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The Literary Modernist Assault on Philosophy

Michael Lackey

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In a recent essay, Richard Rorty makes an insightful distinction between two views of the concept in order to distinguish analytic from conversational philosophy. Rorty defines traditional and analytic philosophy's orientation toward knowledge in terms of "an overarching ahistorical framework of human existence that philosophers should try to describe with greater and greater accuracy."¹ Implicit in this view is the belief that there exists a mind-independent Concept that is what it is whether humans perceive it or not. Moreover, this Concept is best suited to represent the world's essence or nature. Therefore, the task of the philosopher is "to pin down" this invariable and universally valid Concept so that he or she can represent reality. Starting with Hegel, however, concepts were treated "like persons—never quite the same twice, always developing, always maturing" ("ACP," p. 21). This is, according to Rorty, the conversational philosopher's view of the "concept." Instead of being an immutable, mind-independent reality, it is a human-constructed semiotic force that evolves in relation to specific communities of language users. The idea of getting a concept right, therefore, is simply incoherent.

This distinction between an immutable and evolving concept is certainly a valuable way of understanding some crucial developments in philosophy, but Rorty's use of it to characterize non-analytic philosophy as conversational instead of Continental philosophy is certainly an executive decision on his part. And yet, Rorty is not alone in making such an executive declaration about philosophy, for many early twentieth-century writers also examined this shift to a view of the concept as an ever-evolving and ever-shifting force of meaning, but instead of reconfiguring and redefining philosophy in light of this shift, they proclaimed the discipline dead. What I want to do in this short essay is to identify a tension in the writings of early twentieth-century writers on the topic of philosophy and to initiate a dialogue that would take more seriously the crisis in philosophy that led to the split between the analytic and Continental traditions.²

I

"The appartement of the Boulevard des Philosophes presented the dreary signs of impending abandonment. It looked desolate and as if already empty to my eyes."³

In the Western intellectual tradition, philosophy has been defined as a discipline that makes use of rigorous forms of logic in order to apprehend an overarching ahistorical truth, which is embodied in either an Ideal Form or a universal concept. Given the superior nature of philosophy's intellectual tools and primary object of desire, it has been dubbed a "nonempirical super science,"⁴ a disciplinary touchstone used to determine the quality and value of all other systems of knowledge.⁵ According to this view, a discipline has legitimacy and worth insofar as it contributes to, approximates, or yields philosophical knowledge. Philosophy certainly

dominated the Western intellectual tradition from Plato to the end of the nineteenth century, but by 1899, Bertrand Russell was suggesting that philosophy was on the verge of losing its title as the Monarch of knowledge and truth: “Philosophy, by the slow victories of its own offspring, has been forced to forgo, one by one, its high pretensions.”⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogical method certainly did much to undermine philosophy’s credibility, for in exposing the way concepts evolve in relation to an individual community’s ideological needs and desires, Nietzsche implicitly identified the philosopher’s non-normative, mind-independent truth as the seething product of an overheated imagination.⁷

Deeply concerned about the radical subversion of philosophy was T. E. Hulme, the modernist aesthete who understood the threat that the anthropomorphic turn in knowledge posed to Truth. For Hulme, should the intellectual world accept the view that truth is a human construction instead of a pre-given Idea, all conceptual systems would be nothing more than a *Weltanschauung*. To save universal Truth and objective Reality, therefore, modernist intellectuals have only one option: to purge philosophy of “anthropomorphism” so that they could re-establish an “objective basis” for knowledge, a basis that does “not in the least depend on the human mind.” Once philosophy has purged itself of the anthropomorphic or empirical prejudice, “it becomes possible to think of certain “higher” concepts, those of the good, of love, etc., as, at the same time, *simple*, and not necessarily to be analysed into more *elementary* (generally sensual) elements.”⁸ For Hulme, when Truth is tainted by the sensual or the anthropomorphic, it is corrupt and thereby loses its metaphysical character. In other words, “truth” that is anthropomorphic or sensual is not Truth.

At the same time that Hulme (late teens and early 1920’s) was trying to rehabilitate and reground philosophy so that the intellectual community could recover epistemological certainty and epistemic authority, Ludwig Wittgenstein was furthering the project of undermining philosophy in his groundbreaking book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Since the “sense of the world must lie outside the world,”⁹ philosophy has no choice but to recognize its limits, which is to say that philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, could no longer lay epistemological claim to aesthetic, ethical, or metaphysical knowledge. Given this situation, Wittgenstein endorsed a philosophical silence, a silence that he would maintain for nearly ten years (1919–1928).¹⁰ But even after Wittgenstein re-entered the intellectual scene, he did not change his position about philosophy: “The nimbus of philosophy has been lost.”¹¹ While Wittgenstein may have broken his post-*Tractatus* silence, he never gave philosophy back the ladder it had once used to ascend into the metaphysical heaven of Ideas.

This inability to apprehend a metaphysical Truth certainly posed a major challenge to philosophy, but it was the suggestion that philosophers are—of necessity—epistemologically defective that ultimately led so many modernists to reject the discipline. Primarily governed by reason, philosophy only acknowledges the existence of that which is conscious or rational, and as a consequence, it renders that which is non-conscious or non-rational ontologically negligible. To put this in the words of Sigmund Freud, “To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic.”¹² Philosophy treats that which is conscious and rational as having legitimate existence, while that which is non-rational does not exist in the strict sense of the word.¹³ In terms of Freudian psychology, the non-rational contents of the unconscious have no true existence for philosophers and are therefore not worth considering.¹⁴

D. H. Lawrence makes a similar case against philosophy in his posthumously published essay “Why the Novel Matters.” For Lawrence, those “damned philosophers” have misled everyone by asserting their intellectual superiority. Indeed, the philosopher, “because he can think, decides that nothing but thoughts matter.”¹⁵ Philosophers give thoughts ontological priority because they are immutable and universal. According to this logic, that which is mutable and contingent is not just ontologically inferior, it does not exist in a strict sense. Aldous Huxley develops this idea in some detail through the character of Mark Rampion, who is based on Lawrence, in his novel *Point Counter Point*. Rampion/Lawrence makes a distinction between “human truth,” which is a human-constructed concept that assumes a provisional form in and through a semiotic sign, and “non-human truth,” which is the philosopher’s mind-independent Concept, which is subject neither to decay nor change.¹⁶ For Rampion/Lawrence, “the non-human truth isn’t merely irrelevant; it’s dangerous” (p. 399). This is the case because those in pursuit of the “non-human truth” invariably distinguish the relative matters of the ephemeral world (what Rampion refers to as “secondary qualities”) from the absolute matters (primary qualities) of the objective world. Put in more concrete terms, the spiritual soul is superior to the human body, just as the immaterial mind is superior to the contingent psyche. For Rampion/Lawrence, this distinction can only have disastrous consequences for individual beings: “it’s an established non-human truth—or at least it was established in my young days—that secondary qualities have no real existence” (p. 399). By adopting this view, many philosophers have sought eternal Truth and have totally blinded themselves to the contingent, psyche-bound “self.” After all, the psychic “self,” as a secondary quality, has no real existence. But since “secondary qualities” are “the only real ones,” according to both Rampion and Lawrence, philosophers in pursuit of a phantom absolute do irreparable damage to themselves because their search for a non-human truth is not only futile (since no such truth exists) but also dangerous (since the absolute makes secondary qualities seem negligible and irrelevant).

This refusal to distinguish primary from secondary qualities, reality from appearance, or Being from being is the primary reason why so many literary modernists rejected philosophy. To bring into sharp focus the two very distinct approaches to knowledge and the world, let me briefly examine how a literary modernist and an early twentieth-century philosopher have understood Nietzsche’s idea of a will to power. For Nietzsche, the will to power is not an ontological fact of being; it is a psychosemiotic construction, specifically Nietzsche’s fictional creation. Nietzsche makes this point powerfully in *Twilight of the Idols*, when he insists that the traditional “knowing” faculties are semiotically and psychologically projected into the “human:” “The ‘inner world’ is full of phantoms and false lights: the will is one of them.”¹⁷ He continues:

Man projected his three “inner facts,” that in which he believed more firmly than in anything else, will, spirit, ego, outside himself—he derived the concept “being” only from the concept “ego,” he posited “things” as possessing being according to his own image, according to his concept of the ego as cause. No wonder he later always discovered in things only *that which he had put into them!* (*TI*, pp. 59–60)

Given that “inner facts” are psychosemiotic constructions, it is not surprising that Nietzsche rejects the existence of the will as an ontological reality: “there is no such thing as will.—”¹⁸ This is a point that he makes a number of times: “There exists neither ‘spirit,’ nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth” (*WP*, p. 266); “At the beginning stands the great fateful error that the will is something which *produces an effect*—that will is a *faculty* . . . Today we know it is merely a word” (*TI*, p. 48); “the doctrine of the will has been

invented essentially for the purpose of punishment, that is of *finding guilty*” (*TI*, p. 63). Nietzsche rejects the philosophical will to power that exists as an ontological reality, but he accepts the provisional will to power that exists as a psychosemiotic construction.

In his famous study *Nietzsche*, Martin Heidegger uses his own philosophical system to interpret “Nietzsche’s metaphysical thinking,”¹⁹ specifically “the metaphysical content of the doctrine of the will to power” (p. 21). According to Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein, philosophy concerns itself with the ultimate and fundamental questions, “the question of the essence of Being” (p. 4). But Being is not a stable ontological structure that is readily accessible to enquiring minds; rather, it exists in terms of relations that are impossible to signify or codify through the reductivistic discourse of the logos or reason. For Heidegger, the “truth of Being” (p. 10), “the Being of being” (p. 7), is in a perpetual state of becoming in its relational context. The philosophical task, therefore, is to learn how to comport oneself toward Being such that one experiences the relational structure of Being instead of the dubious and deceptive essence of being.

According to Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche, the “innermost essence of Being is will to power” (p. 70). According to this view, Being as will to power is a mind-independent conceptual reality that can be located and defined: “But because for Nietzsche will as will to power designates the essence of Being, it remains forever the actual object of his search, the thing to be determined. What matters—once such an essence is discovered—is to locate it thoroughly, so that it can never be lost again” (p. 39).²⁰ Since the will is an ontological reality that can be pinned down, the foundational questions for Heidegger would be: how can we have epistemological access to a mind-independent Concept like the will to power? Then, how can we represent this mind-independent Concept? According to this reading, to be Nietzschean means accepting the existence of the will to power as an ontological reality, seeking to understand its essence as an established metaphysical fact, and then using this understanding to illuminate the Being of being in the world.

In Lawrence’s novel *Women in Love*, the will to power is not something that can be located and defined. It is simply a fictional creation. We see this most clearly in and through Rupert Birkin, one of the main characters in the novel and the one who most closely embodies Lawrence’s personal worldview. Rupert rejects his friend’s, Gerald’s, version of the “Wille zur Macht.”²¹ While Gerald treats the *Wille zur Macht* like a metaphysical Reality, an ultimate concept that is the essential ground of Being, Birkin reworks it into “a *volonte de pouvoir*, if you like, a will to ability, taking *pouvoir* as a verb” (*WL*, p. 152). Birkin translates Nietzsche’s favored idea into French, converts the noun into a verb, and shifts the focus from power to ability. Nietzsche would be delighted. Instead of treating the “will” as a philosopher’s metaphysical Reality that must be located and defined, as Heidegger does, Birkin treats it as a provisional concept, an idea that is subject to a deconstruction and a subsequent reconstruction, a never-ending process of conceptual evolution. Indeed, notice how Birkin leaves open the possibility of deconstructing his own “*volonte de pouvoir*” by telling his lover to call it that “if you like.” Were Birkin to endorse an absolute *volonte de pouvoir*, one that leaves open no possibility for its own deconstruction, he would be acting as if his fictional creation were a mind-independent Concept. In other words, were Birkin to treat his *volonte de pouvoir* as a metaphysical fact of Being, he would be a philosopher (like Heidegger) who has discovered the Being of being. But since Birkin rejects the idea of a mind-independent Concept, his task is to

create a new “concept.” Paradoxically, we could say that Heidegger is not Nietzschean because he accepts Nietzsche’s Will to power as a metaphysical reality, while Birkin is Nietzschean because he rejects Nietzsche’s “will” to power and constructs his own conceptual system.

For Lawrence, like Nietzsche, the purpose of language is to initiate the process of endlessly recreating and reinvigorating humans and the culture in and through ever-evolving “concepts.” By getting fixated on a pre-given Concept that must be located and defined, philosophers, according to Lawrence, have lost sight of the life-creating potential of “concepts.” Put differently, the Concept, as a metaphysical Reality, enslaves the “human,” incarcerating “it” within a discursive prisonhouse. The consequence: the “human,” like language, ceases to live; it becomes a Bartlebyesque cadaver destined to rot in the Tombs of Truth and language: “This I, this old formula of the ego, was a dead letter” (*WL*, p. 386). For Birkin and Lawrence, only by destroying the philosopher’s Concept and by liberating “self” from what Nietzsche refers to as “the metaphysics of language” (*TI*, p. 48) can humanity overcome “deathbringing speech.”²²

With regard to the concept and philosophy, Lawrence’s work not only anticipates but is also consistent with Woolf’s views as expressed in *Orlando*. In this 1928 novel, Woolf’s narrator refers to “philosophy” or “the philosophers” seven times. These references are neither random nor haphazard. Indeed, they strategically chart the decline and ultimate demise of philosophy. The first two references occur during the reign of King James I in the seventeenth century, when philosophy still stood guard before the door of Truth. Given philosophy’s superior standing within the culture, the philosophers’ words carry considerable epistemic authority, which Woolf’s narrator underscores by turning to the philosophers to legitimate a particular viewpoint. For instance, when Orlando’s mood swings from euphoria to despair, the narrator interjects: “the philosopher is right who says that nothing thicker than a knife’s blade separates happiness from melancholy.”²³ In a scene only sixteen pages later, philosophers are invoked again. When the Thames, which “had been solid ice of such thickness that it seemed permanent as stone” (pp. 61–62), undergoes an almost instantaneous thaw, it was dubbed “a sulphur spring,” a reference that gains legitimacy because it is one “to which many philosophers inclined” (p. 62). The philosophers are called upon again later in the novel to explain Orlando’s transformation from man to woman. After the metamorphosis, Orlando becomes “more modest” and “more vain.” The reason, “some philosophers will say” (p. 187), is the “change of clothes.” It is at this point, however, that the philosophers’ perspective is dismissed, for as the narrator interjects: “This is the view of some philosophers and wise ones, but on the whole, we incline to another” (p. 188). From this point on, philosophy is mentioned only twice, but the philosophers are never invoked again to legitimize a particular idea or way of thinking. In fact, within the historical context of *Orlando*, philosophy dies in the nineteenth century, for once the novel enters the twentieth century, there are no more references to philosophy or the philosophers.

While Rorty uses this distinction between the immutable and evolving concept as a way of distinguishing analytic from conversational philosophy, Woolf makes the same distinction in order to distinguish the age of philosophy from the post-philosophical age. Let us see how this works in *Orlando*. Immediately after the narrator’s second reference to philosophy, in which the philosopher “says that nothing thicker than a knife’s blade separates happiness from melancholy” (p. 45), the narrator makes an observation about the way the mind functions at this point in history: “For that was the way his mind worked now, in violent see-saws from life to death

stopping at nothing in between” (p. 46). In the world of binary oppositions, there is either male or female, life or death, right or wrong (the mind-independent Concept that philosophers would like to pin down, according to Rorty), and if humans would understand the world aright, they must adopt a conceptual system that would clearly identify and define what each polar conceptual opposite is in and of itself. But after the demise of philosophy, the mind functions much differently, which leads to a new view of the concept: “everything was partly something else, and each gained an odd moving power from this union of itself and something not itself so that with this mixture of truth and falsehood her [Orlando’s] mind became like a forest in which things moved; lights and shadows changed, and one thing became another” (p. 323). By this point in the novel, which is the year 1928, there are no more references to philosophy or the philosophers (the last reference occurs in the late-nineteenth century [p. 259]), which is only appropriate since the whole traditional paradigm of philosophy has crumbled, according to Woolf’s narrator, with the discovery that the concept shifts and evolves such that one thing could even become another. This view is clearly anathema to the traditional lovers of Wisdom, because it implicitly rejects the idea of an immutable, mind-independent Concept that is best suited to signify the world aright. But for many literary modernists, since they reject the belief in mind-independent Concepts, there is no longer a place within the culture for philosophy and the philosopher.

II

“What if, after all, philosophy were nothing but literature?”²⁴

What is philosophy? If we assume it is an intellectual discipline with a pre-given nature that we can define, then we would be, by virtue of our approach to the discipline, behaving as an analytic philosopher. As such, it would not matter what definition we would produce, for it would be the intellectual orientation (assumption) about Knowledge and the Concept that would make a person an analytic philosopher. If we assume it is an intellectual discipline that initiates a dialogue regarding the culture’s evolving concepts about “knowledge,” “truth,” and the “human,” among other things, then we would be, by virtue of our approach to the discipline, a conversational philosopher, according to Rorty. But is not Rorty’s Concept/“concept” distinction an executive decision that he uses to set his work apart from both the analytic and Continental traditions? If we accept Rorty’s view of the “concept” as “never quite the same twice, always developing, always maturing,” then why should we accept his executive decision to “save” philosophy by renaming it rather than Woolf’s executive decision to kill it? If literary modernists, like Woolf, consider philosophy an intellectual option that died in the nineteenth century, are those many philosophical studies of literary modernism, and specifically Woolf’s work, legitimate? These are just a few of the interpretive difficulties we face if we take the literary modernist assault on philosophy seriously.

My purpose in writing this essay is not to launch a campaign against philosophy and/or the philosopher. Instead, it is to initiate a dialogue about the literary modernists’ view of pre-Continental/analytic philosophy and the methodology we should use to determine whether their work is in an analytic, Continental, conversational, or post-philosophical tradition. It is my contention that literary modernists were working through the very complex issues about language, knowledge, concepts, and truth that led directly to the Continental/analytic split. I would even say that some literary modernists made significant contributions to that split, while others were heralding the death of philosophy. To my mind, the daunting intellectual task ahead

of us is, not to use the works of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Rorty, or Slavoj Žižek in order to illuminate the philosophies of early twentieth-century writers, but to clarify exactly how various literary modernists conceptualized philosophy before the Continental/analytic split. Once we shed some light on this issue, we will be in a better position to determine whether it is valuable or even legitimate to interpret literary modernists through a philosophical lens. But more than that, with some clarity about the literary modernist view of philosophy, we might be in a better position to determine what would have benefited the intellectual community more: to split philosophy into multiple traditions or to banish it altogether.

¹ Richard Rorty, “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy,” in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, C. G. Prado (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), p. 27; hereafter abbreviated “ACP.”

² Scholars have argued that the split between analytic and Continental philosophy formally occurred in the late twenties or early thirties. For excellent discussions of the split, see Barry Allen, “Carnap’s Contexts: Comte, Heidegger, Nietzsche,” in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, C. G. Prado (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 33–61; and C. G. Prado, “Introduction,” in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, C. G. Prado (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 9–15. While the split did not formally occur until the late twenties or early thirties, it is clear that many writers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were aware that a disciplinary crisis was imminent.

³ Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 275.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 4.

⁵ Aristotle makes this point directly in the *Poetics*: “poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.” Poetry is superior to history only insofar as it approximates the highest forms of knowledge, which are “philosophic” in nature. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingmar Bywater (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1464.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, “Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is,” *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 95.

⁷ As Nietzsche claims in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.” Since everything has a history, there is nothing that is definable. This is the case because all concepts evolve in relation to the shifting ideological needs and desires of the dominant political powers. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 80.

⁸ T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1965), p. 45.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), p. 183.

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of Wittgenstein’s post-*Tractatus* silence, see Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), pp. 169–253.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930–1932*, ed. Desmond Lee (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), p. 21.

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- ¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 3.
- ¹³ For an excellent discussion of the early-twentieth century conflict between psychology and philosophy, specifically the way psychology posed a threat to the basic premises of philosophy, see Martin Jay, "Modernism and the Specter of Psychologism," *Modernism/Modernity* 3.2 (1996): 93–111.
- ¹⁴ For an insightful discussion of the way psychology began to emancipate itself from philosophy in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, see Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- ¹⁵ D. H. Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters," *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (New York: Viking Press, 1936), p. 535.
- ¹⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 398.
- ¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated *TI*.
- ¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 270; hereafter abbreviated *WP*.
- ¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 23.
- ²⁰ Heidegger takes into account Nietzsche's claim that there is no will, but instead of acknowledging and respecting Nietzsche's claim, Heidegger, with no evidence to justify his interpretation, simply asserts: "But Nietzsche means that there is no *such* will as the one previously known and designated as 'a faculty of the soul' and as 'striving in general'" (p. 38).
- ²¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 152; hereafter abbreviated *WL*.
- ²² Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 395.
- ²³ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), p. 45.
- ²⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.