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Contemporary British Poetry  
and the Long 1980s

## Song Lyrics as Poetry from the 1980s to the Present Day – Regulation and Deregulation

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**RÉSUMÉ.** *À la lumière de la constatation de Sean O'Brien de la « grande diversité de la poésie contemporaine » dans *The Deregulated Muse*, on peut se demander si le débat ancien concernant le statut poétique des paroles de chansons est toujours pertinent aujourd'hui — ou s'il l'a jamais été. En outre, la notion de « muse dérégulée » suggère-t-elle que l'inspiration poétique peut désormais être légitimement attribuée à ceux qui s'adonnent à l'art apparemment moins noble de l'écriture de chansons ? Cet article tente de répondre à ces questions à travers une étude de l'évolution de la relation entre musique et langage ainsi que de la réception critique des paroles de chansons. Cet essai s'intéresse aux œuvres de certains auteurs-compositeurs et interprètes des années 1980 à aujourd'hui, parmi lesquels Elvis Costello, Paul Weller, Green Gartside et Jason Williamson. Il aborde également l'ouvrage de 2008 *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-Star Fantasist* du Poète Laureate britannique actuel, afin d'éclairer le lien inextricable entre musique et poésie. La dernière partie de cette étude, intitulée « *When It Sings* », met en lumière la résonance poétique que peut revêtir le langage, qu'il soit accompagné de musique ou qu'il soit seul.*

**ABSTRACT.** In light of Sean O'Brien's observation of the “very variousness of contemporary poetry” in *The Deregulated Muse*, one might question whether the longstanding debate over the poetic status of song lyrics still holds relevance today—or indeed, whether it ever truly did. Furthermore, does the notion of a “deregulated muse” suggest that poetic inspiration can now be legitimately attributed to those engaged in the ostensibly less elevated craft of songwriting? This paper explores the evolving relationship between music and language, aiming to address these questions while also examining the shifting critical reception of song lyrics. It considers the work of selected songwriters and performers from the 1980s to the present, including Elvis Costello, Paul Weller, Green Gartside, and Jason Williamson. In addition, it engages with the 2008 work *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-Star Fantasist* by the current UK Poet Laureate, in the hope that it may illuminate the undeniable nexus between music and poetry. The final section of this study entitled “When It Sings” highlights the poetic resonance that may be found in language, both when accompanied by music and when it stands alone.

**MOTS CLÉS :** *musique et langage, chanson et poésie, intelligence artificielle, mondegreen*

**KEYWORDS:** *music and language, song and poetry, artificial intelligence, mondegreen*

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Why bother about song lyrics as poetry? After all, the activities of the poet and those of the musician are two distinct pursuits, are they not? The answer to the second question is much easier than the answer to the first: no, they are not distinct pursuits, above all in the form of song where the boundaries between the two blur and leak into one another. The words of the poet sing, and the music of the musician speaks to us. But there are grades of course – levels of efficacy and levels of reception in words and in music. Quite apart, however, from the question of linguistic and musical values, simply investigating the question leads us directly to the matter of regulation and deregulation. Who decides the grades, the levels?

Who decides what is poetry and what is not? To couch the question in Sean O'Brien's words, the words of the title of his introduction to *The Deregulated Muse*, "who's in charge here?" In one sense *we* decide, in the sense that the collective *we* grants this status with all the help and the hindrance, with all the fleetness and the ballast or *our* cultures, of *our* histories. But in another, very important sense, that "we" shifts from the collective to the individual – we the readers, we the listeners, we who choose which poetic matters are of interest to us. And then there are always those poets whose voices for whatever reason fail to conform to any collective regulation and choose to cultivate alternatives to the regulated muse. It may even be – one hopes it is so, but one fears it cannot always be – that the best poets and the best musicians are blithely unaware of or unaffected by the regulated muse in their endeavours.

O'Brien remarks on the following fact: "At present it is not clear where authority in poetic matters resides" (O'Brien 9). Indeed, there is in the preface to his 1998 book an acute awareness and perhaps even some distress regarding the multifariousness of the poetry scene that "is at any rate complex" and regarding deregulation he states that it "has figured in the psychology (or maybe the psychiatry) of the nation as a whole" (*Ibid.*). Now at a distance of a quarter of a century that parenthetical joke seems painfully apt not just for Britain, but for the 'developed' world as a whole – it is increasingly, to borrow words from the zeitgeist, which also happen to be the title of a highly successful, much covered 1982 song by the British band Tears for Fears, a "Mad World," a song written by Roland Orzabal.

Again in his preface, O'Brien states that, "Huge areas of contemporary poetry fall outside the limits of this already over-egged book" (O'Brien 9–10). Could it be that song lyrics constitute one of those huge areas? Part of O'Brien's "over-egging" in the introduction that follows his preface is a list of contemporary poetry anthologies and poets and as he comes to the end of the long inventory he observes, "By this stage it's raining names and the point of the exercise may no longer be clear" (O'Brien 19). But the point is clear, in that the necessary over-abundance of anthology titles and poets' names is simply a reflection of the daunting multifariousness mentioned above. It is also clear, however, that O'Brien's language has been influenced by the lyrics, by the title and chorus of the Weather Girls' 1982 smash hit, "It's Raining Men", written by Paul Jabara and Paul Shaffer in 1979. The central trope of such particular song lyrics was and continues to be highly serviceable and adaptable to all sorts of contexts.

The apparent doyenne of deregulation back in the day, of course, was Margaret Thatcher and she receives some attention in O'Brien's preface when he outlines the obvious ways in which deregulation had been a theme in British society and politics – in the financial market, in public utilities and services, regarding citizenship and the role of the state – and describes the anxieties that these changes engendered regarding the “health and coherence of society as a whole”:

These anxieties have a poetic prehistory as well as a recent past, a literature as well as compliant media. They provoke complex and sometimes internally contradictory literary responses from left, right and centre. The Thatcherite ‘unthinkable’ can be felt a long way back – (O'Brien 9–10)

He then lists poets, beginning with Philip Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Tony Harrison, whose work conveys some of those anxieties and is part of that “poetic prehistory.” Later, in the introduction, he suggests that British poets were generally rather slow to respond to Thatcherism; while discussing an *Observer* review by Andrew Motion of Bloodaxe's 1993 anthology, *The New Poetry* (“actually more a review of the introduction”), he describes Motion's attack on the “gruel of committee prose served up by the editors”, but suggests that his dismissal of their political views is in truth, “not quite honest. For example, with the odd exception, British poets were slow to respond to the climate of Thatcherism, and you would in particular have to look hard among Motion's metropolitan peers for any very vigorous response to it” (O'Brien 18). It may well be that in this particular discussion and in general discussion about the state of UK poetry publishing and criticism in the preface and introduction to *The Deregulated Muse* there is a fair dose of concern over who is in charge, over the nature of the poetry establishment, but I tend to take O'Brien's jibe at Motion and his “metropolitan peers” for their lack of a “vigorous response” as a fair observation. I hope to show below that this was not the case with many 1980s songwriters.

Thatcherite deregulation and liberalization are certainly hallmarks of the British 1980s. However, a combination of general hindsight and a specific life lived elsewhere now tell me that if it hadn't been Margaret Thatcher, it would have been someone else to lead the way. She was, to borrow and to translate and to paraphrase some words from Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, “the new woman as she had to be – it's a pity though she had to be like that.”<sup>1</sup>

She certainly was like that, and her policies attracted so much anger and hatred (it is not too strong a word) from many quarters as to distort visions of her as a person. Miriam Gross, writing in *The Oldie*, in January 2016, an article with a

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<sup>1</sup> “Questo è don Calogero, Eccellenza, l'uomo nuovo come dev'essere; è peccato però che debba essere così.” (118) The words are spoken by Don Ciccio Tumeo, employee and hunting companion of the princely protagonist of the novel, Don Fabrizio Salina. In a scene towards the end of the third chapter, while out hunting, Don Fabrizio asks Don Ciccio what he really thinks of Don Calogero, up-and-coming local politician and businessman and soon-to-be relative by marriage of Don Fabrizio, when he becomes Tancredi's (the Prince's beloved nephew) father-in-law. Among the many themes of *The Leopard* that of historical change and the inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie is foremost.

splendidly ambiguous title, “Mrs Thatcher, culture vulture,” presents something of a corrective to the standard view of the woman leader many of us love to hate as a philistine:

The author Robert McCrum, writing in *The Guardian* the day after she died, judged that ‘Margaret Thatcher was the most philistine PM in decades’.

These detractors presumably didn’t realise that Mrs Thatcher was a fan of T S Eliot and Philip Larkin. Or that she was a lifelong reader of poetry, her favourite poets, according to Charles Powell, being Kipling, Walt Whitman and Longfellow, the last of whom she quoted in various speeches in the US. Or that she knew a great deal of poetry by heart, much of it – Wordsworth, Tennyson, the words of numerous English hymns – learned as a girl at her grammar school (Gross).

Each to her own in terms of taste in poetry and its uses. Margaret Thatcher remains a figure many love to love and many love to hate: a sophisticated woman of culture, or simply a vulture.

And we did not know it then, but those years of deregulation, of liberalization, of denial of society, were also the years that saw the dawning of something else that fits hand in glove with deregulation and liberalization, of something the influence of which continues and intensifies with an exponential rate of progression. From this point of view the decade is indeed the long 1980s. The great digital shift for me personally began in 1986 when I forked out some 400 GBP on an Amstrad PCW computer. From the PCW to Google and AI and Chat GPT with so many, with an embarrassing number of devices of all types in between.

We are still reeling from the effects and, with particular reference to AI and generative pre-trained transformers, it seems we still have a fair bit of reeling to do. The following was produced using ChatGPT 3.5, freely available from OpenAI. The more advanced version 4, the current version as of January 2024, requires a subscription payment for its use.

**Me:** Write me a short poem about using Chat GPT to write a poem.

**ChatGPT:**

In the realm of words where muses play,  
I sought a guide, a virtual array.  
With keystrokes dancing in the digital sea,  
I summoned ChatGPT, my poetic key.

There are four more rhyming stanzas where that came from, and presumably also an infinite number of poems and stanzas on as wide an array of topics as we may wish.

**Me:** Write a short song lyric now for a song about using Chat GPT to write song lyrics.

**ChatGPT:**

(Verse 1)

In the quiet of the digital night,  
I seek a muse, a spark of light.  
ChatGPT, my lyrical guide,  
In the binary realm, creativity hides.

(Chorus)  
Oh, ChatGPT, my virtual rhyme,  
Unlock the words, let them chime.  
Together we'll dance, in a language so sweet,  
In the melody of code, our song shall meet.

My lyrical guide also provided me with two more verses, a bridge and an “outro”.

**Me:** Can you write some music for that song lyric?

**ChatGPT:** Certainly, I can suggest a basic chord progression and melody for the song lyric. Please keep in mind that this is a simple representation, and you can customize it further based on your preferences or work with a musician to create a more polished arrangement.

Am            G  
In the quiet of the digital night,  
F            G  
I seek a muse, a spark of light.  
Am            G  
ChatGPT, my lyrical guide,  
F            G  
In the binary realm, creativity hides.

Feel free to experiment with the chords and melody, and adapt them to your musical style and preferences!

**Me:** Where's the melody?

**ChatGPT:** I apologize for the confusion. Describing a melody in text can be challenging, but I can offer a simple representation of the melody for the chorus using a basic notation. Keep in mind that this is a basic guide, and you can adjust it based on your musical preferences:

[Chorus Melody]  
C E G A G F E D  
Oh, Chat-GPT, my vir-tual rhyme,  
C E G A G F E D  
Unlock the words, let them chime.  
C E G A G F E D  
To-geth-er we'll dance, in a lan-guage so sweet,  
C E G A G F E D  
In the mel-o-dy of code, our song shall meet.

This is a simple representation using letters to indicate the melody notes. You can experiment with different rhythms and nuances to make it fit your desired style. If possible, working with a musician or using music software would be the best way to fully realize the melody.

Having barely ever made use of it, I am not by any means pre-trained in the use of this software, but I suggest that the brief exchanges quoted above offer considerable food for thought for songwriters and poets alike, not to mention for those of us who deal with language in contexts of education and criticism. But of course, quite apart from the important question of the qualitative limits of these pre-trained text generators, it is not true to suggest that they will produce anything we ask them to. There are other limits because they are, like any human system, computer-based or otherwise, regulated to greater or lesser degrees. O'Brien's "who's in charge here?" comes back to mind.

### Language and music

In investigating the links between language and music we find ourselves dealing with something challengingly atavistic and fundamental to our being human. State-of-the-art psychological research shows that the distinction between language and music that we often take for granted today is in fact a distortion of the way things actually are and always have been in our brains and minds:

Traditionally, music and language have been treated as different psychological faculties. This duality is reflected in older theories about the lateralization of speech and music in that speech functions were thought to be localized on the left and music functions on the right hemisphere. But with the advent of modern brain imaging techniques and the improvement of neurophysiological measures to investigate brain functions an entirely new view on the neural and psychological underpinnings of music and speech has evolved. The main point of convergence in the findings of these new studies is that music and speech functions have many aspects in common and that several neural modules are similarly involved in speech and music. (Lutz 2)

Jäncke Lutz wrote the above in the editorial introduction to a 2012 special issue of the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, an issue that contains some 20 scientific research and review papers dedicated to the topic of the relationship between music and language. But Lutz's opening – that word "traditionally" – perhaps conceals, as tradition often does, a phenomenon of convenience in our cultures: for the industrial and post-industrial 'developed' world it has made perfect sense over the past three centuries to take the music out of language, to make this distinction in order to render language more 'productive,' less susceptible to anything that may distract from the specific and apparently laudable purpose of getting things done.

A clear feature of the history of our culture in the developed western world is this imposed scission between language and music, or perhaps it is more accurate to

describe it as a purging of music from language. Writing in the introduction to *Lines: A Brief History*, his important 2007 work in cultural anthropology, British scholar Tim Ingold reflected on one of the problems that drove him to write the lectures that became the book:

It was the problem of how we have come to distinguish between speech and song. The fact is that this distinction, at least in the form in which we recognize it nowadays, is relatively recent in the history of the Western world. For much of this history, music was understood as a verbal art. That is, the musical essence of song lay in the sonority of its words. Yet we have somehow arrived today at a notion of music as ‘song without words’, stripped of its verbal component. And complementing that, we have also arrived at a notion of language as a system of words and meanings that is given quite independently of its actual voicing in the sounds of speech. Music has become wordless; language has been silenced. (Lutz 1)

And yet poems can be songs. And songs can be poems. This happens when these forms ‘sing,’ i.e. when the language in them resonates to convey someone’s truth that becomes a shared or at least understood truth between writer/performer and reader/listener. Prose, too, can sing, but prose in today’s world often has other, less poetic jobs to do, jobs in which there is and can be no music, the prose of jobs and activities that lead Ingold to that last rather melodramatic sentence in the quotation above.

Adam Bradley, on the other hand, in his *The Poetry of Pop* (2017), is full of enthusiasm for the poetic potential of song lyrics. In his view, sooner or later, in one way or another, the lyric will demand attention as language:

But every lyric will steal a moment, small though it may be, where it incites a revolution against the tyranny of music, where it commands attention to the recording primarily as language. This doesn’t compromise the song’s identity as song; what it does, though, is complicate blanket pronouncements about the servility of lyric. For this reason, a pop lyric almost always provides close readers and listeners with something upon which to exercise their skills in poetic analysis. (Bradley 17)

That “tyranny of music” may be an example of hyperbole in Bradley’s writing, but we know he means that music will often have the upper hand over the textual elements of any song. This predominance of music is often responsible for the sometimes-entertaining phenomenon of *mondegreens*, mistaken linguistic interpretations of song lyrics, the name deriving from Sylvia Wright’s misinterpretation of a line in the Scottish ballad “The Bonny Earl of Murray.” The original line was “They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray, and laid him on the green,” but she misheard it as “They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray, and Lady Mondegreen.” Wright had a dream-like and compelling article published in *Harper’s Magazine* in November 1954 with the title “The Death of Lady Mondegreen,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the origin of the noun *mondegreen*. It is rather ironic that the noun should have come to mean above all a mishearing of a word in sung lyrics (“esp. of

the lyrics of a song” for the *OED*), because from the very beginning Sylvia Wright makes clear that Lady Mondegreen came to her while her mother *read* the ballad aloud to her:

When I was a child, my mother used to read aloud to me from Percy’s *Reliques*,  
and one of my favorite poems began, as I remember:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands  
Oh, where hae ye been?  
They hae slain the Earl Amurray,  
And Lady Mondegreen (Wright 48)

Wright’s article is based on an imaginative journey regarding the character her mishearing had created and so when after a few paragraphs she makes the reader aware that she knows all about her own error, it makes perfect sense that she should defend it: “The point about what I shall hereafter call mondegreens, since no one else has thought up a word for them, is that they are better than the original” (Wright 49). In Wright’s specific case this is certainly true, given the article and the useful noun her mishearing engendered, but it cannot always be the case. A more general point about mondegreens is that language in its expression and its reception remains thoroughly fallible, sometimes entertainingly so, sometimes disappointingly so. Testimony to our fascination with mondegreens are the websites and the books dedicated to them. The same phenomenon exists in the Italophone world.

And that we are generally fascinated by the lyrics to songs is testified to by the existence of websites that reproduce them, sometimes with more or less accurate interpretations of their meanings, and streaming services now often provide lyrics to the songs in their enormous catalogues. These are the digital equivalents of vinyl and CD liner notes. Their function? Not just to help identify mondegreens, but also surely to reinforce and confirm the linguistic affect and effect of the lyrics. Once upon a time people would write out the lyrics to many of the songs they were listening to (at least, I did when a youngster and perhaps some of today’s youngsters still do too) presumably for precisely this reason. Seeing lyrics “at rest—that is, as fixed composition on the page” (91) as Adam Bradley puts it, helps us in understanding how the language works and how the language and the music work together. The resulting ‘analysis’ does not necessarily have to be the rarefied process of professional academic work; to put it in the words of Sean O’Brien: “It is of limited use to me to read criticism written in the interior code of a class or professional cadre, and I suspect this is the case for most readers and poets” (O’Brien 12).

In his introduction to Paul McCartney’s 2021 book, *The Lyrics*, the poet Paul Muldoon chooses accessible metaphors from pure science to describe the art of bising music and language together – physics and chemistry:

The physics has to do with the song’s engineering, with its concomitant apprenticeship to craft that I referred to earlier. One estimate has The Beatles

playing nearly 300 times in Germany between 1960 and 1962. That sheer exposure to the business of how songs are constructed lies at the root of the word 'poet', a version of the Greek term for a 'maker'. It's no accident that one Scottish term for a poet or bard is *makar*.

The chemistry component is reflected in another term for a poet: 'troubadour'. The word 'troubadour' is related to the French word *trouver*, 'to find'. Paul McCartney often uses some version of the phrase 'I came across the chords' to describe how a song begins its mysterious life. (Muldoon xxx)

Makars and troubadours – physicists and chemists of language and music. The simple fact that the question of whether song lyrics may constitute poetry can be (and often is) asked, tells us that there is something worth investigating here. To dismiss the question summarily is to regulate in a way that wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, ignores not only the history of cultural expression, but also the history of language itself.

#### Four lyrics from the 1980s to the present day (and a rock-struck poet)

Elvis Costello's "Tramp the Dirt Down" was released on the studio album *Spike* in 1989.

I saw a newspaper picture from the political campaign  
A woman was kissing a child, who was obviously in pain  
She spills with compassion, as that young child's  
Face in her hands she grips  
Can you imagine all that greed and avarice  
Coming down on that child's lips?

Well I hope I don't die too soon  
I pray the lord my soul to save  
Oh I'll be a good boy, I'm trying so hard to behave  
Because there's one thing I know, I'd like to live  
Long enough to savour  
That's when they finally put you in the ground  
I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down (Costello)

These are the two opening verses and by the time the angry, lamenting lyric reaches its climax in the fifth verse, after the long bridge of the fourth verse, the animosity, the venom are all very much of an intensity that is an expression of their time. The first verse with its extended image of a newspaper photograph leads the reader/listener directly into the day-to-day reality of political campaigning. The verb "to spill" in its negative collocate "with compassion" gives us a sense of an overwhelming, sinister liquid force, reinforced by the verb "to grip," something that one does not normally do to another person's face. The direct question in the second person involves us and directs us further into the image, which becomes even more grotesque with the idea that the child is being kissed on the lips.

The second verse introduces the central, galling image of the title – the idea of angrily celebrating someone’s death. For all the anger, the music of the song is relatively wistful – a Celtic ballad lament with pipes and mandolin, a vestige of Costello’s Irish heritage.

Elvis Costello has of course lived long enough to savour Thatcher’s death, which occurred in April 2013, and in June that year he controversially performed the song at the Glastonbury festival, and one month later he told *The Independent* newspaper:

I felt I wanted to revisit the song regardless of the offence it gives to people who deify her. We sing the song from our point of view and other people have another view. Nobody shot anybody because of it. I don’t feel vindicated. I didn’t personally kill her (Costello).

But one wonders if some of the “carrion comfort” in the lyric of “Tramp the Dirt Down” – to corrupt the central decaying image of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ famous poem – has been tempered by time. After all, a younger Costello towards the end of the 1970s had written in the song “Red Shoes” from his very first album, *My Aim Is True*: “Oh I used to be disgusted / Now I try to be amused.”

The idea of trying to be amused sits nicely with another 1980s lyric, for come what may, we have to be amused, we have to be entertained. Written by Paul Weller and released by The Jam on the 1980 album *Sound Affects*, “That’s Entertainment” provided a slice-of-life soundtrack to its decade. Here are the last two of the song’s six verses with the ironic, iconic even, recurring refrain:

Waking up from bad dreams and smoking cigarettes  
Cuddling a warm girl and smelling stale perfume  
A hot summer’s day and sticky black tarmac  
Feeding ducks in the park and wishing you were far away

That’s entertainment, that’s entertainment

Two lovers kissing amongst the scream of midnight  
Two lovers missing the tranquility of solitude  
Getting a cab and travelling on buses  
Reading the graffiti about slashed seat affairs (Weller)

Each line presents us with a single image of quotidian life that reflects the social stasis and bleakness of the 1980s, while the ironic refrain is an obvious reference to another, earlier song of the same title, though with an exclamation mark, written by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz for the 1953 MGM musical film *The Band Wagon*. Here are the opening verses:

Everything that happens in life  
Can happen in a show;  
You can make ’em laugh,  
You can make ’em cry,

Anything, anything can go!

The clown  
With his pants falling down,  
Or the dance  
That's a dream of romance,  
Or the scene  
Where the villain is mean,  
That's entertainment! (Schwartz and Dietz)

In 1974 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios released a highly successful film titled *That's Entertainment!* to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a compilation movie compered by a series of stars including Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Bing Crosby. The success of this 1974 compilation led MGM to create several spin-off developments through the '80s and into the '90s, all documenting a golden era in film entertainment and evidently permeating popular cultural consciousness. "Anything can go!" in a show, or a song, and I think Weller and the Jam in 1980 certainly made that point, though not perhaps in a Hollywood, MGM sort of way. The "dream of romance" in "That's Entertainment!" contrasts considerably with the "slashed seat affairs" that bring "That's Entertainment" to a close.

That "tranquility of solitude" (*sic*) in the third-from-last line of Paul Weller's lyric, echoing "Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude," one of Shelley's very first poems, is not by any means a chance allusion on Weller's part. The back of the *Sound Affects* album sleeve carries three stanzas extracted from *The Masque of Anarchy* – 38, 73 and 82. This bolsters Weller's credentials as a well-read singer-songwriter, but also makes the point that there was here a poetic sensibility at work, aware of at least some poetic history. Stanza 38 of *The Masque of Anarchy* reads:

'Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number,  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you –  
Ye are many – they are few. (Weller)

Paul Weller was not alone among 1980s songwriters in this regard. Below is the coda to Welsh band Scritti Politti's "Lions after Slumber," first released as a B-side to the single "The Sweetest Girl" in 1981, but then released on the 1982 album *Songs to Remember*:

My water, my demands, my angels  
My waiting, my distance, my death, my curtness, my insulin  
My memory, my partner, my refrigerator  
My sadness, my story, my wantonness, my skipping  
My wish and my despair, my erasure, my plantation, my chocolate  
My thoughtlessness, my gracelessness, my courage and my crying  
My pockets, my homework

Like lions after slumber in unvanquishable number  
Oh yeah (Gartside)

My memory, at least regarding this song, gives me no cause for concern. It is a song I remember well with its crushing and hypnotic lengthy litany of personal worries – all *me*, no *we*. Many of these topics seem petty and yet as they accumulate, they acquire disordinate significance in the repetitive scheme of the lyric, which is the repetitive scheme of a modern life. Returning to read and listen to “Lions after Slumber” – with its almost funk bass-driven music – now also reminds me of something contemporary, of something very close to home for many of us – social media with its potentially overwhelming insistence on the self, on the fear of missing out, on the fear of being inadequate, of being left on the shelf, and its constant encouragement towards bulimic expressions of the self.

This band’s rather *recherché* name, which was apparently a direct homage to the political writings of Antonio Gramsci, should in fact have been “Scritti Politici” in Italian, were it not for the fact that Green Gartside, pseudonym of Paul Julian Strohmeier, leader of the band, felt that “Politti,” rhyming with Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti,” was more rock’n’roll.

“Lions after Slumber” is a lyric about self-obsession, about *me*, but there are pockets of *we* in poetry, in song, in prose, words put to good and considered use regarding the individual plight and the common wealth, so to speak. There are pockets of *we* certainly on occasion within the self-regulated domains of the internet and social media, and at poetry and music gigs.

The word ‘gig’ has been around in the English language for just over a century and for the *OED* is of unknown etymology. In recent years it has lent itself as a name for an increasingly important sector of the economy, but it is also the one-word title of Simon Armitage’s 2008 book, the subtitle of which is “The Life and Times of a Rock-star Fantasist.” One chapter, “Songbirds,” describes Armitage’s experience writing lyrics for some unusual documentary films, films shot in prisons (and in one case within the pornography industry) in which subjects sang their own tailor-made songs (lyrics by Armitage, music by Simon Boswell – *Feltham Sings* (2002), *Pornography: the Musical* (2003) and *Songbirds* (2005) are the titles of the films). In this chapter Armitage describes an initial visit to Downview Prison in Surrey, where he interviews inmates and then proceeds to detail his writing process at home:

When the lyrics are complete they’re passed on to the composer Simon Boswell, who must be some kind of genius because a few days later they come back and they’re songs. The next stage is to show each song to the prisoner whose words inspired it. [...] It must be strange to be confronted with a ballad or R & B number, the lyrics of which are a detailed description of your own crack habit or a verse-by-verse account of the night you set fire to your husband. But rather than be embarrassed or defensive, most of the women are simply flabbergasted that someone should take the time and trouble to tell their side of the story [...]. The subjects in our films are often people without a voice. (Armitage 54-55)

The book itself is organized cleverly with essays dedicated to Armitage's experiences "on the road" at poetry gigs and his experiences at various music gigs. I found myself wondering what the now Poet Laureate would make of a Sleaford Mods gig – a rather different kettle of fish from the captive subjects of the documentaries, a kettle of fish out there in the world with its own, very distinctive voice, as heard (read) here in this extract from "A Little Ditty" (2014):

What happened to Richard? All I can see is gear  
Breathless, incinerate, processed cheese  
Become what you hate, become what we are  
A series one with dreams to reach a series four  
Drive, drive, six packs, drive, drive, white teeth, KitKat  
Take the money and run, join the elite  
You sold yourself to no one  
Pied piper, whiskey notes, the wonder wall fell down on you

A little ditty and it's all gone wrong  
I don't expect the tools to sing along  
A little ditty and it's all gone wrong  
A little ditty  
A little ditty (Williamson and Fearn)

The Sleaford Mods – Jason Williamson (words urgent, often scurrilous, often funny) and Andrew Fearn (music basic and pre-programmed) – write and perform their little ditty – a ranting meta-lyric with a delivery sometimes reminiscent of punk poet John Cooper Clarke on what a light, popular song might mean in their disadvantaged milieu. Their lyric contains some admirable and sometimes impenetrable wordplay, but it all goes wrong because for too many people in Britain of the have-nots, Britain of the gig and welfare economy, things continue to go seriously wrong in their lives – even their "wonder walls," an obvious reference to Oasis's anthemic little ditty, collapse and fall on them. In 2014 Jason Williamson had a book of some 66 of his lyrics stylishly published in a limited edition by Bracketpress of Rochdale. The book's title tells us a lot about Williamson's desecrating view of the activity of publishing: *Grammar Wanker: Sleaford Mods 2007–2014*. *Guardian* journalist John Harris in reviewing *Grammar Wanker* succeeds in summing up the imperative behind the Sleaford Mods' output:

It sounds like a flash of the modern English condition, but that is only half the point. To watch Williamson deliver these lyrics on stage is to not only get a sense of 21st-century life, but people whose drive to say something about it sets them apart from 99% of modern musicians. (Harris)

Perhaps what it is that sets Jason Williamson apart is something he shares with Costello, Weller, Gartside and Armitage – a direct poetic imperative to say something about life.

### When it sings

I conclude with a return to the beginning and with a modicum of repetition, to Sean O'Brien's preface to *The Deregulated Muse*: his observation about the lack of clarity regarding authority in "poetic matters" back in 1998 in fact touches on a universal regarding poetic use of language. That lack of clarity derives from the fundamental fact that poetry is a use of language that will always have to enjoy the possibility of existing beyond authority and may or may not choose to accompany itself with music.

But a voice contains many precious things  
 It laughs  
 And then it sings  
 And all the lies that we can tell  
 To our foolish selves  
 Maybe this is the love song that I refused to  
 Write her when I loved her like I used to  
 And I fear my heart may spin and fracture  
 Like tears of stone falling from a statue (Costello)

Two verses from Elvis Costello's 2003 song, "When It Sings", which is maybe a love song, but maybe it is also simply a song about the necessity of voices and the necessity of listening to them, a prerequisite for any type of poetry.

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