"The Song of The Mad Prince": The Me That Sings Throughout(*)

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Resumo

A leitura so poema de la Mare patente neste ensaio representa uma estudo no âmbito da literatura nonsense, procurando reflectir sobre os seus laços inevitáveis com a literatura infantil, bem como a sua sistemática desmontagem de padrões do cânone literário e das poética tradicionais. Esta correlação pode observar-se com especial agudeza no referido texto de la Mare, na medida em que este se apresenta como uma construção lírica cuidada de fragmentos desconstruídos de Hamlet de Shakespeare, criando um estranho efeito de suspenção e indefinição quanto às noções e sentidos que orientam a nossa relatividade dos sensos e não-sensos.

Abstract

The presente essay on de la Mare’s “Song of the Mad Prince” is a critical reading in the field of nonsense literature as it reflects inevitable links with children literature and above all tends to question the actual system of canon literature and traditional poetics. A thorough analysis of de la Mare’s poem as an apparently nonsensical construction reveals its careful lyrical arrangement of deconstructed fragments of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, so as to produce an exquisite effect of suspension and indefiniteness in the most of our accepted meanings of sense and nonsense.

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De la Mare’s “The Song of The Mad Prince”, included in Peacock Pie: A Book of Rhymes (1913), is normally read as a nonsensical poem, although, however, it cannot entirely be defined as a nonsense type of text. In fact, and regarding the context of English literature, if the typology of nonsense writing is to be considered, in practical terms, in a set of texts, prose or verse, paradigmatically related to the writings of Carroll and Lear, de la Mare’s nonsensical poem does not fit the pattern. “The Song of The Mad Prince” is a metaphor of oblique references, conveying both a sense of meaning and its total absense, an indefinite reflexion of all major and most controversial aspects

(*) Text adapted and translated from some aspects of nonsense literature exposed on Ch.II.2 of my doctoral dissertation on Walter de la Mare’s poetic Work: “That’s What I Said.”. Dimensões do Sujeto na Poesia de Walter de la Mare. (FLUP 1995).
of de la Mare's work:

Who said. "Peacock Pie"?
The old King to the Sparrow:
Who said, "Crops are ripe"?
Rust to the harrow:
Who said. "Where sleeps she now?"
Where rests she now her head,
Bathed in eve's loveliness? 
That's what I said.
Who said, "Ay, mum's the word"?
Sexton to willow:
Who said, "Green dusk for dreams, 
Moss for a pillow"?
Who said, "All Time's delight 
Hath she for narrow bed: 
Life's troubled bubble broken"?
That's what I said.

"The Song of The Mad Prince"

In the context of Peacock Pie, a book of poems intended mainly for children, "The Song of The Mad Prince" fails to appeal to the child reader, as it cannot meet his interests and expectations. Actually, many of the so-called de la Mare's "children's poems" are not exactly poems for children, but about children and their ways, viewed by the adult as he reawakens his past, and allows memory to fill in the gaps of long forgotten stories: "The Song of The Mad Prince" is one of these poems, a recollection of past memories, where the adult and the child lose their immediate space and time references, as they sing about love, assuming a kind of mythical identity in the nonsensical words of a mad prince. The dramatic structure of de la Mare's song, a typical feature of a great part of his lyrical poetry, presents several dialogue situations where the characters seem to be mere vacant shapes of a dream-like mixture of persons and things, systematically failing to communicate reasonably with each other. The deceptive quality of the scene suggested by the nonsensical acts of speech of the dramatis personae, apparently in dialogue with a partner old King / sparrow; rust / harrow; sexton / willow), points to the possibility that the whole stream of speech of the poem is eventually a monologue, more precisely a dramatic monologue, where a single character gives voice to all the voices that haunt the intimacy of his madness, in an endless repetition of that's what I said. "The Song of The Mad Prince" is a metaphor of obsession in de la Mare's work, at once exposing and redeeming in the abstract sense of poetry, music and madness, the essential nonsense of man's experience: in love, hatred and death. The mad prince is this vacant shape of delamarean poetical obsession
where the image of an *Impossible She* is reflected, despising all barriers and inhibitions of earthly time and space, of common-senses and mortal measures: *All Time's delight/ Hath she for narrow bed:/ Life's troubled bubble broken.*

Reading Foucault in his *Histoire de la Folie* may be illuminating in discussing relevant epistemological questions of literary "nonsense", especially those concerning undeniable cleavages between the representational level of the work and the referential level of the world:

La folie est absolue rupture de l’oeuvre. (...) par la folie, une oeuvre qui a l’air de s’engloutir dans le monde, d’y révéler son non-sens, et de s’y transfigurer sous les seuls traits du pathologique, au fond engage en elle le temps du monde, le maîtrise et le conduit; (...) dans le temps de cette oeuvre (...) le mond éprouve sa culpabilité (...), contraint de s’ordonner à son langage, astreint par elle à une tâche de (...) rendre raison de cette déraison et à cette déraison. (Foucault 1961: 303).

With reference to the outer world, that is, from an external point of view, the nonsense work is judged as a disrupted representation of all images of common experience, using language as a game where signs give up their usual bonds with logical thought. However, the inversion of perspective shows that the nonsense work has a meaning of its own, building up a verbal world of references which keep with reality a poetical and symbolical link. Foucault’s expression - *le monde [est] requis par [l’oeuvre], contraint de s’ordonner à son langage* - finds ecoho in Lise Ede’s conclusion that nonsense means a world of words come to life, a world whose insistently self-defined reality is almost completely linguistic. (Tigges (ed.) 1987: 51). A similar analysis is developed by Wim Tigges as he tries to define literary nonsense from a consensual appreciation of different concepts and critical judgements on the subject:

I hope to have shown that what these authors have in common is the essence of nonsense: the ability to wrongly reduce an argument ad absurdum and backwards, to “play” with language and there by with the reality that lies behind it, not in a haphazard fashion, leaving the result to accident, but to obtain the insight that every “sense”, every “reality” has its reverse, and to keep these two sides of the coin in perfect balance. (Tigges 1987: 46).

Going back to de la Mare’s poem, "The Song of The Mad Prince", and considering its dubious nonsensical nature as well as its failed appeal to children, one should concentrate on the essence of its dramatic monological sequences and, therefore, expand the meaning of the refrain: “That’s what I said”. Obviously pointing to intertextual readings of the delamarean composition, the
refrain is the repeated answer to a repeated question of the one and only monologuing subject of the poem, who plays with the fancied dialogues of imagined characters: “Who said ...?”. The “play within the play” that these characters seem to perform, as a kind of eliotian objective correlative of the subject’s imaginative process, appears to be a shakespearean reading of the “madness-love and death” theme in Hamlet. De la Mare’s reading of Shakespeare cannot be said to be thoroughly mimetic, in the classic sense of the concept, but metaphoric like the reflection of a broken mirror, a fragmented distorted image of the given object, allowing for nonsense out of sense.

However, de la Mare’s nonsense reading of Shakespeare’s Hamlet does not imply that “The Song of The Mad Prince” is a twentieth century parody, in lyrical-dramatic form, of the theme and dramatic lyricism of the Elisabethan tragedy. De la Mare’s song is a peculiar arrangement of quotations from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, without using it for parodic purposes, once the real object of the delamorean poem is the lyrical self-expression of a “mad prince”, not “Hamlet”. Hamlet, the shakespearean character in Hamlet, is a motive in de la Mare’s song, as it represents a mad prince in the mythical resonnance of a literary hero. To bring forward the dialogue with tradition, reawakening its heros, reshaping their typology, rewriting themes and re-inventing stories, means to make new senses out of old sensibilities, or to let memory make sense out of present nonsenses. “The Song of The Mad Prince” is in fact the verbal expression of un-reason (Foucault’s déraison) in its alogical, discontinuous modes of being and speech, which calls for coherence and solidarity, as it brings back literary ghosts and memories of love and crime stories in the fragmentary vision of an insane prince.

Reading Shakespeare’s Hamlet as a background reference to de la Mare’s “Song of The Mad Prince” is not simply critical impressionism focusing on the possible thematic resemblance between the two texts. As a matter of fact, certain passages of Hamlet, words or expressions spoken by its characters, are quoted in de la Mare’s poem, however in a context that systematically breaks with or transforms the original, producing irregular, fragmentary scenes of incomplete meanings, related to each other only by the echo of the one voice speaking: That’s what I said. It all points to an exquisite compositional process.

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(2) The meaning of “parody” referred to in this study is developed in Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais and Medieval and Renaissance culture (Bakhtin 1970). In general terms, a text is assumed to be parodic of another, taken as a model-text, if it intentionally imitates it, in its theme, structure or style, so as to produce a dissonant caricatural effect of the given references. In this sense, the parodic intention of a text is structured upon a rhetorical speech organization, which uses irony and its related devices to produce a comic effect upon the reader who, thereby, is easily convinced to give in to the underlying critical and denouncing point of view of the “author”. M.H.Abrams describes “parody” as the favourite artform of the burlesque since the XIXth century, “an incongruous imitation; that is, it imitates the matter and manner of a serious literary work, or literary genre, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between its form and style and its subject matter. (Abrams 1981: 17-18).
in de la Mare’s “Song”, which reflects in distortion Shakespear’s *Hamlet* by picking up from it, as in a game, apparently disconnected units, and arranging them in a different fashion, building up a solipsistic world of words that just tries to be the poetical stage for the mixed roles of reason and insanity in the lives of men.

Analysing specific intertextual aspects of “The Song of The Mad Prince” and *Hamlet* one should start by the apparently controversial expression “Peacock Pie”, which the poem’s speaker attributes to “the old King” in his dialogue to the “sparrow”. Moreover, the same expression is used by de la Mare as main title to the book of poems that includes “The Song of The Mad Prince”, a circumstance that points to the centrality of its meaning in the song as a unifying motive in the whole work, showing the poet’s awareness of the shakespearean poetics in the lyrical dramatic tradition of English literature. In fact, de la Mare’s choice of the word “peacock” has a referential background in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

Hamlet: (...) For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here,
A very, very - pająk\(^{(2)}\)

(III.ii. 292-295)

With no attempt to simply paraphrase any of the quoted texts, de la Mare’s or Shakespeare’s, one should concentrate on the following aspects: in *Hamlet*’s quotation above, the pejorative allusion to the peacock is introduced in “The Song of The Mad Prince” with a slight change of the speaking characters. In Shakespeare it is Hamlet himself who judges over his uncle, the ruling king at that precise time - *A very, very - pająk*; the negative connotation is built upon the prince’s comparison between his uncle and his father, the murdered king *Jove himself*.

In this very sequence of thought, it is important that Hamlet’s speech can only make sense as a repetition of the murder story heard from his father’s ghost - *the old King* of de la Mare’s song. Curiously, in “The Song of The Mad Prince”, the expression *Peacock Pie* is spoken directly by the first person speaker who actually runs the whole poetic utterance. Nevertheless, it is reported to the indirect dialogue between *the old King* and the *sparrow*, a reference that can be read literally in *Hamlet*, as a symbolical allusion to the prince himself:

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\(^{(2)}\) A useful comment on the shakespearean use of the word can be read on Onions’ *Glossary: Pająk*: “Of unknown meaning, app. intended as an obscure substitute for “on” (…). Commonly taken to be a form of “peacock”, perhaps identical with “patchcock”, Spencer’s name for the degenerated English in Ireland.” (Onions 1953:156).
Not a whit, we defy augury: there's a special providence in the
fall of a sparrow.  
(Vii.230-231)

Both examples of intertextual quotation from the shakespearean model
text do not operate diegetical changes in the latter, in as far as the same contexts
are kept in their original meanings. As a matter of fact, confronting de la Mare's
quotation of the "sparrow", this fate of fall and death, which in Shakespeare's text
identifies man and bird through the symbol of the winged soul, turns out to be
the fundamental reading axis of the delamarean poem. The possible senses of a
text that pretends to delude our expectations of logical reasoning start to
emerge as one gradually assumes de la Mare's play with the shakespearean
reference.

Considering now the second word of the expression Peacock Pie, the
intertextual approach to Shakespeare is rather obscure, as one comes to find
out no occurence of "pie" in the shakespearean text as a whole (Onions 1953:
161). However, a thorough reading of Hamlet can select passages that the
delamarean poetical discourse has disfigured, metamorphosed, so as to synthesize
them in the very texture of "The Song of the Mad Prince". An example of this
procedure can be taken from Hamlet's "play within the play", when one of the
actors says the following lines:

When she saw Phryrus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband's
limbs

(II.ii.535-536)

The relationship with the delamarean Peacock Pie is established around the
meaning of mince: the minced meat of a "pie". The associational play of
oblique references, underlying the meaning of Peacock Pie, reveals a symbolical
concept of destiny, similar to that in Hamlet: a providencial fate, absolute and
omnipresent, pervades existence in all its forms and instances, even the utmost
insignificant: "there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now,
tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it not now, yet it will
come: the readiness is all".

Reading Peacock Pie in its possible intertextual connection to specific excerpts
and main thematic streams of Hamlet may bring forth the following conclusions:
"Peacock" identifies the usurper king. Hamlet himself refers to his uncle in this
pejorative expression, as he takes for real the report of his father's ghost
about his own murder by poisoning. Likewise, the shakespearean allusion to
Phryrus' bloody violence, in murdering the old king, is an implicit reference
to the meaning of "pie". However, the further analysis of the expression
*Peacock Pie*, considering the morphology and syntax of the English, brings about a paradox: given the premisses, as far as the shakespearean reference is concerned in the delamarean text, the expression *Peacock Pie* would make sense if it should be substituted by *Jove Pie*. In fact, it was "the old king", Jove, who suffered the murderous violence. However, it is precisely this kind of disfigured reflection of the model, the subtle shifting of perspectives and roles of the original characters, that structures the nonsensical quality of de la Mare’s "Song", assuring its literary autonomy as a lyrical expression of a monologuing self, who recalls fragments of his own experience in the broken image of a prince that, like Hamlet, may have gone mad.

To realize this kind of poetical devices in de la Mare’s "Song" means to agree upon its textual construction as a nonsense poem: it deliberately plays with the literal meanings of the model-text by perverting their symbolical and metaphorical resonances. A typical example can be referred to in the use of the word *mince*, which in Hamlet’s context does not simply consist of a literal denotational meaning. *Mince*, thus, in *Hamlet*, semantically overlaps the referencial field of words like "chop up" so as to render a more sensorial and vivid image of the murder scene. Besides, the fact that *Hamlet*’s "play within the play" choses to represent allegorically the poisoning of the old King, conveying its mythological dimension, relies on the hyperbolic function of the word *mince* in the given context, adding to its metaphorical depth. The coherence of this figurational process in the discursive sequences of the text is related to the symbolical intentionality around the meaning of mince: essentially, the inescapability of one’s death destiny is ranked with its cruelty and violence.

In this view, de la Mare’s use of Shakespeare’s *mince* is literal, as he produces ("bakes") his peacock "Pie", with the "minced meat" of the old King, murdered by "a very, very pajock": in crude terms, ultimately, the "pie" belongs to the "pajock", hence the sense of the complete expression "Peacock pie". Once again the reading and analysis of "The Song of The Mad Prince" denounces structural operations that are typical in the construction of a nonsense text. The produced effect is one of reflected symmetries, however distorted they may appear from the model. In de la Mare’s poem the nonsensical distortion of the shakespearean model in Hamlet has a historical and cultural character and can appear in several prefigurations, each of them of different orders: symbolic prefigurations, like peacock and sparrow; prefigurations that can be described as topical, like Hamlet, seen as the character-motive of a mad prince; finally, linguistic-semantical prefigurations as noticed in the use of the literal meaning of *mince* for the metaphorical associations in the expression "peacock pie".

It is highly significant in this context that Lise Ede should define nonsense "as a self-reflexive verbal construction which functions through the manipulation
of series of internal and external tensions", mainly those concerning "words and their linguistic relations (language as designation and language as expression), denotation and connotation". Ede proceeds by describing basic dichotomies in nonsense texts, which involve the interplay between "illusion and reality", "order and disorder" and create "further contrasting pairs as fantasy and logic, imagination and reason, the child and the adult, the individual and society" (Tigges 1987: 57).

The fundamental linguistic issue structuring a nonsense text raises important questions related to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, well expressed in his Philosophische Untersuchungen. Wittgenstein's position is a reflexive elaboration of Kant's thought in his Kritik der Reinen Vernunft, about the philosophical need to revise the usual relationships between concepts and language, so as to avoid metaphysical speculations with no epistemological content.(1) Based on these assumptions, Wittgenstein identifies the limits of the cognoscible world with the limits of language, calling back Nietzsche's metaphysical disbelief towards dichotomical concepts as essentia / existentia:

Wir sind in der Täuschung, das Besondere, Tiefe, das uns Wesentliche unserer Untersuchung liege darin, dass sie das unvergleichliche Wesen der Sprache zu begreifen trachtet. (...) Während doch die Worte "Sprache", "Erfahrung", "Welt", wenn sie eine Verwendung haben, eine so niedrige haben müssen, wie die Worte "Tisch", "Lampe", "Tür". (Wittgenstein 1963: §97)

Wittgenstein's theory of language throws some new light on the question of literary nonsense, as it reflects on the peculiar way language does represent external references, using linguistic signs in a complex play of possible meanings: *Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache.* (Wittgenstein 1963:§43). This is exactly the point where "The Song of the Mad Prince" uses the lyrical appeal of its nonsensical wordplay to work on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, decomposing its text in several selected parts and rearranging them in a different order, so as to produce a new set of related meanings. In this context, the concept of madness cannot be taken simply as integrating thematic relationships between Shakespeare's and de la Mare's texts, but should be extended to specific qualities of literary language in general, namely its infinite plasticity as regards means and modes of representation, from close mimicry of the object to its utmost distortion, metamorphosis and pure invention. Considering the language of nonsense, one becomes more aware of this kind of self-conscious "madness" setting the pattern for all linguistic games that structure the multiple

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(1) See specially definitions of sensibilities, e.g. "Esthétique transcendental", §1, §§8, III: definitions of appearance and phenomenon; "Analytic des concepts", §§10-15 (Kant 1963). See also *La Dissertation de 1770 for the theoretical preliminaries of the Kantian "Kritik" period* (Kant 1967).
relationships between text and object. This procedure becomes clear when one picks up certain lines of de la Mare’s song which echo similar passages in *Hamlet*:

"S.M.P." : Who said, "Ay, mum's the word"?
Hamlet : Ay, lady, 'twas my word. (III.iii.30)

Notice that the two lines are almost literally identical. However, considering the hamletian context, the line quoted above as Hamlet’s speech refers to the old king’s murder and not to Ophelia’s suicide, as in the context of de la Mare’s song, clearly shown by the line that follows: *Sexton to willow*. Going back to Shakespeare’s text, one is informed of Ophelia’s death in a precise reference of the queen to the willow tree:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows its hoar leaves in the glassy stream.

(IV.vii. 167-168)

*Willow*, then, in “The Song of the Mad Prince” is not a direct representation of the tree, as in *Hamlet*, but the metonymic prefiguration of both the character that refers to it (the queen) and the character implied in that reference, Ophelia, once she was found dead floating in the stream under that same willow. Nevertheless, the fundamental issue raised in this kind of construction of a nonsense poem is not the metonymic process of figural arrangement in the text, but the actual epistemological transformation suffered by the shakespearean sign “willow” in *Hamlet* as it integrates de la Mare’s “Song of the Mad Prince”. Therefore, the emotional symbolism attached to the “willow” in *Hamlet* is deconstructed and appears in the delamarean song as the actual symbolized object, in its proper subjective value. This epistemological change observed in the change of morpho-syntactical positions of the same word - willow - according to its specific use in two different contextual instances determines the meaning of the word "sexton" in de la Mare’s line, both as regards its sequential relationship to “willow” (in morpho-syntactical terms) and its shakespearean reference in *Hamlet*. In fact, in Shakespeare’s play two “sextons” come to scene in the last act, in the characters of two clowns, making the usual arrangements for a burial: Ophelia’s. The dialogue taking place between these two characters and Hamlet, who does not reveal himself to them as the actual prince, becomes relevant in de la Mare’s poem, however, in an abrupt shift of contexts. In “The Song of The Mad Prince” it is the “sexton” who almost literally quotes Hamlet’s speech: *Ay, mum's the word*. Therefore, the “sexton” who establishes the dialogue with the “willow” is desintegrated in the song’s context from its specific meaning in the shakespearean context, as it recovers its literal semantic resonance once it relates directly to the earthly ground where nature is rooted.

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Nevertheless, the return to literal meanings and senses, as is the case of a large number of nonsensical structures, does not imply an absence of semantic-symbolical levels in those texts. So, considering the song's line "Sexton to willow" in its inner contextual reference, abstracting its possible shakespearean reading, one becomes aware of a peculiar symbolism. The sexton who addresses the willow shows his own deepest attachment to earth and generational life, for the tree can only be born after having been buried: the seed is actually a potential birth. Only then makes sense that a young woman lies dead under that willow and actually generates again in the tree itself, as de la Mare's poem elliptically suggests in the lines that immediately follow the dialogue between the sexton and the willow:

Who said, "Green dusk for dreams,
Moss for a pillow"?
Who said, "All Time's delight
Hath she for narrow bed:

The apparent nonsense of the song's third line - Crops are ripe? - completes a whole cycle of generational existence, pointing to a circular reading of the poem itself which does not end in the second stanza, but starts all over again in endless repetition of the same dialectical tension between stanza one and two, expanding infinitely in that continuous dialogical motion underlying one's desire of being, and thereby communicating, pushing him to break up silence and fear and start to say words in a sing-song whisper. Lyricism in de la Mare's poem can only be understood if the essential nature the "Song" is considered.

In thus reading the song's own symbolism, the way it works inside the semantic structure of the text, it becomes almost inevitable for a reader familiar with the western literary tradition, to hear ecchors from a whole set of commonplace references to the shakespearean Ophelia-motive. However, de la Mare's "Song of The Mad Prince", although it calls back memories of Hamlet in the distracted words of a mad prince and reawakens Ophelia back from death in the waters in the shape of a willow, it is not another version of Shakespeare's themes of love and death, madness and revenge at the core of his tragic sense of drama and life. In its nonsensical appeal de la Mare's poem does not even intend to parodize Hamlet, though it constantly makes use of quotation in distorted contexts: the effect however is never one of exposing to irony or ridicule the shakespearean reference, as it is the practice of parodical texts (Zumthor 1979: 254).

"The Song of The Mad Prince", in its nonsensical way of making sense, has a notorious imaginative potential to project in the reader's mind reflected images of Hamlet, attempting to seduce him to read the whole play in its two short stanzas. However, in as far as it recovers Hamlet, de la Mare's song tries
to go beyond it, metamorphosing fragments of the Shakespearean tragedy in
the lyricism of a nonsensical speech attributed to a distracted prince for whom
the world has the essence and beauty of madness, which is at once the love of
life and the love of death, the ends of nature and the simple to-be of eternity.
De la Mare’s “mad prince” is not actually an individualized character, in the
sense Shakespeare creates his Hamlet to act his role in the play. The “mad
prince” is above all a hollow character where the faces and voices of the world
may play a part - the kings, the sparrows, the rust, the harrow, the mothers
and their sons and daughters, the beloved women and the lovers who lost
them, the sextons, the willows, and more accurately and indelibly the “Me”
that sings throughout: “That’s what I said.”
Bibliography


