GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 4 2019/2020

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

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CITATION INFORMATION

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Grateful Dead Studies

Volume 4 (2019/2020)

Pages: 60–85

URL: http://gratefuldeadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GDSv4_Coffman.pdf

"All That's Still Unsung": Agamben's Potentiality and the Grateful Dead

Christopher K. Coffman

Grateful Dead listeners give many reasons for their remarkable dedication, but central to many of their most enthusiastic declarations is an element that resists easy definition, usually called "the zone" or the X factor (Shenk and Silberman 1994, 336–7, 333–4). The X factor is elusive not only in the sense that no more precise label for it seems appropriate, but also in that it proved difficult for listeners to anticipate if or when it would emerge: it was only rarely present for an entire concert, even when the level of performance was generally high, and more often recognized as a quality of a particular medley, piece, or passage. Likewise, the X factor would sometimes disappear entirely for several performances, only to return at a quite unexpected moment. The musical excellence the term denotes, as well as its resistance to formulation, ensured that this phenomenon would remain a central mystery of the Grateful Dead experience, one that lies at the heart of the Dead's music and the exceptional affective space of community, spontaneity, and transcendence that many feel it engendered.

This essay uses Giorgio Agamben's thought to articulate not only what happened at moments when the X factor appeared, but also how

that phenomenon—the realization of the potential for excellence that kept so many fans returning to Grateful Dead concerts—is consistent with other aspects of the Grateful Dead experience, including the architecture of set lists, the lyrical content of songs, and the music's relation to folk traditions. In particular, I contend that Agamben's remarks on potentiality—which at once consolidate and revise the conclusions of prior philosophical commentary on the topic—offer a number of valuable perspectives on some of the Grateful Dead's most celebrated achievements. My argument surveys Agamben's discussion of potentiality and applies it to three foundational works in the Dead's canon: "Dark Star," "That's It for the Other One," and "Terrapin Station Part 1."[1] The goal is not to submit the Grateful Dead to a particular philosophical position, but rather to demonstrate that the Grateful Dead consistently presented to audiences an aesthetic experience that opens to consideration certain points very much like those that reflection on potentiality offers to philosophy.[2] When we do, the results help to elucidate the band's achievement, on several levels.

"What Must Arrive Now": Agamben on Potentiality

Agamben's major published remarks on potentiality are largely presented in two volumes: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *Potentialities* (1999). This essay draws mainly on the chapter "On Potentiality" from the latter volume, a focus demanded in part because, while the conclusions Agamben reaches regarding aspects of potentiality in his different writings are generally compatible, his intent and application vary somewhat. The general motivation for Agamben's reflections is as a means to think that which is presupposed, in terms of action, speech, and thought. His explanation of this philosophical intent alludes to a figure offered for similar reasons by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*: a fly trapped in a glass bottle. For such a fly, Agamben writes, "the glass is not a *thing* but rather *that through which* it sees things" (2009, 46). Philosophy, Agamben therefore asserts, begins with the attempt to see the glass as a thing, so that its uses may be known, the distortions it engenders recognized, and the limits it imposes possibly escaped. For potentiality, the more specific question is how one might

think about such human capabilities as those of speech, and the possible communities it can allow, in relation to the confining presuppositions the glass represents.[3] Part of his aim is to assess the ways community-building can fail or go astray and to suggest conceptions of more just contexts for collective and individual lives. Among the hindrances to such lives are misrepresentations and misapprehensions that have afflicted philosophical discussion of potentiality since its foundation by Aristotle.

Aristotle discusses the potential in both the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*. In Book Theta of the latter, he begins by distinguishing between the actual, *energeia*, and the potential, *dynamis*, a word one might also translate as power or capability (1933, 428). The actual is, Aristotle argues, the fully realized condition of anything that exists, and it is on the basis of the actual that we can recognize, study, and build understanding. On the other hand, something in the state of potentiality persists only as something that is-not-yet, and therefore is not available to scientific consideration.

Two corollary points follow from this distinction. First is the recognition that there are two somewhat different senses of the potential. One variety includes all that is possible but will require some sort of change: an acorn has the potential to become an oak, or a child can grow into a reasoning adult. The other is the potential for enacting something for which one already has a developed capacity: a trained and capable musician can make music actual in performance, and confirm herself as a musician simultaneously and in the same manner, or a poet can generate a text by writing and thereby allow the emergence of the poem and certify her existence as a poet.[4] The latter kind of potential, which has to do with the exercise of an ability or a power one already has, is what most interests both Aristotle and Agamben. The second corollary is the recognition of a philosophical problem: to discuss anything that remains with the potential is difficult because that which is potential will not be evident unless and until it emerges into the actual—at which point it no longer exists as a potential (Agamben 1999, 179).

For Agamben, most traditional readings of the Aristotelian account of potentiality are problematic, and problematic in a fashion that is particularly vexing for anyone seeking to grapple with the difficulties that arise

when one begins trying to understand the potential. A central part of the problem is that most discussions of potentiality derived from Aristotle's remarks treat the potential and actual as strongly opposed. According to the traditional view, Aristotle suggests that the actual and the potential belong to different ontological categories; they never meet because potential is exhausted and lost entirely when it transmogrifies into actuality. Agamben's revision of these readings derives from his focus on the possibility for one not to actualize a potential—a point Aristotle raised, though he did not emphasize it to the same degree, nor did most of his later commentators. In refraining from making something that is potential into something that is actual, Agamben claims, one does not merely rest with the potential, but exercises the impotential (*adynamis*). An example of this process would be the singer who elects not to sing: while the singer has the capacity to sing, she may resist the potential's impetus to actualization by deciding not to sing. At such a moment, the potential and actual are held in reserve: while the performer remains only a potential singer, what is at work is the impotential, which allows one to decide not to do and even not to be (Agamben 1999, 182). Thus Agamben's reformulation of the problem resituates the potential and the actual so that they are not in strong opposition, but rather are operating together in tension with the impotential.

This revision of the classical understanding of the potential declares the impotential to be that which is exhausted when the actual comes into being as a fulfillment of the potential. Therefore, any actualization of a potential is a turning of the impotential back upon itself in a sort of double negation: making something potential into something actual is the exercise of the impotential on the impotential, via a decision not to do the not-to-do or not to be the not-to-be.

Four key points relevant to the Grateful Dead emerge from Agamben's rethinking of *adynamis* and its relations to its counterparts. First, the impotential and potential can be regarded not as discrete opponents but as negative instances of one another, requiring only one more reflexive iteration in order to assert their own priority or to cede to their alternate. Further, the actual is no longer to be regarded as the opposite of the potential, but that which preserves the potential, saving it from being

overcome by the impotential (Agamben 1999, 183). Moreover, as these two points suggest, the impotential, potential, and actual are not only *not* incompatible, in Agamben's view, they exist instead in playful and mutually supportive relations. Finally, Agamben's remarks allow us to consider the potential as a reservoir of power for the actual, and this concept of a reservoir of power may be said of the impotential as well, as the other side of the potential's coin.

"Mickey Has to Get His Gongs All Together"

—Jerry Garcia, June 24, 1970

"Dark Star" is clearly the *ne plus ultra* for many Deadheads, the song in which the X factor is regarded as most likely to emerge, and, for some, a necessary presence in the set list of any show worth mentioning (*pace* champions of May 8, 1977; May 2, 1970; April 29, 1971, etc.). My interest in "Dark Star" in relation to Agamben derives from its standing as a key piece for reflection on the Grateful Dead's conceptions of song structure and musical improvisation, and the implications of those conceptions for performance of the piece across the thirty years of the Grateful Dead's career.

Some of keyboardist Tom Constanten's remarks about "Dark Star" are especially illuminating here, for they foreground aspects of the piece in ways that echo Agamben's writings on potentiality. Considering potential as a power or capacity to allow a passing into actuality helps explain the role of "Dark Star": given that the Grateful Dead obviously had the capacity to play the piece, one question many fans would ask of a show was whether or not they would make the song actual by performing it, or whether they would elect not to perform it, thus aligning themselves with the impotential. When Constanten declares "'Dark Star' is going on all the time. It's going on right now. You don't begin it so much as enter it. You don't end it so much as leave it" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 52), he points to exactly this notion: when the piece is played, it emerges from a reserve of potential on which the band periodically draws, and this suggests a relation to the potential that many songs simply do not allow.

Unlike other compositions, Constanten's statement implies, there is something in "Dark Star" that foregrounds for performer and audience

alike the emergence of something into actuality from out of a reservoir of power. By delivering to listeners an awareness of itself as always being there, "Dark Star" may be seen as a response to a question Agamben poses: "How is it possible to transmit not a thing but an unconcealment" (1999, 110)? "Dark Star" is the enactment of a response, for it offers itself not only or even primarily as a piece to be performed, but as the revelation of the conditions of and for performance, and it thereby presents itself in such a manner that allows one to read it under the signature of the potential.

One might assert that any Grateful Dead piece, indeed nearly any musical piece, could be heard in the same fashion—that there is no reason any piece within the Grateful Dead repertoire, and perhaps especially the most common of them (e.g., "Sugar Magnolia" or "Me and My Uncle"), might not be regarded as preserving potentiality to an equal or even greater degree, if the number of times it passes into actuality via performance is relatively higher. A reply emerges from two considerations: the openness of "Dark Star" to other compositions and the comparative absence of certain pieces from the band's performance history.

While Grateful Dead sets were long characterized by medleys, perhaps no tune was so open to transition into or out of another as was "Dark Star," and it likewise lent itself to the incorporation of other pieces. Dennis McNally declares it "a song made to go anywhere" (2002, 220), a point Jerry Garcia suggested in 1987; in his view, "'Dark Star' is an envelope … not really a song" (Eisenhart 1998). Consider the many recognizable jams that appear relatively frequently in "Dark Star," including the "Feelin' Groovy Jam," "Soulful Strut Jam" (which also often found space to emerge in "Dancing in the Street" and is frequently labeled "Tighten Up Jam"), and "Mind Left Body Jam," more officially known as "Mud Love Buddy Jam." Unlike a jam like "The Main Ten," which found a home even as it lost something of its identity as a distinct improvisational passage when it evolved into "Playing in the Band," these other recognizable jams always depended for their context on an extant composition open to significant improvisation, and the Myxolidian "Dark Star" served this purpose well in each case. To employ a combination of Agamben's and Constanten's terms, the "always there" nature of "Dark Star" allowed

it to serve as a reservoir of potentiality not only for itself, but for many of the Grateful Dead's regular structured improvisations.

One should consider as well the frequency with which "Dark Star" bookended an established song or set of songs. It might be argued that, unlike the jams listed above, several sets offer something different, such as on November 8, 1969 ("Dark Star" > "The Other One" > "Dark Star" > "Uncle John's Band Jam" > "Dark Star" > "Saint Stephen" > "The Eleven" > "Caution" > "The Main Ten" > "Caution" > "Feedback" > "And We Bid You Goodnight"), or, even better, June 24, 1970: "Dark Star" > "Attics of My Life" > "Dark Star" (featuring an outstanding "Soulful Strut" jam and a brief "Feelin' Groovy" jam) > "Sugar Magnolia" > "Dark Star" > "Saint Stephen" > "China Cat Sunflower" > "I Know You Rider". "Attics of My Life" and "Sugar Magnolia" are not jams that need the context of established compositions to pass into actuality, and one would be no less surprised to hear a full "Dark Star" emerge from between the verses of these shorter pieces than an extended take on "Playing in the Band" sandwiched in, say, the middle of "Monkey and the Engineer." To fans, the latter example is clearly absurd, but the point is that compositions that are more loosely structured or that allow relatively unstructured sections, like "That's It for the Other One" and "Playing in the Band," can reasonably be seen as more reflexive, revealing their own offerings from the reserve of the potential in a more apparent fashion than do songs such as "Bertha" or "One More Saturday Night." It is by virtue of this offering to draw on the reservoir of the potential that "Dark Star" establishes itself as a means for sometimes recursive entrance into or egress from other pieces.

As for the comparison of "Dark Star" to compositions that remained absent for long stretches from the Grateful Dead performance history, let us account for three points. The first is a fairly straightforward qualification: songs such as "Hurts Me Too," "Sunrise," and "I Will Take You Home" may be said to have left the category of the potential as the capacity to perform them became dubious when members of the Grateful Dead closely associated with these pieces died or left the band; these songs can therefore be set aside.

More interesting is a comparison of "Dark Star" to pieces the band declined to perform. Given the rarity of "Dark Star" in concerts between

1974 and 1989, it seems as if it may itself belong to this category, as suggested by the fan practice of hanging "the however-many-days-since-the-last 'Dark Star' banner" from the balcony at Winterland (Scully 1996, 365). But "Dark Star" was at least performed occasionally even during its fifteen-year hiatus, and did return to something of a place in the rotation in the last six years of the band's existence. In comparison, consider "Cosmic Charlie" or "Saint Stephen": the former appeared regularly for a few years, but was never aired after 1976 (excepting a brief tease in 1994); the latter was a set list staple for many years, but only saw three performances after Keith and Donna Jean Godchaux left the band in February 1979. In a 1987 discussion with Mary Eisenhart, Garcia explained why "Saint Stephen" had been dropped:

> The truth is that we did it to death when we did do it—when we did it, we did it. In fact we had two periods of time when we did it, we rearranged it later for three voices, with Donna … It's one of those things that doesn't perform that well—we were able to make it work then because we had the power of conviction. But I don't think that our present sensibilities would let us do it, the way it was, anyway. We would have to change it some. (Eisenhart 1998)

He made the point even more strongly elsewhere, calling the song "a cop. It's our musical policeman: If we don't do it the way it wants to go it doesn't work at all. That means it's inflexible" (Jackson 1992, 9).

Those comments—that the song "doesn't perform well" and that the Dead's "present sensibilities" would not let them perform it—acknowledge what we may recognize as an alignment with the impotential. Although the Grateful Dead did three respectable performances of "Saint Stephen" during Brent Mydland's tenure, all in October 1983, they also apparently regard those final performances as lacking something in execution, context, or attitude in comparison to its appearances with their earlier keyboardists. The deeper implication of Garcia's objection, however, is that the band exhausted the song's potential—that there was something inherently limited or limiting about it that eventually led to stagnation and rigidity rather than possibility and promise. While the band experimented with the song's arrangement over the years, ultimately "Saint Stephen"

resisted their efforts to revitalize it—to have done so later in the 1980s or 1990s would be to have produced something other than the song "the way it was." Another new arrangement, Garcia suggests, would have to have been so radical that it would no longer be the same song. This distinguishes "Saint Stephen" from a piece like "Sunrise," which disappeared with Donna Jean Godchaux, in that the band showed that it could perform "Saint Stephen": that is, they still had the capacity to perform it, but chose not to. In this not-doing, the Grateful Dead resigned "Saint Stephen" to the impotential—much to fans' chagrin.

What, then, of "Dark Star"? Why did it not also disappear permanently, if the songs that the Grateful Dead resigned to the impotential sometimes did not reappear in set lists? The answer emerges, I think, when the question is viewed in the light of Agamben's remarks on the actual as the preservation of the potential. In the Eisenhart interview, Garcia explained that "'Dark Star' is a little of everything we do, all the time ... I've never missed it, because what we were doing with it is everywhere. I mean, our whole second half [of a concert] is 'Dark Star,' you could say" (Eisenhart 1998). Those comments—"everywhere," in "everything," "all the time"— suggest that "Dark Star" was never impotential or merely potential, but rather continually actual. In this sense, even a version of "Me and My Uncle" or "Sugar Magnolia" might evince some "Dark Star" DNA.

In not being performed, "Dark Star" can stand as an example of what David Malvinni identifies as part of the "raw energy at a Grateful Dead show," that which "derived … from what was known to have remained denied, or concealed" (Malvinni 2007, 1–2; cf. Malvinni 2010). This reserve invokes what Garcia called "the power of the almost expressed" (Jackson 1992, 209). In this view, "Dark Star" can be seen as an outstanding illustration of the deep reservoir of the potential that is preserved in the actual, even when it is not performed in a recognizable fashion. Too, "Dark Star" serves in this sense as a metaphor for the Grateful Dead's "group mind," which Phil Lesh believed "opened valves for music to pour through" (2005, 333).

This last point intersects provocatively with Agamben's remarks on language. To communicate orally with a particular language not only

requires a person conversant with its lexicon and grammar and familiar with the physical demands of producing the needed sounds, it also depends upon the very possibility of language use, of communication. This possibility is not something that lends itself to easy conversation; it is, rather, a necessary condition for conversation—something, in other words, like the glass of Wittgenstein's fly. Because it is taken for granted, it is difficult to notice and generally rebuffs attention, even while it defines the fly's existence in profound ways. This is similar to the possibility of "Dark Star": as Boone argues, the song embraces "*in potentia* all musical possibilities" (2010a, 100). "Dark Star" is the Grateful Dead's *ur*-composition in that it is the well of potential from which the band always drew—perhaps some comfort to Deadheads who did not get to see any of the almost 200 "Dark Star" performances by the Grateful Dead.

"No Left Turn Unstoned": Who Can Stop What Must Arrive Now?

"That's It for the Other One," like "Dark Star," serves as a launch pad for lengthy improvisations and atonal explorations. As James A. Tuedio argues, it is not only "a signature song of the Grateful Dead," but also "a proving ground for … musical exploration" (2013, 78). His assertion suggests that much of my argument for "Dark Star" applies equally to this song, especially since the second section, "Quadlibet for Tenderfeet," is architectonic. Here, however, I want to focus not on any aspect of the musical content of the song, nor its status in the band's performance history, but rather on its lyrics.

One of the defining features of the Grateful Dead is their synthesis of a disparate array of musical forms, genres, and influences, both American and foreign. At the musical level, this synthesis meant the fusion of the various band members' experiences as listeners to and performers of such diverse genres as the blues, bluegrass, experimental and avant-garde musics, and jazz, all in a rock context. Lyrically, that synthesis merged folk sources and figures (lyrics that resonate with the name of the band, Zwarte Piet, or Black Peter), popular and high culture (Wolfman Jack, Mary Shelley), and the characters of the American songbook (Stagger Lee, Frank DuPre, Casey Jones), among others. The allusions

and debts, both musical and lyrical, that fill the Grateful Dead's repertoire suggest genealogies for the entire Grateful Dead world, and provide terms that connect the band's work to a number of cultural traditions. That these terms are sometimes superficially incompatible comes with the generally anarchic territory of the Grateful Dead, and the paradoxes that emerge are exacerbated by the fact that their contexts are rarely unambiguous—"Black Peter," for instance, can be heard alternately as threnody or comedy, in a strictly classical sense. Among the most intriguing of the many lyrical references to characters in the constellations of Grateful Dead influences are those to Owsley "Bear" Stanley and Neal Cassady in "That's It for the Other One." The lyrical representation of these two figures offers a way of reading the song as a self-generated Grateful Dead origin myth, one that helps to define the reservoir of potential from which the Dead emerged, and from which they continued to draw for the rest of their career.

Stanley was a key part of the Grateful Dead world during the time in which "That's It for the Other One" took shape. According to Blair Jackson, performances of the song were frequently dedicated to Stanley, and the verses of the first section, "Cryptical Envelopment," may reasonably be heard as addressing his persecution, if more obliquely than "Alice D. Millionaire" (Jackson 1983, 84). To the extent that one hears the song as about Stanley, it can be considered an instance of the Grateful Dead fashioning their own folk mythology, their own effort to enshrine in popular music a cultural hero of their own world. Consider the parallel: if in the folk tradition one may lament Omie Wise, Little Mattie Groves, and the nameless cowboy of "Streets of Laredo," "Cryptical Envelopment" suggests that we may reflect on the glories and troubles of an acid avatar. The only significant difference is that Stanley might be in the audience or manning the PA, rather than buried in a century or more of history, as is the case with the figures of the Child Ballads.

Furthermore, Stanley was no run-of-the-mill folk everyman, but an outlaw, á la Robin Hood or Jesse James. In the context of the song, he may be frowned upon by the establishment, but the younger generations are "learnin' from books" that the same "they" who declared "he has to die" "were burnin'." Of course, the fact that the knowledge with which he

is aligned is forbidden makes it so much the sweeter, and for this reason, too, he is persecuted and "has to die."

In a sense, "That's It for the Other One" can be heard as a contemporary folk song, one that employs the tropes of traditional songs in a fashion that contributes to the ongoing reinterpretation of those tropes. In this way, the song presents a process that is a necessary condition of the persistence of any folk tradition. More to the point here, to hear "That's It for the Other One" as situated in a tradition of folk music encourages a reading of the suite in relation to the question posed by Agamben: "How is it possible to transmit not a thing but an unconcealment?" "Cryptical Envelopment" responds to the query in a particularly striking manner, in that it does not simply propose, but is itself, a response to this query. The song enacts the passage of a certain strain of the potential into the actual; it is the realization of one version of a fluctuating set of folk motifs on which artists continue to draw without ever exhausting them. According to this view, even so musically adventurous a piece as "That's It for the Other One" indicates a strong connection to the streams that would soon swell into the rivers of folk expression that informed *Workingman's Dead*, *American Beauty*, the acoustic sets of 1970, and Garcia's time with the New Riders of the Purple Sage.[5] In "Cryptical Envelopment," to borrow an image, ripples appear where no pebble has been tossed because the unsettling force comes from below—the surface perturbation is consequent to the upsurge of the folk tradition in the context of contemporary music. This disturbance of superficial calm speaks of strong and deep currents, and it reveals the Grateful Dead making something actual from out of a reservoir of potential.

The interpretations of "Cryptical Envelopment" suggested by Garcia, who penned the lyrics, are relevant here. In this song, Garcia has one foot in folk traditions but another in the realm of the more broadly spiritual, as he explained to Blair Jackson: "I think that's an extension of my own personal symbology for 'The Man of Constant Sorrow'—the old folk song—which I always thought of as being a sort of Christ parable" (Jackson 1992, 214). While local events appear in the piece's declaration that "they" say "he had to die," the universal ramifications of the death manifest themselves in a series of pathetic fallacies: the "dark and faded"

sky, the fact that "every leaf was turnin'," and a watchful summer sun. As with records of the natural registers of spiritual events in a variety of traditions—the Bodhi tree, or the dark sky at Jesus's death—these transformations of the universe recognize more than a local physical change or juridical exercise. Of course, as my reference to the Bodhi tree is meant to suggest, the death is not necessarily the end, and the destruction of egos that Stanley and the Grateful Dead worked so hard to effect, via the tools of chemicals and music, are as much delightful perversions as narrow fulfillments of any death sentence. Too, these perversions are only a few from among the many lyrical presentations of gratitude regarding death or on the part of the dead by the Grateful Dead—*nomen est omen*. "Cryptical Envelopment" may thus be regarded as the record of a revelation of the potential that transpires as the impotential—the ego of the sacrificial victim as understood by his persecutors and potentially accepted by the victim—is denied. "He has to die," not because those who misunderstand the process say so (although that declaration may well satisfy them), but because shedding "all the other sound" will allow the purer ringing of the notes made actual. This is that liberating destruction to which Hunter points with his declaration that "when the Dead are playing their best, blood drips from the ceiling in great, rich drops" (2000, 110). It answers to what Eric K. Silverman describes as the "beast" that "was the *terror* of the … Grateful Dead experience *at its best*" (2010, 226).

What is it that emerges—is made actual—from the death? Nothing less than one of the Grateful Dead's central conceits, the bus named Furthur, which carries the listener into the next movement of the piece. In the third section of "That's It for the Other One," called "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get," Garcia's lyrics yield to Weir's. Like "Cryptical Envelopment," "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get" features a contemporary outlaw hero, but this one outdoes even Stanley in terms of countercultural weight. Neal Cassady not only featured prominently in the world of the Grateful Dead and the Merry Pranksters, but he connected their scenes to the Beat world of Kerouac's 1950s, as several scholars have noted (e.g., Boone 2010b, 29). The Grateful Dead family was by no means ignorant of the importance of this connection, and recognized, as Jon McIntire asserts in Robert Greenfield's *Dark Star*, that the "baton

was passed on by Neal Cassady directly to the Grateful Dead" (Greenfield 1996, 100). In short, as McNally notes, Weir was not alone in viewing "Cassady as the original and forever paterfamilias" (McNally 2002, 357).

In explaining how "Cowboy Neal" appears, Weir describes a journey that is among the best of the seemingly endless figures in Grateful Dead lyrics for the preservation of the potential in the actual, and the denial of the impotential. The lines are worth quoting in full:

> Escapin' though the lily fields
> I came across an empty space
> It trembled and exploded
> Left a bus stop in its place
> The bus came by and I got on
> That's when it all began
> There was cowboy Neal
> At the wheel
> Of a bus to never-ever land. (Trist and Dodd 2005, 43)

These lines propose a poetic and ethical response to the problem of nihilism, something that Agamben grappled with often.[6] How can emptiness, he ponders, not be seen as negative? Can "a non-presupposed principle" be found, and how can one reach that which "emerges only where no voice calls us" (Agamben 1999, 115)? If "Cryptical Envelopment" initiates a sense of the messianic as eskhaton—the sacrifice that at once results from and destroys the old order—"The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get" responds to Agamben's concerns by presenting both destruction and that which rushes to fill the gap. All is "Comin' around in a circle."

Weir's description of an empty space that "trembles and explodes" lends itself to a reading in terms of the passage from the potential to the actual. The emptiness is that of unactualized potential, a potential in balance with the impotential. The speaker has been "escapin'" on the way to this place, and, as the journey reaches a point of "empty space," he would seem to have reached a limit, one at which the old order—that of getting "busted … / For smilin' on a cloudy day"—can no longer sustain the impotentialities on which its authoritarianism relies. As a consequence, the impotential collapses upon itself, and the potential for a radically different space emerges, in confirmation of the apocalypse promised in the

dark sky and turning leaves of "Cryptical Envelopment." The episode echoes in its lyrics the importance for the Grateful Dead of maintaining musical openness. Garcia once remarked to Jorma Kaukonen that "it's not what you play, it's what you don't play that counts" (McNally 2002, 171). Garcia explained the freedom provided by the Acid Tests in similar terms: "We could play, or not" (Marre 1997). Likewise essential to this discussion of "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get" is the sense in which the openness the lyrics describe reflects the openness Weir provided for Cassady in life. When the two shared a room at 710 Ashbury, "Weir would lie there … silenced … as Neal gobbled speed, juggled his sledgehammer, and raved," a sight that made John Barlow speculate that "that Weir was somehow 'dreaming' Cassady" (McNally 2002, 250).

Having delineated an opportunity for the emergence of the potential into the actual, Weir offers a striking presentation of the preservation of the potential in the actual. Yet the bus itself is not what first appears in the aftermath of the explosion; a bus stop does. This apparition emblematizes the new—it is what was formerly potential, and formerly restrained by the impotential, but has now emerged as the scales tip in the direction of the actual. Furthermore, insofar as the bus stop stages the possibility of the bus itself, it makes apparent yet another sort of potential: the possibility to transform the speaker's escape into a different sort of journey. The particular actuality of the stop is thus highly charged, in that it bears an exceptionally striking amount of potential. It is the basic condition necessary for the potential suggested when one gets "on the bus."

In this sense, the bus is the second emergent actuality of the new order, following not only the apocalyptic cataclysm but also the bus stop. If the bus stop is highly charged with potential, it is difficult to state the order of potential borne by the bus itself. One can perhaps even conceive of it in terms somewhat alien to Agamben's reflections, as an actuality in which the potential outweighs that which is actual. It is not exactly pure potential, but it is pure potential reified in as thin an actuality as possible, an actuality that is constantly on the verge of sliding into nonexistence under the weight of the potential. If anything could be more contradictory to the impotentiality from which the lyric's speaker fled than the bus, it is hard to imagine. If, to quote the Haight-Ashbury epigram, "the ship of

the sun is driven by the Grateful Dead," who, one wonders, can bear the strain of guiding the emblem of the potential that is the bus? Of course, the answer is the most famous driver of Furthur. Neal Cassady is, in this sense, managing the actual as a vehicle of the potential. The skill needed is akin to that required to break a wild horse, and Weir's designation of Cassady as a "cowboy" recognizes as much, even as it anticipates the Beat valences of the rodeo setting of Kesey's final novel, *Last Go Round* (Kesey and Babbs 1994).

The destination Weir declares for the bus is intriguing, as it is not explicitly "Furthur," but "never-ever land." In Agamben's terms, to conceive of that toward which the potential conserved in the actual is heading as a destination is to suggest a place that must remain "never-ever," for some measure of the potential will be transmitted to and via successive actualizations, waxing or waning as the case may be, but never—unless there is an overwhelming eruption of the impotential—entirely dispersing. Consequently, the actualities that serve as vehicles of the potential never exhaust it, but transmit it as a condition of possibility and power. Kesey believed that all Deadheads sought this seemingly magical event, this break in the coherence of the actual: "there's a crack in your mind and you know it's a trick, but you can't figure it out. That crack lets in all the light. It opens up all the possibilities. When that little split second thing happens, when the Dead are playing … that's the moment that puts them in touch with the invisible" (Johnston 2007, 62). The allusion to J. M. Barrie's most famous work in "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get" reinforces this sense, in that Peter Pan's refusal to grow up can be seen as a refusal to accept the limitations imposed by choosing between options. In this sense, Peter Pan's rejection of adulthood is not a rejection of responsibility so much as an innocent preservation of the wild, which stands against the calcifications that attend the impotential.

The reprise of "Cryptical Envelopment" in "We Leave the Castle" returns listeners to the unenlightened observers introduced earlier, who again declare, "he has to die." These whose "minds remained unbended" persist as the voice of the impotential, but given the radical aural and lyrical journey listeners have been on, their declarations are more clearly than ever the sound of freedom from attachment, not of final extermination.

As Garcia noted, the Grateful Dead "audience wants to be transformed … to something a little wider, something that enlarges them" (Henke 1991, 37). In keeping with this reading of the lyrics, and as McNally points out, the version of the piece included on *Anthem of the Sun* hardly concedes to the stifling of creative power, for as "That's It for the Other One" closes "New Potato Caboose" appears, just as other Grateful Dead compositions so often followed it in concert medleys (McNally 2002, 260). Like "Dark Star," this music never stops.

Beyond Description

In terms of musical composition, improvisation, concert history, and lyrics, both "Dark Star" and "That's It for the Other One" offer compelling insights into the connections between potentiality, as conceived by Agamben, and Grateful Dead performances. Yet the focus on those two works here is not meant to suggest that other Grateful Dead songs are somehow irrelevant to the conversation. Indeed, aside from the fact that there may well be a bit of "Dark Star" in everything the Grateful Dead performed, a number of other works also illuminate Agamben's remarks on potentiality. These include many of the minor pieces but especially the lengthier ones, such as the "Weather Report Suite," "Playing in the Band,"[7] and "Blues for Allah," as well as regularly performed medleys, such as "Help on the Way" > "Slipknot!" > "Franklin's Tower," "Estimated Prophet" > "Eyes of the World," and "Scarlet Begonias" > "Fire on the Mountain." The final section of this essay focuses on "Terrapin Station Part 1" in order to demonstrate not only the continuing engagement with potentiality by the post-hiatus Grateful Dead, but also to highlight another element of their presentations of the concept. Some of this ground is suggested by David Malvinni, who has demonstrated that "Terrapin" is "a meditation" on the Grateful Dead "as a whole," as Nicholas G. Meriwether argues (2013a, 127). "Terrapin Station Part 1" provides lyrics that explicitly encourage its audience to reflect on the act of presentation, and it also indicates certain powerful dangers lurking in the work of the Grateful Dead—dangers that, in another register, Agamben warns against.

For most of "Lady With a Fan," the first section of "Terrapin Station Part 1," the narrator speaks in the voice of a storyteller. Like so many

poets, this singer begins with a call to the muse, seeking inspiration. This traditional invocation serves as an opening to the release of the potential into the actual. Just as in "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get" Weir's persona found the post-apocalyptic bus stop emerging from the potential into the actual after the clearing of an "empty space," so the poetic call to the muse here provides a metaphorical space in which the storyteller's tale can emerge from the potential into the actual. Hunter's use of this traditional opening recalls the vatic poets of ancient Greece, and the ancient thinkers who conceived of poets in terms that are spatial: poets are among those who experience ecstasy (*ekstasis*, out of place), who allow displacement of themselves as a means to the singing of the narrative by the muse.

The final two verses of "Lady With a Fan" offer a remarkable statement regarding potential. A persistent danger in any actuality is calcification: if the potentiality preserved in the actual is repeatedly denied in the interest of maintaining a given state, then that state can become a totalizing status quo antithetical to the potential, and to the freedom it represents. Such is the possible result of an alignment with the impotential on the part of the actual.

There are, however, other ways to think of the impotential. Sometimes the impotential can be a means of liberty, if it is viewed as the means to make a choice *not* to be corrupt, to choose not to preserve an actuality that is oppressive. In siding with the impotential, with the not-to-be, a participant in an actuality that demands submission to, or reinforcement of, an evil power effectively chooses the freedom of the potential. In short, to choose not to preserve or not to advance stultifying projects is an act of the impotential turning back on itself—which is to say, these choices further potential. Given that Hunter's storyteller "makes no choice" and that "the end is never told," consistency demands that "he cannot be bought or sold"—the storyteller remains aloof from the temptations of lucre, as well as beyond any restrictions of his own potential to tell his stories. The key lines of the song here are, "his job is to shed light / and not to master," for they illustrate the storyteller's resistance to restrictive power—as much as he serves the potential, the storyteller chooses the impotential when it preserves his liberty, and when it thereby persists as the ground for the potential he otherwise promotes.

In this dance with the impotential, there is something of a dark power in the work of the storyteller, yet there is an aspect that is occurring at the level of the narrative structure that is even more provocative. Agamben discusses Plato's expression of suspicions regarding the authority of written texts—a paradoxical move, in that the ancient philosopher undercuts his own authority by writing about the weakness of writing. This self-issued challenge to the authenticity of Plato's works is reinforced by his use of his teacher, Socrates, as a mouthpiece throughout the dialogues, an authorial decision that elides the actual author, Plato, and ascribes authority to the man who is the subject of the works, Socrates (Agamben 1999, 34). For Agamben, Plato's choices here work to strip language itself of authority, to deny strength to speech about particular *things*. This denial opens the door for Plato to consider the very possibility of language, the potential for and in language:

> The thing itself is not a thing; it is the very sayability, the very openness at issue in language, which, in language, we always presuppose and forget, perhaps because it is at bottom its own oblivion and abandonment … it is what we are always disclosing in speaking, what we are always saying and communicating, and that of which we nevertheless are always losing sight. (Agamben 1999, 35)

The work of the opening lines and closing verses of "Lady With a Fan" is, in this sense, that of the philosopher, for it foregrounds the conditions for speech while withdrawing authority. As Plato did with Socrates, Hunter elides himself with the voice of a storyteller, whose own authority is assumed only in qualified terms: as he declares, "his job is … / … not to master." In this way, the potential for language is preserved, even as the authors within and of the song limit their claims to the rigidity that can lead to abuse of authority.

Another, related, aspect of "Lady With a Fan" that merits consideration is the fact that the tale told is a version of the "Lady of Carlisle." As with the many other folk traditions the Grateful Dead drew upon, "Lady With a Fan" participates in the preservation of the potential in the actual, which is the hallmark of any living folk tradition. In light of the undermining of authority discussed above, however, one can see that Hunter's use

of a frame tale—the song is not just a retelling of "Lady of Carlisle," but a tale about a retelling of "Lady of Carlisle"—performs some rather more complex work. Here, again, is Agamben:

> The presuppositional structure of language is the very structure of tradition; we presuppose, pass on, and thereby—according to the double sense of the word *traditio*—betray the thing itself in language, so that language may speak about something (*kata tinos*). The effacement of the thing itself is the sole foundation on which it is possible for something like a tradition to be constituted. *The task of philosophical presentation is to come with speech to help speech, so that, in speech, speech itself does not remain presupposed but instead comes to speech*. (Agamben 1999, 35. Emphasis original)

This suggests a discussion of these presuppositions, but that would approach them as things treatable by language, which would betray them in the very manner that Agamben warns against in the passage above. Instead—and even as philosophy works to turn attention to these presuppositions—there must be a resistance to any temptation to claim an unwarranted authority over "authentic human community and communication" (Agamben 1999, 35).[8] In this sense, the achievement of the Grateful Dead in "Lady With a Fan" is not only the telling of a tale about the working of potentiality, but the preservation of the potential power of certain traditions every time "Lady With a Fan" is made actual by performance.

The power of "Lady With a Fan"—especially that careful exchange enacted between the actual, the potential, and the impotential—is replicated in later sections of "Terrapin Station Part 1." Like "Lady With a Fan," "Terrapin Station" begins with an invocation of the muse: "Inspiration move me brightly." Too, the opening to the muse in this section of the suite is, as in its predecessor, an opening to the potential of saying, rather than the staging for any particular articulations. "Faced with mysteries dark and vast," Hunter writes, "statements just seem vain": the potential for communication that is language before any speech act must appear mysterious because it vanishes at the moment anything is articulated, and any "statement" must appear powerless, impotent, in comparison.

What then, by the terms of this reading, is the mystery that is called Terrapin Station? The lyrics offer some information, but no real resolution

of the ambiguity. Terrapin certainly can—but need not always—demand work of us, for "some climb" to reach it, but it does require change in any case: others arrive via a "rise" or a "fall." Like the changes described in the lyrics of "Cryptical Envelopment," those of "Terrapin Station" are reflected in the natural world: the "moon" is "brand-new," the "tune" sung by the "crickets and cicadas" is "rare and different," and the "first" and "best" celestial light, "Venus," appears. If these are the conditions that mark the transformation required for the journey to Terrapin Station, they do not entirely determine its nature; it remains something one "can't figure out" even as the train puts "its brakes on" in order to slow for the station platform. The similarity to "Cryptical Envelopment" emerges most strongly from a final ambiguity: whether "it's the end or beginning" is unclear. As with the earlier piece, obscurity here can be revised in a manner that can perhaps "light the song" and "hold away despair": this is not "end or beginning" but end *and* beginning. The old actuality falls prey to the impotential even as the potential it preserved emerges into a new actuality, and the train's "whistle is screaming" the name of this liminal point: "*Terrapin*." The station is, in short, not any point in the process, but the process itself. As with so many Grateful Dead songs, the ambiguity is not there to be clarified—it is the clarification.

"At a Siding" reinforces Terrapin's ambiguities. Any new actuality, insofar as it is a vessel for the potential, must move again toward that collapse of the impotential that frees the potential for the initiation of a new actuality that again, in turn, preserves the potential. In other words, "the compass always points to Terrapin." The new actuality may, of course, be problematic, but, regardless of its superficial characteristics, it remains evidence of the ongoing play of potential, impotential, and actual that is Terrapin. We are always living within that space; we are "back in Terrapin for good or ill again." Yet Agamben would remind us that these conditions are among those things "of which we nevertheless are always losing sight." Hunter, too, recognizes this: "these spaces filled with darkness / The obvious was hidden."

"No More Time to Tell How"

While the perspectives offered by Agamben's remarks here do not exhaust the possible readings of the Grateful Dead as performers, lyri-

cists, or as the center of a cultural phenomenon, potentiality provides a particularly useful context for hearing their music. Moreover, Agamben's revision of the classical understanding of potentiality allows us to articulate otherwise quite diverse aspects of the Grateful Dead experience, a goal for many scholars assaying this complex, protean phenomenon (Meriwether 2012). This utility also goes to the heart of why the band and the phenomenon it inspired should interest scholars who might otherwise have little interest in the Dead: whether considering the X factor or set list construction or foundational myths and folk traditions, potentiality helps us get at why so many aspects of the Dead's achievement merit and sustain examination. And for those drawn to the music, Agamben helps us articulate how and why, as Hunter so eloquently wrote in "Stella Blue," "It all rolls into one."

Notes

1. I have largely followed the track titles provided on the studio albums, although I have also been influenced by other sources, especially Trist and Dodd's *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* (2005) and Robert Hunter's *A Box of Rain: Lyrics, 1965–1993* (1993). Naming conventions of the sections of "That's It for the Other One" illustrate complications familiar to most listeners. For instance, Deadheads usually refer to the third part of this piece as "The Other One," but on *Anthem of the Sun* it is called "The Faster We Go, the Rounder We Get." Too, Trist and Dodd label the final set of lyrics a reprise of "Cryptical Envelopment," which they are, but they are part of a section identified on the album as "We Leave the Castle." The Dead added to the complications by joining Deadheads in calling the third section of the piece "The Other One" on many releases, beginning as early as 1971. Names for the several sections of the "Terrapin Station" suite, as well as the name of the suite itself, can be equally confusing, for similar reasons.

2. My remarks echo many other listeners' and scholars' belief that the Grateful Dead's songwriting and performance decisions represent a coherent oeuvre. This article therefore treats all songs the band played, whether originals, arrangements of traditional pieces, or covers, as Grateful Dead pieces. I follow scholars such as Horace Fairlamb (2007) in regarding cover songs as an indispensable aspect of the repertoire, for I believe regard for non-originals is justified by the fact that those cover songs and traditional works played by the Grateful Dead answer to attitudes characteristic of the original songs. I likewise consider the work of the

lyricists of their band's original songs—including contributions by band members such as Bob Weir and Jerry Garcia, those of Peter Monk and Robert M. Petersen, and especially those of Robert Hunter and John Perry Barlow—as a unified whole. Though I view these assumptions as justified, that argument lies beyond the scope of this essay.

3. This is very much in keeping with Martin Heidegger's consideration of possibility, which Jason Kemp Winfree has applied to the Grateful Dead. Winfree notes that "Heidegger … says of existence that possibility is higher than actuality…. How we find ourselves … is determined … by being thrown into our potentiality" (2010, 155).

4. Worth consulting is the reading of the existential implications of this aspect of potentiality offered in Ian Duckles and Eric M. Rubenstein's (2007) "Death Don't Have No Mercy: On the Metaphysics of Loss and Why We Should Be Grateful for Death." Still, we may be somewhat concerned at the notion that cessation of being—rather than any more or less serious reconfiguration of the ego—is at the heart of that article's reading of the name of the band. Also relevant is Brent Wood's remarks on "becoming" in Deleuze's sense, as described in "The Eccentric Revolutions of Phil Lesh" (2010).

5. As James Revell Carr has usefully calculated, the Grateful Dead's engagement with earlier musics is not superficial: "A careful examination of the Dead's repertoire shows that of the 484 songs they played … 152 were written by band members and their collaborators. The other 332 can be considered 'non-original.' Of those non-originals, 49—or 14.75 percent—were traditional songs" (2007, 124).

6. Here I am following in the footsteps of Stanley J. Spector, whose "'Bound to Cover Just a Little More Ground': A Heideggerian Reflection on the Grateful Dead" reveals, as Nicholas G. Meriwether contends, that the Grateful Dead posed "the possibility of a morality based on beauty" (2013b, 139). Meriwether addresses that argument himself in his "Innocence and Experience in the Grateful Dead" (2010).

7. In his discussion of "Playing in the Band," Matthew Turner makes a claim entirely suited to my argument: Grateful Dead "songs are a flexible and amorphous set of guidelines that are themselves altered and shaped in different ways at different times" (2007, 213). That is to say, one may understand such songs as "Playing in the Band" as an effort to foreground potentiality itself.

8. Regarding this point, see the discussion of "the One" in Malvinni (2007).

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