Swedish Nonsense: From Folklore to Furniture

I remember an experiment in mnemonics we did in psychology class in upper secondary school back in 1978-79. The idea was to show us students that words and sentences that make sense are easier to remember than gibberish and nonsense. After thirty years I still remember two of the nonsense word pairs – sem-gok, xaz-fep – but none of the sensible words and phrases.

So it goes.

Seriously, what happened was of course that when challenged by our teacher some of us, a) put in a lot more effort to remember the nonsense than the sense in order to prove him wrong, b) the nonsense word-pairs were then alchemically transformed in our minds into *pleasurable* nonsense by a thought “process too complicated to explain” P2C2 (to quote the Water Genie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*), but which is about providing meaning where there is no apparent meaning to begin with and thereby making it memorable. Language in any form can hardly help being meaningful, when we put our minds to it.

Sem-gok, xaz-fep is a Swedish experience of nonsense – but probably not unique from an international point of view; pedagogical ideas have been global for a long time. And the same can surely be said about most of the Swedish nonsense that will be presented in this paper. The assumption here, however, is that by providing a local/national perspective some interesting issues to do with nonsense may be discussed. For although nonsense seems to be a rather universal mode of writing, national variations exist. It is also true that national clichés and stereotypes lend themselves well to nonsensification.

Not all of the nonsense presented in this paper will be “nursery nonsense,” in fact much of it is adult-oriented. This is of course one of the perennial questions of nonsense criticism: is it children’s literature at all or vice versa: can it ever be “adult” enough? This is not the place for a lengthy deliberation, suffice it to say that some of the characteristics of nonsense – its language games, its subversion of rationality – have regularly been associated with the child – childhood perception, child psychology, the construction of the child, or childlikeness. As I see it – and as this brief overview will show – nonsense thrives on ambivalence: child – adult, as well as sense – non-sense.
Folklore often defies adult-child categorizations, and my first example of Swedish (or Scandinavian) nonsense song is the “Peasant and the Crow.” A peasant is out in the forest, he sees a crow, is intimidated by it, goes home. His wife scolds him for his lack of courage so out he goes again and shoots it. From the tallow he and his wife makes “twelve pounds of candles.” The examples get more and more exaggerated: the beak is used as a church steeple and the carcass turned into a magnificent ship travelling the seas. Tall tales and jocular songs that defy or invert logic are common in Swedish folklore, as in many other literatures.

Another kind of anonymous folklore – more closely connected to childhood than folktales and songs – are oral counting games, some of which are very old. Here is another one featuring a crow:

Äppel päppel pirum parum.  Apples, papples pirum parum
Kråkan satt på tallekvist.  The crow sat on fir bough
Hon sa ett, hon sa tu.  She said one, she said two
Ute ska du vara nu!  You shall be out – now!
(Furuland 71)  (my translation)

The “pirum, parum” may or may not derive from dog (or cat) Latin. Another favourite – “ole dole doff / kinke lane koff / koffe lane / binke bane / ole dole doff,” which is complete nonsense in Swedish turns out to be garbled Latin and German (unus, duo, quinque). That the text itself is incomprehensible does not matter; sense is made (and is clear) in the context of a school counting game.

Turning from folklore to literary folklore, Georg Stiernhielm (1598-1672) has the pride of place. To Swedes he is known as “the father of Swedish literature.” But on the strength of his Discursus Astropoeticus (ca 1660) where he experiments with “sound over sense”-effects, language mixtures and macaronics, there is also good cause to label him the step-father of Swedish nonsense. In the following example from another work he composes pure nonsense verse by exchanging all the letters in an Italian poem according to a cipher method: “Ub cryrlo o turi / ak gupri bekuri / Vorsu tamlè” (first three lines – the whole poem quoted in OEI 3). Stiernhielm’s Dadaistic efforts avant le mot did not
lead to successive generations of significant writers of nonsense. We have to leap a hundred years forward in time to the quirky mathematician and rhymester Hans Jakob Seseman (1751-1819). Today Seseman is all but happily forgotten, although his pedagogical verse about the number of days in each month still is used:

*Trettio dagar har november,
April, juni och september.*
*Februari tjuguåtta allen.*
*Alla de övriga trettioen.*

*There are thirty days in november,*
*April, June and September.*
*February has only eight and twenty days*
*All the rest has thirty-one in place*
(my translation)

However, Seseman’s *Brudskrifter med mera* [Bridal writings etc] did set an example. One of the greatest, but also most controversial, writers of the 19th century, Carl Jonas Almqvist (1793-1866) even used Seseman’s name for his own nonsense verses, calling them *Sesemana,* in its turn part of an even larger work called *Swedish Rhymes* comprising 1400 folio pages, which were mostly written during his 15 years of exile in the USA (where he fled after having been charged with attempted murder on a moneylender).

*Swedish Rhymes,* “the most monstrous work in Swedish,” according to one critic, has never been published in its entirety, but *Sesemana* is available in different editions. In this work “Seseman” is the appointed Homer of a rhyming epic (called a “Sesemanic Iliad” in the introduction); the aim is to provide examples and learned explanations of all existing verse forms. Seseman expounds his knowledge and improvisatory skills before an audience of literature-loving aristocrats under the aegis of the patron, Sir Hugo. Any “poetry” is incidental; it is “sound over sense,” as when Seseman chooses different place or proper names as the starting point for an intricate verse (here the limerick comes to mind). Days of the week, months or seasons are also fit poetic subjects, as in the following example.
Årstider äga vi fyra som förr
Men varför ha vi ej åtta?
Fyra har kroppen och fyra vår själ:
Oss komma de alla till mätta. (34)

Of seasons there are four as of yore
But why don’t we have eight?
Four for the body and four for our soul:
A number as good as it is great
(my translation)

Despite the monumental efforts of Almqvist and despite the perennial nonsense qualities of counting games and folklore, nonsense did not truly catch on in Sweden until the second half of the 19th century. The translation of English genres (literary fairy tales and nonsense nursery rhymes) and publishing forms (satirical periodicals) were instrumental in this process. Old Mother Hubbard was first translated into Swedish as Mormor Spitsnos in 1842 – albeit from the German (Furuland 78). In 1872 August Strindberg translated a book of English nursery rhymes, including “Hey diddle, the cat and the fiddle”; eventually the book was published under the title Daddas visor (1872 – see Klingberg 56). The nonsense proved difficult to translate, however. Strindberg complained in a letter to the editor that he was unable render “the strange madness of the original, which, candidly speaking, I do not understand the meaning of” (quoted in Klingberg 54). A bit further on he writes, “no absurdity of this type is met with among my childhood memories” (ibid). Nonsense nursery rhymes were apparently a relatively new mode of writing in Sweden at the time – even to the notoriously “mad” Strindberg.

Emily Nonnen, by contrast, was a writer and translator with a deep understanding of English nonsense. A Brit by birth, she and her family moved to Sweden when she was seven. The Nonnens kept close bonds with the old country, however, and Emily was, for example, personally acquainted with the Liddell sisters and with Lewis Carroll who
asked her to translate *Alice in Wonderland* into Swedish (Nonnen *Introduction*), which she promptly undertook in 1870. In her introduction she writes:

> The task to translate her [Alice’s] adventures into Swedish has not been easy due to the quantity of wordplay, which can hardly be translated, and, moreover, the many *Nursery tales* (old wives’ tales) – a kind of writing which can almost be regarded as a special branch of English literature, so incorporated in all of the social classes as to be glimpsed in passing even in the writings of very prominent authors and scientists. – As for the travestied verses, I have whenever possible tried to use domestic examples, which would be more familiar to my readers (as I have heard the German translator do) and thus, probably, more interesting. (My translation)

Consequently, instead of translating “How doth the little crocodile” literally, with its for Swedes incomprehensible allusions to Isaac Watts’ “How doth the busy bee”, Nonnen achieves what Klingberg calls localization. She introduces the crocodile into a famous passage in *Frithiof’s Saga* by Esaias Tegnér – an epic poem and national classic that Nonnen also translated – this time into English. Nonnen also provides some of the more inexplicable episodes, such as the Caucus Race, with footnotes. *Nota bene:* this is some 100 years before Martin Gardner’s *Annotated Alice!* In “You are old Father William” she uses another strategy. She does not localize the poem. Instead the translation smoothly follows Carroll’s verse. However, she also translates the original, travestied text, and adds an explanatory note.

But Nonnen was not only a translator, she also produced a children’s journal (*Talltrasten* [The Trush] 1865-1866) modeled on English prototypes and source material to a higher extent than the previous German-inspired children’s periodicals in Sweden. All said and done, Nonnen was an important cultural ambassador of English children’s literature in Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century.

This is also the period when *Söndags-Nisse* [The Sunday Elf/Goblin] (1862-1924) was first published. It was a satirical publication in the spirit of *Punch* (which was founded in 1842, and which, in turn, was inspired by the French *Charivari*). Political cartoons and satirical texts were its forte. Occasionally, some its contributors would veer on the side of nonsense. Illustrator, Oskar Andersson’s “the man who does as he pleases” is an unsettling character who may cut off his fingers after having shook hands with a disagreeable person (180), or who refuses to take out his hands when he falls from an omnibus, and without a word, bloodied, leaves the scene (187). There is also a chillingly nonsensi-
cal scene showing an imprisoned maniac with a drawing in his hand and a man standing outside the asylum wall:

The Madman (to the illustrator): Did you make this drawing?

The Illustrator: Yes.

The Madman: Come in!

Pause

The Illustrator: Did you make this story yourself?

The Madman: Yes.

The Illustrator: Come out! (105)

[add illustration]

Some of the versifiers employed in *Söndags-Nisse*, like “Bob” (Karl Benzon), wrote nonsense. A rhyme which is still popular with children revolves around the sound-similarity of the Swedish word for “knot” (and its different declinations) and the proper name “Knut” is his making (I have (k)not attempted to translate this piece):

Knut stod vid sin knut och knöt
En knut. Då kom Knut, som bodde
Knut om knut me’ Knut och sa’
"Va gör du där, Knut?"
"Jag slår en knut, sa’ Knut.
Och då knöt Knut knuten, och
Så var knuten knuten

*(OEI 189)*

By the mid-1890’s the word “Grönköping” cropped up now and again in *Söndags-Nisse* to denote a backward, provincial town (grön = green; “köping” = market town, a common town-suffix, as with “borough” in English; “Greenborough,” in other words!). From
1902 the *Grönköping*-page was a fixture in *Söndags-Nisse* providing sly and humorous commentary on national news, politics and culture. In it Sweden and the Swedes appear through a distorting but nevertheless revealing lens. In 1916 *Grönköpings veckoblad* [“The Greenborough Weekly” – published monthly…of course] became an independent publication; and it still is, nowadays even in electronic form too:

http://www.gronkoping.nu/

It is surely one of the most sustained nonsense efforts worldwide. It succeeds because it is more than just a vehicle for satire; it is a nonsense universe complete in itself. The language, the place, the characters have taken on a life of their own. Characteristically, in my teens I subscribed to two periodicals – *Mad Magazine* and *Grönköpings veckoblad* – both of these publications provided a kind of anti-aesthetics, a discourse, that appealed to me even when I did not fully understand what was funny or what was being satirized. (Perhaps, it strikes me now, these texts are actually more attractive when you don’t understand them fully.)

The articles in *Grönköping* are deliberately archaic, pompous, pretentious and jargon-filled. And the old-fashioned black-and-white photographs bring out the nonsensical qualities of the articles even more. The language of Grönköping is characterized by excess of meaning – intentionally unintentional double meanings are trade marks of Grönköping style. Neologisms and homemade, ridiculous abbreviations abound. Some of the best Grönköping-nonsense is written in Transpiranto, a fabricated language along the lines of Esperanto, created by Grönköping headmaster, Ludvig Hagvald (aka Ludovico Hagwaldo in Transpiranto), and often used in the verses that are a permanent feature in the publication.

**Senila, Liberia**

*Ricardo Dybecko*

Senila, liberia, pinuppans Polar,
tu hyschans, tu lajbans,extrafina!
Hejsvejzo, tu toppschyssta wischa di hektar,
ta’ sunlight, ta rabatti evergreena.
Du gamla, Du fria

Rikard Dybeck

Du gamla, du fria, du fjällhöga Nord,
Du tysta, du glädjerika sköna!
Jag hälsar dig vänaste land uppå jord,
din sol, din himmel, dina ängder gröna [add example?]

The citizens of Grönköping are characters that have developed for a hundred years by now: Mårten Sjökvist (the mayor), Hildor Peterzohn (“former traitor”), Sophie Liljedotter (venerated oldest member of the community) and town poet and faithful producer of rhymed nonsense Alfred Vestlund (usually spelt A:lfr-d V:stl-nd), and some other hundred people. In the early decades of the 20th century the editor of Grönköping and also the person who wrote most of the articles, including the brilliantly failed poetry, was the talented writer Nils Hasselskog (1892-1936). A selection of his poetry has been published in the volume Guldregn (1948).

Side by side with this journalistic development of nonsense during the second half of the 19th century, nonsensical things were happening in the world of academe as well (as if we didn’t know about academic nonsense!). In Lund and Uppsala, university fraternities and lodges – notably CC (Cedant Curae, 1868) in Lund, a society that parody the rituals and ceremonies of, for example, the Freemasons – crop up. In Lund, carnivals (eventually held every fourth year) were held from the middle of the century, and so-called “spex” – humorous, operatic performances – were staged, the very first (Gerda) in 1886. Both the carnivals and the spex contained parodic nonsense pieces. The law student Axel Wallengren (1865-1896) was part of this environment. He was engaged in the 1888 carnival, he contributed to Söndags-Nisse as well as to various student periodicals. He soon adopted the pen name “Falstaff, fakir” (rendered here as Falstaff Fakir) publishing a number of Swedish nonsense classics, including Enhvar sin egen professor (1894) [Each and Everyone His Own Professor, or All Knowledge Known to Man, a Summary A Short Encyclopedia by Falstaff, fakir]. Under the heading “Science and Nature” comes the following characteristic piece:
Man, who is the two-crown of creation, consists of three bodily parts:

*The head,* or the upper part;

*The body,* the middle part; and

*The legs,* or the nether part.

The nethermost parts of the legs are called feet; they are two and consist of five toes. $2 \times 5 = 10$; *ten toes.*

These are collectively (five and five) much alike, but each taken individually unlike the others.

The first toe is called *Bigtoe*; it is considerably bigger than the others.

The second one is called the *Pointy,* because it is used to point things out.

The third toe is called *Longtoe*; it is very long.

The fourth toe is called *Ringtoe.* To avoid showing off one can wear one’s precious rings on it.

The fifth toe is so dreadfully small, that it is called *Littletoe* in daily conversation, and used primarily to harbour the useful organs known as corn. If this toe develops *forward* unto a length of two ells and *then* turns upward some three ells, it is possible to fasten a firebrand at the top with which one can light one’s way homeward during stormy November nights.

The toe bones are three: the first bone, the second bone, and the third bone.

Each bone consists of

*gristle* and *blood*

And some other

*element,*

as yet unknown to man and a mystery of nature.

Another mystery of nature is the

Aurora borealis.

This text provides a schoolbook example of nonsense: the pseudo-scientific approach exemplified by enumeration and repetition (“they [the feet] are two and consist of five toes. $2 \times 5 = 10$; *ten toes*”); the graphic disposition of text and use of italics and blank spaces; the deadpan stating of the obvious (“the nethermost parts of the legs are called feet”); the inflated metaphor (man as the “two-crown of creation”); the false etymology (the ringtoe); the absurd precision (what the ringtoe can be used for); the absurd imprecision (“element unknown to man”); the clash between rigid syntactical cohesion and parallelism between sentences and the absence of cohesion on the semantic level (toe bone vs Aurora borealis); the register shifts (scientific prose and names of toes like “pointy”) – this is the Fakir at his nonsensical best. Another two-line classic is From *The Fakir’s ABC:* “Vatten är ett farligt gift / Vilket omger Visby Stift” [“W – Water may induce disease / It surrounds the Visby Diocese,” my translation] – Visby being the cathedral town on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. (Of course, in the alcohol-liberal milieu of academia the phrase “Water may induce disease” or, literally, “Water is a dangerous poi-
son” has of course been recognized as a universal truth memorably phrased rather than as nonsense.)

In Sweden, less ravaged, than most countries, the modern welfare state was taking shape. Two children’s authors – Astrid Lindgren and Lennart Hellsing – picked up new ideas about education, children’s psychology and combined these ideas with both old and new literary models. Astrid Lindgren published *Pippi Långstrump* [Pippi Longstocking] and Lennart Hellsing *Katten blåser i silverhorn* [The Cat Blows a Silver Horn] the signal year 1945. The anarchic language play, and the promotion of a new childhood ideal (the liberated, wild child) in these groundbreaking books have led critics like Lena Kåreland to talk about “modernism in the nursery.” Just as in high modernism Lindgren and Hellsing also rely on traditional and long-established literary forms. Hellsing has throughout his career translated and adapted English nursery rhymes and Scandinavian folk verse and imbued it with his own brand of nonsense. In this sense he works like traditional oral poets. 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:

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
Empty sand
In the King’s hand! (*Lappricka Pappricka*, my translation 25)
Hellsing relies on sound effects – “Här dansar herr gurka både vals och mazurka” [“Here Mr Gherkin is seen waltzin’ and mazurkin’”] – but 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*).

Lindgren too relies on her absolute pitch for folk verse, especially in the Emil books (see Sundmark 2009). But in Pippi Longstocking she also shows her indebtedness to Falstaff Fakir (whom she admired) and Lewis Carroll, whose *Alice in Wonderland* she was reading at the time (Lundqvist). In *Ur-Pippi* there is an “impromptu” birthday speech which was deleted in the published version, which could have come straight from the pages of the Fakir:

- Ladies and Gentlemen! Unprepared as I am I cannot but lament the fate of Erik XIV. ERIK XIV was a poor king who played Punch once upon a time in Sweden. SWEDEN is my whole world. THE WORLD is a small ball which runs its course around the sun. THE SUN was once worshipped as a God by the ancient, mad Egyptians in Egypt. In EGYPT there are horrible crocodiles. CROCODILES are not at all as meek as lambs. LAMBS have wool and say bah bah. BAH BAH is hardly something that a nice girl ought to say to old ladies, for if she does, they will think that she wants to goad them. A GOAD is of no use whatsoever when making a fire under the cauldron. In the CAULDRON you put meat and vegetables higgledy-piggledy, season generously with pepper and salt, and let it simmer for an hour or so. Serve without ginger. That being so, I call for four cheers for the birthday child: hip hip hooray! (my translation)

The gratuitous conjunction of the worn speech-cliché “unprepared as I am” with the (in Sweden) equally worn school book quotation, “I cannot but lament the fate of Erik XIV”¹ in the very first sentence, alerts the reader to the nonsensical character of the speech. What follows is a grammatically coherent and tight paragraph, but one which follows no internal logic whatsoever. There is no real link between the final words of each sentence and the following identical but emphasised words in the ensuing sentences. Neither does the content of the speech, appear to have anything to do with Pippi or her birthday, despite her emphatic claim of “that being so.” Finally, from a situational point of view, it is of course nonsensical to deliver a birthday speech to oneself.

It is sometimes forgotten (or passed over) that already Pippi’s name connotes craziness in Swedish². To be (or have) “pippi” is to be mad. Pippi is also a diminutive for bird, and there are combinations, such as “dår-pippi” [crazy bird] and related words like...
“dårfink” [crazy finch]. Nonsense should be second (or perhaps first) nature to a character of that name – and it is! Pippi’s superstrength is perhaps her most conspicuous trait, but her looks and her behaviour are certainly striking too. Walking backwards, as on her first meeting with Tommy and Annika, sleeping with her feet on the pillow are all signs of the nonsensical. But it is of course in and with language that the real feats of nonsense are enacted. It can be simple as in Pippi’s murderous but innocent cleaning song:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Städa, städa varje fredag} & \quad \text{Clean up, clean up every Friday} \\
\text{och så varje jul,} & \quad \text{And on Christmas too –} \\
\text{det tycker jag är kul;} & \quad \text{It’s fun for me and you;} \\
\text{men aldrig mörda på en lördag,} & \quad \text{But never murder on a Thursday}^3 \\
\text{för det verkar skumt,} & \quad \text{For it seems so mad –} \\
\text{och det tycker jag är dumt} & \quad \text{I think that is too bad}
\end{align*}
\]
(song performed in TV series) (My translation)

But nonsense can also be used in complex ways and not always attractively, as when Pippi uses nonsense strategies to dominate the scene (and a passing girl):

[Hai Shang]
Villekulla Cottage lay just where the little town ended and the countryside began, and where the street turned into a country road. The townspeople liked to go for walks out Villekulla way, for it was there the most beautiful surroundings lay.
While the children sat there eating pears, a girl came by on the road from the town. When she saw the children she stopped and asked, “Have you seen my father pass by?”
“I don’t know,’ said Pippi. ‘What did he look like? Did he have blue eyes?’
“Yes,” said the girl.
“Black hat and black shoes?”
“Yes, exactly,” said the girl eagerly.
“No, we haven’t seen anyone like that,” said Pippi definitely.
The girl looked disappointed and went on without a word.
“Ahoy there!” Pippi shouted after her. “Was he bald?”
“No, not in the least,” said the girl angrily.
“That’s a bit of good luck for him!” said Pippi, and spat out a pear pip. The girl hurried on, but then Pippi yelled, “Did he have uncommon big ears that reached all the way down to his shoulders?”
“No,” said the girl, and then turned about, astonished. “You don’t mean to say you’ve seen a man walk by with ears as big as that?”
“I’ve never seen anyone walk with his ears,” said Pippi. “Everybody I know walks with his feet.”
“Oof, but you’re silly! I mean, have you really seen a man with ears that big?”
“No,” said Pippi. “There isn’t anybody with ears that big. Why, that would be absurd. How would it look? One simply can’t have such big ears.
“At least, not in this country,” she added after a moment’s thought. “In China it’s a little different. Once I saw a Chinaman in Shanghai. His ears were so big he could use them for a raincoat. When it rained, he just crept in under his ears and was warm and snug as could be. Not that the ears had such a rattling good time of it, you understand. If it was specially bad weather, he’d invite friends and acquaintances to pitch camp under his ears too. There they sat, singing their sorrowful songs while it poured down outside. They thought a lot of him because of his ears. Hai Shang was his name. You should have seen Hai Shang running to his work in the morning! He always came charging along at the last minute because he liked sleeping late so much, and you can’t imagine how lovely it looked when he came running along with his ears like two big yellow sails behind him.’

The girl had stopped and now stood with open mouth listening to Pippi. And Tommy and Annika had quite forgotten about eating more pears. They were busy enough just listening.

“He had more children than he could count, and the smallest one was called Peter,” said Pippi.

“Yes, but a Chinese child can’t be called Peter,” objected Tommy.

“That’s just what his wife told him too. “A Chinese child can’t be called Peter,” she’d say. But Hai Shang was most awfully stubborn and he said that the baby would either be called Peter or else nothing at all. And then he sat down in a corner and pulled his ears over his head and just sulked. And so his wife had to give in, of course, and the child was called Peter.”

“Oh, indeed?” said Annika.

“It was the horridest child to be found in all Shanghai,” continued Pippi. “So fussy with his food, that his mother was quite unhappy. You probably know they eat birds’ nests in China? Well, there sat the mother with a whole plateful of bird’s nest to feed him. “So, little Peter,” she’d say, “now we’ll eat a great big bite of bird’s nest just for Daddy” But Peter only just clamped his lips together and shook his head. In the end Hai Shang got so angry that he said no new food should be made for Peter before he’d eaten that bird’s nest just for Daddy. And when Hai Shang said a thing, it was so. The same bird’s nest was sent in and out of the kitchen from May till October. On the fourteenth of July the mother asked couldn’t she please give Peter a meat pie, but Hai Shang said no.”

“Nonsense,” said the girl on the road.

“Just what Hai Shang said,” continued Pippi.

‘Nonsense!’ he’d say. ‘There’s no reason why a child can’t eat bird’s nest if he only stops being contrary.’ But Peter just clamped his lips together the whole time from May till October.”

“Yes, but how could he live, then?” said Tommy in amazement.

“He couldn’t live,’ said Pippi. “He died. Of contrariness. The eighteenth of October. And buried the nineteenth. And on the twentieth a swallow flew in through the window and laid an egg in the bird’s nest that stood on the table. So it didn’t go to waste anyway. No harm done!” said Pippi gaily. Then she gazed thoughtfully at the girl who stood in the road looking simply bewildered. “How odd you look,” said Pippi.

“Just why’s that, now? You don’t think, do you, that I’m sitting here telling untruths? What’s that? Just say so in that case,” threatened Pippi, and rolled up her sleeves.

“No, no, not at all! Said the girl in alarm I wouldn’t say you are telling untruths, exactly, but….”

“No, no, not at all!” said Pippi. “But that’s just what I am doing. I’m telling fibs till my tongue’s getting black, can’t you see that? Do you really believe a child can live without food from May till October? ‘Course, I know well enough they can manage nicely without food three, four months, but from May till October! Why, that’s silly! You certainly ought to know that’s not true. You shouldn’t let people make you believe just anything they like.”

Then the girl went her way and didn’t once turn around again.

“How simple people can be,” said Pippi to Tommy and Annika. “From May till October! Why, that’s just so silly!” Then she yelled after the girl, “No, we haven’t seen any bald ‘uns all day today. But yesterday seventeen of ‘em went by. Arm in arm!”

(46-50)

[add analysis]

While Hellsing and Lindgren developed their own brand of nonsense against a backdrop of social reform, the welfare state and new notions of childhood, “high litera-
ture” too undertook a turn towards the nonsensical; indeed, there was modernism in the nursery as well as in the ivory tower. Gunnar Ekelöf (1907-1968), arguably the most important Swedish poet of the 20th century, for example, found inspiration in nonsense. In his 1955 collection Strountes – meaning “rubbish/nonsense” but pretentiously spelled (cf. “Nounsence,” and add French accent!) – he experiments with nonsense writing. His ”Epilogue av A:lfr-d V:stl-nd” (274) [Epilogue by A:lfr-d V:stl-nd] is a hommage to the Grönköping nonsense writer. And the poem is in itself preceded by the following epigraph from Almqvist:

It is hard, it is incredibly and indescribably difficult, it almost exceeds human powers, to write nonsense. Indeed, no one even tries to do it.

Here Ekelöf’s indebtedness to the Swedish pioneers of nonsense is evident. But already Ekelöf’s “Sonatform denaturerad prosa” (24-25) [Sonata form: denatured prose] from 1932 or the prose poem “Den gamle superkargören” (178-180) [The Old Supercargo] from 1945 display nonsense traits. In another poem, “Abs mentia animi,” from the 1945 collection we come across the following Latin fragment:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \\
\text{non sens} \\
\text{non sentiens non} \\
\text{dissentiens} \\
\text{indesinenter} \\
\text{terque quaterque} \\
\text{pluries} \\
\text{vox} \\
\text{vel abracadabra}
\end{align*}
\]

*Abraxas abrasax*  
*Thesis antithesis synthesis that becomes thesis again*  
*Meaningless.*  
*Un real. Meaningless.* (from the poem “Abs entia animi” 197)

This almost liturgical invocation to nonsense represents a degree zero of meaning/meaninglessness. But the abracadabras remind the reader of nonsensical counting games and spells (hokus pokus filiokus, ole dole doff kinke lane koff).

While Ekelöf hardly can be considered a nonsense writer for all ages, entertainers and showmen like Povel Ramel and Hans Alfredson were widely acclaimed by both
young and old. Pianist and composer, Povel Ramel had early success in the radio medium (from the mid forties), on stage and with a number of films. Inspired by American “crazy” humour (The Marx brothers for instance) and Jazz music (Spike Jones, Fats Waller, Bing Crosby) he wrote and performed songs, made films and shows. For its effect the humour – and nonsense – depend on the interaction between words and music and sometimes the visual – not least Ramels’ own persona. In the film *Rataata* (1956) the song “Var är tvålen” [where is the soap] is a good example of barber shop run amuck (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRcYa_XOMWM). It provides a world history from a hygienical perspective (from the Biblical Susanna in her bath to Madame Pompadour). A less multimodal example of Ramel’s art would be *Lingonben* [Lingon-berry bones]; it is a collection of most of his lyrics. The title song is a pastiche folk song – which here means that it is incomprehensible – and the verses are written in such a way that you expect a thumping rhyme at the end of each stanza, which you don’t get.

Hans Alfredson (1931- ) started out writing a now classic “spex” in Lund, *Djingis Khan*, founded Nasoteket (the Nasothèque), and is a member of the nonsense society Uarda-akademien (the Uarda Academy). He has made numerous books, films and shows – most of them in collaboration with Tage Danielsson (the duo went by the name “AB Svenska Ord” [Swedish Words Ltd]). In this context I will just mention two of Alfredson’s children’s book. First, *Varför är det så ont om Q?* (1968) [Why are there so few Q’s?], which features the Q-dog, who eats Q’s, and his master, the Crook, who is set on exterminating all the Q’s in the world with an evil invention; second, Alfredson’s collection of songs and short stories *Blommig Falukorv* (1965) [Flowery Frankfurters]. The title song is about a child who refuses to eat anything but flowery frankfurters. The collection also contains gems, such as the ruminations of the boy to whom nothing ever happens, the five-year old boys who play cowboys in their own invented English “which only children can understand,” and the song about the sea captain who got stuck with his foot in a chamber pot. [add text?]

Finally, I want to highlight a little known Ramel-Alfredson piece, the 1987 *Palsternackan* [The Parsnip], which is a calendar with recipes. Both Ramel and Alfredson are members of the Gastronomical Academy (there are many academies in Sweden!) and for a couple of years they concocted the yearbook/calendar. In its form and design *Palster-
nackan conforms to the official Almanackan (note the sound similarity), which has information about the length of each day, the phases of the moon, holidays and names. The difference is that Palsternackan provides information about what to eat on each day of the year, but also about Swedish kings who have died through indigestion, (food-) poisoning or over-indulgence etc. Here is the recommended recipe for 15 November.

Just as there is veal bird and catfish there are cowcuckoos! (Which you did not know when you woke this morning!)

Proceed like this:

Load your anti-aircraft gun and shoot a cow.

When you have flayed the animal, you hew out the fillet, which you then cut in rather small slices. These you flatten out properly, pepper, and daub with a wild fowl paté. Excellent quality can be had tinned, it has been rumoured.

Now, make small roulades of the cow-slices.

Tie these together with twine and serve them two and two (“cuckoo,” or “cow-cow”, in other words).

The guests who must pull the strings themselves should now (in an increasingly jovial spirit) dip their cowcuckoos in boiling broth, which you have prepared from the cow’s bones. Mind that the broth is not to salty!

To go with this you need small boiled leeks and puréed potatoes. Now is not the moment to forget the sea salt in its hand-mill!

On the rest of the meat you make a smoking ragout.

Of the hoofs you can also make four beautiful pen stands, silver-plated, to be distributed as prizes at rowing competitions,

Unless the waters have frozen over.

(27, my translation)

**Works Cited**


1. "Halvt vansinnig och omgiven av dåliga rådgivare kan jag inte annat än beklaga Erik XIV" [Half mad and surrounded by bad counsellors I cannot but lament the fate of Erik XIV] is a classic Swedish example of where (not) to place the subject ("I") in a sentence. Pippi uses the latter part of the well-known phrase.

2. “Pippi” was also the name of a popular garden game in the 19th century (like skittles or ninepins). The smallest pin/skittle was also called "pippi." It is tempting to think that Lindgren may have had this association in mind too when creating her "crazy" character – the smallest but most powerful "pin" in the game.

3. “Lördag” is “Saturday”, but I prefer Thursday, as it approximates the sound of “murder” better (as “lördag” – “mörd” does in the original).