

How Poetry is the Hero of Philosophy, Or, Why I Translated Rilke's *Herbst* for *Borderless Philosophy*

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I. Introduction

In this little essay, I explain, **first**, how not only poetry, but also translating poetry, can be an authentic work of philosophy, and, also, **second**, how, providing that the poetry is brilliant, and that the translation is at least adequate, translated poetry can also be “the hero of philosophy”—that is, a way of directly and essentially non-conceptually conveying profound insights about rational human animals and their thoroughly nonideal natural and social world, that, like a demi-god, leaps and soars over the plodding step-by-step method of conceptualizing, analyzing, inferring, and theorizing, and goes straight to the heart of what really and truly matters.

II. What is a Work of Philosophy?

1. By “philosophy” (aka “real philosophy”), I mean synoptic, systematic, rational reflection on the individual and collective human condition, and on the thoroughly nonideal natural and social world in which human and other conscious animals live, move, and have their being.

1.1 But the primary aim of real philosophy is *to change one's own life*, with a further, ultimate aim of *changing the world* through free, existentially authentic, morally-principled action, hence all philosophy is *liberationist* and *rationaly rebellious*, with radical ethical, religious, and political aims, or what I call, collectively, *radical enlightenment*.¹

¹ On radical enlightenment, see Z et al, “What (The Hell) Is Enlightenment, *Against Professional Philosophy* (2 June 2016), available online at URL = <<http://againstprofphil.org/what-the-hell-is-enlightenment/>>. This radical enlightenment conception of the primary and ultimate aims of real philosophy overlaps in some interesting ways with Kristie Dotson's conception of “a culture of praxis” in philosophy, as formulated in her well-known essay, “How Is This Paper Philosophy?,” *Comparative Philosophy* 3 (2012): 3-29. But there are two important differences. **First**, I think that Dotson's multiculturalist political perspective is *still* too narrow, and needs to be radically broadened to the perspective of *cosmopolitan social anarchism*. And **second**, for the most part, Dotson unquestioningly accepts the assumption that philosophy belongs *inside* the professional academy, whereas I think that philosophy's second Copernican Revolution will not happen until we realize that philosophy is really possible only *outside* the professional academy. See also R. Hanna, “Thinking Inside and Outside the Fly-Bottle: The New Poverty of Philosophy and its Second Copernican Revolution” (Academia.edu, 2018), available online at URL =

1.2 Real philosophy in this sense fully includes the knowledge yielded by the natural and formal sciences; but real philosophy also goes significantly beneath and beyond the exact sciences, and non-reductively incorporates aesthetic, artistic, affective/emotional, ethical/moral, and, more generally, personal and practical insights that cannot be adequately captured or explained by the sciences.

1.3 By “a work,” I mean any freely chosen product of human activity, whether an object (material or intentional), or a performance.

1.4 So works of philosophy are freely chosen products of the human activity of real philosophy, whether an object (material or intentional), or a performance.

2. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant says that there are “**aesthetic idea[s]**,” by which he means,

[a] representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible..., [and] [o]ne readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an idea of reason, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.²

2.1 In other words, an aesthetic idea is a non-empirical, metaphysical representation, like an “idea of pure reason,” but also *non*-discursive and *non*-conceptual, hence linguistically *inexpressible* by means of concepts, propositions, or Fregean “thoughts,” precisely to the extent that it is a product of human sensible imagination.

3. Kant himself does not make this point, but I think that the doctrine of aesthetic ideas has profound meta-philosophical implications: *philosophy need not necessarily be theoretically expressed*.

3.1 Correspondingly, I think that there is a fundamental distinction between

(i) works of philosophy (aka “philosophical works”) and

<https://www.academia.edu/34149847/Thinking_Inside_and_Outside_the_Fly-Bottle_The_New_Poverty_of_Philosophy_and_its_Second_Copernican_Revolution_March_2018_version>.

² I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 5: 314, p. 192.

(ii) philosophical theories,

such that the category of “philosophical works” is essentially wider and more inclusive than the category of philosophical theories—and more generally, philosophical theorizing is only one way of creating and presenting philosophy, as important as it is.

4. The aim of philosophical theories is to provide philosophical explanations that lead to essential, synoptic insights about the rational human condition, guided by the norms of propositional truth and logical consistency, by means of conceptual construction and conceptual reasoning.

4.1 A similarly open-minded conception of philosophical theorizing, in the tradition of connective conceptual analysis, was developed by Robert Nozick in his influential book, *Philosophical Explanations*.³

4.2 But I think that Nozick’s conception is still too much in the grip of the deeply wrongheaded, *scientistic* idea that all philosophy *must* be modeled on natural science, mathematics, or logic.

5. In my view, the aim of philosophical works, *as such*, is to present insights about the rational human condition and the thoroughly nonideal natural and social world around us, with synoptic scope, and a priori/necessary character, tracking categorical normativity and our highest values, as I said above, with the primary aim of *changing one’s own life*, and the ultimate aim of *changing the world*, hence expressing *radical enlightenment*.

5.1 But this can be achieved even without concepts, propositions, arguments, or theories, in an essentially non-conceptual way, by presenting imagery, pictures, structures, etc., that have strictly universal and strongly modal implications, and categorically normative force.

5.2 These essentially non-conceptual insights could *also* be called “truths,” if we use the term “truth” sufficiently broadly—as in “the truth shall set you free.”

5.3 My basic point is that philosophy should be as much aimed at being *inspiring and visionary*, as it is at being *argumentative and explanatory*.

³ See R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981).

6. Pivoting on that basic point, here is a proposal for five disjunctively necessary, individually minimally sufficient, and collectively fully sufficient criteria for something *W*—where *W* is *a work*, that is, as per 1.1, any freely chosen product of human activity, whether an object (material or intentional), or a performance—to count as “a work of philosophy”:

- (i) *W* provides a philosophical theory or a visionary worldview (or both),
- (ii) *W* negatively or positively engages with earlier or contemporary philosophical ideas,
- (iii) *W* expresses and follows a philosophical method,
- (iv) *W* contains an explicit or implicit “philosophy of philosophy,” a metaphilosophy,
- (v) *W* deals with some topic or topics germane to the rational human condition, within a maximally broad range of issues, encompassing epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, history, culture, society, politics, aesthetics, art, formal and natural science, religion, and so-on.⁴

7. Given how I defined the term “a work,” by my use of the term “works” in the phrase “works of philosophy,” I mean something as broad as its use in “works of art.”

7.1 So there is no assumption or presupposition whatsoever here that works of philosophy must be *written or spoken texts*, although obviously many or most works of philosophy have been and are written or spoken texts.

8. Correspondingly, I want to put forward two extremely important metaphilosophical theses that conform to this conception of works of philosophy.

- (i) the thesis of *presentational hylomorphism* in works of philosophy (PHWP), and
- (ii) the thesis of *presentational polymorphism* in works of philosophy (PPWP).

8.1 PHWP says:

There is an essential connection, and in particular, an essential *complementarity*, between the presentational form (*morphê*) of philosophical works and their philosophical content (*hyle*).

8.2 “Content” here is *cognitive-semantic content*, but this content can be

⁴ Many thanks to Otto Paans for proposing this list of criteria in e-mail correspondence.

either (i) conceptual,
or (ii) essentially non-conceptual,

and also it can be

either (iii) theoretical content
or (iv) non-theoretical content, including, aesthetic/artistic, affective/emotive,
pragmatic, moral, political, or religious content.

8.3 Also, (i) and (ii) cross-cut with (iii) and (iv).

8.4 Hence there can be conceptual content that is either theoretical or non-theoretical, and there can be essentially non-conceptual content that is either theoretical or non-theoretical.

9. The **first** thing that PHWP implies, is the intimate connection between truly creative, ground-breaking works of philosophy, and truly creative, original forms of literary and spoken philosophical expression.

9.1 Thus Socrates created philosophical works entirely by conversation; Plato did it by writing dialogues; Aristotle did it by presenting (it seems) nothing but lectures; Descartes wrote meditations; Locke and Hume wrote treatises; Kant wrote the Critiques; Kierkegaard wrote strange pseudonymous books; Nietzsche wrote poetry and aphorisms; Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, both of them completely original, completely different, and equally uncategorizable; and so on.

9.2 The **second** thing that PHWP implies is that since all works of written and spoken philosophy are essentially connected to their literary style and expressive vehicles, then it is a mistake to impose a needlessly restrictive stylistic and expressive straight-jacket on works of philosophy, for example, the standard professional “journal essay,” “200+ page book,” and “philosophy talk.”

9.3 And a **third** thing that PHWP implies is that since the standard view of philosophical content in the analytic tradition—whether as logical analysis, linguistic analysis, conceptual analysis, analytic metaphysics, or scientific naturalism—is that the content of philosophy is exclusively conceptual and theoretical, then recognizing the essential non-conceptuality and non-theoreticality of philosophical content, completely opens up the way we should be thinking about works of philosophy, in three ways.

9.4 First, all written and spoken philosophy is in fact shot through with imagery, poetry, rhetorical devices, and speech-acts of various kinds.

9.5 Second, philosophy need not necessarily be presented (exclusively) in written or spoken form. There could be works of philosophy that are cinematic, diagrammed or drawn, painted, photographed, musical (instrumental or voiced), sculpted, performed like dances or plays, etc., etc., and perhaps above all, mixed works combining written or spoken forms of presentation and one or more non-linguistic forms or vehicles.

9.6 Third, if philosophical content is as apt to be essentially non-conceptual or non-theoretical as it is to be conceptual or theoretical, then there are vast realms of philosophical meaning that very few philosophers, even the most brilliant and great ones, have ever even attempted to explore.

10. Therefore, in full view of PHWP, we also have PPWP:

Philosophy can be expressed in any presentational format whatsoever, provided it satisfies PHWP.

III. Novalis's Metaphilosophy, Poetry, and Philosophy

Novalis is perhaps best known to contemporary philosophers for his aphorism, "Philosophy can bake no bread; but she can procure for us God, Freedom, Immortality."

But less well known is the following sentence: "Which, then, is more practical, Philosophy or Economy?"

In other words, Novalis is saying that philosophy is profoundly *more* practical than economics.

As opposed to Philosophy, with its fundamental interest in matters metaphysical and non-instrumentally moral, Economy *can* bake bread; but, given the existence, hegemony, and alienating, oppressive effects of capitalism, whether in the late 18th, 19th, 20th, or early 21st centuries, it's at best *bread-and-circuses*.

Even less well known is Novalis's metaphilosophy, which I am particularly interested in because it seems to me to confirm beautifully what I wrote in section **II** above.

The rest of this section is taken verbatim, with one small elision, from Pauline Kleingeld's all-around excellent article, "Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis's Christianity or Europe," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 269-284, at pp. 276-278.

Novalis's View of Philosophy

Novalis's views do not lend themselves easily to the kind of description and analysis normally recommended in most Anglophone philosophy departments. Because he does not argue for his view, at least not in the strict, non-romantic sense of "arguing," and because he believes that a direct, discursive exposition of his view is necessarily inadequate, even the description of his view is, methodologically and practically, a tricky matter. It is tempting to try to make romantic philosophers academically respectable according to current mainstream philosophical standards by steering clear of quotes filled with hot tears and banquets of love or with young churches in sweet embraces with loving gods. But selecting quotes on the basis of their palatability or expository nature leads to misrepresentations. It would make Novalis look like an ordinary philosopher by currently dominant standards, where in fact he rejects the customary view of the goal and methods of philosophy.

Yet Novalis was steeped in the philosophical tradition that includes thinkers such as Kant and Fichte, and he was highly reflective about his own stance toward that tradition. The metaphysical notes that he took during his philosophical studies provide the necessary clues for describing his view of philosophy in more customary terms, and these methodological notes also provide valuable hermeneutic keys to his poetry....

A good starting point is Novalis's critique of Enlightenment philosophy. In his eyes, Enlightenment philosophers have adopted a mechanistic attitude towards thinking. They cling to definitions, neat categorizations, and the rules of logic. "They have learned to derive and infer like a shoemaker has learned to make shoes" (Bl, II 431: #47/17). Like other romantics, Novalis criticizes Enlightenment philosophers for undervaluing the role of the creative imagination. He objects to the common opposition of reason and imagination. Indeed, he occasionally equates the two by saying, "Reason is immediate poet—directly productive imagination" (AB, III, 421: #782).^[i] In his view, philosophers who aim at exhaustively describing the truth in discursive and "literal" language, banning poetry from the realm of philosophy, will not attain it. Truth cannot be packaged and communicated ready-made by one person to the next. Arriving at, or better, striving for the truth is a matter of creativity and spiritual activity (and receptivity) on the part of the truth-seeking individual.^[ii]

This view can be better understood against the background of (and as a radicalization of) the Copernican Turn in philosophy, on the one hand, and of Kant's notion of the productive imagination and genius, on the other. Novalis shares with Kant the view that the subject is world-constituting. Knowledge should not be understood in terms of the mind's tracking independently existing objects. Rather, objects conform to the structures that the subject imposes on the world. But Novalis disagrees with Kant as to how the world-constituting role of the subject should be conceived. He loosens up Kant's analysis of these structures, which he regards as too rigid, and he greatly expands the role of the imagination.

With Fichte, Novalis endorses the idea of an absolute ground of self and world. He criticizes Fichte, however, for what he sees as the latter's foundationalism. He objects to Fichte's account of the I's immediate self-awareness and stresses that the absolute ground is not accessible and evades definitive description. Rather, using a concept from Kant, he calls it a "regulative idea" (FS, II, 254: #472). The idea of a ground of self and world, however, implies to Novalis that both are intimately related, that the distinction between thought and reality is fluid, and that the self is constituted in the process of cognizing/imagining the world as much as the world is constituted in the self's act of cognizing/imagining it (ibid.).^[iii]

Novalis combines the view of the world-constituting role of the subject with a broadened notion of genius (a much-debated notion at the time). Genius, Kant had said, is "a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be originality." The products of genius are so highly original, in Kant's view, that although they serve as models once they are produced, artists follow no communicable procedure and are not able to "describe or indicate scientifically" how to bring such products about (CJ, V, 307–08).^[iv] Novalis agrees with much of this account, but whereas Kant strictly limited the sphere of genius to fine art, Novalis lifts this restriction and regards genius as relevant to all areas of human experience. Consequently, there is no sharp distinction between the real and the imagined. Novalis calls genius "the capacity to discuss imagined objects as real ones, and also to treat them as such" (Bl, II, 421: #21/12).^[v]

Novalis occasionally refers to his own view as "magical idealism" (TF, II, 605: #375; cf. AB, III, 315: #399), in contrast to Kant's "transcendental idealism." "Magic is the art of using the world of sense arbitrarily [*willkürlich*]" (*Poeticismen*, II, 546: #109). It is the art of turning external objects into thoughts and thoughts into external objects. "Both operations are idealist. Whoever has completely mastered both is the magical idealist" (AB, III, 301: #338). Hence, Novalis challenges the common distinctions between the

internal and the external world, between the natural and the supernatural, between knowing, thinking, and imagining, and so on. Poetic inspirations (“revelations of the spirit”) are at once imaginings and reality.

This should not create the impression that just anything goes. Novalis rejects philosophical “anarchy” (FS, II, 289: #648). Philosophy, in his sense of magical idealism, is still oriented toward the idea of the absolute. By consciously juxtaposing different descriptions of it, however, it bears witness to the fact that this idea cannot be attained or even exhaustively described. It has “infinite determinations,” says Novalis (FS, II, 290: #649). Elsewhere, he speaks of “experimenting with lightness and multiplicity” and of the “free method of generation of truth” (AB, III, 445: #924): “Fichte and Kant . . . do not know how to experiment with lightness and multiplicity—not poetic at all—Everything is still so stiff, so fearful.”

In a passage in his Hemsterhuis studies, Novalis elaborates on his alternative view of philosophy:

Hemsterhuis has a wonderful passage on spirit and letter in philosophy. According to him the letter is merely a help for philosophical communication—the true essence of which consists in after-thinking [*nachdenken*].^[vi] The speaker merely leads the direction of thought in the hearer—and thereby it becomes after-thinking. He thinks and the other thinks after him. Words are an untrustworthy medium of fore-thinking [*vordenken*]. The genuine truth must, according to its nature, show the way. Therefore, the only thing that matters is sending someone onto the right road, or better, giving him a certain direction towards the truth. He will then get there automatically, if only he is active, desiring, to get to the truth. The exposition [*Darstellung*] of philosophy consists, therefore, merely in themes, first sentences—certain sentences that push [*Stoßsätze*]^[vii]—the exposition exists only for active lovers of the truth. The analytical elaboration of the theme is for slow or unskilled ones, those whom the mother first needs to teach how to fly, and how to maintain a certain direction. (HS, III, 373–74: #35)^[vii]

Thus, while there is a propaedeutic role for “analytic” treatments, true philosophy points one in the right direction, instead of trying to secure particular conclusions. Philosophy is essentially a matter of communication between persons, between speaker and hearer. Both are active and creative in this process—Novalis also speaks of “philosophizing together” (*Gesammtphilosophieren*: HS, II, 374: #35). He does not assign the task of “showing the way” to the guild of academic philosophers. He rejects the sharp distinction between philosophy and literature and holds that anyone with the love of truth and the right spiritual attitude counts as a philosopher—in fact, that most academic so-called

philosophers do not fit this description and that many poets do. Because philosophy should provide *Stoßsätze*, be evocative instead of discursive, and give pride of place to the imagination and feeling, “poetry is the hero of philosophy” (*Anekdoten*, II, 590: #277; cf. CE, III, 515–16/69–71).^[viii]

IV. A Very Brief Summary of the Immediately Preceding Section

There is nothing a thinker cannot be
If poetry is the hero of philosophy

V. Conclusion

And that’s why I translated Rilke’s brilliant poem, *Herbst*, for *Borderless Philosophy*.

One last thing.

By my use of the capitalized “Its” in the final couplet, I have in effect introduced an interpretation of my own about the nature of Rilke’s spirituality, as essentially non-Christian, non-personal, and cosmic, or even pantheistic, yet also deeply affective/aesthetic, creative/existential, organicist, vitalistic, and somehow profoundly comforting.

After all, in the second Duino Elegy, “every angel is terrifying”; yet the One in this poem is not terrifying at all. On the contrary, It is infinitely gently reconciling us to our own inevitable senescence and death.

—But for the attentive, sensitive reader of Rilke’s poem and/or my translation of it, that will have already been intuitively self-evident.

KLEINGELD’S NOTES IN SECTION III

[i] See also FS, II, 258: #498: “Practical reason is pure imagination”; and AB, III, 418: #775: “The creative imagination is divided into reason, power of judgment, and power of sense [*Sinnenkraft*].”

[ii] See also Novalis’s description of philosophy and its history in the Logological Fragments (1798), II, 522–32.

[iii] See also Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism (1781–1801)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 432. For an extensive discussion of Novalis's views, situating him among his philosophical contemporaries (though with an emphasis on Novalis's Fichte-Studien), see Manfred Frank's *Unendliche Annäherung*, and its (shorter) English counterpart, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004).

[iv] References are to Kants *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissen- schaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1900–). 'CJ ' refers to Critique of Judgment.

[v] A more in-depth discussion of the differences and similarities between Novalis's and Kant's notions of genius lies beyond the scope of this essay.

[vi] In ordinary usage, the word means "to think." Novalis here makes use of the fact that the word includes the preposition 'nach', which means "after."

[vii] Also, but with some alterations and without reference to Hemsterhuis, in LLF [1798], II, 522: #3. Hemsterhuis's own text is less radical. See his *Alexis ou De l'age d'or*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Paris: Jansen, 1792), vol. II, 168.

[viii] Novalis's distance from Hegel is very clear here. On Hegel's view, philosophy should move beyond poetry and be "strictly conceptual." Novalis's conception of poetic philosophy should make one wary of interpretations of him as a Hegelian avant la lettre, as found in Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph*.