

# Poetry as Dark Precursor: Nietzschean Poetics in Deleuze's "Literature and Life"

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article utilizes the Nietzschean "poetics" distilled from Nietzsche's *Gay Science* as an interpretive strategy for considering Deleuze's essay "Literature and Life" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. The first section considers Deleuze's overarching project in that essay, and then repositions his thought from literature in general to "poetry" (in Nietzsche's sense) in particular, indicating both resonances between Deleuze's understanding of "literature" and Nietzsche's understanding of "poetry" as well as their dissonances. The second section focuses on the places in Deleuze's analyses where he excludes poetry, and suggests that this exclusion is related to Nietzsche's claim that lyric poetry is the birthplace of philosophy. Put differently, the being of lyric poetry threatens to disrupt Deleuze's distinction between the respective roles and powers of philosophy and art, and thereby to disclose poets as, at least potentially (or "virtually"), philosophers, and vice versa. And the final section offers one of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* as an exemplar of poetry's philosophical potential, before concluding that a Nietzschean conception of poetry constitutes the "dark precursor" of "Literature in Life," *Essays Critical and Clinical*, and Deleuze's work in general.

**KEY WORDS:** Nietzsche, Deleuze, poetry, dark precursor, Rilke

*[T]he power of language . . . implies an always excessive Idea of poetry.*  
—Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

The present article will attempt to use the Nietzschean "poetics" distilled from Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (as I have elaborated elsewhere), as an interpretive strategy for considering Deleuze's essay "Literature and Life" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*.<sup>1</sup> I will begin by considering Deleuze's

overarching project in that essay, and then reposition his thought from literature in general to “poetry” (in Nietzsche’s sense) in particular, indicating both resonances between Deleuze’s understanding of “literature” and Nietzsche’s understanding of “poetry” as well as problematic areas between them. I will then focus on the places in Deleuze’s analyses where he excludes poetry, and suggest that this exclusion is related to Nietzsche’s claim that poetry—and, I will argue, lyric poetry especially—is the birthplace of philosophy. Put differently, the being of lyric poetry threatens to disrupt Deleuze’s distinction between the respective roles and powers of philosophy and art, and thereby to disclose poets, at least potentially—or, better for Deleuze, virtually—as philosophers, and vice versa. I will then turn briefly to sonnet I, 3 of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* for an example of the philosophical potential of lyric poetry, and then conclude by suggesting that a Nietzschean conception of poetry could be understood as the “dark precursor” of “Literature in Life,” *Essays Critical and Clinical*, and Deleuze’s work in general.

There are six crucial passages in *The Gay Science* in which Nietzsche’s “poetics” (broadly construed) is articulated, half of which concern poetry in general and the other half of which concern the figure of the poet specifically, though the meanings of both *poetry* and *poet* are torsioned and greatly expanded.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, let me summarize these passages in the following graph:

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**Poetry:**

**-1. poetry as otherwise than presence**  
(i.e., as absence, as potentiality)

**-2. poetry as otherwise than *logos***  
(i.e., as originating as magic spells)

**-3. poetry as unacknowledged *arché***  
(i.e., of prose philosophy)

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**The Poet:**

**-4. poet as glorified liar**  
(by presenting absence as presence, conflating actuality and potentiality)

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**-5. poet as *mythos*-maker**  
(by applying the magical/mythical dimension of language to life)

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**-6. poet as unacknowledged *arché* of the philosopher<sup>3</sup>**  
(because the “higher man” is unaware that he is already the life-poet)

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These six points are taken from six aphorisms in *The Gay Science* that are centrally concerned with poetry as such. Three are found in Book Two, one in Book Three, and two in Book Four. Altogether, they offer a sense of Nietzsche’s understanding of poetry, and thereby of his own poetic practices as well. The first three aphorisms investigate (1) the poet’s power, (2) poetry itself, and (3) the phenomenon of “prose” as a kind of calcified poetry, respectively. And the last three aphorisms further explore the nature of the poet in ways that liberate the figure of the poet from both (4) a religiously-informed portrayal as medium of transcendent truth, and from (5, 6) a narrow conceptualization as one who simply writes poems as instances of a literary genre. With this background information in place, I turn now directly to Deleuze.

## I. "[POETRY] AND LIFE"

The six central claims of Deleuze's essay "Literature and Life" all revolve around the notion that writing/literature is a "becoming" or process. I will now consider each of these central claims in detail. First, writing, qua becoming, moves in the direction of the feminine, the animalistic, the molecular, the imperceptible and the mortal.<sup>4</sup> In other words, writing moves from a locus of identity and control to the proximity of marginalized otherness. And since becoming (since Aristotle) is the movement of the actualization of potentiality, this claim resonates with passage 1 in *The Gay Science*, in which poetry is linked to its potentiality.<sup>5</sup> Thus, writing/literature for Deleuze is also connected to potentiality (or, in his terminology, "virtuality").

To elaborate on this passage from Nietzsche, it is taken from aphorism 79, which argues that the source of the poets' power and appeal lies in their always approaching yet never completing their goals. "Indeed," Nietzsche writes, the poet "owes his advantages and fame much more to his ultimate incapacity than to his ample strength." Nietzsche goes on to discuss the poet's "foretaste" of a "vision" which is never wholly captured, and which by that very fact inspires such powerful cravings in the poet that it even spreads contagiously to the poet's listeners, and "lifts [them] above [the poet's] work and all mere 'works' and lends them wings to soar as high as listeners had never soared." The *eros* or *Lust* for the poet's ever-unfulfilled vision thus erotically transforms the listeners "into poets and seers" themselves. To connect this back to Deleuze's first central claim in "Literature and Life," since the realm of actuality in Western culture has historically been dominated by the masculine, human, macroscopic, visible and immortal—as that toward which one should look and strive—Nietzsche's linkage of poetry to potentiality also indirectly aligns poetry, as does Deleuze, with the feminine, non-human animal, microscopic, invisible and mortal (as the opposing terms in their respective dichotomies).

Turning to the second central claim from "Literature and Life," this becoming (-woman, -animal, -molecule, -imperceptible) takes place through what Deleuze calls "detours" in language, all of which involve "becoming-mortal." "Syntax," the name Deleuze gives to this detouring-becoming, "is the set of necessary detours that are created in each case to reveal the life in things."<sup>6</sup> Understanding syntax in this subversive way aligns it with passage 2 in *The Gay Science*, which traces the genealogy of poetry to magical spells and incantations, insofar as both *syntaxis-differentiation* and *poetry-as-magic* resist the domination of logocentric rationality.

The latter passage appears in aphorism 84 of *The Gay Science*, the thesis of which aphorism is that the origin of poetry lies in "the magical song and the spell." Against the present-day conception of poetry as useless, both in the present and

throughout its history, Nietzsche asserts that poetry originally possessed “a very great utility,” one which was “superstitious” or “mythological.” Nietzsche explains that in ancient times, the awareness of rhythm as a mnemonic device for human beings was generalized to the belief that rhythm affected the gods in the same way, and that a “rhythmical prayer was supposed to get closer to the ears of the gods.” In short, rhythm was seen as a way to exert power and control over even the gods. As Nietzsche summarizes it, “One threw, at the gods, poetry like a magical lasso.”

To connect this back to Deleuze’s second central claim in “Literature and Life,” the rhythm in poetry could be understood as analogous to his “syntax,” in that the rhythm necessarily requires words to go in different places and times, so as to have the magical-musical effect. In other words, the sound and feel take priority over the meaning—forcing words to detour from their usual routes to articulation in speech, in service to the life that beats in the rhythm.

As for Deleuze’s third central claim, this becoming moves from the personal to the impersonal, from subjectivity to Deleuze’s “Ideas” or immanent qualities. Thus, contrary to popular opinion, “to write is not to recount one’s memories and travels, one’s loves and griefs, one’s dreams and fantasies.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, goes Deleuze’s startling claim, “Literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say ‘I.’”<sup>8</sup> Unlike with Deleuze’s first two points, there is no obvious connection to Nietzsche’s poetics here. On the contrary, the insistence on the third person as the only legitimate mode for literature would seem to exclude from it much of what is currently considered great literature. In particular, it would seem to exclude the majority of the sub-genre of lyric poetry, as poetry is indeed largely excluded from the various literary texts that Deleuze considers in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. One might argue, however, that “third person” in this context does not necessarily refer to the literary concept of a third-person narrator. Perhaps Deleuze is instead referring to something like a process of anonymization or communalization in general. This is an important issue, to which I will return in detail below. Fourth, this becoming makes literature “an enterprise of health,” in which “the writer as such is not a patient but rather a physician, the physician of himself and of the world. The world,” in turn, “is the set of symptoms whose illness merges with man.” Thus, contrary to psychoanalytic literary criticism, “We do not,” according to Deleuze, “write with our neuroses.” These neuroses and psychoses, he claims, “are not passages of life, but states into which we fall when the process is interrupted, blocked, or plugged up.”<sup>9</sup> This idea, that the “fabulation” of literature (to use a Bergsonian term that Deleuze also uses) has a positive and even healing power, is similar to Nietzsche’s suggestion in passage 5 that what is needed is for the fabulation inherent in art to be extended to everyday life—that poets in the narrow sense should inspire life-poets to make their own lives into a kind of poetry. And in further concert with Deleuze’s claim, passage 6 from *The Gay Science* argues that this process is

always-already underway, that the "free spirits" are indeed the poets of a world that is nothing other than their collective poem.<sup>10</sup>

The latter passage is taken from aphorism 301, which treats of the "higher human beings" who "see and hear immeasurably more, and see and hear thoughtfully." But this type of higher human being, according to Nietzsche, "can never shake off a *delusion*. . . . He calls his own nature contemplative and overlooks that he himself, also is the actual poet and ever-poet of life."<sup>11</sup> In this passage, appearing only two aphorisms after the one just considered, one finds that it is the higher human beings, the contemplatives, the free spirits, who are not merely being encouraged to expand the will to untruth from art to life, but rather already doing so:

As a poet, he has . . . above all *vis creativa* [creative power (Kaufmann 241n)], which the active human being lacks. . . . We [higher people] who think and feel at the same time are those who really continually *fashion* something that had not been there before: the whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. *This poem that we have invented* is continually studied by the so-called practical human beings (our actors) who learn their roles and translate everything into flesh and actuality, into the everyday. (301; emphasis added)

Thus, the higher persons, in their continual acts of poetic creation, actually create the world of meaning, signification and value that all human beings inhabit. The deceptive aspect of the poetic impulse applied to life in general (by the higher human beings, to whom Nietzsche's above exhortations are addressed) is thus not used primarily as a license to be destructive of society and the world, but as the power to create ever new worlds. And each of those worlds is, in the broadest sense of the word—a poem.

To connect this back to Deleuze's fourth central claim, one could understand these Nietzschean poetic creators as makers of the health of the world, concocting drugs and therapies (i.e., ideas and practices) to strengthen it, help it be the most active it can be, and fill it with joy and well-being.

Fifth, "health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people who are missing." In other words, literature belongs to a community, a revolutionary people who are created by the voice given by the writer to allow those people to express themselves. And literature's "ultimate" aim is "to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life."<sup>12</sup> Thus, literature is a form of political power that can be used by oppressed peoples to move towards greater expression and freedom. This claim, with its egalitarian orientation, is also at odds with the poetics of Nietzsche, whose aristocratic bent tends to downplay such concerns, thereby excluding democracy from the start. Whether this move to understand literature as a sort of political activism (as with Sartre's "committed literature") might not improve the Nietzschean poetics

is an interesting consideration, but one that is beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Sixth, and lastly, this liberating power can also be seen in “the effect of literature on language,” which consists in literature’s “open[ing] up a kind of foreign language within language . . . a becoming-other of language, a minorization of the major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch’s line that escapes the dominant system.”<sup>13</sup> This is an elaboration of the second central claim and its understanding of syntax. According to Deleuze, there are “three aspects” to this effect of literature: (a) to subvert the original “major” language, (b) to create a new “poetic” language within that language, and (c) to push language to its furthest limit, exposing “the outside” of language, which are the “Ideas.” In conclusion, “it is the passage of life within language that constitutes these Ideas.”<sup>14</sup> It does not seem controversial to suggest that the name *poetry* could easily be applied to this three-pronged effect of literature on language, since (a) poetry is often used to challenge and move beyond what is commonly accepted in prose and everyday speech, (b) Deleuze himself uses the word “poetic” in places to describe the creation of style or disruption of a language, and (c) poetry frequently pushes language to its limit, gesturing towards what Heidegger calls “what gives food for thought” or actualizing Deleuze’s Ideas through the disruptive/creative poetic process.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, four of Deleuze’s six central claims in “Literature and Life” already resonate with the Nietzschean poetics sketched at the beginning of the present essay, while one of the remaining two claims offers the possibility for a political critique of that poetics, and the last is at odds with that poetics because at odds with much of poetry (in the conventional sense) in general. This final claim seems the most controversial, and it is to a more thorough consideration of the claim that I now turn.

## II. “IS THERE SOMETHING ‘DANGEROUS’ IN [POETRY]?”

To restate the point, Deleuze insists that literature begins with the destruction of the “I,” the arrival of the third person, and the im-/trans-/meta-personal Ideas conveyed under the third-person aegis, supporting this claim with a reference to Maurice Blanchot. It is clear that lyric poetry, with its frequent use of the first person, is not well suited to that definition of literature. But that fact alone, that the validity of Deleuze’s claim necessitates the exclusion of an entire and massive body of texts under one existing sub-genre of literature, calls for a careful examination of that claim. To begin, I return to the aforementioned issue regarding the possibility that “third person” for Deleuze might refer instead to something like a process of anonymization or communalization.<sup>16</sup>

One might be tempted to buttress this interpretation by emphasizing the aforementioned influence on Deleuze of Blanchot, and arguing that Blanchot

means something like a process of anonymization with his concept of the neuter. Although Deleuze briefly mentions Blanchot elsewhere in his corpus, the majority of the references to him are found in Deleuze's *Foucault*.<sup>17</sup> For starters, Deleuze claims that Foucault "echoes Blanchot in denouncing all linguistic personology and seeing the different positions for the speaking subject as located within a deep anonymous murmur." Deleuze then identifies the basic unit of language for Foucault as "statements," each of which possesses a "discursive object" that "stems from the statement itself" (rather than being derived from a subject).<sup>18</sup> The subject, in turn, for Foucault (as for Blanchot) is merely a "product" (rather than an agent), of which product the statement only leaves a "trace" — and "only in the third person."<sup>19</sup> As elaborated in one of Deleuze's endnotes, the latter idea appears clearly in Foucault's use of the expression "one speaks" to define the "being of language."<sup>20</sup> Put differently, language for Foucault speaks through the subject, not the other way around, and thus "I" am always epiphenomenal relative to the "s/he" that speaks from within (or behind or underneath) the "I."

Although this admittedly sounds less like the grammatical third person, and more like an impersonal agent pulling the strings of a subject-as-puppet, such an interpretation becomes increasingly untenable as one considers the rest of Deleuze's references to Blanchot. More specifically, in eight of the remaining ten of these references, Deleuze discusses Blanchot's valorization of "exteriority," "the outside," "absolute outside," "Outside," "the passion of the outside," etc.<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on exteriority and the outside, I would argue, conflicts with the idea of an impersonality that speaks from within the "I" of the subject, and thus brings Blanchot's neuter into closer proximity to the grammatical third person as an object of discourse.

Moreover, it is important not to naively equate the positions of Blanchot and Foucault, nor of Deleuze with both. In another endnote, Deleuze observes that Blanchot "to a certain extent remains a Cartesian."<sup>22</sup> The context of this remark, returning to the main body of Deleuze's text, is that Foucault agrees with Blanchot that "speaking is not seeing," which means that "there is a difference in nature between the form of content and the form of expression, between the visible and the articulable."<sup>23</sup> Deleuze then elaborates that seeing and speaking are two different "strata," claiming that the difference between Foucault and Blanchot is that Blanchot "insisted on the primacy of speaking as the determining element," while Foucault "upholds the specificity of seeing" and of the visible "as a determinable element."<sup>24</sup> Put differently, for Blanchot, the stratum of speech determines what is seen — through the third-person of language's self-enunciation — while for Foucault something of the visible always escapes being named by language.

Though Deleuze does not state his allegiance here, he does call Foucault more of a Kantian, and Deleuze after all devoted entire monographs to both Foucault and Kant (but not to either Blanchot or Descartes). From this, one might suspect

that Deleuze would side with Foucault's visible to-be-determined, rather than Blanchot's sayable determining force. Finally on this issue, Deleuze's greater sympathy for Foucault than Blanchot would appear to pull Deleuze's own use of "third person" further away from an "impersonal agency" interpretation (as evoked by Blanchot's saying) and closer instead to the "grammatical object" interpretation (as evoked by Foucault's seeing).

Regardless of whether Blanchot can provide authoritative support for understanding Deleuze's "third person" as something like impersonal agency, it might still be helpful to consider that possibility on its own terms. One apparent example might be found in the diary of Witold Gombrowicz (whom Deleuze references frequently), which expresses a need to refer to himself using "he" rather than "I."<sup>25</sup> Since, that is, this is a diary, and since the author explicitly articulates this strategy, it might seem as if this would constitute a third person without third-person narration. Note, though, that a third person narrator is, as it were, automatically generated by the introduction of the third person pronoun "he." The reason is that Gombrowicz-as-Gombrowicz cannot be assumed to be the person enunciating the word "he." Other possibilities include Gombrowicz-as-fictional-character, an unnamed other character in the text, and an omniscient narrator. In other words, because of a structural uncertainty as to the referent(s) of "he," third-person narration appears to be an ineliminable complement to the anonymity and communalization produced by Gombrowicz's "he."

A second apparent example of a third person without third-person narration (to recall Deleuze's aforementioned quote from Foucault on "one speaks" as the "being of language"), might be the impersonal use of "one" in idiomatic English to refer to oneself (as when I say to my opponent in a game of chess, "One wonders about the prudence of that move"). Since "one" (unlike "he") does not usually function as a third person pronoun, it might seem that this formulation evades third-person narration in a way that Gombrowicz's diary does not. I would suggest, however, that a person using "one" in this way speaks as an omniscient narrator, as a result of attempting to bracket the person's singular subjectivity. In other words, one imaginatively reduces oneself to merely another character, whose actions one attempts to narrate with impersonal objectivity.

Even if one assumes that I am wrong, however, about third person narration being generated in this way, one could nevertheless argue that Deleuze did not actually need the concept of a "third person" in order to generate such anonymization or communalization. More specifically, consider the case of Walt Whitman's lyrical, "I"-centric poems, which (in addition to his prose) seem capable even of actualizing Deleuze's impersonal Ideas. When, for example, the speaker of Whitman's poem announces, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," this could be understood as a fitting medium for the actualization of the Ideas of comfort, intimacy, and love. The reason this works, in Whitman's own words, is that "ev-



ery atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”<sup>26</sup> More prosaically, Whitman appears to achieve anonymization and communalization, here, not through the birth of a third person that disempowers his subjectivity, but rather through a radical expansion and depersonalization of his subjectivity—an immanently and eminently superior first person.

In light of these counterexamples, one might wonder why Deleuze would make this move of undermining the literary first person. Deleuze's essay seems to suggest that from his perspective, the “I” is always primarily European and Cartesian, the “I” of “Subjectivity” and “Identity” and “the Same.” The self-same “I” of the conquistadors, of the imperialists, of Man. And if literature for Deleuze consists in becoming-other, in lines of flight from domination, then one might respond in Deleuze's defense with the following question: how can writing that supports the subjectivity of the “I” be consistent with those powers? At the very least, one can say that Deleuze makes plenty of room for the “I” within philosophy, including his own philosophical writings. Consider, for example, the very sentence with which he excludes the “I” from literature—“Literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say ‘I.’”<sup>27</sup> But this means that the lyrical “I” actually functions as the invisible support for his exclusion of the lyrical “I” from literature. Additionally, and to anticipate my discussion below of Deleuze's exclusion of Whitman's poetry from his essay on Whitman, his poetry (with its many “I”s) is the dark precursor, the invisible thread of energy that connects the “Whitman” series to the “Deleuze” series, with Deleuze's essay on Whitman's prose as the bright bolt following on poetry's dark heels.

In fact, one could even argue that the lyrical “I” in general is the dark precursor of the philosophical “I” for Deleuze. Since Deleuze nowhere explicitly assesses the lyrical or lyricism per se, however, this argument is necessarily speculative. On the one hand, this very omission of lyricism seems rather glaring in a philosopher who devotes so much attention to art in general (and literature in particular). This seems even more relevant in light of Deleuze's explicit indebtedness to Nietzsche, and his implicit indebtedness to Heidegger, since both predecessors are obsessed with lyricism-qua-lyric-poetry. On the other hand, when considering the latter two thinkers in tandem, one begins to suspect a connection here to the issue of Nazism. Perhaps, that is, Deleuze's silence on the lyrical is a willful silence in the wake of a movement problematically linked to those two great philosophical lovers of lyrical poetry, and one that killed Deleuze's own brother in the French resistance.

One might also attempt to defend Deleuze's exclusion of the lyrical from literature through appeal to the issue of definition versus evaluation in the philosophy of art. As with many other such texts, Deleuze's essay seems to vacillate between definition and evaluation in its treatment of art. That is, does Deleuze include in the concept of “literature” both “good” and “bad” literature, or is he describing only “good” literature? Or is any writing which is not “good,” simply not literature at all,

but some other kind of writing? The text does not seem clear on this point. And to supplement the confusion with more confusion, Deleuze also appears to conflate the words “literature” and “writing.” The admixture of writing with literature could conceivably involve an attempt to resist the power structures embedded in the term “literature,” such as the issue of literary canons. Deleuze, however, seems quite comfortable with the similarly problematic issue of boundaries between genres of writing, as with those between philosophy and poetry.

Deleuze insists that his work is not literary criticism or anything else besides “philosophy, nothing but philosophy, in the traditional sense of the word.”<sup>28</sup> This position undoubtedly stems from Deleuze’s more general segregation (with Guattari) of the domains of philosophy and art in *What Is Philosophy?*, in which art is assigned the creation of percepts and affects, while the creation of concepts is reserved for philosophy alone. But is this strict separation of different genres of writing (namely prose philosophy and verse non-philosophy) merely a neutral, functional separation, or does it indicate a hierarchy in which philosophy is granted a special status? Is philosophy not only essentially different from but also somehow “higher” than “poetry” (as one might also wonder with regard to Heidegger’s insistence on the term “Thought” instead of “poetry” to characterize some of his most non-traditional texts)?<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting, on this note, that not one essay in *Essays Critical and Clinical* is devoted to poetry, not even any of the ones that are primarily concerned with writers known foremost as poets, such as Walt Whitman. The chapter of *Essays Critical and Clinical* entitled “Whitman,” as I mentioned above, does not quote or analyze even one line of Whitman’s poetry. Instead, it focuses solely on his prose work. One could argue that Deleuze is attempting to shed light on a less well-known portion of Whitman’s oeuvre, which would be a typical move for Deleuze, but the absence of poetry nevertheless seems unusual. It seems more likely that Whitman’s prose was simply perceived as offering a more fitting subject matter for Deleuze’s philosophical work than Whitman’s more widely acclaimed work in poetry.

I would further argue that the specific genre or sub-genre of lyric poetry, Whitman’s dominant mode, is especially problematic for Deleuze within the problematic neighborhood of poetry in general for him. Tilottama Rajan identifies the genre of lyric poetry, with its characteristic focus on the atemporal frozen moment and the univocal claims of an abstracted subjectivity, as the most metaphysical and logocentric of all literary genres (as opposed to the temporal and intersubjective aspects inherent in narrative or dramatic poetry).<sup>30</sup> What is significant about her claim for my purposes here is that the attributes *metaphysical*, *atemporal*, and *abstract* all link lyric poetry to the majority of Western philosophy, suggesting the possibility of other commonalities between lyric poetry and philosophy as well, such as the ability to create concepts.

This final possibility would presumably be most problematic for Deleuze, because if such commonalities do in fact exist, particularly the ability to create concepts, then the already often indistinct boundaries between poetry and philosophy begin to "tremble[] from head to toe" just as Deleuze claims language trembles when "poetic" language erupts within it.<sup>31</sup> In other words, poetry becomes (and/or reveals itself to be) "dangerous" in a similar way to that in which thought after the "image of thought" becomes (and/or reveals itself to be) "dangerous."<sup>32</sup>

This motivation for Deleuze's exclusion of lyric poetry could also help explain why passage 3 of Nietzsche's poetics found no counterpart in the central claims of "Literature and Life." The possible implications of that passage's thesis—that prose is actually poetry in denial and resistance to its own nature as poetry—could certainly present a challenge to any attempt to establish or maintain rigid boundaries between philosophy (qua prose) and poetry. To explicate those implications, it might be useful to consider again the portion of aphorism 92 in which this passage occurs:

Everything abstract wants to be read as a prank against poetry and as with mocking voice; everything dry and cool is meant to drive the lovely goddess into despair. Often there are rapprochements, reconciliations for a moment—and then a sudden leap back and laughter. Often the curtain is raised and harsh light let in just as the goddess is enjoying her dusks and muted colors. Often the words are taken out of her mouth and sung to a tune that drives her to cover her refined ears with her refined hands. Thus there are thousands of delights in this war.<sup>33</sup>

At one level, or according to one analysis, the above text constitutes a piece of prose that is performative of the very warfare that it articulates between prose and poetry, but at another level, this passage may also be read as itself poetry . . . a poetry masquerading as prose that is locked in battle with poetry. Thus, in actuality, the entire scene is a fiction deployed by poetry for her own pleasure.<sup>34</sup> Philosophy qua prose is therefore revealed to be poetry in disguise.

With regard to Nietzsche's understanding here of poetry as the *archê* of prose, is Deleuze resistant to this understanding because (as passage 4 from *The Gay Science* makes clear) poetry is an *archê* that is inherently deceptive? For in merging philosophy with poetry in this way, the falsification inherent to poetry could of course extend to philosophy as well, thereby possibly jeopardizing philosophy's status as truth-seeker (or at least truth-bearer).

At this point, the reader might object that Deleuze elsewhere seems energetically supportive of something like a deceptive poetics, for example in his discussion in the latter part of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* of "the powers of the false."<sup>35</sup> There are two aspects of Deleuze's approach there, however, that appear to distance it significantly from Nietzsche's. First, Deleuze's use of the true/false

dichotomy—rather than the dichotomy of truth/illusion, or truth/lies—reinforces the primacy of truth, and of truth’s being situated in a discourse of logic, representation and negation. In other words, the false here is that which has no rhetorical power except at the expense of reminding one of its own basis in truth—the false as mere absence of logical truth. By contrast, a lie has its own positive, constructive power, and broadens the rhetorical context to include the interpersonal, sociopolitical, desirous, etc. And illusion, for its part, connotes magic and potentially beneficent deception.

The second distancing aspect here is that the most important figure in Deleuze’s discussion is the “forger,” rather than, instead, the “creator” or “artist.” The reason that this amounts to distance from Nietzsche’s approach is that, like the word “false,” “forger” wears its illegitimacy on its sleeve, along with its dependence on a representational model of truth. Thus, for example, in the film Deleuze chooses to analyze there, Orson Welles portrays a magician—rather than, say, a god—and in a film which announces its own forgery (*F for Fake*)—rather than, say, affirming its power for beautiful fabrication.

Together, these two points recall that it is a category mistake to call poetry “false,” or to judge the figure of the poet to be a second-class “maker” (such as a carpenter). On the contrary, at least for Nietzsche in the *Gay Science*, poetry and poets occupy a space anterior to the bifurcation of existence into logical truth and falsity. Thus, while Deleuze is certainly sympathetic to Nietzsche’s (and others’) attempt to overturn traditional Western morality, he nevertheless seems too deeply wedded to the idea of truth to accept “deceptive” literature as not fundamentally distinct from “truthful” philosophy. Whatever Deleuze’s motivation for excluding much of lyric poetry from his understanding of literature, this move, in light of the difficulties it raises, requires further justification.

### III. “[POETRY] IS THE ART OF FORMING, INVENTING, AND FABRICATING CONCEPTS”

Having discussed the possibility of poetry that is also philosophy, I will now turn to sonnet I, 3 of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, as an example of this phenomenon. Specifically, this poem incorporates or creates both affects/percepts *and* concepts, thus showing how lyric poetry can be a neighborhood or region of proximity in which all three are invoked together:

A god can. But how, tell me, should  
a man follow him through the lyre?  
Its sense is split. At the crossing  
of heart-roads: no temple for Apollo.  
Singing, as you teach it, is not desire,  
not boasting of new-won prize;

Singing is being. For the god, it's a trifle.  
 But when *are we*? And when does *he* curve  
 the earth and stars to our being?  
 Young man, you *aren't* that you love, even if  
 your voice opens your mouth—learn  
 to forget your song. It's lost.  
 In truth to sing is a different breath.  
 A breath of nothing. A gust in the god. A wind.<sup>36</sup>

As the title of this sonnet series (*Sonnets to Orpheus*) indicates, this poem is addressed to Orpheus, the mythical musician par excellence, whose chosen instrument—the lyre—is also the ancestor of the phrase “lyric poetry.” The primary god referenced in the poem is Apollo, the Greek god of poetry and song, and thus very important for Orpheus and for poets and musicians in general. The discussion of the “crossing” in lines three and four refers to the fact that “sanctuaries that stood at crossroads in classical antiquity were dedicated to sinister deities like Hecate, not to Apollo, the bright god of song.”<sup>37</sup> The poem and the author thus show themselves as heavily indebted to mythology, that of the birthplace of Western philosophy, Ancient Greece.

The poem, as with much of lyric poetry, *is written entirely in the first person*, and can also be read as a dialogue between the speaker of the poem and Orpheus, with the speaker of the poem questioning Orpheus for nine lines, followed by Orpheus offering his reply in the last five lines. It is the first speaker in the poem who offers or creates the poem's first concept, namely: *Dasein*, the German word for “being” or “existence,” which is defined here in Rilke as singing or song (*Ge-sang*). Berkeley offers a concept of existence as “being perceived,” the Buddha conceptualizes existence as “suffering,” and Rilke's concept is: existence = song.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to its conceptual character, another significant aspect of this definition is that both of its nouns seem unfit to being categorized as either percepts or affects. *Song*, in this abstract form, and belonging as it does to the invisible modality of sound, makes for a poor percept when appearing on the printed page (as opposed to being heard as music), while *existence* is of course one of the most abstract concepts in any language; and neither one carries a distinct or intense affective quality. There are various affects and percepts in the poem, such as the man's following the god through the strings of a lyre, but it seems that the definition quoted above is not one of them.

Another concept emerges at the end of the poem, when Orpheus offers us a descriptive definition of *In Wahrheit singen*, “to sing in truth”: he understands it as “a different breath [*ist ein anderer Hauch*];” “a breath of nothing [*Ein Hauch um nichts*];” “a gust in the god [*Ein Wehn im Gott*];” and “a wind [*Ein wind*].” Still

other conceptual moments in the poem include claims regarding the differences between humans and gods and the relationship of song to truth.

In light of these conceptually creative elements, Deleuze is logically bound to deny the excellence of this particular sonnet, or claim that it oversteps the proper bounds of its genre, despite the fact that it is a respected poem, from a respected series of poems, written by one of the most important poets in the twentieth century (whom Russia's greatest female poet, Maria Tsvetaeva, once referred to as simply "poetry itself").<sup>39</sup> Consequently, Deleuze would be incorrect in thinking that Rilke's work is either (a) inferior poetry or (b) not representative of its genre, and thus wrong as well to exclude conceptual creation entirely from the realm of poetry, even if it is much more common and prevalent in philosophy.

#### IV. "[POETRY] AS DARK PRECURSOR"

In conclusion, given both (1) the prominent roles poetry seems implicitly to fill (as suggested by the above comparison with the Nietzschean poetics) in the majority of Deleuze's analyses in "Literature and Life" especially with regard to the "three effects of literature on language" and also (2) the unusual exclusion of lyric poetry from that essay's definition of literature, I wish to raise the question as to whether "poetry" in the Nietzschean sense and Deleuze as a Nietzschean life-poet might constitute a "dark precursor" of "Literature and Life," and perhaps also of *Essays Critical and Clinical* and even of Deleuze's work in general as well.

To begin with, poetry seems to fulfill all of the secondary criteria for being a "dark precursor" as stipulated in *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>40</sup> First, poetry "conceals itself and its functioning" as I have observed in its exclusion from Deleuze's understanding of both philosophy and literature.<sup>41</sup> As Deleuze writes of the dark precursor, one could argue that poetry too "has no place other than that from which it is 'missing.'"<sup>42</sup> As groundbreaking twentieth-century U.S. poet William Carlos Williams wrote (in a poem), "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."<sup>43</sup> Put prosaically, poetry is that which belongs above all in the place where it is least often found today—at the heart of a holistic education and flourishing lives.

Second, poetry seems a fitting candidate for being "the in-itself of difference" or "the self-different which relates different to different by itself," as attributed to the dark precursor, insofar as the making and fabulation of poetry show it to be an exemplary engineer of difference.<sup>44</sup> Further, and what is for Deleuze "the most important thing," poetry's metaphorical, overdetermined, polysemous language means that in addition to the differences it produces, it *is* also its own difference, i.e., a difference that is "internal."<sup>45</sup>

Third, poetry (in the narrow sense) occupies various positions, and with differing importance, in the levels or regions of *Essays Critical and Clinical*. It appears,

for example, in the "four poetic formulas" that summarize Kant's philosophy, the "Idea of poetry" as quoted at the beginning of this paper, and Deleuze's characterization of Gherasim Luca's speech as "eminently poetic." Poetry is indeed, as Deleuze writes of the dark precursor, a master of "displacement and disguise."<sup>46</sup>

And it could also be argued that poetry fulfills the primary, or most obvious, criterion for being a dark precursor—connecting, by its own differential nature, multiple differential systems or series. In the case of poetry and the work of Deleuze in general, those series could be articulated as both the multiple series that are the texts of prominent figures (for Deleuze) in the history of philosophy, and also the single series that is constituted by Deleuze's own texts.

In other words, one could argue that it is the Nietzschean poetry at work in each of these major figures—including such rigorous and seemingly prosaic thinkers as Leibniz and Kant—to which Deleuze is drawn; and that it is often Deleuze's analyses that draw out or even create the poetry at work in these philosophers in the first place. This ability to draw out or create the poetic in previous philosophy would in turn be based on the inherently poetic nature of Deleuze's own philosophy. The free play of the Kantian faculties, the literary excursions of *Essays Critical and Clinical*, the creative syntax described in "Literature and Life," and even the concept of the "dark precursor" itself—all can be understood to derive from the differentiating dark precursor of Deleuze's thought and writing that is Nietzschean poetry.<sup>47</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See Joshua M. Hall, "Slanted Truths: *The Gay Science* as Nietzsche's *Ars Poetica*," *Evental Aesthetics* 5(1) (2016): 98–117.
2. See aphorisms 79, 84, 92, 222, 299, and 301 in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974). The numbers in the figure below are based on the order of appearance in *The Cheerful Thoughtcraft*.
3. I use *archê* in Heidegger's double sense of both "origin" and "guiding force." See, for example, Heidegger's essay, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York: Harper, 2008), 432.
4. "The deepest experience of the creative artist is feminine." Rilke, in a letter "To a young woman, November 20, 1904," quoted in the "Notes" to the first *Sonnet to Orpheus*, in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 230.
5. See Aristotle's *Physics*, as helpfully discussed in Joe Sachs's translator's introduction to his *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 22.
6. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 2.

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid.
10. It seems strange that Deleuze should restrict literature to the symptomatology aspect of medicine, without reference to the possibility that literature also operates as etiology and/or therapy. The first person introspective mode, such as that of Sylvia Plath, for example, seems particularly attuned to the search for causes. And philosophically oriented literature, such as that of Pablo Neruda or Wallace Stevens, often seems geared more towards therapy than symptomatology. Perhaps Deleuze's symptomatology vs. etiology/therapy distinction maps onto the affect/percept vs. concept distinction with regard to art and philosophy—meaning that etiology and therapy (in writing) are the exclusive domain of philosophy.
11. In Kaufmann's translation, the word *Fortdichter*, a Nietzschean compound of *fort*, "continually," and *Dichter*, "poet," is omitted entirely; and *des Lebens* is rendered as "this life," whereas in my view, a more straightforward translation that would also expand the scope of the word "life" would be, simply, "life."
12. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
13. Given the reference to the witch in this striking passage, and in the spirit of writing as becoming-woman, perhaps I should re-characterize Deleuze from a magician to a witch.
14. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 5.
15. See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper, 1976).
16. I am indebted for this suggestion and the subsequent two examples to an early reviewer of this article.
17. See Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Séan Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
18. Ibid., 7–8.
19. Ibid., 15.
20. Ibid., 135n10.
21. Ibid., 43, 61, 87, 96, 97, 104, 113.
22. Ibid., 140n19.
23. Ibid., 61.
24. Ibid.
25. See Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).
26. See Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (New York: Dover, 2001).
27. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 3.
28. From an interview quoted in Daniel W. Smith's "Introduction" to *Essays Critical and Clinical*.
29. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 2013), 96.
30. Rajan Tiltotama, "'The Web of Human Things': Narrative and Identity in Alastor," in *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views*, ed. G. Kim Blank (London: Macmillan, 1991), 85–107.
31. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 109.



32. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia, 1995), 153.
33. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 92.
34. One could easily read this passage as symbolic of Deleuze's texts on the history of philosophy. At one level, Deleuze's meta-texts would be *the Prose warrior* that is assaulting—i.e., misinterpreting or imposing ideas under the guise of discovering those ideas—the texts in the history of philosophy, or *the Poetry goddess*. But at a more fundamental level, Deleuze's meta-texts and the original texts would *both* constitute the *Poetry-behind-the-scenes*, which is actually staging the assault. In this light, the poetic play of the language of the texts, the understanding of *poiësis* as making, the inherent deception or fabrication of poetry, would all work to make the question of accuracy in interpretation irrelevant for Deleuze's meta-texts. If both the meta-texts and the original texts are disclosed as fundamentally poetry—poetry which makes its meanings and is capable of sustaining multiple and contradictory meanings—then Deleuze's philosophy shines as even more interesting, beautiful, and healthy.
35. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 126. I am indebted for this insight as well to the aforementioned reviewer.
36. My translation, privileging faithfulness to the original German over aesthetic considerations, and informed by Stephen Mitchell's translation, from *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 230.
37. Hermann Mörchen, *Rilkes Sonette an Orpheus* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1958), 66; quoted in Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 337.
38. See George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (New York: Hackett, 1982), 39; and *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (New York: Wisdom, 2005).
39. Quoted in Anna A. Tavis, *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 110.
40. See, in particular, pp. 119–26 in Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.
41. *Ibid.*, 119.
42. *Ibid.*, 120.
43. See "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower;" in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume 2, 1939–1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), 238.
44. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 119.
45. *Ibid.*, 121.
46. *Ibid.*, 120. It is also interesting that after analyzing the concept of the "dark precursor," Deleuze then turns to examples of dark precursors at work within literary texts, and two of the most prominent figures he discusses are Proust and Joyce, who are probably considered the most "poetic" prose writers in the history of the French and English languages, respectively, largely because of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and *Finnegans Wake*. The word *poetry*, however, does not occur in any part of the analysis or the examples.
47. For more on poetry's prominent role in multiple thinkers of central importance to Deleuze, see Joshua M. Hall, "Prevailing Winds: Marx as Romantic Poet," *Philosophy and Literature* 37(2) (2013): 343–59; and "Poetic Intuition: Spinoza and Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Philosophy Today* 57(4) (2013): 401–07.

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