1963) connects also literary modernism and particularly German dada with literary nonsense. Connections between nonsense and modernism are also made by Alison Rieke (1992), Michael Holquist (1969), Elizabeth Sewell (1971) and Juliet Dusinberre (1992). Susan Stewart (1978) sees some connections with French surrealism (Breton, Aragon, Soupault, Artaud) and the literary movements rooted in the surrealist experience (Desnos, Quenau, Roy), while Lisa Ede considers Kafka, Ionesco, Beckett, Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme as “artists whose work seems in some way to share in or extend the world view established by Lear and Carroll's nonsense” (Ede/Tigges 1987: 53).



As we can see, there doesn't seem to be agreement among scholars, and if in their studies the genealogy of the “nonsense family” is blurred, this “literary maze” (Ede/Tigges 1987: 51) becomes even more complex when dealing with the problem of the origins of the genre. If some critics like Tigges, Emile Cammaerts (1925), and Richard Gott (1988) limit nonsense literature to the British Victorian period “as a reaction to Byron and Shelley” (Tigges 1988: 8) or “against the conventionalized Romanticism of the later Wordsworth and of much of Tennyson's poetry, and especially [...] against their second- and third-rate epigones” (Tigges 1988: 234-235), usually criticism traces literary nonsense's birth further back, for instance, to the thirteen-century French *fatrasies*<sup>28</sup> (Benayoun 1977), or to Aristophanes' comedies (Jennings 1977), while Susan Stewart and Wim Tigges note that the use of nonsensical devices has been found in writing from ancient Egypt (Stewart 1978: 66) and even in the Hebrew Bible (Tigges 1988: 138).

The genealogy of nonsense literature is not easy to describe. As a matter of fact, given all the information listed above, we are presented with sets of different hypotheses, rather than with a coherent history of literary nonsense. From this maze of names and periods, one thing can easily be gathered: the rather dangerous tendency to connect with literary nonsense everything that doesn't seem to fit in any other codified genre, that is to say, everything that doesn't seem to follow the canons and the fixed structures of any other well-defined genre. Such a connection, of course, raises more doubts than answers.

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<sup>28</sup> *Fatrasies*, (like *sotties* and *menus propos*) are medieval and Renaissance humorous texts characterized by verbal fantasy “i.e. a completely defunctionalized [...], non-communicative use of language based upon associations, repetitions, and in general on a verbal ‘euphoria’” (Attardo 1994: 268).. For a more detailed account on *fatrasies* see Garapon (1957) and Attardo (1994: 268-269).



As a matter of fact, can a *peculiarly* incoherent satiric comedy (such as Aristophanes'), or an *unprototypical* grotesque satire (such as Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*), or an *obsessively* metafictional novel (such as Sterne's *The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy*) be considered as part of nonsense literature? Probably not. They are only original examples of satiric comedy, grotesque satire, and metafiction. Can modernism be seen as a form of nonsense? And surrealism? Even though some of the critics listed above (Rieke 1992, Holquist 1969, Sewell 1971) seem to take this connection for granted, is it really possible to say that modernist and surrealist texts *make no sense*? Certainly not<sup>29</sup>.

But is there a common ground that allows us to compare or to relate all these authors and their works, or is nonsense that melting pot where *everything that is not clearly 'something else'* can fit in?

Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), offers a valuable perspective that explains the reason why these works can be somehow related. In his "Theory of Genres" he distinguishes four different literary 'forms': the *novel* (characterized by the "attempt to create 'real people,'"<sup>30</sup> and to reproduce social reality), the *romance* (characterized by the idealization of reality, where "a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in"<sup>31</sup>), the *confession* (represented by autobiographies, fictional biographies, and stories using stream of consciousness techniques), and the *anatomy* (or *Menippean satire*). Unlike the previous ones, this last literary form "is not primarily concerned with the exploit of

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<sup>29</sup> Wim Tigges (1988) provides evidences to show that modernism, grotesque (1988: 112), surrealism (1988: 116), dada (1988: 122), absurdism (1988: 125) and metafiction (1988: 131), cannot be considered as part of literary nonsense.

<sup>30</sup> Frye 1957: 304.



heroes, but relies on the free play of intellectual fancy and the kind of humorous observation that produces caricature" (1957: 310), and "deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes" (1957: 309).

In anatomies, "the intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative" (1957: 310). "The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon" (1957: 311). According to this distinction Carroll's "Alice books are perfect Menippean satires"<sup>32</sup> (1957: 310), and according to this point of view the connection between nonsense texts as the *Alice* books and the work of such authors as Rabelais, Sterne or Joyce, is clear: all of them, in fact, are *perfect Menippean satires*.

Another ground on which Lear's and Carroll's work can be compared to the work of the authors mentioned above is offered by Northrop Frye's "Theory of Genres," in which he tries a definition of *melos* and *opsis* in prose (that is to say, of the *musical* and the *pictorial* or *plastic* element in prose writing).

A tendency to long sentences made up of short phrases and coordinate clauses, to emphatic repetition combined with a driving linear rhythm, to invective, to exhaustive catalogues, and to expressing the process or movement of thought instead of the logical word-order of achieved thought, are among the signs of prose *melos*.  
(1957: 266)

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<sup>31</sup> Frye 1957: 304.

<sup>32</sup> "As the name of an attitude, satire is [...] a combination of fantasy and morality. But as the name of a form, the term satire [...] is more flexible, and can be either entirely fantastic or entirely moral. The Menippean adventure story may thus be pure fantasy, as in literary fairy tale" (Frye 1957: 310). This is the only possible way in which *Alice in Wonderland* can be considered as a satire. It is an 'entirely fantastic' satire, without target and without moral.





In Frye's opinion "Rabelais is one of the greatest masters of *melos* in prose" (1957: 266), "Sterne is the chief master of prose *melos* before the development of 'stream of conscious' techniques for presenting thought as a process" (1957: 266), "Gertrude Stein [...] gives to the words something of the capacity for repetition that music has," "but it is of course Joyce who has made the most elaborate experiments in the *melos*" (1957: 266). And what is described by Frye as *melos* prose is one of the main features of Carroll's *Alice* books and Lear's prose short stories and limericks.

If Frye provides the common grounds on which to compare all these texts, it must be kept in mind that not every *anatomy* text can be considered as a nonsense text (even though nonsense texts are deeply affected by devices typical of *anatomy*), nor every text in which *melos* is the central mode can be reduced to a nonsense text (even though *melos* is actually one of the main features of a nonsense text).

Wim Tigges clarifies the nature of this difference when he states that "the early samples of nonsense quoted in anthologies or mentioned by critics (names that occur frequently in this context are those of Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Swift, and Sterne) are at most *nonsensical as device* or mode, *subservient to other aims* such as satire, parody and burlesque" (1988: 139, italics added). Tigges' words imply two important distinctions to be made in order to 'clear the field' before we can come to a definition of literary nonsense: first, *nonsensical* devices and the introduction of episodes that violate the principle of *common sense* into a text doesn't necessarily turn it into a nonsense text; second (and most importantly), a nonsense text is not *subservient to other aims* (than the pure entertainment of the readers) but is essentially (and intentionally) *purposeless*.



Having said that, it becomes easy to isolate Victorian nonsense writers from the “nonsense family” grouped by Parsons. Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear are the first and (possibly) the only ones among this group of authors to identify their work as nonsense. Therefore, if it would sound awkward and even disrespectful to address authors like Shakespeare<sup>33</sup>, Sterne, Rabelais, or Joyce as nonsense writers, the same thing does not apply to Carroll and Lear. Lear chooses for his work the eloquent and *unmistakeable* title *The Book of Nonsense*<sup>34</sup>, whereas Carroll, when asked about the meaning of his works (often “supposed to contain all the metaphysics in the world”<sup>35</sup>), used to provide answers like “I’m very much afraid I didn’t mean anything but nonsense”<sup>36</sup> (Cohen 1996: 408).

At this point it would *seem* possible to see the ‘nonsense family’ as basically “a nuclear one” (Parsons 1994: 16) and to see nonsense as “a relatively recent phenomenon in literature, originating in Britain in the Romantic and post-Romantic era” (Tigges 1988: 2). Research about literary nonsense starts with the unquestioned assumption expressed by Wim Tigges (1988) that “whatever nonsense is, specific works by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll belong to its canon” (1988: 2). Derek Hudson (1966), sharing Tigges’ opinion, maintains that these “two Victorians, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, carried the art of nonsense to the highest point” (1966: 8)

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<sup>33</sup> “A lot of Shakespeare sounds like nonsense, and it is meant to, though - out of deference to the logicians in his audience - he usually has a kernel of meaning in it” (Burgess 1986/1987: 19).

<sup>34</sup> “In regard to his verses, Lear asserted that ‘nonsense, pure and absolute,’ was his aim throughout” (Wells 1914: xxvi), and when critics persisted in seeing in his nonsense “a hidden meaning, a cynical, political, or other intent [...] Lear takes occasion to deny this in the preface to one of his books, and asserts not only that his rhymes and pictures have no symbolical meaning, but that he ‘took more care than might be supposed to make the subjects incapable of such misinterpretation.’” (Wells 1914: xxviii).

<sup>35</sup> Lennon 1972: 93.

<sup>36</sup> If answers like this usually don’t mean much and are not meant to be taken literally - being a part of the conventional game of ‘hide and seek’ between the author and his audience - they become significant and ‘meaningful’ from the part of authors like Lewis Carroll, who didn’t consider *Alice in Wonderland* worthy of publication (and was eventually persuaded by the authoritative advice of the novelist George



## II.B. Survey of the Literature.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, the popularity of such works like Edward Lear's 1846's *The Book of Nonsense* (which in the year 1888 reached its twenty-sixth edition) and especially the huge success of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* stimulated a deeper and more serious consideration of this peculiar way of writing, whose following of appreciators and imitators not only popularized but also legitimized as an autonomous literary genre.

I would at this point list some of the most influential studies that helped the theory of nonsense to progress, especially those considering this genre under a narratological and linguistic point of view. I will omit studies addressing the subject under a psychological perspective, as this would exceed the scope of the present work.

### II.B.1. The Nineteenth Century.

The first mention of nonsense as an autonomous literary genre is by an anonymous reviewer of the *Spectator* in an article entitled "Word Twisting *versus* Nonsense" (April 9, 1887). As the title suggests, the main focus of the article is on the distinction of nonsense from the inferior work of punsters and satirist. In doing that, the reviewer outlines what have oftentimes been considered the main features of the genre: its *detachedness* from any kind of social or political context and its being mainly a *verbal phenomenon*. Nonsense, according to the reviewer, is "pure and absolute" (1887: 493), a

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MacDonald), and who composed poetry ("The Hunting of the Snark") *backwards*, starting from the very last line, without a precise idea of how the story would *begin*.



form of creative verbal play for its own sake, without serving “ulterior motives” (ibidem) as satire does.

In “Nonsense as a Fine Art” (1888), Sir Edmund Strachey moves along the same lines, distinguishing nonsense from vulgar eighteenth century parodies, and defining it as apolitical and devoid of symbolic meaning. Most importantly, for the first time, nonsense is considered in connection to humor (as “the flower and fruit of Wit and Humour,” 1888: 336). Strachey also suggests what differentiates the two forms by stressing as one of nonsense’s main features the fact that it simply uncovers the “incongruities of all things within and without us” (1888: 335), rather than resolving them. In Strachey’s opinion, despite presenting a world turned upside-down (he introduces the concept of “topsyturvydom” to define the genre), nonsense is amusing because, in addition to bringing forward absurdities, it uncovers “a new deeper harmony of life in and through its contradiction” (ibidem), and because such absurdities are “so out of place” (ibidem) that they become a source of delight rather than discomfort.

As a response to Strachey, another article appeared anonymously on the *Spectator* (November 3, 1888) by the title of “Nonsense Pure and Simple.” The author disagrees with Strachey, maintaining that nonsense is not necessarily related to humor and that it need not be so detached from any kind of context (instead it “must have the ring of sincerity about it,” 1888: 1505). On the other hand he maintains that nonsense is a typically English phenomenon, given that only the English *taste* (as opposed to the French, the German, and the American) would appreciate such incongruities.





## II.B.2. The Early Twentieth Century.

G.K. Chesterton's "A Defence of Nonsense" (1901), one of the earliest and most quoted studies on the subject, offers a few insights for the definition of nonsense. Diachronically he distinguishes the Victorian nonsense from Aristophane's, Rabelais' or Sterne's, for Carroll's and Lear's nonsense has absolutely no meaning, neither satirical nor parodic. Synchronically he also distinguishes nonsense from humor, relating its *amusing* effect to its being completely a-contextualized, presenting "a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness" (1901: 124), offering therefore a pleasant avenue of escape. What results from the experience of nonsense is not necessarily humor, *but a different form of appreciation* of oddities, absurdities, and incongruities, unaffected by the filter of logic. Influenced by his religious preoccupations, he goes even further by saying that the appreciation of nonsense is a sort of *spiritual* experience, because, far from logic, nonsense offers a "spiritual view of things" leading its reader to "exult in the 'wonders' of creation" (1901: 126).

Emile Cammaerts, in *The Poetry of Nonsense* (1925) - the first full-length study to isolate and describe nonsense as a genre - starts by distinguishing it from wit and humor.

Speaking of Lear's limericks, he notes that

they do not contain any sparkling witticism or any striking caricature, still less any worldly wisdom. They are just sheer nonsense, and, unless we enjoy nonsense for nonsense's sake, we shall never be able to appreciate them  
(1925: 7).

He implicitly suggest that nonsense's main feature is its being incongruous, and this incongruity operates on two levels:



- on a literary-narratological level, where nonsense could be read as satire or parody, if it didn't lack any specific butt; or it could be read as fantasy or fairy tale if it told a connected story and if it used the narrative contexts and conventions of such genres
- on a logical level, for the main purpose of nonsense seems to be to upset all logic, or to confuse everyday-life conventions and logic for no specific purpose.

He visually describes nonsense as

the wild, exuberant mood of a Christmas party or of a popular carnival [...]. It runs in all directions and gesticulates madly, just as children and young animals do when let loose in an open field, after a long confinement.  
(1925: 15-16)

An interesting point is Cammaerts' attempt to connect nonsense's *looseness* to the fact that it deals more with senses and sensations (perceptions) rather than thoughts (logic). In his opinion nonsense is such because it is a playful verbal representation of visual and mental images or sounds, rather than of ideas or logically related events.

Cammaerts concludes his study with another important claim that indirectly sums up the essence of nonsense. He maintains that this genre is typically English, that in French and German culture there is nothing comparable, because only England possesses a sense of "broad humor," and is keen "to enjoy a joke even if there is no point in it" (1925: 74). Nonsense, in his words, is somehow similar to a pointless joke.

Beside Erika Leimert's (1930) and Walter de la Mare's (1932) studies – in which nonsense is described as an amorphous blend of humor, irrationality and fantasy – very few studies have been done on the subject in the thirties and forties.



### II.B.3. The Fifties.

Eric Patridge, in “The Nonsense Words of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll” (1950), sees as an essential feature for nonsense the role of words and verbal plays. In this article he presents nonsense’s peculiar verbal devices, namely neologisms, portmanteau words and puns.

In 1952, Elizabeth Sewell authors a most insightful work entitled “The Field of Nonsense” in which she explains the nature of the genre as being essentially an orderly language game. Two are the main points of her theory:

- Nonsense is a verbal phenomenon: nonsense is a world of everyday things and, ever so more, one of words: a collection of words that fail to conform to the conventional patterns of a language to which a particular mind is accustomed.
- Nonsense has the idea of *order* as a regulating principle: the mind perceives that nonsense has its own structure “held together by valid mental relations” (1952: 4):

nonsense is not merely the denial of sense, a random reversal of ordinary experience and escape from the limitations of everyday life into a haphazard infinity, but is on the contrary a carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason, a construction subject to its own laws. (1952: 5)

As noted by Sewell, the nonsense writer manipulates words as in a game played within “a limited field” and with “fixed rules” (1952: 17). This laws that order and regulate nonsense are based on:

- logic (i.e. they reproduce, parallel or parody logic relations and mechanisms)
- commonsense and conventions
- ‘serial order’ (i.e. the combination, the listing of similar words - as *signified*, i.e., according to their meaning, and as *signifiers*, i.e., according to their sound, their



spelling, etc. – of similar things and images is taken as a substitutive criterion for cause-effect relationships).

On this basis Sewell argues that nonsense should be distinguished from dreams and fantasy, which are essentially disorganized accumulations of images. On the same basis, nonsense shouldn't be mistaken for a humorous genre: even if nonsense's misapplied logic or pseudo-logic sound funny, humor is *incidental* for this genre.

Concluding her study, Sewell, too (as Cammaertes did before her), notes the extreme visual power of nonsense, the importance of images (evoked or alluded to by the text) and of actual illustrations (stressing for example the importance for nonsense writers to carefully supervise the drawings meant to illustrate their works or to do them themselves).

#### **II.B.4. The Sixties and the Seventies.**

In the sixties and seventies the theoretical approach to nonsense literature has been supplanted by histories and surveys on the genre. One of the most important is probably Rolf Hildebrandt's "Nonsense-Aspekte der englischen Kinderliteratur" (1962). The novelty of this work is that it introduces a distinction among different kinds of nonsense in literature, namely

- Volk-nonsense, i.e., folk or popular nonsense as it appears in fantasy tales and in nursery-rhymes
- Ornamental nonsense, as a surface element in otherwise *sense* and traditional texts, like the nonsensical parenthesis we found in Aristophanes, Chaucer, Shakespeare.
- Literary and "pure" nonsense like the one in Lear's and Carroll's work.





Hildebrandt sees this last kind of nonsense as a typically English phenomenon and stresses its detachment from social or political context as a possible source of inspiration.

Another interesting work is Alfred Liede's *Dichtung als Spiel: Studien zur Unsinnspoese an den Grezen der Sprache* (1963), which is a remarkable history of playful literature in general. Here, nonsense is considered an inferior form of poetry, mainly based on a play with language. Liede then provides a list of nonsense's verbal devices (puns, porte-manteau words, neologisms) and forms, which is not dissimilar from the one presented in Patridge's 1950 article.

In 1966, Donald J. Gray, with the article "The Use of the Victorian Laughter" studies the similarities and the main differences existing between nonsense and other forms of Victorian humor, and explains why nonsense, even if sharing humor's incongruities, and even if it may sound amusing, should not be mistaken for a humorous genre:

Consonance, integrity, its pretense to be complete and conventionally coherent: that is what makes nonsense. Like other entertainments which furnish release from the imperatives of ordinary experience, nonsense amuses by failing to achieve the coherence expected of sounds and sentences and literary forms like those it uses. But the writers of nonsense also amuse by being careful to make their poems and tales so coherent in their own terms that they seem to be making sense, so entire and satisfying in their logic and motion that their order seems to be free-standing and completely independent of the conventional order of language and literature against which they are in fact playing.  
(1966: 171-172)

If we take the humorous resolution of incongruity as the main feature of humor, it becomes evident that the tensions between coherence and incoherence, between logic and lack of logic, or between expectations and their systematic violations, are not reasons enough to make nonsense a humorous genre.



Of a completely different advice is Dieter Petzold. In *Formen und Funktionen der englischen Nonsense-Dichtung im 19. Jahrhundert* (1972), he sees nonsense as one of the comic expressions of Romantic irony, for it undermines a genuine response to the world. Among the features that contribute to its humorousness, Petzold lists its lack of causality, its pleasing freedom from logical thinking, its comic use of language, its interest in sounds and sequences that seem to carry intelligible meaning, and its linguistic surprises. But proving nonsense humorous is not the main point of Petzold's work, as it is analyzing the genre as an expression of (either personal or social) suppressed anxieties, under a psychological perspective.

In 1977 in his anthology of nonsense writings (*Le nonsense*) Robert Benayoun considers nonsense under a socio-political perspective, as a direct product of a very specific economic and socially distressed situation and he sees it as a peculiar kind of satire.

Not completely different is Susan Stewart's position, as presented in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1978). In her opinion nonsense is indeed a social phenomenon, because 'discourse' or language are social events, and especially nonsense "will always be contingent upon the nature of the corresponding common sense" (1978: 51). Stewart in fact sees nonsense as a *discursive* reaction to accepted common sense, and she lists all the non-commonsensical devices used in this genre: reversals and inversions, plays with boundaries of meaning and languages, plays with infinity (the infinity of possibilities in language), use of simultaneity (e.g. puns), or arrangements and rearrangements of words inside a closed field. Stewart also considers nonsense as related to humor, and in her opinion, it is the peculiar way of using language,



abstracted from its everyday sensible use, what makes nonsense sound funny. In Stewart's words, in fact, nonsense can be considered "humor without context" (1978: 38).

### **II.B.5. The Eighties and the Nineties.**

During the 1980s some important studies about the nature of nonsense saw the light.

In 1980, Elizabeth Sewell, studying the reasons that make nonsense literature appealing (especially to the tastes of a young audience), finds the answer in the *alternative orders* offered in nonsense writings, which are a consequence of the systematic re-patterning of familiar words and elements: by this re-patterning nonsense delights its readers, providing them with glimpses of "other orders beyond and through our usual perspectives" (1980-1981: 45). Sewell's study, which was supposed to highlight the main *themes* of nonsense by introducing the concept of *re-patterning*, implies instead that nonsense depends mainly on its *formal-structural* features rather than on its *thematic* ones.

To a similar conclusion leads Lisa Ede's article "An Introduction to the Nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll" (1987). She sees the core of this genre in the "constant interplay between various dichotomies" (1987: 57).

[Nonsense is] a self-reflexive verbal construction which functions through the manipulation of a series of internal and external tensions. The basic dichotomies involve illusion and reality and order and disorder, with such further contrasting pairs as fantasy and logic, imagination and reason, the child and the adult, the individual and the society, words and their linguistic relation.  
(1987: 57).



Like Sewell before her, Ede, even when presenting some of the themes or the contrasting *motives* that characterize nonsense, defines nonsense as a mainly linguistic phenomenon. For Ede in fact language is at the same time the means and the subject of nonsense literature.

Probably the most important and insightful studies on this genre to date are Wim Tigges' article "An Anatomy of Nonsense" (1987) and the full-length study *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (1988). Very concisely and clearly he defines nonsense as

a genre of narrative 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.  
(1987: 27)

- The most important point, for the range of implications which come with it, is that nonsense is essentially a narrative genre, that is, it must tell a story. This feature, never stressed as salient before, is what allows us to distinguish between literary nonsense and everyday nonsense. Everyday nonsense could be anything that is inconsequential, incoherent, and illogical according to day-to-day life criteria (i.e., Question: "What time is it?" Answer: "Yes, seventeen and two halves, please"), whereas literary nonsense is inconsistent also according to narratological criteria. In nonsense writings there is a metanarrative parodic undercurrent that, on the one hand, prevents the texts from being read as fitting into clear-cut traditional genres like fantasy and fairy tales or simple adventures, but the other hand, it is not enough alone (i.e., it is not well-directed, it doesn't *aim* at any specific target) to turn these texts into simple parodies (see sections II.C.3 and II.C.4.).
- Secondly, talking about the balancing of (multiple and no) meanings, Tigges implies that nonsense stories should suggest "that there is a deeper meaning" (1987: 27) by





providing the reader with sensible inputs around which to shape a possible interpretation or prefiguration of the texts, but all these expectations remain unanswered (not necessarily violated). In this sense it can be said of nonsense that it is a cross “between the ‘romantic’ and the absurd” (Colley 1993: 44), or between convention and unconventional innovation, as a “creative play with rules of language, logic [...] form” (Tigges 1988: 256) “prosody and representation” (1987: 27). On this same basis Tigges draws a clear distinction between nonsense and humor: “nonsense [...] presents a balance between meaning and non-meaning, and therefore lacks a point or unambiguous explanation” (1988: 95), this last being one of the main feature of humor (i.e. irony, satire, jokes, etc.):

In irony, the balance is between a meaning and its opposite, which is not the same as non-meaning. “You’re a fine fellow” ironically means “you’re not a fine fellow.” Satire has the point of attacking or showing up an undesired situation or event. Parody satirizes a subject-text, whose weaknesses (usually formal) come under attack. A joke, and even a shaggy dog story, has a point; the tension is released when we see what the joke is about, just as the tension in a riddle is released when we see what the solution is.  
(1988: 95)

Nonsense’s inconsequentiality is not humorous: “we may laugh at the fact, but neither the events recounted nor the language in which they are described is humorous, comic, witty or ironic” (1988:95).

- Thirdly, by saying that nonsense does not reproduce nor imitate reality, but instead creates its own reality through language (1988: 257), Tigges (like Partridge 1950, Sewell 1952, Hilebrandt 1962, Petzold 1972, Stewart 1978, Ede 1987 before him) recognizes the eminently verbal nature of this genre.



Among the most recent studies on the subject is Alison Rieke's *The Sense of Nonsense* (1992). Despite the title this is not properly a study of nonsense, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning because it summarizes the main misconception about the genre. Rieke (like Holquist 1969; Burgess 1986; Dusi 1987; Pearson 1994) confuses and identifies nonsense with modernism as a *mode* in writing. She characterizes it as a disruptive use of languages – as found in James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and Louis Zukofsky – that might at times result in something close to funniness (i.e., some passages in *Finnegan's Wake*) or can be totally serious, but whose main point is not a denial of sense, rather a different and more authentic way to express profound sense, without the filtering effect of logic and conventional discourse.

With *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen* (1996) Gabriele Schwab implicitly responds to Rieke's points. In the chapter titled "Nonsense and Metacommunication" Schwab puts things in perspective by stressing which are the similarities that ideally link Victorian nonsense to modern literary movements:

The Victorian genre of nonsense literature [...] emerges at the beginning of a far-reaching break with the mimetic tradition. Writers begin to free the materiality of language from meaning and reference. [...] Surprisingly enough, Carroll's break with the mimetic tradition anticipated many new literary techniques developed later during the proliferation of multiple forms of experimental literature in the twentieth century – ranging from Surrealism, Dada, High Modernism (especially James Joyce and Gertrude Stein) to the manifold simulacra of post-modernism.  
(1996: 49)

The most striking similarity between nonsense's and modern literary movements' way of writing is that in both genres

free from the constraints of linguistic codes or a mimetic reality principle, the narrated events dispense with the familiar relationship between cause and effect as well as time and space. Surprising – yet smooth – metonymic transitions govern a set of narrative sequences in which actions or



dialogues are constantly disrupted, while seemingly unmotivated shifts are taken for granted.  
(1996: 52)

Still the claim (implicit in Rieke 1992) that the lack of mimesis is enough to group literary nonsense with modernism is proved to be somehow weak. In fact, if for modernism (and surrealism, too) the abandonment of the filter of logic and linguistic convention is a way to present internal worlds, psychological states, deeper meanings (i.e., it implies symbolic interpretations), nonsense is completely non-symbolic, “rather than referring to imaginary objects and worlds, this language refers to linguistic and mental relations”: it is self-centered and self-absorbed.

Literary Nonsense uses the excess of the signifier over the signified – which has always characterized the poetic use of language – in order to disturb and to recreate the relation between words and worlds and *to fold language back upon itself*. [...] It unsettles mental habits formed by rhetorical conventions and thus induces the pleasures of both a temporary relief from the boundaries of internalized rules and an increased flexibility of mind.  
(1996: 49-50, emphasis added).

The “temporary relief” mentioned by Schwab is what has oftentimes been mistaken for the humorous effect of nonsense: “nonmimetic if not antimimetic relationship between words and words” (1996: 50), which delights “our mimetic mental habits” (ibidem), can, in his opinion, be perceived as funny.

After stressing the many tensions around which nonsense stories seem to be organized (Dream vs. Reality, Logic vs. Literality vs. Convention, Common Sense vs. No Common Sense, etc.), Schwab concludes by maintaining that nonsense is essentially a formal-verbal phenomenon, directly depending on its “linguistic ambiguity” (1996: 57).

For nonsense “the word is an empty literal surface, a mere container of meaning that resembles a ‘thing’ only in the sense of its own reification” (1996: 61), and this is the



main difference between nonsense literature and modernism. In fact, talking about the specific case of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Schwab closes his study by claiming that "Carroll's nonsense may also be read as an anticipatory parody of postmodernism and its enchantment with simulacra and effects produced at the surface of language" (1996: 70).

### **II.C. Analysis of Nonsense Texts.**

Summarizing the most relevant points stressed by the critics studying nonsense as a literary genre, the main features of this way of writing are:

- its essential ambiguity, the unresolved tension that underlies the stories
- its being a formal phenomenon
- its problematic connection to humor.

#### **II.C.1. Nonsense: Surface vs. Core Narrative.**

The complex nature of these texts is easily explained according to the theory presented in this work (I.B.), by distinguishing the two levels of narrative. Nonsense texts are characterized as follows:

- At the level of the *core narrative*: There seems to be a tension between several elements (scripts) that allows a certain dynamic to the stories. Nonetheless this tension is not a *meaningful* one, that is, the dynamic between the scripts does not produce or is not responsible for a linear narrative progression (i.e. the development from one stage to the following due to cause-effect mechanisms), but rather for simple sequences of detached micro narratives, series of detached events. The tension of the scripts may produce complications and incongruities that are neither positively





nor negatively resolved by the end of the text (as opposed to traditional comedies, romances, fairy tales, on the one hand, and tragedies on the other).

- At the level of the *surface narrative*:
- 1) the texts are formally organized according to the basic three stages that make a plot according to the Aristotelian definition (i.e. beginning, complication, resolution); the actual lack of an reasonable progression of the stories (that made the complication-stage depending on the beginning-stage, and the resolution-stage depending on the complication-stage) adds a parodic-metafictional undertone to the text<sup>37</sup>;
- 2) language is very much important – not only as a carrier of specific meanings, but as an *event* in itself, because of its sound, its rhythm, its spelling, its length, its shape, the level of allusiveness, etc.

### **II.C.2. Humor in Nonsense Texts.**

According to the theory presented above (I.B.) when dealing with the definition of humorous texts, at this point it becomes easy to distinguish nonsense from a humorous text *tout court*. In nonsense, humor is:

- *non-salient – non-central*: there is no core opposition, just a (vague) tension of elements from which all incongruity depends.

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<sup>37</sup> Nonsense texts, even if close, cannot be mistaken for parodies or metafictional texts: they both expose the arbitrariness of specific formal conventions about the organization a text, but they do it differently. In parody and especially in metafiction the exposure of the conventions is meant to ridicule a specific genre, and it is brought about by means of caricature and unnecessary over-exaggeration of specific formal features. In nonsense the exposure of the convention is simply a side-effect: it is the lack of a coherent story displaying over (and covering) the conventional formal and structural features of a genre that makes these conventions stand out as if they were foregrounded. As noted by Cammaerts, parody “is to literature what caricature is to art [...] therefore, parody has very little in common with nonsense, and should be considered as a form of satire” (1925: 10-11). In nonsense the mocking-satirizing intent is not there. The nonsense



- either *dominant* and *non-dominant*: instances of humor – i.e., superficial or local script oppositions - may or may not occupy privileged points; 1) when they do (Carroll, Lear), the prefiguration is that of a humorous text; 2) when they don't, the prefiguration is that of a serious text (Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*, Edward Gorey). Both prefigurations will be violated due to a final lack of resolution: the stories present too many unresolved incongruities to be either serious or humorous texts. It is, therefore, the peculiar incongruity of the core narrative - the incongruity derived from the obvious *gap* between a *well organized form* and a *little content* - that distinguishes nonsense texts either from serious ones and from what defined above as *superficially humorous texts* (both characterized by a coherent core narrative).

Secondly, what characterizes nonsense is the peculiar linguistic nature of the instances of humor, which for the main part are play on words, puns, portmanteau words, etc.

### **II.C.3. Play with Form: The Case of Lear's Short Stories**

To properly understand the peculiar narratological nature of nonsense texts, it would be useful to consider Propp's (1928) and Frye's (1957; 1970) analysis of fairy tales and myths. Synthesizing their study, the main elements of a *prototypical* fantastic adventure are the *hero*, who is always good and (usually) only does good things; the *antihero*, who is always bad and only does bad things; and the partition of the story into three main stages: the quest of the hero to rescue someone or to restore order (*agon* or conflict); the crucial struggle with villains representing Evil (*pathos* or death struggle); exaltation of

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author simply respects the basic structure, the narrative patterns, and the main features (the form) implied



the hero (*anagnorisis* or discovery).<sup>38</sup> These three stages, which (not coincidentally) parallel the three steps in an Aristotelian syllogisms<sup>39</sup>, represent the necessary and indispensable steps to *prove a point*, to *make sense*.

To see how a nonsense story would work we will discuss the case of two Lear's short stories: "The Story of the four Little Children Who Went Round the World" and "The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple".

### ***II.C.3.a. "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World."***

This is the account of the extravagant adventures of a group of four children, Violet, Slingsby, Guy, and Lionel, accompanied by a small Cat – whose task was "to steer and look after the boat" (1871/1951: 91) - and by "an elderly Quangle-Wangle, who had to cook dinner and make tea" (*ibidem*). One day "they all thought they should like to see the world" (*ibidem*), so, without hesitation, "they bought a large boat to sail quite round the world by sea, and then they were to come back on the other side by land" (*ibidem*). Their first stop was on a desert island "made of water quite surrounded by earth [...] full of veal-cutlets and chocolate-drops" (1871/1951: 93). Given that there was no one there to talk to or to ask permission from "they loaded the boat with two thousand veal-cutlets and a million of chocolate drops" (*ibidem*), which "afforded them sustenance [*sic*] for more than a month" (*ibidem*).

Then the four children and their party came to a shore "where there were no less than sixty-five great red parrots with blue tails" (*ibidem*) asleep on a rail. After the Cat

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by a genre but *plays with the rest* (the content).

<sup>38</sup> Frye 1957: 187.

<sup>39</sup> Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis.



and the Quangle-Wangle bit off the tail-feathers of all the parrots, Violet “reproved them both severely” (1871/1951: 94), but she kept the beautiful feathers to embellish her bonnet.

Then, they arrived on an island “covered with immense Orange-trees of a vast size, and quite full of fruit” (ibidem), but when they landed for gathering some fruit, a strong wind made all the oranges fall from the trees, forcing the children to run for their life back to the boat.

After an unsuccessful stop on an island where a “countless multitude of white Mice” (1871/1951: 97) didn’t let the children have any of their custard pudding, the party arrived on the island of the friendly Blue-Bottle Flies, where they finally managed to make some tea by placing “some pebbles in the hot water [while] the Quangle-Wangle played some tunes over it on an Accordion” (1871/1951: 99). The children and the Blue-Bottle Flies became friends, which made the departure of the young heroes a sad moment for everybody. After that, they came on a shore where Violet made mittens for “a large number of Crabs and Crawfish” (1871/1951: 101), before arriving on the island of the Co-operative Cauliflower. Here nothing at all happened:

While the whole party from the boat was gazing at him [the Co-operative Cauliflower] with mingled affection and disgust, he suddenly arose, and in a somewhat plumbdomphious manner hurried off towards the setting sun, - his steps supported by two superincumbent confidential cucumbers, and a large number of Waterwagtails proceeding in advance of him by three-and-three in a row - till he finally disappeared on the brink of the western sky in a crystal cloud of sudorific sand. So remarkable a sight of course impressed the Four Children very deeply; and they returned immediately to their boat with a strong sense of undeveloped asthma and a great appetite.  
(1871/1951: 103)





While sailing, their boat was upset by an enormous pumpkin thrown by a little boy in knickerbockers, but they managed to turn the boat over, after which the Quangle-Wangle threw the pumpkin back to the little boy, who “being quite full of Lucifer-matches” (ibidem), exploded.

Then, while the children were collecting Mulberry Jam on the island of the Yellow-nosed Apes, their boat got destroyed by a big fish “into fifty-five-thousand-million-hundred-billion bits” (1871/1951: 104) so that it was impossible for them to sail back home.

“Fortunately there happened to pass by at the moment, an elderly Rhinoceros” (1871/1951: 105), whose back “the whole party seized and managed to get home” (ibidem).

Thus, in less than eighteen weeks, they all arrived safely at home, where they were received by their admiring relatives with joy tempered with contempt; and where they finally resolved to carry out the rest of their travelling plans at some more favourable opportunity.

As for the Rhinoceros, in token of their grateful adherence, they had killed and stuffed directly, and then set him up outside the door of their father’s house as a Diaphanous Doorscraper.  
(1871/1951: 106)

### ***II.C.3.b. “The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple.”***

This is the story of seven families belonging to seven different animal species. Each family was composed of the two parents and seven children.

“One day all the Seven Fathers and the seven mothers of the Seven Families agreed that they would send their children out to see the world [...] so they called them altogether, and gave them each eight shillings and some good advice” (1971/1951: 110).



“If [...] you find a Cherry, do not fight about who should have it” (1871/1951: 111), said the old Parrots to their children.

“If you find a Frog, divide it carefully into seven bits” (ibidem), said the old Storks.

“Do not touch a Plum-pudding Flea” (ibidem), said the old Geese.

“If you find a Mouse, tear him up into seven slices” (ibidem), said the old Owls.

“Have a care that you eat your lettuces [...] not greedily but calmly” (ibidem), said the old Guinea Pigs.

“Be particularly careful not to meddle with a Clangel-Wangel” (ibidem), said the old Cats.

“Above all things avoid eating a blue Boss-woss” (ibidem), said the old Fishes.

“So all the Children of each Family thanked their parents, and making in all forty-nine polite bows, they went into the wide world” (ibidem).

But in the course of their adventures, by accident or mistake, they forget to apply those pieces of advice. And because of that they all die. Emblematic is the case of the seven little guinea pigs. When they see the Lettuce, overexcited they all exclaimed:

‘Lettuce! O Lettuce!  
 ‘Let us, O let us,  
 ‘O Lettuce leaves,  
 ‘O let us leave this tree and eat  
 ‘Lettuce, O let us, Lettuce leaves!’

And instantly the Seven young Guines Pigs rushed with such extreme force against the Lettuce-plant, and hit their heads so vividly against its stalk, that the concussion brought on directly an incipient transitional inflammation of their noses, which grew worse and worse and worse till it incidentally killed them all Seven.  
 (1871/1951: 116)

After the death of the little animals, Frogs, Plum-pudding Fleas, Mice, Clangel-Wangels and Blue boss Wosses met together to celebrate their good fortune.



The parents of the unlucky animals, instead, hearing the news about their children's death, decide to commit suicide.

They ate a light supper of brown bread and Jerusalem Artichokes, and took an affecting and formal leave of whole of their acquaintance, which was very numerous and distinguished, and select, and responsible, and ridiculous.

[...]

And after this, they filled the bottles with the ingredients for pickling, and each couple jumped into a separate bottle, by which effort of course they all died immediately, and become thoroughly pickled in a few minutes; having previously made their wills [...] that they themselves in the Bottles should be presented to the principal museum of the city of Tosh, [...] to be placed on a marble table with silver-gilt legs, for the daily inspection and contemplation, and for the perpetual benefit of the pusillanimous public. (1871/1951: 120-121)

### ***II.C.3.c. Over-detailed Surface.***

From the few quoted passages above it is easy to see that the most striking and appealing feature of these texts is not the story in itself, but rather the way it is presented. Wit, humor, derived from *topsy-turvy* inversions or contradictory combinations of words (“the utmost delight and apathy,” “full of joy and respect, sympathy, satisfaction, and disgust”), neologisms, distortion of language, alliteration, strongly characterize both Lear's nonsense stories. As a matter of fact, “*form* and *sound* serve as a reliable guidepost for the content of nonsense” (Cohn Livingstone 1981: 137, emphasis added), and they are powerful means that allow the author to “use the touchstones of reality – physical laws as well as objects and people – and transfer them, though carefully controlled imagination, to an *impossible* world” (Cohn Livingstone 1981: 124). As seen above, Wim Tigges (1988) defines nonsense as an unresolved tension between *sense* and *its absence*, where *sense* can be defined as a set of *events* that are recognizable according



to reality models - parameters drawn from everyday life - or to literary models – parameters drawn from literary texts (see Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 124).

In these two stories, for example, *sense* (as *verisimilitude* to everyday life) is evoked by the constant search for food from the part of the characters, and at the same time it is denied (*nonsense*) by the fact that apparently all the characters can do very well without food for months. *Narrative-narratological* sense is instead implied by the way the stories are organized: they are presented as adventures, (similar to Arthurian romances and *picaresque* novels), where the heroes leave their hometown, go out in the world, and finally return back home with a fuller knowledge of the world. This is openly implied by the very words used at the beginning of both stories, where the heroes leave in order “to see the world.” But, whereas in prototypical adventures the phrase ‘to see the world’ would be simply an idiom meaning ‘to know about the world’ or ‘to understand the world,’ in the case of Lear’s stories it couldn’t be more literal. The experience of the world is only an *visual* one: they go, they only *see*, but they don’t seem to learn anything from what they see, neither the seven families, which die in the course of the story, nor the four children, who arrive home with the intention of leaving again soon, and the first thing that they do is to kill one of their party, the friendly Rhinoceros that took them back home. Not a sensible thing to do, indeed.

#### ***II.C.3.d. Tragedy?***

Both the stories presented above end with an unreasonable death.

In her essay “Happy Endings? Of Course, and Also Joy” (1970), Natalie Babbit argues that the main characteristic of a book for children (we should remember that





Lear's stories are meant for children) is the happy ending: "not [...] a simple 'happily ever after,' or not the kind of contrived final sugar coating that seems tacked on primarily to spare the child any glimpse of what really would have happened had the author not been vigilant; not these, but [...] something which goes much deeper, something which turns a story ultimately toward hope rather than resignation" (1970/1973: 158).

So, if death is there, it must be reasonable, purposeful, motivated (at least as a necessary step in the 'circle of life'), to be understood and accepted by young readers. This is the reason why, as Francelia Butler in "Death in Children's Literature" (1971) points out, death in children's book is usually linked to ideas of restoration of life or resurrection, spiritual purification, or sacrificial offerings (death to save other lives). If none of these apply, "romance turns into tragedy when the death of a hero occurs" (McGillis 1996: 60).

Are Lear's stories tragedies? There seem to be all the surface structure ingredients for such a conclusion. But does the reader actually perceive these stories as tragedies (like Shakespeare's *Othello*, or *Romeo and Juliet*)? Do the characters in the stories themselves perceive what happens to them as a tragedy?

In both cases the answer will have to be negative. As a matter of fact, there is something missing in the deep structure of the stories that prevents them from being read as tragedies.

#### ***II.C.3.e. Blurred Core Narrative.***

One of the main characteristics for any narrative text is a (more or less) clear and recognizable tension between different elements. In children's book, usually, this tension



boils down to the tension between Good and Evil. This is what child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim claims, too: the polarization between these two extremes is essential in tales for very young readers, mainly because they are unable to see and understand gray and undefined areas.

But in Edward Lear's stories – even if shaped and presented as prototypical stories for children (i.e., with an *expected* progression from an inferior stage to a superior one) - there's no such tension. Good and Evil, if they can be found somewhere in the core narrative, are not in a relation of *meaningful* tension (i.e., a tension capable of providing motivation for the development of the story): they are instead perfectly interchangeable, both viable way to deal with the world.

Let's consider the case of the "History of the Seven Families." At the beginning of the story the seven groups of heroes are sent in the wide world by their parents. The fact that the parents impart strict advice for the children to follow seems to imply that there is *something bad* that the young animals have to beware and keep away from. Most of the *good advise* focuses on the importance of being friendly and not to quarrel. The tension would *seem* clear at this point: Love (or positive feelings) vs. Hate (negative feelings). But 'quarreling' is the cause of only some of the deaths. The rest of the little animals die because they actually don't think about what they are doing and act irresponsibly, without necessarily quarreling. At this point, another tension *seems* to be there: adult's Wisdom vs. Children's Inexperience-Naivete. This actually would apply and explain all the tragic deaths in the story except for one: the voluntary suicide of the parents. Even if such an ending ideally *closes* the circle of deaths, it's not at all a *wise*



The basic opposition of Good and Evil, then, doesn't seem to be there at all. The ending proves it without any doubt: the supposed heroes of the story, the four children, with no reason at all kill their *helper* (Propp 1928: 79), the friendly Rhinoceros, and turn him into a "Diaphanous Doorscraper."

### ***II.C.3.f. Conclusion.***

Many have been the interpretations of the peculiar form of nonsense that we encounter in Lear's works. On a linguistic level Susan Stewart describes it as a decontextualized use of everyday language. For Roderick McGillis nonsense grows from a misuse of a *conceptual language*<sup>40</sup> where a *literature language*<sup>41</sup> should be used. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, would identify these kinds of text as 'anatomies', because they are "not primarily concerned with the exploits of heroes, but [which rely] on the free play of intellectual fancy and the kind of humorous observation that produces caricature" (1957: 309).

Other readings have seen in Lear's work what Mikhail Bakhtin (in his study on Rabelais) defines as 'carneval', which in medieval times "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (1984: 10). Along the same lines, John Rieder sees Lear's work as a way "to expose the arbitrariness or artificiality of convention" (1998: 51), or even to celebrate "eccentrics' freedom" as opposed to an "intolerant social normality" (Rieder 1998: 52).

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<sup>40</sup> "The language of science [according to which] if we follow the proper path of rational discourse, the answers to all problems lie before us" (1996: 72).



All of these are perfectly legitimate readings. But on a purely narratological level nonsense is a verbally playful displaying of strange events on the surface narrative – events which are intended and organized as if they were logically connected (i.e., *agon*, *pathos*, *anagnorisis*) but which lack any logic or consequentiality due to the lack of a meaningful tension (or *motivation*, in Propp’s words) at the level of the core narrative. As a matter of fact, if there were a meaningful tension or an opposition between two different scripts, there should also be (or at least, it could be inferred) a hierarchical relationship between them, where one necessarily has to be (morally, socially, etc.) *preferable* over the other (i.e. Love over Hate, Good over Evil, Life over Death, etc.). This way the story would have a recognizable direction as how to develop; it would have a sense; it would proceed (progressing from an inferior stage to a superior one). Not existing any clear and meaningful tension nor opposition, nor hierarchical organization between any script, the story cannot have a direction, a proper sense: it moves randomly up to the point where - *chronologically* more than *logically* - it just stops, rather than being properly concluded.

#### **II.C.4. Parodic and Metafictional Aspects.**

As seen in the case of Lear’s stories, in nonsense texts it is easy to recognize the *heroes* the *anti-heroes*, and the *three stages*, but these turn out to be simply *empty* narratological categories. This can be seen in Alice's adventures. In fact, by the end of the story we understand that there is no difference between the first and the third stage: being just a dream, *the beginning* and *the ending* are exactly the same situation; therefore, there is no

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<sup>41</sup> “Most metaphoric [...] controlled not by laws, regulations, tables, or standards verifiable truthfulness, but





*improvement*. Secondly, no matter how hard she tries, Alice, the hero of the story, is not always *good*: many times she scares, hurts, and offends Wonderland creatures, either on purpose or unconsciously. Finally, what seems to be the *point* of the whole story (the reaching of the 'beautiful garden' in *Wonderland*, or of the eighth square in *Through the Looking-Glass*) does not coincide, nor even imply, a possible happy ending. What seemed to be the *goals* of Alice's adventures turn out to be simply further tasks which the child has to deal with.

Nonetheless, something in these texts prevents us from dismissing them as meaningless, senseless, absurd, or *void*. Curiously enough, in fact, these kinds of texts present many of the features listed by Susan Stewart as defining a commonsense discourse (as opposed to a nonsense discourse!):

This page is 'common sense' discourse. Complete sentences, paragraphing, margins, footnotes, titles, the author's true name - all say 'I really mean this, this counts' as do ideas presented as if they were contingent upon one another and quotations from the past that are 'brought to bear' upon the text. Such writing becomes concerned with creating a plausible context within which the discourse can make sense to the readers.  
(1978: 7)

It is this *closeness* to perfect sense that makes nonsense what it is. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it,

there is something paradoxical in [this kind of] text: it appears to lack meaning (partly or utterly) and yet, somehow, it always means. Even if the reader fails to understand *what* it means, he is certain that the text means to mean.  
(1985: 107)

In nonsense texts, sensible expectations are implied by the literary form (hero, three stages, etc.) in which they are written; nonetheless there is no resolution, no getting



to the point, even though the possibility of a *reasonable* conclusion is there. The premises for *sense* are given, without them leading anywhere. The *impression* of sense is there, without any specific sense being really there. The author simply doesn't seem to be interested in pursuing a specific and reasonable narrative line, especially not what seems to be the main narrative line.

This is what Susan Stewart intends when she defines “nonsense as a *mistake-on-purpose*” (1978: 206), and this is what Tigges implies when he defines nonsense as an “unresolved tension”: on the one hand, the *shape* of a usually sense text guarantees a certain internal coherence and makes the reader believe in and expect some kind of *achievement*; on the other hand, even when the reader finds that there's no resolution present, still too many *sensible* elements in the surface narrative (i.e., a *possible* hero, three *recognizable* stages, etc.) prevent the text from being dismissed as merely meaningless.

At this point it becomes necessary to specify that the respect for the main formal structures of a codified literary genre combined with the *absurdity* or the lack of narrative coherence is not a sufficient condition to make a nonsense text. These are the main features of literary modes like metafiction or absurdism and surrealism, which are only close to nonsense, but not to be mistaken for nonsense itself.

As seen above, nonsense's main focus is form. Nonsense is a play with form either intended as a *literary genre* (as seen so far) or as *language*. This linguistic play turns a metafictional or an (otherwise) absurd text into a nonsense one.



### II.C.5. Language Game

In this section, we will analyze *linguistic nonsense* according to the categories listed in Baier's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) as presented and explained by Marnie Parsons and Alison Rieke.

Linguistic nonsense can be divided into six categories: "pure gibberish," "vocabulary nonsense," "syntax nonsense," "category mistake," "semantic nonsense" and "obvious falsehood."

Given the postulate that nonsense should *give an impression of a possible sense*, two of these categories clearly do not belong to the genre. "Pure gibberish," which Parsons defines as "[neither] familiar syntax, nor familiar vocabulary" (1992: 46), is a contradiction of the very idea of nonsense. As Rieke points out, "language which is totally meaningless is rare, or even non existent, in this discussion [because] literary nonsense almost never reduces sensible language to gibberish" (1992: 8). The second category excluded from literary nonsense is "syntax nonsense," under which Rieke groups all "utterances constructed from strings of actual/familiar words lacking [...] the syntactic structure of the paradigm of sense" (1992: 7). This violation of the natural order and of the codified structure of language prevents any possible impression of meaning: sentences like 'jumps digestible indicators the under' (in Parsons 1994: 45) are empty of any possible sense.

The other four categories perfectly explain the peculiar ways in which language works, combines, or reacts in a nonsense text.

1) The first category is "vocabulary nonsense." Rieke lists as part of it all those "utterances which have a discernible syntax, but whose vocabulary is unfamiliar and



untranslatable into recognizable sense” (1992: 7). Dolitsky would define this category as *free morphemes* (unusual, misplaced, or made-up words) organized inside grammatically ordered patterns. Many examples of this are easily recognizable in Lear’s and Carroll’s works, as both these authors loved to play with the *mechanical* aspects of vocabulary, with the shape and the sound of words. Lear limits his play to adjectives and adverbs (combining common nouns and verbs with unsuitable or made-up adjectives and adverbs like “runcible,” “scroobious,” “plumdomphious,” “meloobious,” “ombliferous,” “borascible,” “slobaciously,” “himmeltanium,” “flumpetty” and “mumbian”), while Carroll goes even further, transforming even nouns and verbs. ‘Jabberwocky’ is a clear example of this:

‘Twas *brilling* and the *slithy toves*  
 did *gyre* and *gimble* in the *wabe*  
 All *mimsy* were the *borogoves*,  
 and the *mome raths outgrabe*.  
 ‘Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
 The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
 Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
 The *frumious* Bandersnatch!’  
 He took his *vorpal* sword in hand:  
 Long time the *manxome* foe he sought –  
 So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
 And stood awhile in thought.  
 And, as in *uffish* thought he stood,  
 The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
 Came *whiffling* through the *tulgey* wood.  
 (Carroll 1872/1988: 140)

The impeccable syntactic structure prevents the poem from being dismissed as pure gibberish, even though very few of the words are recognizable. Lecercle, commenting on Alice’s reaction to the poem (as quoted above) adds that hers is “the best description [...] of the experience of reading nonsense. What Alice is dimly aware of is that narrative coherence somehow compensates for semantic incoherence” (1994: 22).





2) The second category of linguistic nonsense goes under the name of “category mistake.” Synthesizing Parsons’ and Rieke’s points of view, it is possible to include in this category every kind of syntactically correct sentence attaching an unsuitable predicate to a subject (and vice versa), where this *inappropriate agreement* suggests new meanings. This occurs when idioms, metaphors, figurative speech, and puns are taken literally and out of their context. Clear examples of this category are to be found in the *Alice* books. When the narrator, at the beginning of Alice’s adventures, says that his heroine cried *a pool of tears*, we find Alice *actually swimming* in a big pool made of her own tears. And when Alice asks the Looking-Glass roses why they can speak, they answer that their *bed* is so hard that they cannot possibly *sleep* on it (punning the idiom “bed of roses”). Let’s consider the following example also taken from *Alice in Wonderland*, when the little creatures, after finding their way out of the pool made of Alice’s tears, try to find a way to get dry:

At last the Mouse, who seemed to be a person of authority among them, called out, ‘Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! I’LL soon *make you dry* enough!’

They all sat down at once, in a large ring, with the Mouse in the middle. Alice kept her eyes anxiously fixed on it, for she felt sure she would catch a bad cold if she did not get dry very soon.

‘Ahem!’ said the Mouse with an important air, ‘are you all ready? *This is the driest thing I know*. Silence all round, if you please! “William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest.”’

(1865/1988: 30-31)

In this case, the telling of very *dry* stories, is indeed meant to *keep people dry*.

3) The third and largest category of linguistic nonsense is “semantic nonsense.” A broad definition of this category would be very similar to the definition given above of



*everyday nonsense*: we can consider as part of semantic nonsense every kind of utterance or action (inside a literary text) performed out of its expected context. The doubts expressed at the beginning of this paper about such a definition as being appropriate for literary nonsense find here their justification: such a definition in fact explains just one single category of linguistic nonsense and is completely inadequate as a definition of nonsense as genre.

This category is far too broad to be clearly and exhaustively defined. It would thus be useful to further divide it into six sub-categories representing different instances of “semantic nonsense,” such as “explicitation of the implicit,”<sup>42</sup> “non sequitur,” “false assumption,” “false logic,” “decontextualized idioms” (i.e., abstract logic), and “self-denying discourse.”

- 3.a “Explicitation of the implicit” is the actualization of what would be usually (and reasonably) left unsaid in a *sensible* text. When Lear, in the introductory poem of his *Book of Nonsense*, introduces himself saying that “he has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers, / leastways if you reckon two thumbs” (1846/1951: vii), he is giving obvious (and useless) information. When, in the “History of the Seven Families”, he says that

[the cats] all gradually died of fatigue and of exhaustion, *and never afterwards recovered* [...] and if ever you happen to go to Gramble Bamble, and visit the museum in the city of Tosh, look for them, *for if you don't, you certainly will not see them* (1871/1951: 117, 121, italics added)

he is using the same linguistic device.

- 3.b. “Non sequitur” is represented by actions and utterances that are not logically linked to one another, even though they are presented as if they were. Lear uses this linguistic device in “The Story of the Four Children” when he says that



Lionel with [...] devotion and perseverance, continued to stand on one leg and whistle to them in a loud and lively manner, which diverted the whole party so extremely [that they] agreed [...] they would subscribe towards a testimonial to Lionel [...] as an earnest token of their sincere and grateful *infection*.

(1871/1951: 97, italics added)

The word “gratitude” would have been the perfect and logic conclusion to such a sentence, whereas the word (and the idea of) “infection” is completely unexpected and unrelated to the context.

Other examples of the same nonsensical device can be found in *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance during the Croquet Game Party:

[Alice said] "The game's going on rather better now."  
 "'Tis so", said the Duchess: "and the moral of that is 'oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!'"  
 [Alice replied] "Somebody said that it's done by everybody minding their own business!"  
 "Ah well! It means much the same thing" said the Duchess [...] "and the moral of that is - '*take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves*.'"

(1865/1988: 88, italics added)

Here, not only are the two statements about ‘what makes the world go round’ not at all *the same thing*, but the moral that the Duchess draws from them is completely non-consequential.

- 3.c. “False assumption” is a case where, to understand what the narrator is implying, readers have to assume something they know is not true. This happens in the “Story of the Four Children”, when Lear writes that "as they had no tea-leaves, they merely placed some pebbles in the hot water, and the Quangle Wangle played some tunes over it on an Accordion, by which *of course* tea was made directly, and of the very best quality" (1871/1951: 99, italics added) or again when he says that "the Quangle-

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<sup>42</sup> See Stewart 1978: 54.



Wangle's *right foot* was so knocked about that he had to sit with his *head* in his *slipper* for at least one week" (1871/1951: 96, italics added). To understand what Lear is saying (by using forms like 'of course' or 'so ... that') we must assume that what Violet did can be an *alternative way* to make tea, and resting the head in a slipper is a sensible cure for knocked-about feet.

A clear case of false assumption occurs in *Through the Looking-Glass*, when Humpty Dumpty, complaining that all people look alike, says to Alice:

"Now if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance - or the mouth at the top - that would be *some* help."  
 "It wouldn't look nice," Alice objected. But Humpty Dumpty only shut his eyes, and said "*Wait till you've tried.*"  
 (1872/1988: 203, italics added)

In Humpty Dumpty's words, Alice shouldn't be so sure about the bad-looking appearance of such 'human monsters' only because she hasn't seen one *yet* - understating that it is not so unlikely for Alice (and for the reader) to meet with such creatures or, even worse, to turn into one herself.

- 3.d. "False logic" is represented by reasonings that seem to make perfect sense, but the conclusions to which they necessarily lead are totally disappointing, if not at all *wrong* (i.e. true premises leading to false conclusions). Many examples of this category of linguistic nonsense are found in Carroll's book. One of the best-known occurs when Alice tries to explain to a pigeon that she is *not* a serpent. The pigeon insists:

"You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"  
 "I *have* tasted eggs, certainly", said Alice [...] "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do."  
 "[...] If they do, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say."  
 (1865/1988: 56)





(This is actually a version of the three-staged Aristotelian syllogism: Serpents eat eggs; Alice eats eggs; therefore, Alice is a serpent.)

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the White Knight explains to Alice how to save her hair:

“Have you invented a plan for keeping the hair from being blown off?”

Alice enquired.

“Not yet,” said the Knight. “But I’ve got a plan from keeping it from *falling* off.[...] First you take an upright stick [...] then you make your hair creep up it, like a fruit-tree. Now the reason hair falls off is because it hangs *down* - things never fall *upwards*, you know.”

(1872/1988: 218 -219).

The Knight’s reasoning seems to make perfect sense - to prevent things from *falling down*, just make them *stand up*. - only, it is *not* true.

- 3.e. “The decontextualized idiom” (or abstract logic) is a sub-division of “semantic nonsense” which is very closely related to “category mistake”: there, idioms taken literally would create new meaning; here, their literal interpretation remains and resolves on a purely linguistic level. An example of this occurs during the Mad Tea Party, when the March Hare offers Alice some *more* tea:

“I’ve had nothing yet”, Alice replied [...]: “so I ca’n’t [*sic*] take more.”

“You mean you ca’n’t take *less*,” said the Hatter: “it’s very easy to make *more* than nothing.”

(1865/1988: 71)

Alice, sticking to the conventional meaning of the idiom “to take some more” (which implies that *something* has already been *taken*), observes that, in that context, it has been used incorrectly. The Hatter, sticking to the literal meaning of those words, replies that its use in that very context is *perfectly* correct.

Even clearer is the episode in which Alice meets with the Caterpillar:

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar. [...]



Alice replied, rather shyly, "I - I hardly know, Sir, just at present - at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar, sternly. "Explain yourself!"

"I ca'n't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."

"I don't see," said the Caterpillar.

(1865/1988: 48 - 49)

Here, Alice, forgetting all linguistic conventions, takes the simple and straight-forward words of the Caterpillar literally and sees in requests like "who are you?" or "explain yourself!" *philosophical* undertones that are not there. On his part, the Caterpillar replies to the conventional (and rather *empty*) idiom "...you see," as if it were a proper question.

- 3.f. "Self-denying discourse" is an instance of semantic nonsense where a group of sentences falsify one another: what is stated at the beginning of a paragraph, in an attempt to be further explained, becomes more and more confused or is completely denied. A funny example of this can be found in Lear's *Nonsense Cookery*, when he explains how 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, 3 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 quires 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*.

(1871/1951: 125, italics added)



The explanation of how to make Gosky Patties ends *without* explaining how to make Gosky Patties, or without any Gosky Patty being made at all.

Another clear example of self-denying discourse occurs in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

“Now the cleverest thing [...] that I ever did, “ [the White Knight] went on after a pause, “was inventing a new pudding during the meat-course.”  
 “In time to have it cooked for the next course?” said Alice. “Well, that *was* quick work, certainly!”  
 “Well, not the *next* course, [nor] the next *day*. In fact,” he went on, holding his head down, and his voice getting lower and lower, “I don’t believe that pudding ever *was* cooked! In fact, I don’t believe that pudding ever *will* be cooked! And yet it was a very clever pudding to invent.”  
 (1872/1988: 223)

An *invention* of something that *is not* and probably *never will be*, is *no invention* at all.

Therefore, the White Knight’s statements falsify one another.

4) The fourth and last category of linguistic nonsense is represented by “obvious falsehood,” that is to say “utterances that are contrary to the fact” (Rieke 1992: 7). Lear uses this category when in the “Story of the Four Children” he writes that “after a time they saw some land at a distance, and when they came to it, they found it was an island made of water quite surrounded by earth” (1871/1951: 93). Carroll displays this device in Alice’s adventures *Through the Looking-Glass*, where, like in a mirror image, things often work *the other way around*: therefore, Alice has to run to stay where she is, to step ahead to reach behind, and to eat dry biscuits to quench her thirst<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> It could be objected that this shouldn’t be considered as a case of obvious falsehood, once the rule of ‘mirroring’ has been set. But this rule in *Through the Looking-Glass* is not systematically applied: as a matter of fact, Alice manages to reach the eighth square by moving ahead, and very few *reversals* occur towards the end of the story.



## II.C.6. Conclusions.

In the history of English literature, many writers used instances of “linguistic nonsense” (especially of “vocabulary” and “semantic nonsense”) in their works, James Joyce and Dylan Thomas<sup>44</sup> among the modern, Christopher Smart, Samuel Foote and Gerald Manley Hopkins<sup>45</sup> before them, and probably the tradition of this *linguistic playfulness* is to be traced back to the origin of English alliterative poetry. But this has nothing (or very little) to share with the tradition of literary nonsense<sup>46</sup>.

As seen above, the *linguistic play* alone is not enough to make a nonsense text. The play on both structural and linguistic level is the condition which is necessary and sufficient for nonsense. The *conventional* structure provides *recognizable* frameworks and guidelines for a sensible story, whereas the language - elsewhere the proper means to present a story and to convey sense - is misused so that the resulting story *doesn't make sense* (at least, not in a *traditional* way). It is pure play. It doesn't prove anything; it doesn't imply anything; it doesn't stand for anything else other than itself.

Nonsense is simply a swerving from what is conventional and expected. It only diverts: a diverting diversion from the fields of sense.

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<sup>44</sup> “His work is full of jarring juxtapositions that make sense uncertain and difficult. Connections are far from obvious. Thomas claimed to use ‘old tricks, new tricks, puns, portmanteau-words, paradox, allusion, paronomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonant rhymes, vowel rhymes, [and] sprung rhythm’ [...] in his writing - almost all of which are to be found in nonsense’s own bag of tricks.” (Parsons 1994: 76)

<sup>45</sup> David Sonstroem, in “Making Earnest of the Game” (1967), lists “the many stylistic (nonsensical) elements that shape the flow of Hopkins’s lines” (Parsons, 1994: 70): portmanteau words, words run together (“amansstrength,” “churlgrace”), words pulled together by hyphenating them (“dappled-with-damson,” “seraph-arrival,” “never-eldering”). Marnie Parsons also notes that distinctive elements of Hopkins’s poetic - ‘sprung rhythm’ and ‘inscape’ - add to the apparent “nonsensicality” (1994: 70) of many of his poems.

<sup>46</sup> “Thomas’s poetry is ‘charged with meaning’” (Parsons 1994: 78). “There is no denying that Hopkins is a poet of sense, of theological sense; but, like Buddhist koans, his poems use nonsense to reach that sense” (Parsons 1994: 72). The ‘excessive meaning’ that Rieke sees in Joyce’s work automatically excludes it from the field of nonsense. Samuel Foote and Christopher Smart, as implied by Anthony Burgess in





### III. ABSURD

In this chapter will be discussed the linguistic nature of absurd texts.

Section III.A. will be devoted to narrowing down and defining the field of research, providing also the literary and philosophical background of absurdism as a literary genre.

Section III.B. will present a review of some of the major theories on absurd literature.

Section III.C. is devoted to the linguistic and narratological study of the genre, first through a contrastive analysis with nonsense literature (III.C.1), then as an autonomous non-serious genre in itself (III.C.2). The last part of the last section will show how the perception of humor in absurd texts depends mainly on the incongruity which is implicit in the narrated events (III.C.3.a) rather than on the way the stories are organized and presented (III.C.3.c.).

#### III.A. Premises: Clearing the Field.

Absurd, if not common, has always been present in the literary tradition. Absurd episodes, sketches, talks, or reasonings can easily be found in narrative texts. But, as it was for pre-Victorian nonsense, such *absurdities* are usually local and parenthetical, that is, inserted in perfectly sensible contexts as peculiar means for specific purposes (like the clowning and foolery in Aristophane's New Comedy and in Shakespeare's plays) or else, they are isolated productions hardly related to literary-narrative context, like the case of semi-improvised performances by Latin *mimi* and itinerant *joculatores*, or Medieval court jesters. Until the second half of the twentieth century, this discontinuous appearance of absurd elements (or the appearance of hardly inter-connectable instances of absurd) was

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"Nonsense" (1987) are closer to absurdism than they are to nonsense. Alliterative poetry, even if strongly



too little (or too badly documented) a subject to start a theoretical treatment of the phenomenon.

The idea of absurd as a literary genre is fairly recent, dating back approximately to the end of the second World War, when, influenced by the literary *avant-garde*, a group of writers (many of whom coincidentally based in Paris but operating independently, that is, not being part of any specific literary movement) started to use logical and formal disorder, disorganization, and incongruity as means to express their inspiration and creativity.

Unlike nonsense - which was recognized as a mainly linguistic phenomenon since its heyday during the Victorian period - absurd was, and still is, usually studied as a *philosophical* expression. Given the historical, social, and literary background, and especially given the strong philosophical background in which it formed, absurdism has been almost exclusively considered as a philosophical phenomenon connected with Existentialist philosophy. Albert Camus - from whose *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) the genre received its name - introduces the term *absurd* to define the condition of men in a world of shattered beliefs, and he intends the term as an explanation of an ontological state.

Absurdist literature originates from literary movements like surrealism and modernism (rooted in the conscious abandonment of the concept of verisimilitude and of the canons or realism for a freer development of the narrative action, shaped after the sequencing of dreams), and from the experimentation of the iconoclast French *avant-garde* writers like Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Guillaume Apollinaire, George

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informed by the auditive effect (as the name itself suggests) makes perfect sense.



Vitrac, and Antonin Artaud (who gave new life and impetus to already existing literary form, namely satire, fantasy adventures, poetry, novels, and drama). The most representative absurdist writers are Eugène Ionesco, the author of such plays like *La Cantatrice Chauve* (1950), *La Leçon* (1951), *Le Salutation* (1950), and Samuel Beckett, author of novels like *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1945), and *Molloy* (1951), and also of *Waiting for Godot* (1953) – certainly one of the most popular absurd plays. These authors and texts will be dealt with in some depth in this section of the present study.

### **III.B. Survey of the Literature.**

Given the nature of this study, only those critical works dealing with the genre under a (close to) linguistic perspective, which are meaningful for narratological speculation, or which consider the genre's connection to humor will be considered, whereas the studies grounded in different fields (like philosophy or psychology) will not be included, as exceeding the scope of this work.

#### **III.B.1. The Fifties.**

One of the earliest attempts at isolating and defining absurd literature as an autonomous literary genre is by Maurice Nadeau with the article "Samuel Beckett: Humor and the Void," published in 1951.

Talking about this not yet well-defined genre, Nadeau starts by noticing the peculiar and ambiguous nature of the new way of writing: in reference to Beckett's novel *Molloy* he notes that "one person sees it as a masterpiece of humor, another as an epic of disaster [...] to some it is silence translated into words, to others no more than a literary



expositions of complexes belonging more properly to psychoanalysis” (1951/1965: 33). Still, not yet familiar with what would become the default definition of the genre as *absurd*<sup>47</sup>, but sticking to the original dictionary definition of the word (as ‘senseless’ or ‘illogical’), he argues whether Beckett’s works should be defined as absurd at all. Always about *Molloy* he wonders

an epic of the absurd? Perhaps, but one that the author has chosen to write in a language that always denies the absurd at the same time as it expresses it. To say that the world is absurd, that man is alone and in despair, automatically implies the possibility of reason, companionship, and hope. Beckett avoids this by following every affirmation with the corresponding negative, and placing them both in the realms of *humour noir*.<sup>48</sup>  
(1951/1965: 34-35)

Seeing these genre closer to humor than to absurdism *tout court*, Nadeau explains that what makes this way of writing humorous is either 1) the new and formally unconventional way of presenting a story, and 2) the a-logical reality portrayed:

We don’t know whether the events are real or imaginary; the boundaries between conscious and unconscious have all disappeared. What we are offered in the *form of an adventure whose goal recedes even as we seem to approach it*, is in fact a life in its entirety, one of which *eludes all the meshes of ordinary explanation and comprehension*.  
(1951/1965: 34, emphasis added)

In this formal and thematic incoherence Nadeau sees the roots of Beckett’s humor:

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<sup>47</sup> As of the flexibility of the definition of absurdism, we should remember that still in 1974, twenty-three years after Nadeau’s article, Jacquart in a most important study on absurd literature would refer to it as *Le Théâtre de la Dérision*.

<sup>48</sup> The laughter about human ‘tragedy’ is typical of what is defined as *black humor*. The assumption in which black humor is rooted, is similar to that of the literature of the Existentialism: the world is meaningless, absurd, ridiculous, “but rather than a stoic resignation or heroic struggle, the black humorist tries to wrest laughter from our cosmic plight” (Pratt 1993: xvii-xviii). This form of humor has no satiric nor amendatory intent. If on the one hand it “involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying [...] and bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions” (Pratt 1993: xix), on the other hand “[it] offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (ibidem). (See Huckabay 1972 in III.B.3. for a more detailed analysis on black humor).





[the author] wishes neither to prove nor to demonstrate nor to describe. He belongs rather to the class of great humorists like Lichtenberg, who spend their time making 'a knife without a blade that has the handle missing'. (1951/1965: 36)

Under a strictly formal point of view, Nadeau notices an important aspect of these works: their structural circularity. The case of *Molloy* is possibly the most striking, presenting a bi-parted story, where the second one is a slightly varied version of the first one; the protagonists of the two parts are not the same person, but they share similar destinies: they are both looking for somebody that they won't find; they both need to get a bike to get where they are supposed to; they both get lost; they both grow increasingly deformed by paralysis. This repetitiousness, in Nadeau's opinion, adds to the humorousness of the whole story. Similar correspondences are also in the tripartition of *Murphy*, another work by Beckett, and in *Waiting for Godot* (not yet written when Nadeau published his article), where the closure is the repetition of the opening scene, and the same characteristic can be found in some of Ionesco's plays as well, like in *La Cantatrice Chauve* or in *La Leçon*.

J. S. Doubrovsky (1959) starts his study on Ionesco by distinguishing his absurd theatre from fantasy and surrealism: Ionesco's work is not to represent the incoherent world of dreams or delirium, but the inconsistency of reality. Doubrovsky stresses the solid connection between Ionesco's plays and Camus' and Sartre's existentialism: "one might say that Ionesco's theatre is an ontological theatre" (1959/1973: 13). This view on life is displayed in new and unconventional ways, which make the plays humorous. Like Nadeau, Doubrovsky sees absurdism as essentially humorous, and its comicality depending on



- “comique de non-caractère” (1959/1973: 14), as opposed to the ‘comedy of characters’: “You think you have one human being in front of you and you suddenly find another. This is the kind of comic effect due to abrupt change of balance and cheated expectation which Kant stressed” (ibidem);
- “comedy of *circularity*”: because “destinies, like personalities are interchangeable” (1959/1973: 14) a story or plot in the usual sense is no more possible, since it would presuppose a linear progression. “We are faced with yet another endless vicious circle, which explains why the denouements of *The Bald Soprano* [*La Cantatrice Chauve*] and *The Lesson* [*La Leçon*] exactly repeat the beginning, with other characters who happen to be the same” (1959/1973: 15);
- “comedy of *proliferation*,” as a consequence of “the uncontrollable growth and geometrical progression of objects, the most part of human fabrication [...] and the inevitable ultimate triumph of object over subject” (1959/1973: 15);
- “comedy of language”: “the playwright will expose the duplicity and failure of words on all levels [...], the absurdity of the world under the veil of universal logos” (1959/1973: 15).

In Doubrovsky’s mind, this last aspect in Ionesco is overwhelming: through “accumulation of puns, spoonerisms, equivocations, misunderstandings and [...] other nonsensical drolleries, down to outright disintegration of articulate language into onomatopoeias, brayings and belchings [...]” (1959/1973: 17) the absurd writer shows not only that the language on which logic and reason are based (as carrier of deep thought and meaning) is a failure, but also reveals the empty conventionality in the language of everyday:



Ionesco offers a complete range of that ‘everyday talk’ [...] in which human stupidity is deposited in maxims and sayings clearly recognizable as they fit by, since they adorn our daily conversation [...] all that reveals the utter inanity of human logorrhea.  
(1959/1973: 16-17)

This vacuousness of language is the basis for a deeper, more philosophical, and tragic form of humor (tragicomedy, black humor): despite their worthlessness, words are the only means men have to understand themselves, to interrelate, and to interact with the world: “words are not simply a frame of reference or a support, but the whole reality” (ibidem), and every man is “a prisoner of his speech” (ibidem).

Beside all the possible considerations about how the absurdity of the pitiful human condition can elicit humor<sup>49</sup>, in Doubrovsky’s words what makes humor easily perceivable in absurd texts is the lack of any traditional parameter of recognizability: “the frame of the stage-world, the fetters of ordinary language are broken” (1959/1973: 17), what happens on stage and what it is said doesn’t have any logic or order, and this total casualty as a regulating principle may make the work of the absurdist sound funny.

### **III.B.2. The Sixties.**

Probably one of the most complete and influential studies for the theory of absurdism is Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961).

He tries to legitimize the theatre of the absurd inside a broad literary frame, highlighting the peculiarities and the main features of this new dramatic genre as opposed to the pre-existing and codified genre:

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<sup>49</sup> “‘Pity’ can elicit laughter. The revelation of absurdity is usually accompanied by anguish, the anguish of man’s dignity for Camus, that of man’s responsibility for Sartre. But is one goes further in the experience



Inevitably, plays written in this new convention will, when judged by [traditional] standards and criteria [...], be regarded as impertinent and outrageous impostures. If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have *no story or plot to speak of*; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often *without recognizable characters* and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have *neither a beginning nor an end*; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of *incoherent babblings*.

(1961: xvii-xviii, emphasis added)

As opposed to traditional ways of conceiving drama, incongruity (both structural and of content) is for Esslin absurdism's most striking characteristic.

If we took the most simplistic and still fallacious definition of humor, according to which unreality or the violation of the parameters of realism (the incongruity model) are among its main sources (as implied both by Nadeau and Doubrovsky), the evident gap between "preconceived notions and ready-made expectations [...] of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense" (1961: xvii) and their total lack should provide a possible reason why these texts might sound funny. Esslin, though, claims the opposite. Talking about Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Esslin notes that the world 'absurd', which originally means 'out of harmony' in a musical context and was instead used by the French author according to its more common dictionary meaning of "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (1961: xix), shouldn't be confused with its common usage (in the English-speaking world) of 'ridiculous.' In fact, in Esslin's mind, the theatre of the

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of absurdity, man becomes suddenly so unimportant that tragedy turns into a farce, and an absurd laughter bursts forth" (Doubrovsky 1959/1973: 19).





absurd shouldn't be regarded as humorous at all, because its incongruities are meant to display the "bewilderingly stratified picture" (1961: xviii) of post-World War society and psyche, where "medieval beliefs still held and [are] overlaid by eighteenth-century rationalism and mid-nineteenth-century Marxism, rocked by sudden volcanic eruptions of prehistoric fanaticisms and primitive tribal cults" (1961: xviii). Like many critics after him, Esslin sees absurd as a serious phenomenon in connection to existentialism, "as an expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus" (1961: xx), striving "to express [the] sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (1961: xix- xx). Therefore, absurdism, like parallel literary movements such as surrealism and modernism, has a symbolic meaning, as a way of mirroring modern times (and not to ridicule and satirize them).

Another important aspect stressed by Esslin is the "radical devaluation of language" (1961: xxi): "the element of language still plays an important, yet subordinate, part in this conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters" (*ibidem*).

The prominence of action (content), as incongruous and disorganized as it may be, over language and structure (form) is the main point of another study by Esslin, *Reflections. Essays on Modern Theatre* (which even if it appeared in 1969, because of its content, it is worth mentioning at this point). Paradoxically, he starts the opening section by defining authors of the absurd (Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter) as "Form-smashers" (1969: 3) because they revolt against what "was considered an eternal principle that 1) the drama must imitate nature, that 2) it was based on a plot with a beginning a middle,



and a solution, and 3) on the delineation of characters that must be consistent throughout the action” (1969: 6). With their plays, in fact, the authors of the absurd imply that “drama can no longer be an equation starting from a number of known constants and working toward a solution of the unknown factors and the certainty that there is no easy solutions” (1969: 7). Then Esslin proceeds by saying that in absurd texts the distinction between form and content is not clear-cut:

The attack on the *form* of the traditional theatre is thus revealed as an attack on its *content*. [...] One of the main contents of this new theatre is the demonstration of the difficulties of communication between human beings – the inadequacy of language in establishing contact. [...] The time has passed when an identity was believed to exist between the structure of language, the structure of logic, and the structure of reality. That is the content expressed by the formal means of the dissolution of logical discourse in the avant-garde theatre. (1969: 8).

Having renounced the function of telling a story, of exploring character, of discussing ideas, of solving problems, [absurdism] has been able to concentrate on *the presentation of what is essentially a sense of being, an intuition of the tragicomic absurdity and mystery of human existence*. As such the Theatre of the Absurd is an existentialist theatre. (1969: 9, emphasis added)

Esslin concludes this section of his work by maintaining that “the form-smashers are not form-smashers at all; rather are they explorers who penetrate into new fields and open up new vistas. Instead of destroyers of old forms, they are the bringers of new contents” (1969: 9-10). This idea (somehow adjusted from Doubrovsky’s original concept) of the content as the only structural principle for absurd texts would become one of the bases for all later critical analysis on this subject.

Esslin’s theory on the absurd can be summarized as follows:



- Absurd's main feature is its being incongruous, if compared to everyday life models, to canons of realism or literary conventions
- Absurd is essentially a serious, non-humorous, form of literature
- The sense of absurd comes directly from the incongruities in the content of a text, and this substantial incongruity affects the form and the structure of such texts.

In 1963, talking about absurd plays – referring specifically to Beckett's - Alain Robbe-Grillet maintains that incongruity and inconsequentiality are the genre's main features and that they depend exclusively on a total lack of action. Of *Waiting for Godot* he says:

They [Vladimir and Estragon, the two main characters] have to stay because they are waiting for Godot. They are there from beginning to end of the first act, and when the curtain comes down it falls, in spite of their announced departure, on the two men still waiting. There they are again in the second act, which adds nothing new; and again, in spite of the announcement of their going, they are still on stage when the curtain falls (1963/1965: 113)

“The two beings [...] do nothing, say practically nothing, have no other property but that of being there” (1963/1965: 110). Still, everything depends on this non-action, and this is where the sense of absurd arises from.

Language has a marginal position. Talking about the power of speech in conventional dramas, Robbe-Grillet says that

it is impossible to estimate the number of misunderstandings due to noble and harmonious discourse, with its power to conceal either ideas or their absence. Here [in *Waiting for Godot*] there can be no misunderstanding: both thought and eloquence are conspicuous by their absence, both figure in the text only in the form of parody, as yet one more reversal. (1963/1965: 112)



Instead of being carrier of meaning or (at least) of some sort of verbal progression, Robbe-Grillet sees language in absurd as only a further instance of inaction.

### III.B.3. The Seventies.

In 1972, Keith Huckabay (“Black Humor and Theatre of the Absurd: Ontological Insecurity Confronted”) explains the connection existing between absurd and black humor. Even if in his opinion black humor is a new literary genre (“the new form in the novel” 1972/1993: 323) rather than a peculiar kind of humor, he maintains that absurd and black humor share the same way of eliciting laughter:

They work very effectively on the lower levels of the mind, releasing hidden and repressed fears and anxieties. This is accomplished through a process of confronting the audience with its worst fears and then alleviating the fears by rendering them comic.  
(1972/1993: 324)

The humor comes from peculiar way of portraying “the dehumanization or loss of self of modern man” (1972/1993: 325).

In synthesis, the main features of an absurd (and of black humor) text are:

- its pointless gratuity, unlike Existentialist novels where “the usual result of the meeting with absurdity [...] is the development of some way to revolt and achieve ‘authentic existence’ in spite of Nothingness [with] reactions such as a ‘leap of faith’ or ‘stoic resistance’” (1972/1993: 328).
- its lack of coherence, following the “*non-sequitur*-order of the dream [but without] the free release of the unconscious as there is in surrealism” (1972/1993: 330) by displaying such ontological anxieties as the fear of *engulfment*, *implosion*, and





*petrification* (i.e., fear of losing one's own identity and of not being able to establish human relationships).

- its unreality: character and situations are too far removed from reality. "The Absurd's anti-characters are too exaggerated to allow identification" (1972/1993: 338), ending up as caricatural "*personified fears*" (ibidem).

Huckabay also explains why absurd texts may be perceived as humorous:

The hideous or pathetic characters of the Absurd are [...] comic because of the fact that [...] they are too grotesque for us to identify with them. Their situations are comic – just as the painful kicks, falls, etc. of the clown and the slapstick comedian are comic – because we are not invited to experience the pain vicariously.  
(1972/1993: 338)

According to Huckabay, what distinguishes the black humor of absurd texts from the humor in comedies is its detachedness, its un-recognizability according to literary or day-to-day life parameters: to an absurd text readers "do not respond empathetically" (1992/1993: 338), because, unlike the case of low mimetic comedies (realistic characters in recognizable settings), absurd text do not provide the readers with elements (characters, situations, etc.) with which it is possible to sympathize.

Another very important study on absurd is Emmanuel Jacquart's *Le Théâtre de la Dérision* (1974). He devotes a section to the absurdist techniques of composition, listing there the main differences between this new way of writing and the traditional one:

- whereas traditional plays display a progression-evolution deterministically fixed by the principle of causality, by logic and everyday-life experience, absurd is based on the aesthetic of casuality, of "*hasard et non sequitur*"<sup>50</sup> (1974: 153);

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<sup>50</sup> Random chance and non-sequitur.



- whereas in traditional plays everything tends to converge and harmonize, in absurd everything seems to juxtapose, to fragmentize, and contradict;
- whereas the Aristotelian tripartition can be seen as a structural rule for all traditional plays, each absurd play has its own peculiar structure.

In direct disagreement with Robbe-Grillet, Jacquart argues that absurd is not characterized by total inaction. Even if the action is just “une série de vignettes juxtaposées, en apparence sans lien, séparées par des silences appuyés”<sup>51</sup> (1974: 152), even if “les personnages disent ce qui leur passe par la tête, chantent et se racontent des histoires [et] la pièce ne semble être qu’une conversation à bâtons rompus”<sup>52</sup> (ibidem), even if “le suspense ne croît pas, l’évolution des personnages et des situations n’est pas motivée”<sup>53</sup> (1974: 160), still there is a sort of progression, which does not depend on a rational principle:

Toutes [les] énigmes [...] qui se posent à différents moments de la pièce, se font plus nombreuses et plus pressantes à mesure qu’on progresse vers la fin. [...] C’est *l’absurde qui devient l’élément moteur*. Présent dès les premières scènes, le non-sense s’amplifie peu à peu puis finit par devenir envahissant. [...] D’où une impression d’intensification et d’évolution.<sup>54</sup> (1974: 160)

This progression, this “mouvement soudain du non-sens partiel au non-sens total”<sup>55</sup> (1974: 163) occurs either by effect of acceleration (in the sequencing of events and dialogues) and accumulation (of details) – this being the case of Ionesco – or by

<sup>51</sup> A series of juxtaposed sketches, without apparent connection, separated by emphasized silences.

<sup>52</sup> The characters say whatever comes to their mind, sing, and tell stories and the play sounds just like a random conversation.

<sup>53</sup> The suspense doesn’t mount, the evolution of characters and of situations is not motivated.

<sup>54</sup> All dilemmas presented in different moments of the play become more numerous and more urgent while we progress toward the end. It is the absurd that becomes the central element. Present since the first scenes, non-sense amplifies little by little and ends up becoming overwhelming. Hence the impression of intensification and of evolution.

<sup>55</sup> Sudden movement from partial to total nonsense.



“ralentissement et même [...] enlisement de l’action”<sup>56</sup> (1974: 175) as in the case of Beckett.

Jacquart then devotes a section to the “architectural elements” typical of absurd drama. In his opinion, the most important formal elements in absurd are 1) the cyclic structure and 2) its “counterpoints” (contradictions).

- 1) By “structure cyclique” Jacquart intends all the repetitions that mark the plot, from the circular endings that reproduce with very few variations the initial situation (*La Cantatrice Chauve, La Leçon, Waiting for Godot*), to the local repetitions where “portions de dialogue sont reprises”<sup>57</sup> (1974: 178) either identically or with few variations (like *liet-motifs* or musical refrains in songs) as one of the few elements of coherence to mark an otherwise completely incoherent progression. Jacquart doesn’t see this as a purely structural device, devoid of symbolic meaning: “le retour cyclique n’est pas un simple élément architectural placé hors du champ de la signification [...] sa raison d’être, c’est de *signifier*: l’existence n’est qu’un éternel retour absurde et sans solution”<sup>58</sup> (1974: 178).
- 2) As of “counterpoints,” the most foregrounded contradictions in absurd writing are the ones between “geste et [...] parole”<sup>59</sup> (1974: 180) or “dénotation et [...] connotation” (ibidem, i.e. between the signification of one utterance and an unsuitable intonation with which it is delivered), and the one about tragic and comic aspects.

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<sup>56</sup> The slowing down and even the bogging of the action.

<sup>57</sup> Portions of dialogue are repeated.

<sup>58</sup> The cyclic return is not a simple architectural element employed outside the field of signification; its *raison d’être* is to *signify*: the existence itself isn’t but an absurd returning without resolution.

<sup>59</sup> Gesture and word.



Jacquart explains how this last opposition (typical also to black humor) is brought about. The characters in absurd plays are

sans défense, esseulés, inadaptés, accablés par un sort contre lequel ils ne peuvent rien: la condition humaine. Cette structure essentiellement tragique se double d'autre part d'une veine comique: [1] plaisanteries grossières, [2] attitudes clownesques, [3] gags de toutes sortes [...] de *chansons*, d'*anecdotes*, de *poèmes loufoques*, et [...] de passages mimés.<sup>60</sup>  
(1974: 182-183)

Jacquart closes his study with a section devoted to all linguistic devices used in absurd texts:

- "l'opposition pure" (i.e., pure opposition, 1974: 210)
- "la stichomythie" (i.e., stichomothy, "un type de dialogue [...] reposant à la fois sur l'antithèse et un parallélisme anaphorique, au cours duquel les personnages se répondent ligne par ligne"<sup>61</sup>, 1974: 212)
- "la répétition" (i.e., the repetition, 1974: 215)
- "la progression par association" (i.e., progression through free association) which can be distinguished in association of sounds, of concepts, of objects belonging to different levels of discourse (i.e. "concret – abstrait"<sup>62</sup> "particulier à universel"<sup>63</sup>, "sérieux au facétieux"<sup>64</sup>, 1974: 222–223),

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<sup>60</sup> Defenseless, lonely, inapt, crushed by a destiny against which they don't have any power: this is the human condition. This structure essentially tragic is paralleled by a comic strand: [1] gross jokes; clownings, [3] gags of any kinds, songs, anecdotes, senseless poems and mimed passages.

<sup>61</sup> A type of dialogue [...] based at the same time on the antithesis and on an anaphoric parallelism, during which the characters reply to one another line by line

<sup>62</sup> Concrete vs. Abstract.

<sup>63</sup> Particular vs. Universal.

<sup>64</sup> Serious vs. Ridiculous.





- “la progerssion sérielle” (i.e., serial progression), which can be “*alphabétique, mathématique ou musical*”<sup>65</sup> (1974: 227).
- All these devices substitute the linear, logical, and consequentially organized sequencing of a discourse.

For Jacquart also, as for many critics before him, the reason for this peculiar use of language is philosophical: “l’idée sur laquelle repose la pièce est qu’il n’existe pas de communication entre les êtres, que ‘personne n’entend personne’, que toute conversation équivaut à un dialogue de sourds”<sup>66</sup> (1974: 224), and therefore language is just an aspect of everyday absurdity.

#### **III.B.4. The Eighties and Nineties.**

A clear connection between absurd and humor is noted by Topsfield (1988). She sees especially Beckett’s work as essentially humorous: “humorous toleration of the way things are has always been in the background of his gloomy view of the human condition” (1988: 1), and quoting Beckett, she distinguishes among three forms of humor: “the ethical” (“the bitter laughs at what is not good”, 1976: 46 ), “the intellectual” (“the hollow laugh [...] at that which is not true”, *ibidem*) , and finally “the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs [...] at that which is unhappy” (*ibidem*). This form of detached, a-sympathetic, or even cruel laughter at what is in itself gloomy or tragic, as we have already seen, is typical of *black humor*.

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<sup>65</sup> Musical progression, not so common, occurs when the dialogue is combined with some music, and the utterances are arranged around musical progression of notes.



Tornquist provides a list of Beckett's humor-provoking linguistic devices - "juxtaposition of intellectual and colloquial language, [...] convoluted, grotesque [writing] full of *non sequiturs*" (1988: 30-31), "punning bilingually" (1988: 34), self-denying discourses and obscenities – and concludes by maintaining that Beckett's humor is primarily non-verbal, and instances of verbal humor are just one of the many aspects of reality: "absurd jokes, like absurd tragedies, are part of the existence" (1988: 2)

Connection between absurd and humor are stressed also by Marie-Claude Hubert (1990). In her study of Ionesco, Hubert maintains that absurdist drama introduces "un rire nouveau, qui résonne sur des gouffres d'angoisse"<sup>67</sup> (1990: 227). Talking specifically of Ionesco, she sees his *vis comica* as coming from the combination of 'fantastic' elements (and by 'fantastic', Hubert simply means 'detached from reality', 'unrealistic': "le recours au fantastique vint [...] rendre sensible l'opacité d'un monde que nous ne percevons que diffracté par nos sens, fallacieux"<sup>68</sup> 1990: 228), with a detached-ironic way of telling presenting the stories (through an "oeil extérieur"<sup>69</sup> 1990: 228) insisting "sur le burlesque, soulignant les traits caricaturaux des personnages"<sup>70</sup> (1990: 229).

Studying the specific case of *La Cantatrice Chauve* - which in Hubert's opinion is meant as a direct parody of the conventions of the "théâtre du boulevard" (amusing pièces involving witty couples, bourgeois settings, etc.) – she notes that "toute intrigue,

<sup>66</sup> The idea on which the play is based is that there is no communication between human beings, that 'no one understands nobody', and that all conversation is like a dialogue among deaf people.

<sup>67</sup> A new way of laughing which echoes on chasms of anguish.

<sup>68</sup> The recourse to the fantastic came to reveal the opaqueness of a world that we can only perceive as fallacious, and fragmented by our senses.

<sup>69</sup> External eye (in the meaning of external perspective, or external point of view).

<sup>70</sup> [Focusing] On the burlesque, stressing the caricatural features of the characters.



toute action particulière est dénuée d'intérêt"<sup>71</sup> (in 1990: 58), just "une série de discussion sans objet, qui dégénèrent en dispute générale [...] à coups de mots, car ils ne parviennent à s'accorder ni sur le langage ni sur le sens que l'on peut attribuer aux événements de la réalité"<sup>72</sup> (1990: 58)

Hubert concludes by seeing the force and the peculiarity of this new way of humor in its paradoxical seriousness: "la force de ce comique déroutant, c'est qu'il est chargé de questions métaphysiques, rôle qui n'était dévolu antérieurement qu'à la tragédie"<sup>73</sup> (1990: 229).

### III.C. Analysis of Absurd Texts.

Summarizing the different theories of absurd presented above, the main or the most foregrounded features of the genre – under a linguistic and narratological viewpoint - are:

- its incongruity, ambiguity, lack of conventional action
- its being primarily a non verbal phenomenon
- its problematic connection with humor

As seen in the previous section (II.C.1. and II.C.3, especially in II.C.3.e.) ambiguity and incongruity were among the main feature of nonsense as well. In the following section we shall present the distinction between the two different genres.

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<sup>71</sup> Every intrigue, every specific action is devoided of any interest.

<sup>72</sup> A series of discussion without object, which turn into general dispute by dint of words, because they [the characters] cannot manage to agree about the language nor about the possible meaning to apply to the events of the reality.

<sup>73</sup> The strength of this disorienting comicality is its being loaded with metaphysical questions – a role which previously was only restricted to tragedy.



### III.C.1. Nonsense and Absurd.

The distinction between these two ideas is not intuitively clear, not in day-to-day speech, where “‘absurd’ and ‘nonsensical’ are often used as synonyms”<sup>74</sup> (Tigges 1988: 125-126), and not in narratological terms, where the two genres have often been considered as a blurry and undefined unicum or have been studied as interrelated literary phenomena.

Wells (1914), for instance, sees the essence of nonsense in the use of “words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas” (1914: xxi). Cammaerts (1925) writes that nonsense “invariably brings with it a touch of absurdity” (1925: 8). Davidson (1938) considers Lear’s poetry as “the ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ of Romanticism” (1938: 200, emphasis added), and claims that “Lear’s writing is intended to be absurd” (*ibidem*). Hildebrandt (1962) considers “absurd conclusions” (1962: 26) as one of the characteristic features of nonsense. Haight (1971) also considers absurdity as essential to nonsense writings, and his broad definition of nonsense literature includes such authors like Carroll, Lear, Borges, Beckett, Joyce, Ionesco, Rabelais and Aristophanes (see 1971: 247). Similar connections are made by Byrom (1977), who sees Lear and Carroll as “the spiritual father of a movement in European culture, which embraces Flaubert, Jarry, Kafka, Ionesco, Beckett” (1977: 2), and sees Lear as a precursor of the absurdists by maintaining that he was “our first absurdist” (1977: 127). Stewart (1978) considers absurdity as one of the variety of nonsense. Baacke (1978), Hofstadter (1982), Rieke (1992) consider absurd and nonsense literature as interrelated and connected to other literary movements such as modernism and surrealism.

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<sup>74</sup> Freud (1905) himself does not seem to make a distinction between the two concepts (see 1905/1976: 130, 176-177).





One of the first implicit attempts at distinguishing the two genres is to be found in Esslin (1968) when he maintains that the theatre of the absurd “tends toward a radical devaluation of language” (1968: 26) with the purpose of freeing the texts from logic and conventions and to describe a world that has lost its meaning, whereas we have already seen the extreme importance of logic and verbal conventions for nonsense. The same distinction is provided by Ede (1975) when she claims that the absurdist dramatists turned predominantly to extralinguistic means, “using language minimally and then only to reveal its inadequacies” (1975: 5), whereas in nonsense “words often exercise a creative power” (1975: 6). Tigges (1988) provides probably the clearest and more concise distinction, by saying that “in nonsense language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (1988: 128).

Sticking to the dictionary meaning of absurd as “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical,” and its common usage in the sense of ‘ridiculous’” (in Esslin 1968: 23), Tigges notes that “none of these terms is essential for nonsense, although incongruity is often adduced as such” (1988: 127), but instead the essential feature of the genre is the interplay between order (created by language) and disorder (created by reference) (see also Flescher 1969/1970: 128).

Synthesizing the main points of the theories of nonsense and of absurd, I will try here a more detailed distinction between the two genres:

1) Nonsense is a formal (linguistic and structural-metafictional) phenomenon. It *questions the logic of narrative conventions and the logic of words.*

- As a metafictional phenomenon it reveals the arbitrariness of narratological conventions: most of nonsense texts are presented as adventures, with (apparently)



recognizable *heroes*, and organized according to the three-staged model (*agon*, *pathos*, *anagnorisis*) presented by Frye (1957). But the lack of a final *synthesis* or *sensible resolution* (see the mass suicide at the end of Lear's "Story of the Seven Families", or the gratuitous murdering of the Rinhoceros at the end of the "History of the Four Little Children") reveals the three stages as empty stages, unimportant steps for the development and the conclusion of the stories.

- As a meta-linguistic phenomenon, nonsense is rooted in the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*. It displays the arbitrary relations between *signifiant* and *signifié*, semantics and pragmatics, denotation and connotation. It is an unconventional use of the language (and the plot that it presents oftentimes grows out of the multiple nuances of meaning – arising from the gap literality vs. convention - implicit in the use of words). Let's consider the following example in *Alice in Wonderland*, where the idiomatic expressions 'to beat the time' and 'to murder time' are taken literally, and they constitute the reason why time does not progress in the episode of the Mad-Tea Party:

Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."

"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's *him*.."

"I don't know what you mean," said Alice.

"Of course you don't!" the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. "I dare say you never even spoke to Time!"

"Perhaps not," Alice cautiously replied: "but I know I have to beat time when I learn music."

"Ah! that accounts for it," said the Hatter. "He won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!"

("I only wish it was," the March Hare said to itself in a whisper.)



"That would be grand, certainly," said Alice thoughtfully: "but then--I shouldn't be hungry for it, you know."

"Not at first, perhaps," said the Hatter: "but you could keep it to half-past one as long as you liked."

"Is that the way you manage?" Alice asked.

The Hatter shook his head mournfully. "Not I!" he replied. "We quarrelled last March - just before he went mad, you know - " (pointing with his teaspoon at the March Hare) "- it was at the great concert given by the Queen of Hearts, and I had to sing

' Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at!

[...]

"Well, I'd hardly finished the first verse," said the Hatter, "when the Queen bawled out, 'He's murdering the time! Off with his head !' "

"How dreadfully savage!" exclaimed Alice.

"And ever since that," the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, "he won't do a thing I ask ! It's always six o'clock now."

A bright idea came into Alice's head. "Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it," said the Hatter with a sigh: "it's always tea-time, and we've no time to wash the things between whiles."

(Carroll 1965/1988: 71-72)

2) Absurd is mainly a non-verbal phenomenon: it hinges mainly on the content that it presents. It questions *the logic of facts, the conventions of everyday reality*. "All semblance of logical construction of the rational linking of idea with idea in an intellectually viable argument, is abandoned, and instead the irrationality of experience is transferred to the [text]" (Hincliffe 1969: 1). Instead of *creating* an unreal or abnormal reality, as nonsense does, absurd just presents or stages an *un-bounded* reality: a-social, a-moral, lacking of all purposes, a-consequential (not tied by cause-effect relations). A brief and clear example of an absurd text is the story told by one of the characters in Ionesco's play *La Cantatrice Chauve*:

Un jeune veau avait mangé trop de verre pilé. En conséquence, il fut obligé d'accoucher. Il mit au monde une vache. Cependant, comme le veau était un garçon, la vache ne pouvait pas l'appeler 'maman'. Elle ne pouvait pas lui dire 'papa' non plus, parce que le veau était trop petit. Le



veau fut donc obligé de se marier avec une personne et la mairie prit alors toutes les mesures édictées par les circonstances à la mode.<sup>75</sup>  
(Ionesco 1950/1991 32).

The impression of incongruity comes also from the fact that there is no formal-structural frame (setting-incongruity-resolution, or *agon*, *pathos*, *anagnorisis*) that helps (or pretends to help, in the specific case of nonsense) the *naturalization*<sup>76</sup> of a story.

Everything that happens is gratuitous, does not depend on what precedes and does not cause what follows, and instead of a linear progression, the reader has the impression of a continuous digression.

A further distinction between the two *genres* can be seen in their *performability*.

Nonsense, because of its very nature of play on words, is highly *unperformable* (if we exclude the only instance where the performance consists mainly of the staging of spoken - rather than acted - sketches, i.e., many scenes in the Marx Brothers' movies, see Tigges 1988). This explains the ever-predictable disappointment after almost each cinema or television version of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, where the nonsense story is necessarily made to fit cinematic-filmic requisites, oftentimes turning the original text into either a moralistic fairy tale or into a prototypical fantastic adventure very similar to the very sensible Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, depriving it of all its formal-verbal nonsensical spirit). On the other hand, absurd is eminently *performable*. As a mater of

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<sup>75</sup> A young calf had eaten too much ground glass. As a result, it was obliged to give birth. It brought forth a cow into the world. However, since the calf was male, the cow could not call him Mamma. Nor could she call him Papa, because the calf was too little. The calf was then obliged to get married and the registry office carried out all the details completely à la mode (Ionesco 1950/1958: 30).

<sup>76</sup> Culler (1975) defines as 'naturalization' the assimilation of the text to *déjà-vu* models: "to naturalize a text is to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible" (1975: 138). As Rimmon-Kenan notes "these already-natural-and-legible models have been variously called 'codes' in Barthes (1970), 'Gestalten' in Iser (1971a), 'frames of reference' in Hrushovski (1976), 'intertextual frames' in Eco (1979) and 'frames' *tout court* in Perry (1979). 'Naturalization' of a





fact, most of absurd texts are intended for the stage. As incongruous as they might be, not much gets lost when it is transferred from page to the stage.

There are then texts, like *Les Salutations* by Ionesco - a list of 97 made-up adverbs in alphabetic order intended as answers to the simple question “Et vous, comment allez-vous?” (“And you, how are you?”) - where nonsense and absurd seem to fall together and be undistinguishable the one from the other. Still, the fact that the text displays a simple *impasse* created by words, rather than an unexpected development of the story due to an *unconventional* interpretation of the words, brings the text closer to the domain of absurd literature. This is the same reason that brings Tigges to consider Samuel Foote’s “The Great Panjandrum”<sup>77</sup>, frequently referred to as an early if not the earliest nonsense poem, as a simple absurd test:

[its] the complete inconsequentiality [...] the impossibility of identifying the many characters and their relationships [do] not give us any clues as to a possible meaning of the ‘plot’. One may well call this text absurd, for the nonsensical tension between meaning and its absence is lacking, and the ‘reality’ is not primarily created by the language.  
(1988: 128)

Applying the same parameters used in section I.C.7. for the distinction between two different forms of humor, namely verbal and situational-referential, we can easily see the difference of nonsense and absurd: nonsense is mainly and eminently a verbal literary phenomenon, whereas absurd is mainly and eminently a referential-situational one.

text can be by reference either to literature models or reality models, or, to use the Formalists terms, a text can be either *artistically* or *realistically* motivated.

<sup>77</sup> To cut a cabbage-leaf / To make an apple pie; / And at the same time / A great she-bear, / coming down the street, / Pops its head into the shop. / What! No soap? / So he died, / And she very imprudently married the Barber; / And there were present / The Picinnies, / And the Joblillies, / And the Garyulies, / And the great Panjandrum himself, / With the little round button at top: / And they all fell to playing the game of catch as catch can / Till the gunpowder ran out at the heels of their boots (in Tigges 127-128).



### III.C.2. Absurd and Humor

Even though intuitively related to humor, absurd actually represents a blurred twilight zone: it is close to (or it is itself) the borderline between serious and humorous literature, where the line that separates absurd texts from either humorous and serious ones is very thin. In this section we will see that the lack of proper scripts, and as a consequence the lack of any possible tension or opposition between scripts, is the threshold that separates absurd texts from serious and humorous ones. Once that that distinction is clear, it will also be easy to understand how the impression of funniness that (as we have seen in the literary survey) depends either on the level of recognizability of (even illusionary) scripts and at the same time on their un-realistic instability (this will explain for example why texts like Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* might be perceived as funny, whereas this is not the case of texts like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*), and on the number of local instances of humor (jab lines) or local incongruities scattered through the surface narrative.

In synthesis, and according to the theory presented in I.B., humor in absurd texts is:

- *non-salient – non-central*: there is no core opposition on which the narrative (and the incongruity) depends.
- either *dominant* or *non-dominant*: local instances of humor may or may not occupy privileged points

#### III.C.2.a. Models of Coherence: Scripts.

Mieke Bal describes the functioning of a text (the relationship reader-text) as follows.

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The readers, intentionally or not, search for a logical line in [...] a text. They spend a great amount of energy in this search, and, if necessary, they introduce such a line themselves. Emotional involvement, aesthetic pleasure, suspense, and humour depends on it. No matter how absurd, tangled, or unreal a text may be, readers will tend to regard what they consider '*normal*' as a *criterion* by which they can *give meaning* to the text, even if that meaning can only be articulated in opposition to that of normality.

(Bal 1997: 176, emphasis added).

The same process is described by Perry (1979) as follows:

any reading text is a process of constructing a system of hypotheses or frames which can create maximal relevancy among the various data of the text – which can motivate their 'co-presence' in the text according to models derived from 'reality', from literary or cultural conventions, and the like.

(1979: 43)

These “‘models of coherence’ can derive either from ‘reality’ or from literature”

(Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 124). Under a semantic perspective, a model of coherence is a script, “an organized complex of information about something” (Attardo 1994: 198) that “contains information which is typical, such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities” (Attardo 1994: 200).

As seen above (I.B.), narrative texts (non-humorous as well as humorous and nonsense) are characterized by the presence of some scripts that allow the dramatic-dynamic construction of the text.

- In humorous texts we have the presence of two (or more) scripts (Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994), which are opposed and belong to different domains (Actuality vs. Non-Actuality, Normality vs. Abnormality, Possibility vs. Impossibility, or, as Raskin 1985 synthesizes the three cases, Reality vs. Unreality). Using different terms Attardo (1994) defines the oppositeness of scripts as being between “a ‘local’ logic, i.e., a distorted, playful logic, that does not hold outside of the world of the joke” (1994:



226), and a broader, general, accepted, and well-established logic, which holds outside the closed world of the humorous text. We have already seen that according to this criterion it is possible to explain the humor in Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", based on the opposition Duty vs. Murder (of the type Normal vs. Abnormal-Broad, or Broad Logic vs. Local Logic), or of Poe's "The Sphinx", centered on the core opposition Gigantic Monster vs. Small Insect (of the type Abnormal vs. Normal, or Local Logic vs. Broad Logic). In humor the scripts must be clear<sup>78</sup> and clearly distinguishable the one(s) from the other(s), to detect the opposition and for the trigger switch from the one(s) to the other(s) to take place.

- In the case of non-humorous texts, the story is instead governed by a core tension between different scripts belonging to the same domain (Actuality, Normality, Possibility, or Reality). We have considered above the case of *Romeo and Juliet* and the tension between Love and Non-Love, which is the case of most love stories, but fairly common is also the tension between Disorder and Order (or Mystery and Solution) as in *The Name of the Rose* or in many detective and mystery novels, or between Inexperience and Experience, which is the case of many adventures and fairy tales. Scripts grow to be mostly conflicting during the climax scenes (usually toward the end of the story), before being resolved either via a synthesis or via a substitution and the subsiding of one script to the other(s).

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<sup>78</sup> According to reality models, or models presented in literature: patterns of behavior (or of development of the action), characters and events that – even though not according to every day reality – can be perceived as plausible. This is the case of Poe's "The Sphinx". The mentioning of the gigantic insect-like creature immediately activates a script which involves *fear, horror, death, destruction*, etc., because in literature such creatures (as dragons) have usually been depicted in connection with these things.





### ***III.C.2.b. Lack of Core Opposition.***

One of the main features that distinguish humor from absurd, as already noted, is the unresolved incongruity that characterizes absurd narratives. And the lack of resolution, the sheer incongruity, depends on the fact that the identification (i.e., recognition, reconstruction) of scripts is not easy: absurd texts are usually so far from logic and actual or literary reality (i.e., far from codified canons of verisimilitude) that it is hard to recognize clear scripts. If a script is a “dynamic system which updates its knowledge banks whenever it encounters a bit of information it was not aware of (and which is *consistent with its prior knowledge*)” (Attardo 1999: 11, emphasis added), in absurd texts usually bits of information are *not consistent* with a prior knowledge in a script, therefore unsuitable to be included in previous scripts and usually not enough to activate new clear scripts of their own.

Let's consider the difficulty of recognizing a script in the following example, from Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, when a couple of guests arrive at the Smiths' door.

Scene II:

Mary: Mme et M. Martin, vos invités, sont à la porte [...]

Madame Smith: Ah oui. Nous les attendions.<sup>79</sup>

(Ionesco 1950/ 1991: 15)

Script activated: The Martins (husband and wife) invited for dinner at the Smiths'

Scene IV:

(*Mme et M. Martin s'assoient l'un en face de l'autre, sans se parler. Il se sourient, avec timidité.*)

Monsieur Martin [...]: Mes excuses, madame, mais il me semble, si je ne me trompe, que je vous ai déjà rencontrée quelque part.

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<sup>79</sup> Mary: Mr. And Mrs. Martin, your guests, are at the door. [...]  
Mrs. Smith: Oh, yes. We were expecting them.  
(Ionesco 1950/1958: 14)



Madame Martin: À moi aussi, monsieur, il me semble que je vous ai déjà rencontré quelque part.<sup>80</sup>  
(Ionesco 1950/ 1991: 16)

Script interrupted: The Martins (husband and wife)

Script activated: Mme Martin and M. Martin have just met, without being introduced

Incongruity: unclear if the two are related or have just met.

Monsieur Martin: Ne vous aurais-je pas déjà aperçue, madame, à Manchester, par hasard?

Madame Martin: C'est très possible. Moi, je suis originaire de la ville de Manchester!<sup>81</sup>

[...]

Monsieur Martin: [...] Nous nous sommes peut-être rencontrés rue Bromfield, chère madame.

Madame Martin: Comme c'est curieux; comme c'est bizarre! C'est bien possible, après tout!

[...]

Monsieur Martin: Je demeure au n° 19, chère madame.

Madame Martin: Comme c'est curieux, moi aussi j'habite au n° 19, cher Monsieur.<sup>82</sup>

[...]

Monsieur Martin: J'ai un petite fille, ma petite fille, elle habite avec moi, chère

madame. Elle a deux ans, elle est blonde, elle a un oeil blanc et un oeil rouge, elle est très jolie, elle s'appelle Alice, chère madame.

Madame Martin: Quel bizarre coïncidence! moi aussi j'ai une petite fille, elle a

deux ans, un oeil blanc et un oeil rouge, elle est très jolie et s'appelle aussi Alice, cher monsieur!

Monsieur Martin [...]: Comme c'est curieux et quelle coïncidence! et bizarre!

<sup>80</sup> (Mr. And Mrs. Martin sit facing each other, without speaking. They smile timidly at each other)

Mr. Martin: Excuse me, madam, but it seems to me, unless I'm mistaken, that I've met you somewhere before.

Mrs. Martin: I, too, sir. It seems to me that I've met you somewhere before.

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 15)

<sup>81</sup> Mr. Martin: Was it, by any chance, at Manchester that I caught a glimpse of you, madam?

Mrs. Martin: That is very possible. I am originally from the city of Manchester.

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 15)

<sup>82</sup> Mr. Martin: [...] Perhaps we have seen each other in Bromfield Street, my dear lady.

Mrs. Martin: How curious that is, how bizarre! It is indeed possible, after all! [...]

Mr. Martin: I reside at No. 19, my dear lady.

Mrs. Martin: How curious that is. I also reside at No. 19, my dear sir.

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 17)



C'est peut-être la même, chère madame!

Madame Martin: Comme c'est curieux! C'est bien possible, cher monsieur.

[...]

Monsieur Martin [...]: Alors, chère madame, je crois qu'il n'y a pas de doute,

nous nous sommes déjà vus et vous êtes ma propre épouse... Élisabeth, je t'ai retrouvée!<sup>83</sup>

(Ionesco 1950/1991: 16, 17, 18, 19)

Script interrupted: Madame and Monsieur Martin just met

Script re-activated: The Martins (husband and wife)

Script activated: The Martins were (somehow) separated from each other.

Incongruity: The Martins, husband and wife, (probably) were not invited (or at least they didn't arrived) together.

#### Scene V

Mary: [...] Je puis donc vous révéler un secret. Élisabeth [i.e., Mme Martin] n'est pas Élisabeth, Donald [i.e., M. Martin] n'est pas Donald. En voici la preuve: l'enfant dont parle Donald n'est pas la fille d'Élisabeth, ce n'est pas la même personne. La fillette de Donald a un oeil blanc et un autre rouge tout comme la fillette d'Élisabeth. Mais tandis que l'enfant de Donald a l'oeil blanc à droite et l'oeil rouge à gauche, l'enfant d'Élisabeth, lui, a l'oeil rouge à droite et le blanc à gauche! Ainsi tout le système d'argumentation de Donald s'écroule en se heurtant à ce dernier obstacle qui anéantit toute sa théorie. Malgré les coïncidences extraordinaires qui semblent être des preuves définitives, Donald et Élisabeth n'étant pas les parents du même enfant ne sont pas Donald et Élisabeth. [...]. Mais qui est le véritable Donald? Quelle est la véritable Élisabeth? [...] Je n'en sais rien. Ne tâchons pas de le savoir. Laissons les choses comme elles sont. [...] Mon vrai nom est Sherlock Holmes!<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Mr. Martin: I have a little girl, my little daughter, she lives with me, dear lady. She is two years old, she's blond, she has a white eye and a red eye, she is very pretty, and her name is Alice, dear lady.

Mrs. Martin: What a bizarre coincidence! I, too, have a little girl. She is two years old, has a white eye and a red eye, she is very pretty, and her name is Alice, too, dear sir!

Mr. Martin [...]: How curious it is and what a coincidence! And bizarre! Perhaps they are the same, dear lady!

Mrs. Martin: How curious it is! It is indeed possible, dear sir. [...].

Mr. Martin [...]: Then, dear lady, I believe that there can be no doubt about it, we have seen each other before and you are my own wife... Elizabeth, I have found you again!

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 18)

<sup>84</sup> Mary: [...] I can therefore let you in on a secret. Elizabeth is not Elizabeth, Donald is not Donald. And here is the proof: the child that Donald spoke of is not Elizabeth's daughter, they are not the same person. Donald's daughter has one white eye and one red eye like Elizabeth's daughter. Whereas Donald's child



(Ionesco 1950/1991: 20)

Script re-interrupted: The Martins (husband and wife)

Script re-activated: Mme Martin and M. Martin just met

Script activated: Sherlock Holmes

Incongruity: Sherlock Holmes deliberately avoids resolving the mystery.

As it is plain to see, in the example above no clear script can be activated, or after being activated, no script seems to hold for long: the one that seemed to be the main clear script – a married couple visiting acquaintances – is discarded soon after being introduced, then reactivated, then discarded again, without that the new bits of information that discard a script are enough to activate other clear scripts.

This is what causes the impression of humor in absurd texts: the incongruity depending on the instability of the scripts, that is, the continuous shifting or swinging from one blurry and badly defined microscript to another, which resembles somehow the idea of the script opposition of humor, except in absurd texts these microscripts are not opposed, but simply *different* and not mutually exclusive. In the case of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, the Martins being husband and wife or being a gentleman and a lady coincidentally meeting at the Smiths are only different scripts, not opposed. As a matter of fact, they both belong to the domain of Reality, of Possibility and Normality. The fact that the Martins do not recognize each other as legitimate husband and wife does not

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has a white right eye and a red left eye, Elizabeth's child has a red right eye and a white left eye! Thus all of Donald's system of deduction collapses when it comes up against this last obstacle which destroys his whole theory. In spite of the extraordinary coincidences which seem to be definitive proofs, Donald and Elizabeth, not being the parents of the same child, are not Donald and Elizabeth. [...] But who is the true Donald? Who is the true Elizabeth? [...] I don't know. Let's not try to know. Let's leave things as they are. [...] My real name is Sherlock Holmes.

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 19)





belong to the domain of what is Abnormal and Impossible in that, as Mary the maid claims, they might not be husband and wife at all. For the same reason it is hard to understand if their status of married couple is Actual or Non-Actual.

Under a different perspective, the impression of humor depends on the *outlandishness* of what takes place in this kind of stories. In absurd texts the *seeming* scripts are so detached from every day reality, commonsense and logic, and literary conventions that any of these ‘*models of coherence*’ is of little, if any, use in order to resolve incongruities. In other words, instead of an opposition between *common* and *broad logic* (i.e., day-to-day experience, literary convention, common sense, etc.) and a *local* one, there is only the *turbulent* coalescence and overlapping of many *local logics* that happen to be too detached the ones from the others to react in a significant way or to provide significant data so as to make the story progress. In the case of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, the script activated according to broad and day-to-day logic *the Martins (husband and wife) visiting the Smiths after being invited* is substituted by many local scripts – *the Martins have just met (no husband and wife)*, *the Martins (husband and wife) found each other after being long separated*, *the Martins are not the Martins (no husband and wife)*, etc. - which render the story hard to process.

Unlike humorous texts, in an absurd text, these incongruities do not depend on the oppositions between the domains Actual vs. Non-Actual, Normal vs. Abnormal, Possible vs. Impossible. As a matter of fact, what is Impossible, Abnormal, and Non-Actual may be defined only in relation of opposition of what is Possible, Normal, or Actual (according to reality or literary models) as a least conceivable *alternative*. In absurd texts - even if they are presented as belonging to the realistic tradition – anything seems to go,



and the incongruity does not depend on the emerging (or the unveiling) of *alternatives* belonging to different domains, but rather what happens does not represent an *alternative* altogether.

### ***III.C.2.c. Lack of Core Tension.***

If the absence of a script opposition is what distinguishes absurd for humor, absurd texts must also be distinguished from serious ones because of the absence of a real script tension at the level of the core narrative.

In absurd texts, the lack of coherent data prevents the recognition of core (complex) scripts that might govern the whole text and might justify the dynamic of the story, and this *void* is usually covered under *pretexts* at the level of the surface narrative (i.e., the *long waiting* for Godot, the *long waiting* for a mysterious bald soprano, etc.) from which everything seems to follow without necessarily being explained. Under this perspective, absurd texts are substantially *gratuitous*. The lack of a core tension empties the plots of real motivations and of actual cause-effect relations (replaced by random chain of events), and, because of that, the stories cannot have real and reasonable resolution.

A clear example of that is *La Leçon*, which, being maybe the closest to a conventional (either humorous or non-humorous) text among Ionesco's plays, is helpful to understanding the nature of this genre. It starts out as a serious text, presenting the situation of a private lesson between a student and her professor, activating the script of Private Tutoring.

Le Professeur: Bonjour, mademoiselle... C'est vous, c'est bien vous, n'est-ce pas, la nouvelle élève?



L'Élève [...]: Oui, monsieur. Bonjour, monsieur. Vous voyez, je suis venue à l'heure. Je n'ai pas voulu être en retard.

[...]

Le Professeur: [...] Vous avez eu de la peine à trouver la maison?

L'Élève: Du tout... Pas du tout. Et puis j'ai demandé. Tout le monde vous connaît ici.

[...]

La Professeur: [...] Si vous me permettez, pourriez-vous me dire, Paris, c'est le chef-lieu de... mademoiselle?

L'Élève, *cherche un instant, puis, heureuse de savoir*: Paris, c'est le chef-lieu de... la France?

Le Professeur: Mais oui, mademoiselle, bravo, mais c'est très bien, c'est parfait.<sup>85</sup>

(Ionesco 1951/1991: 47-48)

The script vacillates when we are presented with a main incongruity: the professor's lack of knowledge, in mathematics, linguistics, phonetics, and almost all the subject matters he tries to explain to his student.

Le Professeur: [...] Sept et un?

L'Élève: Huit [...]. Et parfois neuf.

Le Professeur: Magnifique. Vous êtes magnifique. [...] Pour l'addition, vous êtes magistrale.<sup>86</sup>

(Ionesco 1951/1991: 52)

Le Professeur [...]: Ainsi donc, mademoiselle, l'espagnol est bien la langue mère d'où sont nées toutes les langues néo-espagnoles, don't l'espagnol, le latin, l'italien, notre français, le portugais, le roumain, le sarde ou sardanapale, l'espagnol et le néo-espagnol – et aussi, pour certain de ses aspects, le turc lui-même plus rapproché cependant du grec, ce qui est tout à fait logique, étant donné que la Turquie est voisine de la Grèce et la Grèce plus près de la Turquie que vous et moi: ceci n'est pas qu'une

<sup>85</sup> Professor: Good morning, young lady. You... I expect that you... that you are the new pupil?

Pupil [...]: Yes, Professor. Good morning, Professor. As you see, I'm on time. I didn't want to be late. [...]

Professor: [...] Did you have any trouble finding the house?

Pupil: No... Not at all. I just asked the way. Everybody knows you around here. [...].

Professor: [...] If you'll permit me, can you tell me, Paris is the capital city of... miss?

Pupil [searching her memory for a moment, then, happily guessing]: Paris is the capital city of... France?

Professor: Yes, young lady, bravo, that's very good, that's perfect.

(1951/1958: 47)

<sup>86</sup> Professor: Seven and one?

Pupil: Eight [...]. And sometimes nine.

Professor: Magnificent. You are magnificent. [...] At addition you are a past master.

(1951/1958: 52)



illustration de plus d'une loi linguistique très importante selon laquelle géographie et philologie sont soeurs jumelles...<sup>87</sup>  
(Ionesco 1951/1991: 60)

Le Professeur: [...] Les sons remplis d'un air chaud plus léger que l'air environnant voltigeront [...]. Si vous émettez plusieurs sons à une vitesse accélérée, ceux-ci s'agripperont les uns aux autres automatiquement, constituant ainsi des syllabes, des motes, à la rigueur des phrases [...] des assemblages purement irrationnels de sons, dénués de tout sens, mais justement pour cela capables de se maintenir sans danger à une altitude élevée dans les airs. Seuls tombent les mots chargés de signification, alourdis par leur sens [...].<sup>88</sup>  
(Ionesco 1951/1991: 61)

In a serious text, the professor's ineptitude would probably receive its justification in relation to something happened or to happen in the course of the story, or even it could be reasonably dismissed as a sign of the professor's disturbed mind. Or, if we took to text to be a *black novel*, it could be the result of the private tutoring being only an alibi for the professor's criminal purposes.

A humorous text, even if maintaining the incongruity to the end, would then understandingly explain or resolve the professor's ineptitude by introducing (or switching to) a new script (e.g. the professor may turn out not to be a real professor; the professor - for whatever reason - may be just pretending; the professor - for whatever reason - may teach false notions on purpose, etc.), showing that the incongruity is motivated by the

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<sup>87</sup> Professor: And now, miss, Spanish is truly the mother tongue which gave birth to all the neo-Spanish languages, of which Spanish, Latin, Italian, our own French, Portuguese, Romanian, Sardinian or Sardanapalian, Spanish and neo-Spanish – and also, in certain of its aspects Turkish which otherwise very close to Greek, which is only logical, since it is a fact that Turkey is a neighbor of Greece and Greece is even closer to Turkey than you are to me – this is only one more illustration of the very important linguistic law which states that geography and philology are twin sisters...  
(1951/1958: 61).

<sup>88</sup> Professor: This way, the sounds become filled with a warm air that is lighter than the surrounding air so that they can fly. If you utter several sounds at an accelerated speed, they will automatically cling to each other, constituting thus syllables, words, even sentences purely irrational assemblages of sounds, denuded of all sense, but for that very reason the more capable of maintaining themselves without danger at a high altitude in the air. By themselves, words charged with significance will fall, weighted down by their meaning.





we have instead seen the crucial importance of the resolution for the perception of humor, a resolution that makes the reader aware of the existence of (two) opposite scripts, which explains the nature of their temporary humorous overlap, and the way the discarding of one of the scripts for the other is brought about (Suls 1972, Lewis 1989).

Without a resolution, the reader is left with a vague impression of humor, which is not humor *per se*. Carlo Izzo defines this as “una sorta di ‘a priori’ dell’umorismo”<sup>90</sup> (1935: 213), as humor “in abstracto” (1935: 214). There are in fact in absurd texts obvious elements or details that clearly point to or stress some (even striking) incongruity, and such focus on the incongruity seems to furnish an important guideline for the prefiguration of a text as humorous. This is the case presented by Lewis (1989) of the *revised* tonsil joke, “Get dressed up, the doctor will remove us tomorrow” (instead of “get dressed up, the doctor’s taking us out tonight”): intuitively we understand that the text is not serious, and we prefigure it as humorous, but it lacks something essential to be understood as humorous: “the incongruity remains, but it cannot be figured out or resolved [...] and the result is a loss of humor” (1989: 10). The same happens in the already mentioned scenes of *La Cantatrice Chauve* where, instead of an expected (and possibly humorous) explanation of the many doubts about the identity of Mr. and Mrs. Martin, the reader is presented with Mary’s claim that nobody really needs to know who the Martins really are.

As Carlo Izzo clearly puts it, this is “umorismo in potenza”<sup>91</sup> (1935: 214) rather than humor *tout court*.

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<sup>90</sup> A sort of *a priori* of humor.

<sup>91</sup> Potential humor.



But not all absurd texts are *potentially* humorous the same way. This prefiguration of humor directly depends:

- on the closeness to ‘models of coherence’
- on the instances of humor or local incongruities at the level of the surface narrative, either in privileged points, or in non-salient parts of the text.

### ***III.C.3.a. Closeness to Models of Reality.***

What seems to make an absurd text *potentially* humorous is its (even illusionary) connection to reality or literary models of coherence, that is to say, when it is possible to detect the presence of scripts. Whenever the readers are presented with sufficient information for the activation of some scripts – as unstable, vague, and ever-shifting as they might be (e.g. the visiting of acquaintances in *La Cantatrice Chauve*, the private tutoring in *La Leçon*) – they would deduce a set of sensible expectations, whose constant violation or un-fulfillment may be somehow perceived as humorous. When the information is instead insufficient for the identification of even blurry scripts (i.e., Vladimir and Estragon waiting in an unspecified place for an unspecified person in *Waiting for Godot*, Hamm and Clov talking purposelessly under a *grey light* in a *bare interior*, in *Endgame*, or Winnie's disconnected recollection of her past life, while half-buried in sand, in *Happy Days*), no sensible script can be activated nor can any expectation be deduced, limiting the possibility of a humorous prefiguration of the text.



### *III.C.3.b. Privileged Points.*

A humorous prefiguration might be enhanced by (seemingly) humorous or simply absurd points in the surface narrative (either in privileged points or in non-salient portions of the texts).

As seen above, absurd texts lack core tension and, as a consequence, lack a real narrative organization. In such texts the only easily detectable privileged points are not the rhematic ones (carrier of new and relevant bits of information), but rather the structural ones, and especially the beginning and the ending section of the texts.

1) The *beginnings* (the first line, the first paragraph, the first scene, etc.) usually function as a synopsis of what has been up to the point where the story begins, and provide useful data for what may follow. With the beginning the readers are given “more or less specific traces” (Attardo 1999: 24) for the recognition of possible scripts, and receive important suggestions about how to process and prefigure the text. If there are open incongruities or frequent jab lines, that section of the text - and possibly the rest of the text, too – would be predictably processed as a non-serious one. This is, of course, what happens for openly humorous texts. Let's briefly consider the following lines from the opening paragraph of “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”.

It was certainly a wonderful medley of people. Gorgeous peeresses chatted affably to violent Radicals, popular preachers brushed coat-tails with eminent sceptics, a perfect bevy of bishops kept following a stout prima-donna from room to room, on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians, disguised as artists, and it was said that at one time the supper-room was absolutely crammed with geniuses.  
(Wilde 1891/1994: 167)



Here, the unusual matching of the various social groups (gorgeous peeresses + violent radicals, popular preachers + eminent sceptics, bishops + prima donna, etc.), and the unsuitable (or not flattering) adjectives used to describe each group (*gorgeous* peeresses, *eminent* sceptics, *perfect* bevy of bishops, *stout* pima-donna, etc.) indicate a non-serious tone in the story, and provide guidelines for the prefiguration of the text as potentially humorous. In this case the prefiguration would find its further justifications and confirmations in the rest of the narrative, too. The same humorous prefiguration is possible for absurd texts. Let's now consider the opening scene of *La Cantatrice Chauve* where Madame Smith, talking to her husband, when both comfortably sitting in their living-room after dinner, says:

Tiens, il est 9 heures. Nous avons mangé de la soupe, du poisson, des pommes de terre au lard, de la salade anglaise. Les enfants ont bu de Peau anglaise. Nous avons bien mangé, ce soir. C'est parce que nous habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith. [...]  
 Notre petit garçon aurait bien voulu boire de la bière [...] mais moi, j'ai versé dans son verre de l'eau de la carafe. Il avait soif et il l'a bue. Hélène me ressemble: elle est bonne ménagère, économe, *joue du piano*. Elle ne demande jamais à boire de la bière anglaise. C'est comme notre petite fille qui ne boit que du lait et ne mange que de la bouillie. Ça se voit qu'elle n'a que deux ans. *Elle s'appelle Peggy*.<sup>92</sup>  
 (Ionesco 1950/1991: 9, 10, emphasis added).

Here there are obvious instance of explicitation of the implicit (i.e., the list of the edible items had during the meal, the useless mentioning of the place where they live and of the names of their daughters), one instance of false reasoning (i.e., living in London doesn't

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<sup>92</sup> Mrs. Smith: There, it's nine. We've drunk the soup, and eaten the fish and chips, and the English salad. The children have drunk English water. We've eaten well this evening. That's because we live in the suburbs of London and because our name is Smith.

Our little boy wanted to drink some beer but I poured some water from the jug into his glass. He was thirsty and he drank it. Helen is like me: she's a good manager, thrifty, plays the piano. She never asks to drink English beer. She's like our little daughter who drinks only milk and eats only porridge. It's obvious that she's only two. She's named Peggy.  
 (Ionesco 1951/1958: 9-10).





necessarily imply good meals), and some misplaced details about their daughters (i.e., their diet and musical predisposition) that suggest that the text can be prefigured as non-serious.

A humorous prefiguration is possible also from the opening lines of *La Leçon*<sup>93</sup>:

L'Élève: La neige tombe l'hiver. L'hiver, c'est une des quatre saisons. Les trois autres sont... euh...le prin..

Le Professeur: Oui?

L'Élève: ... temps, et puis l'été ... et... euh...

Le Professeur: Ça commence comme 'automobile', mademoiselle.

L'Élève: Ah, oui, l'automne...

[...]

Le Professeur: Vous avez déjà votre baccalauréat, si vous me permettez de vous poser la question.

L'Élève: Oui, monsieur, j'ai mon bachot sciences, et mon bachot lettres.

Le Professeur: Oh, mais vous êtes très avancée, même trop avancée pour votre âge.<sup>94</sup>

(Ionesco 1951/1991: 48, 49)

The evident gap between the students barely remembering the names of the seasons and her degrees in literature and science is definitely and incongruous element of the surface narrative that pushes the reader toward a non-serious prefiguration of the whole story.

Let's now consider the slightly different case of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Here's the opening section:

Vladimir: (*hurt, coldly*). May one inquire where His Majesty spent the night?

Estragon: In a ditch.

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<sup>93</sup> *La Leçon* is also introduced by the author himself as a "Drame comique" (i.e., a comic drama, Ionesco 1951/1991: 43) providing further bias to the Prefiguration of the play.

<sup>94</sup> Pupil: The snow falls in the winter. Winter is one of the four seasons. The other three are... uh... spr...  
Professor: Yes?

Pupil: ...ing, and then summer... and... uh...

Professor: It begins like 'automobile', miss.

Pupil: Ah, yes, autumn... [...]

Professor: You already have your high school diploma, if you'll pardon the question?

Pupil: Yes, Professor, I have my science diploma and my arts diploma, too.

Professor: Ah, you're very far advanced, even perhaps too advanced for your age.

(Ionesco 1951/1958: 48, 49)



Vladimir: (*admiringly*). A ditch! Where?  
 Estragon: [...] Over there.  
 Vladimir: And they didn't beat you?  
 Estragon: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.  
 Vladimir: The same lot as usual?  
 Estragon: The same? I don't know.  
 Vladimir: When I think of it... all these years... but for me... where would you be... (*Decisively*.) You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.  
 Estragon: And what of it?  
 Vladimir: (*gloomingly*). It's too much for one man. (*Pause. Cheerfully*.) On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties. [...] Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up. (*Estragon tears at his boot*.) What are you doing?  
 Estragon: Taking off my boot. Did that never happen to you?  
 Vladimir: Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired of telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?  
 (Beckett 1953/1976: 370-371)

Such a passage is symptomatic of the way of writing in many of Beckett's work. As we can see, there are no plain instances of humor: it is just a sequence of incongruities and non-sequiturs, which prevent the reader from having even the least suggestion of what script is operating there. Still there are mismatched actions and feeling (i.e., Vladimir's admiration for somebody who spent the night in a ditch, Estragon's carelessness despite the fact of having been beaten by a group of strangers and being left oblivious in a ditch, etc.), and the sudden and unpredictable change of emotions (from *coldly* to *admiringly*, from *gloomily* to *cheerfully*) that allow the reader to initiate the prefigure the text as a possibly humorous one.

2) The *ending*, the conclusion, when all (or most of the) narrative lines come together and are (usually) resolved. This is the privileged point where a prefiguration is confirmed or proven wrong.



When a text has proven to be humorous throughout, the final section is just a peculiar place for a further display of instances of humor. This is what happens in the final chapter of Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime." Let's consider the very last line of the text:

'Lord Arthur?'  
 'Yes, Lady Windermere.'  
 "You don't mean to say that you believe in cheiromancy?"  
 'Of course I do,' said the young man, smiling.  
 'But why?'  
 'Because I owe to it all the happiness of my life,' he murmured, throwing himself into a wicker chair.  
 (Wilde 1891/1994: 199, emphasis added)

The final claim is an obvious instance of humor because it reproduces the big misunderstanding-confusion (i.e., script opposition) that informs the whole text: what predicted by the cheiromantist (Murder) is seen as a 'moral imperative' (Duty) rather than a simple prediction. All what Lord Arthur does to obey the cheiromantist's prediction makes his life miserable and should be seen as a reason of unhappiness and remorse (Normal reaction) rather than a reason of 'all the happiness in the life' (Abnormal reaction).

The ending is indeed a revealing section for those texts that seem to be serious all along, with very few (if any) instances of humor. This is the case of those "humorous texts not commonly classified as jokes that are nevertheless structurally homologous to jokes" (Attardo 1999: 55), where an actual punch line or a final narrative section that works as a punch line "cause[s] the actualization of a second script which overlaps with the other one in the text (script overlapping) and is opposed to it (script opposition)" (Attardo 1999: 55). This is the case of such texts like Poe's "The Sphinx", whose main script presents a dreadful creature, "the Death's headed Sphinx [which] has occasioned



much terror among the vulgar, at times, by the melancholy kind of cry which it utters, and the insignia of death which it wears upon its corslet” (1846/1978: 1247):

“Ah, here it is,” he presently exclaimed “it is reascending the face of the hill, and a very remarkable looking creature I admit it to be. Still, it is by no means so large or so distant as you imagined it, - for the fact is that, as it wriggles its way up this thread, which some spider has wrought along the window-sash, I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye.”

(Poe 1846/1978: 1251)

The scary monster (Non Actuality) is nothing more than a little insect (Actuality).

And, with this switch, all incongruity is humorously resolved. Texts like this, if not prefigured as humorous, are revealed as such in the final section (which resolves the incongruity via a logical mechanism).

The opposite case is the case of absurd texts, which are usually prefigured as humorous but they lack the humorous resolution (i.e., script switch) typical of humorous texts. Or, more properly, given the already noted absence of either a core tension or a core opposition that need to be resolved, they lack any resolution. This prevents absurd texts from being taken as serious or from being dismissed as humorous altogether, despite their prefiguration.

Very often in absurd texts the resolution of the incongruity (which would be a sign of narrative *progression*) is substituted by the (oftentimes identical) repetition of the opening scenes, or of scenes that have already been presented in the course of the narration (narrative *regression*). And this is the only ‘model of coherence’ that seems to apply to these texts: such repetition represents the more or the only *recognizable* alternative among the random alternatives that an un-consequential plot would allow.

Let's consider the closing section of *La Cantatrice Chauve*.





Monsieur Smith: C'est!  
 Madame Martin: Pas!  
 Madame Martin: Par!  
 Madame Smith: Là!  
 Monsieur Smith: C'est!  
 Madame Martin: Par!  
 Monsieur Martin: I!  
 Madame Smith: Ci! [...]  
 Tous Ensemble: C'est pas par là, c'est par ici, c'est pas par là, c'est par ici,  
 c'est pas par là, c'est par ici, c'est pas par là, c'est par ici, c'est pas par là,  
 c'est par ici, c'est pas par là, c'est par ici!  
 (Les paroles cessent brusquement. De nouveau, lumière. M. et Mme  
 Martin sont assis comme les Smiths au debut de la pièce. La pièce  
 recommence avec les Martins, qui disent exactement les répliques des  
 Smiths dans la première scène, tandis que le rideau se ferme doucement.)<sup>95</sup>  
 (Ionesco 1950/1991: 42)

In this case the repetition is either in the (confusion of) words (i.e., c'est par ici, c'est par là, etc.) and also in the exact reproduction of the very first scene (even with an exchange in the roles).

The ending of *La Leçon* is once again a repetition of the first scene. Let's compare the two scenes:

La Bonne ([...] *Tout en courant vers la porte de gauche[. . ]*): Patience,  
 J'arrive. (*Elle ouvre la porte [...]*.) Bonjour, mademoiselle.  
 L'Élève: Bonjour, madame. Le Professeur est à la maison?  
 La Bonne: C'est pour la leçon?  
 L'Élève: Oui, madame.  
 La Bonne: Il vous attend, asseyez-vous un instant, je vais le prévenir. [...]  
 Monsieur, descendez, s'il vous plaît. Votre élève est arrivée.

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<sup>95</sup> Mr. Smith: It's!

Mrs. Martin: Not!

Mr. Martin: That!

Mrs. Smith: Way!

Mr. Smith: It's!

Mrs. Martin: O!

Mr. Martin: Ver!

Mrs. Smith: Here! [...]

All together: It's not that way, it's over her, it's not that way, it's over her, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here! [*The words cease abruptly. Again, the lights come on. Mr. And Mrs. Martin are seated like the Smiths at the beginning of the play. The play begins again with the Martins, who say exactly the same lines as the Smiths in the first scene, while the curtain softly falls.*]

(Ionesco 1951/1958: 41-42)



Voix du professeur [...]: Merci. Je descends... dans deux minutes...<sup>96</sup>  
(Ionesco 1950/ 1991: 45-46.)

La Bonne [...]: Patience! (*Elle va vers la porte de gauche, l'ouvre.*)  
Bonjour, mademoiselle! Vous êtes la nouvelle élève? Vous êtes venue  
pour la leçon? Le professeur vous attend. Je vais lui annoncer votre  
arrivée. Il descend tout de suite! Entrez donc, entrez, mademoiselle.<sup>97</sup>  
(Ionesco 1950/ 1991: 75)

As we can see there is no substantial variation between the two scenes: a new student at the door, a busy maid downstairs who answers the door, and a busy professor upstairs keeping the student waiting. If it can be objected that this repetitiousness in the *La Leçon* is not necessarily incongruous in itself, nor incoherent (because the 'model of coherence' implicit in Private Tutoring does not exclude the possibility of a repetition of such scenes each single time a new student comes to a professor for their private lessons), the same thing does not apply to the case of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Let's consider the identical endings of the two acts.

Act I

Estragon: [...] I wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself [...].

Vladimir. We can still part, if, you think it would be better. [...]

Estragon; Well, shall we go?

Vladimir. Yes, let's go.

[*They do not move.*]

(Beckett 1955/1976: 426, 427)

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<sup>96</sup> Maid ([...] *She runs towards the door on the left* [...]): Just a moment, I'm coming (*She opens the door.* [...]) Good morning, miss.

Pupil: Good morning, madam. Is the Professor at home?

Maid: Have you come for the lesson?

Pupil: Yes, I have.

Maid: He's expecting you. [...] Professor, come down please, your pupil is here.

Voice of the Professor [...]: Thank you. I'm coming... in just a moment...

(Ionesco 1951/1958: 45)

<sup>97</sup> Maid [...]: Just a moment! (*She goes to the door on the left, and opens it.*) Good morning, miss! You are the new pupil? You have come for the lesson? The Professor is expecting you. I'll go tell him that you've come. He'll be right down. Come in, miss, come in!  
(1951/1958: 78)



[...]  
 Estragon: If we parted? That might be better for us. [...]  
 Vladimir. Well? Shall we go?  
 Estragon: Yes, let's go.  
 [*They do not move.*]  
 (Beckett 1955/1976: 476)

Or even more radical than *Waiting for Godot* is the case of *Molloy*, a novel divided into two parts, telling the story of two different characters who, despite the different settings, end up doing the exact same things and sharing the same destiny: Molloy is looking for his mother, Moran is looking for Molloy; Molloy has lost his memory and is paralyzed, and paralysis overtakes Moran, too; they both travel by bicycle, until Molloy gets lost in a forest where he spends an interminable amount of time trying to find his way out, and similarly Moran cannot find a way to get home for months and maybe years; they both spend their lives (or, at least, the section of their lives presented in the text) in “weary travelling, buffeted by the weather and reduced [...] to a more or less animal condition” (Nadeau 1951/1965: 34).

In absurd texts, the repetition of what already happened, with the exact same words or in similar way, seems to be the only applicable ‘model of coherence’, at least the only conceivable one that could conclude a story, even if only *formally* rather than *meaningfully*.

### ***III.C.3.c. Linguistic Devices in the Surface Narrative.***

Another important element that may heavily influence the prefiguration of a text is the language. Jacquart (1874), considering the language in absurd texts in a chapter entitled



“Le langage: un élément dramatique parmi d’autres”<sup>98</sup> (1974: 201), provides a list of what he considers to be linguistic peculiarities of this genre. As we will see, almost all this *unconventional* uses of language can be taken as signals for a prefiguration of a humorous text. Such devices are the opposition, the stichomythy, the repetition, the free association of sounds, concept, and levels (Concrete vs. Abstract), and the serial progression, either alphabetical or mathematical.

*The Opposition.*

Usually combined with repetition, opposition consists in sequences of contrasting linguistic utterances whose semantic value is very limited (i.e., not enough to be identified with a proper script opposition) and which are on the whole irrelevant for the *progression* of the plot.

Let’s consider the following examples taken respectively from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *La Leçon*:

Vladimir: Adieu  
 Pozzo: Adieu.  
 Estragon: Adieu.  
*Silence*  
 Pozzo: And thank you.  
 Vladimir: Thank *you*.  
 Pozzo: Not at all.  
 Estragon: Yes yes.  
 Pozzo: No no.  
 Vladimir: Yes yes.  
 Estragon: No no

---

<sup>98</sup> ‘The language: a dramatic element among the others’. We shall at this point remember that for Jacquart, as for many of the critics that studied this literary genre (see literary review on absurd literature), language, as peculiar as it might be, is only a corollary element for absurd. The most important feature is instead the displaying of an incongruous, incoherent, and senseless reality. We came to the same conclusion under a narratological perspective, with the claim that the main feature of this kind of literature is the absence of clear scripts in the core narrative, and also by claiming that absurd is eminently a situational-referential literary phenomenon, rather than a verbal one.





(1953/1976: 418).

Le Professeur: [...] Vous en avez deux, j'en prends une, je vous en mange une, combien vous en reste-t-il?

L'Élève: Deux.

Le Professeur: J'en mange une... une.

L'Élève: Deux.

Le Professeur: Une.

L'Élève: Deux.

Le Professeur: Une!

L'Élève: Deux!

Le Professeur: Une!!!

L'Élève: Deux!!!

Le Professeur: Une!!!

L'Élève: Deux!!!

Le Professeur: Une!!!

L'Élève: Deux!!!

Le Professeur: Non. Non Ce n'est pas ça. L'exemple n'est pas... n'est pas convaincant.<sup>99</sup>

(1951/1991: 55-56)

### The Stichomythie.

This is a type of dialogue based at the same time on the antithesis and on an anaphoric parallelism, during which the characters reply to one another line by line. This is typical of Beckett's style, as it is most noticeable in the following passages:

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

*Silence.*

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<sup>99</sup> Professor: [...] You have two, I take one away, I eat one up, then how many do you have left?

Pupil: Two.

Professor: I eat one of them... one.

Pupil: Two.

Professor: One.

Pupil: Two.

Professor: One! [...] No. No. That's not right. The example is not... it's not convincing.

(Ionesco 1951/1958: 56)



Vladimir: They all speak at once

Estragon: Each one to itself.

*Silence*

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

*Silence.*

(1953/1976: 436)

Vladimir: It'd pass the time. (*Estragon hesitates*) I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Vladimir: A recreation.

Estragon: A relaxation

(1953/1976: 444)

Estragon: It's awful.

Vladimir: Worse than the pantomime.

Estragon: The circus.

Vladimir: The music –hall.

Estragon: The circus.

(1953/1976: 403)

### The Repetition.

The iteration of what already said can sound as a jab line. A clear example is the already mentioned episode in *La Cantatrice Chauve*, where the Martins enter the scene and start recognizing each other:

Madame Martin: [...] *Je suis originaire de la ville de Manchester* [...]

Monsieur Martin: Mon Dieu, *commec'est curieux!* Moi aussi *je suis originaire de la ville de Manchester*, madame!

Madame Martin: *Comme c'est curieux!*

Monsieur Martin: *Comme c'est curieux!* ... Seulement, moi, madame, *j'ai quitté la ville de Manchester, il y a cinq semaines, environ.*

Madame Martin: *Comme c'est curieux!* quelle bizarre coïncidence! Moi aussi, monsieur, *j'ai quitté la ville de Manchester, il y a cinq semaines, environ.* [...]

Monsieur Martin: Mon Dieu, *comme c'est curieux!* Peut-être bien alors, madame, que je vous ai vue dans le train? [...]



Madame Martin: Comme c'est bizarre, que *c'est curieux* et quelle coïncidence! Moi aussi, monsieur, je voyageais en deuxième classe!  
 Monsieur Martin: *Comme c'est curieux!* Nous nous sommes peut-être bien rencontrés en deuxième classe, chère madame!<sup>100</sup>  
 (Ionesco 1950/1991: 16-17, emphasis. added)

Let's also consider the following passage from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, when Estragon is trying to take off his boot:

Estragon: [*Feebly*] Help me!  
 Vladimir: *It hurts?*  
 Estragon: *Hurts? He wants to know if it hurts!*  
 Vladimir: [*Angrily.*] No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.  
 Estragon: *It hurts?*  
 Vladimir: *Hurts? He wants to know if it hurts?* [*Stooping.*]  
 (1953/1976: 371).

Another open example of repetition is in Ionesco's *Les Salutations*:

Troisième Monsieur [...]: Bonjour, messieurs!  
 Premier (*au Deuxième*): Heureux de vous voir. Comment allez-vous?  
 Deuxième (*au Premier*): Merci. *Et Vous?*  
 Troisième (*au Premier*): Comment allez-vous?  
 Premier (*au Troisième*): Chaudement. *Et vous?* (*Au Deuxième*):  
 Froidement. *Et vous?*  
 Troisième (*au Premier*): Agréablement. *Et vous?*  
 Deuxième (*au Troisième*): Désagréablement. *Et vous?*  
 Premier et Deuxième (*au Troisième*): *Et vous?*  
 Troisième: Drolatiquement. *Et vous?*  
 Deuxième (*au Troisième*): Melancoliquement. *Et vous?*  
 Premier (*au Deuxième*): Matinalement. *Et vous?*  
 Deuxième (*au Troisième*): Crepusculairement. *Et vous?*  
 Troisième (*au Premier*): Adipeusement. *Et vous?*<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Mrs. Martin: [...] I am originally from the city of Manchester. [...]

Mr. Martin: Good God, that's curious! I, too, am originally from the city of Manchester, madam!

Mrs. Martin: That is curious!

Mr. Martin: Isn't that curious! Only, i, madam, I left the city of Manchester about five weeks ago.

Mrs. Martin: That is curious! What a bizarre coincidence! I, too, sir, I left the city of Manchester about five weeks ago. [...]

Mr. Martin: Good Lord, how curious! Perhaps then, madam, it was on the train that I saw you? [...]

Mrs. Martin: That is curious! How very bizarre! And what a coincidence! I, too, sir, I traveled second class.

Mr. Martin: How curious is that! Perhaps we did meet in second class, my dear lady!

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 15-16)

<sup>101</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Gentelman [...]: Good-morning, Gentlemen!



(Ionesco 1950/1991: 79, emphasis added)

The Association.

In absurd texts, the logic sequencing of words and ideas is substituted by the free association or the free sequencing of sounds, concepts, or levels. Let's consider the three case separately:

- free association of sounds is noticeable when the narration progresses by assonances and consonances, repetitions of sounds and alliterations: let's consider the following example, the closing scene of *La Cantatrice Chauve*.

Monsieur Smith: Je m'en vais habiter ma cagna dans mes cacaoyers.

Madame Martin: Les cacaoyers des cacaoyères donnent pas des cacahuètes, donnent du cacao! Les cacaoyers des cacaoyères donnent pas des cacahuètes, donnent du cacao! ! Les cacaoyers des cacaoyères donnent pas des cacahuètes, donnent du cacao!

Madame Smith: Les souris ont des sourcils, les sourcils n'ont pas de souris.

Madame Martin: Touche pas ma babouche!

Monsieur Martin: Bouge pas la babouche!

Monsieur Smith: Touche la mouche, mouche pas la touche.

Madame Martin: La mouche bouge.

Madame Smith: Mouche ta bouche.<sup>102</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> Gentleman (to the 2<sup>nd</sup>): Glad to see you. How are things going?

2<sup>nd</sup> Gentleman (to the 1<sup>st</sup>): Fine, thanks. And you?

3<sup>rd</sup> Gentleman (to the 1<sup>st</sup>): How are things going?

1<sup>st</sup> Gentleman (to the 3<sup>rd</sup>): Warmly. And you? (To the 2<sup>nd</sup>;) Coldly. And you?

3<sup>rd</sup> Gentleman (to the 1<sup>st</sup>): Nicely. And you?

2<sup>nd</sup> Gentleman (to the 3<sup>rd</sup>): Nastily. And you?

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> (to the 3<sup>rd</sup>): And you?

3<sup>rd</sup> Gentleman: Peculiarly. And you?

2<sup>nd</sup> Gentleman (to the 3<sup>rd</sup>): Melancholically. And you?

1<sup>st</sup> Gentleman (to the 2<sup>nd</sup>): Earlymorningishly. And you?

2<sup>nd</sup> Gentleman (to the 3<sup>rd</sup>): Gloamingly. And you?

3<sup>rd</sup> Gentleman (to the 1<sup>st</sup>): Obesely. And you?

(Ionesco 1950/1968: 167).

<sup>102</sup> The following translation is obviously not literal. Lacking of any sense, the translator rightly prefers keeping the assonance than venturing in a literal translation of the original.

Mr. Smith: I'm going to live in my cabana among my cacao trees.

Mrs. Martin: Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa.

Mrs. Smith: Mice have lice, lice haven't mice.

Mrs. Martin: Don't ruche my brooch!





(Ionesco 1950/1991: 41)

- free association of concept is noticeable when completely different ideas, belonging to different domains, are brought together by *paralogical* connectors: let's consider the following section of the example just quoted from *La Cantatrice Chauve*, when from simple combination of sounds there is a sudden shift to association of ideas, or more precisely, association of names, which in this case are French historical figures:

Madame Martin: Sainte Nitouche touche ma cartouche.

Madame Smith: N'y touchez pas, elle est brisée.

Monsieur Martin: Sully!

Monsieur Martin: Prudhomme!

Madame Martin, Monsieur Smith: François.

Madame Smith, Monsieur Martin: Coppée.

Madame Martin, Monsieur Smith: Coppée Sully!

Madame Smith, Monsieur Martin: Prudhomme François.

Madame Martin: Espèces de glouglouteurs, espèces de glouglouteurs.<sup>103</sup>

(Ionesco 1950/1991: 41).

- free association of levels is noticeable when we are presented with sudden and not logically justifiable shifting from Abstract to Concrete, from Universal to Particular, etc.. An instance of this (Particular vs. Universal) is to be found in *Waiting for Godot*, when Vladimir is trying to button his fly:

Mr. Martin: Don't ruche my brooch!

Mr. Smith: Groom the goose, don't goose the groom.

Mrs. Martin: The goose grooms.

(Ionesco 1950/1958: 40)

<sup>103</sup> In this case the translator tries to render the free association of the names, rather than sticking to the literal translation.

Mrs. Martin: Sainte-Nitouche stoops to my cartouche.

Mrs. Smith: "Who'd stoop to blame? ... and I never choose to stoop."

Mr. Martin: Robert!

Mr. Smith: Browning!

Mrs. Martin, Mr. Smith: Rudyard.

Mrs. Martin, Mr. Martin: Kipling.

Mrs. Martin, Mr. Smith: Robert Kipling!

Mrs. Smith, Mr. Martin: Rudyard Browning.

Mrs. Martin: Silly gobblegobblers, silly gobblegobblers.

(1950/1958: 40-41).



Vladimir; [...] Never neglect the *little things* of life.  
 Estragon: What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.  
 Vladimir: (*musingly*). The last moment... (*He meditates.*) Hope deferred  
 maketh the something sick, who said that?  
 (1953/1976: 372)

The impression of humor comes not only from the abrupt shifting from the unimportant action of buttoning one's fly (Particular) to the supposedly wise saying about Hope (Universal), but also because this saying badly applies to the circumstances and it is also misquoted.

Soon after this episode, Estragon is trying hard to get something out of his boot:

Vladimir: [...] Well?  
 Estragon: Nothing.  
 Vladimir: Show.  
 Estragon: There's nothing to show.  
 Vladimir: Try and put it on again.  
 Estragon: (*examining his foot*). I'll air it for a bit.  
 Vladimir: *There's man all over you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet.* [...] This is getting alarming. (*Silence. Vladimir deep in thought, Estragon pulling at his toes.*) One of the thieves was saved. (*Pause.*) It's a reasonable percentage.  
 (1953/1976: 372-373, emphasis added)

In this case, too, the detail of Estragon trying to empty his boot from something that was bothering his walking becomes the input for a philosophical reasoning on human nature ('there's man all over you, blaming on his boot the faults of his feet') (Particular vs. Universal), before inexplicably leading to the biblical reference of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, which in its turn is emptied of its religious significance and is taken only for its mathematical-statistic value (Abstract vs. Concrete).



The Serial Progression.

Not completely dissimilar from the above-mentioned free association (i.e, the simple combination of different elements), the progression needs a paradigm that justifies it, and this paradigm is provided by arbitrary system of organization like the alphabet, or the numeration:

- alphabetical progression: a clear example of this is to be found in Ionesco's *Les Salutations*, where, answering the question 'Comment allez-vous?' (how are you?)

three speakers provide a list of made-up adverbs in alphabetical order:

Troisième monsieur: Ça va... adénitement, arthritiquement, astéroïdement, astrolabiquement, atrabilairement, balalaïkement, baobabamment, basculamment, bissextilement, cacologiquement, callipygeusement [...] <sup>104</sup>  
(Ionesco 1950/ 1991: 80)

- numerical progression: an example of this is in Ionesco's *La Leçon*:

Le Professeur: Poussons plus loin: combien font deux et un?  
L'Élève: Trois.  
Le Professeur: Trois et un?  
L'Élève: Quatre.  
Le Professeur: Quatre et un?  
L'Élève: Cinq.  
Le Professeur: Cinq et un?  
L'Élève: Six.  
Le Professeur: Six et un?  
L'Élève: Sept.  
Le Professeur: Sept et un?  
L'Élève: Huit.  
Le Professeur: Sept et un?  
L'Élève: Huit... *bis*.  
Le Professeur: Très bonne réponse. Sept et un?  
L'Élève: Huit *ter*.  
Le Professeur: Parfait. Excellent. Sept et un?

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<sup>104</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Gentleman: Getting on... adolescently, arthritically, asteroidically, astrolabically, [illegible], balalaikally, baobabically, barometrically, bisextilically, cacophonically, callipygically. (Ionesco 1950/1968: 168).



L'Élève: Huit *quarter*. Et parfois neuf.<sup>105</sup>  
(1951/1991: 52)

The linguistic devices considered so far , together with non-sequiturs of all sorts, cram the surface narrative of absurd texts, create some humorous or incongruous twist and seem to provide guidelines toward a humorous prefiguration of the stories.

### III.C.4. Conclusion.

Critics and scholars in the past have seen the nature of absurd in the presentation or in the staging of a senseless reality, disrespectful of canons of verisimilitude, models of logic, and conventions, resulting in a blend of metaphysics-philosophy and laughter (or of tragedy and comedy, or of seriousness and humor) hard to be fully understood, explained or appreciated.

With this work I have attempted an explanation of the nature of absurd under a different perspective, arriving at a linguistic and narratological explanations of what traditional criticism considered absurd's main features.

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<sup>105</sup> Professor: Let's push on: how much are two and one?

Pupil: Three.

Professor: Three and one?

Pupil: Four.

Professor: Four and one?

Pupil: Five.

Professor: Five and one?

Pupil: Six.

Professor: Six and one?

Pupil: Seven.

Professor: Seven and one?

Pupil: Eight.

Professor: Seven and one?

Pupil: Eight again.

Professor: Very well answered. Seven and one?

Pupil: Eight once more.

Professor: Perfect. Excellent. Seven and one?

Pupil: Eight again. And sometimes nine.

(Ionesco 1951/1958: 52).





Under a narratological point of view, what traditional criticism considered absurd's senselessness and unreasonableness depends mainly on the absence of clear (complex-) scripts at the level of the core narrative – whose interaction might have otherwise allowed the story to progress and would have provided the core narrative with motivations for whatever might have taken place at the level of the surface narrative. This lack is what makes absurd texts read gratuitous, inconsequential, or a-consequential, pointless and incongruous.

What traditional criticism considered to be absurd's closeness to humor depends mainly on the ambiguity and the hard-to-process elasticity of the *pseudo*-scripts, whose continuous shifting and changing may somehow resemble (but shall not be mistaken for) the switching from one script to another typical of humor. In humor there is a switch between two opposed scripts, in absurd there is just an ever-changing and non-coherent adjustment of the same *pseudo*-script, in which even contradictory or usually mutually-falsifying elements coalesce and harmonize without creating the least suspect of an opposition, and at the same time render such script highly incongruous (i.e., a *non*-script, or a *pseudo*-script). This incongruity, combined with the (usually numerous) instances of local humor at the level of the surface narrative, suggests a humorous prefiguration, a humorous processing and interpretation of the text. But this humorous prefiguration is bound to be falsified: in absurd texts not only there is no humorous resolution of the incongruity, but the obvious incongruity is the whole point of this form of literature, and it cannot and need not be resolved.



**Conclusion.**

With the present work I have introduced a system that explains the different nature of *non-serious* narratives, and also the different degree of humorousness in such texts.

For this purpose I have attempted a theoretical approach based on the distinction of two narrative levels, namely core and surface narrative, on the role of the resolution of the incongruity at the level of the core narrative, and on the humorous quality of the privileged points at the level of the surface narrative. Far from being an exhaustive tool under any perspective other than linguistic, and open to further revision and re-elaboration, the theory provides workable definitions of *non-serious* texts and allows us to outline the main and distinctive features of the three different groups of *non-serious* narratives: humorous, nonsense, and absurd texts.



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