

12

ITALIAN NONSENSE: TRADITION, TRANSLATION,
 TRANSLOCATION, TRANSCODIFICATION
 (AND A TRINITY)

Alessandro Giammei

As it is hardly possible to make these people understand ordinary Italian, a stranger might, if alone, be awkwardly situated in the event of any misunderstanding.

Edward Lear, 1852¹

A No-Nonsense Tradition

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA, the Sicilian prince who wrote the bestselling Italian novel of all time, owned one of the most exquisite private collections of English books in the whole of the newborn Republic of Italy. In his palazzo, a few years after the fall of fascism, he gave private lectures on English literature to a group of ecstatic young boys, one of whom was destined to become the first professor of Literary Theory in Italy's ultra-philological academia.² Half a century later, right before leaving for New York to direct the Italian Cultural Institute, another disciple transcribed and published these fabled lectures, including one that is entirely dedicated to Nonsense.³ The topic galvanised the prince's disdain for Italy's provincialism. In a time when even Shakespeare's name was customarily italianised into 'Guglielmo', Tomasi spoke about this unruly strand of Victorian literature – a yearning for adventure transported in the realm of pure language, as he defined it – using its anglophone terminology. He even composed a limerick in English on the spot to give his students an example of this special form of humour, which he considered a genre. In fact, he believed it to be the natural late modern culmination of British literary culture: a sophisticated, precise, even rigorous challenge to narrative logic and proper poetry that no Italian could possibly understand. Italian literature, he complained, is the most serious of all traditions, a tragic sequence of sombre poets and dramatists, and it trains Italian readers to be amused only by classical or moralising humour – from Ariosto's irony to Manzoni's sober social caricatures. He didn't believe there could be any Nonsense outside of English.

In fairness, the prince wanted to brush a dusty and nationalistic conception of literature off the shoulders of his pupils, who grew up under a regime that prohibited translation, reduced art to a vessel for spiritual and patriotic values, and ultimately lacked any sense of humour. The Italian canon, after all, started with a Comedy (albeit Divine), crowned Boccaccio's comedic tales as the primary model for prose,

and includes gems of imaginative linguistic and narrative fun such as Luigi Pulci's chivalric giants, who literally explode because of their irrepressible laughter, or Teofilo Folengo's bodily epic in macaronic quasi-Latin. In the land of Ruzante, Aretino, Tassoni, Belli, Pirandello and Fo, comedic literature has also directly played with linguistic short-circuits, such as the terrifying and meaningless 'Papé Satàn aleppe' that resonates in Dante's *Inferno* at the beginning of Canto VII. Some of the most erudite and playful heirs of Petrarch's lyrical model, like the Florentine Burchiello, devoted their careers to lexical juggling and a stupefying deconstruction of established poetical norms: delirious songbooks in perfect metrics whose real meaning escaped most readers for centuries. However, as recent philological efforts of exegesis reveal,⁴ they have (alas!) a meaning after all: they can be credibly explained, solved like an enigma, just like the demonic language invented by Dante. While Italian literature is not as serious as Tomasi lamented, its comedic texts (even the most bold and paradoxical ones) have invariably had the flaw of making sense. And those texts that really abjure sense altogether, studied by linguists and admired by post-structuralists,⁵ are not fun at all.⁶ The prince's envy for the nonchalant absurdity of the Brits (and in particular of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, whom he considered to be the masters of the genre) was, at least at the time he wrote his lecture, justified.

In order to develop an indigenous form of Nonsense comparable to that which Tomasi described to his students, Italy's literature had to wait for the end of modernity. Italian Nonsense is a postmodern phenomenon that stemmed from the experimentalism of the neo-avant-garde of the late sixties and seventies. While forms of irrationalism, obscurity and wordplay characterised many of the aesthetic trends and movements of Italian modernism, a truly nonsensical literature akin to English – appealing, if not editorially addressed, to children but aimed at readers of all ages – only appeared in Italian when authors like Carroll were fully received (and adequately translated) with the same cultivated enthusiasm expressed by Tomasi in the early fifties. However, as noted by many Italianists (including myself),⁷ Alice had a hard time crossing the Alps to acclimate in the land of Pinocchio. Both the ages of national unification and of fascist nationalism, separated by World War I, dismissed Nonsense as a minor or immoral curiosity, and even those who appreciated its subtleties, like Tomasi, considered it to be irreducibly foreign.

Tomasi represented a rare case of Anglophile erudition, with a specific sensibility for refined comedy. Towering Italian experts of English literature and literary humour of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Mario Praz and Carmelo Previtiera, shared the prince's passion for Victorian Nonsense, but also his belief that their compatriots could not really understand it. Praz wrote in 1935 that 'in England this genre is deemed worth of a great deal of respect: indeed, it seems that only the English language is capable of producing the sublime of the absurd'.⁸ Previtiera, four years later, stated that 'this humour is an exclusive property of the Englishmen, or at least of Anglo-Saxon peoples: a native plant that thrives in the mists of Albion'.⁹ Despite the fact that Lear had a studio in Rome, travelled throughout the peninsula to draw landscapes and collect folkloric songs, and died in Sanremo where he is buried, limericks and other forms of nonsense-verse were long inaccessible to Italian readers. Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, as well as his entire production in verse, remained equally unknown in Italy for a long time, so much so that popular authors were not afraid to plagiarise them by re-using their original illustrations up until the early twenties.¹⁰

While German and French translations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* started circulating even before the publication of its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, the first Italian version of the novel appeared only in 1872, and only because Carroll directly solicited it through his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹¹ It was printed at a modest scale, and it hardly circulated.¹² A more widely diffused translation was published at the beginning of the following century, when Lear's limericks were also translated for the first time as part of the Italian version of Arthur Meer's popular *Children's Encyclopædia*. In both cases, the sophisticated wit of the originals was mortified by translators: Carroll's novel became a girly fable, devoid of any clever wordplay,¹³ and Lear's poems were qualified, opting for the most derogatory option to translate the word 'nonsense', as '*le sciocchezze di Edoardo Lear*'—literally: stupid things by Edoardo [*sic*] Lear.

Interestingly, both these early translations were curated by women, Emma Cagli and Camilla Del Soldato. This is not to say that Italy's editorial world, in the first decade of the twentieth century, was particularly inclusive in terms of gender – in fact, it proves the opposite. Rather than works of literature, Carroll's and Lear's Nonsense texts were evidently perceived as unimportant *divertissements* for children by two respectable gentlemen who accomplished serious things in other fields, and the translation of children's literature was considered as a maternal, pedagogical occupation suitable for women. Benedetto Croce, the most influential literary critic of the century, banished all novels and poems for children from the realm of real art ('*arte vera*').¹⁴ When they write for children, he declared in 1904, even the greatest authors (such as Luigi Capuana or Grazia Deledda, whom he otherwise admired) become just pedagogues or moralists, and those who only write for children are, at best, entertainers.¹⁵ The authoritative stigma that Croce imposed on children's literature accompanied the masterpieces of Victorian Nonsense throughout their difficult Italian diffusion in the first half of the twentieth century – a story of misunderstanding and diffidence that I recounted in detail elsewhere.¹⁶ Here, it is worth mentioning that some enthusiastic (if isolated) cases of reception took place in the interwar period. In the thirties, a young Fosco Maraini (destined to become a legendary orientalist, and one of Italy's greatest Nonsense poets a few decades later) used Lear's rhymes, which he knew by heart, to teach English to cadets of the Royal Navy on the Amerigo Vespucci ship.¹⁷ In the same years Carlo Izzo started his solitary and passionate investigation of the *Book of Nonsense*,¹⁸ which led to a series of translations (now considered classics) that, after the war, were put to music by Goffredo Petrassi.¹⁹ Giuseppe Fanciulli's *Il castello delle carte*,²⁰ a comedic and uncanny illustrated story, was clearly inspired by Carroll, as were two novellas of the early twenties that openly challenged the claustrophobic limits of children's literature in Italy. The first, Massimo Bontempelli's *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio*,²¹ is a rationally magical adventure that mixes the incongruous logic of *Through the Looking-Glass* with the metaphysical world-building of Plato's cave, Ariosto's moon and Abbott's *Flatland*. The second, Annie Vivanti's *Sua Altezza!*²² is a surreal *Bildungsroman* that materialises metaphors and plays with literal interpretations of idioms and figurative language. Yet aside from these episodes of fruitful reception, early twentieth-century Italy tended to confine British Nonsense to the children's literature that Croce disdained. Within those boundaries, Lear was hardly read and Carroll was demonised by fascism.

As Caterina Sinibaldi and others have shown,²³ under Mussolini's regime Nonsense was considered a particularly nasty foreign weed to be condemned during the so-called *bonifica del libro* (roughly, 'decontamination, sanitation, or reclamation of books') enacted by the fascist ministries of education and popular culture. For a 1938 national conference on children's literature, fascist pedagogue Nazareno Padellaro gave a talk on *Alice in Wonderland*, stating that the novel is immersed in a 'nightmarish atmosphere' that deforms the rational vision 'that is the innate gift of all Italians'. 'Even if the Anglo-Saxon spirit loves such intoxications', he argued, 'one doesn't see why we should teach them to our children.'²⁴ Padellaro obviously expressed a nationalist, even autarchic position, but his core message (that Nonsense does not belong here, and Italians cannot appreciate its English spirit) converged with that of admirers of the genre. As a matter of fact, more respectful versions of the same ideas appear in post-war essays on children's literature by anti-fascist authors. Bruno Betta, for instance, admitted that Carroll's work is 'a masterpiece for the Anglo-Saxons', but cautioned Italian parents and teachers against giving it to their boys and girls ('never before they turn 10, and only if you cannot find books that are more suitable to our children!').²⁵ Catholic pedagogues like Lina Sacchetti, while acknowledging the global success of Alice's story, found it inferior to sensible and morally edifying tales like *Pinocchio*.²⁶

Ultimately, Tomasi's dramatic complaints about the impenetrable seriousness of Italy's no-nonsense tradition made sense, and kept on faithfully describing Italian Nonsense (or better, the absence of it) up until the raucous years of contestation, when the genre attracted avant-garde authors precisely because it offered a way out of the cumbersome legacy of Italy's sensible, moral and stubbornly rational literary history.

Trailblazing Translations and Three Crowns

If tradition was the primary reason of rejection that Nonsense encountered in modern Italy, translation was certainly a major enduring obstacle. The two are, of course, interconnected. When the first complete Italian edition of *Lear's Book of Nonsense* was printed in Vicenza in 1946, in a modest edition of one thousand copies, the publisher decided to title it *Il libro delle follie* (the book of foolish things), refusing both the English term 'Nonsense' and its italianisation *Nonsenso* that the translator, Carlo Izzo, intended to use. For the second edition, which appeared eight years later in Venice, publisher Neri Pozza simply bought the many unsold copies of the first version and distributed them with a new cover.²⁷ Translations of Carroll's work circulated much more in the same years, but their literary quality was vastly inferior, justifying the perplexed comments of the pedagogues mentioned earlier. Still seen as stories for children, the Alice novels were not seen by their translators as containing complex linguistic challenges, and the creative morphology of Carroll's poems was basically ignored in the first half of the century. The eponymous monsters of *Jabberwocky* and *The Hunting of the Snark* were tellingly turned into Giabbervocco and Snarco by early translators,²⁸ who italianised the spelling but not the dense semantics of the original titles – and other equally meta-semantic words in the texts received similar treatment.

In 1951, two years before Tomasi's lesson on Nonsense, Walt Disney presented his animated version of *Alice in Wonderland* at the Venice International Film Festival. When the Cheshire Cat materialises in the film, he sings a tune whose lyrics, in the original, correspond to the first quatrain of *Jabberwocky* from *Through the*

Looking-Glass. The version that the audience in Venice (and, from the 6 December release, all over Italy) listened to is the following:

*A destra ed a manca va, di qua, di su, di giù, di là
la luna sorge all'ólimon e i palmìpedon neppur.
Albeggia, ed il solleon a larghe falde sbianca il mar
la luna sorge all'ólimon e i palmìpedon neppur.*

A literal English translation of these meaningless lines would sound, more or less, like this: 'To the right and to the left it goes, here, up, down, there / the moon rises on the holemon, and not even the mome raths. / It dawns, and the summer sun whitens the sea in large layers / the moon rises on the holemon, and not even the mome raths'. I render *ólimon*, an invented word that probably combines 'lemon' and 'horizon', with an equally awkward portmanteau, 'holemon'. Except for another portmanteau – *palmìpedon*, which directly translates Carroll's 'mome raths' by combining the Italian terms for 'hand-palms' and 'pedestrians' – the four lines share only a metrical cadence with *Jabberwocky* (and the *Jabberwock* itself doesn't appear at all). They were written by a prolific adaptor of American films, Roberto de Leonardis: one of only five Italians, to date, to be honoured by the Disney Fan Club with the official rank of Disney Legend.²⁹ A recent documentary for the sixtieth anniversary of the film³⁰ reveals that Disney chose to cut a scene centred on Humpty Dumpty, the *Jabberwock*, and the other untranslatable chimeric creatures of the poem, opting instead for an animation of the ballad of the Walrus and the Carpenter. However, he still wanted *Jabberwocky* to be featured in the film, and so decided to use it as the Cat's musical motif. While de Leonardis translated the lines of *The Walrus and the Carpenter* faithfully, the non-narrative and lexically inventive Nonsense of *Jabberwocky* received, instead, a defusing, normalising treatment. It is particularly interesting that the first line directly quotes Dante, who described the chaotic movement of lustful souls with the same fast-paced sequence of monosyllables adopted by de Leonardis: *di qua, di là, di su, di giù li mena* (*Inferno* V, 43).³¹ An effective and influential hendecasyllable, this line was often reprised almost identically throughout the history of Italian poetry, most prominently by Ludovico Ariosto in the sixteenth century.³²

Besides resorting to this ultra-Italian Dantesque trope, de Leonardis clearly avoided the challenge of directly translating the original, and opted instead for a reformulation of parts of the other poem by Carroll that he extensively translated for the film. The following lines of his version base their comedic incongruity on the paradoxical concurrent rising of both the moon (*luna*) and the *solleon* (an Italian expression for 'summer sun', which combines *sole* and *leone*). The idea did not come from *Jabberwocky* of course, but from *The Walrus and the Carpenter* ('The moon was shining sulkily, / Because she thought the sun / Had got no business to be there'), which starts with the same image of the sun shining on the sea that de Leonardis used for the Cat's tune. The poem about naïve oysters and their ill-intentioned hosts does not present the same linguistic challenges that made *Jabberwocky* a primary case study for translatology.³³ De Leonardis was able to establish a formal equivalence with the first text: he translated its plot, not caring too much about the effect that its words were meant to achieve with the audience. In order to transmit the (non)sense of the second, he would have had to attempt a dynamic equivalence,³⁴ dealing with what happens in it at the level of semantics. Rather than going for an abstruse italianisation of the original (like the

plain ‘*Giabbervocco*’ used by Silvio Spaventa Filippi and Giuliana Pozzo in the previous decades) or simplifying a rich blend of words into one Italian term (like Adriana Valori did with ‘*Tartaglione*’ in 1954), de Leonardis just threw in the towel.³⁵

The deconstructive potential of Nonsense was fully understood and tackled by Italy’s literary culture only between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, when, coincidentally, Disney’s movie returned to Italian theatres. In 1970, Izzo’s translations of Lear’s poems were finally published with the title *Il libro dei nonsense*, and canonised in one of the most prestigious collections of Italy’s editorial market: Giulio Einaudi’s philologically curated and beautifully printed *Millenni*. Other major publishers such as Mondadori and Fabbri issued new versions of *Alice in Wonderland*, which was newly translated at least three times in the previous two years. In the same moment, Umberto Eco included Segal’s and Civ’jan’s formalist analysis of English Nonsense in one of his foundational contributions to semiology, offering a precise definition of the limerick as a poetic form.³⁶ The thirty-four paradoxes of Gilles Deleuze’s *Logique du sens* strongly influenced an Italian academia that was heavily structuralist in inclination and rejuvenated by the turmoils of 1968, and the publisher Bompiani devoted an entire issue of his popular *Almanacchi* to playful forms of art such as *la letteratura nonsensica*.³⁷ In 1969, in the pages of the largest and most respected national newspaper, *Il Corriere della sera*, young literary critic Pietro Citati called Carroll ‘the most exquisite philosopher of our times’.³⁸

It was in this time of change³⁹ that new theoretical appreciation of nonsense on the most abstract and purist peripheries of Italy’s neo-avant-garde, generated translations and poetic experiments that formed the first real Italian contribution to the genre. Since the canonisation of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio as the ‘three crowns’ of medieval literature, Italy’s literary history has always had a penchant for poetic trinities (Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso for chivalric epic; Leopardi, Foscolo and Manzoni for Romantic poetry; Carducci, Pascoli and D’Annunzio for Decadence, and so on). In homage to this tradition, one could say that the ‘three crowns’ of Italian Nonsense in the sixties and the seventies are Giulia Niccolai, Fosco Maraini and Toti Scialoja. I shall go on to discuss their different approaches to logic and semantics, but first it is important to list a few crucial characteristics that they share.

These ‘three crowns’ of Italian Nonsense were linked by three major characteristics. They were, in the most elevated sense of the word, dilettantes. They looked at the Italian language and literary tradition from the liminal point of view of multilingualism, translation, expatriation, nostalgia. They actively reacted against the recent legacy of fascist culture and its moralising, homogenising, rationalising prescriptions. Despite the fact that they were educated in the years of Croce’s anathema against children’s literature and fascist diffidence towards foreign literature in general (and *Alice in Wonderland* in particular), all three had known and loved Victorian Nonsense since their youth. Like Lear, the landscape artist, and Carroll, the mathematician, they approached writing as an initially collateral activity, a complement to a more official career. Maraini was an ethnologist and scholar of East Asian cultures and literatures, Niccolai travelled the world as a professional photographer before becoming an editor, publisher and translator, while Scialoja was an eminent abstract painter, art critic and professor at Rome’s Academy of Fine Arts. Their poems stemmed from linguistic epiphanies experienced through these ‘serious’ occupations, investigating the logical incongruities and the revealing phonetic coincidences that occur while travelling, reproducing pictures, practicing action-painting, and trying to make sense

of Western culture during a postmodern economic boom. The Italian Nonsense they produced was informed by the loss of meaning generated by an endless repetition of sounds and images, and by viewing the Italian language as an exotic architecture of resounding syllables. It was rooted in the theory of informal art and the phenomenology of abstract expressionism, as well as in a clash between photographic eye and literary subjectivity inspired by the coeval objectivism of French narrative.

Another important point of contact among the three authors is the perspective of linguistic displacement from which they accessed nonsense verse in Italian. Scialoja, one of the first European artists to visit the painters of the New York School, started composing illustrated limericks in Paris during a long artistic sojourn in which he didn't have many chances to speak Italian. According to him, it was a longing for his native tongue that inspired the nonsensical rhymes that he sent from his studio on Rue de la Tombe Issoire, to his five-year-old nephew James Demby, who would receive and read them in Rome.⁴⁰ Niccolai was the daughter of a Milanese engineer and a worldly American woman from a family of New England timber merchants. She grew up bilingual, and devoted much of her life to the translation of such untranslatable modernist authors as Gertrude Stein and Dylan Thomas.⁴¹ Maraini, whose mother was a Hungarian writer of Anglo-Polish descent, grew up bilingual too, and in his youth taught English on a military ship, visiting North Africa and the Middle East. As an anthropologist he specialised in Tibet, where he travelled with Italian sinologists, and then migrated to Japan, where he lived and taught for many years before and after World War II.⁴² Multilingualism helped these poets understand the semantic possibilities of Nonsense verse: just as English is the real protagonist of Lear and Carroll's works, Italian became the primary object of analysis and playful deconstruction for Maraini, Niccolai and Scialoja.

It is worth adding that all three poets nourished a profound disgust for totalitarianism. Their anti-fascist devotion to freedom explains the xenophile, anti-traditional poetic research that they undertook, and deeply influenced their lives. While in Japan, Maraini refused to adhere to Mussolini's Repubblica di Salò, and for this reason he was imprisoned in a concentration camp in Nagoya for two years with his wife and daughters.⁴³ Because of her mother's nationality, Niccolai was discriminated against as a child under Mussolini's regime, enduring the harassment of schoolmates and teachers in the village on the Como lake where she was evacuated during the bombings.⁴⁴ Scialoja participated in the anti-fascist resistance in Rome at the end of the war. Along with fellow painters Renato Guttuso and Mario Mafai, he joined a group of partisan fighters that started guerrilla actions against the Nazi-fascists.⁴⁵

What's in a Place Name?

On a number of occasions – now preserved for posterity on YouTube – Gigi Proietti, one of Italy's most popular post-war comedians (he dubbed Robin Williams's genie in the Italian version of *Aladdin*), performed a hilarious sonnet titled *Il Lonfo* on national television. He did so to lovingly mock other great Italian actors, such as Vittorio Gassman, Piera degli Esposti or Carmelo Bene, who occasionally agreed to read classical masterpieces of Italian poetry, from Cavalcanti to Leopardi, for the cultural programs of the RAI TV broadcasting service. Proietti's performance of *Il Lonfo* became a cult. The actor's voice, his dignified and dramatic tone, and the pensive intensity of his academic elocution were worthy of the most serious and grand poetic recital. The perfect metrical cadence of the fourteen Petrarchan lines that he read – rhymed

according to the Tuscan scheme that influenced the entirety of the Western lyrical canon – resonated exquisitely throughout the performance. What made it impossible not to laugh was the absurd language of the poem, uncannily similar to that of the great texts recited in serious readings and yet completely different:

*Il Lonfo
Il Lonfo non vaterca né gluisce
e molto raramente barigatta,
ma quando soffia il bego a bisce bisce
sdilenca un poco e gnagio s'archipatta.*

*È frusco il Lonfo! È pieno di lupigna
arrafferia malversa e sofolenta!
Se cionfi ti sbiduglia e ti arrupigna
se lugri ti botalla e ti criventa.*

*Eppure il vecchio Lonfo ammargelluto
che bete e zughia e fonca nei trombazzi
fa lègica busia, fa gisbuto;*

*e quasi quasi in segno di sberdazzi
gli affarferesti un gniffo. Ma lui zuto
t'alloppa, ti sberneccchia; e tu l'accazzi.⁴⁶*

There is no way to translate *Il Lonfo* without rewriting it, because it is written in a nonsensical language that maintains the grammatical structures and phonetic characteristics of Italian without being Italian. It also perfectly uses the phonetic figures, rhythmical rules and rhetorical devices of Italy's traditional poetic language, which famously evolved independently from that of prose.⁴⁷ It makes it possible, for an Italian, to imagine what Dante would sound like to the ears of a Martian: to enjoy an Italian poem in the way that a foreigner might.

Proietti found *Il Lonfo* in Fosco Maraini's first (and only) book of poems, *Gnòsi delle Fànfole*. All the texts in the book are written in the same refined and estranging quasi-Italian, and form a nonsensical songbook. A small publisher, Di Donato, printed it in 1966, in 300 numbered copies, mostly given by the author to friends and colleagues. Maraini's Italian nonsense was a solitary attempt to import the elegant Victorian meta-semantics of Carroll and Lear into a tradition that had rejected them for almost a century (the influence of *Jabberwocky*, in particular, is noticeable). Through the years, the book acquired many admirers and became a cult, as the latest curator of the verses, Maro Marcellini, remembered in the foreword to his annotated edition.⁴⁸ It was reprinted, included in the complete works of the author,⁴⁹ and even put to music by popular jazz pianist Stefano Bollani⁵⁰ before gaining a vast mainstream audience thanks to Proietti's televised performances of *Il Lonfo*. 'Meta-semantics' is the term that Maraini used himself to describe the intransitive morphology, at once familiar and alien, of his rhymes, which have been recently defined more precisely 'peri-semantic'.⁵¹ To explain the genesis of his *Fànfole*, Maraini described language as an ecological system in which a patient observer can find 'natural gems' (*gioielli di natura*) that

mysteriously evolved into their current curious shapes and colours. Fruitful collections of such gems are topographical charts, atlases and train announcements. Lists of place names captivated Maraini's multilingual ear, and suggested to his pen how to form the domestic exoticism of a new, nonsensical Italian.⁵²

While Maraini's represented an early and detached case of pure semantic experiment, the Nonsense of Scialoja and Niccolai germinated directly from the deconstructionist and neo-avant-garde re-evaluation of Carroll and Lear. Niccolai was one of the very few women who took part in Italy's most prominent neo-avant-garde movement, the Gruppo 63.⁵³ In 1969, with other poets interested in subverting linear textuality and experimenting with concrete and visual poetry, she abandoned the group and moved to Mulino di Bazzano, where she devoted her life to writing, editing and publishing edgy literature outside of the mainstream editorial market. Her first book of concrete poems, *Humpty Dumpty* (1969),⁵⁴ is a microscopic analysis of Carroll's nonsense novels: she extracted minimal portions from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (sometimes just one or two words) to build visual comments on its plot, its challenge to logical assumptions, and the intrinsically nonsensical nature of language in general. Using a typewriter, Letraset typefaces and a Linotype machine, she crafted an entire book without writing one word herself: the entire text, shaped in various forms, is borrowed from Carroll, and becomes eloquent and understandable to Italian readers (in fact, to readers of any language) thanks to the visual arrangement of letters, syllables, and sentences (Figures 12.1–3).

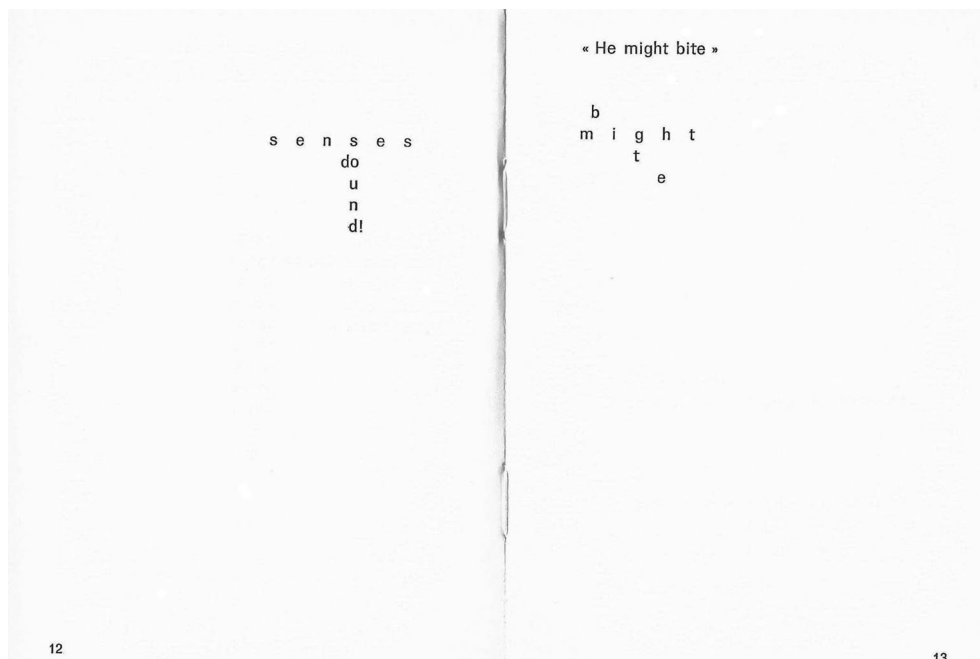


Figure 12.1 Giulia Niccolai, 'Senses Do Sound!' and 'He Might Bite p. 121', from *Humpty Dumpty* (Turin: Geiger, 1969), pp. 13–4, artisanal Linotype on paper, 11x15cm.

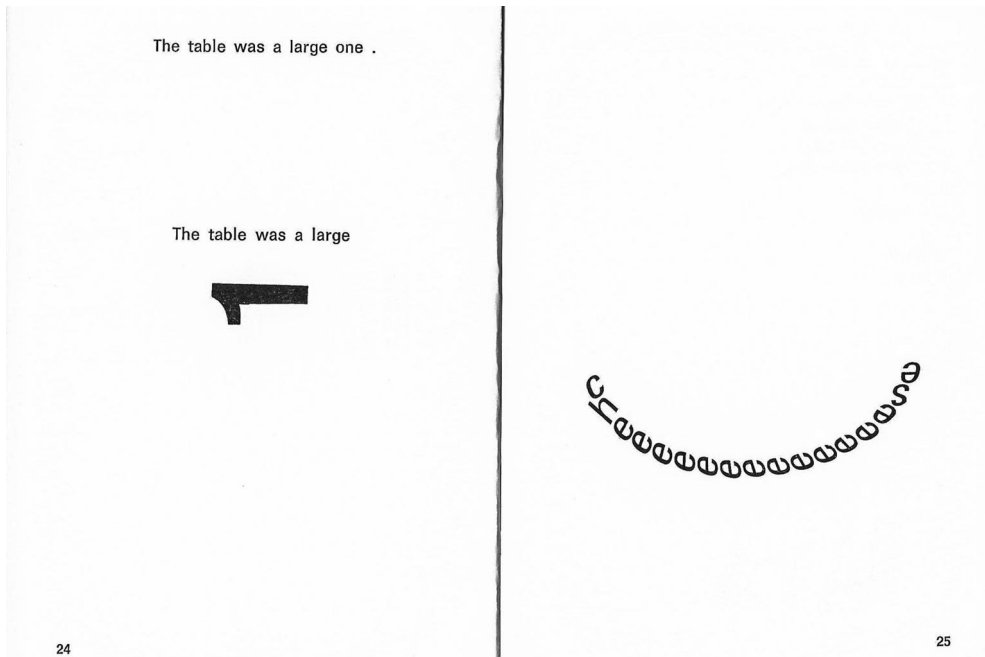


Figure 12.2 Giulia Niccolai, 'The Table Was a Large One p. 93' and 'The Cheshire Cat's Grin p. 83', from *Humpty Dumpty* (Turin: Geiger, 1969), pp. 24–5, artisanal Linotype and xeroxed Letraset print on paper, 11x15cm.

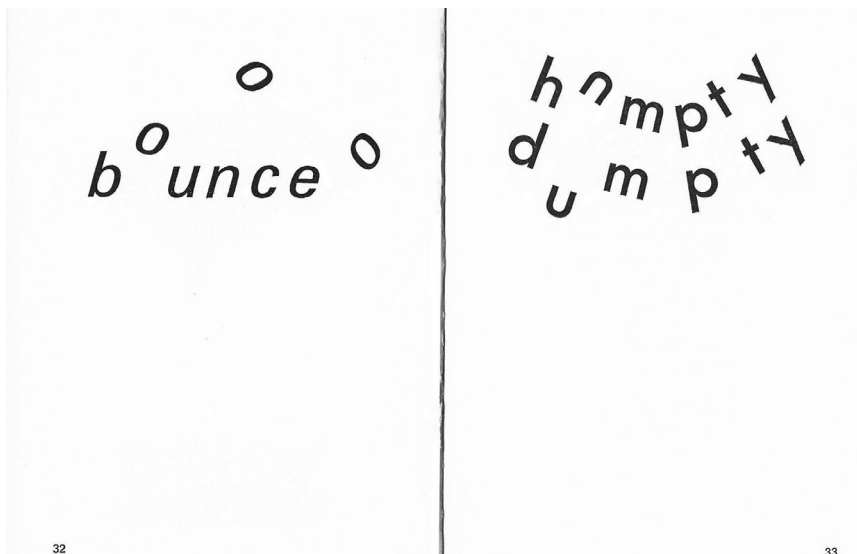


Figure 12.3 Giulia Niccolai, 'To Bounce p. 241' and 'Humpty Dumpty p. 261', from *Humpty Dumpty* (Turin: Geiger, 1969), pp. 31–2, xeroxed Letraset print on paper, 11x15cm.

Between 1970 and 1971, while reviewing the new translation of Lear's *Limericks* for the journal *Tam Tam*, Niccolai composed two books, *Greenwich* and *New Greenwich*, that synthesise her playful and rigorous contribution to Nonsense.⁵⁵ Like Maraini's *Fànfole*, the *nonsensi geografici* of these two collections are based on the intransitive and untranslatable familiarity of place names: every single word of each poem, except for conjunctions and prepositions, was taken from an atlas. The criteria adopted by Niccolai, explained in a seriocomic afterword, were proximity, rhythm and a teasing seduction of sense, which is just slightly out of reach in the geographical compositions. Since the words that compose each text come from the same atlas page, the poems approximate many different languages. Poems based on Italian place names for instance, like 'Como è trieste Venezia', sound Italian, while poems based on American place names, like *Utah*, sound English:

Utah

Strawberry strawberry
holden monroe
bountiful farmington
minnie plateau.
Emory upton
on devils side
washington terrace
oh enterprise!
Riverton vernon
elmo woodside
strawberry strawberry
lofgreen lakeside.

Nothing is more untranslatable than toponyms: ancient, powerful words that resist the natural evolution of language, crystallising ancient morphologies and semantics. Sometimes they even survive the places that they define, becoming, through time, vestigia of lost meaning. The poems in *Greenwich* that are based on Sardinian place names, for example, look like Latin *carmina*; those based on French toponyms from around Lyon seem like early modern ballads of the Romance tradition. With *Greenwich*, Niccolai flirted with the utopia of a universal poetic language while mocking the xenophobia of Italy's literary tradition. In the following decades she wrote books of poems that deconstructed dictionaries, mixed texts with objects and reflected on linguistic coincidences and wordplays.⁵⁶ She became a towering figure of Italy's experimentalism, studied all over the world, and at the turn of the twenty-first century began to merge her earlier nonsense poetics with the Buddhist philosophy that she learned from Tibetan monks.

Place names were a spark for Scialoja's Nonsense as well. His poems however, like Lear's limericks, are written in a readable language and look like nursery rhymes. They are multimodal texts, always accompanied by illustrations drawn by the author that complete the words, visualising their impossible or ridiculous content. As noted above, Scialoja started writing them to amuse his young nephew at the beginning of the sixties. He then continued to fabricate illustrated letters, with typed rhymes and sketches, for other children in his family, eventually collecting many illustrated texts

in an artisanal book that circulated among friends. The book was noticed by an editor at Bompiani, who published a selection of the rhymes in 1971, under the title *Amato topino caro*. This beautiful edition, filled with Scialoja's elegant and colourful drawings – which were secretly inspired by Grandville's uncanny etchings⁵⁷ – became one of the favourite books of Italo Calvino's seven-year-old daughter Giovanna, who convinced her father to publish Scialoja's second book, *Una vespa! Che spavento*, with Einaudi in 1975. Already famous as a painter, Scialoja started a literary career that continued until his death.⁵⁸

To present his second book, Calvino directly connected Scialoja's poems with Lear and Carroll, calling them 'the first true Italian example of a poetic amusement congenial to the extraordinary English tradition of limericks and nonsense verse'. As a matter of fact, Scialoja's early poems are based on a linguistic mechanism very close to that of Lear's limericks. Most of them play on the assonances between the name of an animal and that of a place (*cani* and Kenya for instance, or *marmotta* and Mar Morto) and keep building on the same sounds.⁵⁹ The resulting micro-stories are grammatically plausible, like those of Lear, but the author's absolute attention for the sounds makes the sense progressively disappear.⁶⁰ Walruses on tricycles, woodpeckers at picnics, rabbits on the Capitol hill: the poems are only justified by the phonetic associations of their words in Italian (*tricheco* and *triciclo*, *picchio* and *pic nic*, *coniglio* and *Campidoglio*). To truly translate them, one needs to rewrite them – and this is what I tried to do in the following example, keeping the central animal (*rondini*, swallows) and the rhythmic structure, but changing meanings in order to make sounds work.

*Sotto la gronda gridano le rondini:
'Sono grandini i chicchi della grandine!'*⁶¹

Six swift swallows, wallowing like whales,
bawl, whirl, wander and howl above the vales.

Rather than playing with the enigmatic sound of toponyms and peri-semantic words, like Niccolai and Maraini, Scialoja mobilised the sounds of classical Italian poems. Many of his limericks are parodies of famous texts of the lyrical tradition. In this, he is close to the model of Carroll, who composed parodic versions of English Romantic poems and eighteenth-century didactic children's verse. However, while Carroll's parodies of authors such as Watts and Southey came to supercede the original texts, such that in some cases they are much less familiar today than Carroll's nonsensical versions, Scialoja played with a tradition that remains vivid in the memory of any Italian who attended elementary school. The authors that he parodied most often are Nobel Prize winners like Carducci, tragic symbolists like Pascoli, and poet-philosophers like Leopardi. The extremely serious texts of these masters are traditionally learned by heart by Italian children long before they are able to understand them. Scialoja's parodies, therefore, allow adult readers to recall the confusing repetition of grandiloquent words and constructions that they experienced as children: to live again, like Alice, in the strict and nonsensical rules of Wonderland, the impression that the meaning of things is just beyond their grasp.

Geography and philology are twin sisters, according to a passage from Ionesco quoted at the beginning of Niccolai's *Greenwich*.⁶² Italian Nonsense mobilised these

two unlikely muses to acclimate Victorian humour in the most serious of all traditions. It is time, now, to repatriate their senseless but meaningful rhymes in the mists of Albion, translating them with the same inventive enthusiasm that recent Italian masters of Nonsense translation, such as Ottavio Fatica,⁶³ and Milli Graffi⁶⁴ applied to Carroll and Lear, now loved and studied as classics by readers of all ages.

Notes

1. Edward Lear, *Edward Lear in Southern Italy: Journals of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria and the Kingdom of Naples*, ed. Peter Quennell (London: William Kimber, 1964), p. 152.
2. I am referring to Francesco Orlando, who recalled the Sicilian lectures in Francesco Orlando, *Ricordo di Lampedusa* (Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1963).
3. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 'Nonsense', in Id., *Opere*, ed. Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), pp. 1167–9.
4. See for instance Giuseppe Crimi, *L'oscura lingua e il parlar sottile: tradizione e fortuna del Burchiello* (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 2005). On the decryption of similar forms of Italian early modern Nonsense à clef, see the Renaissance and Baroque chapters of 'Nominativi fritti e mappamondi': *Il nonsense nella letteratura italiana*, ed. Giuseppe Antonelli and Carla Chiummo (Rome: Salerno, 2007).
5. On texts that make no sense in the oeuvre of canonical authors such as Montale and Caproni, see Andrea Afribo, 'Approssimazioni al nonsense nella poesia italiana del Novecento' in Antonelli and Chiummo, 'Nominativi fritti e mappamondi', pp. 289–306.
6. A typical example of unfunny Nonsense is Alfredo Giuliani's 1979 composition *Poema Chomsky*. Giuliani was a pre-eminent figure of Italy's neo-avant-garde, and was interested in the purely grammatical aspects of Nonsense. He composed a poem by repeating Chomsky's famous example of a nonsensical sentence (colourless green ideas sleep furiously) in a variety of Italian translations. Despite this cold, purely structural approach to the concept, he appreciated Nonsense verse as a humorous literary genre, and was one of the first critics to map Italian approximations to it (including the ones attempted by Scialoja and Niccolai, on which I will insist in the last section of this essay). See Alfredo Giuliani, *Le droghe di Marsiglia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977), pp. 396–7.
7. See for instance, *Quando Alice incontrò Pinocchio*, ed. Pompeo Vigliani (Turin: Trauben, 1988), and Alessandro Giammei, 'Nonsense-verse Made in Italy', *il verri* 60 (2016), 31–43.
8. 'In Inghilterra è un genere degno di gran rispetto: solo in lingua inglese, infatti, pare che sia possibile creare il sublime dell'assurdo'. Mario Praz, *Cronache Letterarie Anglosassoni II. Cronache inglesi e americane* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1951), p. 56.
9. '[Quest]'humour è proprietà esclusiva degli'Inglesi o almeno dei popoli anglosassoni: una pianta indigena che vegeta fra le brume di Albione'. Carmelo Previtiera, *La poesia giocosa e l'umorismo* (Florence: Vallardi, 1939), p. 36.
10. In his quintessentially Tuscan *La regina di cuori* for instance, Renato Fucini clearly draws on John Tenniel's classical illustrations of Carroll's work, which are directly reused in an early edition of his book *Il ciuco di Melessecche* (Florence: La Voce, 1922).
11. The translator was Rossetti's nephew, Teodorico Pietrocola Rossetti. The edition was printed by Loescher in Turin.
12. See *Quando Alice incontrò Pinocchio*, ed. Vigliani, p. 68.
13. The first Italian academic biography of Carroll, in 1968, utterly condemned the translation (published in 1908, with the title *Nel paese delle meraviglie*) in these terms ('non ha nulla a che vedere con l'astratto squisito nitore della vera Alice'). See Laura Draghi Salvatori, *Lewis Carroll* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1968), pp. 45–55.

14. 'l'arte per bambini non sarà mai arte vera' (art for children will never be real art). These considerations appeared in a 1904 essay on Luigi Capuana, which was then collected in an influential 1914 book. See Benedetto Croce, *La letteratura della Nuova Italia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1929), III, pp. 101–18.
15. See Croce's comments on De Amicis in Benedetto Croce, *La letteratura italiana per saggi storicamente disposti*, ed. Mario Sansone (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1960), III, p. 384.
16. Alessandro Giammei, *Nell'officina del nonsense di Toti Scialoja. Topi, toponimi, tropi, cronotopi* (Milan: edizioni del verri, 2014). See in particular the first chapter, 'Il nonsense vittoriano e l'Italia. Cronistoria di un difficile acclimamento', pp. 11–58.
17. Fosco Maraini, *Case, amori, universi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 260.
18. His first, seminal study is Carlo Izzo, 'L'umorismo alla luce del Book of Nonsense', *Ateneo Veneto* 126.119 (1935), 211–19.
19. Goffredo Petrassi, *Nonsense: per coro a cappella da The Book of Nonsense di Edward Lear* (Milan: Suvini-Zerboni, 1953).
20. Giuseppe Fanciulli, *Il castello delle carte. Novelline bizzarre* (Florence: Bemporad, 1914).
21. Published in 1922 by Bemporad and reprinted many times, this novella was translated into English: Massimo Bontempelli, *The Chess Set in the Mirror*, trans. Estelle Gilson (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007).
22. On this novella, see Maria Rosa Truglio, 'Annie in Wonderland: Vivanti's sua altezza! and children's literature during fascism', *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 1 (2004), 121–43.
23. See Caterina Sinibaldi, 'Tradurre Alice durante il ventennio fascista', in *I dilemmi del traduttore di Nonsense*, ed. Angela Albanese and Franco Nasi, special issue of *Il lettore di provincia* 138 (2012), 65–79; and Mariella Colin, *Les enfants de Mussolini. Littérature, livres, lectures d'enfance et de jeunesse sous le fascisme* (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2010).
24. Nazareno Padellaro, 'Traduzioni e riduzioni di libri per fanciulli', in *Convegno nazionale per la letteratura infantile e giovanile* (Roma: Stige, 1939), pp. 35–42, p. 41.
25. 'Sempre non prima dei 10 anni e se non si trovano libri che per i nostri fanciulli riescono più adatti!' Bruno Betta, *La letteratura per l'infanzia. Che cosa leggere dall'infanzia alla gioventù. Guida pratica per l'educatore alla conoscenza della letteratura infantile* (Brescia: Vita Scolastica, 1952), p. 107.
26. Lina Sacchetti, *Letteratura per ragazzi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1954), pp. 83–93.
27. For the editorial history of Izzo's translation, see his foreword to Edward Lear, *Il libro dei nonsense*, ed. Carlo Izzo (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), pp. I–XXIII: XXII.
28. I am referring to Silvio Spaventa Filippi, who translated the Alice novels in 1914, and Cesare Vico Lodovici, who translated *The Hunting of the Snark* in 1945.
29. The prestigious title is confirmed on the official site of the Disney fan club, in which a curious biography of de Leonardis appears. Available at <<https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/roberto-de-leonardis/>> (last accessed 1 May 2021).
30. The documentary, titled *Through the Keyhole: A companion's Guide to Wonderland*, is included in the 2011 home-video '60th anniversary edition' of the film released by Disney.
31. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. and with a commentary by Charles Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 48–9.
32. In his *Orlando Furioso* (1536), Ariosto reuses Dante's eight syllables (sometimes extracting the hemistichs 'di qua di là' or 'di su di giù') on dozens of occasions. For a sample, and a discussion of the bibliography on Dante in Ariosto, see the recent Lorenzo Bartoli, '«Solo e senza altrui rispetto» (*Orlando Furioso* XXIII, 122, 2). Nota sulla follia di Orlando', *Quaderns d'Italia* 22 (2017), 75–82, p. 78.
33. On the matter, see Daniela Almansi, 'Nonsensical Translation: How to turn the spotlight on the blind spots of interpretation', *Bookbird: Journal of International Children's Literature* 53.3 (2015), 56–65; Pilar Orero, *The Problems of Translating 'Jabberwocky': The Nonsense*

- Literature of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Their Spanish Translators* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2007); and Björn Sundmark, 'Some Uffish Thoughts on the Swedish Translations of Jabberwocky', *The European Journal of Humour Research* 5.3 (2017), 43–56.
34. I am borrowing the terms 'formal equivalence' and 'dynamic equivalence' from Eugene Nida's essays of biblical translation. See Eugene Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964).
 35. On Italian translations of Jabberwocky see *I dilemmi del traduttore di Nonsense* ed. Albanese and Nasi. The volume includes a rich bibliography by the curators (pp. 173–82).
 36. Umberto Eco, *I sistemi di segni e lo strutturalismo sovietico* (Milan: Bompiani, 1969), pp. 151–61.
 37. The 1966 issue, which appeared with the title *Arte e Gioco* and included a section on Nonsense (pp. 107–12).
 38. 'Il più squisito filosofo dei nostri tempi'. The article is now collected in a book that takes its title from Carroll: Pietro Citati, *Il tè del cappellaio matto* (Milan: Adelphi, 2012), pp. 333–6, p. 334.
 39. The re-evaluation of Nonsense continued throughout the seventies. In 1976, a monographic issue of the avant-garde journal *il verri* was devoted to the genre, and in 1977 Gianni Celati held a legendary seminar on Carroll's Alice at the DAMS in Bologna, see Gianni Celati (ed.), *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza*, afterword by Andrea Cortellessa (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007).
 40. On Scialoja's writing and formation, and on his relationship with writers and literature in general, see Giammei, *Nell'officina del nonsense di Toti Scialoja* (in particular Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 59–168). See also Eloisa Moira, *Un allegro fischiettare nelle tenebre* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015).
 41. For an intellectual and, in part, biographical portrait of Niccolai, see Rebecca West, 'Giulia Niccolai: A Wide-Angle Portrait', in *Neoavanguardia*, ed. Luca Somigli (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), pp. 212–30.
 42. On Maraini's life, see Fosco Maraini, *Case, amori, universi*.
 43. On this episode, see Dacia Maraini, *Bagheria* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1993).
 44. An experience recalled in Giulia Niccolai, *Favole & Frisbees* (Milan: Archinto, 2018).
 45. For a precise and rich chronology of Scialoja's life, see Giuseppe Appella, 'Vita, opere, fortuna critica', in *Toti Scialoja. Opere 1955–1963* (Milan: Electa, 2000), pp. 127–216.
 46. Fosco Maraini, *Pellegrino in Asia*, ed. Franco Marcoaldi (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), p. 1479.
 47. During the Italian Renaissance, prominent humanists such as Pietro Bembo established Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* as the standard linguistic model of prose, and Petrarch's *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (today known as *Canzoniere* or 'Songbook') as the standard model of poetic, and in particular lyrical, language. Petrarchan linguistic traditions remained particularly conservative: that is why, for instance, the language of opera, based on those conventions even in the twentieth century, sounds less decipherable to the ears of native speakers even in comparison to the language of pre-Petrarch poets, like Dante. On the morphology of Italian poetic language, see Luca Serianni, *La lingua poetica italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2009).
 48. Fosco Maraini, *Gnòsi delle Fanfole*, ed. Maro Marcellini (Milan: Baldini Castoldi, 2007).
 49. Fosco Maraini, *Pellegrino in Asia*, cit., pp. 1478–96.
 50. The eponymous album was published by Universal Music in 1998.
 51. Daniele Baglioni, 'Poesia metasemantica o perisemantica? La lingua delle Fànfole di Fosco Maraini', in *Studi linguistici per Luca Serianni*, ed. Valeria Della Valle and Pietro Trifone (Rome: Salerno, 2007), pp. 469–80.
 52. Maraini's discussion of his own creative process is in his preface to the *Fanfole*, now in Fosco Maraini, *Pellegrino in Asia*, pp. 1479–84.

53. On Niccolai's role and feminist stance within the Gruppo 63, see Alessandro Giammei, 'Desdemona, Noun: See Othello. Giulia Niccolai: Gender & Neoavanguardia', *Engramma* 145 (2017), 67–82.
54. All of Niccolai's book of poems, from 1969 to 2012, were collected in Giulia Niccolai, *Poemi & Oggetti*, ed. Milli Graffi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2012).
55. An early comment by Bulgheroni is still very illuminating on the ethos and method of Niccolai's first books of Nonsense. See Marisa Bulgheroni, 'Una geografia nonsensical', *Tam Tam* 6/7/8 (1974), 21–4.
56. For a detailed history of Niccolai's poetry, see Alessandro Giammei, 'La bussola di Alice. Giulia Niccolai da Carroll a Stein (via Orgosolo) fino all'illuminazione', *il verri* 51 (2013), 33–77.
57. The direct influence of Grandville's *Vie Privée et Publique des Animaux* (an 1842 disquieting social satire, not really suited for children) on Scialoja's drawings remained undetected until recently. See Alessandro Giammei, 'Disegni (con poesie) per bambini e connoisseurs', in Claudio Crescentini (ed.), *100 Scialoja Azione e Pensiero* (Rome: De Luca, 2015), pp. 88–93.
58. The complete poetic works are collected in two books, one of playful nonsense poems and one of more experimental, less comedic texts: Toti Scialoja, *Versi del senso perso* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989); and Toti Scialoja, *Poesie 1978–1998*, ed. Giovanni Raboni (Milan: Garzanti, 2002).
59. Proposing an Italian version of Carroll's portmanteau words (the *parole melagrane* or pomegranate words), Scialoja described his process in Toti Scialoja, 'Come nascono le mie poesie', *il verri* 8 (1988), 9–20.
60. On the linguistic aspects of Scialoja's poetry, as well as his literary sources, see Luca Serianni, 'Il gioco linguistico nella poesia di Toti Scialoja', in Antonelli and Chiummo (eds), *Nominativi fritti e mappamondi*, pp. 307–24.
61. Toti Scialoja, *Quando la talpa vuol ballare il tango* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), p. 6.
62. In *La Leçon* (1951), the professor states that 'Géographie et philologie sont sœurs jumelles.' Eugène Ionesco, *Théâtre I*, ed. Jacques Lamarchand (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 73.
63. Ottavio Fatica, an award-winning poet, curated a new version of Lear's poems in 1994. A prestigious edition was printed more recently: Edward Lear, *Limericks*, ed. Ottavio Fatica (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).
64. Graffi was a younger follower of Niccolai's avant-garde group. She published her translation of *Jabberwocky* in her debut book as a poet – Milli Graffi, *Mille graffi e venti poesie* (Parma: Geiger, 1979), pp. 43–4. She then curated an integral version of Carroll's novels for Garzanti, which is still in print. She also translated *The Hunting of the Snark* – Lewis Carroll, *La caccia allo Snualo*, ed. Milli Graffi (Matera: Edizioni del Labirinto, 1982). Her own experimental poetry, concerned with the limits of language and the power of performance, awaits a systematic study. Milli Graffi was a fearless beacon in the realm of Italy's neo-neo-avant-garde, a master in translating the untranslatable and the (not-so-fairy) god-mother of any young scholar interested in nonsense and experimentalism. To her memory I dedicate this essay.