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"To Shed Light and Not to Master": Paratext and Perspective in Robert Hunter's *The Giant's Harp*

JACOB WAYNE RUNNER

Released on Robert Hunter's website in 1996, *The Giant's Harp* is the only longform prose novel published by the Grateful Dead lyricist. On the final page of the text alongside the copyright information, there is the following dedication: "*in memory of JJG | November 1, 1996*" (italics in original). JJG is, of course, Jerome John Garcia, Hunter's friend and creative partner; below that, the colophon offers: "1984 – 1996 | © 1996 by Robert Hunter | Copying for personal use or private circulation only" (Hunter 1996, 188). Both the dedication and the colophon are revealing, especially the dates of the text's production as well as its initial release, as scholars have begun to explore (Jarnow 2019). My intention here, however, is to lay out an internal approach to *The Giant's Harp*, drawing on the notion of "paratext" and the "Horizon of Expectations" from the critical literary apparatus of Gérard Genette (1997; 1980; 1988) and Hans Robert Jauss (1982).

This conceptual framework requires a brief personal introduction, which offers both experiential and contextual bearing on the subject and reflects the argument that literary research is invariably tied into our own subjectivities. Moreover, in the case of *The Giant's Harp*, ignoring subjective perceptions can be misleading, discounting the text's reliance on the reader's individual experience. This essay draws on my own academic background in comparative literature, semiotic theory, and second language acquisition, working specifically with historical English, Japanese, and Latin. That approach also draws on my own experience: I have lived

outside of the United States for virtually all of my adult life, making the majority of my interactions with the Grateful Dead phenomenon far removed from its immediate contexts.

Assessing the narratorial perspective of *The Giant's Harp* and the deliberately playful semiotic destabilization at work in the text requires a brief survey of the notions of "paratext" and "Horizon of Expectations." Paratextual features are those elements that surround a "main text," such as the front and back matter of a book or the cover/art direction. The paratext also encompasses more abstract elements such as the title and authorial information, as Genette notes:

> More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is rather a *threshold*, or—a word Borges used apropos of a preface—a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text) an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." (Genette 1997, 1–2; cf. Lejeune 1975, 45)

Paratext not only encompasses all of the different facets that go into priming readers for their interactions with the text but all of those elements that mediate their perceptions of it.

Those facets and elements are not static, as Genette notes: "The ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition, with varying degrees of pressure" (1997, 3). As a concept, then, paratext is not easily disconnected from the reception aesthetic idea of a preconceptive "Horizon of Expectations," which can be defined as:

> The shared 'mental set' or framework within which those of a particular generation in a culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text or an artwork. This includes textual knowledge of conventions and expectations (e.g. regarding genre and style), and social knowledge (e.g. of moral codes)." (Chandler and Munday 2011, *s.v.* "horizon of expectations"; Jauss 1982)

These two concepts are particularly useful for a stylistic assessment of *The Giant's Harp*, especially its narratorial perspectives and its specific presentations of semiotic function. More broadly, paratext and the horizon of expectations have significant bearing on Hunter's text in a fundamental sense.

For a contemporary novel, the paratext of *The Giant's Harp* is somewhat peculiar. On one hand, it has no cover, no art, no binding, and in fact no traditional physicality whatsoever—although, as a PDF, it can be easily printed. Presaging, as it were, the screen-centricity that is now characteristic of much present-day media , the novel has only ever existed as a file uploaded by Hunter to his website.[1] Yet on the other hand, the authorial name of Robert Hunter, as well as the dedication to Jerry Garcia, carry immense paratextual and symbolic weight for certain audiences. The simple fact that Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter penned the text is meaningful to Deadheads, an association that colors any perceptions they receive from the narrative and that they produce as part of their individual readings.

Compounding this paratextual situation is the fact that, in in terms of their horizon of expectations, virtually no reader engages *The Giant's Harp* with a blank slate. Given the text's author and its online publication, the overwhelming majority of the text's audience are likely to be Deadheads, and probably fairly enthusiastic ones. Those who have taken the time to access and read the text are, in all likelihood, readers who are not evaluating the text in isolation, engaging it purely on its own terms. Instead, their engagement has been primed by pre-existing knowledge that heavily impacts their reading. That knowledge is more than just shared common information; indeed, what is fascinating is that such knowledge is not merely a metonymic "mode of signification wherein the part stands for the whole […] a situation in which a text or version is enriched by an unspoken context that dwarfs the textual artifact" (Foley 1991, 7). To a considerably greater degree than with many other texts, each reader comes to *The Giant's Harp* with a subjective and diverse array of semiotic pre-conditionings, associations, and cosmic understandings tied into specific signifying words, imagery, and thematic components that are encountered across Hunter's writings and specifically in the "Terrapin Station" song suite.

These elements include Terrapins (both a mythical living entity and the name of the town that serves as the primary setting), a Storyteller, a Lady throwing a fan, singing crickets and cicadas, and so forth. All of the perceptions that a reader produces as part of their reading of the text are thus filtered through the lens of their own personal "headcanon" formed out of repeated listens to and experiences with the song suite. The imagery and pre-existing associations partially occlude the text as its own independent entity, and indeed, the reading of *The Giant's Harp* in turn impacts any subsequent interactions with the music and lyrics. Hunter's novel cleverly plays off all of these charged signifiers in ways that are captivating both narratively and stylistically.

The novel's third-person narrative voice fits the paradigm Genette terms "heterodiegetic voice." Narrative level or distance fluctuates between "extradiegesis" and "intradiegesis," meaning that the narration itself alternates between positions external and internal to the narrative. Descriptive passages about characters and events are external (extradiegesis), but reported speech dialogue that is spoken, as well as lyrics to songs sung by different characters, take place from within the narrative (intradiegesis). The opening lines of the novel neatly exemplify both the narratorial voice and the level/distance:

> "Listen son. Hear her?" R o clenched Elmo's wrist as they leaned over the ledge of the Giant's Harp, looking through layers of cloud and mirage at the faraway beach below. (Hunter 1996, 1)

In and of themselves, these features are not exceptional. However, narration in *The Giant's Harp* gets slightly more unusual and intriguing in other places, where these borders are destabilized and made less than perfectly clear. For example, in Chapter 2, the character Elmo listens to "a ballad of ancient Terrapin" about the gods that is being sung the Schula Isa, but that Elmo already knows as "familiar from the tellings of Aeoui [the Storyteller]" (Hunter 1996, 10). Following that framing information and a line break that divides the narration, the reader is presented with an extended series of passages, beginning with:

> Yu was father to all gods but one. Ist was half mortal, daughter of Bran, a giant shepherd of land whales. Her mother, File, was the

> youngest daughter of Yu. She had discovered the giant drifting in the sea, an island to all appearances.
>
> It seems that after searching the Earth for hundreds of years, seeking others of his giant race and finding none, Bran gave way to despair, left his herd of land whales, and plunged into the sea where he floated unconscious and dreamless. File discovered the giant, fell in love with his handsome countenance, and did her best to awaken him by dancing on his breast while singing the same song with endless variations for a hundred years.
>
> Wake my love and come to me
> Wake my love and follow
> I will sing to thee today
> And thou to me tomorrow
> alalee alala alaloo

Three more sung stanzas follow before the text returns to third-person narration:

> Before the birth of Ist, Yu was content ruling over the gods, a respected parent. But Ist was stubborn, willful, insolent, beautiful, vain, and gifted with music earthly and divine.
>
> She made Yu unhappy. […]

The conclusion of the passage displays further shifting:

> It happened, sang the Schula, life was so interesting on Earth that Yu recovered his former good cheer. In the hundredth year of his wanderings, he discovered the oldest of his creatures, one long lost to him, created even before the gods to whom was given the task of building Earth upon a foundation of mud heaved up from the dark ocean between the stars. The dark ocean was the mother of Yu, who had no father.
>
> This oldest of creatures was the very friend Yu had created for company while still a child, tired of wandering the skies alone—the very Terrapin who helped the children of Yu to build Earth, carrying upon his broad back whatever the gods designed and wished to place there: trees, sand, the many living things they had made in their shops and petitioned Yu to breathe life into.
>
> The song was becoming repetitious. Elmo did not hear the end of the tale. (Hunter 1996, 10–11)

The narration throughout this excerpt does not simply slide between internal and external diegesis, it rather melts across them, even manifesting both simultaneously. Surely the lines presented as reported speech-sung lyrics are meant to be understood as part of Isa's song, but it is also clearly intimated that the narrativized portions are as well ("the moral of the Schula's song avowed"; "as the Schula suggested"; "It happened, sang the Schula"). Is everything in this segment part of Isa's song, or are parts of it Elmo's personal background knowledge from Aeoui's tellings? Yes. Rather than an either/or, the position of both/and might be more characteristic not just of the scene, but also of the text in general and its narrative viewpoints.

The novel is equally tricky to pin down in terms of focalization. At times the narrator seems omniscient—what Genette terms "zero focalization" (1980, 189–194)—but just as frequently the text reads as focalized through its different characters. The narration adopts their individual perspective, going only as far as what they know (internal focalization), or even less that what they may know in a deliberately limiting manner (external focalization). Such shifts between omniscience and character perspective are also neither uniform nor stable. They can occur with changing scenes or imbedded narratives, but also from character to character as part of scenes, as seen in the extract above.

Composition teachers may warn against such rampant instability in writing, and David Emerson and Janet Brennan Croft have criticized the novel for "perhaps too many storylines going on at once; themes that initially seem important trail off into nothing; and there are pacing issues with long sequences that turn out to be unimportant to the story in the end" (2020, 6). Yet these instabilities and imbalances can be seen as an inextricable part of the text, and indeed, they produce one of its central effects. Critics may debate whether they are a bug or a feature, but these aspects can be seen as a harmonious aspect of the novel, entirely in keeping with the text's overall gestalt. They not only play off the text's overarching theme of knowability, they also play directly into the aspect of its cast of characters.

As Emerson and Croft also highlight, *The Giant's Harp* is very much "an ensemble piece" (2020, 3). There is no primary main character, and one effective means of providing conceptual access is in terms of the

divinatory/reflective function of Tarot cards. While the novel does not utterly forego more realistic/Realist varieties of characterization, by and large the characters come across as deliberately less specific and individual, and more "figural" in a manner that is more routinely encountered in earlier literary periods and genres, but which has largely fallen out of favor with present-day aesthetic tastes.[2] While we are given named individuals, the text also presents the characters as epitomistic figures, such as the Storyteller, the Astronomer, the Demigoddess, and so forth. Rather like the Sailor and Soldier in "Lady with a Fan," Hunter's etching of patterned and flexibly loose archetypes renders the novel's characters ripe for subjective projection much in the manner of Tarot cards. The reader is invited, if not effectively obliged, to map their own personal meanings onto those figures.

If an individual's familiarity and subjective preconditioning can butt heads with *The Giant's Harp*'s themes and imagery, the onus is on the reader to reconcile the two. Readers familiar with Hunter's lyrics have the prerogative of aligning their readings with that body of work, especially the allied song suites. Perceived discord is no less valid a reading than discovered harmony. Further, what makes this doubly compelling is the text's own purposeful probing of these same topics. A unifying theme in the novel is the notion of belief as opposed to knowledge, specifically tied into the issues of knowability and unknowability. This allows us to explore the ways that *The Giant's Harp* consciously questions and strives to destabilize these binaries.

One prominent way the text achieves this effect is through semiotic explorations and deconstructions. Different forms of communication—dialogue, storytelling, singing, reading, writing, and so forth—act as major motifs in the novel, and language itself plays a constitutive function. Words create reality in Terrapin, a place where literacy arouses suspicion: "Literacy in these parts had all the status of a contagious disease" (Hunter 1996, 100). Secret and ancient languages abound, songs take on physical forms, fire speaks, but by far the clearest illustration of this theme is that of the character Jabajaba. A traveler, Jabajaba ventures to Terrapin from far across the desert in order to study and decode the symbols inscribed on the monolith that the residents of Terrapin call the Giant's Harp, but which

he knows as the Eagle Mall(!). Semiotic processing and destabilization are such defining parts of Jabajaba's characterization and identity that they prompt another character to remark, "It's . . . your name! I'm sorry, but it always makes me think of gibber-gibber, and you do spend all your time with gibberish . . . oh, please excuse me" (Hunter 1996, 89).

Jabajaba works at deciphering the Giant's Harp, where he discovers, in its ringed aisles, "[e]ight rays display[ing] eight distinct varieties of script: cuneiform, pictograph, alphabet, rune, hieroglyph, cursive, one that looked like worms and broken twigs with dangling berries and another resembling a network of mazes," as well as "swarms of tiny footprints in sand, headed Northwest" (Hunter 1996, 62; 81).[3] Undaunted, Jabajaba receives hints and different forms of guidance until finally he is able to decode the symbols on the Northwest Aisle: "Aeoui had compared the script to terrapin tracks […] Or was it bird tracks he'd called them?" (Hunter 1996, 157). The signs had remained mysterious until they became a message, intended only for Jabajaba, at specifically the right moment.

That revelation, and Jabajaba's character arc, offer a tidy encapsulation of the novel, but that is only one interpretation, as the text itself makes clear. The insistence on a reader's subjective engagement opens the possibility for multiplicity, whether in terms of thematic resonance, allusion, or synecdoche. There are myriad points in the text that stimulate an array of such potential readings. My own subjective preconditioning and identity management orient me toward the figural character of Jabajaba, a bookish type deeply invested in the study of dead languages and scripts. However, I think that is precisely Hunter's point, and a powerful functional mechanism of the text. Through its pointed contradiction with audience expectations, semiotic destabilization, and stylistic openendedness, *The Giant's Harp* does not present the reader with a skeleton key that smoothly unlocks the esoteric meanings of Robert Hunter's writings. Rather, the novel itself works more paradoxically, along the lines of the enigmatic monolith that is central to its plot. Each reader encounters their own symbol-encrusted and semiotically potent Giant's Harp, with elements that feel at once both familiar and alien. They are invited to decode its symbols, and to encode their own meanings in the process. Hunter suggests as much when he writes, "The test was whether or not

a coherent story could be read from, *or into*, the writing" (Hunter 1996, 103; emphasis mine). After all, as the narrator explains in "Lady With a Fan," the job of the storyteller is "to shed light / and not to master."

Notes

I am grateful to Christopher K. Coffman for further perspective and comments offered on the subjects of medium and paratext at the time of this paper's original presentation.

1. Even that access is unstable at present with decaying links. At the time of this essay's publication, this link works: https://web.archive.org/web/20050525045800/http%3A/www.dead.net%3A80/RobertHunterArchive/files/giantsharp/GHARP.pdf.

2. See, for example, early medieval hagiographical (saints' lives) narratives where often the literary "force arises from something other than convincing mimesis" (Wittig 1974, 148). On "figural narrative" more generally, see Auerbach (1984).

3. Note again the potential for association with the lyrics of "Terrapin Station": "From the *northwest* corner" (Hunter 1993, 312; emphasis mine).

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