

Slanted Truths:
*The Gay Science as
Nietzsche's *Ars Poetica**

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ABSTRACT

This essay derives its focus on poetry from the subtitle of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*: “*la gaya scienza*.” Nietzsche appropriated this phrase from the phrase “*gai saber*” used by the Provençal knight-poets (or troubadours) of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries — the first lyric poets of the European languages — to designate their *Ars Poetica* or “art of poetry.” I will begin with an exploration of Nietzsche’s treatment of poets and poetry as a subject matter, closely analyzing his six aphorisms which deal explicitly with poets and poetry. Having considered *The Gay Science* as a text about poetry, I will then briefly explore three further ways in which *The Gay Science* can be thought of as itself a kind of poetry. The result of these analyses is an understanding of Nietzsche’s own understanding of philosophy (and of the best way to live) as also a form of poetry.

KEYWORDS

Nietzsche
Poetry
The Gay Science
Playfulness
Humor



Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
–Emily Dickinson (ca. 1868)¹

I. *The Gay Science* on Poetry

There are six aphorisms in *The Gay Science* that are centrally concerned with poetry as such: three in Book Two, one in Book Three, and two in Book Four. I will consider them in the order in which they appear in the text, building a cumulative sense of Nietzsche's understanding of poetry and thereby of his own *Ars Poetica*. I will begin with three aphorisms that investigate the sources of (1) the poet's power, (2) poetry itself, and (3) the phenomenon of "prose" as a kind of calcified poetry. From the beginning, one can see that poetry is not, for Nietzsche as opposed to Heidegger, some omnipotent, metaphysical force filled with gravitas.² Instead, poetry for Nietzsche is essentially incomplete, it traffics in the fantasy world of magic, and it is not above masking itself as its apparent other — prose.

Aphorism 79 argues that the source of poets' power and appeal lies in their forever approaching their goals without achieving them. "Indeed, [the poet] owes his advantages and fame much more to his ultimate incapacity than to his ample strength [*Kraft*]." Nietzsche writes of 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. The expanding range of the concept of *poet* in this radical democratization, though it is seemingly anathema to Nietzsche’s aristocratic sensibilities, also prefigures his later discussion of a kind of poetry of life, living one’s life as a form of poetry, to which I will return below.

This interplay of erotic forces also suggests the *eros* of the Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Ion*, in which Socrates describes the young Ion’s tremendous yet comical power over those who experience his recitations of Homer. As Socrates puts it to Ion, “this is not an art in you whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power, which moves like the stone which Euripedes named a magnet.”³ As for the comical dimension, during this divine inspiration, the poet “has been put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him.”⁴ Given Nietzsche’s love of philology and the ancient Greeks, it would be surprising if he did not have this connection to Ion as the comically inarticulate poetic performer in mind.

Aphorism 84 builds on Nietzsche’s understanding of the poet as master of potentiality, with its central thesis that the *Ursprung* of poetry — its origin or “upspring” as in Heidegger’s *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* — lies in “the magical song and the spell.” In German, aphorism 84 reads as follows: *Zauberlied und Besprechung scheinen die Urgestalt der Poesie zu sein.* “Magic-song and incantation shines the originary-form of poetry to be.” Against the popular conception of poetry as currently useless and therefore useless in its origins, Nietzsche asserts that, on the contrary, poetry had originally “a very great utility,” a utility that was “superstitious” or “mythological” [*abergläubische*].

He 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 in what contemporary Westerners would characterize as a silly, superstitious way. “[M]an warf ihnen die Poesie wie eine magische Schlinge um: One threw, at the gods, poetry like a magical lasso.”

It is also interesting that Nietzsche in the preceding quote characterizes rhythm, the chief music of poetry, as a compulsion (*Zwang*):

the same word he uses to describe “every morality” in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which he links moral compulsion to “the metrical compulsion [*Zwang*] of rhyme and rhythm.”⁵ Thus, both morality and poetry according to Nietzsche have a “compulsive” power, and in both cases this compulsion is linked to religion. For poetry this link to religion is explicit, as poetry is the lasso that pulls the gods. And as for morality, Nietzsche attributes what he terms “slave morality” to the priestly class of the Jewish people, the central aspect of whose faith is the sacred text (especially the *Torah*). Put differently, poetry in general for Nietzsche (like the Jewish poetry of the *Tanakh*) is a tool through which the priest can compel the people with their preferred new morality. The poet from aphorism 79 can thus be thought of as a sort of priest or mountebank, hawking a truth that is always deferred and delivered in the compulsion of the music of language. The poet is part of the same priestly lineage from which, according to the third essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the philosopher is born.⁶

To resume my reading of aphorism 84 of *The Gay Science*, and return from the specific issue of religious magic to magic in general: Nietzsche also distinguishes “an even stranger notion that may have contributed most of all to the origin of poetry” — “the power of discharging the emotions, of purifying the soul... precisely by means of rhythm.” Nietzsche seems to be speaking here of the famous *catharsis* of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. “[O]ne sought to push the exuberance and giddiness of the emotions to an extreme ... a tranquilizer, not because it is tranquil itself, but because its aftereffects make one tranquil.” Nietzsche also stresses the everyday utility of poetry as incantation or spell: “Every action provides an occasion for song: *every* action depends on the assistance of spirits.” In other words, poetry is simultaneously ordinary and divine, since every action is worthy of song, every song is composed of lyrics (that is, lyric poetry), and every action requires divine assistance. With regard to the larger issue of poetry’s origins, the point is that something which now strikes us as banal nevertheless began as divine — because the everyday for the ancient Greeks was itself a magical thing. Put differently, we undervalue poetry because we underestimate the magic of the ordinary.

Nietzsche concludes aphorism 84 by discussing the role of poetry in prophecy. He claims that prophecy meant originally, etymologically, “to get something determined ... to bind the future.” The power of rhythm was believed to be so great that when wielded by Apollo, it could “bind even the

goddesses of fate”: goddesses so strong that, in Homer, even Zeus is powerless to control them. And remember here that Nietzsche was an atheist, and thus is not affirming prophecy as a legitimate and objectively rich faculty. Instead, he is affirming it as a fictively creative power. And that is the larger point of the entire aphorism. To wit, Nietzsche is attempting to separate the form of poetry from specific religious content so that he can both practice and advocate redeploing the form with new and better content. In other words, the Jewish priests used poetry to create gods, to compel their communities to live according to certain ethical values, but those values have outlived their purpose, and we have not yet learned to tap into that power of poetry in order to inspire present-day communities to live by new ethical values that will better promote flourishing today.

Aphorism 92 provides a greater clarification and expansion of Nietzsche’s concept of poetry by juxtaposing it with prose. The aphorism begins: “It is noteworthy that the great masters of prose have almost always been poets, too ... Good prose is only written face to face with poetry.” Prose “is an uninterrupted war with poetry: all of its attractions depend on the way in which poetry is continually avoided and contradicted.” Just as it is often argued in the professional dance community that ballet is the foundational dance, one sees Nietzsche arguing that poetry is the fundamental linguistic art, the *arche* of writing. In other words, anything other than poetry can only be written by, so to speak, turning poetry against itself, wresting the poetic away from poetry. Westerners today tend to adopt a contrasting view in which poetry is augmented and ornamented prose. But for Nietzsche, prose is fundamentally a stripped-down form of poetry, a poetry that negates most of its musicality and rhythm. So when prose asserts its minimalist independence from poetry, that is really just poetry minimizing itself. Poetry is thus a form of self-overcoming, while prose is one result or manifestation of that self-overcoming. As with the employment of rhythm to coerce the Fates, prose is merely a tool capable of perhaps bending the will of poetry but never of fully overpowering it.

All language for Nietzsche is fundamentally poetry although some poetry is so stripped down and minimal that it goes by another name, “prose.” When one wants to accomplish certain goals — such as precision, clarity, or the appearance of scientific objectivity — it makes sense to write in the sub-genre of poetry that is prose. Nietzsche elaborates:

Everything abstract wants to be read as a prank against poetry and as with a 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.⁷

This is a remarkable passage for several reasons. It constitutes a piece of prose that is performative of the very warfare it articulates between prose and poetry. For Nietzsche, following Heraclitus, “*War [thus, conflict, strife, opposition] is the father of all good things,*” including “good prose.”⁸ In the passage above, Nietzsche’s prose dances and flirts with poetic imagery and devices such as metaphor and personification as it laughingly describes the same process.

However, there also seems to be a highly problematic, sadistic, sexual dimension to this passage. Poetry is personified as a goddess, a woman with whom one toys. One is cool towards her out of cruelty and then sadistically enjoys her ensuing despair. One feigns agreeableness only to savor her pain when the agreeableness is withdrawn. One steals her voice only to turn it against her painfully, all the while mocking her overly refined nature. In a sense, in the middle of this warfare between poetry and prose, the prose warrior bursts into the poetic stronghold to violate the poetic enemy.

On another analysis, this passage may itself be read as poetry. It is a poetry masquerading as prose that is locked in battle with poetry — and a poetry which laughs secretly at the reader for assuming that he or she is reading prose and assuming that the struggle between prose and poetry symbolized by the sexual imagery and language constitutes a sort of violation of poetry by prose — when in actuality, the entire scene is a fiction deployed by poetry for her own pleasure.

In order to corroborate the interpretation of aphorism 92 as poetry, I will now reproduce it in the original German in order to note a couple of poetic elements that were inevitably lost in translation:

Jedes Abstraktum will als Schalkheit gegen diese und wie mit spöttischer Stimme vorgetragen sein; jede Trockenheit und Kühle soll die liebliche Göttin in eine liebliche Verzweifung bringen; oft gibt es Annäherungen, Versöhnungen des Augenblickes und dann ein plötzliches Zurückspringen und Auslachen; oft wird der Vorhang aufgezogen und grelles Licht hereingelassen, während gerade

Slanted Truths

die Göttin ihre Dämmerungen und dumpfen Farben genießt; oft wird ihr das Wort aus dem Munde genommen und nach einer Melodie abgesungen, bei der sie die feinen Hände vor die feinen Ohrchen hält, — und so gibt es tausend Vergnügungen des Krieges.⁹

Note the alliteration of “s” sounds in the first clause and “k” sounds in the second clause as well as Nietzsche’s use of repetition (for example, of the word “*liebliche*” in the second clause.) Note also the rolling cadence of the third clause, primarily established by the falling metrical pattern of the words: the first syllable is stressed, and the last syllables are not — as in “*Aus-lach-en*” and “*plötz-lich-es*.”

In reviewing aphorism 92, one might conclude that Nietzsche presents poetry as the true *arche* of prose in the dual sense of origin or source and of governing principle or ruling trajectory. Nietzsche thereby problematizes the general distinction between poetry and prose, and the distinction between poetry and philosophy *qua* argumentative prose that is evident in his own writing. Is all philosophy simply poetry that to some extent resists its own “poeticity”?

Poetry, construed as the *arche* of prose, is thus strongly implicated in the lineage of philosophy. At least in Nietzsche’s work, quoted above, philosophy demonstrates itself a rightful inheritor of the characteristics of poetry elaborated in aphorisms 79 and 84 above. The philosopher manifests as the unwitting carrier of the traits of the seductive, ever-seeking, ever-unfinished visionary, working in a linguistic medium born as magic and spells. What is more, if we attend to the history of this marginalized origin of philosophy in poetry, the memories of these spells can be restored to the philosopher, and the traits show themselves as a visible phenotype. In other words, the philosopher can become a poet. The benefit of this transformation is the ability to create worlds that do not forget their creative origins, which origins imply that we can and perhaps ought to laugh at “those creations,” rather than force those creations on others in the guise of absolute truth.

II. *The Gay Science* as Problematizing of the Poet and Poetry

Having developed a general picture of the poet and poetry for Nietzsche, I now turn to the last three aphorisms on poetry in *The Gay Science*, which further explore the nature of the poet in ways that liberate the figure of the poet from both (1) a religiously-informed portrayal as medium of transcendent truth and (2) a narrow conceptualization as one who simply writes poems as instances of a literary genre. Beginning with (1), Nietzsche's most condensed statement of what makes poets unfit to serve as mouthpieces for transcendent truth appears in aphorism 222: "Poet and liar [*Dichter und Lügner*]: the poet considers the liar a foster brother [*Milchbruder*: literally, 'milk brother,' nursed by the same woman] whose milk the poet has drunk; so it is that the liar remains wretched and has not once attained a good conscience." The title of the aphorism, in which the names of the two figures constitute a half-rhyme or slant rhyme, adds literary potency to their discursive identification in the sentence that follows. Not only is the poet a liar, but his or her name also partially rhymes with the word "liar."

One may consider the privation of the poet as a privation insofar as lying is considered a privation of the truth. In formal logic, the presence of even one embedded negation or privation in an argument alters its conclusion. According to my descriptions of Nietzsche's other aphorisms above, the poet emerges as a more original form of the philosopher. The philosopher is thus as — an amnesiac-rebellious poet — indirectly condemned as essentially a liar as well.

It is not entirely surprising that Nietzsche should describe the poet as a liar, since in aphorism 79 he describes the poet as a visionary who lures others with the deception that his or her vision will eventually be realized. And in aphorism 84, he describes poetry as originating from incantations and other obscure occult practices, which certainly do not ring with connotations of truth to ears accustomed to scientific materialism. Furthermore, aphorism 84 ends with the following Homeric quote: "Many lies tell the poets." And in aphorism 92, poetry was also described as deceptive insofar as it often parades in a deformed disguise calling itself prose.

But in aphorism 222, this deceptive nature is made much more explicit to the extent that the poet drinks the same milk as the common liar but is only half-brother to the liar. The only significant difference between the two figures is that the poet achieves power and dubious renown while the liar remains despised. One assumes that the source of poetry's better fortune lies in its magical-musical aspects since only those who lie in prose are persecuted while their lyrically-inclined relatives prosper under a different name.

As a result of this essential deceptiveness, Nietzsche's poets doubtlessly prove themselves unworthy of the mantle of absolute truth and equally deserving of their exile from communities that hold absolute truth most precious, such as the allegedly ideal "city in speech" in Plato's *Republic*.¹⁰ But this unworthiness with regard to Truth also allows Nietzsche to praise the poets for their considerable power and charm without fear of elevating the poets to the level of new transcendent idols.

By naming the poet as liar, Nietzsche as himself a lying poet performs a self-overcoming of lying as it has been understood in Western culture. The lie in its role as the poet's instrument begins to absorb the magical quality and beautiful seductive music that formerly belonged only to poetry. Nietzsche is in effect assisting the poet's milk-brother in finally getting his fair share of the milk, becoming healthy and strong and attaining a good conscience — all of which seems appropriate, given that the will to lie and the will to poetry for Nietzsche are but two names for the same drive, the same will to power.

This radical homogenization of deception and poetry has various implications both inside and outside of poetry as literary genre. In the context of poetry's sharing its powers and positive status with its formerly unacknowledged relatives, consider *The Gay Science's* oft-quoted aphorism 299:

What one should learn from artists. — How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. Here we could learn something from physicians, when for example they dilute what is bitter or add wine and sugar to a mixture — but even more from artists who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out or framed; or to place them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspectives; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of sunset; or giving them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent — all

this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. *For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life — first of all in the smallest most everyday matters.*"

This entire passage, too, is remarkable and merits careful consideration. First, Nietzsche remarks that he thinks life is never beautiful, attractive, or desirable in itself. If Nietzsche took metaphysical claims to the realities of things “in themselves” seriously, this would indeed be a very dark sentiment. But for Nietzsche there is always the issue of all-too-human perspectives that necessarily rule out the possibility of a divine perspective for human beings. That is, by his own reasoning, Nietzsche can only be making this claim, whether genuinely or ironically, from one particular embodied perspective. Either he is serious, but it is just one person speaking from one position at one moment in history. Or he is disingenuous. But in neither case is this the timeless, absolute, “God’s honest” truth about human life.

Second, Nietzsche in a certain way equates the physician’s work and the artist’s work. Both kinds of work pursue a similar goal, namely making the undesirable world appear desirable, and even their methods are somewhat similar. The physician, however, acts to shift the perception of the patient in a way that is unconscious for the patient (for example by helping a diabetic patient regulate her/his insulin levels, part of the benefit of which is more stable mood, as hypoglycemia can cause distressing feelings). By contrast, the artist works to consciously shift the viewer’s perceptions. A more important distinguishing factor than medium, however, appears to be the intensity or obsessive duration of the artist’s efforts, insofar as the artist is “really continually trying” to make the world appear beautiful. Since artists are trying to do so all the time and thus have plenty of experience, Nietzsche seems to suggest that we see what can be learned from their efforts.

The reader is then instructed to learn the following specific things: (1) to create distance between oneself and a thing until one is forced to create parts of the thing that one can no longer perceive in order to perceive the thing at all — as in the literary criticism of ancient texts for example; (2) to adopt an unusual perspective (which is typically considered inferior) on something — as in free-wheeling scientific experimentation; (3) to artificially frame a thing or put it in a different context; (4) to arrange things in such a way that each one obscures one’s view of the others; (5) to examine things through tinted glass or inferior media; (6) to examine things at unusual times; and (7) to intentionally obscure an otherwise clear view of something

— all of which are possible descriptions of intentional, repressive, active forgetting.

These paraphrases and examples as well of course are merely possible interpretations — and similarly untrustworthy ones — of the will to knowledge that is always already the will “to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue!”¹² However, according to Nietzsche we wish to go beyond the instructive example of the artist. And to do so requires that we liberate this deceptive practice of the artist from the confines of art and extend it to every other practice in our world, to the very living of our lives. “*Wir aber wollen die Dichter unseres Lebens sein, und im Kleinsten und Alltäglichen zuerst!* — We, however, wish the poets of our lives to be, and in that which is smallest and most everyday, first.” It seems this would entail the joyful celebration of perspectives and the carefree utilization of deception where necessary in our lives. In the light of the previous aphorisms, we wish to be the visionaries who hunger perennially for visions never fully realized in a language born as poetry, born as magical spells, fighting a constant war to return our prose to poetry, the joyful deceived-deceivers, the “tempting-attempting experimenters [*Versucher*].”¹³

One might wonder, however, what would stop the inevitable collapse of society consequent upon everyone’s beginning to lie without constraint or inhibition. The answer lies in the very specific audience for whom Nietzsche’s challenge was intended. He writes of what “one” should learn from artists and of the “we” who wish to be the poets of our lives. But who exactly are these people? Did they even exist for Nietzsche when he composed these lines? If not, do they exist now? The final aphorism I will consider, 301, should prove helpful in this context.

This aphorism 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 *er selbst auch der eigentliche Dichter und Fortdichter des Lebens ist* [that he himself, also, the actual poet and ever-poet of life is].”¹⁴ 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*, 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.¹⁵

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. Nietzsche is never clear, however, as to whom he has in mind with the term “higher persons” — though it seems likely to include scientists and philosophers who are especially creative in their work. 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. Nietzsche seems to loosely define a world as a collection of objects organized, evaluated, and created according to a particular set of standards. And each of those worlds in its broadest sense is a poem.¹⁶

One implication of this view is that adding an ordinary object like a new pair of shoes creates a new world. Though this might initially seem counterintuitive, consider the famous scene from the film adaptation of the *Grapes of Wrath* in which a young boy lights up with the joy of a new world when he receives a pair of new shoes. Or take the case of Che Guevara’s classic text *Guerrilla Warfare*. Guevara mentions shoes no less than twelve times in that slim volume, claiming that they are the most important tool in the guerilla fighters’ attempt to bring a post-revolutionary world into being.¹⁷ And few things are more poetic than a revolution.

I will conclude my exploration of these aphorisms by presenting the rest of the passage quoted above, the meaning of which seems relatively clear:

Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature — nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present — and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it. Only we have created the world that concerns man! — But precisely this knowledge we lack, and when we occasionally catch it for a fleeting moment we forget it again immediately; we fail to recognize our best power and underestimate ourselves, the contemplatives, just a little. We are *neither as proud nor as happy* as we might be.¹⁸

III. *The Gay Science* as Poetry

I have already considered two ways in which, according to Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* itself constitutes a type of poetry. First, from the poetry/prose warfare described in aphorism 92, I observed that all prose is merely a kind of calcified poetry, constantly fighting its own poetic tendencies. Thus, *The Gay Science*, just like all prose, can be considered partially de-formed poetry. Moreover, *The Gay Science* would not be Nietzsche's only prose poem as he also composed the epic, ironic prose poem that is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.¹⁹

Second, I noted at the beginning of this essay Nietzsche's allusion to the troubadours' art of poetry, *gai saber*, in the subtitle of *The Gay Science*. It is a widespread tradition for poets in the West to compose a poem entitled "*Ars Poetica*" in which they describe their particular way of writing poetry, which is itself in the form of a poem (including those by Archibald MacLeish and Timothy Liu). There are also, incidentally, many other poems that serve the same function without the official title, such as Marianne Moore's "Poetry."²⁰ The phrase "*Ars Poetica*" comes from the Roman poet Horace's treatise of the same name. The contents and styles of these "*Ars Poetica*" poems vary enormously, as one might expect, from one type of poet to another. Compare for example these lines from Archibald MacLeish's contribution:

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.²¹

to these lines from contemporary American poet Timothy Liu's effort:

Childhood begins with your first good line —
a spider waiting for its kill.²²

Given the subtitle of the second edition of *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, which suggests that the book's "prose" content is surrounded at both ends by a group of individual poems, perhaps it would be fruitful to think of *The Gay Science* as itself an *Ars Poetica* and

therefore as a poem that both enacts and describes the art of poetry as the poet understands it. Moreover, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche describes the troubadours as “magnificent and inventive human beings... to whom Europe owes so many things and almost owes itself.”²³ The significance that Nietzsche attaches to these knight-poets seems to further support my conception of *The Gay Science* as poetry. Recall that the title of the book is a German translation (*Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*) of the Latin phrase the troubadours used for their art of poetry. Finally, *The Gay Science* fits Nietzsche’s broad conception of poetry as revealed in the above six aphorisms.

At any rate, these two groups of poems at the beginning and end of *The Gay Science*, particularly in their playful spirit, can be understood as forming a poetic boundary which is at the same time a sort of *un-bounding* insofar as it attacks seriousness and serious attempts to contain or achieve certainty in knowledge and thereby to contain life itself. Instead, one is free to willfully create knowledge for one’s time in the service of life.

Consider for example poem 9 from the opening poems, entitled “My Roses”:

Yes, joy wants to amuse,
Every joy wants to amuse.
Would you like to pick my roses?

You must stoop and stick your noses
Between thorns and rocky views,
And not be afraid of bruises.

For my joy — enjoys good teases.
For my joy — enjoys good ruses.
Would you like to pick my roses?²⁴

One would be at a loss here if searching for the kind of clarity and order which have long been demanded of philosophical texts by some philosophical traditions (sometimes at the cost of the clear thing being


pointless, the order stultifying and rigid). A Western reader encounters the phrases “my love is like a rose” and “the soul is a simple substance” with very different expectations, allowing possibilities to multiply in the case of the former while trying to nail down the timelessly transcendent truth of the latter. Against this bifurcation into serious philosophy and silly poetry, Nietzsche offers a prelude and appendix of poems to a philosophical text and thereby questions the assumption that poetry and philosophy must be interpreted differently.

In other words, in the face of what Nietzsche might describe as “Socratic” attempts to “cage Dionysus,” the “prelude of rhymes” and “appendix of songs” can be thought of as rebellious, wicked guards that are always flinging open the gates of the cage. The prelude and appendix are nevertheless limits to the “prose” aphoristic center of the text, delimiting where the “book” begins and ends. But since poetry for Nietzsche is self-mocking, as I have attempted to show in this essay, the prelude and appendix also simultaneously un-limit the limits that they embody, loosening and unbinding the prose text, which thereby acquires the semblance of poetic freedom. The conventional poetry of the prelude and appendix can be read as a reminder to the reader of the light-hearted, subversive, poetic quality of the entire text of *The Gay Science*. The prelude and appendix of *The Gay Science* are not its only instances of poetic unlimiting limits. That which the prelude and appendix encircle, namely the aphorisms themselves, also resonate with poetic unbounding boundaries. Of particular relevance to this issue is the etymology of the word “aphorism.” The word is derived from the Greek root *horizein*, from which is derived the English word *horizon*. As a verb, *horizein* means to bound, to limit, to mark; and in mathematical discourses, a true horizon is one in which one’s visibility is unobstructed in all directions, resulting in a perfectly circular perspective. However, the limits enacted by even a true horizon are radically perspectival, and with even the slightest change of location, the observer finds her/himself no longer bound to those limits. Thus, a horizon should be understood not as an absolute limit but as a limit on what can be seen from a given point of view over one period of time.

One could in this light conceive of Nietzsche’s aphorisms as a network of these various, circular true horizons, which a reader can overlap like seismographic readings to create more complex, subtle, and perhaps even accurate “readings” or results. Furthermore, the true horizon in its

circular nature can be articulated theoretically as the result of bending or slanting a perfectly straight line. All but parallel straight lines intersect at some point, so even the slightest slant on a line — or a truth — entails convergence, intersection, and the likelihood of circularity. As to why Nietzsche might have chosen to write this book aphoristically, one likely possibility is that most lyric poetry is short, and as a prose poem about poetry, it is fitting for *The Gay Science* to contain a significant number of lyric poem-sized sections. Poetry, as “slanted truths,” as problematic and often circular lines of language and thought, can thus be thought of as the “true horizon” of language and thought. As Emily Dickinson reminds us, “Success in circuit lies.”

IV. Conclusion: Slanted Truths

In light of the above explorations, it seems that the best way of characterizing poetry, broadly construed, would be as slanted truths. Slanted truths, meaning a plurality of truths attacked and constructed from different angles, always from an embedded, embodied perspective and always strategically. Truth slanted — to summarize my above analyses of the six aphorisms from *The Gay Science* — by the tempests of a vision that must always be pursued, slanted by the forces of magical incantations, by the glancing blows of the perpetual civil war of poetry expressed as prose, slanted by the power of creativity. And especially by the creation of the “higher persons” of their ever-evolving cumulative poems, which we call the world. 

Notes

- 1 Emily Dickinson, "Untitled Poem 1263," <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56824>.
- 2 See, for example, Martin Heidegger, "Poetically Man Dwells," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), 211–227.
- 3 Plato, *Statesman. Philebus. Ion*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 533D (p. 421).
- 4 Plato, *Ion*, 534B (p. 423).
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 260.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 115.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage 1974), aphorism 92.
- 8 *Ibid.*, emphasis original.
- 9 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- 10 Plato, *The Republic of Plato: Second Edition*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic, 1991), Book II: 369A (p. 45).
- 11 *The Gay Science*, aphorism 299, emphasis added.
- 12 *Beyond Good and Evil*, 24.
- 13 *Beyond Good and Evil*, 42.
- 14 The word "delusion" is italicized in Kaufmann's translation, and the German is italicized merely as non-English text. 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 if the present author is correct, a more straightforward translation that would also expand the scope of the word "life" would be simply "life."
- 15 Emphasis added. "*Vis creative*" means "creative power" (Kaufmann 241n).
- 16 The characterization of poetry in this aphorism strongly suggests the original Greek sense of *poiesis* as "making" that is so important to Heidegger in his work on poetry.
- 17 See *The Grapes of Wrath*, DVD, directed by John Ford (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1940); and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. J. P. Morray (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2012), 23, 27, 28, 41, 44, 72, 77, 78, 79, 96, 97, 98.
- 18 Emphasis original.
- 19 The reader is perhaps curious as to why I have chosen *The Gay Science* as opposed to *Zarathustra* as the exemplar of Nietzsche's art of poetry, given the fact that the latter is the most overtly and conventionally (qua prose poem) poetic of Nietzsche's texts. The advantage offered by *The Gay Science* however is a certain meta-analysis of poetry or poetics, simultaneous with an enactment of poetry, while *Zarathustra*, due to its style and format, is more purely an enactment of poetry without poetics.

20 Marianne Moore, "Poetry," 1919, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/poetry>.

21 Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," 1926,
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/17168>.

22 Timothy Liu, "Ars Poetica," 1999,
<http://salmagundimagazine.tumblr.com/post/83215274749/ars-poetica-by-timothy-liu>.

23 *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 260, 201.

24 *The Gay Science*, "My Roses," 45.

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