CONCLUSION

ANOTHER PREFACE

A conclusion is nothing but a prelude to another beginning. In this final chapter, I recapitulate briefly, the salient points that I have attempted to demonstrate in this dissertation and indicate the challenges that may lie ahead in the field of the study of Nonsense Literature.

Nonsense literature broke the surface of the literary waters in the Victorian age, with the writings of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It was a fortuitous set of circumstances that enabled a new form of literature to enter the mainstream -- circumstances which included a renewed interest in language and etymology, a steady government, industrial development, prosperity in trade and business, a sufficiently advanced printing technology, abundant resources from the colonies and the effects of two major inventions on the culture and perspectives of the age: the railways and the camera.

The intuitive perceptions of Lear and Carroll led them to create a form of textuality which was by nature subversive and one of the first things that their works subverted was the structure of language itself. Prompting Derrida, who was to appear about a century later, Lear and Carroll demonstrated the sliding nature of signification, the lack of fixity in language and the very impossibility of meaning, through their self-deconstructing works. Using the postmodern techniques of reversal, displacement, play, parody and pastiche, they engineered, perhaps, the first fully self-conscious “genre” in the history of English literature.

Nonsense has the quality of pre-linguistic baby-talk. In Lacanian terms, Lear and Carroll turned to Nonsense in the same way as they turned to the other legitimate forms of Imaginary Order jouissance -- painting and photography. Although Nonsense follows rules of its own, it
provided release to the suppressed feelings of exclusion and ostracism to the self-conscious and sensitive Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It allowed them to perform a sort of rebellion: by indulging in pre-symbolic writing, they could satirise society, parody canonised and fixed forms of thinking and writing and undermine hierarchies.

The Victorian Age constructed a concept of the delicate and dependent woman in several ways – medically (her biology makes her helpless), socially (the “angel in the house” was a signifier that gained its meaning from its binary opposite – the prostitute) and politically (women are not as mature as men and therefore, not eligible to vote). The most unique feature of the style of writing of Lear and Carroll, its non-patriarchal and non-hierarchical form – one never attempted before – met with great success in a hyper-masculine and jingoistic age. The female characters in Carroll’s works (the Red Queen, White Queen, the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts and Alice herself) and the eccentric women in Lear’s limericks (who twirl, climb up trees, have pointed chins etc.), all seem to be portrayals of women who find that they are unable to be themselves in a patriarchal environment. These characters seem to represent the various roles that women are typically forced into by the ubiquitous forces of male dominance.

These are the arguments that I have put forward and attempted to reason out in the pages of this dissertation so far. To criticise my own endeavour, I agree with Pendlebury that often, theoretical studies of Nonsense end up “choosing literary ‘evidence’ to cohere with one’s own theory” and “perceive symbolism where there is none” (Pendlebury 73). However, a review of my dissertation would show that at no point have I dogmatically enforced an illogical or unreasonable perspective, having stood on the shoulders of giants like Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. My thesis, then, is the product of a “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” approach combined with the analytical insights of philosophers who, today, are widely accepted as having provided revolutionary, valid and
sound frames of thought which help us understand literature and the world around us, in a
critical and questioning and, therefore, more humane way.

Nothing remains to be said

I perceive two major milestones that are yet to be reached in the field of Nonsense: (a) Academic and (b) Transformation.

(a) The Academic Challenge: The writing and study of Nonsense has always been relegated to the margins in mainstream academic environments. Nonsense is a much-maligned term, a term that is used in daily parlance with negative connotations (and denotations, for that matter) and generally refers to something silly, superfluous, irrational or illogical. The fact remains, however, that Nonsense (i) ensures the sustenance of our world of sense through very specific and unique relations which must always be kept in mind whenever we try to be meaningful or make sense (ii) has never lost its popularity (iii) is a part of almost every literate child’s childhood and best memories (iv) helps us learn a language better (v) is a part of almost every language, culture and country (vi) gives a child a confidence as a language user by virtue of its freedom to play with signifiers (vii) is quoted as supporting texts in books about scientific fact, management techniques and philosophical observations (viii) is a sort of collective unconscious of the entire world (ix) makes uncannily accurate revelations about the reality and mechanics of society, gender, language and culture and (x) is enjoyed by adults all over the world, irrespective of age.

Perhaps, then, the time is ripe to include Nonsense in mainstream academics. The growing critical attention being paid by serious researchers to Nonsense and Nonsense texts is a clear movement in this direction. The day may not be distant when universities all over the world establish Departments of Nonsense and offer degrees in Nonsense Studies.
On the other hand, this may turn out to be a gross mistake. Nonsense thrives on its subaltern status. It is every grown-up’s dirty secret, a private joke that everybody knows, a constituting principle for the brotherhood of babble that all Nonsense-lovers are part of. It is in the very nature of Nonsense to be non-commercial, anti-institutional and subaltern. To make it part of a mainstream is to risk ruining it by commercialisation, institutionalisation and canonisation. So while the future of the inclusion of Nonsense into mainstream academics may be inevitable, it may also be a great pity.

(b) Transformation: There is an abundance of Nonsense Literature in India and local languages all over the world. But, precisely because they are written in local tongues, they seldom find an audience beyond their linguistic and geographical boundaries. Recent attempts at translation have met (Heyman 2007) with limited success. Michael Heyman, one of the co-editors of The Tenth Rasa has undertaken a daunting worldwide enterprise (and a futile one in my opinion) with his colleague, Kevin Shortsleeve – the translation of the Nonsense works of different countries into English, to eventually produce An Anthology of World Nonsense. While this is truly a valiant endeavour and an admirable work in progress, the viability of the effort is doubtful.

While I agree with Heyman that it was Sukumar Ray who invented the Tenth Rasa (Heyman xli) in India and the Bengali kheyal rasha was instrumental in its emerging in Bengal as a literary form, I find it difficult to agree with his claim that “non-sense, folk and literary texts are certainly translatable, even if they do present some special challenges” (xvii). Heyman deflates his own enterprise at the outset by making some suicidal statements that render his endeavour futile. He states that “our goal in these translations was to keep as much original meaning as possible” (xviii). If Nonsense is entirely based on non-referentiality, multiplicity of signification and the deliberate subversion of meaning, it is ridiculous to aim at sticking to the meaning of the original. Unlike texts that are dependent
on the assumption that they *can mean* or that they have a meaning, Nonsense claims no such thing. Texts of sense can be translated into texts of sense. Texts of *Nonsense*, if translated into texts of *sense* (as Heyman claims), are *no longer texts of Nonsense at all*.

Heyman justifies his venture with a quote from Sukanta Chaudhuri (translator of Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol*) which states that “people might debate whether nonsense can be translated; but I reassure myself that at worst the result will be nonsense” (Chaudhuri qtd. in Heyman xviii). On the contrary, when Nonsense is translated, keeping “as much original meaning as possible”, eventually what is produced is *sense*, not *Nonsense*. The quest of the translator has *shifted* from the syntactic jugglery, the phonetic play and semantic irrationality of a language to an attempt to adhere to the *denotative signification of the words* that the Nonsense work is made of. It is the language of the original that allows a *particular sort of play* which is simply impossible in any other language. Each language is a world-view – how we mouth the words changes the way we see the world around us; where we place the words prioritises certain kinds of relationships between ourselves and the people and things around us. Nonsense works on these. By juggling sounds, words and phrases in unpredictable ways, Nonsense calls into question the world view of *that particular language*. Translating the Nonsense work into another language makes neither Nonsense nor sense.

What, then, is the way out? Is there no way to spread the wonder that is Nonsense to every corner of the Earth from every other corner of the Earth? I recommend that fans of Nonsense move away from the attempt to translate and attempt *transformation* in its place. If Lear transformed Tennyson’s *Break Break Break* into *Calico Pie* (Pendlebury 37) and Carroll changed Isaac Watts’ *T’is the Voice of the Sluggard* into *T’is the Voice of the Lobster* (*AA* 139), what might work with Nonsense is a complete transformation – one that is, in a similar way, *inspired by the original* but *not a translation/transliteration of it* – not ruled by the phonology, syntactics, phraseology and particular qualities of the source language but by
those of the target language. For that, the translator must possess the following two rare qualities (i) a hundred per cent fluency in both – the source language as well as the target language – and (ii) an incredibly radical and childlike sense of humour. This combination is extremely difficult to find, but once found, might render Nonsense texts into other languages with a greater degree of effectiveness.

That said, I would like to point out that any work being done in the field of Nonsense – whether accurate or erroneous – is a welcome addition to the field, for this would bring to the "genre" the dignity and attention it deserves. One of the major objectives of my dissertation was, through my analysis, to try and bring a greater degree of respectability to this highly marginalised and ignored branch of literature. I trust that, to some extent, I have achieved my aim.