

Chapter Twelve

Not Just Blathering Balderdash: Alan Watts' Nonsense Experience

Michael Heyman

I have also The Bible of Hell, which the world shall have whether they will or no.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1789/1975)

We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience...

—Alan W. Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You are* (1966/1989)

Are You Experienced?

Alan Watts devoted a lifetime of philosophical discourse to an impossibility: conveying, through language, an “experience, a vision, a revelation which will explain, without words” (Watts, 1966/1989, p. 142) that life is a kind of “glorious nonsense.” As Alan Keightley (2012) puts it, Watts strove to transmit a “mystical realization of reality, before thought and words” (p. 44), and yet, with over twenty scholarly and popular books (and many more published posthumously), a variety of essays in magazines and professional journals, and countless lectures as a part of university faculty and as a renegade quasi-guru, Alan Watts did a remarkable job of forging his “thoughts and words” into multiple “bibles,” as William Blake might have called them, from the 1930s up to his death in 1973. While Watts is known more as the philosopher-guru who brought Zen Buddhism to the West, his mission, particularly towards the latter part of his career, was more like Blake’s, that is, to convey his own syncretic vision, in Watts’ case, revealing the unified “truths” underlying seemingly disparate Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. And while he wrote and spoke assuredly, with the authority borne of wide and deep study of global spiritual traditions, he admitted the intractable inadequacies of his own discursive methods. Such flaws were not in his knowledge, reasoning, or communicative eloquence, but, as might not be surprising in attempting to express the ineffable, “nonsensical” nature of reality, in his unavoidable reliance on the bedrocks of sense: language and logic themselves.

Looking back on his career, Watts (1972/2007) wrote, “My own work [...] is basically an attempt to describe mystical experience— [...] of reality as seen and felt directly in a silence of words and mindings. In this I set myself the same impossible task as the poet: to say what cannot be said” (p. 5). Such anxieties appeared increasingly as he published ever more volumes. In *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* (1951/2011), his eighth book, he lamented that the “crux of what I was trying to say in those [earlier] books was seldom understood; the framework and the context of my thought often hid the meaning” (p. 10). Nine years later, in the Preface to *This is IT and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience*

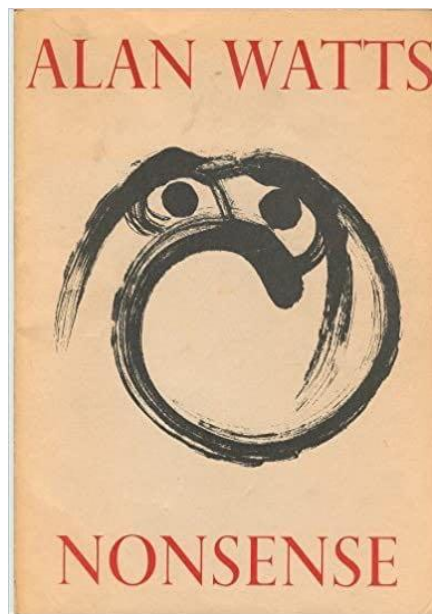
(1960/1973a), his insecurity concerning language resurfaces, as he writes about his efforts in communicating how “mystical experience” relates to “ordinary material life” (p. 11), yet, in the very next sentence, he admits: “I am instantly aware that I have used the wrong words; and yet there are no satisfactory alternatives” (p. 11). In the former example, he recognizes the failure of the entire “framework” of past books, the logic of his rhetorical methods; in the latter, he presents ideas and retracts them immediately due to the inadequacy of words themselves to convey his meaning.

One of Watts' solutions to the conundrum of philosophical language was to conceive of himself differently, not as a professor, priest, guru, or even a traditional philosopher, but rather as what he called a “philosopher as artist.” He explains in the essay “This is IT” (1960/1973b), that as this new type of philosopher, surprisingly, he “will not preach or advocate practices leading to improvement. As I understand it, the work of the philosopher as artist is to reveal and celebrate the eternal and purposeless background of human life” (p. 33). Like poets, the “philosopher as artist” uses language as art, to achieve what utilitarian language cannot do, to “say what cannot be said,” because, as he writes (striving for a rather Blakean goal), to know the “real world in its undefined (i.e. infinite) state [...] is to know life without trying to capture it in the fixed forms of conventional words and ideas” (Watts, 1951/2017b, p. 65). He further explains, in what we might call a Romantic vision of self, the nature of his “philosophic art”: “I am neither a preacher nor a reformer, for I like to write and talk about this way of seeing things as one sings in the bathtub or splashes in the sea” (Watts, 1960/1973a, p. 12). His self-description sounds rather like those critics who have dismissed his work as lightweight. But this is not, as it might seem, self-deprecation; rather, it is aspirational. Artistic expression, as he saw it, had no meaning except itself, and that is exactly what enables it to convey the true nature of reality, which also has no meaning, no purpose—in other words, no *sense*.

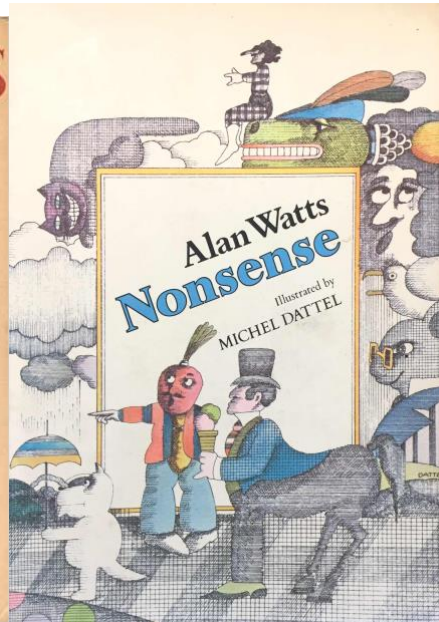
Of course Watts' many books are decidedly *not* simple bathtub ballads or “splashes in the sea,” though his *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966/1989) aspired to such aqueousness: he writes that he wanted this book to be passed on to his children, a “slippery” book that would “slip them into a new domain, not of ideas alone, but of experience and feeling” (p. 11). In other words, he wanted to provide, rather than Blake's “new bible,” a “new experience” (p. 12). It is not the material knowledge of something, as related by normative uses of language, that makes it real to us, but rather, “centrally and above all the *experience* [...] of its being so, and for this reason [this method is] such a complete subversion of our ordinary way of seeing things. It turns the world inside out and outside in” (p. 19). Even in this book, however, though he wishes it to be otherwise, Watts must *explain* himself, hoping that his explanations will be “so clear that you will not only understand the words but *feel* the fact” (p. 53). His explanations' “clarity” depends less on any artistic aesthetic than the old, doddering stewards of sense, language and logic, bringing him once again to the unbridgeable gap between something explained and something experienced.

It is no coincidence that just one year after the *The Book's* attempt at “philosophy as art,” Watts published a different vision of the “world inside out and outside in” not bound to the “fixed forms of conventional words and ideas.” He wrote in a manner aiming to solve his problems with philosophical discourse: a slim volume of poetry, song, and prose, simply called

Nonsense (1967). My argument here is that Watts' work in what G. K. Chesterton (1914), one of his heroes, called the truest form to "spiritual wonder" (p. 69), the genre of literary nonsense, enabled him to create an *experience* impossible through "normal" language. In form, Watts followed in the Victorian nonsense tradition, popularized by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, which he combined with the Eastern philosophical puzzles, such as Zen haiku and Buddhist koan. His goal was not to *explain* anything. He would not write as he was wont, in the "ordinary language of meaning—of leading to something else," but rather in the baffling, playful, self-referential language of nonsense, precisely *because* it leads nowhere, or from a different perspective, everywhere. Through nonsense art he invites a kind of divine performative play, exploiting the self-reflexive functions of nonsense literature that mirror our true relationship to ourselves and the world's purposeless "nonsensical" nature. In the reading, singing, and chanting of this art, we are to *experience* the shift in consciousness Watts normally tried to *explain*. Employing a genre whose significance is not in *what* it means but in how it does *not*, he attempts, and just possibly achieves, the impossible: to give the experience of knowing without imparting knowledge. Indeed, in *Nonsense* he is able to do far more than create mere "splashes in the sea"; he becomes what might more accurately be labeled the "artist as philosopher." Watts' literary nonsense, in its subversive, artistic playfulness, proves a fitting vehicle to expose the weaknesses of language and logic, failings that simultaneously demonstrate the true nature of reality.



1967 Edition



1975 Expanded edition

A World of Nonsense

Throughout his career, Watts' philosophy remained strikingly consistent; the "continuous thread" within was, according to Keightley (2012), "the assertion of the possibility of a direct,

immediate, mystical realization of reality” (p. 44). The *nature* of this reality, what Watts might call the underlying unity of everything, foregrounds all other concepts. Of particular note here are the resultant concepts that relate to sense and nonsense, which include the ultimate “meaninglessness” of the world, the complexity and diversity that comprise yet hide said unity, and its joyful playfulness. Before moving to the *Nonsense* book itself, I shall outline these concepts, with two further aids: the first is a poem from the *Nonsense* volume, “Birdle Burble,” presented here in full:

I went out of my mind and then came to my senses
 By meeting a magpie who mixed up his tenses,
 Who muddled distinctions of nouns and of verbs,
 And insisted that logic is bad for the birds.
 With a poo-wee cluck and a chit, chit-chit;
 The grammar and meaning don't matter a bit.

The stars in their courses have no destination;
 The train of events will arrive at no station;
 The inmost and ultimate Self of us all
 Is dancing on nothing and having a ball.
 So with chat for chit and with tat for tit,
 This will be that, and that will be It! (p. 39)¹

This poem is actually something of an outlier in the volume in that, strictly speaking, it is only marginally nonsensical; it is, however, with a little teasing out, a fairly succinct portrait of Watts' foundational principles and, not coincidentally, how his nonsense art functions. In a similar vein is “Rejoice, Ye Pure in 'Art” (Watts, circa 1967), an unreleased recording of Watts (and his friend Henry “Sandy” Jacobs), giving what can only be called a nonsense sermon, which mixes Christian hymn, Zen anecdotes, and art-as-philosophy nonsense, in what Jacobs notes on the archived CD cover is a “Very silly maniacal, pseudo-religious declamation” (N. Lewis, personal communication, May 29, 2020). It is delivered by Watts' invented comical persona, the over-the-top Anglican-cum-Buddhist, the “Reverend Crowson Munsie.” Like “Birdle Burble,” this performance is, at its root, expository, but it incorporates an abundance of nonsense elements, helping to “explain,” by way of performance and play with non-meaning, the philosophical principles connected to his conception of nonsense.²

We begin in “Birdle Burble,” appropriately for nonsense, back-to-front, with Watts' give-

¹ This poem is dedicated to James Broughton. All references to *Nonsense* come from the 1975 edition.

² “Rejoice, Ye Pure in 'Art,” (the title is a play on nineteenth-century hymn “Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart”) exists in a few takes, with only slight textual variations. It seems Watts tried different performative ideas, such as making the speaker Cockney, but the most complete version, and that used here, is declaimed from the pulpit of the “Reverend Crowson Munsie.”

away, the capitalization of “It” in the poem’s last line. Watts’ “It” is frequently-used shorthand to refer to the totality of existence, the unity that, despite appearances of separateness, is everything. In “Birdle Burble,” “This will be that” functions in its lack of specificity; any kind of so-called separate entity, a “this,” is actually not separate from “that,” another seemingly separate entity. All are simply expressions or forms of “It.” The “Reverend Crowson Munsie” is more concrete in the nonsense sermon “Rejoice, Ye Pure in ’Art.” He says, “No outstanding convexation without instanding concaving; billiard-wise, no cue-and-balls without the pockets; no mountaining without valleyfication.” This is to say, to take the last example, a mountain is not separate from the valleys around it; it is not even a *thing*, but rather a temporary organization of It, always changing, making it more accurate to refer to “mountain” as a verb, since nouns denote illusory stasis and separateness. Hence, the wise magpie’s properly “muddled distinctions of nouns and of verbs” (“Birdle”).

In “The Negative Way,” Watts explains the unity of It in terms of Eastern thought: “[T]he whole world of experience, including myself and others—is in essence identical with *sunyata* or Brahman. In other words, there is no reality but the absolute, nondual, and ultimate reality” (63-64). Or, in terms of Western thought, Watts refers to Paul Tillich, the celebrated Christian theologian, whose concept for God as “the ground of being” also suits, for “the Ultimate Ground of Being is *you*. Not, of course, the everyday you which the Ground is assuming [...], but that inmost Self which escapes inspection because it’s always the inspector. This, then, is the taboo of taboos: you’re IT!” (*The Book* 15). “Birdle Burble” mirrors this language: “The inmost and ultimate Self of us all / Is dancing on nothing”; in other words, there is nothing outside the “ultimate Self” (the capital S signifying here) to dance on, because it already *is* everything (including anything it might perceive itself to be dancing upon).

The true reality of “It,” it turns out, directly contradicts the traditional (i.e. misguided) definition of “sense”: the concept of purpose. To explain, we move backwards again in “Birdle Burble”: “The stars in their courses have no destination / The train of events will arrive at no station.” Stars are not only traditional emblems of our fates, but, like us, they are in constant motion, supposedly towards our celestially obscured purposes. But to Watts, they are not going anywhere; they are just going. Everything is always in motion, and motion precludes destination. Likewise, the events we perceive as moving us (and everything else) in time and space from A to B to C turn out to be going nowhere. The train can’t arrive because it is always going, always where it is. As Watts explains in “This is IT”: “everything, just as it is now, is IT—is the whole point of there being life and a universe” (30). The “point” or purpose of the universe, the result of everything we perceive to have happened in the past, is nothing beyond the continual now, and there *is* nothing beyond the continual now. The “goal” of the universe is already fulfilled, in every moment, and could not have been otherwise than it is. “Human purposes,” he continues, “are pursued within an immense circling universe which does not seem to me to have purpose, in our sense, at all. [...] [T]he processes of nature as we see them both in the surrounding world and in the involuntary aspects of our own organisms [...] unfold themselves without aiming at future destinations” (“This is IT” 32-33). If sense and meaning necessitate something leading to something else (a purpose, the “point” of something, a series of events, the train’s “destination”), but at the same time, according to the idea of the unified “It,” there can be nothing outside of that

something (no “something else”), then this kind of sense is impossible. Just as with Alice in the Looking-Glass world, no amount of running can get us anywhere but where we are, because here *is* there, or, in Watts’ poem, “this will be that / And that will be IT!”³

Watts sums up the impossibility of sense in “Sense of Nonsense,” a radio talk from around 1958, that details his indebtedness to nonsense literature: “This participation in the essential glorious nonsense that is at the heart of the word” enables us to understand that “thus the true meaning of life is no-meaning. That its purpose is no purpose and that its sense is non-sense” (“Sense”). To Watts, as we have seen, “sense” is the misperception that things lead to other things, that the world and our lives move from here to there; but there is no fixed “here” or “there.” As soon as we try to see reality as fixed *things*, whether places, people, hippopotamuses, or gods, we must fail because there is no fixity, only flux, only “wiggleness” as Watts liked to call it. Watts wrote in *Nature, Man and Woman*, “Nature is not necessarily arranged in accordance with the system of mutually exclusive alternatives which characterize our language and logic” (12), and we are brought back to nonsense, the genre whose very foundation is subversion of language and logic.

Discarding untenable concepts of purpose and fixity, Watts proposes a new way of seeing sense, or purpose, which, to us, may seem to be nonsense: recognizing that rather than being, as we instinctively suppose, solid *matter*, we are, instead, complex pattern, which is but an expression of the infinite complexity of “It.” As the Reverend Crowson Munsie preaches, we are “click-clack zig-zagly precisioned patternings [...] with all their articulate accurate delineated and definite structures” (“Rejoice”). We need only look out into the world to see a reflection of this in the strange gambols, pranks, and spranks of creation. Watts writes:

It is a special kind of enlightenment to have this feeling that the usual, the way things normally are, is odd—uncanny and highly improbable. G. K. Chesterton once said that it is one thing to be amazed at a gorgon or a griffin, creatures which do not exist; but it is quite another and much higher thing to be amazed at a rhinoceros or a giraffe, creatures which do exist and look as if they don’t. Why, of all possible worlds, this colossal and apparently unnecessary multitude of galaxies in a mysteriously curved space-time continuum, these myriads of differing tube-species playing frantic games of one-upmanship [...]? (*The Book* 3-4).⁴

He suggests that we can *see* this complexity by adopting the viewpoint of the “wise baby.” From this perspective, “the world becomes immeasurably rich in color and detail because we no longer ignore aspects of life which adults pass over and screen out in their haste after serious matters” (*Own Way* 307). With new eyes that take in every complexity, every “tube species” from rhino to

³ Watts himself likened some of his work to the Looking-Glass world, as in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, when he admits, “This begins to sound like something from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, of which this book is a sort of philosophical equivalent. For the reader will frequently find himself in a topsy-turvy world in which the normal order of things seems to be completely reversed, and common sense turned inside out and upside down” (9).

⁴ This example is also given, in a very similar form, in the “Sense of Nonsense” radio talk.

giraffe, every snowflake and diatom, every *thing* of everything, we are better able to see the totality of "It." This indiscriminating vision allows us to see that "the point of life is its pattern at every stage of its development" (*Own Way* 307). The universe has been working towards nothing but the immeasurable complexity of us (and everything), the patch and pattern of "It" that we happen to presently inhabit; our form is our meaning. Purpose is nothing more than this: the patterned complexity of what already is. And patterned complexity for its own sake is a significant element in defining literary nonsense.

Another significant aspect of seeing, as the "wise baby," the nature of reality is to recognize that it is, as Watts might say, *fun*—ludic, exuberant, hilarious, and joyful. The Reverend Crowson Munsie, as usual, relates this with exactitude: "the whole of reality is *chit-chit-puck tick-tock ping dit-dit-dit dat-puck-ping clug-jug bonk spit-spit-spa honk dong vrrrooom boy-yo-yoing pow tweet dit-dit siss-quock*" ("Rejoice"). Perhaps slightly more articulate, "Birdle Burble" offers that the "inmost and ultimate Self of us all / Is dancing on nothing and *having a ball*" (my italics). While Samuel Beckett might find the world's gibberish or the meaninglessness of "dancing on nothing" to be, ultimately, tragic, Watts saw the world through the lens of G. K. Chesterton: "No[w] if Chesterton was right in feeling, as I do, that [...] humor is uniquely human, and that if, furthermore, man is made in God's image, then, as Chesterton suggested, we should not be surprised at the verbal similarity of cosmic and comic" (*Own Way* 213). Even from the beginnings of his career, in his 1937 work *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man*, Watts proclaimed that true self knowledge allowed us to "join in the laughter of the gods. For the gods are laughing at themselves" (159), or, as he put it thirty-five years later "real religion is the transformation of anxiety into laughter" (*Own Way* 47).

To explain *how* the humor arises, we could turn again to Reverend Muncie, who preaches with studied gravity that to become a *disable* (that is, perhaps, a nonsense *disciple*) "you have to make yolk in your egghead, yoghurt in your jughead, joke in your belly" ("Rejoice"). As Alice might say, this is "*rather* hard to understand," but *some* kind of joke must be made out of *some* cranial matter, "that is clear at any rate" (Carroll 116). More helpful, perhaps, would be the "wise baby's" perspective, which finds that the unsolvable "confusions of the adult world are not really serious, but only the games whereby adults pass the time and pretend to be important" (*Own Way* 307). In this vein, "*all* philosophical opinions and disputations sound like somewhat sophisticated versions of children yelling back and forth—'Tis!' 'Tisn't!' 'Tis!' 'Tisn't!'—until [...] they catch the nonsense of it and roll over backwards with hoots of laughter." ("This is IT" 28). What the universe is *doing*, its "purpose," Watts calls *play*, which he sometimes uses interchangeably with the activity of nonsense: "For as the nonsense of the madman is a babble of words for its own fascination, the nonsense of nature and of the sage is the perception that the ultimate meaninglessness of the world contains the same hidden joy as its transience and emptiness" (*Nature, Man and Woman* 120). Such joy overflows in Watts' own performances, as we hear in the recitation of the pseudo-admonitory nonsense poem "The Negative Confession," when, after a long list of "serious" denials like "We just say: no, no" and "We just: don't go," he squeaks in an incongruous and ridiculous falsetto, "We don't try: Tweeky tweeky tweeky," (*Nonsense* recording). In "Birdle Burble" the sound and word-play, a version of the madman's babble, also echoes: "So with chat for chit and with tat for tit, / This will be that, and that will be

It!” On the recording, after this last line of the written text, he adds, as a final joke, “So... that’s that!” (*Nonsense* recording) while laughing with his signature rasp. He couldn’t help but laugh at himself, as the nonsense sage (and the nonsense Reverend) must.

How to experience IT: Music, poetry, and finally, nonsense

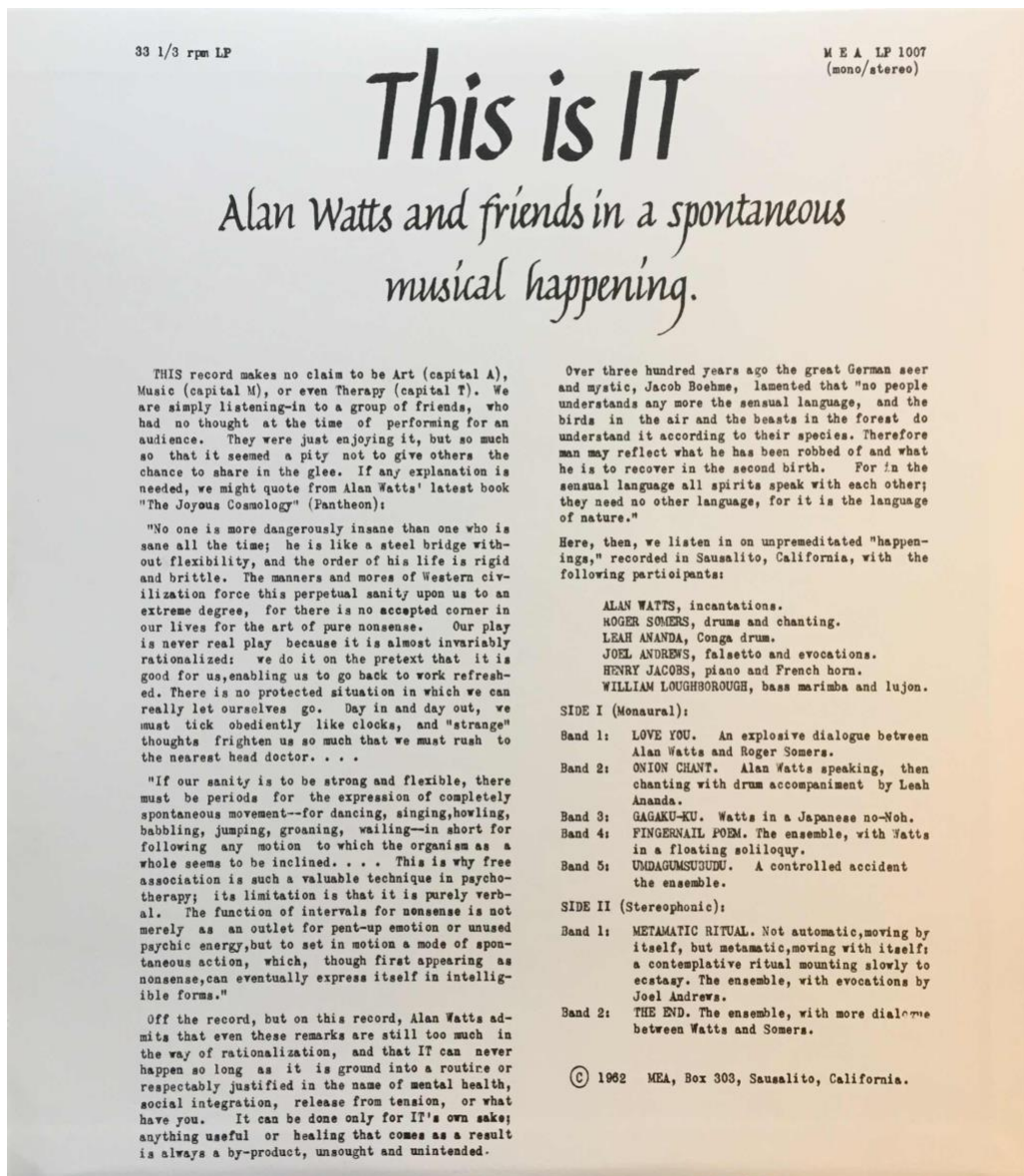
As we have seen, Watts considered the consciousness of “It” and its qualities of purposelessness, complexity, and joyful playfulness, to be impossible to communicate in the logical language of philosophical discourse. But this does not mean it was impossible to communicate, via the new “experience” he claimed the world needed. He writes:

the processes of nature as we see them both in the surrounding world and in the involuntary aspects of our own organisms are much more like art than business, politics, or religion. They are especially like the arts of music and dancing, which unfold themselves without aiming at future destinations. (“This is It” 32-33)

The experience, then, comes about most readily through music and dance, arts that, unlike “words and symbols,” do not (at least to Watts) *mean* anything, that do not “point to anything beyond themselves” (*The Book* 119). While Watts has received little credit for it, it just so happens that, four years before the *Nonsense* volume came out, he and a like-minded cadre created what is sometimes acknowledged as the first psychedelic album, called, unsurprisingly, *This is IT* (1962), in many ways a nonsensical musical expression of It.

Before Sandy Bull, John Fahey, and 13th Floor Elevators; before The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd, and Frank Zappa, there was, unlikely as it may seem, “Alan Watts and friends in a spontaneous musical happening” (*This is IT* (album cover)). It would be easy to write off the album *This is IT* as Watts merely “on drugs,” but it was, in fact, intended, as earnestly as Watts could be in his Bohemian gleeful wildness, as an “interval for nonsense” (*This is IT* (album cover)) which would have psychological and philosophical benefits. His first LSD experience, long before the mid-60s fad, was in 1958, when he participated in an academic study conducted through the University of California. Over the next few years, with his own careful experimentation, he came to believe that LSD could be useful, like medicine, to help people see the totality of “It.” Indeed, his *The Joyous Cosmology*, also published in 1962, promoted these psychological benefits of LSD, as opposed to its being used just “for kicks” (Furlong 169). The album, while never explicitly mentioning LSD, was meant to fulfill a similar purpose, as the liner notes are mostly just a long passage from *The Joyous Cosmology*. It was recorded in informal gatherings with Watts’ free-spirited California friends Roger Somers, Leah Ananda, Joel Andrews and others, has seven tracks, each a deep dive into wild musical and verbal experimentation—privileging exuberance over skillful musical chops. Tribal drumming, marimba and droning piano, mumbling vocalizations, philosophical lecturing, screaming, bodily noises, primal chanting, falsetto twitterings, scat-like syllables, and indecipherable interstellar languages (perhaps), all combine to create, through music, the “art of

pure nonsense," so that we may tap into "It" (*This is IT* (album cover), qtd. from *The Joyous Cosmology*).



The experimental music from this album embraced unbridled expression of energy and emotion, while eschewing strict musical form and notions of virtuosity. It played a critical role in giving one side of the "experience" Watts was trying to generate, but interestingly, in some ways it was quite different from the other means he suggested: poetry. He often writes, as he does here in *Nature, Man and Woman*, that the means of awareness of "It," "is in the realm of feeling rather than thought, and is in the spirit of poetry rather than formal, intellectual philosophy" (14). It might seem that poetry, which tends to be constructed precisely of the problematic "words and symbols" that "point...beyond themselves," would be the antithesis of what he needed. Watts' own take on poetry, inspired by his study of Zen, would help solve this problem. He writes in his

1948 article "Zen":

The Zen way of teaching is to demonstrate Reality rather than to talk about it, or, if words are used at all, to avoid formally religious terminology and conceptual statements. When Zen speaks it expresses Reality, not with logical explanations and doctrines but with everyday conversation, or with statements that upset the normal conceptual mode of thinking so violently that they appear as utter nonsense. (115)

The two modes he suggests here represent the two unique types of poetry he felt fit his formal and conceptual requirements. The first, of course, is haiku, "the simplest and the most sophisticated form of literature in the world" (Watts "Haiku"). Part of his role in ushering Zen into the West was to introduce haiku, which he did via *The Way of Zen* (1957) and his essay "Haiku," originally heard as a radio broadcast in 1958. With its "everyday" conversational language, oddly juxtaposed images, leaps of logic, formal intricacies, and especially its minimalism, it manages to communicate the "moment of intense perception" (Welch) that Watts so valued. Michael Dylan Welch connects Watts' notion of haiku to Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* (1970), noting that haiku functions not by being "signifier," but simply by *being* (Welch, Note 8). In this, it frustrates our usual intellectual approach to finding meaning, reaching for symbols, signs, and definitions, by simply letting the poem be what it is and nothing beyond (haikus "in their courses have no destination," as Watts might have written).

While haiku may have suited Watts in terms of form and function, when he took poetry into his own hands, his form of choice was an old favorite, literary nonsense, which, from a different angle, still satisfies the "Zen way of teaching, "using "words and symbols" in musical, subversive, tautological, "utterly" non-sensical ways.⁵ Watts' own experience in nonsense literature goes back to his childhood, and to the "fathers" of modern English nonsense literature, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. He notes in his autobiography, "At a very early age I was presented with a handsome edition of the nonsense limericks of Edward Lear" (21). Though he doesn't mention Carroll in his childhood reading, there is little doubt he read him, considering, in particular, the first poem of the *Nonsense* volume, "The Lovelorn Loon," an "epic limerick on the folly of reaching for the moon" ("Introduction"), completed in 1935 when Watts was twenty, which begins:

A certain umstumptular loon
Fell vastly in love with the moon;
 With shimular turve
 And binlimular gurve
He caroozed to the gorble bassoon. (1)

In the nineteen limerick stanzas that follow, Watts demonstrates his youthful nonsense apprenticeship to both Lear and Carroll, the former of which is seen in the modified use of Lear's

⁵ Welch notes that Watts did try his hand at a few haiku himself. See his note, 13.

signature limerick form, and the latter of which comes about through the constant use of neologisms, almost every stanza jam-packed with them, in a manner similar to Carroll's iconic nonsense poem "Jabberwocky." "The Lovelorn Loon," written before Watts' more serious engagements with the genre of nonsense, is quite different in tone, method, and effect from the other works in the volume. Its anti-Capitalist message vies with, and perhaps overpowers our experience of the form, pulling it away from Watts' later nonsense forms.

In his twenties, his interest in nonsense literature became more integrated into his study of philosophy, as he came under the sway of one of the genre's great critics and promoters, G. K. Chesterton. Watts wrote: "of all [Chesterton's] many essays the most profound and provoking was 'On Nonsense,' the peculiarly British kind of nonsense represented by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, which is something of a much higher and subtler order than mere twaddle, gibberish, poppycock, or balderdash" (*Own Way* 212). Chesterton's "Defence of Nonsense" argues that the dour Christianity of the day "has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible" (48). It was Chesterton who helped Watts make the connection between mystical spirituality and this higher order of nonsense.

In the service, then, of making the world "wonderful," Watts gives us *Nonsense*, published in 1967, a book that has received little to no critical or even bibliographical recognition. He himself doesn't mention it in his autobiography, either, but it does pop up in one letter, written July 9, 1967, to his agent, Henry Volkening: "I want to try an experiment with one of the young, small, and very up-and-coming publishers here. He has asked me for a book of nonsense ditties..." (*Letters* 322). The publisher was Jeff Berner, at the time a young columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a member of the second wave of Fluxus artists, and a teacher of avant-garde history at the University of California. Berner was also a regular participant in the eclectic and sometimes wild gatherings on Watts' houseboat in the Sausalito harbor, where, as Berner states, Ram Das, Timothy Leary, and various prominent counter-culture filmmakers, artists, poets, and thinkers, would mingle (personal communication, August 5, 2020). Watts' *Nonsense* fits rather impishly into Berner's fledgling press, Stolen Paper Editions, which included *Astronauts of Inner-Space*, a volume of trippy avant-garde poetry, Finnish "visionary" Kalevi Lappalainen's *Outside the Alphabets*, and Lenore Kandel's "holy/erotic poems" *The Love Book* (*Nonsense* 1967 rear advertisement). Berner's placement of *Nonsense* in this list suggests the seriousness with which its silliness was taken. In this same letter to Volkening, Watts mentions that he is not asking for an advance because "the job is already done" (322), implying that the texts were written before this date. Aside from "The Lovelorn Loon," which he states was finished in 1935, we have no further dates for the other texts here. In the introduction to the volume (a brilliant exercise in prose nonsense, itself, written in 1967), he mentions that some of "the following ditties, mellifluous and cacophonous [...] have been running in my head since childhood and early youth" [n.p.], though the similarity to the language and ideas in the essay "This is IT" and *The Book* (1966) suggest some came about in the late '50s, into the '60s.

This edition was a small run, selling modestly, mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area (Berner, 2020), but eight years later, in 1975, an expanded edition published by E. P. Dutton appeared (posthumously), introduced by Berner and illustrated by Michel Dattel in the late 60s Beatles *Yellow Submarine* style, giving it the feel, in a way, of a children's book. In addition to a

rather dapper photo of a grinning Watts, this edition also includes three brief essays, “On Nonsense,” “A Conversation on Goofing,” and “On Drudgery,” which deepen the philosophical and practical implications of performative nonsense literature. Lastly, in the back of this edition, an audio cassette was offered by mail order, which included Watts reciting, singing, and chanting his work, in addition, perhaps, to parts of his lectures from which the included essays came.⁶

By titling the book *Nonsense*, Watts puts it squarely in the Victorian genre tradition, but, like all nonsense artists, he carves his own style. The genre of nonsense as we know it today in the West, and what Watts was most familiar with, came from its development and popularization in the work of Lear and Carroll, though theirs came, in many ways, from a confluence of older traditions, both high-literary and folk. Indeed, the genre is often defined ostensibly by Lear and Carroll’s work, but the more theoretical definitions are manifold. Nonsense criticism picks up significantly in the mid-twentieth century, with Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Field of Nonsense* (1952) and since then has bifurcated bounteously. Wim Tigges’s comprehensive, more scientific approach calls it a genre which “balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody and representation [...] In order to be successful, nonsense must at the same time invite the reader to interpretation and avoid the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning...” (47). Tigges adapts his work, in part, from Susan Stewart, employing a long list of formal devices commonly used in nonsense, including neologism, imprecision, infinite repetition, simultaneity, and arbitrariness (47). Stewart’s definition, in *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1979) embraces sense and nonsense-making in terms of social contexts, and others, such as Noam Chomsky and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, have discussed it in terms of linguistics and philosophy. As we have already seen, G. K. Chesterton developed a spiritual school of nonsense criticism that was probably the most influential to Watts, but it was Watts’ roots in Lear and Carroll that shone most brightly in *Nonsense*.

In 1871, Edward Lear responded to accusations that his popular book *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets* (1871) was hidden political satire or otherwise “symbolic,” to which he answered, “The critics are very silly to see politics in such bosh: not but that bosh requires a good deal of care, for it is a sine qua non in writing for children to keep what they have to read perfectly clear & bright, & incapable of any meaning but one of sheer nonsense.” (Lear *Selected Letters* 228). In writing this, Lear put himself in a critical camp that claimed nonsense to be, in a way, utterly meaningless, or as he put it elsewhere “nonsense pure and absolute” (*More Nonsense* iv). Of course, one should not trust writers to divulge their “meanings,” but Watts, at least in certain ways, did subscribe to this non-sense angle (at least regarding *conventional* sense), as we see in “On Nonsense,” the first essay in the expanded 1975 edition of *Nonsense*:

Life is a kind of nonsense in the same way that music is a kind of nonsense, because music isn’t usually supposed to mean anything other than itself. Using the nonsense in

⁶ This cassette is no longer available. I have used recordings pulled from the Alan Watts Organization archives, to reconstruct much of what was probably on it.

words means using words for their musical value, like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear did. (41)

We must admit that Watts, for all his experience and knowledge, knew little about musical aesthetics, and so while music theory may not have been his strong suit,⁷ he tried to employ the concept of using words for their “musical value,” to be sound without sense, in his own writing. In this way, as “On Nonsense” suggests, Watts finds an analogy of sorts for the nonsense of life through playful, meaningless, sonorous language, as in the limerick example he gives:

Thrumula thrumula thrilp
comlipsible lipsible lilp
dim thrick and me thrummy
lulgumptulous bunny
sormgurgle umbumdular bilp⁸

What Watts wrote of life applies equally to his complex, “meaningless,” musical nonsense: “It is simultaneously the purest nonsense and the utmost artistry” (*The Book* 120).⁹

While the follies of nonsense language express the joy and nonsense of “It,” they also expose the fraud of “sensical” language itself. Language’s functioning is symbolic and symptomatic of our own misconceptions of reality, as critiqued by Watts, and shown by the mechanics of nonsense literature. In many of his works, he explains how words can never be used as a proper conduit to the world, that they are inherently problematic. Words, he admits, are necessary for our survival as a kind of shorthand, but they are ill-equipped, even downright antithetical, to take on any kind of expression of the true nature of reality (*Wisdom* 50). The problems with language are legion, as expanded upon in detail in Watts’ work throughout his life. To summarize briefly here, he found language, first of all to be inadequate to describe experience: “Words can express no more than a tiny fragment of human knowledge, for what we can say and think is always immeasurably less than what we experience” (*Ways* 127). Just as an inch is infinitely divisible, so

⁷ In a letter on Dec 12, 1960, to Timothy Leary, Watts displayed an unfortunately imperialistic approach to classical Hindustani music. He notes: “I was quite startled to realize that the music was pure nonsense... [The singers] were not singing words: they were lulling, playing with syllables (dit-da stuff), and blowing their oboes just to make weird spontaneous noises. There was nothing “classical” about it; it was the most abandoned, delightful blathering [...]” (Letters). Of course, this music was indeed classical Indian music and anything but nonsense (though certainly improvisational), but Watts, in his ignorance, saw it as a rhapsodic expression of the spontaneity and joy of being in the present: “nonsense” as a musical method of experiencing “It.”

⁸ This limerick I have transcribed from the recording that probably would have been a part of the original cassette tape to accompany the 1975 edition of *Nonsense*. Variants exist in “On Nonsense” (41) and *The Book* (119).

⁹ Such aesthetically-mindful complexity and form (and indeed the balance kept with some sense-elements) is also what distinguishes nonsense from more experimental conceptual poetry, like Dada, sound poems, and Fluxus art.

an experience is infinitely “meaningful.” Furthermore, as Watts states, “there are experiences that defy the very structure of our language, as water cannot be carried in a sieve” (*Ways* 127). What he calls the “ordinary language of meaning, of leading to something else” (“Sense of Nonsense”) is faulty because, as we have seen earlier, the “stars in their courses have no destination”; likewise, words, though we may think otherwise, lead us nowhere except back to themselves.

This kind of circularity is another part of words’ inadequacy, in that their meaning, in a way, is a kind of illusion created by their circular nature. In *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, Watts writes that “all ‘explanations’ of the universe couched in language are circular, and leave the most essential things unexplained and undefined. The dictionary itself is circular. It defines words in terms of other words” (48). Such circularity jibes with the Deleuzian “paradox of regress,” a central component of nonsense. The “sense” of a word, in a way, does not exist at all, but rather, like the sense of any kind of logical proposition, must be already assumed. Deleuze expresses it as such:

Sense is always presupposed as soon as I begin to speak [...]. In other words, I never state the sense of what I am saying. But on the other hand, I can always take the sense of what I say as the object of another proposition whose sense, in turn, I cannot state. I thus enter into the infinite regress of that which is presupposed. (28)

Sense presupposes sense, and words presuppose other words, leading us in giant loops of meaning, in infinite regression. Words becomes a shell game where the joke is on us; no matter which shell we pick, the meaning is never there. Next time, we think, we might just catch it. More fools we.

Even when words manage, in their stumbling and impossible way (John Gardner’s *Dragon* says that humans, with their language and logic, “rush across chasms on spiderwebs, and sometimes they make it” (64)), to define what we think is a thing, we are once again misled. Words are static and create separation in a world whose very existence is defined by its fluidity and connectedness, as has been shown earlier, with “Birdle Burble” and “Rejoice, Ye Pure in Art.” Watts writes, “To define is to isolate, to separate some complex of forms from the stream of life and say, ‘This is I.’ When man can name and define himself, he feels that he has an identity. Thus he begins to feel, like the word, separate and static, as over against the real, fluid world of nature” (*Wisdom* 46). This feeling, of course, is illusory, but language, these fabricated boxes, are just our ways of splitting reality into “millions of arbitrary distinctions called feet, inches, stars, trees, men, ounces, pounds, and mountains” (*Negative Way* 66). In our mistaking our arbitrary boxes for reality, “we are bewitched by words. We confuse them with the real world, and try to live in the real world as if it were the world of words” (*Wisdom* 50).

Language exposes our common illusion of reality; nonsense language exposes our common illusions of language. Elizabeth Sewall’s perspective on nonsense reflects Watts’ on language: she states that nonsense, unlike like most other kinds of writing, depicts “Not a world of ‘things’ but of words and ways of using them...” (17). Going further into the process of this world creation, Anna Barton writes, “[nonsense] complicates or obstructs the relationship between word and world, or word and meaning, rather than using words as a conduit to the world they describe” (Nonsense). But it’s all a matter of perspective. The relationship between “word and

world" is only "obstructed" if we are seeing word and world incorrectly, as a kind of achievable "conduit," rather than the words' (and world's) true emptiness (or oneness, their being the same) that Watts argues for. And so, by creating an intentional, self-reflexive "world of words," through nonsense art Watts is fighting fire with fire, exposing the inadequacy of words with words themselves, sometimes neologisms and near-gibberish-wordishness, and sometimes words used in illogical ways. In the passage above from "On Nonsense," Watts is careful to mention that, in his own nonsense writing, he is "using the nonsense *in* words," (my emphasis) rather than what we might expect, "using nonsense *words*." The implication is that nonsense is implicit in *all* words, nonsense or not. The same is true for logic. He writes, "absurdities arise when we think that the kind of language we use or the kind of logic with which we reason can really define or explain the 'physical' world" (48).

The playful use of aesthetically complex non-meaning is a crucial connection between literary nonsense and his philosophical concept of nonsense, but of course Carroll and Lear did not only use words *purely* for their musical value, as anyone remembering Humpty Dumpty's linguistic discourse on the meanings of the words of "Jabberwocky" will remember. Watts explains in his "Sense of Nonsense" talk that literary nonsense is an art form that

is not just chaos. That is not just blathering balderdash. But that has in it rhythm. Fascinating complexity. A kind of artistry. It is in this kind of meaninglessness that we get the profoundest meaning.

This is the rub. Literary nonsense, in its deepest functioning, does not signify by regular means. In many ways, it simply doesn't make sense: and yet, a meaninglessness imbued with rhythm, complexity, and artistry seems to bring us to a different kind of meaning, in a different kind of way—to the truths of existence that Watts wishes us not to *understand*, but to *experience*.

Reading, however, is not enough; Watts' nonsense "experience" necessitates performance. As he states in the introduction to *Nonsense*, texts therein "*are written to be read aloud—to be chanted, muttered, declaimed, or bellowed while showering, shaving, dusting, or driving*" ([Watts' italics] xi). *Nonsense*'s texts (and the nonsense of the world) are not something to be understood intellectually but rather to be experienced in continual *doing*. Alan Levinovitz has noted this characteristic of literary nonsense as an "experience of rewarding sense-juggling [...]" [It] is something more than the quality of a symbol or set of symbols: it is the nexus of connection between ambiguous semantic elements, a reader, and a context, which together determine a particular and rewarding experience" (255).¹⁰ Nonsense does not exist solely in text but arises as interaction between text, reader, and context that cannot end and cannot come to conclusions, as such, but must exist in a continual state of "juggling." As soon as the sense juggling stops, as soon as only one version of sense is grasped, the other balls fall, and it is no longer nonsense. Performance itself creates the nonsense experience, demonstrated, as we have seen, with Watts' album *This is IT*, where he encourages listeners to be spontaneous, joyous, and

¹⁰ Levinovitz is extending my own definition of nonsense as "sense-juggling," in *This Book Makes No Sense* (5).

energetic, to perform “nonsensically” in such a way that reflects the nature of reality. He explains further in his “Sense of Nonsense” radio talk: “It is this participation in the essential glorious nonsense that is at the heart of the world.” Our *participation* is essential. By performing nonsense literature we are really just making explicit what is implicit—because *everything* we do (and even the concept of “we”) is also nonsense. It’s just IT.

Closing ditargument...

So far, I have been dancing around (and occasionally *with*) Watts’ more proper nonsense texts in the volume, and so, as a conclusion of sorts, I will look to one poem that represents many of the formal and philosophical elements discussed here. “Ditargument” is a poetic dialogue, performative by nature, in the tradition of the nonsense dialogue trope seen in Carroll’s “A-sitting On A Gate,” and extended by Mervyn Peake, in “Tintinabulum”¹¹ where an “enlightened” nonsense figure parries verbally with a bowler hat-wearing square. Watts distinguishes his unnamed speakers with indentation and italics, the nonsense voice being flush left and non-italic:

Willy is belly and belly is willy.

A ditty-song, a ditty-song, and goddam silly. (1-2)

The disagreement begins immediately, as the nonsense-speaker compares two things (belly and willy) that seem quite similar if we consider them as *words* (in this world of words), with their near rhyme and visually similar construction. But the statement also seems to posit the symmetric property, in mathematical parlance, of two unique variables ($x = y$ and $y = x$), since “belly” and “willy,” despite their sounds, are clearly different *things*. And so, even before we consider what these things *are*, language and logic are already at odds. “Willy” could be a name, but coming from an Englishman like Watts, and *not* being capitalized in its second appearance, most likely means “penis,” especially in relation to another lower-stratum body part, the belly. However one may read it, this formal proposition, whether linguistic or strictly logical, defies common sense; it is absurd—as long as one remains ignorant of the “true” nature of reality, of “It,” where there are no true separations, where all things are, in significant ways, each other, where even the use of discrete variables (or words, or body parts) betrays a misunderstanding of the interconnectedness of all things. The sense-speaker will have none of it, dismissing it as a lowly nonsense song, a “*ditty-song*,” linking it, tellingly, to the “meaninglessness” of music—and its being, generally, *goddamned silly* to such a right-thinking gentleman.

The nonsense-speaker is undaunted and rattles off three more lines of nonsense, to the derision of the sense-monger.

Braddle-pin, pot-pin, a long gone done.

¹¹ This poem didn’t appear until Peake’s posthumous *A Book of Nonsense* (1972). It’s quite possible that Watts was familiar with Peake’s nonsense in the popular *Gormenghast* novels (1946-59) and in separate volumes such as *Rhymes Without Reason* (1954).

Just "dum-diddy, dum-diddy, dum-dum, dum."
 Mugwump double-rump is sitting on the fence.
 You say nothing that makes any sense.
 Fiddle in the middle and be diddled with quibbles.
 Try something better- 'n piddling with riddles. (3-8)

The nonsense here occurs through several methods: starting with neologism, in "Braddle," though the context (with a "pot-pin," more concrete but still unclear) shows it's a kind of pin, just as the Owl and Pussy-cat's "runcible spoon" (Lear *Complete* 239) is *some* kind of spoon.¹² "A long gone done" mixes in a rarity for nonsense, syntactic confusion: "done" with the article "a" and the adjectives "long gone," would suggest its being a noun, which it is not, nor does it serve as an adjective or the past participle of "do." The more usual semantic levels of meaning get juggled as well, with the addition of the near rhymes of "long" and "gone" and the visual rhyme with "gone" and "done." Adding in the consonance (with the "g"), we are *almost* led to say "dong," which, while fitting into the cheeky humor with "willy," (and perhaps Lear's "Dong with a Luminous Nose"?) nevertheless still does not make *sense*. We may shuffle the meanings around, with the alternative syntactical and semantic options, but the sense never settles, the juggling balls continue to revolve. A "Mugwump double-rump" seems a creature of sorts, given its (unexplained, though highlighted) twin-posterior, and might well refer to the creatures in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), something Watts no doubt was familiar with. Another possible source could be the famed nineteenth-century American political flip-floppers, but however one connects the dots, the picture and story of this figure "on the fence" remains obscure. In the third nonsense line, sound over sense seems to rule, with the parade of "-iddle"-rhymed words leading us blithely into murky ambiguities. And yet, "sitting on the fence" is indeed to be "fiddling" in the "middle," and the sense-speaker seems to be "quibbling," with the nonsense-speaker's (ab)uses of language and logic. By balancing nonsense and sense, Watts brings us tantalizingly close to making sense—always a sign of successful *nonsense*—without actually doing so, at least in the conventional manner. The greatest mistake of the sense-speaker, perhaps, is calling all of this nonsense "riddles." Riddles, commonly confused with nonsense, only seem to be nonsensical until one finds their answer. In other words, the "Mugwump," for instance, surely should be a specific reference from which we could derive the "true" meaning of the whole. But approaching nonsense from this angle, that it is a puzzle with an answer, that it is a set of signs with corresponding signifiers, is antithetical to its function as nonsense.

The nonsense-speaker, perhaps mockingly, then notes annoyance with a quirk of language, the sense-speaker's ambiguous contraction "'n," (as in, "*better- 'n piddling*"), which could mean "and" or "than." In an attempt to provoke the nonsense-speaker, then, the sense-speaker goes on a rant, using commonly-connected phrases with "'n":

¹² When Lear created the "runcible spoon" it was indeed a nonsensical spoon type. Only later, in obstinate contradiction to the "runcible hat" (*Complete* 429) Lear weareth and Aunt Jobiska's "Runcible Cat" (*Complete* 396) did it, regrettably, acquire an OED-sanctioned definition as a kind of slotted spoon.

Burger- 'n-bun;
Buttons- 'n-bows;
Bottle- 'n-jug;
Pepper- 'n-salt [...] (11-14)

This boring list goes on, to be countered immediately with the nonsense-speaker's retort:

Fiddle-di-dee!
 Riddle-mi-ree!
 Lickety-split!
 Lickety-cut!
 Clippety-clop!
 Dickery-dock!
 Slippery-slop!
 Flipetty-flop!
 Clickety-clack!
 Jigetty-jog!
 Rickety-tin!
 Chippetty-CHOP! (22-33)

The first thing to note here is that the “argument” occurs, in part, not by logic and semantics, but via the patterned complexity that characterizes nonsense—in this case, in the poem's meter. The sense-speaker speaks in antispasts (/U U/), and so, by way of dialogic equivalency, at least in sound, the nonsense-speaker answers in identical meter, giving a kind of *musical*, extra-semantic answer. This equivalency is reified in the next exchange, also, wherein the sense-speaker's amphimacers (/U/) such as “*Cook- 'n-serve; / Pork- 'n-beans*” (34-35) are countered with:

Chick-a-dee!
 Peek-a-boo!
 Fol-de-rol!
 Doodle-doo! [...] (44-47)

And so the “argument” carries on by way of form through mirrored meter, regardless of meaning. In this manner, one might expect a parallel retort to the sense-speaker's list items that are each two linked but separate *things*, and yet the nonsense-speaker's list items, despite keeping the same rhythmic foot, all represent only *one* thing, as if to say, the sound properties of words may *imply* two separate things—but words, clearly, cannot be trusted, and we're reminded of the language flaws earlier discussed.

Of course, the “argument” is not executed through form and meter exclusively. Many of the words and phrases have various semantic and referential layers of “juggled” meanings that, in different ways, respond to the dreary sense-flushed phrases. The sense-speaker begins, as we have seen, with workmanlike “and” phrases such as “*Burger- 'n-bun*” and “*Sugar- 'n-spice*.”

These are everything we expect, clichés in language and practice, linked by the “n” so (mockingly?) reviled by the nonsense-speaker. Aside from employing the directness of metrical engagement, the responses all seem to try to derail the stolid staleness, but in different ways. “Fiddle-di-dee!” is, appropriately, the first; not only is it a nonsensical expression of contempt (often for what is perceived as nonsense itself, as in Edward Lear’s *Young Lady of Lucca* or the *Pobble Who Has No Toes* (*Complete* 169, 397), but it also happens to be the representative bit of nonsense that the Red Queen asks Alice to translate to French, in *Through the Looking-Glass*. But even the terms with some root in semantic or pragmatic functioning are followed by a deeper dive into nonsense, as with, “Riddle-mi-ree,” which is a snatch from a traditional English nursery rhyme (Opie 363). Of course, this phrase has an actual word in it, “riddle,” but it is nonetheless *more* nonsensical as a functioning phrase than “fiddle-dee-dee,” implying, in a way that, counterintuitively, words that seem the most sensical are perhaps the most dangerously nonsensical, getting, again, to the heart of Watts’ objections to language. Throwing “riddle” into this more gibberish-like statement also harkens back to, and mocks, the earlier (erroneous) association made between riddles and nonsense.

In the long, rhythmic lists of “Ditargument” the debaters dig themselves ever deeper, and meanings mushroom, so much so that their culling would take us far beyond the limited space of this chapter. Some of the nonsense terms are just onomatopoeic (“clippety-clop”), some are concrete things (“chick-a-dee”), some come from snatches of nursery rhyme (“dickery-dock”), and some are common phrases nonsensical in a *literal* meaning, but colloquially clear (“lickety-split”). As we have seen, there are nods to Lear and Carroll and to pop culture, as seen possibly in the “Mugwump” reference, in addition to the poem’s final phrase, “Love-a-duck!”, originally a British expression of exasperation (*OED*) that also happens to be in the title of the 1966 Roddy McDowall film, *Lord Love a Duck*. This ending, while perhaps giving some sense of the nonsense-speaker’s state of mind, is hardly conclusive. How, then, is this conflict resolved? As befitting a nonsense poem, there is no definitive resolution, only a kind of infinite back and forth implied.

Within the quasi-argumentative engagement of meter and the various references and types of nonsense, we see to the heart of Watts’ method of “ditargument” and peek, as well, into the formation of this odd title, which we might see as a portmanteau of “ditty” and “argument.” Reappropriating “ditty” would be a dig at the sense-speaker, who uses the term “ditty-song” to mock the nonsense as a meaningless musical trifle, but more importantly would elevate this “music” to a method of truth-telling, even enlightenment. Ironically, they are both correct. Watts, in a way, presents philosophical debate as *song* that functions only in performance, that convinces not, primarily, by *what* it says (what the sense-maker desperately wants), but by *how* it says it. Such “music” has no conclusive meaning in conventional ways (it *is* “goddam silly”), but that’s exactly what makes it work. Through our performance of its expressions of “It,” its skillful complexity, and its playfulness, we achieve the *experience* Watts so wished his many books could explain. As belly *is* willy, so sense is nonsense, a revelation arrived at in ways wholly different from our expectations. As Deleuze writes, sense “is not something to discover, to restore, and to re-employ; it is something to produce by a new machinery” (72), and here, Watts is the engineer. Or, to put it more in his terms, by writing in modes of literary nonsense, he fully

becomes an artist-as-philosopher.

Acknowledgements

The Alan Watts Organization was a generous and invaluable resource for this essay. They provided from the archives several crucial recordings, including much of what was probably on the *Nonsense* cassette tape, and the unreleased "Rejoice, Ye Pure in 'Art.'" Many thanks to the Organization, and in particular, to Nora Lewis and Mark Watts. Thanks, also, to Jeff Berner for his enthusiastic support, to Eric Connally for his mathematical meatiness, to Peter Columbus for easing the way into the Watts world, and to Jodie Tesoriero for her insight into the *American Book of the Dead*.

References

- Barton, A. (2015). "Nonsense Literature." *Oxford Bibliographies*. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846719/obo-9780199846719-0099.xml>
- Berner, J. (2020, August 5). Phone interview with M. Heyman.
- Blake, W. (1975). *The marriage of heaven and hell* (G. Keynes, Ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, (Original work published 1790).
- Carroll, L. (2013). *Alice in wonderland* (D. J. Gray, Ed.). New York: Norton.
- Chesterton, G. K. (1914). A defence of nonsense. In *The defendant* (pp. 61-70). London: Dent.

- Deleuze, J. (1990). *The logic of sense* (C. V. Boundas, Ed., & M. Lester with C. Stivale, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1969).
- Furlong, M. (2012). *Zen effects: The life of Alan Watts*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths.
(Original work published 1986)
- Gardner, J. (1989). *Grendel*. New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1971)
- Heyman, M. (2012). How to Juggle: An Introduction. In M. Heyman (Ed.), *This Book Makes No Sense: Nonsense Poems and Worse* (pp. 5-7). New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Keightley, A. (2012). Alan Watts: The immediate magic of God. In P. J. Columbus & D. L. Rice (Eds.), *Alan Watts—Here and Now: contributions to psychology, philosophy, and religion* (pp. 43-57). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lear, E. (2001). *The complete verse and other nonsense* (V. Noakes, Ed.). London: Penguin.
- Lear, E. (1872). *More nonsense, pictures, rhymes, botany, etc.* London: R. J. Bush.
- Lear, E. (1988). *Selected letters* (V. Noakes, Ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Levinovitz, A. (2017). Slaying the Chinese jabberwock: Toward a comparative philosophy of nonsense. *Comparative Literature*. 69(3), 251-270.
- Opie, I., & Opie, P. (1951). *The Oxford dictionary of nursery rhymes*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sewell, E. (1952). *The field of nonsense*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Stewart, S. (1979). *Nonsense: Aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Tigges, W. (1988). *An anatomy of literary nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Watts, A. W. (1937). *The legacy of Asia and Western man*. London: John Murray.

Watts, A. W. (circa 1957 - 1958). *Sense of Nonsense* (Audio Transcript). AlanWatts.org. Retrieved January 8, 2020, from <https://www.alanwatts.org/1-1-3-sense-of-nonsense/?highlight=The%20Sense%20of%20nonsense>

Watts, A. W. (1958). *Nature, man and woman: A new approach to sexual experience*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Watts, A. W. (1960). Haiku. In N. Wilson Ross (Ed.), *The world of Zen: An East-West anthology* (pp. 121-128). New York, NY: Vintage.

Watts, A. W. (1962). *This is IT* (record album). Sausalito, CA: MEA.

Watts, A. W. (1967). *Nonsense*. San Francisco, CA: Stolen Paper Editions.

Watts, A. W. (1968). *The book on the taboo against knowing who you are*. New York, NY: Collier.

Watts, A. W. (1973a). This is IT. In *This is IT and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience* (pp. 15-39). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1960)

Watts, A. W. (1973b). *This is IT and other essays on Zen and spiritual experience*. New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1960)

Watts, A. W. (1975) *Nonsense* (exp. ed., M. Dattel, Illus., & J. Berner, Prod.) New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.

Watts, A. W. (2007). *In my own way: An autobiography*. Novato, CA: World Library.
(Original work published 1972)

Watts, A. W. (2011). *The wisdom of insecurity: A message for an age of anxiety*. New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1951)

Watts, A. W. (2017a). *The collected letters of Alan Watts* (J. Watts & A. Watts, Eds.). Novato, CA: New World Library.

Watts, A. W. (2017b). The negative way. In P. J. Columbus & D. L. Rice (Eds.), *Alan Watts - In the academy: Essays and lectures*. (pp. 63-66). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1951)

Watts, A. W. (2017c). The way of liberation in Zen Buddhism. In P. J. Columbus & D. L. Rice (Eds.), *Alan Watts - In the academy: Essays and lectures* (Kindle Edition). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1955)

Watts, A. W. (2017d). Zen. In P. J. Columbus & D. L. Rice (Eds.), *Alan Watts - In the academy: Essays and lectures* (Kindle Edition). Albany, NY: State University of New

York Press. (Original work published 1948)

Watts, A. W. (2020a). [untitled audio recording transcript (M. Heyman, transcriber)]. The Alan

Watts Organization. (Original recording date unknown).

Watts, A. W. (2020b). *Rejoice, Ye Pure in Art* (Audio Transcript, M. Heyman, Transcriber). The

Alan Watts Organization. (Original recording circa 1967).

Welch, M. D. (n.d.). Haiku missionary: An annotated response to Alan Watts' "Haiku."

Retrieved January 1, 2020, <http://www.graceguts.com/essays/haiku-missionary-an-annotated-response-to-alan-watts-haiku>