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Grateful Dead Lyric Poetry  
and Merleau-Ponty

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STANLEY J. SPECTOR

2023

WORKING PAPERS SERIES



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ISSN (print) 2832-1162

ISSN (online) 2832-1170

#### CITATION INFORMATION:

Spector, Stanley J. "Let the Words Be Ours: Grateful Dead Lyric Poetry and Merleau-Ponty." *Grateful Dead Studies Working Papers*, no. 2 (2023), pp. 1–7. URL: [https://deadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GDSA\\_Working\\_Paper2.pdf](https://deadstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GDSA_Working_Paper2.pdf)

# Let the Words Be Ours: Grateful Dead Lyric Poetry and Merleau-Ponty

**STANLEY J. SPECTOR**

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IN PHILOSOPHY, EFFORTS TO SHOW THE RELATIONSHIP between poetry and perception have been sparse, as philosophers have largely ignored the role of perception in sensation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was the first of the phenomenologists to focus on the role of perception in human existence. As early as his second major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, originally published in French in 1945 and then translated into English in 1962, Merleau-Ponty already distinguished between two senses of perception. He began his study with the observation that “At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation which seems immediate and obvious ... It will, however, be seen that nothing could in fact be more confused” (1962, 3).

As he makes his case throughout this study, he discovers that “the perceived by its nature, admits of the ambiguous, the shifting, and is shaped by its context,” and so a “theory of sensation, which builds up all knowledge out of determinate qualities, [and] offers us objects purged of all ambiguity” (1962,11) will largely fail as an account of human experience. By focusing on the notions of perception and its ambiguities, Merleau-Ponty’s account of human experience in its ordinary everydayness is richer than the traditional accounts focusing on the “I think” aspect of human expe-

rience. Nonetheless, the arts present a special case, and within the arts, poetry and literature are exceptionally problematic, since language demands that we consider words that suggest meanings, and so the special cases of literature and poetry require an even deeper analysis. Merleau-Ponty specifically addressed all of these issues in the radio lectures of 1948, later published as *The World of Perception*; consequently, this paper looks at the framework he established in those lectures to discuss all of the arts in terms of perception, ambiguity, and incompleteness, with an eye toward how that helps us understand the Dead's lyrics.

This essay is part of a larger project on how the band's lyrics, both alone and in conjunction with the music, allow tensions, ambiguities and rhythms to emerge that also open the possibility of affirming life with dance and movement.<sup>1</sup> It supplements my earlier essay (Spector 2018), which focused on the music of the Grateful Dead, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and how the way fans danced at shows exemplified the role of dance/movement in Nietzsche's philosophy. Reading the lyrics of songs such as "Dark Star" in the light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy allows us to understand better the scale, scope, and achievement of the Dead's work, and why their music resonates so strongly with so many critics, theorists, and philosophers whose work describes our world.

## I.

There is no single philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. In his early works, *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he presented a detailed analysis of human experience that emphasized the role of perception and movement. He then offered a general framework for his earlier work in a series of radio lectures broadcast in 1948. Finally, as he realized that in his earlier works he was still constrained by the language of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty began to develop a different ontological framework.

Unfortunately, he died before he finished that project, leaving only notes, though those have inspired extensive commentary.<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the 1948 lectures as a context for situating the Grateful Dead in a post-Enlightenment era in which perception is more fundamental than cognitive thought and reason.

In *The World of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty began, as he did in *Phenomenology of Perception*, by noting the distinction between sense experience and calculative and deliberative thought. He observed that "The world of perception, or in other words the world which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life, seems at first sight to be the one we know best of all." However, he continued, "as long as we remain in the practical and utilitarian attitude"—that is, the attitude driven by the Enlightenment's focus on the primacy of reason, in which we "hold science and knowledge in such high esteem that all our lived experience of the world seems by contrast to be of little value"—then "the world of perception is, to a great extent, unknown territory" (2008, 31). Merleau-Ponty then claimed that because of a renewed focus on perception, modern art, modern science, and modern philosophy have overcome this problem insofar as they "allow us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which are always prone to forget" (2008, 32).

Recognizing the transitions that occurred in science, art, and philosophy from what he called a Classical Age (roughly the seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries) to what he called a Modern Age (spanning the end of nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century), Merleau-Ponty showed that what marked the shift was a new emphasis on perception, and with it a shift away from certainty, completeness, and clarity toward possibility, incompleteness, and ambiguity. The new physics expressed relativity as the new art embraced Post-Impressionism, and the new philosophy shifted emphasis from disembodied truth to embodied vitality, as shown in the writings of

Nietzsche. Our ideas of perception in the Modern Age changed. Now perception was no longer understood objectively as mere representation or “the confused beginning of scientific knowledge” (2008, 34); instead, every act of perception was understood to be from a particular perspective in a particular context and of the whole rather than of an aggregate of parts.

At the same time, however, Merleau-Ponty was not anti-science. He recognized that science has quite a bit to say about some of the ways we can understand ourselves and the world, even though it does not speak to direct experience. In direct experience, for example, we perceive a lemon in a single act of perception, and we do not add together a series of sensations, one after the other—namely, a sensing of a yellow color, an oblong shape, a sweet smell, a not quite smooth texture, and a sour taste. He does not deny the role of the nervous system in perception, but he strongly advocates not reducing human experience to brain activity, since our experience is of a lemon and not a series of discrete sensations.

In his sixth lecture, “Art and the World of Perception,” Merleau-Ponty specifically considered how modern painting, cinema, music, and literature have emphasized the primacy of perception. He claimed that, “far from having narrowed our horizons by immersing ourselves in the world of perception ... we have rediscovered a way of looking at works of art, language and culture which respects their autonomy and their original richness” (2008, 76). With most of the arts, it is clear that perception is primary. With the arts involving words, he understood that “words, unlike music, present a peculiarity in that they already designate objects in the world and in that way are not neutral” (2008, 75). Merleau-Ponty resolved this issue by following the distinction Stéphane Mallarmé made between the poetic use of language and everyday chatter:

The chatterer only names things sufficiently to point them out quickly, to indicate ‘what he is

talking about’. The poet by contrast ... replaces the usual way of referring to things, which presents them as ‘well known’, with a mode of expression that describes the essential structure of the thing and accordingly forces us to enter into that thing. (2008, 75).

In his seventh and last radio lecture in this series, “Classical World, Modern World,” Merleau-Ponty summarized his discussion of the development of modern thought from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, repeatedly emphasizing the role of perception. In the earlier age, he argued:

We have the self-assurance of a system of thought which is unflinching and convinced of its mission both to know nature through and through and to purge its knowledge of man of all mystery. In modernity, on the other hand, this rational universe which is open in principle to human endeavors to know it and act within it, is replaced by a kind of knowledge and art that is characterized by difficulty and reserve, one full of restrictions ... Modern thought displays the dual characteristics of being unfinished and ambiguous. (2008, 77–78)

The question now asks, how can we read Grateful Dead lyrics, specifically the lyrics to “Dark Star,” against the backdrop of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of poetry in what he called the Modern Age?

## II.

Musically, the Grateful Dead were clearly a band of modernity, as their music was often ambiguous and unfinished. Of course, in the context of a show, they usually did end their songs, but not always: sometimes they omitted “Sunshine Daydream” or the “Playing in the Band” reprise, or even the second verse of “Dark Star”, only to have them appear in a subsequent show. Besides the actual songs, however, the music itself was also unfinished, as many of the tunes they played opened up the possibility of musical exploration. These tunes include songs like “Bird Song,”

“Playing in the Band,” “The Other One,” and, of course, “Dark Star.” In his interview with Charles Reich, Garcia called “Dark Star” a song he heard “in each performance as a completely improvised piece over a long period of time.” That sense of interconnectedness defined the song for him:

I have a long continuum of “Dark Stars” which range in character from each other to real different extremes. “Dark Star” has meant, while I’m playing it, almost as many things as I can sit here and imagine, so all I can do is talk about “Dark Star” as a playing experience. (1972, 84–85)

More than two decades later, Tom Constanten echoed Garcia’s perspective, emphasizing the song’s incompleteness: “‘Dark Star’ is going on all the time. It’s going on right now. You don’t begin it so much as enter it. You don’t end it so much as leave it” (Greenfield 1996, 126).

Lyricaly, the Grateful Dead were also of modernity. They often used language that shakes us out of the ordinary chatter of the everyday and leads us into the possibility of entering a deeper, richer world of sense perceptions and meanings that nonetheless remain ambiguous and incomplete. The lyrics of “Dark Star” are an excellent example. According to Merleau-Ponty, our immediate experience of the poem is sensory: we hear sounds and rhythms and words, all of which suggest sensory images; cognition and meaning are secondary. So much discussion has been devoted to the science of a dark star that we lose the actual image of a dark star crashing, or the image of light pouring into ashes. These images certainly are not of the everyday, but I would also argue that they are not constructions of the imagination. They are immediate, psychedelic images created by both the poet and the audience. We can imagine tripping, or not, and these images appearing one after the other. And in that split second of asking “what was that?”, an image of order, the place where images are contained, tatters, and just as we get a glimpse of the absence

of order, the image of searchlights looking for a new way to order the stream of images appears.

This psychedelic world is different, but we can enter it, as the lyrics invite: “Shall we go, / you and I / while we can”? What image does a “transitive nightfall of diamonds” conjure? Here it may be most useful to see that image as a divider, or a curtain, between this world and something other, something unknown. And the dividing curtain is made up of strands of diamonds—shapes and sparkles and clear light, and we can go through them to the other side.

The second verse is also filled with images. A mirror shatters; what does that look like? Are the glass pieces of a certain shape? Do they sparkle or give off an illumination? No, the lyrics tell us that themselves are reflections of matter that has no form or boundary. And just before we can say “Wait,” a glass hand emerges and melts away as ice-petals start circling, only to have a lady in velvet emerge and just as quickly disappear into the backdrop of darkness.

At this level of immediate experience the question is not, what does it mean, but rather, what are we sensing? Did you hear the crash of the dark star or the shattering of the mirror? Did you smell or feel the ice-petal flowers? What did the velvet feel like? What color was it? The poetry of “Dark Star” uses language in a disruptive way. It suggests images that take us out of the everyday and open up the possibility for a deeper, richer world, which, it turns out, is also an ambiguous and incomplete one.

At some point, though, we do wonder what these images mean. As we look to unlock the meaning of the images that the words suggest, we need to remember that first, in a Modern Age that privileges perception, meanings are fluid, incomplete, and ambiguous. There is no one correct meaning, just as there is no one correct perception. Consequently, different approaches and narratives about the meaning of the poem have been offered. One approach to these lyrics focuses on the image

of the dark star, using it as the foundation of an exegesis derived from the principles and data from physics and astronomy (Trist and Dodd 2005, 49n1; Berg 2022). Graeme Boone's approach is different. He takes the poem in its entirety and concludes, "The lyrics, then, suggest cosmic wheels of action involving order and chaos, inner and outer worlds, innocence and ephemerality" (2010, 87). And, in an earlier paper, I approached the lyrics philosophically, focusing on an idea gleaned from the second line, the displacement of order when reason tattered, showing how that could form the basis of an ethics—a guide for action in a world of uncertainty, ambiguity, and incompleteness—that can be found in many of the songs (Spector 2004).

There is no doubt that "Dark Star" expressed the band's psychedelic experience and vision, both musically and lyrically. As Phil Lesh explained, the "because of its infinite mutability, [it] became our signature space-out tune, consciously designed to be opened up into alternate universes" (2005, 101–102). That is true lyrically as well, as we have seen: the song is filled with psychedelic imagery that opens up into alternate universes. This is a function of psychedelic awareness, as Brent Wood has noted: "The psychedelic experience ought not to be seen as a distortion of reality, but rather as an alternative experience of the universe in which the compartmentalization of reality endemic to our rational, everyday mind-set begins to break down and the ability to see connections between one sphere of experience and another is set free" (2003, 41).

The lyrics of "Dark Star" clearly suggest the possibilities of alternate universes embedded in psychedelic experience, and its poetry meets the criteria suggested by Mallarmé: Hunter "replace(d) the usual way of referring to things, which presents them as 'well known', with a mode of expression that describes the essential structure of the thing and accordingly forces us to enter into that thing" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 75). He describes

a dark star with light, matter with no form, and kaleidoscopic images of a hand dissolving into moving ice-petals. Contradictions at the level of the everyday ordinary do not seem out of place in a psychedelic experience. In addition, as these images themselves are unfinished and ambiguous, the poetry of "Dark Star" is situated in the modern world as it was described by Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty recognized the shift in philosophy that marked the contrast between the Classical Age and the Modern Age in the philosophy of Nietzsche. Nietzsche had brought into question all that the Classical Age took as fundamental. By shifting the emphasis away from absolute knowledge and focusing instead on the vitality of living a life, he rejected the idea of an underlying reality that can be known, and he absolutely celebrated the ideas of perception, ambiguity, incompleteness, and movement. These were not ideas to be overcome, but rather were ideas to be embraced.

The uncertainty, incompleteness, and ambiguity of "Dark Star" expresses a psychedelic vision that is congruent with philosophy in the Modern Age. It truly is the star around which the rest of the band's songbook revolves. Always, the initial insight of inhabiting alternate worlds, sometimes consecutively and sometimes simultaneously, is present. We cannot rely solely on reason to get to the absolute truth of anything, and so we act, without the safety net of foreknowledge. Hunter, and Barlow as well, never abandoned the initial psychedelic vision of "Dark Star." Some songs, such as "The Other One" and "China Cat Sunflower", speak directly to the experience itself, while others, like "Ripple" and "Box of Rain," recast the original vision. And some songs presuppose what "Dark Star" says about reality and knowledge and offer possibilities for action. In other words, once we have moved the first time and gone through the transitive nightfall of diamonds, what do we do then? What does our living a life look like now?

Whatever it looks like, we have to move. Life is dynamic and not static. This theme is central to “Truckin’.” The verses of the song review events in the history of the band. The bridges, though, are more philosophical. In those, we are told first that we have to act; we cannot just hold our cards. We have “to play our hand,” since cards not played have no value. There is no guarantee that your hand is a winner, though, as the lyrics observe: “Sometimes the light’s all shining on me / Other times I can barely see” (Trist and Dodd 2005, 131). After the experience of “Dark Star,” the grid of the world that we live in is incomplete and ambiguous; we still have to act, though, and wait to see how things turn out.

The second bridge reinforces the sense of movement from the first verse. Sometimes we get tired and we want to go home to rest. But we continue moving in a world where the light sometimes shines on us, illuminating the grid with provisional clarity. Other times, though, we are groping in the dark.

### III.

There is much more to say about the rest of the Grateful Dead’s songbook. That, however, is part of the larger project that this essay informs. Here, though, a final point about the lyrics to many of those songs brings us back to Merleau-Ponty. It can be argued that volumes such as Hunter’s *A Box of Rain* and Trist and Dodd’s *Annotated Lyrics* present the words as poems, a lyric verse that strips them of their musical context. It must be remembered that in fact they are lyrics, whose rhythms and sounds do not stand alone, but are designed to be sung—to be heard in conjunction with music. If our only concern was how the sensory experience of the performance necessarily leads to dance or movement, we could omit any analysis of the lyrics. Yet Merleau-Ponty does make the case that poetry in the Modern Age also leads to dance/movement—and that in turn fosters exactly the kind of analysis given here.

Separating the lyrics from the music and treating them independently reinforces the Grateful Dead’s position in a Modern Age whose fundamental characteristics are incompleteness, ambiguity, and uncertainty, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear.

Merleau-Ponty was not addressing music like the Dead’s, or musicians like the Dead, when he gave the lectures that became *The World of Perception*. Yet the arguments he made there go to the heart of critical aspects of the Dead’s music, and in ways that the band also invoked in their own discussions of their work. Interestingly, the unfinished state of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, primarily in the form of notes and fragments, suggests another link between his work and the Dead’s, as Jessica Wiskus notes:

Yet it is perhaps appropriate that much of Merleau-Ponty’s late work comes down to us not in the form of narrative, but in rough outline. For instead of offering us the sedimentation of a philosophy spoken from the *end* of thinking, his work promises an opening—an initiation to a philosophical discourse that by its very nature could be nothing other than ongoing and incomplete. In this sense, the course notes and working notes contribute to our understanding of his philosophy precisely in the degree to which they illustrate that philosophy in practice. When we read the notes, we participate in a movement of thought. (Wiskus 2013, 1–2)

What Wiskus says of how the state of Merleau-Ponty’s thought invites participation echoes how critics and scholars have long described the Dead’s approach to music.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this essay, however, it is interesting to speculate on whether Merleau-Ponty might have recognized in the Dead’s music an example—an expression—of the kind of poetry he was imagining, and the kind of art he was discussing. Scholars may debate that, but for Dead studies, the larger point is that Merleau-Ponty offers a compelling way of getting at the larger connections between the band’s project and the defining intellectual and critical issues of their age.



## Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association, February 21, 2020.
2. See, for example, Barbaras (2004), Carbone (2004), Evans and Lawler (2000), and Low (2000).
3. This point has been made by journalists as well as scholars over the years; see, for example Boone (1997) and Malvinni (2013), especially his first chapter.

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