

THINKING THROUGH THE GAP

POETIC PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHICAL POETS

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UDK 1:82.0-1

As both a poet and an academic, in this essay I attempt a personal and academic exploration of the controversial and symbiotic relationship between philosophy and poetry. I make reference to several thinkers in the tradition of continental theory, from Nietzsche to Alphonso Lingis, and use the example of a poem by Derek Walcott. The argument raises questions about the ontology of language and what is at stake in the notion of truth when we consider Heidegger's translation of the Greek word for truth (aletheia) as "unforgetting." I hope to raise questions regarding how the conceptualizing faculty may (or may not) enhance our understanding of poetry and art.

Keywords: delinquent poet, delinquent theoretician, truth, memory, forgetting, thinking, poetry, nature

The relationship between philosophy and poetry is a complex and controversial one that has informed literary theory since ancient times. By sheer or meaningful coincidence, when I received the invitation for this roundtable, I received a message from my friend, the Indian writer Priya Sarukkai-Chabria, who had just read one of essays and who hitherto had only read my poetry. She commented "how immense and thought-provoking the gap! Should I not have known otherwise, I'd say these are from two different people. True, the forms demand difference, but you are radically oppositional in the way you choose to write in these forms. Why such divergence? Could you expand on it?" In a subsequent message, she gave hints of how this apparent gap is bridged, but I would like to take up the challenge of her question with reference to a quote in the call for papers for this roundtable from Roberto Juarroz ("Vertical Poetry" X/19):

Poetry and thought
are precisely
the most opposed to death
because they are its most faithful witnesses. (Juarroz 51)

This suggests that, whether as philosophers or as poets, we know ourselves in our mortality. The discursive communities that arise from this mortal condition vary according to our relationships to established institutions and cultures. In her renowned essay “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag stated that, in most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone, and she would want to liberate art from the taming of interpretation, which in her view makes art manageable and conformable, whereas real art has the capacity to make us nervous. She implies that interpretation denies the abyss of possibility that opens our understanding in art to go beyond the things within reach, and to make our stance vertiginous. The potentials of things must be reached out to by our powers to heal or break with the past and remain innocent and free. Sontag (perhaps drawing on Adorno, who also says that no thought can express non-identity) argues that concepts cannot do justice to the materiality of art.

Julia Kristeva has suggested in her work that social life today closes the subject from the qualities in art that do not conform to its preconceptions and stereotypes, but at the same time some have argued that the conceptualizing faculty could become impoverished through its rejection of its worth or efficacy – a certain degree of identity philosophy is as essential as material nonidentity. The aim is to open the subject to develop new symbolic capacities in social life and at the same time revise identity. Along with Kristeva, some have suggested that rhythm marks the differential spaces in poetry and philosophy, and they seek the future possibility of a musical thinking that would go beyond the opposition between philosophy and poetry. Rhythm is the force to be reckoned with and is the essential element in an understanding of philosophy and poetry. Rhythm in effect provides a musical ethics of philosophy because musical thinking goes beyond the metaphysical opposition between philosophy and poetry and sets the frame for post-philosophical practice.

If the interpreter, as Sontag would have it, speaks from an established discourse, philosopher Alphonso Lingis claims that the philosopher can maintain his dignity in a community of skeptics revealing inconsistencies and incoherencies in the established canon. Nonetheless, in academic institutions we position our minds to avoid adventures that we sense we will not have the ardor to live through. One measures feelings and codifies responses to the promises and the threats. However, there are those that are excluded and marginalized from the philosophical statements that are acknowledged as reliable and true, and that are denied access to the truth and feel the fatigue of homelessness in their bodies.

How we understand the notion of truth is at stake here, as in all the thinkers and critics we have cited. Heidegger’s critiques of the Western philosophical tradition raises questions as to what we mean when we speak of truth. He goes back to the pre-Socratics in search of a term that better defines truth, suggesting that Plato misused the original meaning of the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, which has its root in *lethe* ‘forgetting’, so it literally means non-forgetting. Thus Heidegger reads the original meaning as non-concealment. He says that if we translate *aletheia* as ‘non-concealment’ rather than ‘truth’, this translation not only draws on the literal mean-

ing of the word, but directs us to rethinking the concept of truth. It does not merely mean correctness of statements, but rather takes us to the disclosure of beings. Heidegger believes that Plato misdirected us and he claims that there is no right way to get at beings at all, only better ways of uncovering them. Truth is not a feature of correct propositions that are asserted about an object by a human subject and then validated. Truth is the disclosure of beings and the idea of being in the world (*Dasein*) and here he moves from the abstract language of philosophical inquiry to the subtler poetic language. The intention is to allow *Dasein* to engage the world, to allow beings to reveal themselves to *Dasein* in their non-forgetting, not in their analysis. The primary task of poets is to uncover the world, to depict and explore the various relationships between beings and *Dasein*.

Poets are less exact but not less rigorous, drawing on nuance and metaphor, whereas philosophy tries to make terms as specific as possible. Blanchot, also inspired by Heidegger, turns to the pre-Socratics to discuss the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Blanchot tells us in “The Beast of Lascaux” that the listeners to Xenophon’s poetry and Heraclitus’ oracular and ambiguous aphorisms were present at the birth of philosophy in poetry, which he describes as a very strange event. For Blanchot, in Heraclitus there is a turning away from cosmogony to a new discourse in which sacred speech becomes the discourse of *physis*, permitting things themselves to resonate in the power to name, reaffirming their exultant presence as they disclose the materiality of language. Blanchot’s notion of nature and poetry also draws upon the reflections on being and *physis* in the work of Heidegger, and on Heidegger’s notion that this experience is linked to a certain experience of origin in the work of art that renews the now. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot suggests that, if nature offers as well as denies itself to utilization, then it forgets itself in the real, and the experience of art is “is always original and at all moments a beginning” – “ever new, the mirage of the future’s inaccessible truth” (229) – and thus disrupts the reigning order of experience. In its promise or nostalgia for the future, the original experience occurs in the work of art as an experience of non-forgetting, which is the coming to presence of the real. The poem, by remembering, also renews our time by drawing on the future. It is to this excess that poetry points in the experience of nature, as the original experience, as what is remembered with an uncanny and transpersonal or communal memory. In the “The Beast of Lascaux,” he speaks of the immediate and the remote, what is more real than all real things and forgets itself in each thing, the bond we cannot bind, and by which everything, the whole, is bound.

The issue is related to a philosophy of language and the materiality of language. In identifying the problem of language, Alphonso Lingis’ own language hovers between the axiological and the apophantic, seeking words whose forces chant and do not discourse. Alluding to Nietzsche’s affirmation that the primal force of language is axiological, he affirms that “words are uttered not for their representational form but for their condensing intensifying force – mantras” (64); “the strong and active forces of healthy sensuality speak, speak words of consecration and imprecation” (65). At times, Lingis writes in quiet complicity with the delinquency of the poet

seeking ambient materiality that enraptures with its sensuous substances, following Nietzsche, who in the modern era opened the way to thought as creative, as a form of poetry. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he portrays poetry as the great healer of the existential troubles of human life: the Apollonian (philosophical) and Dionysian (poetic) characters must be held together if either is to attain its fullest potential. Nietzsche regarded poetry as an exceptional form of art, much more useful to philosophy than other forms.

Communication and contention cannot be resolved by abstraction alone because this leads to a leveling and undiscerning perception. Language as an intensifying force of incantation has the possibility to allow some noise to enter and break the singularity of order. However, even the poet cannot sustain a language of intensifying force and has to use representational form – darkness is a correlate to enlightenment. Derek Walcott wonderfully evokes this in his poem *Midsummer* (XVII):

I pause to hear a racketing triumph of cicadas
setting life's pitch, but to live at their pitch
of joy is unendurable. Turn off
that sound. After the plunge of silence
the eye gets used to the shapes of furniture, and the mind
to darkness. The cicadas are frantic as my mother's
feet, treading the needles of approaching rain.
Day thick as leaves then, close to each other as hours,
And a sunburnt smell rose up from the drizzled road.
I stitch her lines to mine now with the same machine.
What work lies ahead of us, what sunlight for generations!

The sounds of the cicadas like words that are non-teleological send forth flashes of light in which vocalization is a discharge of excess energies and the solar chant of expenditure without return. We may recall here Michel Serres' idea of noise as part of communication. Poetry is the noise of science – without it there would be no science, yet without at least some philosophy there would be no poeticizing or philosophizing – and coming to grips with noise is opening to non-knowledge or the real beyond the rational. Serres considers noise as disorder to have a founding role in the production of order. The maximal elimination of noise would produce successful communication, but this leads to a leveling and undiscerning perception – to a process of dematerialization that leads to abstract thought, but eliminates the refractions off things and their luminous surfaces.

Contradictions arise both from the ontology of language with its processes of in/exclusion and its interaction with the institutionalization of the social and cultural establishment. This affects not only academic criticism, but also poetry because literary and artistic production feels the constraints of its hierarchies and institutions. Both perhaps need the delinquent poet within them (whether as literati or as philosophers), who will break hegemonic singularity, who will discern where to release the intensifying force of language that will enliven the groan and rumble of wasted bodies and wasted nature, discern the multiple contours and possibilities of landscape and being. This delinquency is troped into the figure of the parasite in Serres'

theoretical model – the parasite is the static noise that interferes in communication and is also configured as the uninvited guest in La Fontaine’s fables, that feeds from others but offers stories in return, upsetting the system of exchange, introducing a little noise into the order of the dinner party – the parasite moves through the turbulence of midstream and his strategy opens up a new space in a new stream or channel. His tactics transform the nature of the dinner party to his advantage, which might provoke the host to take action to ensure his future exclusion. Thus the parasite is both included and excluded (because the party is founded on the exclusion of the uninvited), but creates a condition of new possibility in the parasite’s logic of displacement opening a way out of determinacy through an infusion of miracle, chance, and the unpredictable. As in Bataille, chance is important in Serres’ thought, drawing on the theory of entropy and the infinite variation in the course of an object’s trajectory. For Bataille, chance is linked to anguish because anguish is the contestation of chance. Thus, chance is a rupture with identity and the utilitarian experience based on the determination of events.

When I was a student in Britain, as a migrant out of language and out of place, I was troubled by the linear periodization of my literary studies, which led me from *Beowulf* to T. S. Eliot and left me asking myself where I belong – looking for the chance connections and turbulence that brought me into that classroom. I was always wanting to move sideward and across, above and below. The subsequent decades led to transformation in academic literary studies with a new emphasis on such issues as the postcolonial and the transcultural. If I have found a space in academia, it is because of the delinquent theorists and writers that brought about this turn to horizontality. Nonetheless, new hegemonies and orthodoxies arise as we move to a new canon and a new world order that brings with it new forces of singularity and homogenization in an increasingly global experience, and of scientific and technological rationality. It is a sad fact about our culture, W. H. Auden observed, that a poet can earn much more money writing or talking about his art than he can by practicing it. However, this should not be sad at all because poets, like magicians, are non-professional beings and their role is to subvert exchange value, and magic is furtive and mysterious, irregular, a threat to the social and the boundaries that gives it meaning. Walcott says: “genius was not arrested for its epoch-shattering shout / but for running in the streets naked – spluttering out that what it discovers was always there to be known” (XII). The problem is not only a tension between the philosopher critic and the delinquent poet, but within each as we grapple with the boundaries of our mediation. As Juarroz suggests above, this mediation is within the domain of dying that circumscribes and limits the range of possibilities. Sontag warns us against the taming of real art in the realization that life is nurtured in its relentless sensuality. If we have learned to protect ourselves against nature, we now have to learn to protect nature from ourselves using our powers to dissolve into her strangeness, and the strangeness of others that in effect is also our own. Seeing alone cannot grasp its other – bursts of poetry come from the limitations of seeing because the truth of the concept is separated from the reality to which it refers. Although sci-

ence is in the image and the image in science, science cannot predict the trajectory of the imagination, an activity subject to the individual's creative will, and has to do with semiconscious daydreaming and the hierarchy of forces or intensities which express it. Again, I quote Walcott:

to betray philosophy is the gentle treason of poets, to smile at all science, scorning its instruments; these lines will wilt like mayflies – kamikazes or Icarus singed in empirical radiance. (XII)

We do not as humans necessarily seem aware of what we are physically or mentally doing at all! There is opacity in human affairs and as human beings we are spoken as much as we speak. Here I would like to invoke Walter Benjamin's notion of *memoire involontaire* discussed in relation to Proust, where remembrance gives rise to experience although is not itself an experience. Lyricism becomes the principle of poetry's transmission as a kind of aftershock, just as involuntary memory carries a life forward despite the fact that the events at issue may have been forgotten by consciousness – the subject may have forgotten the basis of the lyricism or the memory, but these have not forgotten the subject.

And on this note I will end, quoting the final lines of the final poem of Walcott's *Midsummer* (LIV): "though no man dies in his own country / the grateful grass will grow thick from his heart."

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