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B. Steve Csaki

Listeners of the Grateful Dead song "He's Gone" have varied interpretations of who the song references and the types of departure the title suggests. That is just as Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, the song's composer and lyricist, respectively, intended: indeed, fans and critics have embraced the band's refusal to dictate a specific interpretation as an invitation to provide their own, and that is appropriate. Yet Hunter has been clear that he originally wrote the song as a pointed comment to the band about his warnings against former manager Lenny Hart, even though fans heard it almost immediately as an elegy for Ron "Pigpen" McKernan, who died less than a year after the song's debut in 1972. That ambiguity was something Hunter embraced, however: although he bristled at the suggestion that his songs lacked definite intent, he understood that audience interpretation was critical for a work of art to have a life beyond its origin. That stance is revealing, and for scholars, it usefully raises the issue of authorial intent. This paper uses "He's Gone" to explore autho-

Grateful Dead Studies Vol. 6 (2023/2024)

rial intent in the Dead's music, tracing how this long-standing academic debate helps us better understand the Dead's approach to composition, and how the band's work calls for and sustains scholarly discussion.

Authorial intention has long been an issue for literary scholars and textual theorists. As Roland Barthes observed in "The Death of the Author," "the author still reigns" (1967, 143). That was more than twenty years after Monroe Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt argued that critics need not know the author's intention to accurately explain the meaning of the work; in their view, "The evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside of the author" (1946, 477). They believed the proper focus of interpretation was the work itself, rather than the mind that created it. This approach, a cornerstone of what was dubbed New Criticism, was appealing in part because it made interpreting texts possible even when the author's intent could not be discerned. Yet Beardsley and Wimsatt insisted that even if the author could tell us about a work, that did not constitute the definitive truth of the matter. Works can communicate more than their authors ever intended, they argued: "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (1946, 487).

Michel Foucault took an even stronger position. For him, not only was the author unnecessary for readers to discern meaning, authorial intention cannot limit interpretation. As he put it, "the task of criticism is not to bring out the works relationships with the author, nor to reconstruct through the text a thought or experience, but rather to analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships" (1998, 207). Foucault goes on to criticize modern literary criticism for too often using knowledge of an author's intentions to supplement, if not supplant, interpretations anchored in the structures of the work. In these cases, Foucault says that "the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design)" (1998, 214–15). Foucault concludes by suggesting that the author's influence unduly restricts meaning and that this influence should come to an end:

"I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear" (1998, 222). Like Barthes, Foucault saw the removal of the author from the work of determining meaning as not only a positive development in literary criticism but an inevitable one.

Other scholars disagree. Peggy Zeglin Brand, in her discussion of interested versus disinterested attitudes towards art, argues that the "fullest and fairest" approach to a work requires acknowledging the author as one of many players involved in interpretation (2010, 4). This offers a way to acknowledge and appreciate the "limited relevance of the author," as David Weberman suggests (2002, 55). In this approach, the author is not the determining focus of meaning, only a possible participant; authorial intent is therefore a potential factor in, rather than a necessary condition for, interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of interpretation as play explicates this position.

In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer argues that the concept of play offers a more accurate understanding of the way in which we engage with art, and the way we discern the meaning of artistic works when compared to other alternatives. Specifically, the analogy of play highlights the experiential and dynamic nature of interpretation and the various factors that contribute to the understanding of artwork. Gadamer rejects the notion that the experience of art, and the knowledge inherent to it, lies exclusively in the subject (the viewer) or the object (the artistic object). Rather, he suggests that we should try to understand the experience of art and the knowledge it produces by utilizing "the concept of play" (Gadamer 1993, 101). This approach emphasizes the interactive nature of our engagements with art; interaction is not a supplemental addition to art, but rather "the mode of being of the work of art itself" (Gadamer 1993, 101).

Seen in this way, the experience of art is not focused on "the orientation or even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play" (Gadamer 1993, 101). Rather, Gadamer sees artworks as objects that catalyze activity, that initiate play, and it is through the interplay between works, with their inherent features, and individuals, possessing cultural associations, that meaning is determined. Unlike theorists who focus on the generat-

ing figure of the author, the experiencing subject (affective theory), or the art object (formalist), Gadamer emphasizes interaction between these agents; he prioritizes the play, rather than the players: "As far as language is concerned, the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the play itself" (Gadamer 1993, 104). Gadamer's analogy of play removes the experience of art from the purely subjective by involving all the players in the understanding of it. These players include the productive agents and the works they produce but also the audience and intermediary agents, such as translators.

Gadamer explains what he means by art as play first by discussing the nature of play as having a unique sort of seriousness that is opposed to ordinary "seriousness." True play, he notes, actively "suspends" our preoccupation with ordinary affairs, our "active and caring existence," (or seriousness), which can exhaust us (1993, 101). This is one reason we enjoy play and find it rejuvenating even though it requires effort; play takes us out of the ordinary, and while it has a seriousness of its own, it is not the seriousness of the everyday. Gadamer is clear that play must be taken seriously by the players to genuinely constitute play. One who refuses to do this, who does not take play seriously, is a "spoilsport" who can disrupt play (1993, 102).

To better understand why play is the appropriate analogy to understand art, Gadamer moves on from discussing its seriousness to discussing another essential feature of play. He uses the German word for play, "the word 'Spiel,' [which] originally meant 'dance'," to do so (1993, 103). This word helps him illustrate that play typically possesses a back and forth or "to and fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition" (Gadamer 1993, 103). So, through the application of the term *Spiel*, Gadamer emphasizes that the experience of art not only involves a unique type of seriousness, but also the dynamic interaction, or dance, between players. This understanding of art establishes "the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*" (Gadamer 1993, 104; italics his) and affirms interpretation as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon between various players who are involved in art as a sort of play.

For Gadamer, art as play results from the combination and interaction of its constituent elements, the players. But who are these players? One of the critical players is what is often referred to as the art object. Not all objects are artistic objects, and not all objects intended as such operate as art. Importantly, according to Gadamer, when this type of object is lacking human presence and interaction, it is not actively art. At best, it is potential or intended art, and it also does not suddenly become art when a person interacts with it. For example, attempting to deface the *Mona Lisa* is not play as Gadamer defines it; rather, it is vandalism—in the metaphor of play, it is behaving as a spoilsport. Gadamer argues that it is the whole of this dynamic experience of play that is art, and any single aspect of the whole, by itself, is not play, and therefore is not synonymous with the experience of art.

This notion extends to the audience as well because Gadamer's theory of art as play elevates the significance of play above individual players while seeing various players as elemental to the existence and success of play: "Basically, the difference between the player and the spectators here is superseded. The requirement that the play itself be intended in its meaningfulness is the same for both" (Gadamer 1993, 110). Applying Gadamer's analogy of play to music, we can see that in addition to the art object, such as the sheet music for a particular song, other "players" are needed to bring the experience to life. These include musicians and the audience as well as the agent of the song's production: the author/composer.

Gadamer offers an explicit discussion of the significance of a lack of audience in the performance and production of music, and maintains that even in those instances, play takes precedence over the players:

> This is still the case even when the play community is sealed off against all spectators, either because it opposes the social institutionalization of artistic life, as in so-called chamber music, which seeks to be more authentic music making and being performed for the players themselves and not for an audience. If someone performs music in this way, he is also in fact trying to make the music 'sound good,' but that means that it would really be there for any listener. Artistic presentation by its nature, exists

> for someone, even if there is no one there who merely listens ….
> (Gadamer 1993, 110)

Gadamer makes it clear that the audience and the author can be removed from play without necessarily ending the activity, and yet, like the author, it is still the reason that art exists. What is elemental to play is that the art object exists for someone, that it dynamically engages a mind or minds able to interpret its meaning—a meaning (or meanings) that develop(s) from the interplay between the features of the object and the contents of the agent's experience. As David Weberman notes, for Gadamer, "a text's meaning is always conditioned and constituted, in part by its readers" (2002, 45); in short, meaning is produced as much by those who receive the text as by its progenitor. In Gadamer's estimation, "we should not hope to restore textual meaning by recreating the author's intentions," Weberman explains, but by "interacting with it in light of our own situation" (Weberman 2002, 47).

When considering authorial intention, what Gadamer's view foregrounds is that while the active experience of art diminishes the importance of authorial intention, removing absolutist power from it, it does not exclude it from consideration either; unlike Foucault, Gadamer does not advocate or expect that the author should be removed completely from the phenomenon of play. The author can be a relevant player in the field of interpretation; the author simply should not monopolize the play. For instance, there are times when knowledge of an author's intention can be vital, not so much for defining understanding, but rather to avoid misunderstanding. Discussing Celan's poem "Flower," Gadamer explains that "Of course, outside information can be often valuable. It protects against blatant error in the attempt to interpret. It makes it easier to understand everything correctly, that is, with uniform coherence, at least on a preliminary level" (Gadamer 1997, 133).

Blatant error is a critical concept here. To Gadamer, the intention of the author, if known, can preclude interpretations contrary to the intended meaning while still permitting myriad compatible ones; in other words, while a work can always mean more than its author intended, the author is a sufficient limiter to make it illegitimate to assert a meaning that contradicts the author's intention, when known. As Weberman puts

it, "We see, then, that Gadamer is neither an intentionalist nor an absolute anti-intentionalist. The author's intention has a heuristic and narrowly regulative role to play, but it is not determinative of the text's meaning" (Irwin 2002, 58). This echoes Monroe Beardsley's observation that "we must admit that in many cases an author may be a good reader of his own poem … but he is not necessarily the best reader" (Beardsley 2017, 26).

Clearly, Gadamer sees the author as a legitimate player in the game of interpretation because the author created the work that catalyzes play; however, the author is not an essential player, and is oftentimes essentially inactive in the play (e.g., if the author is deceased or anonymous and the author's intentions unknown). The author can, in some circumstances, play the role of the umpire, or referee. The text or art object is an essential player that is often taken or mistaken for an unchanging element in the game. However, as Gadamer notes, play can change the players, "transform," them, and the text is no exception. To push Gadamer's metaphor further, the text is like a field of play. It can change, but whatever change occurs there is of a particular kind. Particular words, or expressions in a text, are understood differently over time; a lyric or instrumental section may be performed differently, as we will discuss, just as rain may make a field slippery, or even muddy. Finally, the audience is the other essential player because as Gadamer notes, even if not physically present, art is always created for an audience; it exists for someone. So, it can be said that there is no play without an audience, even if the audience is only the performers or the author of the work. But it is the audience's engagement in the field of play that generates interpretation for Gadamer. Moreover, the multiplicity of audiences creates potential for the proliferation of meaning, and the coexistence of "diverse nonerroneous readings" (Weberman 2002, 45).

Gadamer and the Dead

Gadamer's notion of art as play not only helps us interpret "He's Gone" but the larger Grateful Dead phenomenon as a whole. Likewise, to the extent there are more players involved, and the play is more complicated, the music of the Grateful Dead can usefully illuminate the intricacy implicit in Gadamer's theory. When one considers a live performance of

a song by the Dead, there is even more going on than a triangulation of the interrelated players of author, text, and audience. In the case of "He's Gone," for example, there is the author of the song lyrics, Robert Hunter, who brings his own myriad sources and influences to the game. There is the author of the music, Jerry Garcia, who brought bluegrass, jazz, and many other musical influences to the song. And there are the other band members, who are both (re)making and interpreting the song as they are performing it. Consistent with their experience in the moment and interaction with one another and the audience, they present the lyrics in a fashion of their choosing. All of this occurs synchronously with, literally as play itself, as it is played for (or aptly with) the many other players who make up the audience. Finally, there is one more player involved, the physical place, as in location and time.

This is also why interpreting Dead songs is different from interpreting other types of literature, even if we can make use of some of the same tools in an analysis of their songs. Live music that emphasizes improvisation, as the Dead's does, differs from a written text, to which the original score bears greater likeness. In a live show these songs are literally alive in a way that many other texts are not, and this is what makes Gadamer's idea of play so apropos. A supporter of the intentionalist position might argue that the authors of the song changed their intentions with respect to its meaning in each performance (of course, it is easier to claim that Garcia and the band did this rather than Hunter), therefore intentionality is still critical to a correct understanding. There might even be some truth in that position; one might go so far as to say that the Grateful Dead renewed, even rewrote, a song every time they played it—even the lyrics exhibited variations, some of which were creative, as Mark Mattson has explored (2019/2020). Each version of a song played is unique, which helps to explain why Deadheads attended so many shows, collected tapes, and still purchase performance recordings today.

"He's Gone" aptly illustrates how the dynamic between players shapes and reshapes meaning. That begins with the lyrics. Hunter repeatedly noted that his goal as a lyricist was to write in a way that permitted multiple interpretations. Initially, he even resisted having his lyrics printed, noting "Back in the day, I didn't allow my lyrics to be published

with the recordings so people could dub in their own mishearings, adding a bit of themselves to the song" (Hunter 2005, xix). By withholding the printed lyrics from the other players—the listeners—he prevented himself from "coming between" listeners and the text, as Irwin puts it; in effect, Hunter tried to suppress his "authorial authority" (Irwin 2002, 38; 35). That authorial effacement facilitated the listeners' active engagement in the production of meaning.

Hunter's stance accompanied his reluctance to engage with any effort to explain his songs; "the songs themselves say everything I personally want to say about them," he maintained (Hunter 2005, xxi). That was true for even close associates: as Mickey Hart noted, "Very rarely did we talk about his words. He didn't want to explain the songs and I didn't want to ask. Hunter would explain a few things but left enough mystery that you would never get the real meaning. He did that mysteriously on purpose. It was like goodies left along the road" (Hart 2019). Hart's comment is revealing: his reference to a "real meaning" suggests that he believes that Hunter, as the author, knows what that meaning is, even if he welcomed other interpretations.

Hunter made that clear, in a remarkable exception to his refusal to be pinned down on the meaning of his lyrics—one that also illustrates Gadamer's concept of blatant error. When literary theorist Jürgen Fauth criticized Hunter's song "Franklin's Tower" as "evocative yet of undeterminable meaning" (Fauth 1996), Hunter refuted the charge with a detailed explanation, noting:

> Since the concluding remark of your essay stated that the Grateful Dead songs are "meaningless" I choose to reply by explicating one of your examples: "Franklin's Tower." I do this reluctantly because I feel that a straightforward statement of my original intent robs the listener of personal associations and replaces them with my own. I may know where they come from, but I don't know where they've been. My allusions are, admittedly, often not immediately accessible to those whose literary resources are broadly different than my own, but I wouldn't want my listeners' trust to be shaken by an acceptance of the category "meaningless" attached to a bundle of justified signi-

> fiers whose sources happen to escape the scope of simplistic reference. (Hunter 1996)

Hunter's point is clear: he intended his lyrics be open to widely varied interpretations, but to conclude that there is no meaning in his lyrics is simply wrong—a blatant error, in Gadamer's terms.

Yet, as Hunter commented in a 1991 interview, "What I intend is not what a thing is in the end" (Jackson 1992, 225). This is where Gadamer's notion of art as play is more helpful than the straightforward intentionalist position. Understanding art as play involves understanding that no two games are ever identical, even when played on the same field with the same players. It involves knowing that play begets more play, and that a game begun by an artist through the creation of a particular work in a particular time may evolve into games where that same work speaks to new audiences in new places and times in ways that transcend the author's original intentions. John Perry Barlow explained,

> As Deadheads know, these songs are continuously growing and revealing themselves. Resonating with frequencies unheard at the time of their writing. Being imbued with all that received belief, collateral and yet vital as anything that happened in the silence of our own minds or in the hugeness of 200,000 people dancing. The songs revealed themselves over time, even to us. (Barlow 2005, 421)

"He's Gone" illustrates Barlow's commentary well. Hunter wrote the lyrics to "He's Gone" in response to a particularly painful episode in the Dead's history. Mickey Hart's father Lenny managed the band from 1969 to 1970, using his position to embezzle more than $150,000, "leaving the band essentially penniless" (McNally 2002, 362). Hunter wrote "He's Gone" as a poignant but pointed reaction, commenting that he had "warned them about [Lenny] from the beginning … People thought it was about Pigpen after Pig died, but … It was predated (Dym and Alson 2009, 20). As Hunter explained:

> There are some times when you can pick out something that gets you to write. But most of my things are *not* sketches of any individual person. I might start off with something in mind, but then, the character becomes its own thing in the song and acquires its

> own attributes. They may be composite attributes, but they're not often about anyone in particular. (Dym and Alson 2009, 20)

What Hunter says here echoes what Gadamer asserts about knowledge of an author's intent. First, Hunter points out what Gadamer describes as a "blatant error" with respect to what the song is about. Gadamer argues that there are instances where knowing authorial intent can be helpful. Hunter points out that "He's Gone" could not have been about McKernan because the song predates those events; McKernan died almost a year *after* the first performance of "He's Gone" in Denmark, on April 17, 1972. As Foucault argues, this is one of those cases in which we do not need the author to make the point. Yet Hunter notes that while Lenny Hart was the impetus for the song lyrics, his intention was not to write a song about him per se, but about a character like him. Still, knowing the events that prompted Hunter to write adds to the complexity of the game. Not only does this knowledge give us the answer to who is the original "he" in the title, it explains some of the images that do not comport with the elegiac interpretation of the song. The opening line "Rat in drain ditch," for example, tells us what kind of person that "he" (Lenny) is, an image made even more stark by the line that he would "steal your face right off your head." It captures the depth of deception and betrayal perpetrated by a band member's father who presented himself as a man of God and had a fiduciary responsibility to the band, but in reality, he was a grifter willing to steal from his own child. Knowing that story positions or enables one to understand the song in a particular way. The interpretation of the lyrics is pre-framed by the facts of its origin.

In this case, intentionalists are not wrong in claiming that knowledge of the author's original intent suggests one possibly accurate meaning of a text, and certainly provides more insight into the circumstances of the origin of a work. However, the lyrics offer other equally possible and plausible interpretations that are not based on the author's original intention. Some still bear relation to it; others do not. The lyrics make no mention of Lenny by name, for example, nor his role, nor even his specific crime. This allows players to conceive of reasonable interpretations that do not involve him at all, opening the door for more than one meaning for the song.

Indeed, many texts are purposely made multivalent to compound the possibilities for their meaning. Arguably, more meanings exist than the additional ones the author of a multivalent text intends. In "He's Gone," if the lyrics could be literally read as an indictment of Lenny's crimes, that would lend more credence to the intentionalist stance, but they cannot. "Cat on a tin roof / Dogs in a pile / Nothing left to do but / smile, smile, smile" makes no explicit reference to Lenny's crimes, nor does the powerful but befuddling verse that precedes this, "Nine-mile skid / on a ten-mile ride / Hot as a pistol / but cool inside" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 192). Finally, as is typical of Hunter's lyrics, the actor or subject referred to is not definitively fixed. Instead, it is left ambiguous. "He" could be anyone, or even an animal, though the presumption is that "He" is a male.

Consider the verse: "Going where the wind don't blow so strange / Maybe off on some high cold mountain chain / Lost one round but the price wasn't anything / Knife in the back and more of the same" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 193). This verse could be about Lenny or the Grateful Dead, or even other players. Given what we know about the origin story, it makes more sense that "knife in the back" describes Lenny's deceit, but "Going where the wind don't blow so strange" could refer to the band seeking peace, or to Lenny's escape. The next line is even more ambiguous. Who "lost one round"? Lenny, or the band, or both? What was the price and who paid it? The fact that the rest of the song is more easily understood as referring to Lenny shows that without complete knowledge of the author's intention, there would be no way to know that the subject may have shifted in this verse. It could be reasonably interpreted either way.

Although some elements create the potential for varied interpretation, there are elements that offer more of an anchor. There is, for instance, a consistent theme of loss throughout the song. The title refers to loss with the word "gone," and the idea of a specific loss is driven home by the final line of the chorus, "and nothing's gonna bring him back". This choral refrain refers to the permanence of a loss and the epistemological paradox of loss as something that is ever present, as a lack that is never gone. We do not miss people or things that we do not know are gone, lost, or missing. It is the awareness that they are gone, and the fact that they

are not ever coming back that makes loss painful. This understanding of the song as referring to loss more generally is problematic for a purely intentionalist approach that restricts meaning to Lenny's financial deceit and subsequent departure. The fact that literally hundreds of thousands of fans who know nothing of Lenny nonetheless find considerable meaning in the song also points to the inadequacy of this approach.

Caleb Kennedy has argued that the line "Maybe on some high cold mountain range" clearly alludes to Lenny's escape, and "doesn't hold much hope for reformation, for band or thief: 'Lost one round but the price wasn't anything, a knife in the back and more of the same'" (2019). Although his reading hinges on the origin story, speculating that the words "high cold mountain range" point directly to Lenny's attempted escape, the problem is that a casual listener would not know who Lenny was, let alone the story of his theft, making that connection impossible to discern. He is not named in the song, so as Gadamer holds, it is the players' knowledge that is critical in determining meaning.

On the other hand, an intentionalist approach would leave the "correct" interpretation as a sort of esoteric reward for only those who sought out possible meanings by carefully studying the lyrics and the history of the band. Even then, original intent offers no definitive insight into who paid what price to whom. Interestingly, as Hunter noted, McKernan's death would alter the meaning of "He's Gone" in a permanent way. "He's Gone" was played nearly fifty times in 1972, the year before McKernan died (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 127). The first time it was played after McKernan's death was March 19, 1973, eleven days after he died. At that performance, the crowd interpreted the song as an elegy for McKernan (Kennedy 2019). As Gadamer asserts, meaning is dynamic, and determined in and through active play, on that day the meaning of the song opened due to the events that had passed and in conjunction with the audience, the band, and the song lyrics, all critical players that Monday night. Those players created the "new" elegiac meaning for "He's Gone" that served as a lament of the loss of McKernan.

The frequency of the song's performance supports the notion that McKernan's death changed its reception. Before McKernan's death, "He's Gone" was played twice as many times as compared to any of the years

after his death. It was played forty-eight times in 1972, and in all the years after 1972 it was never played more than it was in 1973, twenty-five times total (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 127). Although some of this may have to do with its status as a new song in 1972, this is noteworthy.

It may well have been the band's intention that "He's Gone" serve as an elegy for McKernan that night. After all, the music does not suggest outrage or recrimination, and if one did not know the origin story (the Hunter interview quoted above was in 1978, five years later), the band might have known it could easily serve this purpose. However, the band did not announce, "This is for Pigpen." The absence of explicit confirmation of intention reveals that meaning is not causally linked to the author's intention: meanings emerge even when the intention is unknown; meaning can be clearly generated by the other players who are involved. Without knowledge of the origin story, the title of the song and some of the lyrics support the understanding of it as an elegy for McKernan, rather than an indictment of Lenny.[2]

This shift in interpretation shows that it is possible for there to be legitimate meaning in the song that has nothing to do with the origin story or the original intention of the author, and that other players are critical in the generation of that meaning. The idea of loss in a more general sense is critically present in both of these interpretations, but that idea is anchored principally in the song itself, its lyric, and the linguistic associations an average audience member would have with key terms in the lyrics, such as "gone." The question of loss is especially important because it goes to the heart of the circumstances of the song's composition. The nature of the lyrics and the music do not evoke the loss of money but rather the loss of trust, the betrayal by a family member. This is a loss of innocence and love. The grief occasioned by those losses is akin to the grief caused by death. Precisely because the idea of loss is central to the original intended meaning, and more generically in the lyrics themselves, the song can reach a wide array of listeners, and its meaning can easily shift from an angry lament to the sorrowful mourning of the untimely death of a band member. "He's Gone" captures Hunter's and the Dead's skill in creating art that embraces that capacity for flexibility in interpretation when we see interpretation as play, play that is dynamic and ongoing.

Not unlike other poets, Hunter is an author who intends his work to have a multiplicity of possible interpretations. He chooses words, and creates or borrows phrases such as the allusion to Tennessee William's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" in "He's Gone," that are ambiguous in their narrowest senses, and more often than not, multivalent in meaning. So, while he may have his own idea about the intended meaning, in his production he simultaneously creates an object capable of having meanings different than the one he intended—indeed, ones that he himself may not even have considered and thus does not know—culminating in a truly wonderful paradox.

The song focuses on loss, and change always involves loss of some kind, even if that loss ultimately begets something better. I listened to "He's Gone" when my mother died; it brought me to tears when I heard it after my mother-in-law died. The song addressed loss for me cathartically, a role the band ultimately made explicit: On May 6, 1981, at Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, NY, Bob Weir dedicated it to Bobby Sands, an IRA soldier who had died in prison after a prolonged hunger strike (McNally 2002, 542). Eight years after its performance struck listeners as a tribute to McKernan, the song was formally introduced as an elegy.

While both the audience and the band support this understanding of the song, a third interpretation of "He's Gone" has to do with the self. Gadamer argues that our interactions with art serve to help us better understand the self, or provide self-understanding; in his view, the self can only be understood through experiencing something that is not the self: "The binding quality of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art must not be disintegrated by aesthetic consciousness. This negative insight, positively expressed, is that art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge" (Gadamer 1993, 97). Because defining the self in philosophical terms remains an unfinished business, ideas that help that project are invaluable. The third interpretation of "He's Gone" focuses on the loss of self in a less permanent way than the second interpretation that focuses on the actual, and presumably permanent, loss of an individual person.

For some listeners familiar with LSD use, the Grateful Dead lyric "steal your face" has developed the meaning of a reference to the dissolution of the self that often occurs or seems to occur during an acid trip.

"Steal Your Face" also refers to a very common Grateful Dead logo that appeared as the cover of a live album of the same name, recorded in 1974 and released in 1976. Whether the loss of self occurs, or merely seems to occur, is not a trivial matter, philosophically speaking. If one sides with Zen Buddhists, then the fact of the matter is that there is no actual self, the drug simply reveals this existential fact to the user. However, if one tends to a western understanding of self that is more Platonic or Cartesian, then perhaps the drug does destroy, or dismantle the self, at least temporarily. Many people, including John Barlow, report that they were fundamentally and irrevocably changed after they took LSD the first time (Barlow 2018, 39).

In this third understanding of the lyrics, to steal your face is to remove your identity as an individual, egoistic self. In this case, "He's Gone" means that the self (he) is gone, that the individual identity that defined who one was, is now literally nonexistent. That entity has been completely absorbed by the broader reality, and whatever remnant is left of the self might be what William James referred to as pure experience. Explaining this phenomenon in this way is necessary because language itself becomes problematic due to the distinctions which it must draw in order to make sense. One must ask, if the self is gone, what is having the experience? This is a difficult question. Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" takes up this very question, in a sense (Nagel 1974). As Nagel concludes, we cannot know. As a result, a "selfless person" might feel like "a rat in a drain ditch, caught on a limb." Or they might feel that there is "nothing left to do, but smile, smile, smile," or both simultaneously.

Recent work in clinical psychology that aims to help people cope with depression, particularly the type associated with terminal illness, has focused on the use of psilocybin in fairly high doses (day long "trips") as treatment. Basically, these are guided trips in very controlled settings. Music is considered a crucial part of the control of the trip. It appears that many people are changed after undergoing this treatment and they report that they feel they are able to let go of their depression and fear of death. One particular study reported in *JAMA Psychiatry* concluded:

Results of this randomized clinical trial demonstrated the effi-

> cacy of psilocybin-assisted therapy in producing large, rapid, and sustained antidepressant effects among patients with MDD [major depressive disorders]. These data expand the findings of previous studies involving patients with cancer and depression as well as patients with treatment-resistant depression by suggesting that psilocybin may be effective in the much larger population of MDD. (Davis et al. 2021, 487)

While clinicians are not likely to speculate beyond the empirical findings that this treatment is efficacious, one could speculate that psilocybin is effective because patients see that their own self is diffused when they are on the drug, and so are able to experience a new or different truth or reality. This experience changes their perspective on their situation. This new truth is their understanding with respect to their personal, or self's relationship to the world. At least one person in these experiments lived the rest of his life, seventeen months, "without fear" after his psilocybin experience (Gross 2020).

Importantly, the people in these clinical trials became depressed in large part because they were told that the ultimate demise of their self was imminent, and they believed it. In a sense, they were reminded that death was near and ready to "steal their face"—their very life. The fear of that loss can be overwhelming and result in severe depression. Ironically, it may be the case that taking a hallucinogenic drug that annihilates the very self they feared losing allows them to recover a sense of well-being.

This is an interesting take on ownership. Usually, if something is lost, or stolen, it must first be a thing that is definable in terms of boundaries. Removing the boundaries of the self makes it much harder to cling to, because without boundaries, it is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. How can one lose what can't be held, or even clearly distinguished or identified? Understanding that fact appears to fundamentally change a person. This newfound sense of well-being that patients report is likely a result of the epiphany that losing the self may not be the catastrophic event they had anticipated it to be.

Heidegger and other existentialist philosophers have examined the great lengths that humans regularly go to so that they can ignore, or deny, the reality that we are finite beings, that we all have a definite

expiration date that while unknown, remains undeniable, and omnipresent. According to him, to live with acceptance of our mortality is to live "authentically," but it is not clear who does or can live authentically. This is because of the constant anxiety that would exist if one were to live in that way. This recent work with psilocybin suggests that it may be possible to vitiate that anxiety.

Is it possible that the Grateful Dead intended to convey this meaning of the song? This is the crux of this paper. If one knew that the Dead intended this meaning, it would make a difference. One might feel more confident in this particular interpretation; however, if one had transcended attachment to oneself, one might also be happy to admit many other possible meanings. It is important to note that these interpretations of "He's Gone" are not competing with one another. They each reflect different games played at different times, in different places, with varied players. As Garcia said in 1991, "We don't create the meaning of the tunes ultimately. They recreate themselves each performance in the minds of everybody there" (Jackson 1992, 225–226). This is exactly what Gadamer claims occurs when the meaning of art is determined through play. Each game is new, so each interpretation of each presentation of a song and concert opens itself to a new understanding. Perhaps that is the band's intention—that we all interpret whatever we want in any given song. However, what the invocation of Gadamer's theory provides us is the notion that this hyper relativistic understanding of Garcia's assertion neither fits with the band's corpus of work, nor does it fit with Gadamer's notion of art as play.

As Cynthia R. Nielsen explains, "Play involves players, rules, ordered and reciprocal movement, responsiveness, and leeway or creative flexibility; that is, play includes and involves space or room for improvisatory activity" (Nielsen 2021, 140). According to Gadamer, if the rules and order are completely ignored, then whichever player(s) attempt to play that way are spoilsports. Absolute relativism makes the rules entirely subjective and game playing then becomes impossible, at least with others.

While one might necessarily admit that there are multiple realities that simultaneously exist—each of us has our own reality—and that we

can at times glimpse realities other than our own, most of the time we can agree on the general guidelines, or rules, that frame all our realities. Yes, we can and do "Inch [our] way through dead dreams / to another land," as Hunter writes in "Box of Rain," but we remain human regardless. There's no indication that Garcia or the band ever meant to advocate absolute relativism. Hunter's methodical counterargument to the claim his lyrics were meaningless suggests this. Pushing the boundaries or limits of what is considered normal may appear to be a relativistic attitude, but is more properly understood as improvisation. Even the extraordinary time that the Grateful Dead spent with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the Acid Tests is better understood as an examination of the rules and norms of the time, and how they might be changed, or subverted, not an experiment with absolute relativism.

The textual evidence for the acceptance of moral rules is abundant in the Dead's corpus. Morality stories abound in their repertoire, such as their version of "Stagger Lee," which ends with the retributive justice of Lee shot in the testicles and dragged to City Hall, or the uncle in "Me and My Uncle," shot dead and left by the side of the road. This moral logic is a recurring theme in Grateful Dead songs, as well as songs that they choose to cover, though it seems out of place in a world of pure relativism, where anything goes. It is more coherent to understand that Garcia was asserting relativism only in terms of interpreting and understanding the Dead's music at any given show, not as a blanket statement. Each performance is a new game with many new players and some who played the prior game, so both its outcome and movement can be quite different from any prior performance, but if understood as play, it cannot be entirely relativistic because art as play is not purely subjective.

There is final point to make about "He's Gone" and the intentional fallacy. The three interpretations offered here are distinct, yet all underscore the idea of loss, emphasizing the centrality of its role in the song. That core helps explain how these three understandings of the song work together to offer a fuller, richer, and deeper appreciation of the song. They offer complementary, not contradictory, perspectives; no single view is more correct than the others. That fits with Gadamer's argument that each time a game is played, it is unique, thus new meaning may be created

by the players. That may be the best way to explain how the intentional fallacy helps us understand the music of the Grateful Dead. When we have no information about the authors' intent, we play, always mindful of Hunter's warning in "Terrapin Station": "Since the end is never told / we pay the teller off in gold / in hopes he will come back / but he cannot be bought or sold" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 263).

Notes

1. According to John Barlow, Hunter clashed with Weir on edits to the lyrics of "Sugar Magnolia," noting that "Weir kept changing the words because he thought he had better ones, and Hunter did not believe in making deals on shit like that" (Barlow and Greenfield 2018, 94).

2. See Kennedy (2019) for a detailed discussion of "He's Gone" as it evolved over time. In addition to how many times it was played each year, Kennedy also notes the style of play, the set it appeared in and its place in the set, and the crowd's reaction. As with all Grateful Dead songs, "He's Gone" changed significantly over the two decades the band played it, but it retained its elegiac feel.

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