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A Note on Mariett's "The Grateful Dead"

Paul Mariett's poem "The Grateful Dead" is part of the cultural process that brought the phrase that forms its title to broader public awareness and popular consciousness in the United States. First published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in their October 1912 issue, the poem was republished, with minor differences, a year later in a posthumous anthology of the author's poems. Both the history of the poem and its author, Paul Mariett (1888–1912), trace how the phrase and some of its underlying ideas and literary instantiations culminated in the dictionary entry that Jerry Garcia found in fall 1965.

Born in Canada to well-to-do parents, Mariett matriculated at Harvard in 1907 after distinguishing himself at Phillips Exeter Academy. At Harvard, he was awarded a Matthews Scholarship and earned an honorable mention in the competition for the Bowdoin Prize, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1911 (Harvard University Catalogue 1910, 211; 233). Although he joined a finals club, he found his niche as part of an informal group of undergraduates who met regularly to eat, drink, and talk; one participant, Walter Lippmann, described the group's members as "types; a claim to membership was as poet, dramatist, musician, scientist, romantic, reformer" (1913, i). Mariett was considered the group's most formidable intellect. Classmate Conrad Aiken called him "the genius of his time"

(Butscher 2010, 98); one group member, Mitchell Kennerley, who went on to become a publisher, editor, and gallery owner, described Mariett as a bohemian bon vivant, an extraordinarily well-read cosmopolitan whose thirst for life and literature was voracious and at times unsettling.

Kennerley's assessment may have owed to another of Mariett's characteristics, which was a sense of darkness, something that grew more pronounced during his undergraduate years and informed his poetry. Lippman observed that "in Paul Mariett, the tragic is always active, sharp and colored; it was not so much a regret over life as an insight into it" (iv-v). Other critics recognized that quality in Mariett's poetry as well: in a review, Alice Corbin Henderson commented that "twilight is here, but it is the twilight of a strong mind and a strong body, not unakin in spirit, though not in expression, to the hard, unblinking acceptance of the tragic side of life that we have recognized in Synge" (1914, 147-48). That sense is especially pronounced in Mariett's "The Grateful Dead."

Mariett acquired that sensibility from experience. By the time he graduated in 1911 he was already suffering from the first symptoms of the stomach cancer that would kill him less than a year later. The manuscript of "The Grateful Dead" was discovered after his death by an editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* (Rogers 1913, 151). Mariett had contributed to the *Atlantic* before, with one of his short stories, "Out of the Deep," singled out as noteworthy in the *Journal of Education* (1910), and still considered a significant contribution to the literature on disability (Mariett 1910). "The Grateful Dead" earned scattered praise and a few newspapers picked it up; it continued to find its way into print for a few years afterwards as well (cf. Mariett 1919). The *Harvard Monthly's* eulogy praised it as one of Mariett's best poems, admiring its "slow, calm music of death and life" (Rogers 1913, 147).

After Mariett's death, his friends assembled and published an anthology of his poetry as a tribute. That edition makes several changes to the poem's punctuation; the version here comes from the book. Most of those changes did not change the poem materially, only its flow, except for the addition of an exclamation point at the end of the final line, which is significant.

The book was well received. Alice Corbin Henderson praised the volume in *Poetry*, saying that it “reveals a mind that had, to a large extent, escaped the swaddling bands or imitation and convention. There is an unmistakable note of sincerity and honest originality in his work. There is structure and beauty, not lacking in restraint, and a stern quality as of iron in these poems” (1914, 147–48). For scholars, Mariett’s poem marks the increasing visibility of the phrase “the grateful dead” in the United States outside of academic circles and represents one of the first appearances of the term in a major national magazine. Mariett would likely have encountered the phrase during his studies: folklore was considered a part of literary studies, and Gordon Hall Gerould’s research, summarized in his monograph *The Grateful Dead: The History of a Folk Story* (1908), was a popular topic when Mariett matriculated. Gerould taught at Princeton and the two schools’ faculties had extensive interconnections, so Mariett may have had direct contact as well. In its theme and imagery, Mariett’s poem approaches the mystery of death as a secret known only to those who have died, likening the peace of the grave to a mystery known only to initiates.

That mystery is the poem’s focus, portrayed as a reward that surpasses earthly comprehension and holds forth the promise of an understanding greater than anything the living can apprehend. Yet that is the promise of life, the poem affirms, and the deeper connection between the living and the dead gets at the obligation of the former to the latter that defines the folk motif that Gerould studied and that informs the phrase Mariett chose as the poem’s title. Mariett’s vision and verse represent a thoughtful and accomplished artistic evocation of the term and the deep reservoir of human experience that it crystallized—and that would soon become a dictionary entry, waiting for a young Jerry Garcia to find.

N.G.M.

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