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## Poetic Possibilities: Poetry and Experience in Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud

Amalia Astin  
Bard College, [aa7871@bard.edu](mailto:aa7871@bard.edu)

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Bard

Poetic Possibilities:  
Poetry and Experience in Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Amalía Astin

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## ***Introduction***

Throughout the history of philosophy, we can observe an emergence of the *poet* as a figure the philosopher must contend with. From Plato's *Republic* to post-modern philosophical texts, we have seen the question of the poet resurfacing. This is a character who is both inexplicable to, and unavoidable for the philosopher, eliciting the question: what is poetry to philosophy? In exploring this topic, many questions on the nature of this relationship arise. Does the philosopher benefit from the poet? To what extent are poets already philosophers? What do these two figures have in common, and at what point do they diverge? Are the two merely speaking the same truth in different languages? Do their distinct modes of articulation complicate or compliment one another? Do they each accomplish what the other cannot? More importantly, for our project, how does an investigation of this relationship—fraught with contention and admiration—lead us to a better understanding of the philosopher's necessity for poetics in order to illustrate experience?

To understand this relationship and to trace the necessity of poetry, I will turn to three thinkers who already work at the boundary of philosophy and literature: Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud. Through metaphor, descriptive imagery, and examples of poetry in their texts, each refrain from using strict analysis to form their philosophical arguments. Simultaneously, each has much to say about the genre of poetry itself. Uniquely, these writers survey the threshold at which analysis can no longer go, and by doing so, display the need for poetics. By examining Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud's individual contributions to this project, we can begin to see how essential poetry is to philosophy, and understand its unique ability to convey truth differently than analysis.

Examining of these distinct thinkers side by side, we see an emerging need for poetry in order to create and relay our experiences of the world. Yet how are poetics able to uniquely generate and convey our experiences? By going beyond the limits of analysis and reason, poetry can create a landscape for the reader to inhabit and thereby gain access to an author's truth. What we glean from Emerson's texts is that experience can be conveyed through poetry, and it is in the poet's specificity that he or she is able to speak to a universal truth. Even for Nietzsche, who may not believe in the existence of a universal truth to relay, poetry is still able—in its flexible relationship with language—to create our experience of the world and offer the path to the most fruitful life. Finally, for Freud, in order to understand the self we must suspend reason, and read the writings of our minds as poetry. What philosophy can gain from the incorporation of poetry, is the potential to communicate experience in such way that it can be understood *universally*. In conclusion, I hope to illustrate the ways in which this inclusion of poetry, as a means of imparting experience, allows for a larger range of voices to be incorporated and ultimately understood.

Opening our examination with Emerson, Chapter 1 will start by comparing texts such as *The Poet*, *Self-Reliance*, *The American Scholar*, *Fate*, and *Experience* to address Emerson's notion of 'the poet' in conversation with his call for self-reliance and experience, ultimately illustrating how poetry is the ideal vehicle to impart these qualities. We will also see his initial argument that poetry, materializing from the singular experience of the writer, is capable of being understood universally through its telling. For Emerson, the poet is able to use the articulation of their individual and private experiences, to relay a relatable truth through poetry. With this

chapter, we will attempt to trace how for Emerson, poetry contains and conveys a person's singular experience in such a way that its truth can be recognized universally.

Turning to Nietzsche, who, unlike Emerson, does not believe that language is capable of imparting truth, we still see an argument emerging for *the necessity of poetry*. Examining his essay *On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense*, in conversation with Wallace Stevens's poem "Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination," we observe that when there is no inherent truth in the world, we are left to build our experiences through language and create our reality out of poetry. He goes on to identify two distinct figures, each exemplifying the different modes of using language: 'the man of reason' and 'the man of intuition.' This chapter will illustrate how the path of intuition, in which language is used poetically, creates the more advantageous life. Finally, in exploring the performative aspect of his writing, we will trace Nietzsche's own use of metaphor and poetry in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where we see the poet Zarathustra as the ultimate philosopher-prophet for Nietzsche.

Turning to Freud in our concluding chapter, we see that the mind itself is poetic. Looking at his text, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, we learn that to successfully interpret one's dream in order to understand ourselves, we must abandon the critical function of our mind. We will see how this process of psychoanalysis is that of reading and writing the mind—an interpretation, a translation, the work of making metaphors. What we glean from Freud is a better understating of the structure of the mind as *poetry making*. Finally, this chapter will trace the performance and inclusion of poetry in Freud's work by examining the literary figures and excerpts of poetry he includes. Ultimately, this section seeks to show how even in his construction of a science, Freud cannot confine himself to analysis, but must use poetry to legitimize his theories.

In conclusion, I will illustrate what is at stake in an argument for the inclusion of poetry, turning to a feminist text by Patricia Hill Collins: *Towards an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology*. Collins argues that minority voices are excluded from academia based on their non-adherence to a strict positivist approach to knowledge. She encourages a broader scope of what can be considered truth, which makes a compelling argument for the inclusion of experiential knowledge. How do we really understand the experience of another? Understanding poetry as the containment of experience we observe how this mode of communication allows for the singular experience of a person to potentially be understood universally. In the end I will explicate the crucial role of poetry as a method to include the experience and voices of those typically excluded from the philosophical tradition.



## ***Chapter I: Emerson—Poetry as the Containment of Experience***

Working at the intersection of philosophy and literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson is the ideal writer to explore the role poetry plays in philosophy. By looking at his edifying texts such as *Self Reliance*, *The American Scholar*, *Fate*, and *Experience* we can see how Emerson instructs his readers to live in the world. He encourages self trust and reliance, condemning adherence to the status-quo. In addition, Emerson campaigns for life experience and listening to your intuition, trusting your perceptions as truth. At the same time, in *The Poet* and throughout his other texts, Emerson worships the poet and explains how in their private musings, this person is able to illustrate a universal truth. If we want to truly know what is at stake when Emerson venerates the poet, how and why he worships this figure we must look to his other texts on self reliance and experience. By doing so we can come to realize the poet is the figure who best exemplifies the qualities of intuition and experience. Turning away from Emerson's strict writings on poetry, we can see how this medium is the vehicle through which intuition and experience is communicated.

### **Individual and Universal**

When reading a piece of poetry, you are often overcome by a feeling of recognition. You may not have lived the scene nor experienced the narrative firsthand, yet nonetheless you are moved. Despite the fact that the poem belongs to the experience of the poet, it strikes you as somehow familiar. How can we feel so attached to specific poets and poems that do that do not speak to our personal experience? How is a poem able to strike such a chord within? For Emerson the reason we are moved by poetry is that it captures a poet's individual truth, which in its specific articulation manifests as a universal. Introducing this idea of universal truth in his essay *The American Scholar* Emerson writes:

The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also...the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable most public, and universally true. (64)

For Emerson what a poet finds true in his solitude, crowded cities will also recognize for themselves. A great writer is capable through language of drawing upon their own specific experience, to relay a universal truth. But it appears we've come to a contradiction: how does the individual experience translate into common truth? How does Emerson reconcile these two seemingly opposing ideas? How can poetry transmute private and personal musings into universals? How does Emerson harmonize his call for individual truth and self reliance, while simultaneously asserting that poetry has universal meaning and houses oceanic truth? How can poetry in its singularity carry a common wisdom? Ultimately we will see how the harmonization of this dichotomy leads to a better understanding of the poet, positioned amongst Emerson's other texts and larger body of work.

Who is this poet? For Emerson there are three types of people: "The Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer" (2). The poet inhabits expression, "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty" (2). Poets are exempt from using words in a purely economic sense but instead employ metaphor and rhythm to translate experiences into beauty. We worship this poet in her ability to capture something new, to see what we all missed, with Emerson writing, "Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene" (9). The poet is able to live in the world, and then report on it. Everyone wants to be

able to express the truths that they see, but it is the poet has the tools to do so; They release the lay person from the responsibility of description, and illustrate the scene for us all. Emphasizing this character of the poet Emerson writes, “The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold...He is a beholder of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and causal” (3). The poet for Emerson is able to articulate their private moments with necessity and accessibility. They recount the moment so we can live in it, and remember the beauty later, in the lines of poetry.

### **Intuition**

Yet, what information is being communicated through the poem? If we turn to Emerson’s other writings we see that through intuition things find their common origin. But to access this truth a person cannot look to a consensus. Emerson in fact strongly urges against the allure of conformity and encourages us to become self reliant, favoring self trust and personal intuition. This intuition he speaks of can only be gathered through experience with the world and not through analysis. As Emerson writes, “We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin” (269). For Emerson, intuition accesses a primary source of knowledge, which lives at depths unapproachable by analysis.

Through a reflection on Emerson’s writings on intuition we are led to a conclusion on how a poem can hold both personal and universal truth. The knowledge an individual poet finds is formed not on reason or tuitions, but is roused from within and discovered through interactions with the world at large. Intuition for Emerson is the access point of this primary wisdom. It is discovered within, and is the type of knowledge that cannot be gained through teachings. Thus

the poet must not appeal to their reader's reason, but rather to their experience. This is the project of the poet: to awaken us, to show not tell. This common truth must be accessed from a microscopic vantage point, from the individual perspective. We can only know what is true for ourselves so it is the poet's job to trust his or her self knowledge and understand that it will be grasped in time. As Emerson urges, "Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost" (259). By looking at Emerson's writings beyond strictly those of poetry, we can see how the poet exemplifies the qualities he commands, with a poem as the perfect medium to contain experience and truth spawned from intuition.

How does Emerson's framework of the individual and universal contained in poetry, guide the writer towards intuition and experience? Opening his essay *Self Reliance* Emerson writes, "To believe your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius" (259). For Emerson genius is founded less upon strict analysis or intuitions, but rather on a cultivated self trust. Relying on your deep rooted sense of the world and illustrating it through poetry, becomes, in time, esteemed as truth; the inmost evolving to the outmost. It is the life of a singular man or woman that can strike a cord with the greater population. It is not generalizing about human nature that speaks to it, but instead the looking inward as Emerson contends, "The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy, — more formidable to its enemy, more sweet and serene in its influence to its friend, than any kingdom in history. For a man, rightly viewed, comprehendeth the particular natures of all men" (67 *The American Scholar*). Private truth is more compelling, more universal than a thought contrived to please all. This is the work of the poet, this illustration of the private innermost truth that we can collectively be inspired by. Emerson writes in *The Poet*, "In our way

of talking, we say, ‘That is yours, this is mine:’ but the poet knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to you” (16). Thus inspiration is a gift that comes to the poet, but it does not belong to the poet. Now we can understand this tension of private and public as a poet’s call action. It is their job to bridge the divide between what is mine and yours; to illustrate wisdom by revealing that their truth and your truth are closer than imagined.

How does the poet do this? What is the mechanism that conveys Emerson’s notion of individual truth as universal? To understand what the poet does, it helps gain a better notion of who the poet is. What is their explicit function in society? By Emerson’s earlier definition of the poet we can understand that this person does not create beauty, but notices it in the natural world, then transfers this ineffable to words, through chosen language, rhythm, and line. The poet does not orchestrate the scene, but paints the landscape outside their window. The job of the poet is to both live in experience and write about it. Emerson continues:

In our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.

(2 The Poet)

While the average person may be privy to a range of experiences, they do not have the capacity in language to express these moments. The poet has the vocabulary and ability to vocalize to be the sayer. The poet is the receiver, the transmitter, the vessel to convey truth. It is in this going inward that he or she is capable of representing what we all know as true, but in our daily lives

are incapable of illustrating. This body of work “resemble[s] a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing” (16). The poet has the ability to illustrate the world through writing, to render a mirror in such a way that each person may find something familiar in the reflection, in the written experience. Finally, there is truth in the poet’s language itself, something greater than reflection. There is an experience in reading poetry that can be an awakening, an event in itself. The poet is the namer who gives voice to experience, and through choice vocabulary the reader can be moved not only by the reflective nature of language but by its own invocations, sounds, and power.

### **Against Conformity**

How does the poet accomplish this without falling victim to generalizations and indoctrinated statements, masked as personal knowledge? Emerson discusses this idea of conformity prominently in *Self Reliance*, illustrating how one is to live against the urge of convention while still effectively communicating truth. He illustrates this tension of society and singularity, writing:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs (261).

Society is constantly pressuring its members to conform; to be a citizen of culture you are asked to maintain the status-quo. Thus, to be included in society you must be in agreement with others, and comply with the norms of your community. Yet Emerson wants to challenge this conformity,

to greet it with self-reliance, and instruct people to act their own way, not in accordance with culture, but with their authenticity. This conviction of speech for Emerson might be initially met with aversion but must not be stifled by its critics, the conformists. And yet since a character of a wisdom is its universality, an authentic truth is one that resonates with everyone. If the world does not see your authenticity, Emerson suggests you pair off with those who recognize your truth, parting ways with those who do not, writing “If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own” (273). The poets themselves must avoid falling victim to a contrived universal consensus, rather than an interior wisdom. The poet must work against the current of conformity and recognize their individual truth, and trust it will resonate in time.

The question remains; how does one maintain their integrity and self-reliance but still be recognized by others who don't share their point of view? How is one to walk the fine line between speaking a language others can understand, and living their own individuality? How to exist in the tension of authenticity and recognition? Once again we find ourselves circling back to the idea of intuition. When intuition strikes a chord from within, it is also more likely to stand up against conformity which instructs from without. Turning away from his explicit writings on poetry, we can see Emerson's conviction for self trust is coupled with a call for intuition. He discusses this type of individuality in *The American Scholar*, where he illustrates the qualities of this ideal person. This scholar should be educated “by nature, by books, and by action” (63), but the central feature that integrates this learning, “may all be comprised in self-trust” (63). Even in scholarly writings, it is self trust that is at the heart of Emerson's proposal; the scholar must harmonize their learnings in a self reliance. He continues, “Time shall teach him, that the scholar

loses no hour which the man lives. Herein he unfolds the sacred gem of his instinct, screened from influence.” (62). A life of action and experience, invoking instinct, is as vital to writing and creating as traditional study. For Emerson, a person “cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.” (270). Issuing a call to action; hours in nature and involvement in life is not a waste of time for the intellectual but an invitation to deepen one’s intuition.

### **Experience**

To obtain access to this intuition the individual needs to gain experience and get involved in the world at large. But what does Emerson mean by experience? How does this contribute to the creative process? Emerson encourages his reader to see every moment as an opportunity for learning in his essay *Experience*, writing, “Life itself is a mixture of power and form, and will not bear the least excess of either. To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom” (7). Wisdom is not found through fact, but through living; what the individual finds most valuable to their becoming, is the hours spent involved in life. Each moment is itself a culmination, the work as valuable as the result. What is gained in experience can also be described as a deepening of awareness, and a trust in one’s own perceptions of the world. As Emerson illustrates,

Thoughtless people contradict as readily the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather much more readily; for, they do not distinguish between perception and notion.

They fancy that I choose to see this or that thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. If I see a trait, my children will see it after me, and in course of time, all mankind,



— although it may chance that no one has seen it before me. For my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun (269).

In this statement Emerson defines perceptions as glimpses of truth, while opinions are constructed and liable to being false. This is where people go wrong, the inability to differentiate opinion from perception. Poetry however, as Emerson writes about it, is not a collection of personal beliefs, but rather private perceptions. These can be universal in that they illustrate a deeper awareness of a shared world. These traits that one perceives in nature are collected and illustrated not only for the author, but for their children and the generations to come. In retrospect the connections are made, but these perceptions are continually true as though they were fact. This is the work of the poet, to illustrate their private awareness, to cultivate self trust and become involved in experience.

As Emerson maintains in *Self Reliance*, “If we live truly, we shall see truly” (271). This project of the intellectual and the poet is to live in accordance with self trust. This type of living allows us to “see truly” how authenticity is a mechanism for glimpsing truth. This living truly is going against complacency with norms; it is believing your intuition. Continuing in *On Experience*, Emerson argues, “If we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway...Between extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry” (8). What is good in life is found not by argument or analysis for Emerson, but by collecting life experience that does not get scrutinized. This is the job of poetry, to be the illustration of ‘everything good on the highway,’ the invocation of a moment in nature, the product of self trust. This knowledge is generated from within, a deep seeded knowing that is exempt from being fallible by memory

or debate. It is a sense that is all your own, and also everyone else's. These truths that arise from within through perception are also able to withstand dispute, as Emerson writes:

Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed. (269).

These perceptions are involuntary, not assembled by motive or purpose but rather by intuition. Perceptions are momentary arrivals at truth, at the indisputable beauty of the sunrise or sunset, unique and shared. Truth in this sense arises from within, from intuition and can withstand the external world and persist.

## **Poetry**

Now that we have a better understanding of Emerson's notions of experience and intuition, it is time to turn back to poetry. How is this medium able to contain such wisdom? What is essential to the nature of a poem that allows it to hold a universal truth? How does our reading of Emerson point to the conclusion that poetry is the vehicle through which intuition is communicated, experience is contained? To begin it helps to look at Emerson's idea of truth rendered in retrospect as he writes, "Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or, each generation for the next succeeding" (56-57). When we imagine great poets, their legacy emerges after death, the world never quite satisfied by contemporaries. Why does genius poetry need to be viewed from afar, beheld in nostalgia or anticipation? Emerson contends, "The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new

confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (3). It is the poet’s job to speak, and with each generation comes a new voice that attempts to encapsulate the quintessence of a time. As doers, the non-poets are living in experience instead of reflection. Caught up in life, in its milestones and mundanities we miss the big picture; blind to the essence of our time and place. Emerson himself is skeptical that we will ever encounter this ideal poet that he writes of, announcing, “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (10). As doers instead of sayers, we are too caught up to read in reflection. For Emerson, in the end, it appears that revered poetry is retroactive, not because we are waiting for a poet, but because we are waiting to become capable of reading this poet.

For Emerson the world is always waiting for the great poet, and as he writes “Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await... We have yet had no genius in America” (10). The poet for Emerson is the sayer and we readers are the doers. Essentially we are not ready to hear about our lives since we are too busy living them. Reading poetry is a type of remembering, it is accessing experience we have forgotten in the repetition of our daily lives. The poet gives us a time capsule, the invitation to a sunset we were too occupied to visit ourselves, to retain in perfect memory. And in the specificity of the poets’ remembering, in the beauty they recall, a reader is called back to this inexplicable experience. As Emerson contends, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (259). In this way, what the poet is capable of granting access to is a mirror. You may not believe your intuition’s as truth, but the poet must, and by creating work they build a reminder. A poet’s work is that of inspiration. Emerson quotes a proverb exclaiming ““A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh

fruitful.”(58). In this way when we see something genius, we ourselves want to create it in our own likeness. For an individual truth to be recognized by others, the poet must not tell but show, lead by example. They must evoke a sense of inspiration and wisdom in the other.

But it does not happen all at once, there is a way in which a poet’s truth must be masked in language so as not to overwhelm the reader. To illustrate this point it helps our project to use an example of poetry. Turning to Emily Dickinson, in her poem “1263,” we see a reflection of this idea that the truth takes its time to carry weight:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth’s superb surprise  
 As Lighting to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind –

For Dickinson, the Truth must be told gradually so as not to blind mankind. This metaphor of being blinded illustrates a person’s inability to see or behold the truth in its fullness. In this way, great ideas in the form of poetic expressions cannot arrive too fast or all at once otherwise people will be incapable of interpreting it. For this reason, even if a poet holds some semblance of truth, they must communicate it gradually so people will be ready to hear it. Even though great poets and authors live in the present moment, their words need time to reach our ears, to “dazzle gradually” so as not to blind us by their poignant honesty. Dickinson employs this metaphor of

the dazzling light capable of blinding mankind, illustrating how great ideas, once written, need time to travel, to gain distance from the moment and their mortal author. Additionally, lightening must be explained to children in kind, just as the truth must be cloaked so as not to frighten off the reader. This is also the task of the poet, to mask truth in experience. Thus the reader is guided to the truth, to the light. Wisdom is invoked, perceived, not taught in a factual way. By reading a poem you are left with a sense, not an answer. The poet is the teacher of experience.

As we have seen, the poet does not write for recognition, because it is highly unlikely they will receive it in their lifetime. If they are lucky and perceptive, later generations might recognize truth in their writing. It is not the job of the poet to judge their own genius; their work is that of experience, study, trust in intuition and self reliance. Any accomplishment must come later. As Emerson writes, “Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?” (53). Now that we can see the poet is ahead of their time, and must write for the sake of writing, we can ask what the poet is actually doing in their work? How is their personal experience a reflection of a shared world?

To answer this we must investigate Emerson’s notion of personal musings. While at first we might interpret Emerson’s illustration of the poet as someone delivering highly personal, emotional, and private thoughts to paper. As we remember Emerson’s initial contention that for the poet, “the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable most public, and universally true” (64). But turning to Emerson’s other work we can gain a better understanding of this private sentiment as something less personal and more universal, for the poet who we deem self indulgent in writing, is not the same

author Emerson praises. On the contrary this person does not illustrate opinions in a dogmatic sense, but rather beautifully conveys their own perceptions, “for my perception ... is as much a fact as the sun” (269). In this way we can see that the poet does not create the world in their selection, but rather filters that which we share. In *Self Reliance* he introduces this idea arguing,

We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm (269).

Just as in discerning justice, we do no nothing of our own accord but allow the truth the flow to us and through us. The poet is the person who discerns this truth, who listens rather than creates. They do not simply put themselves in their work, but act as a catalyst for the world at large. Through intuition they are open to world of perceptions and permit experience to be translated through them, their body a passageway. The body receives external truth through nature, and through the creative process, thoughts form on the page, creating poetry. This is how the poem can be so personal to the poet, specific and their own, but also reach a universal audience because it is a perception of truth already contained in the world. Since truth does not originate as a reasoned thought, but is instead filtered through likeness, it can simultaneously be universal and individual, perceived and spoken by the poet, who does not create, so much as translates nature.

**Why Not Philosophy?**

One may ask however, why does philosophy rather than poetry not suffice as the vehicle for truth? Why can't scholarly work and argumentation illustrate this wisdom? What does the addition of poetry give us? To explain the necessity of poetry, it is helpful to look at Emerson's own lapse into poetics. At the start of many essays and lectures Emerson opens with poetry. He begins *Self Reliance* with a poem:

Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
 Render an honest and a perfect man,  
 Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
 Nothing to him falls early or too late.  
 Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
 Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

*Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune (257).*

By looking at the language and metaphors in this poem, we can see Emerson's argument for self reliance contained in the very lines. Just as man is his own star, entirely unique and distinct, he is also capable of commanding all light and influence. Within each person is housed a soul, capable of rendering an honest and perfect man. This poem illustrates that this distinct soul of an individual is able to reach outside itself with light, and order all fate. Just as the poem will reach its audience when they are ready, a person's fate can only be fulfilled in due time. This fate will always arrive with divine timing, never too late or too early. In this poem Emerson is able to use vivid imagery of light, star, and shadow to evoke his call for self reliance, illustrating an individual's capacity for influence. If he had opened with this argument it might feel too heavy handed or didactic, but instead by using a poem, Emerson leaves his reader with an initial sense

of his topic which will color the remainder of his essay, setting a tone. In this way Emerson needs poetry to open his argument.

In addition to his inclusion of poetry to open his essays, Emerson also writes in purposefully poetic ways, incorporating simile and metaphor into his overall arguments. In *Self Reliance* for instance, Emerson employs many comparisons to nature. In one example he writes, “When man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn” (271). This illustration of the person who lives with God is able to speak as though they were articles in nature; Their voice part of the world, as familiar as the brook and the corn but also as singular. By using this description of nature, the reader is offered a scene, an experience, without being told how they should feel about it.

Additionally, Emerson’s language reflects not only a lived experience but. through the chosen words, gives the reader a new one. The language Emerson uses evokes something possibly profound. The cadence of these words, “murmur of the brook,” are striking in their expression. Poetry does not only evoke external experience but is a singular remaking and remarking. The process of reading this poetic language shines a new light, is a new experience of the brook, of the corn; did you notice the murmur, the rustle before now? The sound of these words are powerful in themselves. Here Emerson is quoting a moment where the language used is itself moving.

Another tendency of Emerson is to leave explicit directions unsaid. If we look back to Emerson’s appeal to experience in *On Fate* we see that his overall argument does not hand the reader explicit directions on how to live in accordance with his philosophy, but through his language instructs people on how to find this wisdom themselves. He writes for example that,



“The riddle of the age has for each a private solution” (943). In this instance, Emerson does not give reasoned examples on what a life worth living looks like, he does not try to prove his point through logic but uses language in new and peculiar ways to evoke in the reader inspiration. By listening to Emerson, a person may arrive at their own truths discovered through metaphor.

When you read a great poem, you do not follow its directions; it is the stirring from within, this inspiration that gives it value. This is the power of poetics, the juncture where philosophy ends and poetry begins.

### **Conclusion**

When looking at Emerson’s texts on how to live a good life we see characteristics of self trust, intuition, and adherence to experience emerging. At the same time we see this figure of the poet surfacing, this writer who is able to capture a universal truth in their private perceptions. By reading these works side-by-side we can see the ways in which poetry is the perfect vehicle to convey the qualities Emerson directs. Starting our investigation with the question of how the poet can be both singular and universal, we realize that through trusting their intuition this poet is able to be a catalyst for the world; channeling their experiences into their work. As readers, we have all witnessed the beauty of nature but have we stopped in retrospect to remember? Most likely not, but by turning to poetry, in its specificity and language we can be brought back to the scene; the poet’s perception as good as truth. Throughout his texts Emerson alludes to the fact that he is still waiting for the poet he speaks of. By turning to an example of poetry we see how nature rendered in poetics, takes time to resonate with the reader; this wisdom coming from within, the truth fashioned by the reader who must come to this themselves in the way Emerson advises. But why do we need poetry to give us this ideal truth? Why does philosophy not

accomplish this? We can see for Emerson that it is not through analysis or definition that truth is singularly roused. Poetry in contrast is not a distinct answer, but a unique experience to read, an invocation, an invitation, an arrival the reader must get to themselves, in their own time. This is the work of poetry, to contain experience in such a way that we can all be uniquely inspired. As Emerson writes, “It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth...it came to him business; it went from him poetry.” (56 *The American Scholar*)

## ***Chapter II: Nietzsche—Reality Created through Poetry***

It is not uncommon to believe that there are inherent truths in the world, and that it is our job to uncover these mysteries, to extract truth from nature and convey it as such. From looking at Emerson's texts on poetry and experience we saw the ways in which poetry is able to do just so, to convey a universal truth to the reader, inspired from a singular experience of the poet. This knowledge arriving from poetry, for Emerson, is a kind of truth. In this sense the work of poetry for Emerson is a transmission of truth to the reader. By looking at Nietzsche, however, we turn away from this notion, and investigate the implications of poetry if we cast aside any kind of objective or knowable facts of the world. By delving into Nietzsche, who similarly employs metaphor and poetic language to further his philosophical arguments, we can see how poetry functions to shape (or even create) our experiences even when we've forgone language's ability to convey objective truths. Through an examination Nietzsche's essay *On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense*, along with the Wallace Stevens's poem "Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination", we are able to understand how one must create their reality out of poetry, and build their experiences through language. In the end for Nietzsche, life is not constructed out of truths, but out of the potential of language and words.

To begin, it is helpful to understand Nietzsche's definition of the poet and poetry. Unlike Emerson who sees the poet in more constrained terms as a person composing in rhythm, metaphor and verse, Nietzsche sees all language as poetic in a sense. He writes it broad terms about the poet, both edifying and condemning this inexplicable character. In *The Gay Science*, for instance, we can see his explication of the poet and the inescapability of poetics even when composing prose, as he explains:

It is remarkable that the great masters of prose have almost always also been poets, be it publicly or only in secret, in the 'closet'; and verily, one writes good prose only face to face with poetry! For this is an uninterrupted, courteous war with poetry: all its attractions depend on the fact that poetry is constantly evaded and contradicted. (90)

This quote works to illustrate the dual nature of poetry for Nietzsche. While poetry may be exceptional, it is also ordinary and everywhere, it is sacred but also profane. To write good prose is also to write poetry; the medium is universal while simultaneously particular. Here, we see arising the fact that all language is in a sense poetics, and will inevitably shape our world. Thus where truth is imparted through words and poetics we are left questioning language's capacity to communicate. How much can actually be said through words?

### **The Role of Language**

Foregoing a world where truth is imparted through words, we are left questioning language's ability to convey. No longer communicating an objective truth, what does Nietzsche mean by language? What becomes the function of words at this juncture? Through examining *On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense*, we can gain a better idea of Nietzsche's notion of these terms. To start, Nietzsche questions the "mysterious drive for truth" (143), he asks, "where on earth can the drive to truth possibly have come from" (143). Nietzsche explains that for communication between people to exist there needed to be fixed rules which we could agree upon. For example to enforce the statement, "thou shalt not steal" we needed to know what "steal" means. Thus, for Nietzsche truth is a political invention, an arbitrary mode that was created to fit our needs. Through forgetfulness however, humans entertain the illusion we have truth. The thing in itself and the word for it do not directly correlate for Nietzsche as he writes:

Is there a perfect match between things and their designations? Is language the full and adequate expression of all realities? Only through forgetfulness could human beings ever entertain the illusion that they possess truth to the degree described above. If they will not content themselves with truth in the form of tautology, i.e. with empty husks they will exchange illusions for truth. What is a word? The copy of a nervous stimulation in sounds. To infer from the fact of the nervous stimulation that there exists a cause outside us is already the result of applying the principle of sufficient reason wrongly. (143-144)

For Nietzsche words do not succeed in conveying truth but simply function to associate objects with speech. Truth as we imagine it is merely a translation of the world, with the origin of language built on nothing but our observations. In his explicit address of language in, *On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche argues that words convey very little, contending, “Where words are concerned what matters is never the truth, never the full and adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The ‘thing in itself’...is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for” (144). For Nietzsche words do not succeed in conveying truth but simply work as metaphor, associating objects with speech. Truth is only the metaphor, the translation; there is no inherent truth, the only thing between you and the world is aesthetic. There is only you and poetry!

What can be elucidated from this mimesis, from the dry representation words give us? Why continue to read and write once we have foregone the potential of truth? By examining Nietzsche’s text on language and poetry we find that it is through poetics that we create our experiences of the world rather than convey them. Since there is no truth outside language, we

must construct our experiences out of words and poetics. It is through the manner in which one uses language that directly impacts their experiences of the world. Nietzsche's writing illuminates how through poetry one might create the richest happenings, through this mode of metaphor one might experience the greatest range of pain and pleasure, extract the most out of life. Liberated from needing to convey a truth, poetry and language can shape and create our experiences.

### **Metaphor as Truth**

To understand how language shapes our experiences it helps to understand what Nietzsche means by metaphor. What role does this comparison play in language? As previously discussed, where language is concerned there is no truth, only metaphor as he writes, "It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things--metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities" (144). For Nietzsche, in writing we create relations rather than descriptions of the thing in itself. There is nothing to know other than our translations of things, language is thus only an approximation, a striving without an arrival. No word adequately holds the weight or essence of the thing itself.

Nietzsche continues this argument on metaphor as truth illustrating:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions- they are

metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (146)

Words are not fixed. Truth is an illusion we have forgotten was assembled by our own making. Nietzsche reminds us language is a human intervention on nature and not divinely orchestrated, as he contends, “does nature not remain silent about almost everything” (142). Therefore all we have is subjective equivalents; an inferior conversion of object to word, of experience to poetry. If everything is an illusive metaphor what can be gained from any text? Why does Nietzsche bother writing if there is no truth to be excavated from the world? Yet, even though this argument above is formed on language, constructed itself out of words and metaphors, the reader still comes away with a better understanding of the critique itself. In this way, words are able to convey something, even if it is not logical or relating back to an objective truth.

By reading Nietzsche a person can be moved in an aesthetic way; this experience is not objective, but nonetheless palpable. When Nietzsche compares words to a “mobile army” of metaphors, this visualization helps convey his ideas better to the reader. The image of a ‘movable troops’ of word forms in one’s mind and the reader’s experience of language shifts—they can see words as mobile, forceful, on a mission. Thus this example of a metaphor works to speak to the unexplainable, it associates to elucidate meaning. Language does not convey external truth, but helps shape and create our experiences of the world.

### **Reality through Poetry**

To illustrate this point further it helps our project to turn to poetry. Looking to an example by the early 20th-century poet Wallace Stevens, we can see this phenomenon in action with his poem, “Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination.” This work not only helps to

capture Nietzsche's idea of truth as constructed out of words and our imagination, but simultaneously functions as an example of how through language poetry can transport the reader into a new experience, accessible only through words, as he writes:

Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,  
 We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late.  
 It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna  
 Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.  
 There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round,  
 Under the front of the westward evening star,  
 The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,  
 As things emerged and moved and were dissolved,  
 Either in distance, change or nothingness,  
 The visible transformations of summer night,  
 An argentine abstraction approaching form  
 And suddenly denying itself away.  
 There was an insolid billowing of the solid.  
 Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air.

While in theory the event of driving home late, on a Friday night, is not particularly novel or extraordinary, Stevens makes it so. By using distinct language he creates an experience out of the night that is unique and transportive. Through this poem we see an illustration of the world that challenges our notion of a fixed reality with stagnant truths. To begin, if we take seriously the title, "Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination" we see Stevens' initial argument



that the idea of reality is a creative invention. The notion of reality is a concept born from the mind and “the most august imagination.” If we visualize the imagination as a vessel in which ideas are formed, we can start see where the urge to invent truth comes from. For Stevens, reality is not a fixed, but a thought activity that requires the act of invention to be made real. This echoes Nietzsche’s claim as to the human capacity to manufacture truth, writing, “The human being is an architectural genius who is far superior to the bee; the latter builds with wax which she gathers from nature, whereas the human being builds with the far more delicate material of concepts which he must first manufacture for himself. In this he is much to be admired” (147). The human uses their intellect, their creativity and imagination to construct a world made out of so called truths, a reality for themselves. Through the mere title of Stevens’s poem above we see a similar argument in the works. For both authors, the concepts of truth and reality do not exist separately from the thinking mind, they are born from it. Just as Nietzsche continues, “In short only because man forgets himself as a subject, and indeed as an *artistically creative* subject, does he live with some degree of peace, security, and consistency; if he could escape for just a moment from the prison walls of this faith, it would mean the end of his ‘self consciousness’” (148). Reality is an activity of the artistic mind, an invention we forgot we invented. Thus any access to this mobil truth has the capacity to be realized only through its imagining; through poetry reality is born.

Moving into Stevens’s poem itself we see this title in effect. Stevens starts out by establishing the time and place: Friday night, late, in the car, between Cornwall and Hartford, heading home. From there he uses language to invite the reader into a surreal world of this singular night. It is not the truth of the night or the truth in Stevens’s head that is interesting or

even conveyable. What is remarkable about this poem is that it births a new experience, the words themselves enable the extraordinary. Beyond being able to see “Friday night” in a new light, something entirely new is born out of these lines, an experience only accessible through poetics; a reality that does not exist in a nonlinguistic world. To begin challenging reality Steven’s describes what the night is not; “It was not a night blown at a glassworks in Vienna / Or Venice, motionless, gathering time and dust.” This Friday night is nothing carefully crafted, it is not fragile or foreign like glass blown in Europe. It does not remain motionless, collecting memories and dust. By comparing the night to glass work, he illustrates what kind of art this night was not; the night did not stand still or need to be handled with care. Yet, the night remains artistic—not fine art, as in static and complete, but instead poetic as it is moving and in the moment. Stevens continues, “There was a crush of strength in a grinding going round.” This line further illustrates that the night in question was not created already, not born yet, this experience was being brought to life as Stevens drove, and later wrote; it was created and destroyed in a “grinding going round.” By saying “not blown at glassworks” he establishes that the night was a type of art, but not one that existed before he drove home. The appearance of reality in this poem does not remain fixed or fragile, but instead emerges with an imaginative vigor.

In addition to the mobility of reality, this poem carries the inherent contradictions apparent in rigid truth. Stevens concludes the poem by writing, “An argentine abstraction approaching form / And suddenly denying itself away. / There was an insolid billowing of the solid. / Night’s moonlight lake was neither water nor air.” These lines speak of an abstraction that in approaching form and accessibility, suddenly denies itself away. Just as we start to come at an understanding, we are refused full access to the truth. He continues with a striking image,

describing the “insolid billowing of the solid,” which seems an impossible movement to witness, but somehow through language grants us permission to see. Something is stirred, moved, and rearranged inside the reader by Stevens’ language. This contradiction of the solid and insolid, of neither water nor air, builds on the tension which challenges the notion of reality as stagnant, and illustrates it as something pliable and created. Since there are no tangibilities for which these words correspond, Stevens’s language combinations exceed reality. This poem exemplifies the possibility of words—it is able to create something that does not have a material equivalent.

What we see through the analysis of this poem, is Nietzsche’s thesis performed through poetry. “Reality is an Activity...” illustrates how language functions as a whole to invite the reader into a new experience. The registration of physical phenomena, the specific objects and images evoked, are indispensable from the words of the poem. Just as when Emerson writes about the “rustle of corn,” the reader is offered a new way of hearing the wind through the corn, the cadence of Stevens words offer equal invitation. Through the combination of environment, lights, night, and mind state Stevens turned a once happening in his life, a Friday night, into something much bigger. His words give form to the night. The “insolid billowing of the solid” not only exceeds a description of the world, but becomes a thing in itself, a new motion offered through its articulation. “Reality is an Activity...” becomes into an idea enterable only through language, through reading the poem. This work insights the reader to their own awarenesses on display in the poem. This is the gift of poetry, it allows the subject to inhabit a new experience, to behold the “night’s moonlight lake” that “was neither water nor air.” This poem does not use reasoning to teach us how reality is, but instead demonstrates its thesis through language, using

words to summon forth the reader into a new experience. As Stevens and Nietzsche show us, the power of the poet comes from their ability to create, rather than mirror reality.

### **The Man of Reason vs. the Man of Intuition**

Where does this disassembling of truth and reality leave the reader? How do we live without an objective representation of the world? Nietzsche seems to offer two options, in *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense*, parallel lives to choose from: to be the man of reason or the man of intuition. As Nietzsche begins, “There are epochs in which the man of reason and the man of intuition stand side by side, the one fearful of intuition, the other filled with scorn for abstraction, the latter as unreasonable as the former is unartistic” (152). For Nietzsche these characters stand distinct: the man of reason living in fear of instinct and art, and the man of intuition behaving with no patience for analytics or reason. These are the two different way to use language: conceptually or poetically. These men live in opposition, each frightened by what the other has to offer. At the same time, they both desire to rule over life, to find some semblance of control and understanding emerging in the unknowable abyss. The rational man tries to tame this world and guard against it by using conceptual language, as Nietzsche writes, “the one by his knowledge of how to cope with the chief calamities of life by providing for the future, by prudence and regularity, the other by being an 'exuberant hero' who does not see those calamities and who only acknowledges life as real when it is disguised as beauty and appearance” (152). The man of reason strives to make predictions, forecast what is to come and prepare his words with a hardened regiment. Conversely, the man of intuition admits his own limitations and views only art and aesthetics as real.

What do each of these archetype gain from their distinct life approaches? In practice, what do these philosophies yield their subjects? Looking first at the man of reason, Nietzsche describes, one, “who is guided by concepts and abstractions only succeeds thereby in warding off misfortune, is unable to compel the abstractions themselves to yield him happiness, and strives merely to be as free as possible of pain” (153). For Nietzsche this analytic man succeeds in warding off the most pain and misfortune. This approach guiding by logic and abstractions, removes the element of intuition, and thus the potential for vulnerability. This individual guards against art in order to remove the likelihood of pain; in contrast to this figure, the man of intuition does no such guarding as Nietzsche argues, “That vast assembly of beams and boards to which needy man clings, thereby saving himself on his journey through life, is used by the liberated intellect as a mere climbing frame and play thing on which to perform its most reckless tricks” (152). These abstractions build a protective barrier, a physical structure to ward off the possibility of pain and confusion, but also restricting happiness and delight. While the reasoning man clings to his constructions, the man of intuition builds something more like a playground, embracing life’s lack of security, language’s lack of objective correlation. In the end, the man of reason imprisons himself in the structures he has built, denying the opportunity to feel both pain and pleasure.

These distinct approaches to language do not only impact how one speaks, but also how one lives their life. One’s relationship to words will have inevitable consequences on their life. Offering an illustration of one such existence, that of intuition he writes,

The man of intuition, standing in the midst of a culture, reaps directly from his intuitions not just protection from harm but also a constant stream of brightness, a lightening of the spirit,

redemption, and release. Of course, when he suffers, he suffers more severely; indeed he suffers more frequently because he does not know how to learn from experience and keeps on falling into the very same trap time after time (153).

While the intuitive man has the opportunity for great joy and brightness in his life, he is also the one who suffers most severely and more often than his counterpart. Unable to learn from past experiences, the man of intuition is most susceptible to these unpleasant emotional states. This is the decision you must make: whether to guard against the uncertainty of reality by protecting yourself from both pain and pleasure, or to embrace the insecurity of life and dwell in more extreme conditions, experiencing a larger range of joy and suffering. These are the two different ways of writing and speaking—the one ridged and reasoned, the other unstable, ever evolving and vulnerable.

Which life is more desirable? Which character lives the more advantageously? Which does Nietzsche preach as the superior existence? While never stating explicitly, it is reasonable to assume Nietzsche favors the man of intuition, applauding this person's creativity and flexibility in life. In the same breath however, Nietzsche begins to mock this figure for being unreasonable and self deceptive, writing, "the rule of art over life can become established; all the expressions of a life lived thus are accompanied by pretense, by the denial of neediness, by the radiance of metaphorical visions, and indeed generally by the immediacy of deception" (152-153). This is what the artist does, deceive themselves through metaphor and expression. Yet even with the potential for more pain and self deception, by looking to another text by Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*, we can see how the avenue of intuition and poetry are a favorable way to create our reality.

## Our Ultimate Gratitude for Art

By turning to a section of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* entitled, "Our Ultimate Gratitude for Art" we can see how in a world without capital T truth—the life of intuition, the life of the poet—is more rewarding to that of reason. To illustrate how we ultimately create our experiences through art and poetry it is helpful to look at Nietzsche's opening remarks to illustrate how through aesthetics we build a favorable reality for ourselves:

If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and the error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable... art as the *good* will to appearance (163).

Through intuition and poetry we can combat the absence of knowable truth, by purposefully creating that which is unreal. Rather than trying to endlessly seek to find reality in a world absent of attainable truths, through the art of poetry we can circumvent the problem of truth by creating instead for the purpose of creation. Nietzsche continues to applaud poetry contending:

We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as if were, finishing the poem; and then it is no longer eternal imperfection that we carry across the river of becoming— then we have the sense of carrying a *goddess...as* an aesthetic phenomenon existent is still *bearable* for us (163)

Art and poetry are the gifts we can offer the world, that which makes existence bearable to us. Without ever being able to know anything with certainty we can instead become stimulated and exhilarated by nature. By relishing in the opportunities of language, in its ability to manufacture

the unreal, we are able to create worthwhile experiences and furnish our lives with joy and poetry.

### **Nietzsche as Poet**

What about Nietzsche as a philosopher? How can Nietzsche be such an advocate of the poetic, while remaining a philosopher? How can he preach for only poetry? If we turn to his text *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we can see the example of Zarathustra as a poet, and the ultimate prophet for Nietzsche. In this text we see a perfect example of philosophy rendered in the medium of poetry. Zarathustra, the hero of this book does not form his arguments through reason or analytics, but rather through parable, lyric, irony, rhythm, and metaphor. Through poetry his truth is spoken. On a dialogue entitled “On Poets,” Zarathustra speaks directly about the role of the poet, opening the section, writing:

“Since I have come to know the body better” – Zarathustra said to one of his disciples – “the spirit is only a hypothetical spirit to me; and all that is ‘everlasting’ – that too is only a parable.”

“Thus I heard you speak once before,” answered the disciple, “and at that time you added: ‘But the poets lie too much.’ Why then did you say that the poets lie too much?”

“Why?” said Zarathustra. “You ask why? I do not belong to those whose Why may be questioned.

Is my experience of yesterday? It has been a long time since I experienced the reasons of my opinions.

Would I not have to be a keg of memory if I were also to have my reasons with me?

It is already too much for me to keep my own opinions, and many a bird flies away.

And occasionally I find in my dovecot an animal that has flown to me, a strange one that trembles when I lay my hand upon it.



Yet what did Zarathustra once say to you? That the poets lie too much? – But Zarathustra too is a poet” (99).

This opening dialogue from “On Poets” illustrates Zarathustra as the poet in question. When his disciple questions, “Why then did you say that the poets lie too much?”, Zarathustra replies that it is impossible to know the why, and that he is not bothered with that question. He does not belong to those who question reason, for it has been so long since Zarathustra can remember his *why*. Instead, to illustrate his point, Zarathustra lapses into metaphor, describing birds, which like reasons so often fly away. Likewise he muses that on occasion some animals also fly to him, trembling under his touch. This poetic dialogue illustrates Nietzsche’s—and more broadly speaking philosophies—necessity for poetry. One could object to this idea, conceding that Nietzsche is first and foremost an analytic philosopher, but if you look at the project of Zarathustra we witness poetry as the proper vehicle to communicate philosophical ideas. We do not need the reason or author’s origin to be moved by poetry; instead the medium alone is able to illicit a new experience to the reader.

## **Conclusion**

When we examined Emerson’s writings on poetry and experience we were able to imagine poetry—emerging from the singular experience of the poet—as being able to convey a universal truth to its reader. As we have seen for Nietzsche however, there is no inherent truth in the world. Yet, how can poetry still speak, without a communicable truth? For Nietzsche language is unable to convey truth, but instead simply works as metaphor between nature and speech. For Nietzsche truth is simply translation; there is no truth, the only thing between you and the world is aesthetic. What can poetry accomplish then? By examining Wallace Stevens’s

poem “Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination”, we were able to comprehend how one is called to create their reality out of poetry, how they must build their experiences through language and words. Like the man of intuition vs the man of reason, we have two ways of using language moving forward. One is constraining and restrictive, and uses the rigidity of language to ward off uncertainty. On the other hand we have the poet, who manipulates language, builds a climbing gym to swing from and, in their efforts, experience the largest range of emotions—the highest highs and the lowest lows. This is who we must embody however, just as Nietzsche uses the poet and prophet Zarathustra to illustrate his philosophies, we are called to use language to shape our experiences and invite in new ideas, unrealized through reason.

### ***Chapter III: Freud—The Mind as Poet***

By examining both Emerson and Nietzsche's writings on poetry and experience, we were able to see how this medium is the perfect vehicle to help us convey and create experiences of the world. For Emerson poetics is able to grant the reader access to a universal truth that initially arises from the singular experience of the writer. On the other hand with Nietzsche, even when we have forgone the possibility of conveyable truth, poetry becomes the way in which we create our reality. Thus both authors inspire the use of poetry to shape and create our experiences—a feat unavailable to those who only use reason and analytics to explain the world. For poetic writers such as Emerson and Nietzsche (who both use metaphor and lyrical language in their texts), this praise of poetry might arise as an obvious conclusion. In contrast however, how does a thinker like Sigmund Freud—who's entire body of work is based upon the premise of analysis—further an argument for the virtue of poetry?

Through an examination of Freud's approach to analysis and dream interpretation, we can see the ways in which reason must be suspended in order to understand the self. What we glean from investigating Freud is a better understating of the structure of the mind as poetry making. Freud's distinct method of analysis is that of interpretation, not objective scrutiny; in its simplest terms his project of psychoanalysis is the work of reading the mind. In addition to observing Freud's construction of the mind which reads and writes poetics, we also see Freud's own lapse into examples of poetry. In moments where reasoned argument can take him no further, Freud repeatedly brings in poetry and literature to clarify and deepen his thesis. In trying to trace the necessity of poetry, we see Freud's clear contribution to how we can read the mind as poetic, and the essential nature of poetry to elucidate that which reason cannot articulate.

## The Mind as Poet

To begin understanding Freud's offering to our project of poetry, we must start with his initial approach to mind. By turning to one of his first texts, *The Interpretation of Dreams* we see Freud's fundamental assertion that dreams are something that can be read and interpreted; all dreams have significance and it is through interpretation (and later psychoanalysis) that we uncover their meaning. Illustrating this thought he writes, "dreams are capable of being interpreted" (121) and "every dream has a meaning, though a hidden one, that dreams are designed to take the place of some other process of thought, and that we have only to undo the substitution correctly in order to arrive at this hidden meaning" (121). Even our difficulty to recall or remember dreams carries significance for Freud. Dream interpretation does not seek neutrality or objectivity, but calls for the personal and subjective elucidation of dreams and thoughts—the translation of sleeping vision into waking language.

To understand this project of the mind it helps to follow Freud's distinct approach to dream interpretation. Before Freud there were two primary ways of interpreting dreams; the first was *symbolic* and holistic (122), and the second was a method of *decoding*, looking at it exclusively piece by piece (123). Freud disputes both these previous approaches explaining, "The symbolic method is restricted in its application and incapable of being laid down on general lines. In the case of the decoding method everything depends on the trustworthiness of the 'key'—the dream-book, and of this we have no guarantee" (124). If people were to discover the meaning of their dreams through the decoding method, using a dream-book for instance, they would become restricted under its objectivity and assertion of pre-existing truth. If symbols and words of our dreams had universal connotations, people would not be unraveling themselves, but instead

contriving themselves. Just as each poem is able to illicit a new and distinct experience to the reader, regardless of the authors intent, the dream must be unraveled for the individual, without outside referent.

In explaining what is required for proper dream analysis and self observation, Freud illustrates the need for suspended reason and a poetic imagination. He begins by explaining the challenge of abandoning our critical mind in order to access the truth of our dreams, writing:

The adoption of the required attitude of mind towards ideas that seem to emerge ‘of their own free will’ and the abandonment of the critical function that is normally in operation against them seem to be hard of achievement for some people...If we may trust that great poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller, however, poetic creation must demand an exactly similar attitude. (127)

Freud argues that in our suspending of reason, we must turn to our imagination, our poetic creation to understand ourselves. For dream analysis we must access our self-observation rather than our self-reflection, which still requires the critical faculty to be engaged. This self-observation demands the total disavow of our critical function; for self knowledge there must be no censorship of our thoughts and words. It is important to note here that the proper attitude for analysis is a precisely poetic mood; he states in no uncertain terms poetic creation demands “an exactly similar attitude” as that of self observation.

What does it look like to turn off this self critic, this reasoned part of ourselves that looks for an outside referent to validate our thoughts? To explain this process of self observation (this suspended reason), Freud turns once again to quoting Schiller, who writes:

‘The ground for your complaint seems to me to lie in the constraint imposed by your reason upon your imagination. I will make my idea more concrete by a simile. It seems a bad thing and detrimental to the creative work of the mind if Reason makes too close an examination of the ideas as they come pouring in—at the very gateway, as it were... On the other hand, where there is a creative mind, Reason...relaxes its watch upon the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it look them through and examine them in a mass.—You critics, or whatever else you may call yourselves, are ashamed or frightened of the momentary and transient extravagances which are to be found in all truly creative minds and whose longer or shorter duration distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer. You complain of your unfruitfulness because you reject too soon and discriminate too severely.’ (127-128)

By referencing this passage Freud is comparing the process of writing down one’s dream and interpreting these unfiltered recollections, to the creative process of composing poetry. Just as there would be detriment if you were forced to justify each line of poetry with reason—prove its validity in reality—dream interpretation requires the same level of suspended rationality and self critique. In order to know yourself you must suspend what you think you know about yourself, to open the floodgates of self knowledge you must dissolve your reason and judgement to access your imagination.

Now we understand the mind state required for dream interpretation, how does one extract self knowledge from their our writings? What does this reading of the mind yield? To begin, we know you cannot sensor these dreams, but instead must include all you can remember and work to read your own writings of the mind. What if you cannot remember your whole dream? Does

having fragments of dreams missing, call into question the validity of the entire dream and therefore the interpretation of it? No, in fact it is in this forgetting for Freud, that we do a lot of the work, since there is added significance to what is omitted. Freud writes, “psycho-analytic experience has provided us with yet another proof that the forgetting of dreams depends far more upon resistance than upon fact” (524). What is forgotten during the night is not arbitrary, but is directly related to what people are repressing. The forgetting has just as great an interpretive value as what is remembered and the bias expressed in the re-telling of the dream is a significant part of dissolving of it.

In addition to what is missing, what is remembered remains a mystery until deciphered. For Freud, the meaning of the dream does not emerge from its *manifest* but rather from its *latent* content, as he writes, “It is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream’s manifest content that we disentangle its meaning” (295). What we look for in understanding one’s dream is the relationship between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts from which this content arises. The dream is somewhat of a translation as Freud continues,

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. (295)

When we recount our dreams the objects and people that appear in the fiction do not usually represent their waking equivalents. Instead the dream functions like a personal poem to be decoded, crowded with personal metaphors and associations. Freud continues by illustrating that

the dream is a kind of “pictographic script” that must be explored as he contends, “The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts” (296).

These dreams are a series of images that allow for the mind to be read; they are “poems” our mind composes in sleep, and through interpretation and suspended reason we are able to read and understand.

### **Psychoanalysis as Reading**

As Freud explains that the mind is capable of being read, we are left wondering as to the content of these writings. Where do we gather this self knowledge from? How is the mind able to write? Just as with dream interpretation, we do not look outside the self for knowledge of the individual; there is no code-book to unravel the dream meaning. Instead it is the project of the human to understand their dreams through their subsequent summaries of this sleeping experience: their writings. To illustrate this process of reading and writing one’s mind, Freud uses himself as an example, closely examining his personal dream, “Irma’s injection.” By using himself as an example, Freud comes to striking conclusions from an examination of this injection, using this instance as evidence for his broader claim that “a dream is a the fulfillment of a wish” (145). This example not only illustrates the mind being written and read, but also, by using himself as the subject, Freud demonstrates that by knowing himself better, he gains access a greater understanding of the human mind. His mind not only writes poetry, but these poetics (these metaphors and metonymies), once unraveled, are able to speak on a larger scale, to the mind’s ability to be read.



He begins this dream interpretation through an initial summary of his rememberings, commencing, “A large hall—numerous guests, whom we were receiving.—Among them was Irma. I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my ‘solution’ yet” (131). After recalling the entire dream, Freud begins to analyze his own writing, beginning with an elucidation of the first line concluding, “My dream was thus anticipating this occasion: it was my wife’s birthday and a number of guests, including Irma, were being received by us in the large hall at Bellevue” (133). On and on like this, Freud parses out the significance of his own recollections to gain a broader understanding of the human mind and the work of psychoanalysis. He concludes this entire examination by illustrating its personal message and meaning, contending, “when I came to consider all of these, they could all be collected into a single group of ideas and labelled, as it were, ‘concern about my own and other people’s health— professional conscientiousness’” (144). This personal revelation about the latent content of this dream—as his own concern for the health of himself and others—finally led Freud to his epiphany that each dream is the fulfillment of a wish (144). The example of Irma’s injection illustrated the process of unraveling and the dissolution that guided Freud to a better understanding of himself. Freud’s analysis of Irma’s injection, is a crucial example of his “close reading” of a dream, which illustrates that psychoanalysis is a kind of exegesis: a reading of self composed poetry.

This example of dream interpretation also echoes poetry in its inductive approach to unravelling. Freud argues broad claims based on his specific observations and recorded examples that are inherently subjective. Just as we saw with Wallace Stevens’s “Reality is an activity of the most august imagination,” in the composition of a poem, the examination of a single object or

event is capable of illustrating something significant about the world at large. Rather than writing explicitly about “reality,” Stevens illustrates his argument through the examination of a specific night, a single event remembered in metaphor, imagery, and substitution. Similarly, the mind does not explicitly tell us, but instead shows us, through dreams, that which needs unraveling. Thus, the interpretation of single event in a dream (one moment), can lead to greater conclusions about the self. Likewise, poems are not objective; they do not strive to be accurate on account of logic but on results, on how they settle inside the reader.

Turning to Freud’s subsequent text, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the mind is poetic, and how psychoanalysis is the job of reading the mind as poetry. He begins by explaining the potentially futile project of learning psychoanalysis through these lectures, writing, “I cannot, of course, foretell how much understanding of psychoanalysis you will obtain from the information I give you, but I can promise this: that by listening to it you will not have learnt how to set about a psycho-analytic investigation or how to carry a treatment through” (18). For Freud it is not through a detached approach, but rather a self analysis and discovery that this process of psychoanalysis can be properly understood. People must learn psychoanalysis through the study of themselves, becoming patients of this work and embarking on self-analysis to understand the process, questioning, “If there is no objective verification of psycho-analysis, and no possibility of demonstrating it, how can one learn psycho-analysis at all, and convince oneself of the truth of its assertions?...One learns psycho-analysis on oneself, by studying one’s own personality” (22). Here, Freud is reminding his reader how personal the act of psychoanalysis is, with any proof of results inevitably being tied to the individual. This is the method of trying to overpower a

person's forgetting so they may come to know themselves. It is the process of unraveling a problem to make it go away.

Freud goes on to directly compare this technique of self discovery to that of writing poetry, with every mistake or slip of tongue as a potential moment of meaning. Illuminating this idea in full, he writes:

It has repeatedly happened that a poet has made use of slips of the tongue or some other error as a means of poetic presentation. This fact in itself must prove to us that he considers the error, the slip of the tongue for instance, as meaningful; for he creates it on purpose, and it is not a case of the poet committing an accidental slip of the pen and then letting his pen-slip stand as a tongue-slip of his character. He wants to make something clear to us by this slip of the tongue, and we may examine what it is, whether he wishes to indicate by this that the person in question is distracted or fatigued. Of course, we do not wish to exaggerate the importance of the fact that the poet did make use of a slip to express his meaning. It could nevertheless really be a psychic accident, or meaningful only in very rare cases, and the poet would still retain the right to infuse it with meaning through his setting. As to their poetic use, however, it would not be surprising if we should glean more information concerning slips of the tongue from the poet than from the philologist or the psychiatrist.<sup>1</sup> (27)

Here we see Freud explicitly illustrate the parallel between the poet and the self, as writer of the mind. Just as the poet is able to transform their 'slip-ups' into moments of meaning, the patient of psychoanalysis too, is able to examine their so-called 'errors' in speech and recall, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Translator: A. A. Brill, M. D. Eder, Stanley Hall and H. W. Chase

extract their subconscious meanings. These ‘mistakes’ of mind are not trivial or meaningless, but rather for the project of psychoanalysis can reveal much of what the patient is potentially suppressing. Whether or not the poet’s initial error carries significance as in the form of “a psychic accident”, does not hinder its transformation into something of importance, as Freud contends that, “the poet would still retain the right to infuse it with meaning through his setting.” Likewise, a patient of psychoanalysis is able to use their own slips up to realize hidden meanings of their mind. For Freud, people’s missteps and misremembering can reveal so much about themselves—we have all been subject to the accidental “freudian slip.” Thus, we can conclude that nothing the mind does is senseless; every mundane thought has meaning and implications, discoverable through the poetic process of reading the mind: psychoanalysis.

Although Freud may illuminate the poetic nature of reading and writing the mind, we cannot escape the fact that he presents his process of unraveling as a science. What makes psychoanalysis uniquely poetic and different from other sciences or philosophies? How is this method distinctly linked to language? By turning to an opening passage of Freud’s *Introductory Lectures*, we see his deep reverence for words, emphasizing their significance explaining, “Words were originally magic and to this day words have retained much of their ancient magical power. By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair... Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men” (20). Freud does not underestimate the power of words and even anoints them with a high degree of reverence; he does not underestimate their power. This is the essence of his science: an exchange of words, as Freud writes, “Nothing takes place in psycho-analytic treatment but an interchange of words between patient and the analyst” (19). This process is one of reading our writings, which means

that whatever is written becomes ordained with value and significance. In psychoanalysis it is the exact words chosen as a descriptor of our dreams that can capture the truth. Any bias or initial mistake in word choice does not undermine psychoanalysis, but serves to further elucidate people's unconscious thoughts and wishes. Psychoanalysis is making poetry out of the mind; it is an intuitive and subjective process of images being translated into language. With words at the center of psychoanalysis, their power is proven to be not in the articulation of results, but conversely as the vehicle through which to deliver the patient to recovery. This is the unique feature of psychoanalysis that positions it as distinct from other sciences, its only implement for convalescence is the exchange of words, the unraveling of our mind's poetry to arrive at a better understanding of the self.

### **Freud's Use of Poetry**

Not only does Freud's practice echo the process of poetics, but his writings themselves contain the lapse into poetry, using poets like Schiller and Goethe to better illuminate his theories. On many occasions Freud struggles to illustrate his "science" without a turn to poetry and metaphor. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for instance, Freud uses an example from literature to build his infamous theory of the 'Oedipus Complex.' Not only does he use this literary tragedy to support his thesis, but grounds the entire argument on its historical emergence. The fact that this tragedy is fiction does not deter Freud from extracting its value; he views literature and poetry as a manifestation of the truths we see at play in reality. He argues that Oedipus is an example of the repressed sexual desire that boys exhibit toward the mothers. Describing the emergence of this theory Freud explains, "This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal

power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity” (278). Here we see that Freud regards the poet and creative writer as able to articulate inherent human truths, able to capture and illustrate the depths of human nature in their writings. Instead of using a specific case study to prove this theory, Freud finds more substantial evidence of this universal human nature in a piece of literature, insisting, “There must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in *Oedipus*” (280). Here again, we see Freud emphasizing the medium of poetry to speak to a universal quality. Similarly, we can remember Emerson echoing this sentiment, explaining that in a poet’s most private recollections, “to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable most public, and universally true.” (64) This is the gift of poetry, it is able in its specificity, to capture something universal about human nature.

After concluding this analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, Freud concedes that with this one example as proof you might not be convinced. In response he again turns to poetic literature writing, “Another of the great creations of tragic poetry, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*” (282). Here his argument, substantiated by the example of Hamlet, describes the sexual urge felt toward one’s mother. He explains, “In *Hamlet* it remains repressed; and—just as in the case of a neurosis—we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences” (285). By using *Hamlet* to illustrate the nuance and varying manifestations of the Oedipus Complex, Freud is anointing the work of Shakespeare with more universal validity than scientific evidence. Freud, in fact, treats these artistic works as master examples, as perfect case studies that exemplify human nature. Going on to justify his deep (perhaps “over”) analysis of

these texts, Freud makes an explicit connection between reading the mind and reading literature, contending:

But just as all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being ‘over-interpreted’ and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet’s mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation. In what I have written I have only attempted to interpret the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer. (283)

With this quote we see Freud making the overt comparison of extracting latent truths from the mind to the work of analyzing poetry. He singularly groups these two tasks of extraction—the analysis of literature and the project of psychoanalysis—as equally helpful methods to obtain insight into the human psyche. Just as Freud turns to poetry and literature to illustrate his broader claims of the mind, we see a similar exegesis of the mind as uniformly able to be read and interpreted in order to gain crucial and hidden information about human nature.

In addition to Freud’s treatment of literature as able to reflect universal human traits, he also uses excerpts of poetry at moments where analysis can go no further. During his explanation of the our opposing human drives to life and death, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud cannot help but take refuge in poetry, using this less reasoned approach to illuminate his thesis. In defending the argument that all instincts seek the return to an earlier state, Freud explains that this drive to death, to restoration—which appears antithetical to the human drive to perfection—must be culturally repressed (50-51). Nonetheless Freud explains, these instincts persist, turning to the words of the poet, insisting:

The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction. No substitutive or creative formations and no sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct's persisting tension...but, in the poet's words, 'presses ever forward unsubdued' (Mephistopheles in *Faust*, Part I, Scene 4). (50-51)

In order to explain the repression of our instincts, Freud does not use science or a patient example to back his point, but rather makes use of poetry not only to articulate, but also substantiate his argument. Here and throughout his works, Freud quotes creative writers to poeticize his theories, to mark a break where analysis can go no further. Without defending the inclusion of poetry, Freud assumes its innate descriptive legitimacy. Through the inclusion of poetry Freud is able to communicate how repression works with more efficacy than a reasoned argument is able to.

As we have started to see, Freud does not only use interludes of poetry as universal examples to prove his theories, but also uses this medium to fill a space where analysis can go no further. We encounter this phenomena emerging at the very end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud concludes his revelations yet again, by a turn to the poet, writing:

We must be patient and await fresh methods and occasions of research. We must be ready, too, to abandon a path that we have followed for a time, if it seems to be leaning to no good end. Only believers, who demand that science shall be a substitute for the catechism they have given up, will blame an investigator for developing or even transforming his views. We may take comfort, too, for the slow advances of our scientific knowledge in the words of the poet:



What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping....

The Book tells us it is no sin to limp (Rückert in the ‘Makamen des Mariri’). (77-78)

For Freud, only those among us who substitute science for religion in the hope of finding concrete answers, will reject the evolution of an idea if it challenges an existing viewpoint. For the rest of us however, we may take comfort in science’s slower rate of arrival, and find consolation in the words of the poet. This is how Freud concludes his entire book—in a metaphor, in poetry. By using this quote, he assumes there is something the poet inherently knows, which will help substantiate his science and consecrate his entire study. At the end of the day, the fact that the poet said it, for Freud, applies a more universal legitimacy, than if it had been analytically conceptualized. Finally, Freud uses to poet not only to validate his argument but also elucidate it with metaphor, cementing the image of a science that shamelessly limps toward answers.

## **Conclusion**

So where does Freud leave us in understanding the philosophical implications of poetry? How does an examination of the mind substantiate the value of poetry? From an investigation of Freud’s process of analysis and dream interpretation, we can come to realize the necessity of abandoning our critical mind in order to understand the self, uncensored by doubt. By an awareness of how Freud conducts his dream interpretations and psychoanalysis linguistically—with the mind as reader and writer—we comprehend the mind as poet. Just as Emerson argues that in the poet’s most private musings will he or she be able to access the universal, Freud too echoes this argument with his own employment of personal dream analysis, which lead him to

greater discoveries of the mind. Through this unravelling one does not only gain access to the self, but can potentially discover larger implications about the universality of the human experience. Not only do we see the emergence of the mind as poetic, we also see Freud's own inclusion of poetry to help prove his science. In instances where analysis can take him no further, Freud unitizes poetry and literature to clarify and legitimize his argument. For Freud, poetry offers more collective validity than analysis ever will. This is the power of the poet—to speak to that which we all know and to express the hidden nuances of human nature. Through an examination of Freud we see the essential nature of poetry as able elucidate that which reason cannot articulate.

## ***Conclusion***

### **Why Should We Care?**

By examining Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud side-by-side, we see that while they might disagree on the definition of truth, each utilizes poetry as a means of arriving there. Each of their seminal contributions demonstrate the threshold beyond which we can no longer use a reasoned, analytic approach to impart knowledge. Conversely, with its unique ability to address and convey human experience, we start to see how poetry is essential, how it is able to include the reader in such a way that logic alone cannot. This leaves us with the necessary conclusion that in order to communicate experience, philosophy needs the contributions of poetry. Why though does philosophy need the inclusion of experience in the first place?

### **Inclusion and the Political Criteria**

Now that we see the capacity of poetry to communicate experience, I intend to show that this inclusion of experiential knowledge has the ability to allow a greater range of voices to be understood—those typically excluded from philosophy due to their divergence from strict logic, reason, and analysis. To understand what is at stake in this inclusion, we must put aside the thinkers we have just examined, and turn to feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins. In her essay *Towards an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology*, she calls for an expansion of what we consider *knowledge in academia*. It may be taken for granted that what constitutes knowledge in Western academia is best based upon accuracy and validity, without the influence of cultural or political viewpoints. Dr. Collins challenges this assumption by arguing that what is considered to be ‘true’ in academia is not based simply on accuracy or validity, but on an adherence to an existing structure within academia that operates largely in the service of the white male patriarchy. These

criteria additionally exclude knowledge that does not meet a positivist standard, which means that knowledge gained through experience is not considered true. Collins argues these criteria limit women, and especially black women, from having their knowledge claims validated in the current academic structures.

What is the architecture of these political criteria Collins describes? To explain this criteria, Collins argues that academia approaches knowledge exclusively under the positivist lens. She contends that “positivist approaches aims to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations,” and that, “genuine science is thought to be unattainable unless all human characteristics except rationality are eliminated from the research process” (366). Collins explains that “by following strict methodological rules, scientists aim to distance themselves from values, vested interests, and emotion generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation” (366). This positivist approach, which validates knowledge based on political criteria, results in a loss of varied perspectives. Moreover, this political criterion limits what constitutes truth based on its obedience to the status quo, thus excluding knowledge that does not conform to pure objectivity, knowledge based built upon emotion, experience, and participation for instance—all traits poetry exemplifies. This method of reasoned analysis to access knowledge, denies the possibility of a personal truth gained through an experience with the world. This is a problem specifically for those voices not already represented in academia, and communities whose knowledge is not purely based on adherence to the existing analytic approach.

### **Wisdom Gained from Experience**

What type of knowledge are excluded by these political criteria? Implicit knowing, not informed by logic, is 'wisdom,' according to Collins's description of a black feminist epistemology. Knowledge is gained from books and facts, whereas wisdom comes from experience. She contends that the current positivist epistemology does not view concrete experience (wisdom) as sufficient for knowledge claims. Collins disagrees that authentic information is not gained from experience, and illustrates how essential wisdom is to the Black female perspective, writing, "Living as a Black woman requires wisdom ... about the dynamics of race, gender, and class oppression [because this] has been essential to Black women's survival" (367). Through the articulation of the specific experiences, the author is able to use individual stories to speak to a larger trend of oppression. Experience becomes a criterion for meaning. For Black women especially, it is not simply enough to witness or study oppression; they must live it and in their experiences, gaining an intrinsic wisdom about race, gender, and social dynamics. Collins continues, arguing:

Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate... Experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicles is a fundamental epistemological tenet in African-American thought system... By invoking concrete practical images from her own life to symbolize new meanings (368).

Collins is suggesting that knowledge not grounded in personal narrative is acceptable for those in positions of privilege who can witness disadvantage from afar; whereas for the oppressed, wisdom is an essential element of survival. People in privilege are capable of understanding information about those who are oppressed, but it is only through lived experience that this

knowing becomes embodied wisdom. In this way not only is the experience of African American women, for instance, not included in academia, but its absence impoverishes those in privilege, denying them insight into the nuanced dynamics of their world. What does the articulation of these experiences accomplish that facts cannot? How does experiential knowledge get communicated in such a way that it can be understood by another?

### **Communicating Experience through Poetry**

When reading a piece of literature, one is often overcome by a feeling of familiarity. As we saw with Emerson, the reason we are moved by poetry is because of its ability to speak to a universal truth. What a poet finds true in their solitude, those crowded into cities will also recognize for themselves. Likewise with Nietzsche, we saw that composing poetry is a universal facet of human experience. Finally as we saw with Freud, a great writer is able to use their own specific experience to relay a universal truth about human nature. What about experiences specific to oppressed groups, instances of sexism or racism unique to particular individuals or communities? How does one communicate instances of oppression to a privileged audience that has never felt marginalized?

One book that illustrates the ability of poetry to relay experiences of oppression, is Claudia Rankine's renowned, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Through a mixture of deeply personal poetic anecdote, in conversation with highly public instances of violence towards African Americans, Rankine is able to raise nuanced questions of race, gender, and identity in American society. The poetic and intuitive use of language employed throughout *Citizen*, illustrates experiences of racial oppression, while keeping the space open for potential recognition from people who might never have felt marginalized. How is Rankine able to open up this space to

white readers for instance, helping them identify with the text? Throughout her book, Rankine employs the pronoun “you” instead of “I” in relating narratives. It might appear advantageous to relate personal narratives in the first person, but Rankine's choice to write in the second person allows for a different experience in the reader. This 2nd person might at first seem subtle or stylistic, but the use of “you” works as the wedge, holding the door open for new perception in the reader.

Rankine starts this book with an invitation, writing, “When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows” (5). In the very first sentence Rankine repeats this “you” five times, placing the reader among their pillows, in a specific mood and a particular place. Here we see how Rankine’s work demonstrates poetry’s potential to speak to a universal sense, to evoke a shared experience through the illustration of one’s personal story. Yet on an empirical level, the American experience is not universally shared; not everyone has access to the same advantages or experiences. Rankine is illustrating a specific experience of America, but by using the pronoun “you,” she keeps open the space for readers who do not share her origin, helping them empathize and find common ground.

A particularly striking section of *Citizen* is the poem “Making Room,” in which Rankine presents a scenario about an empty seat next to a black man on a crowded subway. She describes the woman who would rather stand all the way to Union Station rather than sit next to this man. Then she explains how, “you” as reader of the poem, “step over this [woman’s] fear and sit down next to the man” (131), you know the significance of that unclaimed spot on a crowded train. Rankine continues, “You put your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within. You

don't speak unless you are spoken to and your body speaks to the space you fill and you keep trying to fill it except the space belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you" (131). Rankine describes the train moving through the darkness; you are shoulder to shoulder with the man but you do not speak, and as the story closes Rankine concludes, "It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are traveling as family" (133). Where does this passage leave the reader who cannot relate to the experience of the black man? The reader can join the "you," can put their body in that place. This example is moving as a possibility, a particular solution illustrated through the poeticizing of experience. Just as the person occupying the empty seat does not speak to the man, but instead communicates with their actions, Rankine's poetry does not instruct explicitly, it illustrates. Rankine does not tell you to sit there or prove why you *must*, instead she invites you by opening up this space for recognition. Rankine also shows us what we are all up against; that person whose historic fear is making them 'stand all the way,' and invites us to not only 'step over' that fear, but to 'marry' the very object of that fear, to join with it as family, confronting the wasteful fears of those who only stand.

In addition to examples from the book, at the 2016 Hannah Arendt conference at Bard College, I witnessed Rankine speak out specifically about why she employed this "you," in response to a fellow panelist's criticism of her book, as he compared it to, "a church held together by the hunt for heresy." He felt that *Citizen* was too heavily focused on calling out people on racism, that it was held together by examples that searched to be racist, that it looked for white people to call out. He argued that her book merely worked to illuminate racism and prosecute the wrong doers, rather than find a solution through common ground. To this critique



Rankine answered simply that her book was not on the hunt for heresy, instead by intentionally employing the “you,” she was opening up a space into which people could enter into if they felt so willing, and if not, they could move on. *Citizen* is not about prosecution because it does not instruct. By using the “you,” Rankine offers very specific examples that speak to a universal experience. Yet, if said experience is not shared, she invites the reader to move on. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson understands this paradox that in living in one’s truth, we might come into conflict with another’s truth, writing, “If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own” (273). In this way, Rankine does not direct everyone to agree with her but summons them to the window, to give them an opportunity to join her and see what strikes a cord.

Additionally in *Citizen*, Rankine facilitates the reader to discern truths for themselves, instead of handing them explanations. She does this by intentionally leaving blank space on the pages and omitting any analysis of poetry, letting each instance stand by itself. In one example there are only five lines on the whole page, as Rankine relates an incident, “Despite the fact that you have the same sabbatical schedule as everyone else, he says, you are always on sabbatical” (47). After describing this short interaction Rankine does not explain how it made her feel, or why it was problematic; instead she leaves the reader with 3/4 an empty page and a chance to sit with their feelings. Emerson tells us, “when we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.” (269). Rankine’s “you” is a catalyst, an opening of the vessel to allows this passage of truth, this ability to convey her story to those who’ve never experienced it.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, what we see from Rankine's *Citizen* is an example of what is possible through poetry. We have traced this potential throughout Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud, and saw their overlapping evocation for the necessity of poetry to relay experience. Throughout her writings, Rankine creates an inhabitable landscape for the reader. She does not seek to defend or provide proof of her wisdom, but rather illustrates the effect and implications of an experience through poetry—a truth that is not up for debate, but rather up for understanding. Throughout this entire project we have traced this need to abandon reason and trust one's intuition in order to articulate a truth that will resonate at large, illuminating that in order to understand oneself and be recognized by others, adapting to the status quo will not suffice. Instead, a person must abandon their inner critic and embrace their intuition and embodied knowledge. This example of Rankine also illuminates the political implications of what is possible through poetics. Philosophy can no longer be a privileged, elite, undertaking. This inclusion of poetry—especially poetry which tangles with race and gender—helps to inject philosophy with a new realism and capacity to illicit change. We may never fully grasp the experience of another, but if we are willing to listen, in due time, this wisdom offered through poetry will begin to resonate as truth.

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