

# Where Play and Poetic Word Meet as a Generation Device: a few Reflections

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**Abstract.** There is a link between the experience of the Anglo-Saxon nonsense by Lear and Carroll, literary surrealist experimentation, and poetry for children by Rodari onwards. Word becomes playful and close to feeling childish: one could say that it mimics a primitive language that pursues more phonetic associations rather than sense, until it generates semantic disorientation and surprise, as well as comedy and entertainment through the transgression of formally shared codes. Word thus conceived (and played, using various reconstruction and decomposition techniques) takes on an extraordinary poetic power and encourages interpretative work of an ever new reality.

**Keywords.** Poetry for Children, Nonsense, Linguistic Experimentation, Lewis Carroll, Gianni Rodari, Toti Scialoja

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## 1. Poetry and the primitive state of language

About forty-five years ago, in a famous article published in the journal “Strumenti Critici” on the relationship between childhood, poetry and school, poet Andrea Zanzotto recognised the extremely virtuous common thread that united the Anglo-Saxon experience of Lear and Carroll to surrealist literary research, up to the very fruitful results, and – we might say today – radical change represented by the poetic production of Gianni Rodari. What is the link between poetic experiences separated by era and context? Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens* that “the function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. *Poesis*, in fact, is a play-function”<sup>1</sup>. So, if writing poetry means operating within a play dimension, it is possible more than ever to distinguish the specific intentionality of Carroll, of French surrealists (but we need to look more generally to the historical avant-garde movements and, therefore, even to the Futurism of Palazzeschi, another word juggler: *jongleur*, as Montale wrote) and of Rodari of using words as an actual play device. But there is more: this play, which consists of constructing, dismantling, condensing, and assembling, has a striking generative, productive, and creative property manifested in different ways and intentions in relation to cultural contexts. Word thus conceived, word that is obtained at the end of this type of decomposition and reconfiguration/transfiguration process, assumes its own autonomy and departs from the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Turin, Einaudi, 1973, p. 140.

common eloquence of the known language, since it serves to recover the elementary and fundamental particles of language, a changeable and multifarious nucleus that moistens poetic discourse by distorting the expected meanings, creating semantic disorientation, surprise, but also comedy and entertainment through the transgression of formally shared codes.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition, from the Limericks of Edward Lear, and thanks to the complicity of a language, English, which particularly lends itself to the formation of puns, riddles and jokes, has produced remarkable examples of nonsensical language, capable of breaking logical and automatic mental convergences in favour of a surreal pace legitimised by the use of words of pure invention inserted into a plausible syntactic structure whose fluctuating meaning we seem to grasp: “omliferous”, translated by Carlo Izzo into the mad-up Italian word “omlifero” referring to a young lady in Crete dressed in a black spotted sack, could suggest the idea of a clumsy and awkward girl in her polka dot dress; “scroobious”, “scrubbio” in Italian, emphasises and strengthens the adjective that follows, “strange”, in alliteration which adds a clearly negative connotation to the uniqueness and extravagance of the Old Person of Grange: “scrubbio” seems to squash together the words “scorbuto” e “dubbio”<sup>2</sup> (“cranky” and “doubt”) (as well as reminding us, for obvious sound associations, of another famous old person from literature: the gruff Dickens character Scrooge). In this regard, even more interesting is Lewis Carroll’s use of a portmanteau-word deliberately theorised earlier in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) through the haughty explanation of Humpty Dumpty on the charming poem *Jabberwocky*, then in the verses of the poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876)<sup>3</sup>. In the trunk-word there are two “packed” meanings in one word<sup>4</sup>; the “snark” itself reveals a fanciful beast somewhere between a snail and a shark, “frumious”, however, is composed of “fuming” and “furious”<sup>5</sup> and allows us to merge the peculiarities of one into the other in a neologism with a meaning to the Nth degree. In the *Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze speaks of this connection of esoteric words: “it is a synthesis of co-existence, which aims to ensure the conjunction of two sets of heterogeneous propositions or sizes or proportions”<sup>6</sup>. Such language training, according to the French philosopher, which highlights the generative power, can produce ramifications susceptible to almost endless interpretations, thus exceeding the binary combination constantly used (“fuming/furious” and “furious/fuming”) to give rise to a flourishing disjunctive synthesis. The *hinge* that unites and separates the seed syllable of a word simultaneously

<sup>2</sup> See limericks *There was a Young Person of Crete* and *There was an Old Person of Grange*. E. Lear, *The Book of Nonsense*, Italian translation by C. Izzo, Turin, Einaudi, 2004, p. 46-47 and p. 350-351.

<sup>3</sup> *Through the Looking Glass*, published Christmas 1971, represents the completion of the previous and most well-known *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The poem *The Hunting of the Snark, An Agony in Eight Fits, full of puzzles, charades, acrostics, puzzles like many other poems* by Carroll, has been a challenge for many academics: the same portmanteau-word “snark” has been translated into Italian words “snarco” (C.V. Lodovici, 1945), “snualo” (M. Graffi, 1985), “squlo” (L. Pellegrini, 1985). See L. Carroll, *Attraverso lo specchio*, in *Alice nel Paese delle Meraviglie e Attraverso lo specchio*, Italian translation by M. Graffi, Milano, Garzanti, 2000 and *La caccia allo Snark*, Italian translation by R. Sanesi, Milan, SE, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> “You see it’s like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word”, says Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*. See L. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, Stilwell, Digireads, 2005, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> In Italian, the words mean, in order, “fumante” and “fumoso”. See L. Carroll, *La caccia allo Snark*, cit., p. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> G. Deleuze, *Logica del senso*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2006, p. 46.

therefore offers multiple possibilities of play, modelled at will depending on whichever meaning the poet wants to impose. The process resembles the dream state, preconscious, but also – more simply – the lexicon of the imaginative life that each child experiences with awe and wonder he encounters in the most difficult sounds when trying to gibe form and substance to images with the voice and words.

Moreover, poetic language is close to baby talk, as if the stable condition of the poet was naturally aimed at the origins of linguistic experience, the constant search for an effective arrangement of the fragments available, just like the child would when trying to pronounce sounds and attribute meaning to them in an industrious activity with full commitment and dedication: poetry “remains at the root of the human world, both in phylogeny and cultural ontogeny, so to say. This also happens because in poetic function, language, taking “joy” and “conscience” of its own existence, restores all its history, summarises all its potential, reactivates or represents all its other functions in a nutshell, and finally, if we want, expresses its nature as a structural foundation of man,” says Zanzotto<sup>7</sup>, and André Breton, in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, testifies to this process, seeing one of the most fruitful feelings that the poet might ever experience emanate from childhood memories<sup>8</sup>. The childhood image, reiterates Andrea Zanzotto, helps us define the poet because it expresses the “utmost good faith in life”<sup>9</sup>, and clarifies and emphasises the tensionality aimed at development, creation, and therefore responsibility<sup>10</sup>.

## 2. When play gets serious

Along this ideal line, in the context of poetry/playthings<sup>11</sup> aimed at childhood, the primacy of the word used in this way is owed to Rodari, who sought to innovate children’s literature once and for all both in terms of linguistics and content. The operation is not trivial, more so cultured and refined: Rodari converges the ideological matrix and the lesson of Surrealism, but also attention to fable and poetic material with popular roots, and the search for a logical dimension to be recovered through creative processes. The result is a poetic word which certainly undermines traditional language and which recognises a communicative code in response to feeling childish in the free association of phonemes, rhythm and assonance; the word, thrown into the mind like a stone into the pond, follows unexpected paths, tackles unusual trajectories, loads itself with references

<sup>7</sup> A. Zanzotto, *Infanzie, poesie, scuoletta (appunti)*, in “Strumenti critici”, 20, 1973, p. 56-57. The essay is also available in A. Zanzotto, *Fantasie in avvicinamento*, Milan, Mondadori, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Breton, *Manifesto del Surrealismo*, in *Manifesti del Surrealismo*, Turin, Einaudi, 2003, p. 43. Regarding the relationship between childhood play and poetry, refer to Freud’s *On Poetic Imagination* (1907): “The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him [...]. The poet does what the child playing: he creates a fantasy world, which is very serious”. S. Freud, *Il poeta e la fantasia*, in *Opere 1905-1908*, Turin, Boringhieri, 1972, p. 375-376. For a more in-depth discussion on the relationship between poetry and baby talk, see C. Lepri, *Abitare la lingua dell’infanzia. Cenni sul rapporto tra poesia e infanzia*, in F. Bacchetti (eds.), *Percorsi della letteratura per l’infanzia. Tra leggere e interpretare*, Bologna, Clueb, 2013, p. 207-216.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Zanzotto in F. Camon, *Il mestiere di poeta*, Milan, Lerici, 1965, p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 156-157.

<sup>11</sup> Rodari used to describe his poems as “poetic toys”. See G. Rodari, *I bambini e la poesia*, in *Il cane di Magonza*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1981.

and correspondences while freeing itself from any established meanings, thus producing a personal narrative discourse that is totally dissimilar – it is hoped – from the so-called “language of consensus”<sup>12</sup>: “every technique for inventing stories [...] is also based on the generative power of a word. A word can create a story because it sets in motion traits of our experience, vocabulary, subconscious, it gives motion to our ideas, our ideology”<sup>13</sup>. In terms of methodology, the generative power of the word can be experienced through the principal technique of fantastic binomial, according to which creative thinking begins inside a binary structure: two words separated from each other by gender and class merge, producing alienating juxtapositions that are particularly productive precisely because of the contrasts they create. The wordplay, in this case, is not so much in acquiring the linguistic units, but rather in dilating meanings *ad libitum* starting from the random formation of constructs, which are set as foundations for the creation of fantasy situations, fictional worlds, whimsical imaginary characters. It should be noted that if Carroll works for condensations with his portmanteau-words, Rodari proceeds according to the opposite mode, that is, by building new meanings from fully understandable word pairs. The outcome is productive once again, as well as in the use of other linguistic play set out in *The Grammar Of Fantasy*: in addition to fantastic binomial, stories and rhymes may arise from the combination of an arbitrary prefix to a word in common use (“staccapanni” dispenses free coats, while the “scannone” is used to undo war, “from the prefix utopia”<sup>14</sup>), as well as from a creative mistake, which we invent from a typo or a slip of the tongue<sup>15</sup>. Of course, linguistic play thus conceived, which unfolds between *ludus* and utopian function, for Rodari was of no less educational importance of critical thinking, contains a project idea – in the words of Franco Cambi<sup>16</sup> – which looks at the development of the subject/person within democratic society: “all uses of the word for all”<sup>17</sup> presupposes and implies an emancipation process by means of free use of the word in every sense: to say “no” to the fixed and immutable actuality of unique languages, but also to actively contribute/participate in the meaning process of the words themselves. In this sense, the generative power of the word is play that becomes serious: it takes on a meaningful value because it redefines the boundaries of the known world, offers an alternative to the existing one, and opens to divergence and diversity.

Continuing along this thread that makes poetic word capable of new configurations of meaning, but mainly makes it into a play device, many other authors have rediscovered the original experience of the language in poetry. The after-Rodari initiates a linguistic experimentation that, on this path, abandons all ideological remnants and mainly obeys an aesthetic order. For example, the contribution to poetry for children by Toti Scialoja is significant as part of an unconventional use of language, in which the phonic effect clearly prevails over sense<sup>18</sup>, in a short composition reminiscent of the folk tradition tongue twister:

<sup>12</sup> G. Rodari, *Scuola di fantasia*, in “Riforma della Scuola”, 5, 1981, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> G. Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia: introduzione all'arte di inventare storie*, Turin, Einaudi, 1973, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 34-36.

<sup>16</sup> See F. Cambi, *Rodari pedagogista*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1990, p. 141-145.

<sup>17</sup> G. Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Scialoja writes: “Word is the word of poetry if it acquires an immediate forgetfulness: forgetfulness of meaning”. T. Scialoja, *Come nascono le mie poesie*, in “Il Verri”, 8, 1988, p. 9.

Nel tufo c'è un buco fiorito di muffa,  
 nel buco c'è un gufo, seduto su un puf,  
 che è stufo, che sbuffa, e fa sempre: «Uff!».<sup>19</sup>

Defined by Calvin as “the first real Italian example of congenial amusement in the extraordinary tradition of nonsense and limerick”<sup>20</sup>, the poems by Scialoja, who is a fully-fledged artist of representation, are characterised by a playful mechanism of decomposition of the words into minimal terms, that is, into syllables that become pieces of a puzzle that needs completely rebuilt. From portmanteau-words, right through to the fantastic binomial, we come to the “pomegranate-word”, that is, speech conveyed as a container “swarming” in rich particles, “gleaming, reflective, magnetised by their possible combinations” and projected toward semiotics germination. Play is not difficult, you just need to allow yourself the pleasure of saying a word “that knocks on the windows”<sup>21</sup>, in a sassy and seductive eruption of all its organicity; then we need to get carried away by the flow of associations and emotions to empty the word-calque and knead and reorder the primary components: “the word suddenly sprinkled in the mind, the word that suddenly sets your lips in motion, proves to be the bearer of its specific weight, an almost tangible thickness – short, a substance drawn only from itself. It is as if the word had discovered its own implication – and began to resemble a still unknown essence, a flashing eternity – stripping itself of its daily wrapping, of the servile habit of aiding every mundane task. As if now its syllables will crumble into a kind of pollen and vibrate a sound captured by an ear that popped out from nowhere. So, it loses its daily misplacement and takes on another – made only of grace”<sup>22</sup>. The analogy with alogical procedures set out in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* and the metaphor of the stone in the pond is really obvious; here, the intrinsic germinating power of each linguistic unit is nevertheless accompanied by the image of a word that is revealed as a corporeal entity, that is almost tangible in its continuous representation of concrete essences through alliteration, onomatopoeia, and sound effects.

### 3. Linguistic experimentation in poetry for children today

Present-day poetry makes treasure of the classical examples mentioned here, and of the encounter with the popular nursery rhymes, with old rhymes, rigmarole, always able to effectively arrange itself on a level of child communication; the indispensable and irreplaceable ingredients are the pace, play, rhyme, authentic and not didactic message, close to personal experiences<sup>23</sup>. Poets of today, from Roberto Piumini and especially since the eighties of the twentieth century, recovered the plastic potential of the word, while also introducing special attention to sophisticated processes capable of producing complex structures on a formal level, all the while adhering to the *animus* of the child in the con-

<sup>19</sup> T. Scialoja, *Quando la talpa vuol ballare il tango*, Milan, Mondadori, 1997, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. II of the cover.

<sup>21</sup> A. Breton, *Manifesto del Surrealismo*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> T. Scialoja, in “Poesia”, 3, 1988, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> See F. Cambi, *La parola incantata. Poesia per bambini: quale, come, perché*, in F. Cambi, G. Cives, *Il bambino e la lettura. Testi scolastici e libri per l'infanzia*, Pisa, ETS, 1996, p. 199-200.

text of fruition stretched to gratuity and the pleasure of the text, but also the aesthetic dimension. We are in the context of a word that establishes a privileged relationship with the corporeity and lends itself to readings that involve all the senses: musicality, rhythm, harmony phonic satisfy hearing, invite movement, or they can even imitate sounds of nature, such as the rustle of the wind (“Quando fa caldo [...] / per favore usate / solo parole / con molte effe e vi / fffresche e vvventose”<sup>24</sup>); however, some words evoke the flavour and texture of foods, like in this poem:

Ora  
 io scrivo una poesia.  
 Aiutatemi  
 coi vostri occhi  
 aperti come bocche  
 per mangiare le parole salate  
 corte e lunghe  
 morbide e resistenti,  
 aiutatemi cogli occhi  
 come bocche per mangiare  
 le mie parole  
 stringerne il succo  
 aspro  
 che arriccia il naso  
 e dolce  
 come di frutta  
 matura e giusta.  
 [...]”<sup>25</sup>

Here Piumini establishes highly effective multi-dimensional communication with the child-reader: the body is called upon to taste a word that is shown in its dual identities, conceptual and physical. And yet in line with a well-rounded attemptable language, following the example of carrollesque calligrams (think of the famous poem/story like a mouse’s tail in Alice, playing with homophony of English words tale/tail<sup>26</sup>) as well as certain typical compositions of visual poetry from the twentieth century, where the word acquires pictorial significance, draws expressiveness from iconic values, creates imitative and analogue signs of great evocative power: the following verse, once again Piumini graphically accompanies the unfortunate love story of a “he” and a “she”, perhaps ironically reproducing the sinuous female form:

Luila  
 mavael  
 ed  
 issep  
 erfa

<sup>24</sup> R. Piumini, *Le parole adatte*, in *Io mi ricordo quieto patate... Poesie*, Rome, Nuove Edizioni Romane, 1996, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> R. Piumini, *Ora io scrivo una poesia*, in *Io mi ricordo quieto patate... Poesie*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> L. Carroll, *Alice nel Paese delle Meraviglie*, cit., p. 27.

vor  
 eam  
 amian  
 chetule  
 irispo  
 sen  
 onpos  
 sotid  
 ounba  
 cioenul  
 lapiù<sup>27</sup>

Following the initial visual confusion, we realise that the words create a tangible image by means of divisions and connections. The meanings are mimed, but also reinterpreted according to the sensitivity of the poet, who enjoys playing with the words like blocks to be broken down and rebuilt from scratch. Pietro Formentini, in this regard, creates a leitmotif of his poetic research from linguistic iconism and phonetic synaesthesiae, “thus creating continuous metaphorical, synesthetic combinations, proposing hyper-realist and surrealist figurations, unusual and unexpected rhythms, messages of an active transversal thought”<sup>28</sup>: the reference is to *Parola mongolfiera*, for example, as well as to *Polpentine di parole*<sup>29</sup>, in which the linguistic unit is sometimes subjected and twisted and broken down even into individual graphic signs, which hybridise and intersect each other to form structures that are almost unpronounceable (“marmellata” and “filastrocca” become “filastrolla” “marmellocchell”<sup>30</sup>).

#### 4. A final remark

Creating quality poetry means playing with words until we manage to tickle the aesthetic and emotional sensitivity of the reader. The authors we have mentioned – together, of course, with many others – in addition to embellishing a literary genre full of potential, surpass the imaginary line we initially referred to, which sees poetry as a creation device for words. The poet, thus, becomes a jongleur of meaning: he appropriates the linguistic material, reworks it, gives it form and proposes a new code to the child-reader, the bearer of new senses. The message becomes secondary and the word pursues other reasons, such as the immediate pleasure given from the articulation of an incongruous verse or the wonder associated with the representation of a fantastic image, or the fun in deciphering coded languages. On a symbolic and conceptual level, such work takes on a remarkable educational scope since it implies education of the possible: creating images with words means training a mind not to accept the unequivocal solutions, to redefine the usual data, to break the order of things and – thus – to personally reinterpret areas

<sup>27</sup> R. Piumini, *Luila*, in *Sole, scherzavo*, Rome, Nuove Edizioni Romane, 1994, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> P. Formentini, *Immaginare poesia: alla ricerca di nuova scrittura, dentro e fuori le pagine, per e con i bambini*, in S. Blezza Picherle (eds.), *Raccontare ancora. La scrittura e l'editoria per ragazzi*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2007, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> See P. Formentini, *Parola Mongolfiera*, Rome, Nuove Edizioni Romane, 1993; Id., *Polpentine di parole*, Florence, Salani, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> P. Formentini, *Marmellata di parole*, in *Polpentine di parole*, cit., p. 33.

of experience in light of the multiplicity and complexity of what is real, indeed, “it is [also] in this state of non-commitment that we experience new ideas, new values, new ways of being in the world”<sup>31</sup>. The Rodari lesson, in this sense, is still extremely topical and comparison with it is necessary once again.

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<sup>31</sup> P. Ricoeur, *L'immaginazione nel discorso e nell'azione*, in *Dal testo all'azione*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1994, p. 212.