

CALIFORNIA COSMOGONY  
CURRICULUM:  
THE LEGACY OF JAMES MOFFETT



GEOFFREY SIRC AND THOMAS RICKERT

enculturation intermezzo

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THE LEGACY OF JAMES MOFFETT**

by

Geoffrey Sirc and Thomas Rickert

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By Geoffrey Sirc and Thomas Rickert

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>PART I: COSMOLOGY AND THE PRESOCRATICS</b> .....	7
A. Cosmogony's Origins .....	8
B. Cosmology as Figure and Style .....	11
C. What Cosmology Can Do .....	14
<b>PART II: MOFFETT AND LANGUAGE TRAINING</b> .....	19
A. An Integrated Curriculum in the Era of Cultural Studies .....	20
B. Classroom, Composition, Poetry .....	25
C. Growth and the Cosmic .....	31
<b>PART III: "IN THE END THERE'S JUST A SONG . . . ":     COSMOLOGY AS A GRATEFUL DEAD PERFORMANCE</b> .....	36
A. Music as Spiritual Ground .....	37
B. Music as Cosmogonic Performance .....	44
Excursion I: A trio of "Dark Stars" .....	50
C. Music, Poetic, and the Question of Gnosis .....	55
Excursion II: "Terrapin Station" .....	59
<b>PART IV: COSMOLOGY, CURRICULUM, AND CLASS WORK</b> .....	61
Excursion III: Hunter's Americana Folk Tradition .....	68
<b>CONCLUSION: THE COSMOPOLITAN FROM THE COSMOGONIC</b> .....	70
<b>ENDNOTES</b> .....	74
<b>References</b> .....	77

# LIST OF FIGURES

<b>FIGURE 1:</b> Diagram of Plato’s Atlantis .....	2
<b>FIGURE 2:</b> Armillary sphere .....	6
<b>FIGURE 3:</b> Modeling the inner world through the outer world .....	18
<b>FIGURE 4:</b> Protestors picketing in Kanawha County, WV in 1974 .....	23
<b>FIGURE 5:</b> The famous “skull and roses” image from the Grateful Dead .....	35
<b>FIGURE 6:</b> Fans dancing at a Grateful Dead show, 2009 .....	41
<b>FIGURE 7:</b> Greek women in a Dionysian dance, from a Greek vase .....	41
<b>FIGURE 8:</b> The Grateful Dead’s iconic “steal your face” image .....	49

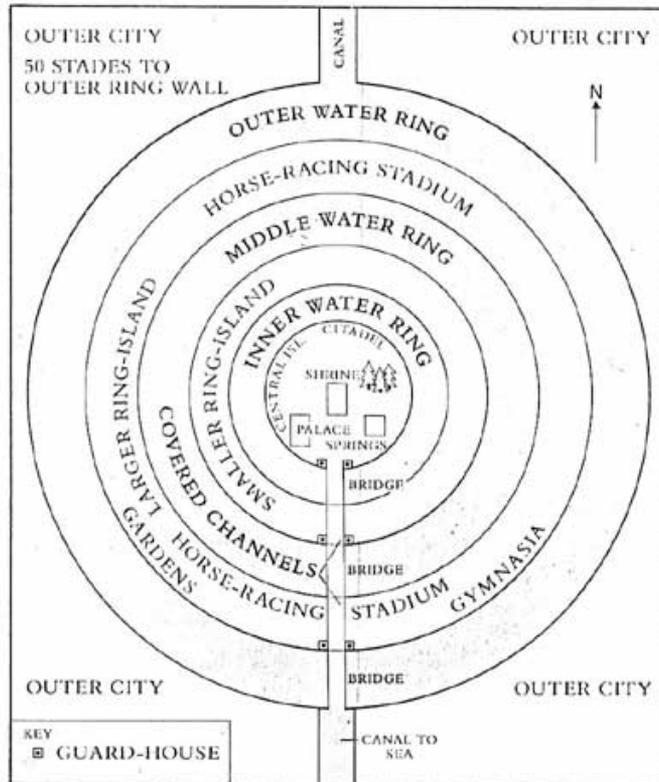
# LIST OF MEDIA

<b>VIDEO 1:</b> 9/10/72: Hollywood Palladium, with David Crosby as guest .....	50
<b>VIDEO 2:</b> 3/29/90: Nassau Coliseum, with Branford Marsalis as guest .....	51
<b>VIDEO 3:</b> 12/31/78: Winterland .....	52
<b>VIDEO 4:</b> 2/26/77 Swing Auditorium .....	59
<b>VIDEO 5:</b> Dead playing "Brown-Eyed Women," 6/19/76 Capitol Theatre .....	68

## **California Cosmogony Curriculum: The Legacy of James Moffett**

A tune spins out one after another the same notes that its chord sounds simultaneously. The tune is a plural version of the unity of the chord. . . . A chord is a matrix from which many tunes may be generated by permuting the notes in various orders. All melodies so derived share the tonal qualities of the chord—its particular set of intervals—and yet differ from one another by virtue of stringing differently the same notes. These melodies amount to different statements, even different interpretations, of the same matrix or matter. They are like sentences about a subject.

James Moffett  
*Harmonic Learning 92-93*



**Figure 1**

Diagram of Plato's Atlantis. An attempt to conceptualize the polis in the cosmos. From the *Timaeus*, Tr. Waterfield, p. 159.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the first song he ever wrote with the Grateful Dead, Robert Hunter spins out a tale of how it all started and where we're going. His myth, his interpretation, depicts a variation on the 'big bang' theme: "Dark star crashes, pouring its light into ashes. Reason tatters, the forces tear loose from the axis."<sup>1</sup> It's a *stella obscura* Hunter describes, super-novaing amidst the elemental ether ("the waxen wind of never set to motion in the unbecoming"), a kind of primal dark matter in which "the stars were set in spin." We'd like to take this 1967 lyric as a metaphor for all writing. Writing, then, as an attempt to explain the mute text of the world – its origins, its traits, its pitfalls, its promises; writing that's oracular, possibly obscure, but reaching; writing, Hunter might say, as a "searchlight, casting for faults in the clouds of delusion." This is no stretch at all, for the very origins of writing were an attempt to account for the world, to name and number it, whether in the simple lists recording early economic transactions or the more grandiose narratives comprising ancient cosmogony. At its origins, writing's cast sought a sense of who we are amidst all that is, crafting some thin raft to ride the cresting cosmic swells. So, the fragments of Empedocles, for example, offering philosophic insight alongside a rich store of imagery, might hold promise for an aspiring psychedelic jam band trying to make sense, like Hunter, of our worldly matrix:

Earth makes night by standing in the way of the light  
deserted, blind-eyed night  
sharp-arrowed sun and gentle moon  
in a circle round the earth she winds, another's light  
For opposite she observes the pure circle of the king. (In Barnes 147-148)

Across the millennia, we see the shared impulse to glean our everyday mysteries and evoke them powerfully, in words, images, and harmonies. Our claim is that there has never been a time when cosmogony hasn't been central to human life. Our concern for the outer world inflects our inner life, our sense of beginning and end, death and rebirth, order and the unknown—indeed, goes beyond inflection to shape what have become the arts, music, sciences, religion,

education. This is the essence of the cosmic: how we find the story of ourselves in the bigger story; how we narrate and negotiate our place in larger wholes, and so find our stake. While it may not be explicitly discussed much in today's climate, nevertheless, this essence suffuses the public realm as much as the academy, stretching across the most trivial to the most grandiose, from a simple consideration of self and meaning to the grand debates about human being in the universe. Cosmogony unites the disparate subject areas of contemporary education, suggesting their fundamental interweaving, and brings the past into fluent conversation with the present, illuminating our own era freshly.

But while cosmogony necessarily permeates English Studies, it is rarely thematized as such. A noteworthy exception would be the language arts theorist and practitioner James Moffett. He saw with clarity how cosmogony cradled, suffused, and inspired the humanities as well as the sciences, and his ideas offer compelling reason to return now to his work.<sup>2</sup> Much of Moffett's best work, appearing in the late 1960s onward, was done either while living in California or sprung from that source in his later, early 1990s work, which now appears in fresh light following the cultural studies turn the field was then taking. Moffett's work reflects the visionary spirituality of that California era, evoking the sensorium of the times, a musically-keyed striving for growth and transcendence. A concern for cosmology puts aspects of personal growth, wonder, and exploration into writing, even as it puts writing back in touch with song, lyric, and existential thought. Hence, our interest in rhyming his work with that of artists we would count as his fellow-seekers, Robert Hunter and the Grateful Dead, who explored these cosmological trajectories in lyrical and musical forms. We ask, then: What if James Moffett's pedagogy connects as well with primordial metaphysics as it does with a more current 'now' (e.g., the Grateful Dead) in its invocation of the cosmological muse? And what if these arcane connections became central in our life and in our field?

Such questions are particularly important because we live in a time when the liberal arts are considered to be in transition. Certainly, they are experiencing funding cuts, shrinking enrollment numbers, institutional pressures for vocational emphases, and misguided public perception. Such malaise is exacerbated by the focus on STEM in education, while at the

same time education and science struggle in the face of ideological and fundamentalist driven opposition, particularly in arenas such as climate change, evolution, and cultural critique. And yet, all these issues invoke cosmology—who are we? what kind of world is it that we must face and within which we must flourish? how might life best be pursued? what principles will favorably sustain us? These and more all remain central to life and its pursuits, and so also at the core of the liberal arts. In this regard, James Moffett's work stands out. He understood, presciently, that the 90s "culture wars" were just a symptom of deeper issues and thus a precursor to future problems. And Moffett's diagnosis of the ills besetting late 20th Century education has only grown sharper in the meantime. In the face of the liberal arts' dissipation, Moffett sought to reintegrate writing, literature, math, science, music, and art in order to rekindle imagination and wonder alongside the development of skill and critical thinking. Moffett believed that waning interest in the humanities went hand in hand with turning from what it has always done best, which is to mesh practical training in writing and the arts with care and judgement. And this necessarily re-invokes cosmology, for care and judgement are rooted in questions concerning self, society, world, and cosmos.

In what follows, we explicate Moffett's concerns and vision, exploring them not only directly through Moffett's work, but in terms of the cosmological dimension in ancient Greek thought that continues to ground the liberal arts, as well as the Late-Sixties California culture, exemplified here through the Grateful Dead, that contributed to Moffett's own cosmological growth. The Dead may seem an unlikely choice, but they provide exemplary means to illuminate the cosmic across music, lyric, performance, and philosophy in a non-academic setting, and thereby, we hope we can prompt others to find their own similarly rich contrapuntal connections. Further, the Dead were, perhaps surprisingly, self-reflexive about what they said and did, talking concretely and performatively concerning the harmonic themes Moffett also invokes. We follow this harmonic structure as well; indeed, we might say that each section of this essay lays out the same arguments but through different means—a form of terraced thematics, perhaps. So, even as each section singles out a key component—philosophical thinking, language arts, and song—they emerge in service to the larger harmonic, and in this form of compositional "harmothematics," they offer insight, inspiration, and direction for college English's *raison d'être*.



**Figure 2**

Armillary sphere. Ordering cosmic ephemerality through the tensions of change and movement.  
From Plato, *Timaeus*, Tr. Lee, p. 112.

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## **PART I**

### **COSMOLOGY AND THE PRESOCRATICS**

## A. COSMOGONY'S ORIGINS

Between 600 and 400 BCE a new kind of inquiry began in Greece. While this move has been simplified as the turn from *mythos* to *logos*, that narrative distorts the Greeks, as well as contemporary education, and is therefore something Moffett seeks to rethink. For one thing, the scientific bent was already seeded long before the Greeks, probably in the Paleolithic, but certainly in the monumental astronomical temples of the Mesolithic.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, with the Greeks this germinal scientificity, still cradled in epic, storied form, gets a resounding name, cosmogony/cosmology, which puts *kosmos* (adornment, arrangement, one that's apt or harmonious) together with *gonos* (birth or genesis) or with *logos* (order, account, rationale, or word). Cosmogony, as the attempt to order a baffling world, is a culture's basic genre; it is absolutely inseparable from writing's emergence. As Paleolithic shamans explored their inner worlds, weaving texts of cosmic psychical insight, alongside them others explored the outer, charting the earth and sky, finding the patterns, and setting them in stone, song, and sign. In the first civilizations these movements were brought together in divination, horoscopy, and what we now call astronomy—the discovery of an arcane, celestial semiotics, what the Sumerians called “the heavenly writing.”<sup>4</sup> These remote cosmogonies, of the Mesolithic and then the Sumerians, Egyptians, and others, emerge from this tension between inner and outer; they seek a *place* in the great dark mysteries, of making livable rhythms from the cycles of death and rebirth. We might still learn from this. Our histories of writing remain too prosaic, as writing is born with an eye to the sky and the inner spirit as much as in accounting for sheep and grain.<sup>5</sup>

At some level, though, the supernatural causes of divine but fickle beings and celestial signs became increasingly less satisfying in their explanatory power and practical application. The move to *logos* meant an attempt to find generalizable laws which ordered the cosmos—to remake the burgeoning insights of math and empirical observation into fundamental principles. A kind of philosophical questioning and concentrated scientific method developed

in order to limn such systemic accounts. Thus Thales is hailed as the first philosopher (rightly or wrongly) because he posited water as the cosmological first principle, a rationalizing move given increasing power and sophistication with subsequent figures. For it is not simply that reasonable explanations need to be given, but that life needs to be lived within such accountings. Heraclitus tells us that “they [people in general] do not understand how, though at variance with itself it [the cosmos] agrees with itself: [it is] a backwards-turning attunement as of a bow or a lyre” (F41). What “they” do not understand, then, is the mystery of tension in order, a cosmological *gnosis* written into life itself.<sup>6</sup>

This legacy is still at work in our scholarly disciplines, a wellspring watering our attempts at explaining the world, systematizing it, giving it its rationale. But we also see another tension here, implicit in the *logos* itself. Inherent in their writing of cosmogony is, as Jonathan Barnes, scholar on classical philosophy, puts it, an “emphasis on the use of reason, on rationality and ratiocination, on argument and inference” (xxiii). Barnes’ philosophical spin heralds the Greek Enlightenment but narrows cosmogony’s complex provenance to its rational underpinnings. Barnes’ move is both important and misleading; certainly, rationality’s emergence is crucial, but it’s not solely a Greek phenomenon, nor should rationality be narrowly construed. Indeed, philosophy and rhetoric are both borne in these movements of the *logos*. Certainly, too, cosmogonic writing in his sense can be seen in contemporary textual genres, including such polemical textuality as global political debates, social and economic theories, criticism, history. Work in the disciplines is ultimately all about explaining the world, systematizing it, giving it its rationale, but doing so through the intricacies of trope and image. Both are of the *logos*. Wright gets at this in her thoughts on the linguistic nature of cosmology: “A question that was once shunted to theology becomes increasingly relevant as we are made more aware that cosmology itself, like all arts and sciences, is a construct of human intelligence, subject to social and linguistic conditioning and dubious means of communication” (2). Whatever their debts to previous cosmological narratives, the Greeks are increasingly called to reflect on the *logos* in the *kosmos*, to see the power, sacred and profane, in the constitutive word. In even the most up-to-date science Wright sees “the reappearance of presocratic terminology” (2), thought and language coterminous with the elemental poetry of cosmology: e.g., “cold dark matter” and

“hot dark matter,” along with theories of heating and cooling. The *logos* cannot be reduced to a choice between “reason” and “idiom,” being sprung always in their tensions.

Further, reflection on the perennial rebirth of ancient cosmological thoughts in ever new guise should give pause. Alongside their intensifications of reason and the powers of the *logos* were reworkings of the greatest transcendent mysteries. The so-called presocratics never lost their sense of the divine, and the image of Plato as supreme rationalist is colorlessly figured. Cosmogony is not just reason and image—even when given over to its most arcane mathematical formulations, as with the Pythagoreans or the Plato of the *Timeaus*, and the most striking images (*chora* as matrix) the demiurge weaves and the ephemeral beckons. We cannot be surprised by the Neo-Platonic belief that discursive reasoning was ultimately in service of a noetic merging with the divine ordering given in their cosmology, leading to what Neo-Platonist scholar Sara Rappe calls a “non-discursive pedagogy” that includes theurgic ritual, visionary journeys, and spiritual exercises—right alongside the most rigorous textual exegesis (3).

This presents us with the challenge of cosmology: writing itself as this backward stretched bow, a tension between what we know and what lies beyond, tantalizing, dazzling, for which we seek understanding, attuning, some sense of place within its immensity. The word accounts. But at this point we should return to one of the Greek terms for education—not *paideia*, although that’s a rich term in itself—but *mousikē*, that combination of music, dance, word, and culture. As Plato says, “*gymnastike* for the body, *mousikē* for the soul” (*Republic* 376c).<sup>7</sup> Moffett will claim that *mousikē* is soul training by means of everything that is inspired by the Muses—music, writing, even philosophy and math (*Universal* 331). Inner and outer; body and soul; mortal and divine; cosmos and person; word and world—in each of these we see the the move to integrate opposition into a holistic dynamic fostering intellectual and spiritual growth.

## B. COSMOLOGY AS FIGURE AND STYLE

What we are calling California Cosmogony is borne of such insight, becoming a journey in music, math, and word, keyed to style and harmonic wisdom, which reawakens us to cosmogony. Cosmology constitutes the deepest sources for why we write, evoking and charting our very sense of world, sending us not into the mystic, not into talk of cultivating souls in an obscurantist way, but into the nuts and bolts of what we might literally call “worldly” writing—its styles, motifs, rhythms, and figures. Thus we are drawn to the fascinating form of cosmogonic texts, delivered in meter not as simple story but also as indelible image and concept conveyed by words of power. Creation stories require “more elevated language” (Lee 24)—so, Socrates, for example: “in all kinds of representation one represents best and most easily what lies within one’s experience, while what lies outside that experience is difficult to represent in action and even more difficult in words” (*Timaeus* 19 - 20). Description is not enough; something of the experience must be given. In the *Timaeus*, for instance, this results in, as Lee terms it, “a lack of the ease and vitality that characterized the earlier dialogues” (24); hence, prose that’s unnatural, difficult to understand (what Shklovsky would call ‘stranged’ language, the language of poetry). As translator, Lee’s intent is to express this recondite dialogue in everyday English, hoping that “even in plain language something of the grandeur of Plato’s thought may be apparent” (25). Plato, then, not only as philosophical thinker, but as writer still steeped in what we euphemistically call the “mytho-poetic,” tying him not only to his presocratic forebears but the orbit of bards such as Homer and Hesiod and lyric writers such as Sappho.

This begins to convey something of the elemental figural language of cosmology—a plainspeak poetic interrupting our mass-produced sense of reality. As Moffett sees it, in line with many of the ancients, our world is one of “social hypnosis,” where “most thinking is mass thinking carried on in an illusion of privacy” (*Coming* 166, 167).<sup>8</sup> The presocratics and Plato seek a cosmological language that sparks an awakening, an insight, a catching ourselves in the act that can inspire or transform. Witness Anaximenes’ notion that “the earth is flat and rides on air” or his description of how heavenly bodies move: “round the earth—as a felt cap turns round on

our heads" (Barnes 24-5). His images take cosmic abstractions and ground them in our everyday, reworking how we see ourselves fitting into that grand scale. Or Parmenides' deep sympathy for our everyday confusion, expressed in equally personal and cosmic idiom: we are wandering, helpless mortals, "two headed" (*dikranoi*), carried away always on something new learned from the crowd (B6, 4-5); but the masses are themselves tied to an equally bounded cosmos, albeit still "perfectly complete—just like the bulk of a sphere neatly rounded off from each direction, equally matched from the middle on every side" (B8, 44-45). Or Sappho, sketching middle age from a wintry mood: "The moon and then the Pleiades go down / The night now half-gone; youth goes; I am / In bed alone" (Barnard 64). And in the *Phaedo's* cosmogonic sections, already redolent of Orphic myths, Plato captures the pathos in Cebes' fear that the soul "leaves the body and departs from it . . . scattering like a breath or smoke" (70a). Here our deepest fears of mortality are worked out in simple images that figure ephemerality. Involved in all this work was an anthropomorphic, metaphoric style, "transfer[ring] the language of human relationships to that of the physical world" (Wright 6). Such a poetic algorithm of correspondences, of myth and metaphor, Wright notes, was the only way the cosmically baffling, the ultimately unknowable, could be made intelligible—and not as an abstract problem of explanation, but as a profound human investment in finding one's stakes and place in a mystifying cosmos, where the "wisdom" of the crowd is as much bane as boon.

Such figurative, analogical thinking proved a powerful tool for primal theory-building, an accounting of the world and reckoning of one's place within it. But two reception problems emerged later, one being their interpretation, the other being their scattered, haphazard preservation. In terms of interpretation, Aristotle raided these metaphysical poet-thinkers for rational principles, which in turn stripped them of their poetic and performative dimension. This furthered the idea that reason and word could be sundered. But additional complications ensue since these early presocratic works now survive only as scattered fragments. As Aristotle rationalized them, so now someone like Heraclitus, nicknamed 'the Riddler,' comes to us as "a collection of short 'sound-bites'—striking, ambiguous and deliberately puzzling after the fashion of the Delphic oracles; even in antiquity Heraclitus was called 'dark and obscure'" (Wright 20). Parmenides fares no better, and is also called obscure or just plain bad (Barnes 155). But reading

the presocratics or even Plato in cosmological mode solely for rational content obscures their richer treasures. Thus, the style in which we have received them—gnostic, fragmentary shards of poetically striking text, full of pithy analysis, riddling and confounding us—seems as apt for existential searching as for the Twitterverse. Heraclitus: “The barley drink stands still by moving” (B53). Decant that, he implicitly asks—and circulate it.

Perhaps we can make a virtue of these texts’s scattered, fragmented survival. The presocratics were simply, stunningly powerful in their brevity. In just three powerful lines, Parmenides can capture an entire theory of cosmogonic textuality, a notion of writing as encountering the natural world on a physical level and naming it anew, trying to capture something real in the rush of transience:

Thus, according to opinion, these things sprang up and now are,  
and then, hereafter, having been nourished they will cease to be:  
and on them men have set names, a mark for each. (B 19)

Some two thousand years later Wallace Stevens, in one of his own cosmological lyrics, “Men Made Out of Words,” will share a similar revelation about a world built out of textual fragments: “Life consists/ Of propositions about life.” We see that presocratic cosmology is an attempt to figure and thereby give style and rationale to how such propositions chart the world, orienting us in psychic, worldly, and cosmic place. It is wisdom oriented on the arts of life, wedded to both practice and the *logos*.

### C. WHAT COSMOLOGY CAN DO

Such propositions sketching our cosmic place chart the stakes of life. Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and other presocratics spoke and wrote to ensnare and transform, delivering their texts as spellbinding performances asking you to change the road you are on, to change your very world. Parmenides incants the revelatory words of the goddess in a dizzying rush of images and logical twists, bedazzling us as we try to follow, no less than Socrates stuns his interlocutors with his dialectical ‘question and mastery.’ Growth is not solely discursive, but it often begins through language’s power. Moffett understand this aspect of language use well, noting that it always involves a “double teaching” that addresses meaning and what is beyond meaning. Language never loses its incantatory effects, so that at the same time it spells and lulls us, it also counterspells (“Writing, Inner Speech 167, 170). Here we see some of the interconnection between music and language that is frequently lost in emphasizing the power of semantic meaning. We are accustomed to understanding how language plies the conceptual and imagistic, while music composes the affective. But it is in their irrepressible double natures, or their frequent combination, that we see how such a binary collapses. In this way, language never loses its musicality, even if it can drift quite far from, say, melody. These elements, rhythm, imagery, complex emotions, and the lure of the beyond, get into our bodies and our heads behind the back of the conceptual, and in so doing enrichen it. Moffett, then, ever calls attention to language in this double sense, emphasizing the extra-rational effects achieved through “rhythm, rhyme, repetition, nonsense, imagery, sheer sound and beat and vocal play” (“Writing, Inner Speech” 172). What power writing has, Moffett argues, finds its source here, and education forsakes this at its peril.

The goal of education is the leading out from where one is, and the cultivation of ability to go alongside. As Moffett points out, the term education comes from the Latin, *educare*, meaning to lead or draw out (*e* = out, *ducare* = lead). Thus, education begins with the student where he or she is in order to induce them towards realizing and actualizing who they can become. Such leading out takes all our resources, and not just the few that are granted

too much weight (rationality, critical thinking, and skills training, most commonly). We might dig somewhat deeper here and note that education's goal of leading out has to include the meta-perspective of why such a fashioning is valuable in the first place, beyond the obvious point that it is necessary to have socially useful skills. But as we know, skill is never empty, but rather borne up and guided by other forms of knowledge and feeling. Inculcating this insight, however, can place one at odds with narratives of educational efficiency that see the arts as wasteful (or threatening). We might turn that around, however, and note that skill lacking other, accompanying forms of knowledge is adrift. The ability to do math, organize a business, or conduct a scientific study is important, but without the ability to understand how such pursuits have moral, aesthetic, communicative, and galvanizing qualities, they find themselves incomplete. But, again, this can be difficult to see. The need for plumbing the counterspell of language goes hand in hand with teaching the broader, less visible aspects of education as "leading out."

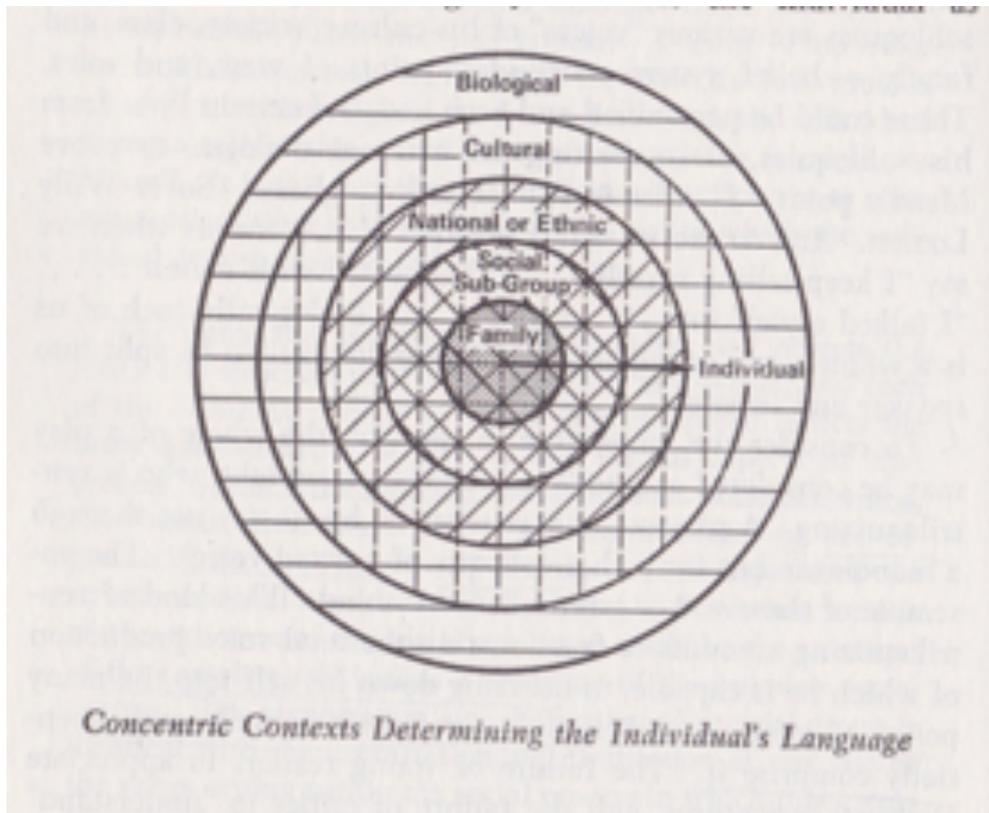
We might say that the difference between spell and counterspell, sense and trans-sense, lies in the placement of emphasis. Recall that many of the presocratics emphasized how little we know or understand, even with rational knowledge—or in spite of it. Parmenides, for instance, openly proclaims our helplessness—we are *amechania*, he asserts, without a ruse or trick to get us by (F6 line 5). Parmenides, in contradiction to our dominant picture of the Greeks as proto-rationalists, insinuates that achieving a rational grasp of cosmological principles alone won't save us, suggesting through his conversation with the goddess that we need divine, aesthetic, and rhetorical resources as well. Such insight becomes the key for understanding the entirely practical bent of the presocratics' seemingly most obscure and mystic statements. Here we see another direct link to Moffett, for the presocratics and sophists shared a common concern for education, one that is cosmological by bringing together reason, emotion, language, style, and spirituality. We can paraphrase Empedocles's fine example: "Come, sit by me Pausanias," says Empedocles, "learn from me by sheltering my words within; for the body's senses are always open, battered by the things we experience, blunting the thoughts" (B3). Empedocles builds into his teaching the deeper need for it, seeing that only in all the counterspelling resources he can muster can the drawing out of the student begin. Hence, on

Empedocles goes with his teaching, inculcating vision and awareness as the building of spiritual and intellectual character, as the means for shelter within the cosmic storm and for the fortitude to ride it out.

For Moffett, while the cosmos is no longer that of Empedocles, the song retains the name. Education for the cosmographically inclined Greeks, along with Moffett, has the same goal as the work of a cosmic artist like Hunter: the awakening of vision, insight in the transcendent key. This statement is nothing abstract: it refers to the coming to perspective on what society has so far inculcated, in order to develop further perspective, imagination, and ability. But the coming to new perspectives takes work, courage, and a sharpened desire for it. Discourse awakens to the extent that it taps into the supra-connotative and becomes musical, visionary, transporting. Logic is neither a counter nor a barrier to transcendence—the real lesson of Plato, if seen from the perspective of the Neo-Platonist conundrum of mystic rationalism, is that, just as with music and arts, we don't push reason far enough. The non-discursive, ineffable moves through us regardless—we just numb ourselves to it. This numbness shows in our understanding of the Greek legacy, which transforms their arts and pedagogy into the tale of rationality. What gets dropped like a bad cell phone connection is their attunement to the Muse, to the divine, and to a deep-seated sense of cosmological oneness that runs like a golden thread through all the work of the ancients, even those we like to consider the most sober.

Parmenides well exemplifies this sense of oneness, as he is still read today as a philosophical monist, meaning that he considered the universe to be “all one.” This reading is considered a rational explanation of the cosmos, and is accordingly one of the first and most important steps setting us on the road to science. But what goes missing is how this sense of oneness weaves throughout his philosophy, inculcating a sense of connection to this world and its beyond, an embracement of the other, the reach of imagination, and a kind of worldly humility. There is far more in Parmenides than rationalism; he is sketching a way of life. Moffett understands this aspect of the presocratics, and cosmological thinking more generally, when he explores the meaning of spirituality. Moffett in fact hesitates to use the word, but finally pushes on for lack of a better term, taking time to qualify its problematic equivalence with religion and

morality (*Harmonic* 15). But Moffett sees that spirituality is “the perception of oneness behind plurality,” suggesting that spirituality precedes and exceeds any particular cultural instantiation (*Harmonic* 15). Further, the line on oneness from Parmenides to Moffett is plain, but again, just as in Parmenides, this is not simply rationalist fundament nor mystic insight—although it can share in both—but foremostly ground for everyday social practice, since, Moffett continues, “spiritual *behavior* is the acting on this perception” (*Harmonic* 15). Put differently, that sense of oneness is not just experiential but practical. And so too lest we forget with Plato. We cannot ignore that the *Timaeus*, as rigorously mathematical as it can be, closes (or re-opens?) on the idea of a living cosmos, full and perfect, to which all souls are bound (*Tim* 92C). Moffett’s work in turn shows, with an awareness that grows stronger with each successive book, that this cosmogonic legacy of awakening, imagining, connecting—all as part of being drawn out—must be rekindled, in our own idioms, lest education be as blunted as Empedocles’ poor lost soul. And further, it is important to see that such cosmological insight grounds morality and religion without for all that being synonymous with them, and thus in school settings can pursue the work of spiritual leading out without falling into “moralizing or indoctrinating” (Moffett, *Harmonic* 15).



**Figure 3**

Modeling the inner world through the outer world.  
From Moffett, *Teaching*, p. 68.

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## **PART II**

### **MOFFETT AND LANGUAGE TRAINING**

## A. AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM IN THE ERA OF CULTURAL STUDIES

We have argued that Moffett's counter to the narrowing political and economic vision for education reaches back to the earliest educational models we have, back to presocratics and sophists, in order to retune their cosmological impulses to contemporary key signatures. His foreword to *Harmonic Learning* gives a sense of his affinity with ancient philosophy: "the book switches among past, present, and future. . . . This search across time and space for the biggest whole culminates in cosmology" (vii). Hence, his focus on origins (i.e., early education): underlying his curriculum is the tenet that "how well a student fares with a certain assignment in, say, tenth or eleventh grade depends enormously on what he was asked to do in the lower grades" (*Student-Centered* 3). Throughout his career, then, Moffett has been writing his ongoing *Republic cum Timeaus*, a curriculum, as it were, for the schools of Magnesia. The goal is always the "total learning environment" for "the total growth of each person—physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual" (*Universal* xii, 9). His slant is mystagogical: "Far too long and far too much, we have thought of reading and writing as technical language matters, when the fact is that composing and comprehending are deep operations of the mind and spirit having no necessary connection with the world of letters, or even with oral speech" (*Student-Centered* 28). To achieve this holistic development in the use of language, Moffett advocated a curriculum that synthesized seemingly discrete concepts in order to reveal underlying interconnectedness, a kind of basic interactive intent between meaning makers. What he advocates is a return to a baseline rhetoric in which writing becomes—always—verbalization in some sort of dramatic scene, one's contribution to an ongoing dyadic dialogue:

units on style, logic, and rhetoric can teach little more than abstract information if these things are not kept as functions of each other, and they can be kept so only in the context of somebody-talking-to-somebody-else-about-something. . . . I am thinking that the student would learn the skills of operating our symbol system by role-playing first and second persons in all possible relations that might exist between the student and a subject, and between him and a speaker

or listener. . . . The starting point, then, of teaching discourse is “drama”:  
interaction between the communicants, who are equal and whose relation is  
reversible. (*Teaching the Universe* 5, 10, 11-12).

What’s taught as “Composition” becomes de-determined and re-combined according to this deeper, all-inclusive rhetorical holism: “I am construing English as all discourse in our native language—any verbalizing of any phenomena, whether thought, spoken, or written; whether literary or non-literary” (*Teaching the Universe* 9). Speech, writing, poetry, drama, and song (all key genres in Moffett’s language arts curriculum) are bound up in and spring from the cosmological impulse; the attempt to isolate and prize the technical diminishes composing and comprehending, obscuring both the rich rhizomatic bed that nourishes them, as well as the ever-present stage on which our communicative efforts are performed.

Before we examine more closely the concrete emphases and exercises Moffett advocated, it is worth lingering over the cultural studies turn composition took just as Moffett began moving toward the cosmological. It is perhaps tempting to see these tendencies as being at odds. Indeed, as we indicate below when we turn to Moffett’s critics, Moffett was increasingly read as floating into the mystic rather than dealing with the harsh realities of prejudice and injustice, particularly as they pressed heavily on women and people of color. But we would suggest that this binary is far too easy and deceptive. It is true that cultural studies front loads its ethical bearings, however, and this needs acknowledgement. Seeking equality where it is lacking remains a powerful and worthy goal. If there is an issue here, it is that we may not push hard enough on these premises. What makes the ethical *ethical*? What grounds our senses of freedom and the work it takes to pursue it—even if such work remains more difficult for some than for others? What grounds the pursuit of freedom in all cultural and vocational arenas, fostering a deeper seated sense that, as Nelson Mandela put it, freedom isn’t just casting off fetters but living in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others?

The work of redressing injustice is not an isolated pursuit. It too takes part in the cosmological, for the high concepts to which it is wedded—perhaps especially concepts such as liberty, freedom, equality, and value—reach down into our most basic questions about who

human beings can be and what place and role they may have in the grander cosmos. Thus, such questions and ideas are entwined with the always shifting story of the self we endlessly perform. They spring from connection and its vicissitudes. Such questions thus take part, as we stated above, in “deep operations of the mind and spirit” that cannot be tethered solely to literacy, reading; rather, they invoke the whole of a person and all they can or desire to do (*Student-Centered* 28). The transcending of one’s immediate ethnic chauvinism and cultural location, i.e., the abandonment of blood and soil, takes all available resources. As we saw above with the strategies of the presocratics, leading the person out from where they are, ensnared in cultural traps, bounds, and prejudices, is rarely easy. The civil rights movement, and the racism still permeating everyday life, further testify to how much work remains to be done.

So, the idea that Moffett doesn’t share in many of cultural studies’ goals is false. But there remain differences, too. Cultural studies sees itself as overtly political and critical, and its work continually plies this ground. Its critique can be positive, as in its penchant to laud resistant practices, but even here, the readings that support such assertions reside in the house that critique built, since resistance is conceived on criticality, rarely wandering too far from ideas of hegemony and ideology. In this regard, we argue that Moffett has advantages, since he shares with cultural studies the larger goals of freedom and equality, growth and increased potential, but addresses them from vastly different and often broader perspectives. Cultural studies has always been vulnerable to counter-attack precisely for being seen as indoctrinating and moralistic, and today, as business interests continue to infiltrate the university, we can see how the hot button culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s have given way to quite effective *realpolitik* stealth and control strategies (and not only from the conservative right wing). It is precisely in such a climate that strategies of Moffett take on new appeal, since they work toward at least some shared goals without becoming such a visible target or being so easily corralled. Moffett’s curriculum, then, works more indirectly—but admittedly, as we shall see below, not without risks of its own. Nevertheless, by declining to force direct moral ends and rather building groundwork for pluralism and liberality (in the sense of freedom seeking and achieving, or in the sense of the *liberal* arts, not the contemporary political orientation), Moffett suggests fresh or at least alternative pathways that elevate us toward the cultivation of a genuinely cosmopolitan ethos.

However, this last point needs some qualification. It is seldom the case that transcending prejudice and cultivating cosmopolitanism is easy. Indeed, it is striking that Moffett is actually caught up in perhaps the earliest battle—and battle it was—for what became the culture wars in the 1980s. But this fight took place in Kanawha County, West Virginia in 1974. Kanawha County was working toward adopting a K-12 program called Interaction that Moffett was instrumental in creating and directing. A few school board members objected to it, and they were able to build support, as well as spurring increasingly strong activist tactics, including picketing, withholding children from school, firebombing, shooting at buses, and other mayhem (See Fig. 4). Schools were forced to shut down for a while, and eventually, the school board was forced to capitulate and reject Moffett's curriculum (Moffett, *Harmonic* 2-3).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 4**

The first battle of the culture wars: protestors picketing in Kanawha County, WV in 1974. Note how the sign, invoking “our religion, home, and nation,” sketches anchor points within a larger cosmological orientation, albeit an ethnocentric one.

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While neither this incident nor cultural studies are our focuses, it is worth making a few brief remarks about them in order to set up our longer examination of Moffett's curriculum and its expansive understanding of literacy and education, including, as we will get to, the musical. First, Moffett, who was subject to considerable personal duress during the Kanawha battle and its aftermath, refused to be bitter, stating several times in *Harmonic Learning* that he owes his foes a favor (5, 14). We see that Moffett puts his own curriculum to the test and finds it true, for when the elevator tries to break him down, he punches a higher floor. Moffett's response is to point out how the Kanawha protestors were ultimately *ethnocentrist*. Moffett notes that they objected to anything that overly stretched or challenged the beliefs that they were raised with—narratives of hearth and ethos—because they ultimately feared losing their children to ideas, beliefs, and values obscure to them (5). Those beliefs were centered on fundamentalist Christianity and Appalachian culture. Moffett, in turn, refuses to denigrate this, seeing that one cannot but honor it. Yet at the same time, honoring it does not equal leaving it alone. As he points out, their tactics and values tended toward the authoritarian, including censorship, and ethnocentric, including attitudes fundamentally racist. Still, he recognizes that educators, such as English teachers, ask questions about matters that many fundamentalists consider settled, and in so asking, challenge family, church, and state (6).

Moffett's response to these entails the whole of his curriculum, particularly as rethought throughout *Harmonic Learning*. For family, Moffett demonstrates how one's local ties can be expanded to include larger populations and foster non-racist attitudes; for church, Moffett demonstrates how spirituality grounds a sense of oneness from out of the plural; and for state, Moffett demonstrates how the founders of America conceived democracy as jeopardized by the absolutist, authoritarian, and ethnocentric biases, particularly those grounded in religion. In each case, spirituality, as the elevation beyond where one is and the creation of new, broader forms of connection, is proposed, whether through literature, math, science, music, or more. The full spectrum of the arts and sciences is continually brought to bear, in theory and in practice.

## B. CLASSROOM, COMPOSITION, POETRY

We have lingered over cultural studies and the Kanawha County incident in order to set up some of the more practical stakes of Moffett's work, lest the spiritual aspects get misread as frivolous. But the opposite is the case; Moffett demonstrates with great clarity, erudition, and skill how revitalizing education and its power depend precisely on such spiritual work. He knits it into the very question of democracy and cosmopolitan humanity. What we turn to now are some of the actual classwork and lessons he uses to move toward these larger goals. We emphasize that, in contradistinction to so much stemming from cultural studies, Moffett rarely if ever relies on critique to accomplish pedagogical work. Critique arises, but it does so from out of different orientations, because, as we have seen, for Moffett, critique's bearings are watered from deeper pools. What he first wants to cultivate is desire, interest, enjoyment, curiosity.

For Moffett, then, classroom work must develop these deep operations of the mind and spirit, with an eye to the practical matters they buoy up, and to a more joyous relation with song, word, and knowledge. Such development need not be grandiose. For instance, Moffett prizes the notion of student-sponsored discourse in teaching composition: not a generic assignment given out to the class as a whole, but something personally chosen by a student after pre-writing activities: "only within some whole, actual discourse based on individual thinking can words, sentences, and paragraphs—or style, rhetoric, and logic—be meaningfully practiced and examined [since] students are more highly motivated to write realistic discourses grounded in the writer's experience" (*Active 7*). This reflects Moffett's notion of the broader universe of discourse—in this case, student genres based on everyday textuality: "common kinds of writing actually practiced all the time outside of school . . . the discourse our world turns out as items in magazines, journals, and newspapers or as whole books or other printed matter" (*Active 14*). His curriculum becomes a specifically defined micro-cosmology of the discourse universe's origins; in describing text production, he sounds like Timaeus explaining digestion or respiration:

Inwardly, we record or register the drama of our ongoing perception of what is happening in and around us, file a report on this to our memory banks, where it

is assimilated and consciously or unconsciously organized according to classes or categories derived from society and past experience. The mind formulates new generalizations or confirms previous ones based on these classifications and combines these generalizations to infer a system of interlocking propositions that constitute our outlook and that will act downward in turn to influence how the next experiences shall be registered and digested. Writing reflects inner mental structures. (Active 13)

Moffett realizes that those “inner mental structures” are dependent on one’s discursive past—“an individual is a walking model of his social world” (*Teaching the Universe* 70)—so it is up to the school to help broaden children’s textual worlds, beyond what they may have internalized at home or in their larger social sphere. School can foster the coalescence of new discursive planets to orbit the home system of a child’s geography, language, and culture, expanding their micro-universe of discourses. Moffett’s model imagines the child’s mind as a kind of armillary sphere needing the full range of ideo-cosmic trajectories: “The cranium is the globe, but the globe any child grows up in is always too small for later purposes, especially in the chameleon civilization we know and are increasingly going to know” (*Teaching the Universe* 70). The most immediate discursive orbits Moffett defines as “a confluence of streams issuing from sensory receptors, memory, and a variety of more or less emotional or logical kinds of reflection,” which, if developed through proper schooling, expand the original inner-speech world of the child’s textual universe through both time and space: “in time, from immediate to long-term and, in space, from the most indwelling nature to the farthest-flung cultural and material environments” (“Writing, Inner Speech” 136). His attunement to the space/time nexus in which communication occurs explains his curricular predilection for drama and dialogue:

There is one thing that no grammar book will ever tell us about the trinity of discourse: first and second persons are of a different order of reality than third person. Whereas *I* and *you* are existential, unabstracted persons, *he* or *it* has merely referential or symbolic reality. That is, *I* and *you* inhabit some space-time, but, in a given communication situation, *he* or *it* inhabits only the timeless realm

of abstraction. (*Teaching the Universe* 11)

For Moffett “composition” is more properly subsumed by “language arts” because he sees that writing is a far-flung pursuit, and not pedagogically isolable: “reading, speech, literature, drama, composition, and language are learned by means of each other and interrelated to the point of effacing some conventional categories of the field” (*Student-Centered* 1). Accordingly, Moffett avoids textbooks and any literarily thin reading selections. So, early reading materials would include “folk and fairy tales, fables and legends, poems and songs” as “any small child would rather read about the remote or fantastic” (*Student-Centered* 80). Realism delimits to the extent that it cannot spark thoughts beyond the immediate and the known. Another criteria: literature that teaches the “melody of language” and the “sound of sense” (88), reading in which students “are invited to soak up and savor the sounds of sentences in poems and stories” (*Student-Centered* 88) which tap into “the incantatory power of literary language” (*Student-Centered* 89). Moffett’s preferred genres for student writing practice are equally creative and more reflective of the discursive worlds populating the classroom universe (as well as students’ lives): “Picture captions, cartoon strips, songs, poems, stories, journal entries, jokes, riddles, telegrams, directions to follow, eyewitness accounts, personal recollections, personal essays, fables, editorials, and original nature booklets” (*Student-Centered* 116)—i.e., writing that “gives full play to the inventions of imagination and expresses inner psychic material” (*Student-Centered* 117).<sup>10</sup>

The focus is on possibility, expanding repertoires: “what a student needs most of all is to perceive how he *is* using language and how he *might* use it” (11). As realism can delimit imaginative reach, so dull prose can curtail the experience of joy and delight in language, deadening students to language’s non-semantic powers. This implies a performance-oriented curriculum involving reading aloud by student as well as teacher. It’s necessary to continue reading aloud, even after the children can read silently, to show how the storyteller’s voice works to bring out moods and meanings. Some selections are chosen that allow for choral reading as well. His performance-based curriculum follows this trajectory: first, drama, with costumes and a small rostrum stage; then music/rhythm/sound—instruments, piano, and record player become key classroom materials, providing a wide variety of stimuli for young students to translate into

a wide variety of body movements: “running the sound spectrum is running the emotional gauntlet” (S-C 38). The teacher makes a sound and asks students how one should move to it: “The question would be: What is happening? Who are you? Where are you?” (*Student-Centered* 39). Dramatic play leads to work with sound, then movement and sound together, then pantomime, then movement and speech. At one point comes the use of monologues, which lets children practice extended utterance—Moffett calls it “learning to write without paper” (*Student-Centered* 64). It’s an ironically Platonic move, illuminating how monologues are actually “born of dialogue, when a single voice takes over momentarily, like an aria in an opera” (*Student-Centered* 65).

Poetry is the key genre in his curricular practice: “Along with Northrop Frye, I feel strongly that much of the first reading matter should be poetry. The three R’s of poetry—rhyme, rhythm, and repetition—teach children a lot about individual words and patterns of words, and they do so in delightful and memorable ways” (114). We’re struck by the emphasis on criteria such as the lexical focus, the need for delight, the power of the memorable—criteria considered of lesser importance in most of what we read in our field. Again, we see how his curriculum stresses the universe of discourse, not just university discourse. It is also the case that the primacy of poetry is unsurprising; as we elaborated above, the first Greek cosmological texts were the Homeric epics: “The cosmic structure assumed in these poems was a simple one of earth as a circular disk around which flowed the freshwater river Ocean; the hemisphere of the vault of the sky was above, and the matching realm of Tartarus was below” (Wright 16). Hesiod’s work followed, exploiting the Homeric form for more focused protreptic purposes; later Parmenides and Empedocles would follow suit. What’s key here is that the presocratics used the poetic not only because it was the tradition and simply means to achieve more logical idioms. Rather, the poetic already within itself kindles the gesture toward transcendence and an order beyond. This aspect of the poetic also evokes the musical, a point will explore this further below.

Poetry, then, as the primal genre for cosmology. In the *Phaedo*, Cebes asks the imprisoned Socrates why he’s suddenly started composing poems (metrical versions of Aesop’s fables and a hymn to Apollo) at the end of his life. It’s because of dreams, Socrates answers,

which repeatedly command him to cultivate the Muses. “Socrates,” the recurring dream entreats him, “make music and work at it” (60e). And why, choosing to obey the dream, does he transpose Aesop’s fables into verse? Because the mythic is a more compelling genre than exposition or persuasion: “A poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose myths and not speeches, since I was not a maker of myths, I took the myths of Aesop” (61b). Plato, of course, will craft his own myths, including a lovely one at the end of the *Phaedo*, regarding the destination of souls and the real, bejeweled world awaiting them on the upper surface of the earth, as opposed to the corroded depths we think of as reality: “one part is purple of wonderful beauty, and one is golden, and one is white, whiter than chalk or snow” (110c).

Poetry is primal, too, for its power. Moffett: “The first literature is always poetry because scripture is poetry, and scripture is poetry because only language at once multileveled and incantatory can do justice to the reality it evokes and invokes” (*Harmonic* 71). Moffett prizes poetry for its “vocal potency,” its ability to summon power (“Writing, Inner Speech” 172). Time and again in *Active Voice* (the compilation of the writing program he developed while teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy in the 1960s), no matter whether the classroom assignment is a memoir, a fable, a chronicle, dialogues, monologues, letters, or a diary entry, Moffett suggests students revise their writing as a poem, urging them to explore their power to en-*chant* language. The throat, poised midway between brain and heart, is a powerful energy center in Moffett’s educational scheme; yogis “regard this place of speech not just as expressing thought and feeling but as a vibrational power source of great influence” (172 – 173), a resonance-source enabling a desired attunement. Chanted language, for Moffett, holds magic—he even invokes the earlier meaning of *logos* as “energy source of the solar system” (173). In every one of his language-arts curricula, students, at every grade level, are reading and reciting poetry, getting practice in “the forms of language that transcend ideas and alter consciousness, induce trance. This means far more time devoted to song and poetry . . . as rhythmic influences, not merely as thematic vehicles” (173).

The incantatory power of language is lost in what Moffett remarks as the “tense emphasis school usually places on communication alone” (“Writing, Inner Speech” 172). Traditional academic writing is dismissed as “glorified book-reporting” (“Writing, Inner Speech”

140). Communication isn't to be discounted, of course—the point rather is that communication itself is cradled by language's "other half," the elements operating at meaning degree zero: "rhythm, rhyme, repetition, nonsense, imagery, sheer sound and beat and vocal play" ("Writing, Inner Speech 172). This end-around the numbing focus on the narrowest conceptions of rationality, practicality, and communication serves to interrupt the inner stream of thought we call the self—and in interrupting it, it offers space for imaginative change. Personal growth begins here, and we stress how Moffett's curriculum, as it evolved over the years, dovetails with contemporaneous cultural developments, including the new, exploratory musics emerging from rock's ascendance, in particular the California scene burgeoning around him. Our upcoming look at one of these iconic California groups, the Grateful Dead, will thereby explore a non-academic scene for the merging of lyric, performance, philosophical rumination, and music, with an emphasis on the pursuit of insight, interruption, and transformation.

### C. GROWTH AND THE COSMIC

In fact, Moffett's curriculum captures the psychedelic spirit more deeply than any other work in the field at the time. Others may have lit incense and played groovy music, but Moffett found the most resonant educational applications for the era's cosmic consciousness. Allowing inner speech to find paths beyond the simple replication of the culturally given necessitated catalytic means. Literature and rhyme, yes, but even further: his use of yoga and meditation in teaching; a theory and practice undergirded with sources like the Sufi's, the Rosicrucians, and Egyptian Hermeticism; an unwavering view of learning as a unified field, including cross-disciplinary classroom projects and nonverbal experience; an insistence on alternative modes of knowing; and a richly mystic vocabulary with the ultimate aim of a student's attunement, intellectually and spiritually. He roots his theory, always, in the primitive core or wellspring of being, a place transcending language:

"Recalling," "comprehending," "relating facts," "making inferences," "drawing conclusions," "interpreting," and "predicting outcomes" are all mental operations that go on in the head of a non-literate aborigine navigating his outrigger according to cues from the weather, sea life, currents, and the position of the heavenly bodies. Not only do these kinds of thinking have no necessary connection with reading, but they have no necessary connection with language whatever. (*Student-Centered* 16)

Intelligence is not dependent on literacy as such. Moffett thereby implicitly challenges the hierarchical superiority granted literacy that undergirds education, seeing that literacy's power remains grounded in what education (narrowly conceived) cavalierly disregards. His holistic approach would fuse the practical and theoretical, the conclusive and creative, the known and the sought for. This holism is seen in the centrality, in his curriculum, of projects—cross-disciplinary, long-term investigations in which students figure it out as they go along, whereby education becomes the imaginative exercise of knowledge through experience; knowledge not as a criterion point but an ongoing, creative pursuit.

One of Moffett's approaches is to develop a group of assignments all constellated around the idea of narrative: e.g., take the first part of some sentence and spin off an imaginative conclusion; find some photos to make up stories about; keep a dream notebook; make up some outlandish tall tales (*Active Voice* 73-74). Then the student keeps a diary for five weeks; then the student is asked to select and summary diary entries, shaping a narrative (*Active Voice* 77-81). This leads to a series of autobiographical writings, as well as accounts of things that happened to others or things that happened in nature (*Active Voice* 92-108). Evident in that last type of text is one of Moffett's intent with this long project: "go[ing] from concrete narratives to more distilled ones and thence to the ultimate distillation of narrative—generalization. So the shift is from the past tense to the present tense of generalization—*what happened to what happens*" (*Active Voice* 71). And so, the next several assignments develop that temporal shift: a 'reporter-at-large' assignment, asking the student to visit some space, observe the activity over time, and write an account of it; biographical sketches of students' acquaintances; chronicles of a group or community; a series of parables, fables, and proverbs (very novel sorts of generalizations); a thematized series of incidents; and finally, the student is asked to conduct some research and generate some theory (*Active Voice* 109-158). Moffett's gloss on the series of assignments in this long unit, and their culmination in the theory-building assignment, is worth noting, as it shows his intent of allowing students to become cosmologists (student as Parmenides, say, amassing a textual canon to explain the world), building their own worlds instead of simply re-presenting the creative realizations of others:

The importance of having the student argue a theory about a subject he really knows is to prevent him from borrowing arguments he has heard or read, for in that case the paper will be merely an elaborate kind of copying and there is little chance for him to learn from it. An excellent point of departure, if this is possible, would be for the student to take generalizations he created in "Proverb and Saying," "Narrative Illustrating a Generality," or other assignments, reflect on some of their ramifications, and combine them to see if new statements can reasonably ensue. Ideally, all the propositions he manipulates in this paper would

have been drawn from his previous papers. He would then be forging an entire thought structure of his own. (*Active Voice* 152)

For Moffett, as with the presocratics, the fundamental gesture of writing becomes the creation of a “personal” cosmos. That is, to gain insight into how we are always integrating ourselves into the world, and then to push for more self-reflective awareness of it via thinking and writing. Moffett plays on the double meaning of “temple” to connect the center of individual consciousness and the space of divine worship (“Writing, Inner Speech” 150). The tension in those early philosophers between the macrocosm and the microcosm becomes a basic curricular tenet for Moffett:

A human being is literally *made to order* and will *make* sense of everything that comes into his ken, weird as his cosmology may look to another individual or another culture. The typifying trait of humankind is to “get his head together” even if his only symbolic medium for doing so is iconographic, and no matter how chaotic his environment. . . . Writing throws out to society samples of the cosmology that any individual has to be making for himself all the time as an ongoing orientation to this world and an unceasingly updated guide for behavior. . . . As micro-cosmos, he reflects to some degree the cosmos of culture and the macro-cosmos of nature, but he is always in the process of converting chaos to cosmos—or perhaps of discovering the order concealed in apparent disorder—and the particular instance of this composition that we call writing partakes of this general ordering. (“Writing, Inner Speech” 141)

If education is “the ascent from chaos to cosmos,” then “What really teaches composition –‘putting together’—is disorder” (“Writing, Inner Speech” 141, 140); indeed, Moffett’s very focus on tapping a student’s inner speech is to make the inner outer. Such reconciliation of opposites brings to mind Heraclitus’s “The way up is the way back” (F69) or “The beginning is the end” (F70). The sense, too, in that “ongoing orientation of the world,” of the universe as being freshly encountered (“The sun is new again, all day” [F32]) and verbally made sense of by an individual in one’s “idiosyncratic ways of structuring and symbolizing

experience" ("Writing, Inner Speech" 145). "Things keep their secrets" (F10), and so that concealed order must be individually discovered. Ideally, Moffett sees writers as evolving their own personal, ongoing composition courses, a kind of idiolect-based curriculum forged from one's experiential encounters with the world, "drawing on those discursive paradigms from society that meant most to them" ("Writing, Inner Speech" 159).

And so his assignments strive for multivalency in an attempt to move beyond known horizons. Such imaginative academic work, along with the focus on meditation and songs and dances, show Moffett's desire to spark the spiritual, to awaken us to the incantatory power of music and language, powers that transform and enliven; borrowing from Mircea Eliade, he calls such practices "techniques of ecstasy" ("Writing, Inner Speech" 178). It's not enough, perhaps, simply to teach works that bring the greatest transcendent experiences and affirmations of life. Moffett decried how education teaches them in order to tame them. And in tapping into the wellsprings running beneath education's business as usual, he sought to bring their vitality to what we do. This is Moffett's crucial notion of education as *counterspell*: freeing the student from conceptual, discursive, imaginative atrophy into a higher, more aware state of consciousness.

We have emphasized the poetic, but insofar as literacy is not everything, as Moffett argues, and as the poetic takes part in the musical, so it is that music seems to be central to Moffett's educational insights and curricular paths. It is no accident that Moffett hinges much of his thought on musical metaphors and their resources. As suggested earlier, the Greeks grouped music training with Muse-inspired pursuits of many stripes, including math and philosophy. And music itself irrepressibly invokes all of life, the beautiful and the terrible, and the most powerful music can change who we are. All the great musical movements express this potential for change. But music understood in this sense is not just the background wallpaper we are surrounded with—musics tempered by oversaturation and plasticity. Perhaps this is why great musics, historically, are so often associated with a *scene*. A scene is always more than just the emergence of some fresh artists—it entails the emergence of new musical languages, sounds, styles, feelings, antagonisms, and solidarities. Moffett had no faith in the predominant mode of the teaching of writing, assigning "'topics for composition" he felt bored students with

“arbitrary material to exercise with,” when, as he knew, “any subject matter whatsoever will serve as something to talk, read, and write about. The main thing is that the material should involve the hearts and minds of the learners sufficiently for them to practice these language arts realistically” (*Harmonic* 88). Music remains a most fruitful subject matter in that regard.



**Figure 5**

The famous “skull and roses” image from the Grateful Dead, created by Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelly, based on an image they found in an old edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* illustrated by Edmund Sullivan. The image was used for a 1966 Avalon Ballroom concert poster first, then later on the cover of the Grateful Dead’s self-titled 1971 live album. The band originally wanted to call the album “Skull Fuck,” but that title was unsurprisingly rejected by Warner Bros. Records. The image merges death with rebirth and love.

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## **PART III**

**"IN THE END THERE'S JUST A SONG ...":  
COSMOLOGY AS A GRATEFUL DEAD PERFORMANCE**

## A. MUSIC AS SPIRITUAL GROUND

Why song? Song transports us. The musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl answers the question of “why people sing” by focusing on the primal moment of the folk song, especially in its social, communal function: “Wherever folk music is still alive, people come together to sing” (25). The experience transforms us by entering into the communal joy of singing, a unity which breaks down distinctions. For him, it is, indeed, a sort of Dionysian frenzy of self-abandonment, but Zuckerkandl puts a finer point on it: “not a turning away from the self, not a negation, but an enlargement, an enhancement of the self, a breaking down of the barriers separating self from things, subject from object, agent from action, contemplator from what is contemplated” (23). He acknowledges that the folk song is a poem, of course, but teases out song’s difference from simply the spoken word, which, for him, “presupposes ‘the other,’ the person or persons to whom it is addressed” (27). Song obliterates that separation or juxtaposition; it is singing that is the natural expression of a group. This is due in large part to the tonal quality of song: “Whereas the word goes out from me, the speaker, and remains outside with the person spoken to, who replies with another word, I, as a singer, go out of myself with the tone and at the same time, as a listener, return to myself from outside with the tone. In the tone, and only in the tone, the singer encounters himself coming from the outside, and not just himself if the singer is the group” (28). Egbert Bakker makes a similar argument in his study of Homeric poetic performance; the rhythm of dactylic hexameter (the standard meter of Greek epic) propels the consciousness of the singer forward, giving the singer the sense that their words and power transcend the ego and are “an authority located beyond everyday experience and the source of immutable knowledge and authority” (136). This experience was considered essential to ancient education. As Plato writes in the *Laws*, “by an ‘uneducated’ man we shall mean a man who has not been trained to take part in the chorus” (654a). Witness, too, Eryximachus’s comment in the *Symposium*, underscoring the nexus between song, education, and life: “But when it’s a question of employing rhythm and harmony in human life—either creatively (that is to say, in song-writing) or in turning the compositions, with their tunes and tempos, to good account (that

is to say, in education)—then it’s hard, and skill is required” (187d).

When words are combined with music, an even more remarkable transformation occurs; the singer forges not only identification with the group but with the things, the content, the words of the song: “if his words are not merely spoken but sung, they build a living bridge that links [the singer] with the things referred to by the words, that transmutes distinction and separation into togetherness. By means of the tones, the speaker goes out to the things, brings the things from outside within himself, so that they are no longer the other,’ something alien that he is not, but the other and his own in one” (29). When Robert Hunter is asked in an interview about reading poems, his preference is for the voiced performance: “a lot more people will listen to it on their cassette machines than will ever read the book. . . . I think that’s the appropriate place for poetry. It *should* be read [aloud]. It’s only second-hand when it’s on the page. . . . [R]eading them aloud . . . I find that the meanings become more and more apparent to me” (“February 25, 1988” 271). Song’s participatory potential is what drew Hunter to songwriting as a poetic outlet, its ability to achieve a togetherness, an immediacy:

Well, let’s give [young listeners bored with reading] their literature through their ears, then, with a rock beat. See if that happens. There is a great joy in good literature, but if you’re not getting that great joy out of it, there’s no point in pushing your nose in it. (Eisenhart 187)

This removal of barriers, this “inner participation” affected by singing, is, for Zuckerkandl, “a spiritual experience” (29). And hence, we have Zuckerkandl’s most important reason for why people sing: “people sing in order to make sure, through direct experience, of their existence in a layer of reality different from the one in which they encounter each other and things as speakers, as facing one another and separate from one another—in order to be aware of their existence on a plane where distinction and separation of man and man, man and thing, thing and thing give way to unity, to authentic togetherness” (42). It is nothing less than “the opening of new layers of reality and meaning” (43).

Let us emphasize: ancient peoples sang, hummed, rhymed, chanted, incanted. They created instruments, danced, sought ritual and drama, ecstasy and tragedy. Goat songs

(*tragoidia*) and lyrics, epics and gnostic sophistications. It is the most basic fact of human communion that it pulses into rhythms and melodies. It is no wonder that music is fundamental to culture, community, polity, and hence education. As we discussed above, the Greeks called such education *mousikē*—education grounded in music, beginning at age six. This should not surprise. As Moffett sees with clarity, education begins with language's spell, but this includes the fact that language's impact cannot be reduced to meaning alone. Human-infant interaction is first before all, and it is the sing-song coo, which cultivates affective relations and bonding that in turn, as Zuckerkandl has said, helps build our sense of world—the opening of new layers of reality and meaning, the living bridge that conjoins selfness and cosmos. As we recall, this goes back to our earlier discussion of Moffett's understanding of spirituality: the experience of a oneness we share in behind the plurality of the everyday. Moffett is equally interested, and tuned in through what he saw ongoing in California and elsewhere, to the many roads to such insight, and, further, the wisdom to find how to enact in everyday behavior this fundamental interconnection.

The conjunction of song, communion, and shamanism is crucial and puts in high relief the reason we felt Hunter's songs, performed by the Grateful Dead, were emblematic for this discussion. Physically, the space of a Dead concert was a different space, a heightened space, so of course the prose used to describe a Dead show tried to rise to its heights:

The walls change color with the music. Liquid-light projections dance and tremble to the sound. A strobe jerks the environment into ragged film action. The Grateful Dead lead the lost souls through purgatory and hell and to the gates of heaven in search of salvation, pointing out the torments and joys and wonders that we pass. Grateful to be dead—grateful to have been shown the truth of the void. "In the Land of the Dark the Ship of the Sun shall be driven by the Grateful Dead." These are the Grateful Dead. *The Grateful Dead*.

I took the cap of acid from my shirt pocket and swallowed it, surrendering myself to the coming of The Final Truth. All possible variables lined up. Nothing left to do. This is it. (Craddock 15)

Jerry Garcia (in 1969) describes the Grateful Dead audience in terms that show its singular nature: "I think that the more important thing than just the music is the whole attitude. The dance thing, the whole fact that there are lots of people getting together. And for all of us, this is the first time we've ever seen lots of people get together" (Gleason "Jerry Garcia" 33). Richard Kostelanetz also notes the unique community that formed at the Dead's Fillmore East shows: "The audience seemed a microcosm of a new society that was free of both race prejudice and class prejudice, free of middle-class inhibitions about pleasure, free of censorship, acutely sensitive to political and social evil" (in Silberman 43-44). "Of course the Dead are unique," Ralph J. Gleason claims: "All you had to do was to look around backstage and see the women, babies, and dogs and it couldn't have been anyone but the Dead" ("Full Circle" 89). That overwhelming sense of a massive, embodied, engaged participatory communion prompted Garcia to claim, "I think that we still feel that our function is as a dance band and that's what we like to do. We like to play with dancers. We like to see it and really, nothing improves your time like having somebody dance" (Gleason "Jerry Garcia" 27) [See Figs. 6, 7].



**Figure 6**

Fans dancing at a Grateful Dead show, 2009.

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**Figure 7**

Greek women in a Dionysian dance, from a Greek vase.  
Cosmos, spirituality, and *mousikē*.

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Dancing is important. McNally notes that “San Francisco poet Michael McClure once said that the Haight scene ended when people stopped dancing at concerts,” but adds “people have never stopped dancing at Dead concerts” (166). That perennial dancing, perennial celebratory ritualism, helps distinguish a Dead show’s status as shamanic initiation rite. As California writer Mary Goodenough sees it, a Dead concert has all the hallmarks of shamanistic ritual: “establishment of sacred space, the altering of consciousness, and a death-rebirth ordeal that results in the awakening of the spirit into another realm of being” (177). Goodenough sees the blankets laid on arena floors by fans close to the stage, the incense and cannabis smoke filling the air, the use of psychedelics, and the animal imagery in songs (e.g., “Dire Wolf” or “Bird Song”) as all contributing to the establishment of a sacred space at a Dead show (177). Additionally, she reads the typical rhythmic pattern in the trajectory of a Dead set list – from harmony to discord and back to harmony (e.g., “Epilogue”/“Prelude”/“Morning Dew” – as signaling a cyclic journey from order to chaos and death to epiphanic rebirth (178). Scholars who explore this transformative aspect of a Dead concert often bring in comments made by mythologist Joseph Campbell, like Reist, for example:

Joseph Campbell also recognized the potent, ritualistic nature of a Grateful Dead concert and compared it to a Dionysian festival, saying that he had rarely beheld such innocence as he saw in the “rapturous” faces of Deadheads as they danced: “It doesn’t matter what the name of the god is, or whether it’s a rock group or a clergy. It’s somehow hitting that chord of realization of the unity of God in us all. That’s a terrific thing and it just blows the rest away.” (185)

Goodenough adds that Campbell felt “the Grateful Dead phenomenon evolved in the latter half of the twentieth century to help Western civilization recover from the spiritual poverty of modern society” (176). Such a desire for mythic, spiritual, cosmological enrichment permeate comments from Dead fans. McNally cites the example of Tim, a thirty-one year old lawyer from Southern California, a drug-free yoga devotee who, together with his wife, attended “every Dead concert west of the Rockies and owns perhaps 1,000 hours of concert tapes. Tim suggested that the

music be called 'alternate reality rock,' or 'transcendental rock,' that it wasn't earth music, but a search for a spiritual/alchemical transformation" (169).

And when you hear that song  
Come crying like the wind  
It seems like all this life  
Was just a dream ("Stella Blue")

## B. MUSIC AS COSMOGONIC PERFORMANCE

And so, our own preference is for song that reinforces the truth of this deeper layer of reality and meaning, songs that inflect the cosmological realities we find in the presocratics. Perhaps here too we see why great musics, historically, are so often associated with a scene, which, we have pointed out, entails the emergence of new musical languages, sounds, styles, feelings, antagonisms, and solidarities. And this is transformative, as Nietzsche understood, as for instance when Zarathustra is advised by the animals, “new lyres are needed for your new songs” (*Zarathustra* III “Convalescent” 2). We find a true scene permeating the music and legacy of the Grateful Dead. Here’s how Hank Harrison describes the time (and the Dead’s place in it) in his history of the band:

Yes, you can be frightened of them! They are real and they have grown to be many and they are happy but deadly serious, armed to the teeth and extremely intelligent. They are as powerful as painted buses and battalions of tie-dyed, uniformed marijuana smokers, young and old. They are as powerful as a sunset at Big Sur, which sets twice—once for the clouds and once for the prophets who dot the cliffs and inhabit the seal rookeries. . .

Terrifying, huh? That’s it, that’s the magic!

That’s where the plots are hatched to overthrow the kingdom, and it’s inaccessible to the unwashed. Only the Zen Master knows the shibboleth.

The new music, you see, is the airborne detergent that broke down the walls.

It was Joshua’s music. The lamb ram sheep horn shofa holy music. Transmuting molecules into wafers to be consumed as peyote buttons and holy eucharists.

Eerie musical notes, glowing, bringing up a generation to a sacred level of consciousness through mantra chanting, electronic pulsations, and, of course, random consultation with the *I-Ching* and the *Tarot*. . . .

The music was all they had for awhile. (11)

There may be a sweet, excited breathlessness about such a description, but its key terms and propositions are very much of a piece with our discussion. Moffett took deep inspiration from that late '60s California scene, hearing in its new songs a musical *askesis* for his educational vision.

Take the Grateful Dead's song "Ripple," wherein Robert Hunter reflects on the very idea of writing music and its cultural effect. "Ripple" stages Zuckerkandl's insight that music "comes to us from the other side, from beyond a boundary [i.e., a stage, a record player, a radio]" and, as we receive it, confronts us with the possibility of an existential response, whether to be musical and measure up or to be unmusical and not respond (9, 11). This distinction is integral not just to receptive and creative acts but to the essence of the sacred. In his book *The Prehistory of Religion*, Brian Hayden points out that any act can be performed in profane (non-sacred, non-attuned) or sacred fashion—but "if it is done in a sacred fashion, the connection is made and the world lights up. We feel euphoric" (54). Music is one of the primary sites for this connection; hence, Moffett's Platonic notion of 'soul school,' to enable us to channel our inner musical person: "The most fundamental aspects of any material subject in society and nature are its rhythms. . . . If some universal force is to integrate learning, then we want a rhythmic curriculum" (*Harmonic* 124). The need for integration stems from the distance that we must cross: "Wherever there is a work, there must be a confrontation" (9). Music comes from the other side; it sweeps us up and carries us along, as Parmenides was so carried along to meet the Goddess, whose words he in turn brought back from the underworld—the ultimate other side.<sup>11</sup> Being so carried, however, is also an invitation to understand, and thus *gnosis* is already cosmogonical, since it invites reasoning and the development of knowledge alongside the spark of transporting experiences and the arts that evoke it.

"Ripple," then, is Hunter glossing this confrontation, putting it in mythic, cosmic terms. The music is played "on the harp unstrung" because it is the music of the spheres perhaps, or the musical idea patterned into the very fiber of our soul and the world soul, if you believe Plato's myth in the *Timaeus* of how god took the mixture of the Same and the Different and

marked off sections and intervals according to a musical scale, giving the soul an ingrained musical/mathematical structure (36). This gives a particular twist to Hunter's admission of the non-originality of the words to the song—they're all "hand-me-downs," he remarks. Hunter's is a postmodern version of musical cosmogony, where what is gifted are literally hand-me-downs from the gods and goddesses, from the muses, who give us their bit of word and insight—but as cast-off, handed down from what we cannot fathom, and from which we make our craft. Once created, there is the confrontation with the composition; the pebble has been tossed and the waves ripple out (if you are in touch with your musical mind). Hunter falls back on Eastern thought to try to convey this message, using a haiku for the chorus of the song. The writing of the song is also a confrontation: "after all," Zuckerkandl notes, "the composer too is at bottom a listener" (9), and Hunter notes this, wrestling not just with his songwriter role, given hand-me-down materials with which to work, but with the ways of divine inspiration, which he invokes via the image of the Muses' fount, Hippocrene, on Mt. Helicon, rendered as Hunter's "fountain that was not made by the hands of men." The music is there for the journey, hopefully to inspire us on our life-"road," which Hunter describes in an image resonant with Parmenides' road, the way of awakening and knowledge: "no simple highway, between the dawn and the dark of night."

Moffett understands that our senses of "learning" or "education" can be nonsensical, even redundant. We are always learning, nearly from the second we are born—as Nietzsche's Zarathustra reminds us, "we are presented with grave words and values almost from the cradle" (*Zarathustra* III, "On the Spirit of Gravity"). Music and song are instrumental in such learning, which is ongoing. School is both the continuation of such learning and its interruption. And yet, if there is going to be an interruption, one that cultivates something new in the face of what is already learned, there must be something musical about it. This is not simply music for music's sake, an ornamental palliation for the daily drudge. As we have noted, music is inseparable from math and science, and these practicalities also take organizational form. In his last major book, *The Universal Schoolhouse*, Moffett seeks to put spiritual growth back into education as a *practical matter*, which requires, among other things, forms of community participation. But such pursuit also has a musical key. Just like Nietzsche, Moffett understands the profound and intimate connection between music and rhythm, the body, knowledge, and everyday

practice—and hence spirituality, which, in keeping with the ancient traditions, he thinks of as the soul. And while Nietzsche may have rejected that latter aspect, Nietzsche cultivated his own sense of transcendence of the human, centered on music; as the animals, with their wisdom, tell Zarathustra, “new lyres are needed for your new songs ... cure your soul with new songs” (*Zarathustra* III, “Convalescent 2). The ideal lay-out of Moffett’s student-centered classroom has, next to its “raised platform for stage,” a “listening area”: “Here are stored a record player or cassette recorder—ideally one equipped with earphones—and the class library of discs and cassettes” (Moffett and Wagner 67).

It is the profoundly transformational nature of new musics that grants such import to emerging musical scenes and their new forms of worlding, giving that cosmogonic spark a sonic, lyric, rhythmic shape. Here we should consider one of the Dead’s most iconic moments, their first epic, “Dark Star” (See Excursion 1). It’s a tale of musical, spiritual, and cosmic cycling, the building up of structures that in turn fall, to begin again: “Dark star crashes pouring its light into ashes” becomes reason tattering, tearing loose—and from this, one casts out again, searching, having become aware of the “clouds of delusion.” As the cosmological, so the personal: the mirrors of representation shatter, the glass hand—grasping, transparent, yet fragile—reorders as ice petal flowers revolving; the Muse manifests as a lady in velvet, who visits only to recede. What does all this mean? In an interview, Jerry Garcia makes plain that this is not poetry as we understand it, but rather words given musical life. “All I can do,” says Garcia, “is talk about ‘Dark Star’ as a playing experience”; the interviewer, unsurprisingly, wants to hear more than that, but Garcia grants *gnosis* instead: “I can’t. It talks about itself” (Reich and Wenner 84-5). A dark star is a star that hides its shining, but that shining shines only in performance. “Shall we go, you and I” asks the chorus, in a Prufrockian (i.e., existential) invitation to explore the “transitive nightfall of diamonds.” At that exact point of offer comes the long, exploratory instrumental passages, different for each performance, which have rendered this song an endlessly re-activatable cultural talisman transcending its historic origin. “Dark Star” harkens to that presocratic past even as it invents new visions of what it can be, just as it builds on traditional Americana song forms to create newly electric inner experience—the lightning bolt through the skull (see Figure 8).<sup>12</sup>

Such deeply intuited, telepathic group improvisation is itself a cosmogonic performance. New lyres for new musics, then, is a *gnosis* sought in the path, not something delivered from on high. And so Moffett, steeped in this California Cosmogony, embraces from within science the deep lessons of the ancients and the spiritually-minded: “the I is an individual spirit, represented by the egoic body and incarnated as a soul . . . it does indeed exist independently of a physical body and can not only be born again in the original sense of reawakened while in the flesh but also literally born again and again” (*Universal* 288). Here the notion of metempsychosis, embraced by Empedocles and others, gets resurrected. But the point, finally, is not simply one of belief in souls reincarnating, but rather a new fundament for education and growth. Students are seen not as blank-slate neonates but as “having patterns of experience accumulated across plural lifetimes comprising a larger destiny” (*Universal* 288). This necessitates a personalization for education, where the educational locus shifts from, say, testing, to “the decisions learners make as they go about trying to fulfill their present promptings, which in the system I am proposing will evolve under the influence of interaction with others in the system” (*Universal* 288-89). The focus becomes performance, student as Garcia, riffing, operationalizing a prompt, in concert with cosmic band-mates.

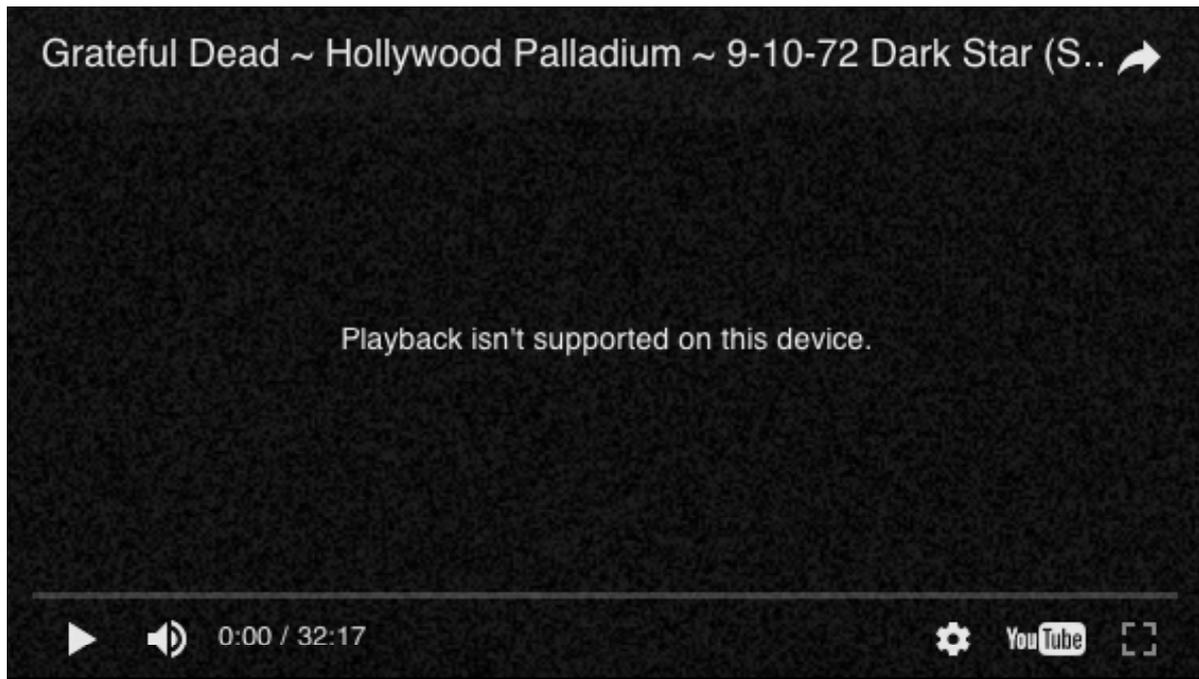


**Figure 8**

The Grateful Dead's iconic "steal your face" image. If "face" is given an existential connotation, then the image harkens to a transformation of being, inner and outer, even as the Dead's music transforms bold old and new musics, both old and new ways of being.

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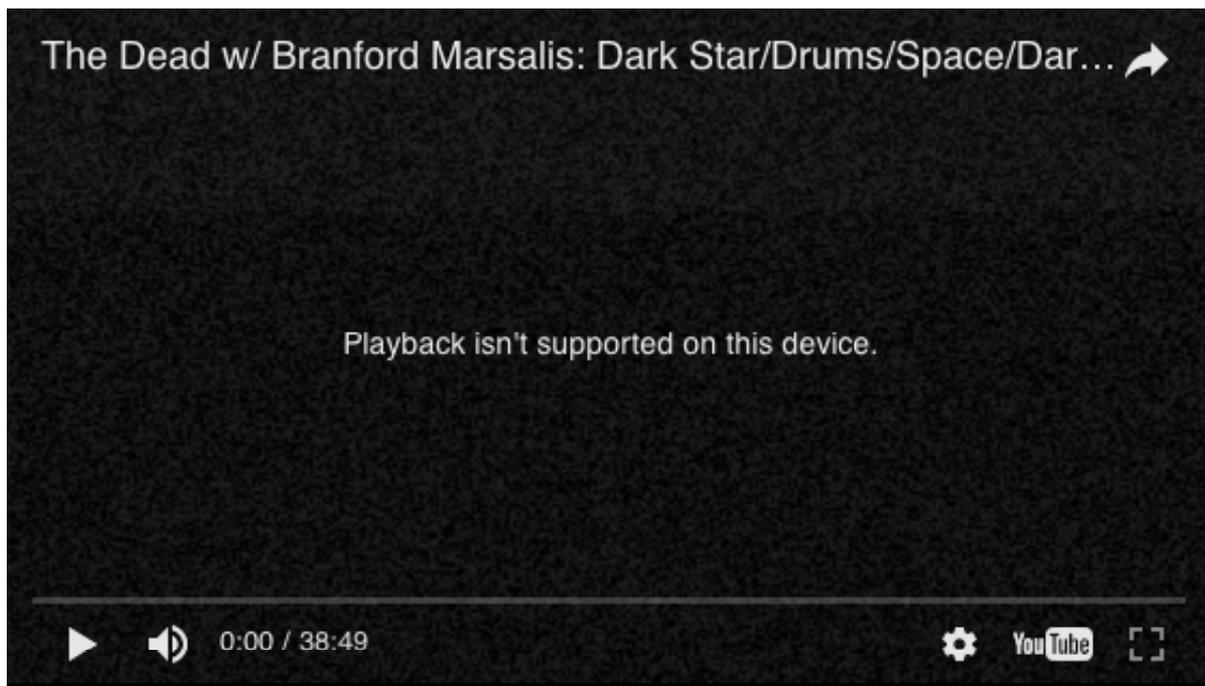
EXCURSION I  
A TRIO OF "DARK STARS"



**Video 1**

9/10/72: Hollywood Palladium, with David Crosby as guest.

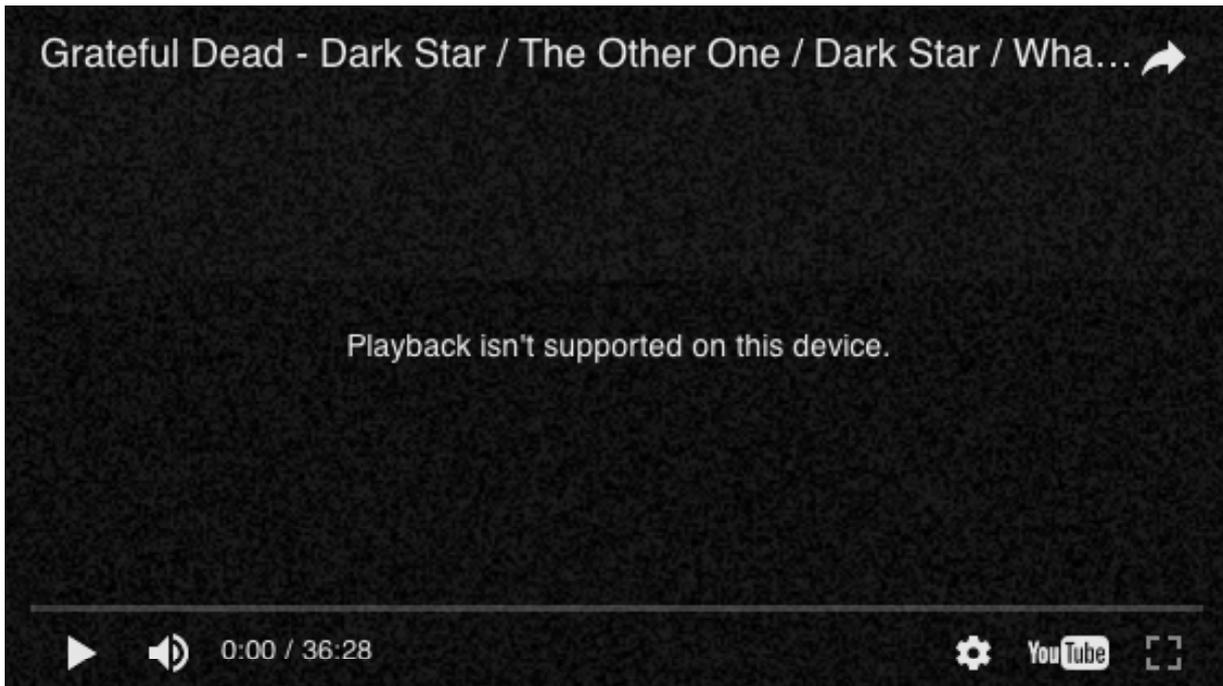
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zf-rRwkWPoU>



## Video 2

3/29/90: Nassau Coliseum, with Branford Marsalis as guest.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJobd-Z-zOc>



**Video 3**

12/31/78: Winterland

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV-2EJnfzjY>

The language of systems and promptings should not mask the cosmological import—learning’s possibility grows out of this performative dimension, sparked by a harmonic approach to language and bodies. As Moffett says, music is the “art of arts” because it is fundamentally self-referential in its structure and pattern (*Harmonic* 115). Garcia understands this intuitively—when he says that “Dark Star” talks about itself, he addresses how the transcendence of music is inseparable from its performative growth from out of the intricate musical interplay of the group members and a responding audience. This unfolding of the local within larger structures goes hand in hand with Moffett’s otherwise difficult to understand ambition to rework education from the ground up in *The Universal Schoolhouse*, where he argues powerfully for local community action in shaping education, including wresting funding and control from the Federal government and returning it to communities. What is difficult, perhaps, to understand is that this is an expansion of what we mean by education. Personal growth is not simply a matter of putting “Dark Star” on the stereo and zoning out to its cosmic tune-in. Certainly that is a wondrous experience, but Moffett’s point is that you can’t stop there. It is in forms of engagement, with others and with the community, that the power of education unwinds—that is, in performance, which becomes the upshot or enactment of attunement. This is why Moffett argues that it’s not enough to strengthen local learning resources; rather, education is itself conceived as merging with other public services, which leads to the “(re)unification of the individual with the cosmos” (*Universal* 294). Here, too, the Grateful Dead were noteworthy in the way the spirit of their music became socially transformative. Ed McNally offers a telling overview for the ways the band enabled a more broadly systemic cultural influence. At concerts, a Dead-sanctioned alternate recording industry thrived, with about thirty microphones positioned behind the sound board at the start of concerts, so fans could record the show and later trade tapes. For sale were home-made crafts like T-shirts, patches, bumper stickers and jewelry. Sympathetic promoters like Bill Graham would seek variances to allow fans travelling from across the country to camp in a park close by the auditorium where the Dead was playing. The ‘Dead Heads’ fan club which sprang up had a different business template than other fan clubs — rather than simply a means to merchandise product, Jerry Garcia, in 1971, helped turn it into a clearinghouse for getting information to fans, as well as allowing communication from fans to performers. And the Dead were the first band to have a separate

section at their concerts for fans either recovering or who simply wanted to practice sobriety.

All this helps us get a sense of what Moffett might mean by “soul school,” a term that, in the wake of someone like Allan Bloom, can seem reactionary. But Bloom, if we remember, thought that cultivating the souls of students meant learning what conservative elites valued, alongside boringly literal reads of Plato, obnoxiously misguided fights against Nietzsche, and ignorant jeremiads about rock and roll. Bloom thought he was smarter than his students and their culture. Moffett’s genius is to reject this elitism and recover the entirely practical understanding of “soul school.” He may want us to “outgrow materiality,” but such personal growth never takes shape as the smug superiority of the fake mystic who’s ‘arrived’ and looks down at everyday struggle (*Universal* 337). It’s more a matter of not accepting materialist values as a valued given, and integrating materialist pursuits, whatever those might be, into a larger weave, as, for instance, the Dead attempted to do as described above with early versions of alternative business practices. Further, we wager that fostering desire and ability beyond the materialist consumerism underpinning contemporary culture has deep appeal in an era struggling with the social, political, and geological realities of “unending economic growth.” Outgrowing materiality for Moffett means a cosmic sensibility that enables personal growth, including skill, enterprise, and employability, that sustains us in the face of pain and struggle, hardship and inequality. These are never simply overcome. We note again the strong emphasis on classroom performance—whether reading-aloud, making music, dancing, or play-acting—that characterizes every year of Moffett’s K-12 language arts curriculum; it is involvement with other people, cradled by an education that attunes us to it (thus, harmonic in the musical sense, where it “talks about itself”), which allows for personal growth in the classroom, in the community, on the earth, within the cosmos. Holism here is the putting together of what’s taken to be separate, and spirituality as soul school can only get its life from this fuller engagement. Indeed, for Moffett, it is this notion of education that our schools have lost, and to their detriment—for not only does he point out that that such deep-seated growth “will solve more social ills and material problems than any other sort of educational orientation” but that “personal development may also be the main purpose of life” (*Universal* 331).

### C. MUSIC, POETIC, AND THE QUESTION OF **G**NOSIS

Music is complexly involved in poetry's emergence and in its performance. As we have argued, music evokes ephemerality and the beyond; it stimulates strong feelings and pulses through the body; it fosters togetherness and connection. These feelings and experiences are not only powerful and educational (in the sense of leading out) in themselves, but they in turn call us to explore them further, and in exploring, to name and narrate. And here we touch back on the epics of Homer and Hesiod, which was in turn ground for the development of other poetic idioms, such as those of the presocratics. What they offer is a grammar of the poetic fragment, evolved as a way to talk about the universe in a way both serious and elegant, still in touch musical modalities of experience. That is, it shared with music a tendency towards movement beyond, the sense of being put in touch with something larger, perhaps wiser, which called for both further exploration and greater concreteness. The continual interplay of musicality and discursivity springs in Heraclitian manner from this tension.

Like Orpheus, then, in navigating and building out of this tension, we show our profound affinity for Apollo and the lyric, a key genre for recording truths about language, the self, and the world. As we have seen, Moffett insisted on the poetic in his language arts curriculum -- having students read and write it -- as both a way to "keep touching on the sensory world" (*Active Voice* 35), as well as to see the world anew, to "see familiar things in an unfamiliar way, to freshen and deepen our vision" (*K-12* 396). Again, we see the recurring thematic that new musics, feelings, and thoughts estrange us from who we were, which in turn inspires fresh idioms to name and narrate that estrangement. Thus, Wright describes the defamiliarization strategies practiced by the presocratics in their cosmogonic verse: "These early thinkers set out to discard mythical and theological traditions and to forge a new language of nature and necessity to account for the structure and functioning of phenomena" (Wright 5). Cosmology is nothing more than writing the world in verse, still in touch with musical and other experience, using figurative language to re-envision life, and in so doing, to theorize it, and find what wisdom we offered in it. Heraclitus often resorts to metaphor to sum up life's aleatory quality: "Eternity is a child at play, playing draughts," or his notion that "the most beautiful world . . . is like rubbish

scattered at random” (Barnes 50, 60). Or Empedocles, whom Plutarch reminds us called birth “a journey abroad” (Barnes 113), with his view of life as standing sorrowfully on the threshold of a long, strange trip: “I wept and I lamented as I saw the unfamiliar country” (B118) (Barnes 144). Plutarch comments on Empedocles’ poetic minimalism: “the man is not one to embellish the facts, for the sake of fine writing, with showy epithets (as with gorgeous colors) but rather makes each one a sign of an essence or power—as ‘man-enclosing earth’ [B148] for the body which contains the soul, ‘cloud-gathering’ [B149] for the air, and ‘blood-rich’ [B150] for the liver” (Barnes 149-150). There are the facts of the world, then, and there is one’s presentation of them, one’s rhetoric, which marks, in its suasion, a tuning, and so needs a different prosody.

It is thus unsurprising that Moffett would prize the figurative as a curricular goal, as the late 1960s marked a high time for the use of poetry to excite students into thought and language. As we have argued, new musics, figures, and idioms intermingle and spur each other on. Moffett caught this excitement from the California scene, and thus emphasized poetics in terms of growth and intensification, rather than carrying on a tradition or learning a canon. This connects Moffett to Kenneth Koch, who is perhaps an even more famous proselytizer of poetry’s potential to say “true things in fresh and surprising ways” (Koch 8). Koch’s classic *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* is worth revisiting in this context. He takes an almost Shklovskyan tack with students, having them use the art of poetry as a device to defamiliarize the familiar: “I asked them specifically to look for strange comparisons—if the grass seemed to them like an Easter egg they should say so” (15). It worked beautifully with his young students, who became presocratic throwbacks in crafting an elemental cosmology in the poetic fragments:

A breeze is like the sky coming to you (15)

The sun had the glare of glass in it (41)

Often they achieve the psychedelic beauty of Hunter himself:

I have a sailboat of sinking water

I was given a piece of paper made of roses (18)

I dream I’m standing on the floor and diamonds snow on me (17)

Incorporating song into the writing curriculum not only re-figures composition around the

figurative (the lyric as a short, portable poetic), but it also engages the transformative potential of music.

But, like the presocratics he has such affinity with, Moffett never let go of the goal of wisdom, either; and thus he declined the temptation to romanticize figuration and transformation. This is more than a matter of practicality, a goal he also never lost touch with; or, rather, it is that practicality itself is always cradled in the need to find, express, and practice wisely. Indeed, Moffett's own focus on engagement indicates a wrestling with the question of knowledge into *gnosis*. What good is spiritualizing the arts if that doesn't bear personal and social benefit—the possibility of better lives and more a just and equitable society? This is where Moffett's critics—those who see him as escaping into mysticism just when, say, what is perceived as a more grounded cultural studies gets down to its hard work—go wrong. It is Moffett who is more grounded, on the idea that critique is a narrowing of a deeper cosmological sensibility. Such narrowing too often forecloses on this sensibility, seeking power in moral righteousness. Moffett's whole curriculum is organized on the idea that righteousness, no matter how right it might be, needs to drink from other wells. Thus, Moffett is about opening this broader sensibility back up, making it newly alive for us, as something integral to everyday life. Thus, for Moffett, music and verse go hand in hand with practicality and decisions. Moffett's great insight is that we can never escape the involvement of the whole person, since who we are is always in play in what we experience, say, and do. Perhaps Moffett near the end of his career takes on the guise of the Dead's "St. Stephen," the Hunter lyric referencing the martyr, an early deacon of the Church, stoned circa 34 A.D. for preaching that Israel had lost its way. So Moffett in turn suggests of the emergent, cultural critique doxa of the 1990s—a way has been lost when critique is given authority over other modes of engagement. But again like St. Stephen, it's not that Moffett thinks he has all the answers—rather, it's the push-pull of answer and question while the chief Muse, Calliope, looks on. We offer our bemused answer, but "what would be the answer to the answer man?" A cryptic riddle, itself cosmologic: "Lady finger dipped in moonlight / Writing 'what for?' across the morning sky" suggests the tightest of links between the grandest of images and the most pressing existential questions, wrapped up in song and story that bemuse, delight, and educate—educate, that is, as "leading out" (*Universal* 334).

We also see Moffett grow in nuance and complexity right alongside the final flowering of the California scene in the Hunter-penned “Terrapin Station,” the Grateful Dead’s last epic, an end that is also a beginning, as the song itself says (See Excursion 2). Certainly, it marks a shift in the collective Dead psyche. Musically, it’s less improvisation-based and closer to the complexities of prog rock, even when performed live, indicating a willingness to reside within craft differently than they had heretofore. This musical shift is also reflected in the lyric’s thematization of craft as the transformative power of story. This is a fresh stance, where story, verse, and music combine to bring the Muse’s inspiration, and work to attune us to such insight and find the wisdom to render a choice. But there are complications, for “the storyteller makes no choice .... his job is to shed light and not to master.” Story is never decisive, nor is it ever done—it transcends its situations, cannot be bought or sold, not because writers are above influence, but because Story is infinite. It sheds light, like Conrad’s soft glow as opposed to the kernel of meaning in *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>13</sup> But its manifold beckoning and beguiling are caught between two levels, as it were—mundane logos and divine muse. Hunter’s lyrics twice invoke the muse for inspiration, even as the lyrics reflect back upon themselves, acknowledging that statements can just seem vain at last, as “some rise, some fall, some climb to get to Terrapin.” What Hunter understands, that Moffett too gleans, is that Terrapin Station is more ambivalent than it appears. The power of music, the seductions of language, and the gifts of inspiration can all take one to Terrapin, “in the shadow of the moon,” i.e. a place dark and difficult to find, perhaps not far from lunacy or divine madness. But there are warnings. From this moon crickets and cicadas sing, and as Plato relates in the *Phaedrus*, cicadas were once men before the birth of the Muses; and when the Muses appeared and brought song, some of them were so overcome with the delight of song that they sang and sang, neglecting all else, until they died (*Phaedrus* 259a-d).

EXCURSION II  
"TERRAPIN STATION"



Video 4

2/26/77 Swing Auditorium

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgP8eoP1GH8>

Hunter's lyric directly addresses this neglect, telling us that "while you were gone"—presumably to Terrapin—"these spaces filled with darkness / the obvious was hidden." At this point we might ask about Terrapin itself. If we look again to Plato, he once likened people to trees. We are rooted in the earth, and our heads point toward the heavens, which is to say, the divine.<sup>14</sup> "Terrapin," then, evokes not just our turtlish life's journey, but it also puns; we are "terra" "pins," pinned to terra, the earth, heads looking to the sky. Inspiration from the muse and the divine is wondrous, but not without its perils. We can never neglect what happens when we are taken by the muse; the awakening of *gnosis* means little without engagement with the here and now, especially with other people. This is why being stuck in Terrapin is undecidable, it could be "good or ill," just like Hunter's earlier remark about story, which can "shed light but not master." The power of music and verse, then, is not simply to give us the rush, the sense of cosmic belongingness and oneness, but to give us that in order to shed light on where we are and what to do, how to act. This in turn requires the experience in order to glean it. Without experience in traversing with the Muse, how can one come to relate well what its gifts bring? It is telling that the early twentieth century explorers of cosmic consciousness, such as William James, Aldous Huxley, and P. D. Ouspensky, who attempted to apply rational and philosophical methods to understanding cosmic awakening, all note the impossibility of trying to capture in words the fullness that it is alive in their heads (Lachman 34-46). They had no training in how to do so, since education is predicated on deadening those experiences, not exploring them. One cannot live in Terrapin, even though, as the ultimate source of inspiration, "the compass always points to Terrapin." This suggests, importantly, another reason for looking again at the presocratics. They were hybrids of a new sort, a kind of shamanic-rhetorical-healer-philosopher, who had been properly trained in how to bring to the word the impossible fullness of experience that cosmic experience grants.

## **PART IV**

### **COSMOLOGY, CURRICULUM, AND CLASS WORK**

Before we began this formal journey into music, cosmology, and the work of James Moffett, we very much, intuitively, were following along a path that seemed almost destined to lead us to that road. Both of us, for example, had felt a deep rightness about the curricular power of song to achieve growth in language and conception for the students we teach. We saw writing about music as one way to allow writers to order their worlds, each writing as another entry in an on-going musical autobiography, generating a personal cosmology. Again, we think of the *Timaeus* and Plato's reflections on time in that dialogue. In the *Timaeus's* cosmology, after the body and soul of the world are formed, the universe begins to exist in time, measured by the sun and moon and planets, which are then created to both create and measure temporality. Timaeus notes, "When the father who had begotten it perceived that the universe was alive and in motion, a shrine for the eternal gods, he was glad, and in his delight planned to make it still more like its pattern; and as this pattern is an eternal Living Being, he set out to make the universe resemble it in this way too as far as was possible" (37d). We used the Desmond Lee translation there because we like the way that Lee, taking his cue possibly from Francis Cornford, translates *agalma* as *shrine*. Cornford writes eloquently about his decision, and the explanation for his choice is relevant here. Cornford notes how troubling this passage can be for translators, who want to read *agalma* as similar to *eikon*. For Cornford, the word has two main meanings: "(1) object of worship, and (2) something in which one takes delight" (99). Cornford defends his choice: "To the ancient a cult-statue was a thing he worshipped and took delight in because the visible image betokened the presence of the divinity in the shrine. It was set up there in order that the god might come and dwell in it" (100). So, too, we see our students – just as we see ourselves – as using writing about music not just to order their world but set it in motion. They become the delighted Demiurges of their own microcosmos, shaping its body and soul with the songs or records that form their own personal universes, and then organizing them, giving them existential motion, in their reflective recasting of them. It's a way to chart the growth of their worlds. As Lee notes, "Plato was aware of the close connection between time and time measurement. Can we speak of one without the other?" (11).

Here, then, are some snippets from some assignments and student writing we've collected over the years, showing our students using the music that looms most importantly in

their inner universe. These, of course, are just some of the possible paths; and here, in keeping with the movement of our essay, we emphasize music over other cosmogonic possibilities. But the goal remains of keeping a way for students to measure their worlds, giving them intelligibility, forming, we might say, the portable shrines they use to venerate their creative gods. This includes cultivating a sensibility to how the nondiscursive, whether as music or as affective colors permeating poetry and prose, remains an everpresent wellspring for their lives. In short, to find what joins them to the larger orders, and engage them in seeking that growth into more cosmic insight. That primal spark of curiosity and the desire to follow it, give it a figure and a story. And to teach the tools of craft enabling them to do so, including rhetorical devices.

One of the most effective ways to bring about this music-based world ordering is through the mixtape or playlist. Students are, of course, familiar with the genre. So much of hip hop is released as a mixtape, and what are movie soundtracks but mixtapes. And many of our students have been making them for years. We take some time to look at a few online <http://www.artofthemix.org> and discuss the tracks. Then students do their own. A way to make the assignment an exercise in writing practice is to ask students to turn in not just their mixtapes but an annotated discussion of each of the tracks they've chosen. This allows us to look at a few key writing skills: first, the genre of the short review. As a 'short review' manifesto, the painter and critic Fairfield Porter's brief "The Short Review" helps to capture the aim of the genre: "accurate impressionist criticism" is what Porter stresses, containing "an implied meaning" rather than an explicit one, which allows the brief review to be "at best a parallel creation" to the work under examination (168). As Porter humorously notes, capturing the distracted pace of media-saturation, "Reviews should be short. Who likes to read art criticism?" (169). Students are very familiar with those brief, bite-sized bits of drive-by criticism; they read them online all the time—on music sites like Pitchfork, for example—and as Moffett urges, "Rather than assign literary exegesis, I would have [a student] write in the forms he reads" (*Active Voice* 202). One benefit for teaching the short review is that short prose, like poetry, puts language in high relief, and so the genre can provide an incredibly focused, effective teaching tool.

And speaking of poetry, one of the most effective things the short review can teach is the poetic—specifically, the way that writers, who only have a very short space to work within, almost

always fall back on the class rhetorical figures and poetic devices in order to achieve that pithy, memorable quality. So, we begin by showing students some writing about music (since that's what they're going to have to do) and ask them to identify what for them are the coolest, wish-I-could-write-like-that parts. For example, we give them a brief piece of writing on the Doors, written by Marilyn Manson. Every single time we've used this article in class, students identify the same two passages as the coolest lines in the piece: First is Manson's observation that "I think the Doors still fit in because they never fit in in the first place." Then there's this lovely description of Jim Morrison's singing: "Morrison's voice was a beautiful pond for anything to drown in. Whatever he sang became as deep as he was." Students are intrigued when it's pointed out that both those lines are so powerful because in each of them Manson, whether he knew what he was doing or not, used poetic devices — *antithesis* in the first example and *metaphor* in the second. We cover a little Russian Formalism to show that that's what the poetic does, it makes ordinary language extraordinary. Shklovsky's article on the subject is called "Art as Device," and so students then get a cheat-sheet with the most useful rhetorical figures on it, defined and illustrated, so they can add these new devices to their writing toolbox.

Students are then turned loose to find examples of their use in a wonderful piece of music writing, Steve Erickson's "L. A.'s Top 100," which is an annotated mixtape of the one hundred songs Erickson feels combine into forming the soundtrack for the city of Los Angeles. Erickson's writing in this piece is phenomenal (indeed, it was chosen for inclusion in one of the annual 'Best Music Writing' collections). Working in teams, students get pretty good at spotting, for example, *appositio* in this line from Erickson's brief comments on the Go-Go's "This Town": "an autonomous American girl group not only playing their own instruments but writing their own material, particularly this deadly Valentine to their city — a Pop Tart with a razor blade in the middle" (71). Or the *asyndeton* in his review of "Cry Me a River": "Intensely shy about her bombshell looks, apprehensive about her torrid singing, musically naked but for a bare bass and stark guitar. London invented a new genre: revenge-torch. Robert Johnson by way of Marilyn Monroe" (78). And then, of course, students write their own short reviews as annotations of the selections they enshrine on their mixtapes, armed now not only with their knowledge and love of music, but with some new techniques to set their charged expertise into verbal motion. So

Heather, for example, employed *sententia* in the first sentence of her short gloss of Delta Spirit's "Vivian": "Harmonicas instantly make a song heartbreaking." Or *appositio* to write about her mixtape's inclusion of Solomon Burke's "Goodbye, Baby": "I was led to Solomon Burke by means of Ray Charles and Otis Redding – gateway drugs of soul, if you will." Desmond Lee was right – creation stories require elevated language, and so we think that students' textual creation of the worlds of their musical taste are best served by this crash-course on how to instantly make one's writing worthy of the musical gods. The elegant possibilities of craft afforded by rhetorical devices is of a piece with Hunter's stated criteria for how he judges a good lyric: "vulnerable, unique, universal, graceful and craftsmanly" ("Robert Hunter, Dark Star" 108).

There are further challenges afforded by the mixtape, ones that shift our emphasis from the lyrical to the musical. For instance, even the question of ordering is slippery. What song starts, what song ends the collection? What is gained in lost in the choices one makes, how one song follows another? Lyrical themes are only way of organizing, or the music that describes a place, such as LA; but these turn us toward mood, intensity, emotional pull in themselves. They evoke the more ephemeral qualities of music, and by extension, the world. How to give word and story to organized nondiscursive sound and feeling? When we teach review writing, we are struck by the difficulty of focusing the writing on the music as opposed to the lyrics. This problem is not endemic to students, either. As students read professional reviews, we ask them to notice how little is said about the music itself beyond descriptive commonplaces (twanging guitar, thudding drums) and genre placement (dance pop, alt country, death metal, etc.). It quickly becomes apparent that the easier task even for professional reviewers is to focus on lyrics and imagery. While these are important, we have found that it is fruitful to teach students about the sound of music—instrumentality, tone, timbre, rhythm. One of the more productive pieces we have used is Lester Bangs' infamous "A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise," an ode to noise rock. What makes it so useful is that, first, the writing is terrific ("they had to toddle along a guitar and rhythm track that sounded like Malt-O-Meal being trailed from dining room to TV set"); and second, it focuses almost exclusively on *sound*, and what certain sounds do to us (Bangs 303). How they make us feel; how we pull meaning from them ("Thus the shriek, the caterwaul, the chainsaw gnarlgnashing, the yowl and the whizz that decapitates may be reheard by the adventurous or

emotionally damaged as mellifluous bursts of unarguable affirmation”) (Bangs 301). While the students are at first mystified, as there are rarely any aficionados of old noise rock in class, the energy of the writing and the effort to fathom how sound affects us pulls them in. What’s next is to work on what music, as music, means for students. This takes the form of assignments where students describe, in memorable and evocative prose, how a piece of music sounds. They can be shared with the class—first some of the music is played, and then the student reads. Further exercises follow, where students convey how the music generates feeling and meaning for them. Strong attention to language is necessary, of course, but equally strong attention to listening is needed, too. Giving figure and story to the ephemeral, then, and allowing students to write their own meanings for the sounds that move them.

This learning to listen and articulate skillfully and powerfully the feelings and meanings that are heard underpins music fandom, from the mixtape-as-reliquary to the lists proposed and debated endlessly about what’s greater and greatest. One thinks of opera fans who never tire of listing the best Callas performances or the greatest versions of *La Traviata*. Or Kurt Cobain, who continually archived his own pop reliquary, posthumously published as his *Journals*, and containing page after page of his curatorial attempt to list his top bands or top albums or top performances – so one page has Led Zeppelin’s “No Quarter” in the top spot (67), another features Green River’s “Ain’t Nothin’ to Do” at number one (85), or the Stooges’ *Raw Power*, followed by the Beatles’ *Something New* (94). An online search for the greatest Grateful Dead performance of “Dark Star”—or any other song or concert they performed—yields a treasure trove of dedicated fan-based ordering, writing, and wrangling, often focused on the cosmic qualities of the music. This sharp desire for the auto-curatorial is a key part of Moffett’s curriculum as well, underscoring why he had no use for commercially prepared textbooks, judging them as inauthentic reading matter: “Prepackaged curricula have always blocked improvement of language learning because they inherently contradict its personal, social, and spontaneous nature, which simply cannot be planned in enough detail to incarnate in physical materials for masses of students. . . . The people who have to use the materials must be the ones to select them” (Moffett and Wagner 56).

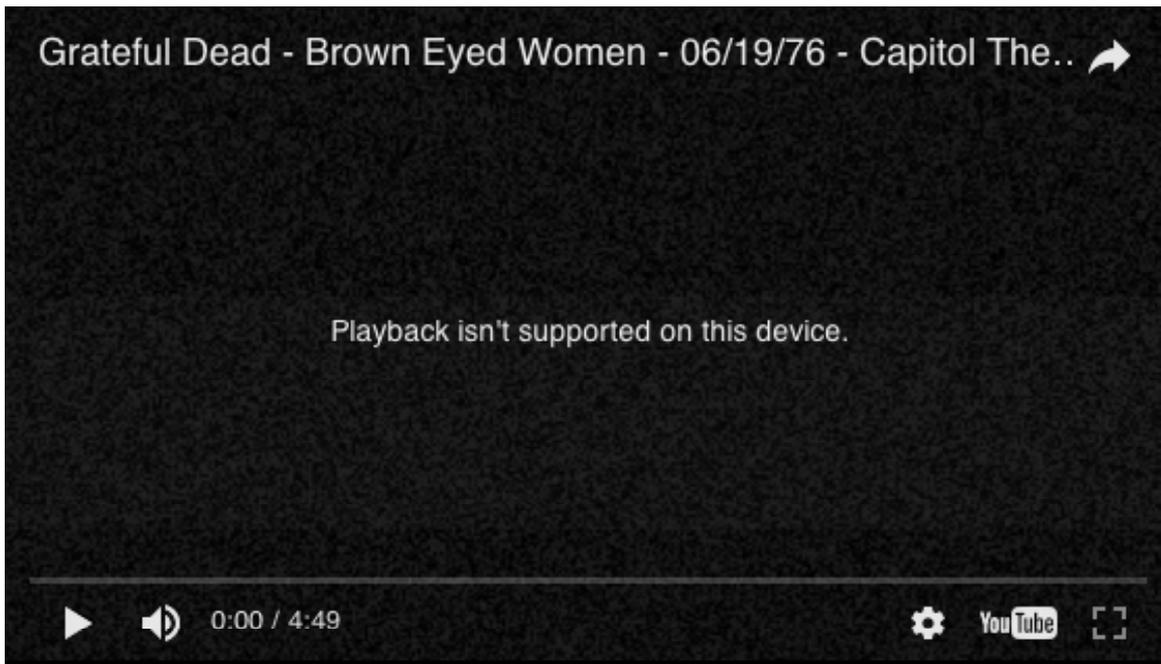
This ability to create, order, and find deeper meanings that give insight into ourselves and connect us to others is not just a classroom exercise but an essential aspect of life. Thus, a mixtape

playlist is much like a Dead show set-list, and part of the fascination with being a Grateful Dead fan is watching their own canon of key songs emerge over the years, seeing some songs recur for a while in live performance and then fade out (e.g., “New Speedway Boogie”), some never really catch on in concert (“Till the Morning Comes”) and some become immediate staples of their live repertoire (“Truckin’”). Part of that set-list evolution evinces the truth of the Moffett notion that users must ultimately select materials – in the Dead’s case, it was Robert Hunter learning which materials Jerry Garcia liked to perform:

I write differently for Garcia than I write for myself. I write it with the intention of him singing it, and I write things other than I would write with the intention of me singing it. I know the kind of—in a way, through long experience—the sorts of things that he doesn’t like to sing about, the sorts of things that don’t express *him*. (Eisenhart 194)

It’s like watching Robert Hunter himself grow into his themes and content as a songwriter, learning the language and rhythm and imagery and idiolect that he would use to fashion his own dramatic scripts. And so, starting in 1970 with *Workingman’s Dead* and continuing over the next couple of albums, Hunter found his voice as an American songwriter working in the tradition. He learns how to write Americana-style songs, creating contemporary classics that sound like blues or cowboy ballad throwbacks: “Black Peter,” “Brown-Eyed Women,” “Cumberland Blues” – songs Hunter notes are “of a piece,” “part of my gestalt baggage” (“A Rose Grows” 28). One is reminded of Hunter’s admission, discussed above, that he often writes with “hand-me-downs.” Grateful Dead scholar David Dodd sees Hunter mining “blues, ragtime, spirituals, folk, nursery rhymes, country & western, and rock and roll” (154) in the American idiom he develops, “evoking more and more tributaries of the mainstream of American music” (157). Steve Silberman calls those echt-Hunter lyrics “Old West miniatures that will be the folk songs of the 21st century” (41). It’s fitting that a writer as interested in cosmology would gravitate toward the genre of folk music, which Zuckerkandl terms “closest to the beginning of music” (13). He hones that faux-Americana style to the point where he can laugh about how second-nature it is: “I couldn’t *not* write a Grateful Dead song if I tried” (Eisenhart 185).

**EXCURSION III**  
**HUNTER'S AMERICANA FOLK TRADITION**



**Video 5**

Dead playing "Brown-Eyed Women," 6/19/76 Capitol Theatre

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsKl\\_vkU9oc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsKl_vkU9oc)

Perhaps that's one of the best goals of a language arts education: allowing students to learn their own individual themes and style, the gnostic, gnomic verses that will become the key works in their canon, selecting and mastering the scripts that will serve them for the long haul. We're always rehearsing, each performance is simply another rehearsal; as Garcia put it, "the best practice there is is playing the gig" (Gleason "Jerry Garcia" 31). And that is perhaps what's most crucial: in these hand-me-downs we try to reclaim, the gnostic shards that ply what we are still trying to understand or describe, we cast out into the unknown, performing our stake in it. And it is here that real transformation can happen. We'd even assert that if something like critique generates actual change (such as in a cultural studies curriculum), it's less critique per se that accomplished the work but in the way the critical work drew water from cosmogonic springs. If the spiritualizing of the arts has meaning and power, it is here, in performance, as Moffett always knew.

## CONCLUSION

### THE COSMOPOLITAN FROM THE COSMOGONIC

These ideas about song, poetry, transformation, and attempt to forge a new cosmopolitan give us a far deeper understanding for Moffett's response to his critics. He knew how ideas like this would be received by a cynical mainstream—the same way the cosmic consciousness of California '68 was taken for banal mysticism or kooky consumerism, the way the post-'68 Dead were dismissed by 'serious' critics as "anachronisms, leftover hippies irrelevant to the current scene" (McNally 171). In a response to John Rouse, who scoffed at Moffett's spiritualism, comparing him with an old cleaning lady he once had who used to attend séances and would bring Rouse spirit-messages from the Great Beyond, one of those people who "can't tell fact from fiction" (507), Moffett seems to sigh in resignation at being thought "the otherworldly escapist, the weak-minded mystic" ("Response" 508). And Stephen North, in his 1987 attempt to fit the history of Composition into discrete, tidy categories, at first lumps Moffett in with "the Philosophers," based on the way the field's Philosophers "foraged" for theoretical material in other fields. Moffett, though, ultimately proves too baffling for North, who has trouble with Moffett's attempt to base his holistic curriculum on a cosmogony of childhood development. After posing a few pedantic questions to his straw-Moffett, North downgrades him in with the "Technicians or Curriculum Engineers" (104-05). Moffett, then, appears as difficult to categorize as his ancient fellow-seers, the Presocratics, who were variously called philosophers, scientists, mystics, prophets, shamans, and metaphysicians. But as much as someone like North wants to insist on more strictly delimited premises for philosophical exploration, or someone like Rouse might want to tar Moffett with brushes named "Edgar Cayce" or "Jeanne Dixon," the wellsprings Moffett draws on in his curriculum go back to the very beginnings of whatever it is we want to call education—or the liberal arts. Philosophy, drama, sophistry and rhetoric, literature, music, math, and science were all born alongside and by means of transcendent feeling, transformational ritual, and ecstatic experience. From these diverse trajectories a new sense of what an educated person might be and do emerged, one with a strong cosmopolitan bent. Narrowing this vision

is tantamount to the narrowing of our possibilities, which should never be what education seeks. The rationalist whitewashing of the Greeks goes hand in hand with the purging of these other (cosmic, spiritual, ephemeral, transcendent) aspects in order to recreate a diminished and not coincidentally waning version of the “liberal arts.” Moffett’s critics may well want the cosmopolitan, too, but they can only hear the “-politan” aspect, the socio-political narrowly conceived; but Moffett’s vision is truer in seeing the “cosmo-” as equally essential.

For Moffett, education must re-attune us to the arts of the muse, but not in order to live there. We cannot simply stay in Terrapin Station. As he asks, pointedly, why do so many people, once they realize their goals and achieve success, fall apart? (*Universal* 332). It is a version of the same question Hunter and the Grateful Dead wrestle with in “Terrapin Station,” as they stumble upon the perils of achieving their own goals, as they face up to a decade of life on the road calling and channeling the muse. Lifelong learning, for Moffett, is the means to prepare us not just to succeed, not just to confront adversity and pain, but to prepare us for success. This puts in perspective Moffett’s drive to see the world anew, to “see familiar things in an unfamiliar way, to freshen and deepen our vision” (*K-12* 396). And this also highlights how the strands we have been discussing—presocratic thought, education, poetry, and song—weave themselves together in cosmological idioms. These idioms are rather thematically focused here, but another cosmological narrative could easily be woven through any number of figures, *mutatis mutandis*, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Nietzsche, Sun Ra, Parliament/Funkadelic, and, say, Kate Bush. That is, once seen, such cosmological themes show up irrepressibly, in the past and present, to spark and transform; and that our narrative is but one of many that could be woven.

What we seek, in making music (in the broadest possible sense, as captured in Moffett’s use of “harmonic” to describe his approach) a key curricular component—in its use as theory, content, and anagogic form, as well as in its incipient transcendence—is a gloss or update on Moffett’s use of poetry at the heart of his curriculum. We see it as a recasting of “composition” beyond a narrowly construed notion of “language arts,” perhaps both tied to the past and beckoning to the emerging present, and dedicated to the sense of “leading out” (education, that is) beyond the bounds of where we are, beyond where our culture has bounded us. As we’ve tried to show in our extended readings of his work, lyricists like Hunter provide us with a rich stock

of cosmic fragments, as rich in their own way as Parmenides or Empedocles, and oftentimes as obscurely oracular – ideal prompts, we feel, for discussions in the spaces of higher education. They tie experience, music, the arts together as valuable in themselves as part of how we grow, become transformed, reach for what wisdom we can find beyond the confines we too often find ourselves bound within. The cosmic that is inseparable from the cosmopolitan. We have lingered on the connections to the Grateful Dead because they intersect with Moffett’s own sensibility, and, in a different way, that of the presocratics. It’s less that Moffett’s educational thought and Hunter’s cosmic verse say the same thing than that they illuminate complementary visions of the irrepressibility of the cosmological in everyday life. The charge of mysticism misses the boat entirely because, as the presocratics were perhaps the first to bring to light, the interchange of inner and outer, order and change, mundane and spiritual, are not difficult because they are far and abstract but because they are most near and concrete. They don’t so much ground as found us. We were confronted with this as a writerly issue throughout this essay. With every line we quoted, we felt manifold appeal—beauty in feeling and image, a musical allure in rhythm and sound; reflective thought opened up the space of the cosmological in our everyday, alive with the tension between a song’s material experience and its cosmic pull.

But the real challenge here is not the look back but the look forward. We the authors are of two generations, and although we share a profound appreciation for their genius, we cannot inhabit the Dead’s music-verse the same way. And so also for other scenes. One of us would find equal inspiration in the profound, almost mystically simple song cycles of Schubert; the other in the early 1970s German progressive music scene—in its deeply *kosmische* epics and stunning advances in electronica and improvisation.<sup>15</sup> But again, the point remains that these are not resting places. Terrapin Station resonates best when we see it phasing forward: “From the northwest corner of a brand-new crescent moon / Crickets and cicadas sing a rare and different tune.” The question is where the new scene is, and what it sparks. New moons are always rising. Story, verse, song and our grasp for wisdom come with them. This indeed entwines lessons of Moffett, the presocratics, and the Dead into the aims and uses of college English within the liberal arts.



## ENDNOTES

1. Our source for all the Robert Hunter lyrics we use is *A Box of Rain: Collected Lyrics of Robert Hunter*.
2. See also the special issue "Re-reading James Moffett," eds. Bill Green, Wayne Sawyer, and Tony Burgess. *Changing English* 17.3 (2010).
3. The recent discovery of Neanderthal stalagmite structures constructed in caves in France, dated to 175,000 years ago, suggests that the cosmological impulse predates the advent of modern humanity; see Jaubert et al. Other research establishes astronomical-oriented culture in the Paleolithic, from 100,000-12,000 years ago; see Vavilova and Artmenko for finds in the Paleolithic Ukraine.
4. The Sumerian phrases for "heavenly writing," *šitir šamê* or *šitirti šamāmī*, imply a heavenly script that could be read and interpreted, with consequences for what happens on earth; it is an idea with long philosophical life, extending, for instance, thousands of years into the Neo-Platonist Plotinus' *Enneads* (Rochberg 1-2).
5. There is increasing attention to the symbols so often inscribed next to the famous animal images in European Paleolithic cave art; twenty-six basic and recurring symbols (signs?) have been isolated. It is likely that we see a form of proto-writing here, right alongside cave imagery that is often linked to shamanistic or other ritual function. See Petzinger for extensive discussion of the signs.
6. The bow is a rich example; Heraclitus also famously states that "The name of the bow is Life, but its work is death" (F42). The statement depends on a (masked) pun—although Heraclitus uses *taxon* for bow, what is evoked is the older, epic word for bow, *bios*; and with only a difference in accent, *bios* also means life. Thus, the fragment tells us that life and death, language and cosmos all work together even when appearing in the guise of opposites.
7. See Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* for a study of the gymnastic component of education.
8. Moffett's assumption of social imitation, even to the point of "hypnosis," is prescient; theorists of network culture are rediscovering the work of social theorist Gabriel Tarde, who argued for imitation and its multivalent morphings as being the bottom up ground for social organization. See Sampson for an introduction in terms of network culture and the phenomenon of virality.
9. Moffett wrote a whole book about the incident, *Storm in the Mountains*. We

confine ourselves here to Moffett's remarks about the incident in *Harmonic Learning*, in part because he opens the book discussing the Kanawha incident, confronting it directly, *learning from it*, and using it to further his thoughts about education.

10. Note, we are not claiming Moffett is unique in his emphasis on alternative, imaginative materials; we're merely trying to show how such thinking fits into Moffett's broader scheme.
11. This muse-like aspect of Parmenides' journey is underscored by four deliberate uses of the Greek verb *pherein*, meaning to carry, in the opening verse. Even Parmenides' willingness is aided from across the divide.
12. Much could be written about the strong ties the Dead forged with their artists. For instance, the Grateful Dead's first live album, *Live/Dead*, presents its cover fonts in line with old script traditions, ornately designed and filigreed. Like most California psychedelic art, it's more than decorative but rather an illustration of words becoming design becoming power. The inscriptive sign of an excess, a transcendence, felt within the word—and the word is never just signification, never just communication. The design sketches another order, another dimension of experience. As Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart explains, the Dead's artworks "were sound symbols that connected to a sacred dimension . . . powerful in spiritual information and transformative in nature" (Cushway 10). The word is woven into the entire artistic design, and works alongside the power of the music to talk about the whole tapestry of visual and sonic—all to elevate and explore that "transitive nightfall." Such symbols and imagery are part of what Reist calls the "shared, familiar rituals of transformation and transcendence" (183) common to shamanism: "The Grateful Dead culture is rich with consistent, powerful symbols. The skeleton emblem, a traditional shamanic symbol, is undoubtedly the most salient of these. Skeletons and skulls appear in Grateful Dead art and folklore in a number of guises . . . Deadheads use them to identify themselves and each other" (186).
13. Conrad writes, "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the talk which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (18).
14. This suggests still further layers for the remarkable pun in the *Phaedrus* about the plane tree, a variety of sycamore, which is called *platonos*, a pun on Plato's name. Given the dialogue's extensive discussion of madness and inspiration, the mundane and the divine, the shelter given by the Plato tree casts significant shade.
15. The bands would include Neu!, Tangerine Dream, Ash Ra Tempel, Popol Vuh, Can, Cosmic Jokers, Amon Düül II, Kraftwerk, and more. For an idiosyncratic overview, see Cope.



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