

# D.H. Lawrence: The Thinker as Poet (On Dissolving the Genre Distinction Between Philosophy and Literature)

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## *Opening Remarks*

The following paper will be divided into two parts. In the first of these, I will offer fairly general remarks concerning the dissolving of genre distinctions between philosophy and literature, poetry and critical theory; arguing in agreement with both Nietzsche and Lawrence (and those related to them) that such a dissolution is positively to be encouraged if we are to find a new way of thinking and to enter into a new revealing. For in this time of the world's night (i.e. the era of modern European nihilism), it falls to the poet-as-thinker to help us see once more the bright possibility of a new dawn. This crucial task of the poet in a destitute time is my concern in part two.

## *Part I: The Greatest Pity in the World*

It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted ... so the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract-dry. The two should come together again ...<sup>1</sup>

One consequence of the death of God and the subsequent collapse of all values, is that genre distinctions and the dualistic hierarchies that support them become unprotected and thus vulnerable to challenge. The opportunity for philosophy and literature to interpenetrate and reunite is thereby enlarged. No matter what efforts are made by the moral guardians of

thought (i.e. those who would secure the purity of genres), we therefore witness today an increased level of intertextual promiscuity and transgression as the rules governing intellectual production are, in the words of Roland Barthes, 'periodically by-passed and ... consigned to the flames'.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident from all manner of recent works – labelled with ever-increasing difficulty by those for whom the act of classification (and particularly the classification of language-modes) is essential, as fictional, poetic, or discursive – that thought is acceding to a common territory or region of shared experience that is, in a very real sense, outside the gate; a realm in which there is at last a genuine thinking (both sensual and reasoned) and nothing remains except writing, as the poet and philosopher are faced at last with the same object (language) and the same goal (the invocation and invention of a people and a time yet to come).

Clearly, this is a revolutionary project. But it is equally clear that Lawrence approves of it and actively promotes the union of fiction and theory, arguing throughout his work that the world of thought and of feeling need to be made inseparable:

Apart they are no good. The emotions that have not the approval and inspiration of the mind are just hysterics. The mind without the approval and inspiration of the emotions is just a dry stick ... no good for anything unless to make a rod to beat and bully somebody with.<sup>3</sup>

For Lawrence, man's consciousness is fatally divided and only when the union between art and philosophy is complete will we ever be able to know and to feel in full. Nietzsche in his writings is equally explicit about the need to dissolve genre distinctions and heal the split between man's passionate and rational being, arguing from the first that philosophy and literature can and ought to be brought into a more 'profound

and congenial relation to each other' – and to life.<sup>4</sup> In order to help achieve this, Nietzsche develops a new style of writing and presents himself as the first of a new type of philosopher: the philosopher-as-artist. Such a philosopher produces a text that is radically and openly figurative, drawing upon all manner of considerations, including those previously (and often still) regarded as unacceptable or irrelevant to serious investigation. J.P. Stern rightly suggests that Nietzsche's devising of a highly personal literary-philosophical mode of language and thought (a 'gay science') and his application of such to 'an almost infinite variety of contemporary issues' is one of his greatest achievements.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Nietzsche's proto-deconstructive attempt to dissolve the genre distinction between philosophy and literature is not something previously unimaginable, or entirely without precedent. As Sarah Kofman reminds us: 'If Nietzsche can venture a new kind of philosophy ... it is because it has always and already existed; such a philosophy is possible because it had already been alive for the pre-Socratics.'<sup>6</sup>

This confirms Lawrence's claim with which we opened this section, that philosophy and fiction used to be one 'right from the days of myth'. And, arguably, although it is not my task here to do so, one can trace a discontinuous line of heterodox writers between this time and the present for whom philosophy and art have never been divorced.

Kofman goes on to argue – and, essentially, I am in agreement with her – that it would be advantageous to revive the earliest Greek model of philosophy-as-literature and/or poetry, because the metaphorical style 'indicates the fullness of life, just as the "demonstrative" style indicates its poverty'.<sup>7</sup> To employ deliberately the former is to affirm an active and creative model of thought; whilst, on the other hand, to favour the purely conceptual model is to display a continued adherence to the ascetic ideal. For concepts, according to Nietzsche and those in agreement with him (including

Lawrence), are merely mummified metaphors; the result of a becoming-reactive and becoming-immobile of the active and dynamic forces of the body that originally gave rise to the living images and symbols of (pre-)consciousness. Metaphysical philosophy and science has long disguised and denied this (perhaps even genuinely forgotten it), relegating metaphor to the 'poetic' or 'literary' sphere – the realm of art and myth, but one full of immaturity and confusion, devoid of all logic, according to Aristotle and Socrates. When Nietzsche begins a dissolution of the opposition between metaphor and concept, provoking and subverting genre theories, challenging metaphysical thought-forms and prejudices, he allows us to resume a dialogue with the pre-Socratics in and on their own terms and 'inaugurates a kind of philosophy that ... risks being confused with poetry. This is a confusion, however, that Nietzsche does not find regrettable'.<sup>8</sup> Far more regrettable, for Nietzsche, is metaphysical thought's insistence on the separation between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' (or the 'true' and the 'false'): a separation that has damaged human consciousness and is one of the chief blights of modern Western civilisation.

As Herbert Marcuse writes regarding this: 'The establishment of the reality principle causes a division and mutilation of the mind which fatefully determines its entire development.'<sup>9</sup> One part is channelled into the domain of the real and brought into line with the requirements of the reality principle; this part of the mind interprets, manipulates, and defines what is true. The opposing part, whilst remaining relatively free of the dictates of the reality principle, also becomes 'powerless, inconsequential, unrealistic'.<sup>10</sup> Fantasy is seen as being untrue, a species of lie and illusion that is at best accepted as an amusing distraction not to be taken very seriously (and certainly not to be allowed to get in the way of making money). As Clifford Chatterley concluded, writing short stories is as nothing compared to run-

ning a coal industry. But fantasy – fiction, poetry, myth – according to Marcuse, as well as to Nietzsche and Lawrence, retains its own truth and reason; and, importantly, it environs the whole man once more, speaking as it does not only of reconciliation between the known and unknown self, but also of the self and non-self, or other. In learning to think and speak once more in metaphor, we learn to move some way toward healing the fatal division of man; allowing the 'greater intelligence' of the body the right to free expression.

For Lawrence, then, thought has to be 'an adventure of the whole man, not merely his wits'<sup>11</sup> and by this he means thoughts must arise 'as much from the heart and genitals as from the head',<sup>12</sup> forming transient and contingent truths. He rejects the transcendental idealism of Kant and company on the grounds that such philosophers think only with their heads, and never with the blood, which, he claims, 'also thinks, inside a man, darkly and ponderously. It thinks in desires and revulsions and makes strange conclusions.'<sup>13</sup> Of course, the effort to derive from 'blood-knowledge' a new reality principle which is capable of providing 'standards for existential attitudes, for practice, and for historical possibilities appears as childish fantasy'<sup>14</sup> to those critics, such as Habermas, who regard the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean project of 'gay science' and revaluation as hopelessly infected with a dangerous 'irrationalism' and 'aestheticism'. Yet Nietzsche and Lawrence both maintain that it is vital that modern man learns how to listen and write in 'blood': i.e., to think intuitively and instinctively outside the humanistic boundaries of moral-rationalism and to conduct thought-experiments, rather than construct theoretical systems which betray a lack of integrity on behalf of the thinker. For Nietzsche and Lawrence, the small fragment of verse, or the aphorism, can be of greater value than a grand narrative of monolithic logic; for art, too, not only produces knowledge about the world, but retains a determinate relation to phi-

losophy (realised as a passionate blood-experience); this is what Plato missed and what Habermas continues to ignore.

In a sense, then, I am arguing that literature and poetry are of far more use than theory in allowing one to 'think through and move across established categories and levels of experience'<sup>15</sup> and in transporting us to those extreme places 'where the highest and deepest truths rise up'.<sup>16</sup> It is of greater use also in providing a sense of *solidarity* as Deleuze and Guattari stress in their study of Kafka: 'not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere'.<sup>17</sup> The novelist expresses another possible becoming via a creative story telling or act of 'fabulation' that challenges the dominant myths and fictions of his time. It is not just because the novel forms a superior medium to theory for exploring notions of relativity and contingency that makes it so vital (as Lawrence argues), but because it also offers a form of resistance. Implicit in this claim is a belief in the 'potency and relevance of the imagination ... as a way to step out of the political and intellectual stasis of these postmodern times'.<sup>18</sup> Also implicit is a belief that the novel, at its best, can help us live more fully by setting free alien forces within us and registering more completely than any other medium 'the complex and shifting world of relationships'<sup>19</sup> which for Lawrence, as for Nietzsche, is the very essence of reality.

Critics such as Habermas, however, claim that in levelling the genre distinctions between philosophy, literature, and political theory, in promoting the artwork and interrogating the primacy of logic over rhetoric, Nietzsche and those who come after him and radically extend his project (such as Derrida), fail to recognise important differences between the above, with the result that each discipline is lessened in a significant manner. Such critics argue that philosophy should address clear questions and offer, where it can, clear answers.

They accuse Nietzsche *et al* of making truth claims impossible and of a 'poetic affection' designed to 'seduce philosophers and arouse adolescents'.<sup>20</sup>

Habermas writes: 'The false assimilation of one enterprise to the other robs both of their substance.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, he fears that if philosophy and literature are denied independent status and separate identity, then the former becomes unable to operate successfully as a medium for problem solving, 'robbed not merely of its seriousness, but of its productivity'.<sup>22</sup> The latter, too, is reduced, he claims, when enlisted into the battle against metaphysics. Quite simply, I do not agree with Habermas, nor share his concerns. Rather, I think that Derrida has shown how the former's prejudices which allow him to assume that rhetoric is simply an adornment to logic, stop him and those like him from reading and interrogating texts (not least their own) carefully enough. Nietzsche and Lawrence, on the other hand, teach us to be constantly alert and sensitive to the surface play of language and to be concerned with the vital question of style. This results in a radically different way of reading, writing, and thinking: superficial – but in the Greek sense (i.e. out of profundity).

Habermas, I would suggest, suffers from a dread of incest, admitting as he does the familial bond between philosophy and literature. Thus, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, for example, he writes: 'Literary criticism and philosophy have a family resemblance to literature – and to this extent to one another as well – in their rhetorical achievements. But their family relationship stops right there ....'<sup>23</sup> He would prohibit any meeting within desire between the thinker and the poet, but for me, as a Lawrentian, it seems clear that everything of living value is fucked into being between two bodies. Thus, for me, it is perfectly legitimate and acceptable – not to mention highly rewarding – to explore the intertextual quality of writing and proliferate the points of

contact and mutual involvement between philosophy and literature, allowing writers from various backgrounds to come together into touch. To 'rob' philosophy of its seriousness and productivity is perhaps to allow it to become gay and creative. Habermas is not wrong to claim that the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean text with its 'various games of irony, parody, interrogation, innuendo ... its ruptures, drifts, displacements, and the like' destroys 'all logical, and especially, dialectical seriousness'<sup>24</sup> – it's simply that this does not trouble me.

Similarly, to give poetry and fiction a seriousness of purpose, is not to betray the integrity of art, nor to slide helplessly along a confused and dangerous path towards a fascist aesthetic, but simply to acknowledge that 'art-speech' can be used as a medium for important thought adventures and intellectual experimentation and exchange. To postulate the unity of thought and poetry, of philosophy and fiction, is to understand that the latter is not simply 'an aimless imagining of whimsicalities ... a flight of mere notions and fancies into the realm of the unreal'.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, as I shall argue in Part II, art alone returns us back to the real; to the sensual and material realm, the poet-as-thinker leading us, as Lawrence would say, back down Pisgah.

I am, then, advocating here that we should be prepared methodologically to test the claim advanced by Jonathan Culler – and condemned by Habermas – that 'the most truly philosophical reading of a philosophical text ... is one that treats the work as literature, as a fictive rhetorical construct whose elements and order are determined by various textual exigencies ... Conversely, the most powerful ... readings of literature may be those that treat them as philosophical gestures.'<sup>26</sup>

## Part II: *The Case of D.H. Lawrence as Poet-Philosopher*

It remains to give an indication, briefly, of what kind of poet-thinker Lawrence was. Crucially, I would argue that what Lawrence wishes to articulate in his poetry and fiction is uncannily close to what the later Heidegger attempts to reveal in his philosophy: namely, what it is to exist as a mortal being in relation to other men and women, as well as to the earth and sky, and to 'the divinities, present or absent, to things and plants and animals'.<sup>27</sup> This is a libidinally material form of thinking and writing about the differing being of different beings and not a bloodless theorising about the nature of reality caught up in the traditional metaphysics and abstract technical jargon of the tortured and torturous complexity of Western philosophy à la Kant and Hegel. The thinker-as-poet transforms the Word back into the Flesh, giving back to language and thought its heavy material fullness and sensual delight.<sup>28</sup>

It is of course not always the case that the poet thinks; and even rarer to find a philosopher prepared to experiment openly with those emancipatory elements within language such as metaphor and rhetoric, but as Albert Hofstadter rightly says: 'to be a poet of the first rank there is a thinking that the poet must accomplish, and it is the same kind of thinking, in essence, that the thinker of first rank must accomplish, a thinking which has all the purity and thickness and solidity of poetry, and whose saying *is* poetry'.<sup>29</sup> This is a thinking advanced in a language full of 'thunder and heavenly fireworks' which speaks directly to 'feeble and dormant senses',<sup>30</sup> i.e. an elemental language which touches us physically, tearing up the foundations of the human soul as presently constituted within bad conscience and corruption, resurrecting the body and its most active forces and providing a new dwelling place for man as risen lord in which he can perfect his unfolding into that innocence and forgetfulness

which characterises the greater health. This may sound like mystical nonsense; for, as Michael Bell writes: 'The physical quality of "touch" may, to a positivist frame of mind, seem to be logically opposed to the symbolic medium of language'. However, as he goes on to argue: 'our very language, at least if one attends to common parlance, tells us this is not so. We can be deeply "touched" by the things people say, or write.'<sup>31</sup>

Such a poetic language, which even a great poet like Lawrence can only begin to stammer, whilst speaking to and of the present, nevertheless arrives in some sense from the future in that it hints, as we said earlier, at a time and a people to come; it is the language of an immanent utopia. A poet-philosopher like Lawrence not only safeguards the power of such a language, excavating from individual syllables, words, or phrases an entire world of meaning, but he demonstrates too how 'the occlusion of this meaning has altered and damaged the destiny of Western thought.'<sup>32</sup>

The latter point hints toward what I would describe as the task of the poet-as-thinker. But before commenting further on this, let me make clear what I mean by an immanent utopia. Essentially, I would argue that one of the great values of a philosophically informed poetry as a critical practice of thought is to contribute toward what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a 'new earth and a new people'. This is a utopian vocation – but in a special, fully material (non-transcendental, non-absolute, non-authoritarian) sense; a utopia of the here and now that exists in the nearness of the present and in the bonds between people. In his 'Introduction' to the American edition of his *New Poems*, Lawrence recognises that whilst, as a rule, poetry is usually the voice of a far-off future, or a distant past, his task is to speak that which is at hand and create a poetry of the present which remains 'untimely' only in as much as it calls for change and mutation, unleashing a little of the chaos of the Outside. Via his poetry, Lawrence wants us to experience the sheer inten-

sity of the 'thingness' of things – and not barter such away for mere mental representation (or knowledge of the thing). In other words, he wishes to remind us that things exist not simply as concepts or abstract objects of representation within human consciousness; nor merely as things with use-value to us within an ideal-materialism. At its best, Lawrence's poetry, like his fiction, shows us how we might dwell within a world of things and not merely be enframed by a world of technology and the simulacrum: i.e., how to dwell poetically. It is not enough knowing how to think *about* Lawrence's poetry – one has to learn how to think with it, opening oneself up to the intensity of the life-experiences shared and accepting with good grace and a little humility the gift that is offered.

Finally, let me comment briefly on the task of the poet-as-thinker in this world in which man is no longer gathered into the light of divine radiance.

To be a poet in a destitute and decadent time means, above all, to act as a guide within the darkness of the world's night and amongst the ruins, helping modern mankind survive its engagement with nihilism. Philosophers-as-metaphysicians cannot achieve this; cannot help us return into the Fourth Dimensional realm from which we have fallen, refusing as they do to accept that man does not exclusively have his being within reason and moral humanism, but also within the precinct of poetic thought. Heidegger writes that whilst the poetic or gay character of thinking is still often veiled over and denied (and whilst where it does show itself it is often confused with the mistaken utopianism of the idealists), nevertheless 'poetry that thinks is in truth the topology of Being. This topology tells Being the whereabouts of its actual presence'.<sup>33</sup>

### Closing Remarks

If the 'nighness of the singing poet' threatens the purity of philosophy as a discipline or isolated genre, then, this is, as Heidegger says, a good and wholesome danger to be welcomed. Certainly Lawrence had no qualms about this, believing that only when the division between thought and feeling was healed, could man make a new effort of attention and discover a new world within the known world. This act of attention is the essential act of the poet-as-thinker. Via such an act, man reveals his inward desire, which, ultimately, according to Lawrence, is a desire for a little wild chaos; the chaos from out of which we can, perhaps, as Zarathustra says, give birth to the dancing stars of ourselves.

### Endnotes

1. D.H. Lawrence, 'The Future of the Novel', in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 154.
2. Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. and ed. Katrine Pilcher Keunemann, The Athlone Press, 1998, p. 65.
3. D.H. Lawrence, 'On Human Destiny', in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 205.
4. Nietzsche, 'The Struggle Between Science and Wisdom', in *Philosophy and Truth*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale, Humanities Press International, 1993, p. 205.
5. J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche*, Fontana Press, 1990, p. 146. It should be noted, however, that for Stern: 'What Nietzsche teaches us is not to read philosophy as literature, let alone literature as philosophy, but to read both as closely related forms of life' (*ibid.*, p. 147). As will become clear, I do not think this goes far enough and it misses the extremely radical nature of Nietzsche's work.
6. Sarah Kofman, 'Metaphor, Symbol, Metamorphosis', in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 209.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Penguin Press, 1977, p. 120.
10. *Ibid.*

11. D.H. Lawrence, 'Books', in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 198.
12. D.H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to Pansies', in *The Complete Poems*, collected and ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts, Penguin Press, 1977, p. 417.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Herbert Marcuse, *op.cit.*, p. 133.
15. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 4.
16. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, The Athlone Press, 1992, p. 110.
17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 18.
18. Rosi Braidotti, *op.cit.*, p. 4.
19. Colin Milton, *Lawrence and Nietzsche: A Study in Influence*, Aberdeen University Press, 1987, p. 231.
20. Eric Blondell, 'Nietzsche: Life as Metaphor', in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 150.
21. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Polity Press, 1994, p. 210.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
24. Michel Haar, 'Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language', in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison, The MIT Press, 1992, pp. 6-7.
25. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Routledge, 1994, p. 197.
26. Jonathan Culler, quoted in Habermas, *op.cit.*, pp. 192-3.
27. Albert Hofstadter, 'Introduction' to Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, 1971, p. x.
28. Anais Nin clearly recognises the importance of this; see, for example, her *Unprofessional Study of Lawrence*, Blackspring Press, 1985, p. 63.
29. Albert Hofstadter, *op.cit.*, pp. x-xi.
30. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 117.
31. Michael Bell, *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 215.
32. George Steiner, *Heidegger*, Fontana Press, 1989, p. 15.
33. Heidegger, 'The Thinker as Poet', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, *op.cit.*, p. 12.