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Robert Hunter's Prose Debut: "Starship 'Grateful Dead'"

CHRISTOPHER K. COFFMAN

Robert Hunter's talents as a songwriter are widely recognized and rightly celebrated, but his success as a lyricist tends to draw attention away from the poetry and creative prose to which he also gave substantial energy, time, and attention. These publications are an essential component of his oeuvre and warrant study by readers interested in avant-garde and post-Beat literature, not just Grateful Dead fans. The most substantial examples of Hunter's printed work appeared in the late 1980s and 1990s, although earlier instances are by no means lacking, if one knows where to look. Significant bibliographic work on these scattered and irregular pieces has been undertaken by the community of Grateful Dead scholars, and the short texts by Hunter published in the *Dead Heads* newsletter, beginning in 1972, have generally been acknowledged as the earliest instances of his writings for print. To the extent that this is the case, we might regard Hunter's success as a published author as temporally secondary, lagging some years behind his explosive late-1960s emergence and development as a lyricist.

Yet, a text has recently come to light that Hunter acknowledged as his first print publication, one that predates the earliest *Dead Heads* contributions by three years.¹ This short work, "Starship 'Grateful Dead,' An Instruction Manual," brings the date of his first print publication to the period during which his songwriting began to gain attention and therefore encourages us to reconsider prior assumptions about Hunter's development as an author and the implications of the history of his print publications for our thinking about his songwriting.

Credit for preserving a copy and identifying the significance of “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” must be given to two Bay Area brothers, William and Paul Jacobs. Paul purchased a copy of the issue of the periodical in which the piece appeared upon its release in 1969. In 1990, he showed the issue to Hunter at a Bay Area reading, who confirmed the authenticity of the text, telling Jacobs that it was his first print publication (Jacobs 2020). Surviving copies of the issue corroborate the Jacobs’ discovery, and I am tremendously grateful to Paul for his time and conversation, and to William for bringing the piece to my attention in the first place.

It is in some senses entirely appropriate that “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” remained unknown to scholars until now: although Hunter was a productive writer even as a youth, broader awareness of that aspect of his identity was hindered by the fact that he initially composed behind something of a veil. Still, his first projects developed quite early: Dennis McNally mentions a “novel that [Hunter] began to write at eleven” (i.e., about 1952), and his songwriting stretches back at least as far as the very early 1960s, as the dating of his first composition with Jerry Garcia, “Black Cat,” demonstrates (McNally 2002, 26; 32). The relative obscurity that characterized Hunter’s earliest work continued even when he began composing songs for the Grateful Dead: “Alligator,” “China Cat Sunflower,” and “Saint Stephen,” rather than being written in the Haight, were mailed to Garcia from New Mexico, where Hunter had moved in April 1967 (Jackson 1999, 134–135). Furthermore, the lyrics for those pieces spent a fairly long time in germination and revision before he shared them, as he remarked when discussing “Saint Stephen” in an interview (Tamarkin 2009, 74). When Hunter returned to the Bay Area in late 1967, conditions were different: his confidence as a lyricist appears to have grown, and the band was ready for his talents, too. Listeners thus heard Hunter’s words, by the close of 1970, not only on “Alligator” but also on “The Eleven,” “Dark Star,” every song on both *Aoxomoxoa* and *Workingman’s Dead*, and all but one song on *American Beauty*.

The publication date of “Starship ‘Grateful Dead,’” then, positions Hunter’s debut as a published writer in the period during which he composed many of his best-regarded lyrics. The piece originally appeared

in the *San Francisco Oracle of the Spiritual Revolution* in 1969. That paper was something of a successor to the earlier and better known *San Francisco Oracle* (aka *The Oracle of the City of San Francisco*), a Haight-Ashbury effort largely edited by Allen Cohen that had folded in late 1968. This later *Oracle* was edited by Phillip Davenport and headquartered in Larkspur at 160 Magnolia Avenue—less than a mile from the house at 271 Madrone that Hunter and Garcia shared beginning in early 1969 (McNally 2002, 301). The paper published seven issues, from late 1968 to late 1969, and, although its focus tended to the more mystical than the *San Francisco Oracle*, it continued its predecessor's design aesthetic, presenting colorful psychedelic art with interviews and texts by hip cognoscenti. Hunter's text suggests more than just a neighborhood connection, however: both the tone and content, as well as its graphic presentation, show that in 1969, the Dead were still actively engaged with the Bay Area underground. For scholars, the piece also attests to a higher level of involvement on Hunter's part with underground print publications than previously known, and it also speaks to Hunter's reputation as a writer, not just a lyricist, at least locally.

As interesting as "Starship 'Grateful Dead'" is on its own merits, its original presentation speaks to that integration of the Dead with the broader Bay Area scene. A full-page ad for a Don Cooper album on Roulette records faces it, with a drawing by Doyle Wegner entitled "Mr. Immortal" on the same page, along with advertisements for hip clothing store The Bare Necessity, Larkspur Dry Cleaners, the Print Shop in San Rafael, an herb and coffee shop-cum-gallery in the Haight called The Root of Scarcity, and Everybody's Natural Foods, a San Anselmo organic food store. While most of the art and text in the issue are in black ink, the typed text often cedes to reproductions of stylized handwriting, and yellow, blue, green, and red inks are employed at points. In the case of Hunter's piece, the title is in handwritten script and printed in red, while the text is in black typescript. The lead article for the issue is an interview with former Avalon Ballroom impresario Chet Helms; a centerfold spread is given over to an image by renowned poster artist Eduardo Arderi; and, a full-page advertisement and ticket order form for the "Woodstock Music & Art Fair" are included in Section II.

A close reading of Hunter's piece suggests only oblique connections to the Grateful Dead in their familiar roles as musicians, instead positioning the band as metaphorical communicants in an interplanetary consciousness-expansion program. In that light, "Starship 'Grateful Dead'" very much fits the bill in terms of the 1960s-countercultural interest in science fiction and mysticism, both of which combine in this text with Hunter's preoccupation with the muse and altered mental states. Hunter later elaborated on this interest in an interview with Steve Silberman: "I know Muse is unfashionable now, but I think if people knew *what* it was, they couldn't throw it out. It's an informing joy in creation, in which one's verbal flow spills over the page with a great deal of ease and pleasure." And he credits William S. Burroughs for the proper mental state for such inspiration: "Burroughs has said something about, 'A writer's business is to make his mind absolutely blank'" (Silberman 1992, 7).² In "Starship 'Grateful Dead,'" the muse's message is presented not as the song of a goddess, but as a transmission from superlunary sources, who send encrypted code to earth-based receivers capable of translating the signal into terms meaningful to other humans. The stuttering near the start of the text, which moves from the multi-lingual and attention-grabbing "en" to the German "hoch" to the Latin "tutem" to the mysterious, and perhaps truncated, "eteio," suggests a long heritage of transmissions to a variety of earthly intermediaries to whose receptors the procedure must be calibrated (Hunter 1969, 9).

After settling on English as the language of choice, Hunter offers four lines of verse, presumably acknowledging the place of poetry in the history of muse-inspired writing, "Here beneath the summer skys lay dreaming / I a wand and you a maiden blowing / reel beneath the fragrance of the orchids / awake unto the fantasy beginning." Yet, the passage is more than just a nod to the poetic tradition: the initial line of the piece situates it immediately in relation to a literary text closely tied to altered states of consciousness in the late-1960s countercultural imagination, the Alice books of Lewis Carroll. In this case, Hunter's "Here beneath the summer skys lay dreaming" echoes Carroll's "A Boat, Beneath a Sunny Sky," the poem that closes *Through the Looking Glass*, and begins, "A boat beneath a sunny sky / Lingerin onward dreamily

....” Carroll’s piece is a famous acrostic, spelling with the first letters of each of its lines the name of the little girl who inspired the Wonderland books, Alice Pleasance Liddell (Carroll 2001, 200). Even if we set aside the Jefferson Airplane’s Carroll-inspired “White Rabbit” and The Beatles’s “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (with its “picture yourself in a boat on a river” and its own acrostic puzzle), Hunter’s nod to Carroll’s Alice situates his piece in relation to the history of the Grateful Dead and LSD via the band’s 1966 composition “Alice D Millionaire,” which was not only inspired by an article about Owsley’s arrest, but likely debuted on October 6, 1966, the day that California’s law prohibiting possession of LSD went into effect. Intriguingly, that performance was part of the Love Pageant Rally, which was the focus of the first issue of the original *Oracle*. In this sense, Hunter’s piece closes something of a circle between the Grateful Dead and the *Oracle* (Trist and Dodd 2005, 28n).

While Carroll and his place in relation to late-1960s psychedelic rock are useful referents for Hunter’s text, Burroughs appears to be its presiding spirit. Burroughs anticipates Hunter’s use of speculative fiction in several ways. For instance, Burroughs’s *Nova Express*, among his most science-fictional texts, was published only five years prior to “Starship ‘Grateful Dead,’” and likewise enmeshes humans in a web of obscure interplanetary agents and coded language. In developing his conception of space as a setting for fiction, Burroughs would later elaborate in various ways on connections between two different senses of the term: that of space as a dimensional counterpart to time and that of space as the extra-planetary outer void. Both senses pertain in Hunter’s piece, and in ways that Burroughs shares. As he writes in *The Adding Machine*, “man is an artifact designed for space travel,” and “What you experience in dreams and out of the body trips, what you glimpse in the work of writers and painters, is the promised land of space” (Burroughs 1986, 85; 104). As Alex Houen has argued, Burroughs’s two senses of space are intimately connected: “Burroughs is concerned with relating at least two notions of space as an ‘outer’ space: the first being a matter of interplanetary space programmes; the second being a space of alternative perception which involves ‘seeing time from outside time.’ This latter form, which Burroughs likens to the simultaneity of a ‘market,’ is the launching pad

from which he proceeds to explore the interplanetary” (Houen 2006, 524). In this sense, those science-fictional novels Burroughs produced in the 1960s modeled the same sort of shuttling between explorations of inner space and of outer space on display in this piece by Hunter.

At a more granular level, there are a few points of expression that Hunter seems to owe to Burroughs. Perhaps most striking is the phrase that Hunter’s aliens use to remind their audience of the potential loss of metaphysical privileges: “A word to the wise is sufficient” (Hunter 1969, 6). The clause closely resembles the concluding words of Burroughs’s 1960 introduction to *Naked Lunch*, which couches his advice on opiate use as “A word to the wise guy” (Burroughs 2001, 210); Burroughs was enamored enough of the phrase to revisit it in the title of an essay collected in his *The Adding Machine* in the mid-1980s.

Additional intertextual similarities abound, ranging from plot points to matters of figurative expression. For Burroughs, inimical alien forces operate primarily through language, which traps humans in false space-time frameworks of understanding. As he writes in *Nova Express*, “What scared you into time? Into body? ... I will tell you, ‘the word.’ ... ‘The’ word of Alien Enemy imprisons ‘thee’ in Time. In body” (Burroughs 1964, 4). Burroughs develops the point by describing language as working on humans like a virus, self-replicating and corrupting our metaphysical and political awareness. In *The Ticket that Exploded*, he describes that parasitism:

The ‘Other Half’ is the word ... Word is an organism ... The ‘Other Half’ worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the lungs. The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. (Burroughs 1967, 49)

While the spirit of the text changes somewhat, Hunter follows Burroughs by using viral figures, as in the passage, “If you think of how the flu strikes over the course of a year, you will see the nature of your intolerability. You are a fever that will continue or break” (Hunter 1969, 6). Taken together, Hunter’s union of space travel, mental recalibration via recognition and

experience of alternate time-space formulations, and contagion strongly resembles the work Burroughs was publishing in the decade preceding “Starship ‘Grateful Dead.’”

This is not to say, however, that Hunter’s work is merely derivative: the messages sent by Hunter’s aliens are not mechanisms of hostile control and pollution, as are those of Burroughs. Instead, Hunter’s messages are oriented to advancing human consciousness, via the medium of the Grateful Dead. Here, Hunter envisages the Grateful Dead as something like Burrough’s Nova Police, or, more practically, like the cut-up and fold-in methods of aleatory composition Burroughs developed: those processes remove language and thought from their usual contexts and thus possibly liberate readers by revealing technologies of power and promoting possibilities for growth.

Hunter’s piece also marks a significant intersection between his songwriting and his other creative work. “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” is one of several texts in Hunter’s oeuvre that ponder the nature of the Grateful Dead experience. His poetry from the 1980s and 1990s offers a number of interesting intersections between his printed publications and his identity as a lyricist for the band: phrases very like those of certain Hunter / Garcia songs appear in his translations of poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, and some of his poetry addresses the Grateful Dead phenomenon, as does his aborted screenplay. One point at which “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” fairly directly overlaps with Hunter’s songwriting for the band is the phrase “Cortical 5.” Here, that is the intended destination of the titular starship, yet in the Appendix to Hunter’s collected lyrics, it appears as the title of an unrecorded song (1993, 338). In both cases, the phrase is presumably a reference to the receptors in the human nervous system that hallucinogens most powerfully tap—the 5-HT cortical receptors for serotonin—and a further component of Hunter’s Burroughs-style conflation of psychonaut and astronaut.

Hunter’s note on the song “Cortical Five,” however, provides another and significantly more intriguing point, one that contributes to a sense of a shadow history of the Grateful Dead that runs parallel to the usual narratives about their turn to American-roots songwriting as the 1960s became the 1970s. “Cortical Five,” Hunter writes, “was written

in 1970, to music by Garcia, for an album that never materialized, to be titled *Planet Earth Rock & Roll Orchestra* The project evaporated under the pressures of the day, but the impetus set the ball rolling for a metamorphosis into Kantner's counter culture classic *Blows Against the Empire*" (Hunter 1993, 338). The recordings to which Hunter here refers were produced by an all-star gathering of the leading lights of the San Francisco rock scene, known to fans as the PERRO sessions. Knowing that some of Hunter's unrecorded material would be considered for the PERRO sessions reveals that members of the Grateful Dead were not only players during the earliest of those gatherings, but also bringing new songs to the table from the beginning. However, it seems Hunter may have the date wrong: the sessions did indeed begin yielding records in 1970, but the composition of "Cortical Five" seems likely to have been a few years earlier.

Dennis McNally's collection of interviews with Garcia, *Jerry on Jerry*, reproduces part of a manuscript page that lists ten songs, including "Cortical 5," in two columns. In the first column is the familiar sequence of "Dark Star," "St. Stephen," and "11." Some of the song titles in the second are a bit more mysterious: "Clementine," "What's Become of the Baby," "Dum De Doodly Do," "China Cat Sunflower," "Impatient Man," "Cortical 5," and "Eagle Mall" (McNally 2015, 199). The caption for the image labels it a set list, but, as Jesse Jarnow (2019) has argued, it seems more likely a speculative draft of a potential album's track list. Presumably, given the song titles, this is a potential sequence of pieces for *Earthquake Country*. This evidence therefore suggests that "Cortical Five" actually predates the recording of *Aoxomoxoa*, which began in 1968. The song list also reveals that the Grateful Dead were (or at least Garcia was) considering recording Hunter's "Eagle Mall" suite, whose composition Hunter dates to 1968 or 1969 (Hunter 1993, 299). If we accept that "Cortical Five" and "Eagle Mall" were available and under consideration as Grateful Dead songs as early as mid-1968, and were therefore followed roughly a year later by "Starship 'Grateful Dead,'" we can see that Hunter applied himself to composing science-fictional pieces from at least 1968 (or earlier, if we want to include "Dark Star" as part of the progression) through the PERRO sessions of 1970.

Furthermore, the connections of plot, character, and setting among the “Eagle Mall” suite (ca. 1968), the “Terrapin Station” suite (1977), the additional material for the “Terrapin” suite included on Hunter’s *Jack O’Roses* (1980), Hunter’s unpublished novel *The Giant’s Harp*, first fully drafted in 1986, and the additional material for the “Terrapin Station” suite published in the early 1990s in *A Box of Rain*, indicate a decades-long engagement on his part with the sort of fantastic elements that shape “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” (Hunter 1996). So, rather than seeing the more exotic aspects of “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” in isolation, as only part of a one-off oddity from a young writer, context illuminates an ongoing preoccupation with this sort of material by Hunter, as well as periodic engagements with it by the Grateful Dead, beginning even as they were carving out the elements of their identity as performers of American folk-rock in preparation for *Workingman’s Dead*.

Finally, we might also think of “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” as an element in building Hunter’s reputation and repertoire as an author within the Grateful Dead circle. When considered alongside the work of other Grateful Dead songwriters such as Robert M. Petersen, whose place in the world of print took shape earlier than Hunter’s is usually understood to have done, “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” stands out. Petersen was a strong poet in a particular vein, but he was surely not going to produce anything so fantastical as Hunter offers here. In that sense, the sort of material with which Hunter deals in this text would have offered him an unclaimed foothold in the world of writing about, and for, the Grateful Dead. Hunter may not unseat Petersen as an earlier-accomplished compatriot, but “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” does mitigate the distance between the two. Finally, the text encourages us to view the diversity of Hunter’s early songwriting—from the earthy blues of “Alligator” to the deep (inner) space of “Dark Star” to the delicate Anglo-folk of “Mountains of the Moon”—less as evidence of an ephebe trying to find his voice, and more as the increasingly confident expression of a talent spreading its wings in several directions at once.

For readers, “Starship ‘Grateful Dead’” offers rich possibilities for recalibrating our understanding of Hunter’s career as a published author. The essay also serves as a strong instance of an intermediation between

the Grateful Dead and various trends in the broader counterculture, notably its debt to experimental science fiction. Furthermore, it is another contribution to considerations of Hunter's work in print in relation to his work as a lyricist. It may be the case that, as print publication became a more viable option for Hunter's projects that were less than perfectly suited to psychedelic rock and roll lyrics, the Grateful Dead were increasingly positioned to profit from a coherent and consistent body of work from the pen of Garcia's primary songwriting partner. For scholars, "Starship 'Grateful Dead'" also indicates the pressing need for ongoing bibliographic efforts, for Hunter was prolific in the three years between this piece and the poems of the early *Dead Heads* newsletters; perhaps there are more unrecognized Hunter texts hidden in the underground publications and ephemera of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Notes

1. An intriguing intersection between "Starship 'Grateful Dead'" and the first poem Hunter published in the *Dead Heads* newsletters is that both texts misspell "impedance" as "impedence" (cf. Hunter 2020, 74).
2. The idea from William S. Burroughs that Hunter mentions is something Burroughs discusses with some regularity; see, for example, his July 22, 1976, lecture at Naropa University (Burroughs 1976).

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