

Why Do Poets Lie Too Much?

Nietzsche, Poetry and the Different Voices of Zarathustra

We have gathered here this evening to celebrate Nietzsche's music and poetry in the first public event of the newly founded Nietzsche Circle. Nietzsche's influence on art, literature, culture, and thought has not waned since he died more than a century ago; however, idle chatter that is not based on his works and life still persists, which prevents the best of successive generations from embracing his works and engaging with them in creative ways. I will not deal with the idle chatter tonight, but rather focus briefly on Nietzsche's thoughts on poetry by way of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the section called "On Poets."

In the beginning of this section, one of Zarathustra's disciples asks him why he once said that poets lie too much. Zarathustra prefaces his response by saying that he is not someone who deals with whys and reasons; he is not a barrel of memory to carry his reasons with him. Zarathustra himself then presents the paradox that poets lie too much while being himself a poet. The presence of this mostly passive disciple simply accentuates the paradox even more strongly as shall be revealed later.

In an attempt to deal with this seeming paradox, Zarathustra says: "*we* do lie too much." Here he puts himself in the same camp with all poets. But what does he mean by 'lying'? What is a lie for Zarathustra? Poets know very little ("wir wissen auch zu wenig"), and they invent lies to compensate for what they do not know. Here the word 'wissen' can cover a variety of knowledge since the word 'wissen' is the root of both 'wissenschaft' and 'weisheit.' Knowledge based on all sciences and philosophical wisdom can be implied with the word 'wissen.' Zarathustra is

not necessarily beating the poets for their lack of ‘knowledge,’ but for the fact that they fabricate where they do not ‘know.’ There is, for Zarathustra, another type of poetry that does not tamper with the expanse of human knowledge or with the depth of philosophical thinking, but is a new horizon, a new depth the poet opens up in the infinity of poetry making. Poets of the old epoch, however, mix things up, cook things like alchemists, believe in gossip and folk wisdom, and dabble with the Eternal-Feminine, that is, with the ideal and the after-life. Adulterated wine and poisonous hodge-podge is what they contrive. This section has several explicit references to the ending of Goethe’s *Faust*; one could, therefore, assume that Goethe is one of the targets of the polemic, though he is not the only one.

Poets lie too much and then legitimize their lies when they believe and pretend that it is nature or gods that are speaking through them, that they are the beloved of nature and the only spokespersons of all those things that are eternal. Thus have they monopolized the realm of the spirit—they hold the keys to heaven—and thus their lies are sealed forever for those who believe in their lies. Since poets borrow from gossip and folk wisdom, this sealing does not take much effort for them to achieve; people see their reflections in the fabrications of the poets and feel elevated when they recognize themselves in poetically elevated new forms. The gods and the Overmen, or the highest values, are the fabrications of the poets. Here Zarathustra conceives poets as value-makers and polemicizes against the ways through which they create values.

Zarathustra, therefore, is weary of poets. He is weary of the fact that all the imperfections and all the poetic shallowness have become an event (‘Ereigniss’); that is, they have become the highest values, and that is an event for an epoch.

At this point of Zarathustra's speech, the disciple becomes angry with him. But why does he become angry? The passive disciple is the model of a passive reader who faithfully follows Zarathustra, but what matters faith to Zarathustra? The disciple is the model Zarathustra wants to dismantle, and his anger is a reflection of this dismantlement and a reflection of his disillusionment with Zarathustra as his idol. Zarathustra is not the poetic idol he thought he was. Zarathustra too is a liar, but not in the way that the old poets lie. The disciple is the reader of the old poets and has not, up to this point in his journey, understood how Zarathustra lies. This mood of anger, that is emblematic of disillusionment and dismantling, will be followed by silence, the moment of solitude, the possibility of self-transformation.

But why do poets lie too much? And yet Zarathustra too is a poet. Zarathustra is not a poet of yesterday, but of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow; here we arrive at the second dissolution of the paradox. Here the previously established 'we' of all poets falls asunder: Zarathustra is not any poet, not a poet in the old sense. This was implied in the first dissolution of the paradox, but is now clearly stated. Zarathustra is weary of all poets, old and new. They lie and their lies don't have depth, they are superficial, shallow seas; neither their thoughts nor their feelings penetrate the depths. They are guided by boredom and lust, present shallowness as depth, pose as reconcilers, but they are, in fact, mixers, bring the unmixable together and create eclectic forms. They are poor in style and mix eclectically where the form and the content remain apart, where a variety of disparate elements is not creatively appropriated, which is the mixing of modern style, or lack of style. Here we are in the town of Motley Cow, the cow that passively waits to be painted with a variety of colors that do not belong together and that are not absorbed aesthetically.

Instead of good fish, Zarathustra always finds the head of some old god in the sea of the old poets; either in the form of ideals or the after life or the sentimental love stories of lovers who die in each other's arms to meet in eternity. If it is not some old god, it is the shadow or the ghost of the old god. Instead of souls, Zarathustra often finds salted slime in the old poets.

Why do poets lie too much? And yet Zarathustra too is a poet. In the third and the final dissolution of the paradox of the lying poets, we are presented with a parable to poets, a parable on poets and their vanity. The egos of the poets want to be at the center of the stage like beautiful peacocks, no matter who the spectators may be. Poets bring all beauties together like peacocks; they amalgamate all folk songs and sagas and recreate a new poetry that can easily attract the crowds. In this sense, the poets are the peacock of peacocks.

Human beings are spectacular beings; there are those who create spectacles and those who experience them passively (at least, this is so in the occidental world since the rise of Greek theater in ancient Greece). Zarathustra's parable shows the deficiency of these immediate tendencies in the problem of the creator and the non-creator and points to other possible ways of constituting spectacular experiences where there are no beautiful peacocks on one side and ugly buffaloes on the other.

There will, however, always be vainglorious peacocks who will always find a herd of ugly buffaloes to stare at them and their motley outfits. In this last part of the section, I cannot help but think of Richard Wagner, his Bayreuth, and why Nietzsche was appalled and sickened by the spectacle Wagner had created that attracted all that was non-artistic for the vainglory of the master. Again it is the peacock and the buffaloes it attracts.

Faith, blind obeisance, or idol worshipping does not make Zarathustra blessed. Zarathustra expects that his ‘disciples’ seek their own path and create their own journeys as they appropriate other similar journeys in creative ways and as they fit into their own journeys. There is no predetermined journey that is good for all. Zarathustra whirls around himself as he rises and as he expects whirling and rising from his disciples.

Zarathustra too is a poet; he too is a liar, but a different kind of a liar. He is not a fabricator of dishonest lies such as the lie of after-life; he is not a maker of ideals, to him permanence is a parable, a lie of the poets. He has come to know the body better, he has plunged into the bottom of thinking to bring depth into his poetry, and he does not dress like a peacock to attract buffaloes. In the first part of the paradox of the lying poets Zarathustra showed that all poets lie and how they lie; in the second part he presented himself as a different kind of a poet; and finally in the last part he exposed how poets, out of vanity, seek spectators to place themselves at the center of all attention. Zarathustra, himself a poet but of a different kind, sees the rise of new poetry out of the old poets.

In conclusion, it has been more than a century since Nietzsche created the character of Zarathustra, a new type of a poet, and placed him as the main character of the grand tragic spectacle of the epoch he envisioned. Since then there has been *spectators* who experienced the spectacle of Zarathustra attentively and recreated different forms of poetry and philosophy. Since then the spectacle of Zarathustra has been unfolding in a variety of forms and artistic media, always ready for the attentive, creative spectator to be experienced anew.

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