

'You can't just say "words"': Literature and Nonsense in the Work of Robert Wyatt

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Throughout his career, the British musician Robert Wyatt has explored the interaction of words, language, sound and sense. His lyrical and musical delivery, by turns absurdist, infantile, angry and melancholic, deconstructs everyday phrases and invites listeners to question the borders of sense and nonsense. Linguistic experimentalism has been a mainstay of Wyatt's work from his early days in the jazz-rock group Soft Machine, through the short-lived Matching Mole and on to a distinguished series of albums released under his own name since the early 1970s. Wyatt has also engaged in numerous collaborative projects, providing further evidence of his predilection for pushing at the boundaries of sense. Both solo work and collaborations have strengthened Wyatt's connection to a variety of art worlds – literary, musical, visual, avant-garde – influenced by the linguistic turn of the twentieth century.

This chapter offers a selective assessment of such art worlds by examining connections between Wyatt's work and a range of literary voices, particularly those associated with nursery rhyme, nonsense verse and absurdism. A further aim is to explore the role of sense and nonsense in popular music. If one of the ways in which music differs from literature is through its ability to communicate without words, can there be a relationship between sense and nonsense in musical language that correlates

with that found in literature? In what ways can musical language be said to make or not make sense? These are big questions and a chapter of this length could not hope to explore them in depth. They can nonetheless be left to hover alongside the more modest exploration undertaken here of the ways in which musical and literary voices drift in and out of the sensible. Exposure to Wyatt's work emphasises the extent to which, as a musician, he has made use of words and vocables, even as he has occasionally distanced himself from the importance of lyrics in his music. By focussing on the literary-textual nature of Wyatt's work, I hope to highlight the different demands and expectations placed on the 'popular' and the 'literary'.

The chapter begins by listing some of the explicit connections between Wyatt's work and a range of literary voices from Lewis Carroll to Paul Auster. The focus is on authors who have produced, or been inspired by, nonsense or absurdist literature broadly defined. Having established these connections, I proceed to the sonic arts by considering the role of sound in language (and vice versa) and the relationship between poems and songs. I make reference throughout the chapter to scholarly work on literary nonsense, doing so partly to illuminate the discussion and partly to highlight the relative paucity of work on nonsense in popular music studies.

Robert Wyatt and Literary Voices

The first literary voices to associate with Robert Wyatt are those of nonsense writers such as Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Spike Milligan, and Ivor Cutler, as well as the often anonymous authors of limericks and other linguistically playful verse. Wyatt is a noted fan of limericks, a selection of which he included in the liner notes to a collection

of his work.¹ More generally, Wyatt's work has been marked by a fascination with nonsense verse, wordplay and the construction and deconstruction of linguistic elements. This tendency goes back to his early days with Soft Machine, whose second album included the two-part 'A Concise British Alphabet' (which involved Wyatt singing the alphabet forwards and backwards), and 'Dada Was Here', in which Wyatt sang and scatted in Spanish. His solo albums have been populated by a range of songs that utilise wordplay or nonsense elements, such as 'The Verb', 'When Access Was a Noun', 'The Duchess' and 'Twas Brillig'. Wyatt has described his work as 'basically out-of-tune nursery rhymes'² and it is useful to consider how such rhymes provide us with an early understanding of the relationships between words, rhythms and the musicality of speech. Indeed, nursery rhymes are an exemplary introduction to litpop.

If nonsense poets have been one set of literary voices with which Wyatt's work can be connected, we should also consider authors who have been inspired by them, such as the Dadaists, surrealists, existentialists and modernist writers with a taste for the absurd such as Alfred Jarry, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and William Burroughs. 'Dada Was Here' provides an obvious early reference point to the Dadaists, while the name Soft Machine was taken from the title of a work by Burroughs.³ 'A Concise British Alphabet' was preceded on the album *Two* by a song-sketch entitled 'A Pataphysical Introduction'⁴, a reference to the 'science' of 'pataphysics invented by the

¹ Robert Wyatt, *Solar Flares Burn for You* (Cunieform Rune 175, 2003) [CD].

² Quoted in Barney Hoskyns, '8 out of 10 Cats Prefer Whiskers', *Mojo*, 64 (March 1999), p. 44.

³ William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (New York, 1967).

⁴ The Soft Machine, *Volume Two* (Polydor 532-050-6, 2009) [CD].

French proto-surrealist Alfred Jarry and revived after Jarry's death by the Paris-based *Collège de 'pataphysique*.⁵ Jarry, best known as the playwright of *Ubu Roi*, defined 'pataphysics as 'the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments'.⁶ The Soft Machine pieces by Wyatt and co-writer Hugh Hopper not only refer to Jarry's science, but exemplify it by estranging, rearranging and 'virtualising' the lineament of the most basic of linguistic sense-making tools, the alphabet.

Wyatt's work fits well with the twentieth-century delineation of existentialism and absurdism to be found in writers such as Sartre, Camus, Joyce and Beckett. While Sartre and Camus provide useful reference points for such Wyatt compositions as 'Free Will and Testament' (in which the singer ponders questions of being and non-being), the names of Joyce and Beckett allow us to focus on a certain type of language game associated with nonsense and whimsy. Wyatt's song 'Alifib/Alife' (discussed in more detail below) contains phrases such as 'folly bololey', which could have come straight from Joyce, and 'no nit not', which exhibits the monosyllabic pleasure in sound evident in many of Beckett's plays. In 1976, Wyatt provided vocals to a recording of John Cage's 'The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs', a piece based on a page of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. The recording was released by Brian Eno's Obscure label, with a liner note describing Wyatt as 'an honorary member (Petit-fils Ubu) of the

⁵ The generally accepted orthography is 'pataphysics; the apostrophe is omitted on the Soft Machine song and in the liner notes to the Brian Eno record discussed below.

⁶ Alfred Jarry, 'What is 'Pataphysics?' *Evergreen Review*, 13 (1963), p. 131.

Society of Pataphysics' in a move that linked Joyce to Jarry.⁷ In the late 1980s Wyatt collaborated with the jazz composer Michael Mantler on settings of Beckett's texts, following earlier collaborations that included the setting of Harold Pinter's work. In 2001, the two men collaborated again, this time on the setting of a play by Paul Auster,⁸ a writer clearly influenced by Beckett, and absurdism more generally.

The Meanings of Nonsense

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice's reaction to reading the poem 'Jabberwocky' is described as follows:

'It seems very pretty', she said when she had finished it, 'but it's *rather* hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) 'Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know what they are!'⁹

Alice's reaction anticipates more than a century of commentators who, having had their heads filled with ideas, attempted to 'make it out' by offering interpretations of the work of Carroll, Lear and others. This was an era that witnessed the deployment of influential new theories of hermeneutics, not to mention all-out attacks on the figure of the author and an accompanying elevation of the primacy of the text (and of the

⁷ Uncredited liner notes (presumably by Wyatt) to Jan Steele and John Cage, *Voices and Instruments* (Obscure/Island Obscure No. 5, 1976) [LP].

⁸ Michael Mantler, *Hide and Seek* (ECM ECM1738, 2001) [CD]. This recording is discussed later in this chapter.

⁹ Lewis Carroll and Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition* (London, 2001), p. 156.

meaning of what could be experienced as a text). Carroll knew that sense-making is an urge that may be particularly strong in children, with their endless 'whys', but is not something they necessarily grow out of in adulthood. He knew readers of all ages would want to know the meaning of his works and he was repeatedly adamant that he could not always enlighten them.¹⁰ Anticipating by a century Roland Barthes's observations in 'The Death of the Author' that 'a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original', Carroll was the very opposite of the controlling Author-God.¹¹ This, along with the possibilities opened up by the semantic play of nonsense literature, has drawn many theorists to explore the world of Carroll, Lear and others.

Many of these theorists have been as aware as Barthes that a certain conception of the 'critic' is to be challenged as much as that of the 'author' (or, to put it another way, have recognised that the latter had become, by the twentieth century, a discovery or construction of the former). Avoiding the trap that 'once the Author is found, the text is "explained"', what we actually find with many commentaries on nonsense is a desire to focus on form and logic.¹² While this seems especially apt in the case of Carroll, who under his given name Charles Dodgson was a noted logician, it is also relevant to Lear,

¹⁰ See Martin Gardner's introduction to *The Annotated Snark* (Harmondsworth: 1975) for evidence that Carroll was unable to explain 'The Hunting of the Snark' to his curious readers.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 52–3.

¹² Barthes, p. 53.

whose work as a painter of landscapes, animals and birds showed a seriousness of form that was, in its own way, highly logical. Lear's limericks, as Ann Colley argues, can be seen as logical inversions of his more 'academic' work, 'reverse images of his paintings'.¹³

The logic of the 'regular' limerick, like that of the sonnet or haiku, imposes a constraint on the writer that simultaneously promises seemingly infinite expression. This notion of constraint was arguably taken to its greatest extent in the twentieth century by the writers of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature), better known as OuLiPo. Oulipians such as Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino and Jacques Roubaud created works of literature that were constrained by formal systems, a famous example being Perec's novel *La Disparition*, written entirely without the use of the letter 'e'. The work of OuLiPo thrives on inventiveness, but it is an inventiveness that frequently leads to nonsense as its only logical outcome. As with many commentators on nonsense literature, the movement is inspired by the logic as much as the whimsy of writers such as Carroll.¹⁴

Emile Cammaerts, recognising that a quest for 'the meaning of nonsense' may be a futile one, settled instead for contemplation of a world of 'topsy-turvydom' created by Carroll and Lear and analysis of the poetic forms used by the writers.¹⁵ Similarly, in tracing the 'field of nonsense', Elizabeth Sewell was interested in logical facts rather

¹³ Ann C. Colley, *The Search for Synthesis in Literature and Art: The Paradox of Space* (Athens and London, 1990), p. 9.

¹⁴ See Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (eds.), *Oulipo Compendium*, revised and updated edition (London, 2005).

¹⁵ Emile Cammaerts, *The Poetry of Nonsense* (Folcroft, PA, 1974 [1925]), p. 12.

than psychological interpretations of the authors or their characters.¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze was also interested in the internal logic of Carroll's work, as was Michael Holquist, who followed Cammaerts in refusing to see nonsense as allegory, suggesting that nonsense exists in its own logical world and 'means' according to its own logic.¹⁷ Where Cammaerts had stressed the 'Englishness' of nonsense, however, Holquist is keen to connect nonsense strategies to a wider array of modernist writers such as Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, Nabokov, Borges, Genet and Robbe-Grillet. Susan Stewart perhaps goes furthest in assigning meaning to nonsense, though her frame of reference is wider than the nonsense literature focussed on by most of the foregoing. Stewart identifies five main 'types' of nonsense that can be found in folklore, children's games and literature (both literary nonsense and modernist art from the Dadaists onwards): reversals and inversions; play with boundaries; play with infinity; uses of simultaneity; and arrangement and rearrangement within a closed field.¹⁸

What binds most serious accounts of nonsense is the recognition that nonsense relies on sense, whether this is thought of as 'common sense', semantics or another kind of formal, logical structure. Without this assumption of sense, there can be no nonsense.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London, 1952).

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stival edited by Constantin V. Boundas (London, 1990); Michael Holquist, 'What is a Boojum?: Nonsense and Modernism', *Yale French Studies*, 43, The Child's Part (1969), pp. 145–64.

¹⁸ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore and London, 1989 [1980]).

What is perhaps less clear is where the boundaries lie between nonsense and the absurd.

Holquist makes the following distinction:

The absurd is a contrast between systems of human belief, which may lack all logic, and the extremes of a logic unfettered by human disorder. Thus the absurd is basically play with order and disorder. Nonsense is play with order only. It achieves its effects not from contrasting order and confusion, but rather by contrasting one system of order against another system of order, each of which is logical in itself, but which cannot find a place in the other.¹⁹

A less strict distinction is provided by Stewart, who, following Henri Bergson, describes disorder and absurdity as 'names for the absence or nonbeing of common sense', thus constituting 'varieties of nonsense'.²⁰ Like Holquist, she refers to different systems but her focus is less upon the content of texts than upon the contingent nature of 'discourse events', recognising that what is classed as (not) common sense will vary from one interpretive community to another. For the purposes of this chapter, a similarly close relationship between the nonsensical and the absurd is desired, albeit with the observation – not unlike Holquist's – that the latter is more often presented as a way of dealing with 'the real world' in recognition that what 'really happens' in the world is absurd (or surreal), while nonsense is more often used for the purposes of highlighting play itself.

Pop and Nonsense

¹⁹ Holquist, p. 152.

²⁰ Stewart, p. 16.

In a discussion of poetry and orality, the Oulipian Jacques Roubaud laments the decline of formerly prominent modes of poetry following the attention given to performance-based practices such as sound poetry, rock music and rap.²¹ Roubaud's point mainly concerns the confusion of different forms with each other, an issue that has also been raised by those writers on popular music who have wished to highlight the ways in which song words work as *sounds* in ways that escape analysis as written poetry. Connected to this is a set of arguments based around the notions of whether the art of popular music (rather than its social value) can and should be taken seriously, and which types of popular music can be treated in such a way. Such arguments often pivot around a contrast between the serious and the nonsensical. For example, Dave Harker contrasts what he sees as juvenile nonsense in the Beatles' use of 'yeh, yeh, yeh' (in 'She Loves You') with the mature refusal of 'no, no, no' in Bob Dylan's 'It Ain't Me Babe'.²² As Simon Frith notes, the recognition of song lyrics as poetry paralleled the assumption of 'rock' as artistically superior to 'pop' music.²³ Such debates operated around a number of false oppositions. For a start, Dylan, the very epitome of the 'rock poet', has often shown a fondness not only for absurdity, but also for mocking his own seriousness (as in 'My Back Pages', for example). Indeed Dylan's music is so enmeshed

²¹ Jacques Roubaud, 'Prelude: Poetry and Orality', trans. Jean-Jacques Poucel, in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (eds.), *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, (Chicago, 2009), pp. 18–25.

²² Harker cited in Simon Frith, 'Why Do Songs Have Words?', in Avron Levine White (ed.), *Lost in Music: Culture, Style and the Musical Event* (London and New York, 1987), p. 84.

²³ See Frith, 'Why Do Songs Have Words?' pp.77–106.

in the 'banalities' of pre-rock vernacular music styles and in the work of absurdist artists, that any distinction between the serious and the nonsensical in his work is doomed to failure. Some of his fans might have been disappointed by his decision, in 2001, to sing about 'Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum', but they probably shouldn't have been surprised.

Furthermore, Frith highlights the extent to which the 'rock as poetry' school almost entirely neglected earlier popular music styles, many of which drew their power from their linguistic playfulness. The blues, for Frith, 'is popular music's most literary form' in that it 'contains the most sophisticated explorations of the rhythmic, metaphoric and playful possibilities of language itself'.²⁴ The question of which types of popular music can be seen as being 'literary', however, has to be balanced with which types of literature popular music might be comparable with. It is not clear, for example, exactly what Frith means by 'literary'. One suggestion, based on the current discussion, is that the literary arts have often dealt with 'the playful possibilities of language itself' by staging deliberate conflicts between what Robert Champigny calls 'sense, antisense [and] nonsense'.²⁵ If this is what 'literary' designates, then popular music makes a good comparison. Interestingly, for all the uncountable occasions on which pop has been dismissed as having no artistic merit, its defenders have rarely sought to celebrate the very nonsensicality of pop as one of its great, even 'literary' achievements, in marked contrast to the careful scholarship built up around nonsense literature over the years.²⁶

²⁴Ibid., p. 92.

²⁵ Robert Champigny, *Sense, Antisense, Nonsense* (Gainesville, 1986).

²⁶ Greil Marcus has probably come closest to a synthesis of avant-garde nonsense and pop music. His book on punk's connections to the Situationist International makes

The study of pop's literary-nonsensical connections remains undeveloped, despite continued interest in artists such as John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Talking Heads (who included a Dada poem on their third album) and Syd Barrett (on some of whose solo recordings Robert Wyatt played).²⁷ More generally, popular music is inundated with non-words, from blues slang, scat, jive and vocalese to rock 'n' roll (Little Richard's 'awopbopalooobop alopbamboom' being a pinnacle), doo wop (itself a nonsense term), the Ramones' 'Gabba gabba hey' and the Spice Girls' 'zig-a-zig-ah' (on the textually abbreviated 'Wannabe').²⁸

Wyatting

In 2006 an article in *The Guardian* reported on an activity called 'Wyatting', in which customers in bars equipped with internet-connected jukeboxes would put on what they considered to be particularly unpopular, non-bar-friendly music in an attempt to make other patrons leave. The activity, described as 'either a fearless act of situationist cultural warfare or a nauseatingly snobbish prank' received its name from a London

reference to the Dadaists, although he suggests that punks were the real Dadaists rather than what he sees as the stiff group of artists who came up with the name. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1990).

²⁷ There is an obvious 1960s focus to this brief list, suggesting that the period may have been a high point for references to nonsense literature in pop. Jefferson Airplane's Alice-referencing 'White Rabbit' was another classic of the period.

²⁸ It is interesting to consider some of these languages as coded forms, nonsensical to outsiders. See, for example, Neil Leonard, 'The Jazzman's Verbal Usage', *Black American Literature Forum*, 20: 1/2 (Spring/Summer, 1986), pp. 151–60.

teacher who had used Robert Wyatt's 1991 album *Dondestan* to disturb the clientele of a busy high street pub.²⁹ Aside from the fact that Wyatt himself is quoted as being 'honoured at the idea of becoming a verb', the article is interesting in that it suggests that his music is an acquired taste, something 'difficult' to like. In using Wyatt's work as the main musical thread for this chapter, I am aware of the potential irony that the more explicitly 'literary' his work is, the less 'pop' it might seem. To balance this, however, it is necessary to note Wyatt's repeated claims in interviews that, for all the apparent 'artiness' and even occasional difficulty of his music, he sees pop music as one of the key elements of his sonic palette. Having come from an 'arty' background to popular music, rather than taking the reverse journey that many of his 1960s peers took, he has, in his own words, 'never really quite made it as a pop musician', but not through lack of trying.³⁰ His biggest hit remains a version of a song made popular by the Monkees ('I'm a Believer', a top ten hit in 1974) and his own material has shown its pop potential through collaborations with, or cover versions by, artists such as the Raincoats, Ultramarine, Hot Chip and the Unthanks. It has sometimes seemed that others have 'completed' the project of making Wyatt's songs 'popular', as if his own avant-garde tendencies have prevented him from doing so.

In a point comparable to that made by Simon Frith on the 'literary' qualities of the blues, Wyatt is dismissive of the notion of 'progressive rock', a musical style of

²⁹ Ned Beaman, 'Wyatting (vb): when jukeboxes go mad', *The Guardian* online edition (10 July 2006), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/jul/10/popandrock> (last accessed 28 October 2012).

³⁰ Robert Wyatt, interview in *Prog Rock Britannia*, dir. Chris Rodley (BBC4, 2 Jan 2009).

which Soft Machine are frequently seen as originators: 'how stupid to think you could be better, more progressive than Haydn or Charlie Parker or John Lee Hooker'.³¹ It is this eclecticism – one which also takes in music from non-Anglophone parts of the world – that defines Wyatt's art and makes it fascinating. Rather than attempting to place it on one side of high/low, art/pop, difficult/easy divides, it is perhaps more useful to see it as occupying a more vaguely defined borderland between art and pop, one that raises questions about both. This borderland also lies between and connects Wyatt's whimsical, absurdist 'nonsense' and his more explicitly political work. In the latter, Wyatt and Alfreda Benge (his wife and artistic collaborator) often write away from sense, attaining more impressionistic effects.

In Simon Frith's analysis of words in songs, he cites an observation from 1964 that is typical of Leavisite analyses of pop triteness: 'One and all these refer to the world where June rhymes with moon, where there is no such thing as struggle for existence, where love does not have to be striven for through understanding'.³² While the truth of such a claim can easily be disputed, it serves as a reminder of the way in which the 'moon/June' rhyming mechanism has itself become something of a cliché when describing pop aesthetics. It is also a useful comment to bear in mind when approaching the song 'Moon in June', written by Robert Wyatt and included on the third Soft Machine album in 1970. The title was presumably ironic given that the song seems very far from the 'typical' pop template, being a nearly 20-minute track comprising a number of disparate song sections interspersed with lengthy jazz-based instrumental passages. At the same time, there is sufficient whimsy and self-reflexive absurdity to suggest that

³¹ Quoted in Rob Fitzpatrick, 'Captain Bob', *The Word*, 79 (September 2009), p. 68.

³² D. Hughes cited in Frith, p. 82.

the song is not mocking simpler pop songs but rather creating a meeting point for a variety of registers, presenting itself as a pop art statement. Lyrically it opens with four verses that emphasise carnal lust rather than romantic yearning, before moving into a section in which Wyatt adopts a sincere singing style to deliver quite banal lyrics, such as 'The sun shines here all summer / it's nice 'cause you can get quite brown'. This is followed by a self-reflexive deconstruction of the song not unlike the techniques used in Jean-Luc Godard's films, as Wyatt asks band and listeners to pause 'before moving on to the next part of our song' and to consider that 'music-making still performs the normal functions – background noise for people scheming, seducing, revolting and teaching'.³³ In live performances of the track, Wyatt would improvise different lyrics to the song; a total rewrite occurs in a version recorded for the BBC's *Top Gear* programme in 1969, with Wyatt making tongue-in-cheek references to band mate Mike Ratledge's lengthy solos and mentioning *Top Gear* and its host, John Peel, as well as 'the tea machine just along the corridor' in the Maida Vale studios where the performance is being recorded.³⁴

Such self-reflexivity is something of a Wyatt specialism. His song 'Signed Curtain', recorded with his post-Soft Machine group Matching Mole, featured an opening verse that consisted entirely of the repeated line 'This is the first verse', followed by a similarly self-descriptive chorus and second verse. At the close of the song, the description changes to 'this is the chorus, or perhaps it's a bridge, or just another key change', a move accompanied by the requisite key change. The ultimate

³³ Soft Machine, *Third* (Sony/BMG 82876872932, 2007) [CD].

³⁴ Soft Machine, 'The Moon in June', *Top Gear*, John Peel (BBC Radio, 15 June 1969), also available on Soft Machine, *BBC Radio 1967–1971* (Hux HUX 037, 2003) [CD].

message of the song is that the content is meaningless because 'it won't let me reach you'.³⁵ Song here becomes a vehicle that has the potential – not always realised – to communicate with desired others. The Matching Mole album opens with a similar observation in 'O Caroline', which finds Wyatt earnestly hoping that the object of his affections will not find the song he is singing 'sentimental crap'.³⁶ The song, which also makes reference to the piano playing of Wyatt's band mate David Sinclair, bears an echo of a track Wyatt had recorded for his solo album, *The End of an Ear*. That track's title, 'To Carla, Marsha and Caroline (for making everything beautifuller)', provides a typical example of the mixture of the personal, the heartfelt and the whimsical that has marked much of Wyatt's work.

This combination would arguably find its greatest outlet on Wyatt's second solo album *Rock Bottom*, the first work recorded following his life-changing accident.³⁷ The album opens with 'Sea Song', which Wyatt describes as his 'first love song to Alfie [Benge]'.³⁸ A more abstract, though no less heartfelt, love song than 'O Caroline', 'Sea Song' is an excellent example of what might be termed Wyatt's 'domestic nonsense', in that it describes his lover as 'partly fish, partly porpoise, partly baby sperm whale', praises her 'terrific' drunkenness and mourns the passing of shared wonderland nights

³⁵ Matching Mole, 'Signed Curtain', in *Matching Mole* (Esoteric ECLEC 22311, 2012) [CD].

³⁶ Matching Mole, 'O Caroline' in Matching Mole, *Matching Mole*.

³⁷ In 1973, Wyatt was left paralysed from the waist down after a fall from a building, an event that put an end to his previous career as a drummer.

³⁸ Robert Wyatt, Alfreda Benge and Jean-Michel Marchetti, *Robert Wyatt: Anthologie du Projet MW* (Baume les Dames: Aencrages & Co, 2009).

and the emergence of a 'different you, in the morning when it's time to play at being humans for a while'.³⁹ This sense of a private world with its own language – the language of relationships, with their pet names and secret codes – is even more evident on 'Alifib/Alife', a song-suite that comprises much of the second half of *Rock Bottom*. The titles are two plays on Alfie's name and also reference the musical keys of B and E. In many ways the song's lyrics are typical nonsense verse, with made-up sounds such as 'no nit not' and 'nit nit folly bololey' taking the place of more conventional, sensible lines.⁴⁰ As with much nonsense verse, there is enough grammatical structure for the lines to seem 'correct', and a semantic logic that suggests the song could make perfect sense in a world of 'topsy-turvydom', one its listeners may have visited in dreams, or in their own relationships. Lewis Carroll's influence can be heard in words which morph from familiar ones to neologisms, as when Wyatt sings 'I can't forsake you, nor forsqueak you'. The lyrics also mention characters or places which could derive from nursery rhymes or children's literature, such as Burlybunch, the water mole, Hellyplop, fingerhole and 'Alife my larder'. Bengé also contributes to the domestic nonsense in a response section that partially corrects Wyatt's nonsense: 'what's a bololey when it's a folly? I'm not your larder, I'm your dear little dolly'. Elsewhere on *Rock Bottom*, fairytales are explicitly referenced in the titles of two songs, 'Little Red Riding Hood Hit the Road' and 'Little Red Robin Hood Hit the Road', both of which feature the voice of nonsense poet Ivor Cutler.

The closeness of the relationship between nonsense and the absurd can be seen and heard in many of the songs on Wyatt's recordings from the 1980s onwards. It was

³⁹ Robert Wyatt, 'Sea Song', in *Rock Bottom* (Hannibal HNCD, 1426, 1998) [CD].

⁴⁰ Robert Wyatt, 'Alifib/Alife', in Wyatt, *Rock Bottom*.

during this period that he started to record more explicitly political material, including left-wing anthems and critical observations on global imperialism and the need for postcolonial independence. The 1985 album *Old Rottenhat*, Wyatt's first full studio album in ten years, contained ten tracks with minimal or no lyrics. Noting the influence of Beckett and Mondrian, Wyatt has said of these songs that he wanted to pare the material down to the 'essential song', an exercise he admits was as much aesthetic as political.⁴¹ As for politics, it was at this point that Wyatt decided he wished to make music that was 'non-misusable', that 'couldn't be appropriated by the Right'.⁴² The combination of these desires leads to a series of song texts that interrogate the meanings of words circulated by politicians and the media, turning language in on itself to so that it becomes absurd, estranged or abstract. The song 'Gharbzadegi', for example, refers to a Persian neologism (meaning 'Westernitis'), which Wyatt deliberately uses as a term listeners outside Iran are unlikely to understand. As he sings, 'Gharbzadegi means nothing to me [...] words take the place of meaning'.⁴³

A more abstract form of absurdism can be found on the previously mentioned arrangement by Wyatt and Michael Mantler of work by Paul Auster. Auster, best known as a novelist, is also a noted poet, translator, screenwriter, and dramatist. His early work *Hide and Seek* shows an obvious debt to Beckett's talking-head plays and uses as its

⁴¹ Dave Cross, 'Not Just Different Dialects ... But Different Languages', *Popwatch*, (1999). Available via the website *Une Discographie de Robert Wyatt*, <http://www.discographyrobertwyatt.com>.

⁴² Cross, 'Not Just'; Sean O'Hagan, 'English as a Foreign Language', *NME*, 14 December 1985.

⁴³ Robert Wyatt, 'Gharbzadegi', in *Old Rottenhat* (Domino REWIGCD43, 2008) [CD].

main absurdist device the potential for speech utterances to be misunderstood. The two speaking parts in Auster's text are arranged as songs by Mantler and performed by Wyatt and Susi Hyldgaard, who respond to each other's questions in ways which are both over-logical and annoyingly obtuse:

Man: Do you think we'll ever find it?

Woman: What?

Man: I said, 'Do you think we'll ever find it?'

Woman: I heard what you said. Then I said 'What?'

Man: Oh. You mean *what*.⁴⁴

In another exchange, one character says, 'Words. That's what we're taking about', to which the other responds 'You can't just say "words". That doesn't mean anything. You have to say one word or another'.⁴⁵ Over the course of Auster's play and Mantler's song arrangements, we witness the breakdown of communication between two people, a breakdown that paradoxically also operates as a continuous narrative, one which readers and listeners are able to follow more successfully than the protagonists. This intersection of literature and music raises interesting questions about the boundaries and specifics of both. Mantler, who has made something of a career of such musico-literary experiments, is keen to emphasise that work such as *Hide and Seek* is not 'a play set to

⁴⁴ Michael Mantler, 'What Did You Say?', in *Hide and Seek* (ECM ECM1738, 2001) [CD]. The original text for *Hide and Seek* can be found in Paul Auster, *Hand to Mouth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 189–208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

music' but rather an opportunity to explore the relationship between songs, words and voices.⁴⁶

In this sense, Mantler shows a fidelity to his medium, jazz. Jazz has an interesting relationship with words in that it was a style initially associated with instrumental playing. As a form of musicking, a way of processing musical language, it has placed emphasis on the instrumentalisation of the voice, most notable in the phenomenon of scat, but also present in the inflections and vocal experiments of most of the great jazz singers. At the same time, jazz musicians have often taken popular music standards as their starting points, a move that has constantly kept them at the borders of the popular and the avant-garde. Jazz acts as the constant in the music of Robert Wyatt. A lifelong fan, he has always looked to jazz and improvised music for inspiration, from the pioneering work of Soft Machine through collaborations with jazz musicians and the covering of jazz standards. His obsession with nonsensical singing and his love of what he calls 'a good tune' are both connected to this tradition. The nonsensical side is displayed in a collaboration with Gilad Atzmon on the latter's composition 'Re-arranging the 20th Century', where Wyatt provides a spoken contribution that fuses his typical whimsy with the tradition of jive language associated with jazz: 'In the

⁴⁶ Interview with Michael Mantler available on the composer's website, http://www.mantlermusic.com/Records/Rec_comp/Rec_comp_sgles/hideseek.htm (accessed 11 June 2012). Also of relevance to this chapter is a collaboration between Wyatt and Mantler on the latter's *The Hapless Child* (Watt/Virgin, 1976), an album of settings of the work of American nonsense writer Edward Gorey.

beginning was the bird and the bird was bop. That's bebop, short for Beelzebop'.⁴⁷ The love of a good tune, meanwhile, is amply demonstrated on '*... for the ghosts within*', a collaboration with Atzmon and Ros Stephen, in which half the songs are jazz standards or pop songs indelibly associated with jazz artists, such as 'Laura', 'Lush Life', 'In a Sentimental Mood' and 'Round Midnight'.⁴⁸

On '*... for the ghosts within*', Wyatt escapes the prison house of language by opting to whistle 'Round Midnight' and hum 'In a Sentimental Mood'. In the filmed interview that accompanied the album, Wyatt explains that words are unnecessary additions to some of the great jazz tunes and that, as a singer, he sometimes feels he gets the short straw.⁴⁹ The whistling may be the logical extension of the ways in which, throughout his career, he has explored the interaction of words, language, sound, and sense by deliberately using absurdist techniques. But the voice-as-instrument, whether Wyatt's or another's, is also a voice that delivers messages and asserts a shared humanity.

The wordless voice, in focussing on musicality rather than semantics, would appear to be less of a literary voice than those mentioned earlier. However, Robert Wyatt seems to problematise such an easy distinction in that he never truly gives up on words and, throughout his work, he has reminded his audience of the ways in which

⁴⁷ Gilad Atzmon, 'Re-arranging the 20th Century', in *Musik: Re-Arranging the 20th Century* (Enja TIP-8888482, 2004) [CD].

⁴⁸ Wyatt / Atzmon / Stephen, '*... for the ghosts within*' (Domino WIGCD263X, 2010) [CD & DVD].

⁴⁹ This interview is on a DVD that is included in the album package.

writers themselves use strategies of nonsense, wordplay, childishness and semantic deconstruction to express wonder and frustration with the world.

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