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“All A Seer Can Own”: Lead Sheets, Ice Nine, and the Textual Challenges of the Grateful Dead

NICHOLAS G. MERIWETHER

In 2008, the auction of a handwritten set of lyrics to “New Potato Caboose” caught the attention of sharp-eyed fans and scholars (fig. 1). Offered for sale by Bonham and Butterfield’s, the listing erroneously labeled it “A Ron ‘Pig Pen’ McKernan Page of Handwritten Lyrics for The Grateful Dead song, ‘New Potato Caboose,’ circa 1968” ([Scheuner] 2008). Though dated and attributed incorrectly—the date is most likely around January 1967, and the handwriting is clearly Phil Lesh’s, not McKernan’s—the manuscript was clearly authentic. Most of all, it was significant, clarifying one essential image: in the first verse, the last line begins “Above Madonna,” not “Black Madonna,” as it has always been printed, starting with the publication of the band’s 1979 songbook and reaffirmed by *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* (Grateful Dead 1979, 16; Trist and Dodd 2005, 34). That one word revises how we understand the lyrics: instead of presenting an almost surreal association of images with no real underlying unity, the song now reads as a nature poem, one of several that Petersen wrote at the time that evoked his

LAST LEAF FALLEN, BARE EARTH
 WHERE GREEN WAS, BONE
 ABOVE MADONNA TWO EAGLES HANG
 AGAINST A CLOUD
 SUN COMES UP BLOOD RED - WIND
 YELLS AMONG THE STONE.
 ALL GRACEFUL INSTRUMENTS ARE
 KNOWN
 WHEN THE WINDOWS ALL ARE BROKEN AND
 YOUR LOVE'S BECOME A TOOTHLESS CRONE
 WHEN THE VOICES OF THE STORM SOUND
 LIKE A CROWD
 WINTER MORNING BREAKS YOU'RE
 ALL ALONE -
 ALL G I A K ---

Figure 1. "New Potato Caboose" Lyric Sheet, ca. 1967. Courtesy Jim and Danny Sullivan.

home in the Santa Cruz mountains, where he could see Mount Madonna.¹

The implications of that discovery go beyond how we read one song, however important. For years, scholars have struggled with the lack of authoritative texts for the band's music (cf. Crowley 2022). Official publications have compounded the confusions, with scores and lyrics, even titles, that differed from both recordings and performances. The

Dead's approach to songs contributed to the ambiguity: their commitment to improvisation complicated the question of what constitutes an authoritative text for a number of Grateful Dead songs, as did their attitude toward documentation, which evolved over time.

A survey of the early history of the band's music and lyric publication frames the textual challenges posed by the band's work. While such challenges are familiar to literary and textual scholars, they take on particular resonances in the context of the Dead's history and oeuvre. Those challenges remain, despite the publication of Hunter's collected lyrics and the band-authorized *Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics* (Hunter 1993; Trist and Dodd 2005). As the scholarly study of the Dead grows, the need for reliable texts becomes increasingly vital. This paper provides a sketch of the textual issues posed by the Dead's work, tracing how they arose and how textual theory addresses them.

Scholars have touched on textual issues in Dead studies for decades, and some have addressed them explicitly, from Christian Crumlish's paper on the titles in the suite "That's It For the Other One" (2002) to Stan Spector's work on the philosophical implications of the lyrics of the band's first three albums (2004). Mark Mattson's work on errors and variants in the band's sung lyrics both directly and indirectly invokes textual scholarship, though his focus is on the psychology of memory, not textual theory (Mattson 2019/2020). But to date, no scholar has looked explicitly at textual theory and applied it to the Dead, although some textual theorists would argue that every paper that addresses the band's lyrics and many that address songs invoke textual theory, whether or not they do so explicitly.

That's true for listeners who are not academics as well. Before the band published lyrics, fans spent enormous amounts of time deciphering the words, as the example of "New Potato Caboose" shows: for years, fans debated the significance of the line that the Lesh manuscript clarified; one anecdote—unverified but plausible—describes fans accosting the current owners of the band's Haight-Ashbury Victorian to confirm the existence of a stained glass window that was the purported source of the images of two eagles and a cloud in the line with the corrupted text,

“Above Madonna, two eagles hang against a cloud.” The debate surrounding the image is the larger point, however, and it demonstrates two issues familiar to textual scholars: first, that textual issues matter to all readers and listeners, not just scholars; and second, that textual corruption matters, whether it happens in a classical manuscript altered by insects and a sloppy scriptorium or in a rock song inaccurately transcribed.

One of the principal functions of textual criticism is uncovering those errors and tracing their genealogy. So how did the error happen? “New Potato Caboose” began to take shape in early 1967, around the time the band was recording their debut album (Gleason 1969, 320). For that LP and the two that followed, the band made two decisions about the lyrics: one was to mix the vocals down, and the second was not to print the lyrics. Interestingly, although Hunter was not part of those decisions (nor did he participate in the first album), he agreed with them, later noting that “I used to think that if I printed the lyrics, the band would take the opportunity to mix the vocals down even further. I felt if they didn’t print them they would *have* to be on the record” (Dym and Alson 2009, 20). One can speculate about the motive for those decisions, but Hunter believed there was an artistic rationale: making the lyrics difficult to decipher would engage listeners more deeply. “I wanted our records so that you had to listen to them a bunch to get it all,” Hunter explained, “so that you were forced to listen to them rather than having it all right at your grasp” (Dym and Alson 2009, 20). That also opened the possibility for listeners to make their own inferences, something that Garcia championed: he liked lyrics that offered “a lot of possibilities for different interpretations,” as he put it. “People can fill in their own ideas and make new connections. There’s a greater level of participation” (Young 1995, 127).

It worked. Years later, Garcia commented that “Hunter and I get reports on the contents of our tunes, which include incredibly complex interpretations of what the lyrics *must* mean and all that. And we find, Wow! There’s no intention on our part to include those things, but it’s lucky that there’s that kind of openness, that that kind of range is available” (Tamarkin 2009, 36). Barlow confirmed that attitude: in his afterword to the *Complete Annotated Lyrics*, he remarked, “these songs here will continue to expand and grow as others come along and fill them with

their own imaginings and annotations, explicit or tacit. We've always tried (and Hunter, being subtler, more than I) to give you plenty of room to flesh your own song around the bones of what we gave you" (Barlow 2005, 418).

Yet the band also admitted a certain frustration that what they did intend could get lost. Garcia was proud of the fact that the bridge in "Ripple" is a haiku, but noted that it was one of "a lot of those kinds of things in our music that most people just never get" (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 81). Hunter felt the same way. "People read an amazing amount of stuff into my work, but there's an amazing amount of stuff they *don't* hear. They hear something else other than the amazing thing I wanted them to hear" (Dym and Alson 2009, 20). The gulf between the work envisioned and created by the artist and its subsequent transmission and reception is a linchpin of textual theory, but the point here is that even as the musicians allowed for audience engagement, they also had a clear sense of artistic intention.

Their expression of that understanding evolved—and rapidly. In 1969, they included the lyrics in a release: *Live/Dead* had a beautifully designed lyric sheet, and the next year, both *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* had mixes that allowed listeners to clearly discern the words. That fall, Alan Trist arrived and was charged with the responsibility of establishing Ice Nine, the band's publishing company. One of his first jobs was to complete the copyright registrations of the band's songbook, going back to the debut album. This is where the first flush of confusions, or what scholars call textual corruptions, began.

The band resisted assigning or accepting authorship for the early songs, especially those credited to their group-pseudonym, McGanahan Skjellifetti; as Trist explained, "as to who wrote a song, it was hardly known because they were all writing it together in some fashion." As for assigning copyright, "They didn't want to. They didn't want to distribute the songwriting credits amongst them, because there was a sense in which they were one creative unit" (Trist 2021). In time, Trist was able to persuade them to take that obligation seriously, and for later songs assigning authorship was no longer an obstacle, but even then, getting a band member to sit down and discuss the songs with Trist was "like pulling teeth,"

he noted. For the band, copyright registration was always just a formality; it was not part of their creative process, nor were the legal mechanics of documenting songs, from lyrics and music to even song titles.

That was why Trist had to handle documentation himself. For lyrics, occasionally Hunter might provide them, but just as often someone in the office would transcribe them from a recording, or leave it to Steve Schuster, whom Trist hired to do the lead sheets (Trist 2021). A friend and fellow traveler, Schuster had been a folkie with Garcia and Hunter and gone on to perform with several post-Jefferson Airplane ensembles. He had also earned a music degree, and his ability to transcribe music and understand his peers' work led to Quicksilver Messenger Service and the Airplane hiring him to do their lead sheets (Schuster 2021). He was a seasoned professional by the time Trist hired him, and he could turn a tape recording into a defensible lead sheet far better than a traditional music publisher.²

Part of his skill was understanding how to distill an improvisational performance into a copyrightable piece of music—and that meant that it was never a precise transcription. “If you write a lead sheet accurately,” Schuster explained, “time-wise and detail-wise, it’s useless. What you have to do is simplify the ideas ... the goal is to write the simplest form of the song melody and chords that is indisputably that song” (Schuster 2021). That is also why the band did not view lead sheets as anything more than acquittal of that legal function. “I don’t think anyone ever looked at the lead sheets,” Trist noted. And if the lead sheet had a mistake? “They couldn’t care less,” Trist emphasized. That fit with the band’s approach to working out arrangements, which they developed early in their career. Discussing the first album, Garcia explained that the “arrangements we’ve arrived at through playing the songs. That’s the natural way they go, the sum of us. We have never written out charts or made lead sheets or arranged parts for specific instruments, we’ve instead just, like, played it. And they’ve settled into arrangements” (Gleason 1969, 313).

That philosophy—that the songs, both lyrics and music, were separate entities from the documents that represented them—extended to the songbooks that Ice Nine began producing in 1973. The first one included the songs that comprised *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty*; the

second featured *Wake of the Flood*, *Mars Hotel*, and *Blues for Allah*; and in 1979, Ice Nine published the first anthology, which included transcriptions of all of the songs on every album through *Shakedown Street*. Band members did not weigh in on the scores or the words, although Hunter did approve the lyrics for *Blues for Allah*, which included the lyrics on the LP, a first for him (Dym and Alson 2009, 20).

That attitude was an extension of the philosophy they had developed in the Sixties. As Hunter noted, “the finished tune, as performed and finally recorded, is only one extreme of the songwriting phase. The song in the act of being formed and fitted is also part of the real song” (Hunter 1993, vi). That process continued in performance. “As Deadheads know, these songs are continuously growing and revealing themselves,” Barlow observed. “The songs revealed themselves over time, even to us” (Barlow 2005, 421). That refusal to fix a song—to reduce it to a single definitive instantiation—shows the degree to which the Dead understood the gulf between the work of art and the various means of recording it, whether tape or text.

Garcia made that point explicitly, and in terms that invoke the core of what scholars view as the aesthetics or philosophy of textual scholarship, when he discussed “the dissonance between the original version, the original flash as a composer.”

When a song comes into my head, it comes with a complete sound to it, a complete arrangement, a complete format and a complete *thing* more often than not, which represents my relationship to a personal vision. So, for me, comparing the record to the vision, I always feel that it fails. (Weitzman 1995, 120)

Yet that divide between original intention and subsequent instantiation is also what gave a song its own identity, a life that allowed it to continue to grow and evolve, born anew with every performance—and every listening. “With each interpretation,” Barlow explained, “the song becomes new again” (Barlow 2005, 419). And that is an axiom of textual theory, as Thomas Tanselle notes: “The execution of a statement never exhausts the potentiality of the ideas underlying it” (1989, 67). Textual theory addresses that indeterminacy as the philosophical foundation informing a very practical and real-world process that David C. Greetham calls the

“single great enterprise” of textual scholarship, broadly conceived as “a sequence from the discovery and enumeration of the text, to the history of its production as a physical artifact and a technical description of its concrete form, to its transcription and rendering into another medium (usually the modern typeset page or electronic storage), to its critical or non-critical editing, and its elucidation by annotation and commentary” (Greetham 1992, x). That philosophy, and those processes, help us approach the textual challenges of the Grateful Dead’s music, and that is the last part of this paper.

Tanselle’s 1989 *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* offers one of the most concise and enduring statements of textual theory. Although his focus is on written literary texts, he frames his analysis broadly, and explicitly includes musical compositions as part of why the issues in textual theory “are not simply the concern of specialists; they are of fundamental importance to all who read books, or attend lectures and plays, or listen to music” (Tanselle 1989, [9]). The Deadheads who spent countless hours deciphering lyrics and musing on their possible inspirations attest to his contention, but for Dead studies, what his argument offers is a way of approaching the dizzying array of artifacts that document the Dead’s music—and the problems they present—in a holistic framework:

Every verbal text, whether spoken or written down, is an attempt to convey a work. The preservation of the documents containing verbal texts, like the preservation of other artifacts, is a vital cultural activity. But the act of preserving such documents ... does not preserve works but only evidences of works. If, as readers, we are interested in the verbal works that their producers intended, we must constantly entertain the possibility of altering the texts we have inherited. Those texts, being reports of works, must be suspect ... The attempt to move closer to an intended form of a work, whether it occurs mentally in the process of reading or publicly in the production of a scholarly edition, is a historical exercise. (Tanselle 1989, 69)

Tanselle couches his argument in literary terms, but his broader effort is to differentiate between a work and its medium, which has particular relevance for music: “Messages may be inextricable from their

media,” he notes, “but the medium of literature and other pieces of verbal communication is language, not paper and ink” (Tanselle 1989, 40).

That informs his analysis of the great application of textual theory, which is the preparation of published texts. What he says there remains relevant today, more than thirty years later, and it helps frame the specific challenges that the Dead’s music presents. Those can be posed as two related questions: what constitutes an authoritative text of a Grateful Dead song? And more generally, how does textual theory help us better understand those songs as texts?

“New Potato Caboose” clarifies the first question. Textual critics would say that Lesh’s manuscript is, in fact, the originary historical work for the lyrics: given that no version in Petersen’s hand is known to survive, the manuscript that Lesh gave to McKernan, likely for him to learn as the band rehearsed the song, represents as close to an original source as we are likely to find.³ It establishes an anchor for the chain of textual variants and corruptions that crept in afterwards, from the lead sheet that first recorded different words to the studio and live recordings that obscured the words to the later published texts that reproduced those textual corruptions and compounded them with equally imprecise, even erroneous, musical scores.

Textual theory charges scholars with the duty to trace every step in that genealogy, including the ways that those songs evolved in performance over time. As Tanselle puts it, “The way one threads a path through these uncertainties—to arrive at a defensible reconstruction of the text of a work of literature—depends on the position one takes regarding two questions: what agency is responsible for the production of a work, and what point is the most significant in its history” (Tanselle 1989, 73).

For the Dead, whose approach embraced improvisation and courted variants, the second question is the rub. But that is where textual theory offers more than just utility: once we accept the philosophical position that “every verbal work must be reconstructed, no text of any such work is ever definitive,” as textual theory holds, then the Dead’s belief in the preeminence of the moment of performance not only makes sense, but it is a belief that connects their work to the wellsprings of all art, literature, and music.

Critics of that view could rightly point out that textual theory is also ultimately about pragmatics, not just philosophy. So what does all of this mean for scholars and listeners? Given the textual history of the band's music, does that suggest that the problems exposed by the messy trajectory of the Dead's songs are somehow a reflection of the caliber of their work or an indictment of their standards, especially given how haphazard their recordkeeping practices were? And for us, does that mean that the attempt to study the band's art is forever hamstrung by its status as mere popular music that lacks a strong evidentiary foundation?

The answer to all of these questions is no. The history of textual studies offers abundant examples of all of these issues bedeviling many artists—and their legacies. The band's files were business records, not an artist's papers or a literary archive. Moreover, history is littered with great artists who were equally cavalier about documenting their process, from Fitzgerald ignoring an editor's queries and rewriting *The Great Gatsby* in galley proofs to Faulkner tossing a day's work on Phil Stone's floor to Virginia Woolf methodically destroying earlier drafts. Nor is Dead studies unique: fifty years ago, textual scholars complained that “a respect for good texts of modern authors has too rarely been seen by literary critics and scholars” of even major figures—including Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Woolf (Halpenny 1972, 6). But rather than focus on the universality of these problems, the better way to frame them might be to invoke history itself: discussing “the lack of attention given to reliable twentieth-century texts,” one scholar noted that “authors achieve only with time the status that makes their every work a subject for close scrutiny, and they have also usually achieved, and indeed should achieve, much other study before the quality of their texts becomes a crucial and a possible concern” (Halpenny 1972, 7).

Scholars can argue about when that time arrived for the Dead, but for Dead studies, the work of the Grateful Dead Studies Association makes it clear that the discourse has reached that milestone. Skeptics may scoff, but already that work makes clear that textual theory is not only useful for Grateful Dead studies on several levels, both practically and theoretically, it is also necessary—even fundamental. Ultimately, what textual theory provides is a way of approaching the fluidity of the band's

music. For textual theorists, that fluidity is analogous to indeterminacy, the central concern of textual studies since its inception, both as a practical matter and as a theoretical concern. Indeterminacy is a function of time and technology in the case of classical texts, and it is a byproduct and necessary implication of art, artists, and the technology of printing for later works, especially for nineteenth and twentieth-century texts.

But indeterminacy is an explicit and vital core of the Dead's work, and it needs to be addressed in the scholarship on the band; textual theory offers a well-developed and robust methodology for doing so. That theory does not resolve the problem of indeterminacy, just as it does not reduce the potential for deep readings or obviate the search for meaning: it simply provides a way of discussing these issues. And that in turn also clarifies other evidentiary issues scholars studying the Dead face, most centrally the archival challenges of Dead studies.

That is a larger topic, but there is an important dimension of textual theory that merits mention here: incorporating that theoretical approach in Dead studies will also make that work more accessible, and sensible, to the rest of the academy. That is a central part of the mission of the Grateful Dead Studies Association, but the implications go deeper. Ultimately, recognizing the place of textual studies in Grateful Dead scholarship is a fundamental expression of the field's willingness to take seriously the band's work, *and* itself as well. And that is an acknowledgment of the enduring significance of the Dead's music—not just historically and culturally, but artistically and critically.

NOTES

An early version of this essay was given at the Popular/American Culture Association conference, online, April 13, 2022. Thanks to the audience for their questions and comments, and particular thanks to the two anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions, and to Jay Williams for his insights on textual theory.

1. According to his ex-wife, Petersen and his family moved to Mt. Hermon, a small unincorporated town in the Santa Cruz mountains, in 1965 or 1966 (Matthews 2014).

2. See Crowley (2022) for additional discussion of Schuster's work.
3. According to the current owner, the manuscript was part of a cache of McKernan materials held by his sister. Analysis of the scan, confirmed by follow-up discussion with the current owner, proved that it was folded, as if it were used in rehearsal, possibly tucked in a notebook or pants pocket and likely placed on top of McKernan's keyboard while the band was rehearsing the song. I am indebted to Jesse Jarnow for confirming the details of the manuscript condition and corroborating the original owner's description.

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