STUDIA SCANDINAVICA 3(23)/2019

https://doi.org/10.26881/ss.2019.23.01

Björn Sundmark
Malmö University, Sweden

With Captain Hellsing at the Helm: Sailing the Seas of Nonsense in *Sjörövarbok*

The article analyses and sheds light on the nonsense techniques used in Lennart Hellsing's *Sjörövarbok* (1965) (*The Pirate Book*). In this article, it is argued, furthermore, that Hellsing's nonsense writings fit in with his role in Swedish children's literature in the latter half of the 20th century as both a critic and a carrier of tradition. Theoretically and methodologically the study draws on the critical apparatus developed mainly by Wim Tigges. It is shown that *Sjörövarbok* is a prime example of nonsense literature, particularly in the use of repetition (names, verbs) and simultaneity of meaning.

Key words: nonsense, Lennart Hellsing, Wim Tigges, *The Pirate Book*, *Sjörövarbok*, language play

Introduction

A breaker of conventions and norms, Lennart Hellsing (1919–2015) was in many ways the trickster of Swedish children's literature. This is not a critique – far from it! Tricksters cause disruption and destruction, but may at the same time pave the way for creativity and rejuvenation. In his fictional writings, as well as in his work as a literary critic, Lennart Hellsing expressed and personified many of these trickster-like characteristics. His books are humorous, colorful, and wild. From his debut in 1945, with *Katten blåser i silverhorn* (*The Cat Blows a Silver Horn*) Hellsing combined emerging ideas about education and children's psychology, with both old and new literary models, and expressed this productive mix through his own books (Kåreland 1999). The anarchic language play and the promotion of a new childhood ideal – the liberated, wild child – are evident in stories and verses about such fictional characters as Krakel Spektakel, Kusin Vitamin, Bagare Bengtsson, and Herr Gurka to just name a few (Westin 1993). Moreover, in his role as a critic, Hellsing represented modernity, and was a sharp and influential critic of what he saw as antiquated aesthetic and pedagogical ideals in Swedish children's literature in the latter half of the 20th century (Kåreland 2002). As for his own person (or per-

sona), the flamboyant Hellsing with his colorful suits and joyful *savoir vivre* stood out in the rather grey and bland context of the Swedish welfare state.

At the same time, it is worth noting that Hellsing is not just a norm-breaker and a revolutionary (Lundqvist 1993). He is also a builder of new institutions and literary infrastructure; he was, for instance, instrumental in the founding of the Swedish Children's Book Institute in 1965. As a writer, he is creator and traditionalist wrapped into one. His writings infused the children's literature scene in Sweden with energy through their radical newness, but also because they seemed to reach back to the language-playing roots of children's literature: to nursery rhymes and to traditional humorous verse. Hence, it may not come as a surprise that the great innovator and fictional trickster is also a master of form and a translator of traditional verses (Edström 1998). It is noteworthy (and somewhat ironic) that the combination of song lyrics and music for which he is best remembered today – the songs presented in *Våra visor 1–3* and other collections – basically conforms to the model of Alice Tegnér's enormously successful *Sjung med oss, Mamma!* (*Sing with Us, Mother!* published 1892–1934), and Elsa Beskow's compilation *Nu ska vi sjunga* (*Let Us Sing* 1943– in print) – collections Hellsing criticized for being too conservative and dated. Thus, much of Hellsing's agenda can be seen as a reaction against the bourgeois and traditional perspectives embraced in song-books such as these, but it is evident too that he carries that tradition forward.

The seeming paradoxes of Hellsing's achievement, as outlined here, finds, in my opinion, its subtlest expression in his nonsense. Hence, in this article I am going to focus on his use of nonsense, specifically in *Sjörövarbok* (*The Pirate Book*) from 1965, and provide an analysis of his particular use of the nonsense repertoire. A few previous articles have been devoted to the topic of Hellsing's nonsense. Huldt (1995), for instance, aligns Hellsing with Gunnar Ekelöf, and invokes nonsense as a defining feature of Modernism[1]. Czechowska also explores the "Modernist" associations of his poetry, but also, more productively, compares Hellsing's nonsense with that of Polish writer Jan Brzechwa, and is able to show how the differing societal and political conditions in Poland and Sweden at the time affected their writings. Elliott (1977) discusses nonsense, and how the term has been used in Sweden and internationally; she arrives at the conclusion that Hellsing's "pure" nonsense is limited to two or three books, one of which is *Sjörövarbok*. Hollsten (1995) arrives at a similar conclusion as Elliott and myself (in the present article), but interestingly she does so by employing an alternative methodology, based on Riffaterre's concept of expansion. She argues that *Sjörövarbok* is a "visibly overdetermined text wholly unrelated to everything we understand by mimesis.

[1] This is in line with the view that Hellsing is essentially a Modernist writer. See Arvidsson (1949); Kåreland (1999); Bäckström (1991); Westin (1993). My view is rather that he is a writer of modernity, not Modernism (see also Lundqvist 1993).

As a result of its lack of meaning and of its strong emphasis upon the verbal *Sjörövarbok* is also a piece of nonsense literature" (Hollsten 1995: 139). As for commentary on *Sjörövarbok* specifically, I am indebted to Kåreland (2002: 257–261; Boglind, Nordenstam 2015: 266–268).

1. Nonsense

Nonsense itself is inherently paradoxical, and for effect, nonsense literature balances sense and nonsense. Indeed, there must be "method in the madness". Complete randomness and incomprehensibility is not nonsense. Nonsense is actually the trickster of literary devices; it builds structure and meaning while simultaneously tearing down the construction and denying meaning. One can regard nonsense as a form of advanced logical-linguistic game, like Elizabeth Sewell in her classic study *The Field of Nonsense* from 1952, or one can follow Susan Stewart's cue and see nonsense in terms of stylistic and thematic repertoire. Noel Malcolm's approach in *The Origins of English Nonsense* is more historical-contextual; what comes across as nonsense in his reading is ultimately a historically and culturally determined practice (in this case very English). This is relevant, since literary nonsense as we know it is hugely indebted to the English tradition, but it is somewhat limiting. Finally, Wim Tigges argues that nonsense is in fact a genre. Even if one disagrees – I, for one, believe that Stewart's repertoire approach is more productive – Tigges' definition, and his categorization of different nonsense strategies are highly useful; in his words, nonsense is:

> A genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody and representation, or a combination of these. […] The elements of word and image that may be used in this play are primarily those of negativity or mirroring, imprecision or mixture, infinite repetition, simultaneity, and arbitrariness (Tigges 1998: 47).

Of these critical terms I will mainly use simultaneity, infinite repetition, and mirroring in my analysis of *Sjörövarbok*, which is the main focus of this article. I will also discuss the texts playlike presentation, lack of emotional involvement, and its emphasis on language play. Following my previous work on *Jabberwocky* in translation (Sundmark 2017) I will go into some detail when it comes to rhythm and sound (corresponding to Tigges' "prosody", but quite undeveloped in his approach). I will also establish the immediate literary contexts of *Sjörövarbok*. (For a more general discussion of the Swedish context of Hellsing's nonsense, see Sundmark 2010; 2012).

First, I will discuss Hellsing as a nonsense writer in general, then provide an integrated synopsis and formal description of *Sjörövarbok* (story and verse form). Finally, in this introductory section I will discuss the literary context(s) of *Sjörövarbok*, and say a few words about its reception.

2. Hellsing as a nonsense writer

Hellsing is many things, but is he a nonsense writer? To be sure, his verses regularly fulfill the "sound over-sense" premise of nonsense. Names and refrains are chosen for their suggestiveness and the sounds they make: Lappricka pappricka, Opsis kalopsis, Krakel Spektakel; or the following line from one of his songs: "Här dansar herr gurka både vals och mazurka" ("Here Mr Gherkin is seen waltzin' and mazurkin'", transl. B.S.). However, he also delights in logical paradoxes, as when an Indian wizard is fooled into transforming himself into a glass of lemonade and then happens to drink himself – "a fact he has lamented for the past five hundred years" ("I Indialand", from *Katten blåser i Silverhorn*). He also frequently makes use of the *Mundus inversus* motif, a variant of "mirroring" to use Tigges' classification, for instance in the poem "Annorlunda", ("Differentia") where everything is different – circles are round, the ugly are pretty, etc. ("but other than that everything is as it always has been"). A milder form of mirroring can also be seen in Hellsing's use of the exotic. In the 1963 collection *Katten blåste i silverhorn* (*The Cat Blew a Silver Horn*) – not to be confused with his 1945 debut (see above) – Hellsing divides the book into "exotic" sections, such as "Kings, Marquises and Other Noble People", "Mysterious People", "Romantic People", and the largest category of them all (40 pages), "Eastward". Hellsing's use of the exotic played an important role in making Swedish children's literature more colourful and exciting. However, the exotic can certainly be part of a writer's nonsense repertoire, but is not inherently nonsensical, as I see it.

Some of Hellsing's most successful texts, in terms of nonsense, are his translations and adaptations English nursery rhymes and Scandinavian folk verse. Often these are texts that are already quite nonsensical, but Hellsing imbues them with his own brand of nonsense. In this sense, he works like a traditional oral poet. For this reason it is often hard to know where Hellsing is producing original works or perfecting someone else's, as in the following anthology piece, "What shall we do", with its resonances of folk verse (from *Katten blåste i silverhorn*):

> What to do? Let's hear!
> Bite the King's ear.
> Sit and read prose

On the King's nose.
Go watch telly
On the King's belly.
Have nuts to eat
On the King's feet.
Digest kippers
On the King's slippers.
Sit and drink tea
In the King's knee
Deliver sand
In the King's hand! [transl. B.S.] (Hellsing 1963a: 25).

The nonsense here is a variety of *simultaneity*, "the ill-matched pair", in this case between "the King" and the suggested activities, which neither tallies well with the idea of royalty, nor with what can be performed with (or on) any person, kingly or not. The arbitrariness of the nonsense strategy of *listing* is also used to great effect. Sound over sense randomness is evident in the words that rhyme with the King's body parts (prose-nose, telly-belly, kippers-slippers, sand-hand). A similar strategy is employed to great effect in the list of actions performed by the captains in *Sjörövarbok*.

Besides the forms of nonsense mentioned above, Hellsing delights in exploring the polysemy of words and expressions, for instance by playing out figurative and literal levels of meaning against each other (yet another example of simultaneity). In *Bagar Bengtsson* (*Bengtsson the Baker*), for instance, Hellsing uses the rhetorical figure of zeugma when he writes that the baker put "fikon, och sin själ" into his bread ("figs, and his soul"). And as if the zeugma (the juxtaposition of concrete and abstract referents) is not enough in itself, in Swedish "laying down one's soul" has the additional figurative meaning of making a supreme effort.

Hellsing's verses are almost always whimsical, humorous, and nonsensical in tone. It is also true, however, that only a few of his texts can be considered literary nonsense in the generic sense. Hellsing bends the norms and wants us to see and hear things with new eyes and ears, but he does not aim to subvert or frustrate meaning-making to the extent of, for instance, Edward Lear. Hellsing professes that nonsense verse is "not about the intellect – but a sensuous activity" (Hellsing 1963b: 131). Moreover, nursery rhymes provide an education in creativity that promotes joy (Hellsing 1963b: 130). He writes that the deeper meaning of our engagement with (seeming) nonsense – as well as with dance and song – is that it keeps us alive and joyous in the face of despair (Hellsing 1963b: 130). I would suggest that Hellsing's emphasis on the sensuous rather than the intellectual goes some way towards explaining why actually quite few of his verses are "pure" nonsense. *Katten blåste i silverhorn* collects the most of Hellsing's best nonsense pieces

up to 1963 (and also has a number of texts written specifically for that publication). The other two major nonsense texts are *Sjörövarbok* (1965) and *Bagare Bengtsson* (1966), both illustrated by Poul Ströyer. Interestingly, Bagare Bengtsson had been published first in *Katten blåste i silverhorn* with illustrations by Fibben Hald.

It is worth noting that the reception of *Sjörövarbok* and *Bagare Bengtsson* was rather mixed among critics. The language games were considered too sophisticated in some quarters. Objections were raised against the death of the baker (he is burnt to death on a piece of bread, and is buried in a loaf), and that the baker's chaffinch is killed by a cat (Ambjörnsson 1968). As for *Sjörövarbok*, one critic thought that the 164 captains and their bizarre actions would wear out child readers, and that the depictions of drinking, gambling and dancing were inappropriate (Kåreland 2002: 260). *Sjörövarbok* was translated (or "freely adapted") into English. The adaptation deletes some of the drinking, as well as the reference to a "negress" and "a nude dancer". The dancer has received a dress and is referred to as a "smashing lady". I find it interesting (but not surprising) that the most subversive and successful nonsense books by Hellsing were misunderstood, criticized, and (in translation) bowdlerized.

Now we turn to Hellsing's nonsense tour de force, *Sjörövarbok*.

3. Synopsis

In *Sjörövarbok* narrative is of secondary importance. This may seem paradoxical since there is little by way of description, and since verbal phrases completely dominate the discourse. However, the verbal phrases presented provide variations and iterations on actions (hitting, falling, breaking – thirteen main verbs are employed), and are motivated mainly by their usefulness in the ongoing language game, as well as by the sound effects they create. Still, there is a story of sorts, told in 28 verses, distributed over fourteen double spreads, and framed by two single page-illustrations that serve as intro and coda, respectively[2]. Twelve of the fourteen double-spreads come with two verses each, while the remaining two have a single verse each. The opening single verse and image recapitulates the deeds of the narrating "we" of the text, the pirate collective, here represented by a pirate standing at the helm and facing the reader directly. He enumerates the various feats of the pirates: capturing a bark, a galley, and a Spanish brig. But in the story present they are drifting across the water, taking it easy. The first stanza introduces refrain-like exclamations like "Skepp ohoj! Fylld med rom!" ("Ship ohoy! Filled

[2] *The Pirate Book* is unpaginated.

with rum!"[3]), "Lollipop lollipop" (meaningless in Swedish) and "Jolly Roger i top!" ("Hoist Jolly Roger to the top!"). The opening stanza concludes with a first example of nonsense double-meaning of the words "ligga" and "last": "Kapten Gast tog en rast / och låg alla till last" ("Captain Ghost took a break / and bothered everyone", alternatively, "lay down" [as cargo]"). The language play depends on the polysemy of "last" as cargo, "ligga" as lie down, and the idiomatic expression "ligga till last", being a nuisance, being bothersome. Another way of expressing it is that the word play activates literal and idiomatic connotations simultaneously. Thus, the stanza as a whole sets the scene and tone for what is to follow.

In the first double spread, the pirates are resting, everything is calm. But the last few lines of verse three state that "en kuling blåste opp" ("a storm was brewing"). Apparently more than bad weather is coming up, for why else hoist the Jolly Roger, and inform that "Kapten Kross han vill slåss" ("Captain Fright wants to fight")? In the following pages the sea is actually quite calm, but pirates from different ships engage in a violent battle (verses four to fifteen, spreads two to seven). The fighting does not even stop when they fall or are blown off their ships, but continues in the water (verses fourteen and fifteen, spread seven). Eventually, the shipwrecked pirates stop fighting. In the transitory verse seventeen, spread eight, the pirate captains decide that they need a lifestyle change: "Det är hårt det är svårt / ett piratliv som vårt! Ingen skatt ej ett skvatt / till att rulla en hatt" ("it is hard, it is difficult, this pirate life of ours! No treasure, nothing at all, to allow us to have a ball"). But this does not stop them from actually going to a bar already in the next verse. They drink, play cards, dance, fall in love, and settle down (verses eighteen to twenty-five, spreads eighteen to twenty-two). In the last spread (verses twenty-six and twenty-seven), however, the call to adventure is heard again, something that the pirates are unable to resist. On the very last page they crew is seen sailing away: "Hela världen är vår" ("the whole world is ours"). As we can see, the plot follows a classic pattern, but with a twist: an initial situation of status quo is followed by rising action, conflict, resolution, and a new equilibrium. In *Sjörövarbok*, however, the coda shows a return to the pirate life at sea. In other words, the story not only takes the reader from one status quo to another, but returns us to the initial situation. The narrative is entirely circular in composition. Another way of putting it is that there is little in the storyline that distracts a reader from the ongoing language game.

[3] Other than coincidentally, as happens with some of the set expressions, all translations are mine. The existing published version (Smith 1972) is not really a translation, but a "freely adapted" text, as it says on the title page. For this reason, it is neither very useful when examining the formal properties of the verse, nor for an analysis of content.

4. Metre and sound

Each of the twenty-eight verses has twelve lines and consists of two verse feet (three + three syllables). The metre is basically anapestic dimeter – da-da-dum, da-da-dum – but lines five and seven regularly have feminine rhymes, which makes the verse less static. Rather than try to interpret this as three verse feet, for example, I think it is more attractive to treat the additional two unstressed syllables as extra-metrical, or as a form of syllable resolution, where two short unstressed syllables are regarded as one unstressed. Compare line seven in the first verse "Vi har legat sen och s l ä n t r a t ("we have lain still and been drifting") with "Vi har legat sen och s l ä n t r a t". In any case, scanning the lines as alternating between dimeter and trimeter would certainly ruin the rhythm of the verse. As for the short lines, consisting of only two verse feet each, one could probably also consider them as half lines; anapestic tetrameter is after all more traditional. The English translation actually recognizes this partly, by indention, but misconstrues the translation in other ways, including the formal properties of the verse.

Lines two and four regularly have end rhymes, as does the final couplet, lines eleven and twelve, providing a resounding closure to the stanza. Occasionally too, lines nine and ten come with end rhymes, but the main function of lines nine and ten is that of an exclamatory refrain, as in "Lollipop, lollipop / Jolly Roger i topp!" ("Lollipop, lollipop / Hoist Jolly Roger to the top!"). The second line is regularly refrain-like in character too. The stanzas also consist of initial rhymes – the word "Captain" that introduces around half of the lines (it varies from two to nine) – and a single verb form distributed throughout the stanza. Both of these sound repetitive strategies connect the lines in much the same way as end rhymes. Finally, there are internal rhymes made up of each captain's name and the associated action/verb. All in all, an exceedingly strong sense of rhythm and musicality is produced by the verses. But the meaningfulness ("sense") on the level of sound is arbitrarily conjoined with another set of meanings on the semantic levels (the naming, the actions) and produces an excess of meaning or, simultaneity of meaning, typical of nonsense.

5. Literary contexts

Nonsense verse is almost always formal and traditional. It follows a strict pattern, suggesting order and meaning, even (or especially) when there is none on the semantic level. Anapestic verse is particularly common in humorous verse, like in Lewis Carroll's nonsense masterpiece *The Hunting of the Snark*:

"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
"They are merely conventional signs!"

In Carroll's verse, each stanza consists of four lines, alternating between anapestic tetrameter and trimeter.

Traditional sea shanties, provide another literary context, or frame of reference, for Hellsing's humorous sea epic. In *High Barbary*, for instance, we recognize the exclamatory refrains, and the seamen's jargon and clichés:

There were two lofty ships
From old England came
Blow high, blow low
And so sail we

One was the Prince of Luther
The other Prince of Wales
All a-cruisin' down the coast
Of High Barbary

Aloft there, aloft there
Our jolly bosun cried
Look ahead, look astern,
Look to weather an' a-lee

The stanzas of *Sjörövarbok* are structured in a similar way. The effect of the alternating dimeter and trimeter (trochaic, iambic and anapestic) is similar to that employed in Hellsing's nautical nonsense epic. The reason why humorous verse like Carroll's and Hellsing's employs this form is no doubt its galloping, thumping rhythm. The rhythm establishes a repetitive pattern of beats across the whole sequence.

Metrics aside, some critics have drawn attention to some other Swedish seamen's songs, such as Evert Taube's *Balladen om Eugen Cork* and *Möte monsunen* (Boglind, Nordenstam 2015). Another nautical inspiration piece is almost certainly the song *Svarta Malin* (*Black Malin*) by Povel Ramel, featured in the cabaret Funny Boy from 1957. Here we find a ludicrous list of horrible pirate captains, and nonsensical word play:

Kapten Enben och kapten Tvåben och kapten Träben,
och kapten Modig och kapten Blodig och kapten Frodig,
och kapten Sillben och kapten Bordsben och kapten Skenben,
och kapten Nackben, och kapten Barnsben.

Captain Oneleg and captain Twoleg and captain Treeleg,
And captain Brave and captain Bloody and captain Stout
And captain Herring-leg and captain Table-leg and captain Tibia
And captain Neckbone and Captain Childbone [transl. B.S.].

In the first line, the enumeration leads to a pun on "tre" and "trä" ("three" and "tree"). The enumeration makes you expect "three" but the text provides "tree". The second line presents two typical pirate appellations, followed by a less fearsome name, "Stout"; all three names rhyme in Swedish. In the third line various applications of "ben" ("leg") is explored. In Swedish "ben" can mean both leg and bone, like in fish-bone or the bones of the body (like the "tibia"). In consequence, the names become increasingly ridiculous. This too is something we see with Hellsing's pirates. In the fourth line, the wordplay is taken to new heights with the name "Barnsben". The word literally means "child's bone", but is only ever used in the expression "från barnsben" ("from child's bones") and means, "from childhood". As a captain's name it is of course utterly nonsensical.

All in all, the form and implied genre of the *Sjörövarbok* accentuates its playlike and nonsensical aspects. The formal affinity of its verse to ballads, sea shanties, and musical numbers makes it appear parodic.

6. Simultaneity of meaning: word/verb play and epitext

As I have already mentioned in the plot summary, *Sjörövarbok* is highly action driven and relies to a great extent on the play of verbs. Instead of simply playing on the humorous potential of naming, like in Ramel's "Svarta Malin" (although he does that too!), Hellsing focuses on the verbs. In the story as a whole, fourteen main verbs are employed, explored, and pushed to their absurd limits. In the second stanza, for instance, the reader is presented with various uses of the past tense form, "låg", of the verb "ligga" ("to lie down").

Kapten Hååv l å g o c h s o v	lay sleeping ("sleeping lying down")
Skepp ohoj! Å blås ut!	
Kapten Stygg l å g p å r y g g	lay on his back
med en flaska på lut.	
Kapten Mankar l å g f ö r a n k a r	be at anchor
Kapten Sill l å g n ä s t a n s t i l l.	lay almost still
Kapten Träfot l å g f ö r f ä f o t	lay fallow
Kapten Trä han l å g i l ä!	Lay sheltered from the wind ("was beaten to it")
Lollipop lollipop	
Jolly Roger i topp	
Kapten Zuhr l å g p å l u r	lay hidden (but "lur" also means sleep)
för att bida sin tur	

Some of the verb phrases are completely commonplace, like "låg och sov" and "låg på rygg". Others become humorous in context. To lie at anchor or to lie hidden is not absurd per se, but the list and the illustration suggest different postures when lying down, not altogether different activities. And with the conscious (mis)application of idiomatic expressions like "Kapten Träfot låg för fäfot" ("Captain Treefot lay fallow") we are of course securely in the realm of nonsense. Tigges would say that what we see here is a case of "simultaneity of meaning", since we have two (at least) possible interpretations that are presented simultaneously. Contradiction is one way of producing simultaneity of meaning. One example from *Sjörövarbok* is when the sea described in the third stanza as having two different colours:

> The whole ocean is green
> Ship ohoy! Green and good!
> The whole sea is blue
> As a blueberry compote

As I have already suggested, the rhymes and alliterations too are examples of nonsensical simultaneity since the sound (and/or spelling) likeness suggests a meaning and similarity (sense) that is continuously overwritten on the semantic level (and vice versa).

Finally, a brilliant example of simultaneity of meaning (of a different order) is when the stated purpose of a book is at odds with readers' expectations and genre awareness. In the "Note to the reviewer", an epitext that accompanied the first edition of *Sjörövarbok*, Hellsing does just that. He writes: "This is a study of Swedish verbs, and how they can be used in different idiomatic and proverbial expressions" (reproduced in Kåreland 2002: 299). The note is perfectly adapted to what one would expect to find in a preface to an educational text book – not in a humorous picturebook about pirates. Simultaneity of meaning is thus produced.

7. Mirroring

Another nonsense strategy is mirroring or reversal. I have already mentioned Hellsing's general inclination for the exotic, and argued that it provides a mild form of mirroring. Again, in the *Sjörövarbok*, the exotic is part and parcel of the characterization (the pirate captains), the settings and places (the ships, the sea, the bar), and the actions (fighting, drinking, dancing). However, a more radical reversal occurs when the pirates decide to lead ordinary domestic lives, and we see them mowing grass, working as shopkeepers, and being generally useful. This actually represents a double inversion, a *Mundus inversus* reversed. For if the pirate

life represented in the rest of the book is a mirroring of ordinary life, the everyday ordinariness represented in the second last double-spread represents piracy turned upside down.

Another kind of mirroring operates on the level of plot. I have already mentioned the circularity of the story composition (and will come back to it), but one also notes the reversal of one of the more conventional plot schemas in children literature, that of going from activity to inactivity, typically ending with the protagonist going to sleep after an eventful day. In *The Pirate Book* Hellsing flips this story pattern and starts instead with a ship filled with sleeping captains, and ends with them going off on new adventures.

8. Infinite repetition

Circularity, infinity, lists, non sequiturs, are all salient features of nonsense (and basically belongs to the same category of nonsense). It has already been pointed out that the plot has a circular composition where nothing really evolves or changes as a result of the unfolding of story. Lists are another mainstay of the Hellsing nonsense repertoire. The uses of the fourteen main verbs are, for instance, ticked off like entries in a dictionary, ranging from concrete to abstract applications, and from simple verbal phrases to rare idiomatic expressions. The list of 164 captains is also a prime example of "infinite" repetition, since the selection itself is random, and the supply of captains seems limitless. Other lists include the different kinds of sailing vessels (a brig, a barque, a galleon, a Spanish [ship]), the women (a waitress, a Russian, a Negress, a widow, "someone young", etc.), the drinks (rum, mead, juice, gin, vodka, etc.), and the jobs (brick-maker, tinker, sail-maker, roper, doctor etc.). Lists like these provide a semblance of meaning (or sense), but are essentially arbitrary, and produce an excess of meaning. Moreover, each item is emptied of meaning by being instantly succeeded (replaced) by the next item on the list.

Detached conclusions

It may seem counter-intuitive to characterize Hellsing's energetic and rambunctious verse tale as producing the sense of detachment typical of nonsense. But actually, all of the qualities discussed above contribute to this effect. The focus on sound over sense, excess of meaning, the contradictions, the language game that always prevails over reality (verb exploration), the parody-like character (strengthened by the literary contexts) of the tale, the collective character of the captains (which makes identification impossible), the lists and other iterations, and the

exotic otherness of the setting – all contribute to this sense of detachment. The naïve, unrealistic style of the illustrations further emphasizes the sense of play and detachment. Tigges writes:

> Literary nonsense is characterized by four essential elements: an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature (1988: 55).

As has been demonstrated, all of these features can be found in generous measure in *Sjörövarbok*. It is a book that epitomizes Hellsing's mastery of form and tradition, as well as his ability to chart new routes for his fictions and actions. In the end, he appears less of a trickster and more of a master of language play, a captain, sailing the seas of nonsense.

> Lollipop lollipop
> Jolly Roger to the top!

References

Ambjörnsson, G. (1968). Ur Boken om Bagar Bengtsson av Lennart Hellsing. In: G. Hansson (ed.). *Tjugotvå diktanalyser*. Stockholm: Prisma.

Arvidsson, I. (1949). 40-talet i barnkammaren. *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* 17 (7).

Bäckström, L. (1991). *Mannen utan väg och hans kusin vitamin*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Boglind, A., Nordenstam A. (2015). *Från fabler till manga 1*. Lund: Gleerups.

Czechowska, J. (2004). *Modern barnpoesi i Polen och Sverige: Jan Brzechwa som modernist i en komparativ studie med Lennart Hellsing*. Stockholm: Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen.

Edström, V. (1998). Tingen visar sitt innersta: Lennart Hellsings verser för barn. In: K. Hallberg (ed.) *Läs mig, sluka mig!*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Elliott, M.-L. (1977). *Om termen nonsens och dess användbarhet på Lennart Hellsings författarskap för barn*. Uppsala: Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen.

Hellsing, L. (1963a). *Katten blåste i silverhorn*. Ill. F. Hald. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Hellsing, L. (1963b). *Tankar om barnlitteraturen*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Hellsing, L. (1965). *Sjörövarbok*. Ill. P. Ströyer. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Hellsing, L. (1966). *Boken om bagar Bengtsson*. Ill. P. Ströyer. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Hellsing, L. (1972). *The Pirate Book*. Ill. P. Ströyer. Freely adapted by W.J. Smith. London: Ernest Benn.

Hollsten, A. (1995). Rim och reson i Lennart Hellsings Sjörövarbok. In: S. Bäckman, E. Lilja, B. Lundberg (eds.). *Rytmen i fokus*. Eds. Göteborg: Centrum för metriska studier.

Huldt, C. (1995). *Nonsens som inslag i Gunnar Ekelöfs och Lennart Hellsings diktning – en jämförelse*. Stockholm: Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen.

Kåreland, L. (1999). *Modernismen i barnkammaren*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Kåreland, L. (2002). *En sång för att leva bättre: Om Lennart Hellsings författarskap*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.

Lundqvist, U. (1993). Det städade upproret: Om Lennart Hellsings författarskap. *Barnboken* 16 (1).
Malcolm, N. (1997). *The Origins of English Nonsense*. New York, Harper Collins.
Sundmark, B. (2010). Den bliga sången: svensk nonsenspoesi för barn. *Lyrikvännen* 4–5.
Sundmark, B. (2012). Nonsens på svenska. *Lyrikvännen* 6.
Sundmark, B. (2017). Some Uffish Thoughts on the Swedish Translations of 'Jabberwocky'. *European Journal of Humour* 5 (3). Ed. W. Chlopicki.
Tigges, W. (1988). *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Westin, B. (1993). *Mission impossible – barnlitteraturens dilemma. Läsebok: En festskrift till Ulf Boëthius*. Ed. C. Lidström. Stockholm: Symposion.