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## **The Poetics of Rumour and the Age of Post-Truth**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores how the poetic speaks to philosophical treatments of post-truth. In doing so, it reconsiders the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and the aspects of the poetic that are pertinent to the performance of rumour. It examines classic performances of rumour in both philosophy and poetry, through the lens of Nietzsche's account of poetry as a rhythm that creates an economy of memory. In doing so, it suggests that the poetic can alert us to the ways in which different dimensions of rhythm and memory are at work in the 'post-truth age.'

### **Keywords**

Post-truth; Nietzsche; rhythm; poetry; rumour; memory.

### **I**

In this paper I will explore how the poetic speaks to philosophical treatments of post-truth. In doing so, I reconsider the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and the aspects of the poetic that are pertinent to the performance of rumour. Considering some classical examples of the rumour at work in both philosophy and poetry, I draw on Nietzsche for some suggestions as to what a poetics of post-truth might look like. These suggestions involve identifying a set of relationships with a far longer genealogy than the contemporary challenges of post-truth: between rumour and philosophy, philosophy and poetry, and poetry and rumour.

Much ink has been spilled, and many mouths have frothed, about the so-called age of 'post-truth'. The debate, broadly speaking, has created a perfect storm that collects up in its gales

the legacies of postmodern and post-structural theories in the humanities and social sciences, the ethics of public debate within digital media, a reinvigorated call to a scientism that is both common-sensical and shrouded in the aura of experts, and intrigues of realpolitik of electoral successes for populist figures, with inevitable rafts of conspiracy theories accompanying them. For the meta-narratives that drive this debate, the problems of ‘post-truth’ centre almost exclusively on epistemology. Marcuse is reversed: epistemology is no longer a form of ethics in applied terms, but ethical judgement a consequence of having the right information before us. The political success of populism is diagnosed as a problem of ‘if voters only knew better’; or worse of cognitive dissonance between what can be seen as true and what is felt should be.<sup>1</sup> Truth is, in this sense, conceived of as an informant; the basis of proper knowledge, and something to be defended from the seduction of lies, rumours and exaggerations. This is seen most prominently in the already-worn definition that the Oxford English Dictionary chose, and named it’s ‘word of the year’ in 2016: ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.<sup>2</sup>

It is an unfortunate definition, though. It rides roughshod over the complexities of establishing ‘objective fact’ and what relations, institutions and power dynamics this involves; it ignores the work of feminist theory in addressing the early modern division of reason and emotion, and the separation of the political from the personal. In short, it insists that ‘post-truth’ is in fact (what could be more institutionally factual than a dictionary definition?) an ‘anti-truth’ that is opposed to knowledge, rather than a mutation of how truth is understood and used, much in the way that post-modernism was to modernism. In doing so,

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<sup>1</sup> See Tom Grimwood, *The Problem with Stupid: Intellectuals, Ignorance, Post-Truth and Resistance* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>

though, equally defining of the post-truth phenomenon can be left unsaid. While critics of post-truth typically advocate a separation of scientific truth from political rhetoric, Helmut Heit notes that the very definition of post-truth runs the two practices together. ‘Unlike other composites with “post-” such as “post-modern” or “post-colonial,” post-truth is obviously meant in an unmasking and compromising way. The term itself is inevitably embedded in political discourse, incriminating others for their increasing disrespect for facts and truth.’<sup>3</sup>

As Heit points out, in certain contexts such as the campaigns of Donald Trump or Vote Leave in the Brexit referendum, where fact was seemingly played with for political gain, this merging of politics and science seems a justified manoeuvre. At the same time, significant questions of method are left ambiguous. The identification of, and defence from, post-truth implies an unmasking, a tearing away of appearance to reveal the solid and objective reality beneath it; while also lining up targets such as conspiracy theorists who effectively attempt something very similar.<sup>4</sup> Frieder Vogelmann brings attention to the contradictory problem of the potentially arbitrary acceptance of certain critical performances at the expense of others:

those diagnosing a “post-truth era” often replace the hard work of justifying their truth-claims with appeals that we must learn to trust again [...] our political elites, our fellow citizens and, most of all, our scientists. Yet which experts, which scientists, which politicians and who of our fellow citizens should we trust? Without explaining how we can discriminate between blind faith and trust, calls for a renewal of the virtue of trust turn into calls for being less critical – certainly a bad strategy if we really lived in a “post-truth era” with its reign of “fake news” and phony experts.<sup>5</sup>

What this means is the almost-exclusive focus on epistemology as the battleground of post-truth leads us into some uncomfortable tensions. No amount of rhetoric about returning to the

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<sup>3</sup> Helmut Heit, ““there are no facts.. .”: Nietzsche as Predecessor of Post-Truth?’ *Studia Philosophica Estonica*, 2018, 45

<sup>4</sup> The relationship between critique and conspiracy is discussed in the much-cited article by Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.’ *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 225-248.

<sup>5</sup> Frieder Vogelmann, ‘The Problem of Post-Truth: Rethinking the Relationship between Truth and Politics.’ *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation*, 11:2, 2018, 18-37. 21.

scientific method, making truth matter again, or the regaining of integrity to political debate will resolve these because they seem to leave us with only three conclusions about why we find ourselves in such an era: a) adherence to these principles were in place when post-truth emerged, thus provided no defence against it (whatever we classify 'it' as); b) these principles were adhered to once, but a longer-term impact of socio-cultural turns wore them down (leading to the questionable assertion that intellectual theories such as Derridean deconstruction or Butler's performativity were adopted, not just by impressionable undergraduates, but also by the ruling neoliberal elite); c) these principles never really existed in reality (and so there would not be a *resurgence* of the scientific method, but simply an *implementation* of it; to paraphrase Cynthia Wampole, 'this time without irony'). It is clear that none of these are cases of simple historical reconstruction. They are, instead, accounts of how trust should be ordered and managed. What carries such arguments is the curation of cultural memory, and the negotiation of a specific mutation of knowledge: the rumour. This is why I would argue that a more salient definition of 'post-truth' is that it is a general term used to cover a wide range of shifts and changes in the way epistemological standards are applied: it is the use of a non-contingent term to cover a number of contingent (and in some cases, contradictory) practices. In this sense, of course, the term 'post-truth' is a performance of post-truth in itself.

I agree with Vogelstein that the 'era' of post-truth is effectively a fable, given its lack of any clear starting point, and its tendency to invoke rather worn 'enemies' at the core of its apparent structure: postmodernists, feminists, the irrational and the easily led. Nevertheless, it remains powerful *as* a fable, or, as I have termed it, an exercising in curating cultural memory in order to establish accounts that are not quite as complete as narratives or propositional

arguments, but nevertheless retain a bank of stock figures and metaphors that are by now easily recognised.<sup>6</sup>

This is where, I think, it is important to attend not only to the role of medial technologies and the rise of the ‘information age’ in the development of the post-truth fable, but to the longer-standing problem of the rumour that these rest upon. Rumour carries a relationship not only to truth (a rumour involves a postponing of truth, whereby truth is performed without full conviction), but also to medium (rumour is carried through hearsay, gossip, the crowd, and whatever technological medium enables this, rather than strictly identifiable dialogue).

Perhaps this was best summarised millennia ago by Tacitus, when he suggested that ‘a rumour cannot spread unless people recount it; and they often give it some credit because otherwise they would not repeat it.’<sup>7</sup> In other words, the performance of the rumour carries its own trust via its contingent repetition. As such, it introduces a knowing blur between performance and authenticity, truth and lies, voice and echo. Making sense of this knowing blur at the core of its practice invites certain forms of interpretation often more aligned with the aesthetic than the epistemological.

## II

An aesthetic approach may lead us to some of the more ready-to-hand accounts of poetry and, or of, post-truth. This passage by K.R. Murray is a useful exemplar of such accounts:

Poetry has always been post-truth in the sense that it prioritizes emotional subjectivity over objectivity, usually sacrificing the literal plane for the sake of truths located elsewhere — deeper, higher. Indeed, the term “poetic truth” would be oxymoronic if

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<sup>6</sup> I think here of how we regularly read of ‘drowning’ in the ‘overwhelming’ amount of information age available, experiencing a ‘bombardment’ on the senses, a ‘sea of noise’ giving rise to stupidity. On the figures relied upon for describing the risks of the post-truth mediasphere, see Tom Grimwood, *The Shock of the Same: An Antiphilosophy of Clichés* (London: Rowman and Littlefield Intl., 2021), 165-171.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Israel Shatzman, ‘Tacitean Rumours.’ *Latomus*, 33:3, 1974, 549-578, 549.

we demanded verifiable truths in poetry. As it is, this term folds back on itself without disclosing its meaning, relying more on historical understandings of poetry than any inherent quality of the medium itself. Poetic truth seems at least in part to be that moment of indefinable recognition that happens within the reader, a resonance emotional or intellectual or both, and though we can describe this as “true” it is hard to say exactly why.<sup>8</sup>

That poetry has appealed to the ‘emotional or intellectual or both’ for its meaning is certainly not in question. But the problem with this account of poetry and post-truth is immediately clear: it remains committed to an incomplete definition of post-truth that, as we have already seen, over-emphasises its epistemological basis.

The idea that poetry can subsidise epistemology is not without merit. In some ways, after all, Murray’s argument echoes William Franke’s notion of ‘poetic epistemology’, whereby a ‘sense of human significance’ underlies all endeavours to knowledge and has done since the earliest natural philosophers – Heraclitus, Thales, Anaximander and so on – presented their work at least partially in verse.<sup>9</sup> Poetry constitutes the original wonder that drives human beings to know, which goes beyond the methodologies of ‘truth’ in the scientific or philosophical sense. Perhaps, when such methodologies succumb to forms of cynical reason, one suggestion might be to pursue this notion of poetry as a form of ‘truth that is difficult to say’ as a route forward. Nevertheless, this seems to position the poetic as something of a placeholder for epistemology, either before or after it gets to grips with the problem of post-truth at hand; and in doing so, miss the significance of its emergence as a fable of contemporary culture.

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<sup>8</sup> K.R. Murray, ‘Ears on the Floor: Poetry of Witness in a Post-Truth Era.’ *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 55, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> William Franke, ‘Involved Knowing: On the Poetic Epistemology of the Humanities.’ *The European Legacy*, 16:4, 2011, 447-467, 452.

A different approach would be to follow the largely German tradition in philosophy, where, rather than describe poetry as engaging with that which is difficult to represent in language, the relation between poetizing and thinking is thought of instead in terms of the poetic attunement to the (typically unsaid) difficulties of language itself. In the words of Bambach and George, ‘against the propositional language of statements, poetic language invites us to heed the pauses, the interruptions, and the caesurae that calls us to attend to what is not said or can never be said in language.’<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provides an eminent example of poetic incision into the regime of philosophical representation. Disenchanted with doctrines, teachings and proclamations – the ‘language of the marketplace’<sup>11</sup> – Zarathustra places himself instead amongst the ‘silent stillness’; continuing a tradition, as Bambach and George argue, that goes back to Eckhart, runs through Hölderlin, up to Heidegger and beyond. This attunement does not simply equate to a different kind of truth, one which might sit alongside that of propositional knowledge. Rather, it calls attention to the medium of language itself. ‘To situate language in silence,’ Bambach and George suggest, paraphrasing Heidegger, ‘means to reflect on language’s proper site.’<sup>12</sup>

In one sense, there remains a resonance with Murray’s account of the ‘truth’ of poetry and the ways it might address a post-truth landscape. If there is one defining feature of such a landscape, after all, it is the *lack* of silence: fake news, conspiracy theories and triumphant reclamations of scientific method and political authenticity all emerge on a constant production and circulation of content in the mediasphere (what Jodi Dean once termed ‘cognitive capitalism’, where capital was premised not on meaning but on the endless

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<sup>10</sup> Bambach, Charles and George, Theodore, ‘Introduction: Poetizing and Thinking.’ In Bambach and George (eds.) *Philosophers and their Poets* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019), 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



circulation of content, regardless of what content it was).<sup>13</sup> However, while it may then be tempting to turn to poetry as a strategic way of restoring some semblance of clarity – drawing on both the stillness of Nietzsche’s poet and the concision afforded to the modern poetic form – there are two reasons to be initially cautious of this.

First, there is a need to be careful that the model of poetry invoked in the post-truth debate does not simply repeat this call to return to (some kind of) truth, wrapped in the aura of nostalgia, much in the way that the critics of post-truth do for the ‘scientific method’ as a spectral return of Enlightenment ideals. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> those seeking to defend society from post-truth will regularly invoke an ‘again’. David Roberts, for example, decried the spread of ‘tribal epistemology’ amongst the supporters of populist politicians like Donald Trump.<sup>15</sup> In the face of such tribalism, Roberts is quick to warn that simply asserting facts will gain no traction. ‘Accuracy doesn’t matter unless there are institutions and norms with the authority to make it matter. The question for the press is how to *make truth matter again*.’<sup>16</sup> Lee McIntyre has also utilised the same phraseology in his work, arguing for a return to scientific method as an arbiter of epistemological value;<sup>17</sup> whereas in Matthew D’Ancona’s critique of post-truth, which rejects the idea that there was ever a ‘past of untarnished veracity’, nevertheless insists on a revival of Enlightenment liberal values.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, discussions of post-truth as a threat are so often framed in terms of a call *to return* to something or somewhere else, and this is a key aspect of how the organisation of cultural memory and the preservation of particular relations and antagonisms are characteristic of the

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<sup>13</sup> Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Grimwood, *The Problem with Stupid*.

<sup>15</sup> David Roberts, ‘Donald Trump and the rise of tribal epistemology.’ *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology> 2017, May 19

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Lee MacIntyre, *How to Talk to a Science Denier: Conversations with Flat Earthers, Climate Deniers, and Others Who Defy Reason* (New York: MIT Press, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press.2017).

post-truth discussion. As such, whether appealing to poetic stillness or scientific method, there is always the same risk: the fetishizing of the poetic as an opening of the authentic, or the scientific method fetishized as producing ‘pure’ fact, overlooks what Bruno Latour once described as the attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care necessary for either poetic or scientific insight to be produced.<sup>19</sup>

Second, it follows that in writing about the truth of the poetic, we cannot circumvent how rumours might affect the ways in which Bambach and George’s ‘proper sites’ of language can be reflected. This would include not just the originary meanings that speech reveals, but also the organisation, collection, preservation and distribution of meaningful discourse. Of course, it was these such sites of the philosophical academy that Nietzsche utilised poetry to attack: specifically on their repression of the reliance on the same figures and metaphors they rejected as improper to ‘truthful’ writing.<sup>20</sup> But the issue here is not with truth, but with the work of rumour. By depending on habitual trust of some institutions, authorities, or organisations over others, and by postponing the appearance of any singular ‘truth’ (in either the philosophical or poetic sense we have indicated so far) by repeated circulation, rumours feed off the instability of relationships between site, institution and processes of signification. Such instabilities are brought to bear not only in Nietzsche and Heidegger’s writing, but also in the current debate on post-truth, where the contingencies of such sites are swept aside by the apparent non-contingency of propositional language. This points to a relationship between poetry and philosophy that in many senses lies *underneath* the conjunctions just discussed.

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<sup>19</sup> Latour, ‘Critique.’

<sup>20</sup> See Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, Trans. Duncan Large (London: The Athlone Press, 1993).

### III

It seems to me that a poetics of post-truth would not be overly concerned with the problem of truth that the previous accounts seem to prioritise. Indeed, while Nietzsche's presentation of the poet-philosopher in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a commanding figure, it is in his earlier work that the role of poetry as a form of curator of memory is more prominent, and speaks, I think, far more to the problems that post-truth has raised. The emphasis here is not on stillness, and far less on truth, but on the *rhythm* and *tempo* that the poetic carries, which enables its untimely interventions into the seeming inevitability of the present age.

By insisting that philosophy depends upon language and metaphor, Nietzsche argues that philosophy cannot make any claims to absolute knowledge. Because of poetry's economising of language, it not only shares this partiality, but also provides a model for the philosopher to be inventive; particularly in order to 'soothe and heal provisionally, if only for a moment'<sup>21</sup> the meaninglessness of life. 'At a very basic level, then,' Roberson notes, for Nietzsche 'a philosophy is valuable when it resembles poetry and when it operates in a provisional manner.'<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Nietzsche is clear that this is not simply a case of hedonistic indulgence in beautiful expressions, or perhaps today the motivational meme. Indeed, he is critical of romantic ideas of poetic inventiveness and inspiration: a 'well-known illusion which all artists [...] have somewhat too great an interest in preserving.'<sup>23</sup> Instead, the impact of the poetic lies in the continual production of 'things good, mediocre, and bad [...] untiring not only in invention but also in rejecting, sifting, reforming, arranging.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*. Trans. Marion Faber, with Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 148.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Roberson, 'Nietzsche's Poet-Philosopher: Towards a Poetics of Response-ability, Possibility, and the Future.' *Mosaic*, 45:1, 2012, 187-202, 192.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

The poet is thus situated as, first and foremost, a collector: hence why they ‘must in some respects be creatures facing backwards, so that they can be used as bridges to quite distance times and ideas’.<sup>25</sup> Poetry’s disruption of the present arises from its resonance with previous cultural understandings, those not so dominated by logics of cause and effect and propositional exactitude: the poet ‘attributes his moods and states to causes that are in no way the true ones; to this extent he reminds us of an older mankind, and can help us to understand it.’<sup>26</sup> But the poet is not a historian, obviously. In the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, ‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,’ Nietzsche diagnoses that our understanding of life has become characterised by an unhealthy awareness of memory; as such, the cultivation of history has become a defining principle of modern culture. But this cultivation, and the pride it instils, leads to an ‘oversaturation of an age with history’ which Nietzsche wants to argue leads to a ‘dangerous mood of cynicism,’ and is ‘fatal to the living thing.’<sup>27</sup> The poet, however, has a different role in the preservation of cultural memory, one which is aimed rather at ‘easing life’. This arises from the rhythm of their work: the ‘rhythmic force that reorganises all the atoms of a sentence, bids one to select one’s words and gives thoughts new colour and makes them darker, stranger, more distant’.<sup>28</sup> ‘The poet,’ Nietzsche remarks, ‘presents his thoughts in splendour, on the wagon of rhythm – usually because they cannot go on foot.’<sup>29</sup> Hence, the great poet is one who is ‘untimely’: not simply about being ahead of one’s time, or even old-fashioned, but rather in adopting a different tempo to that of ‘habits and valuations’ which ‘change too rapidly’. ‘For tempo is as significant a power in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 13. Hence Nietzsche’s concern that within modernity the artist will be rendered only ‘a wondrous relic, on whose strength and beauty the happiness of earlier times depended.’ (137)

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Ed. Daniel Breazedale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 83, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 189.

development of peoples as in music: in our case, what is absolutely necessary is an *andante* of development, as the tempo of a passionate and slow spirit'.<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche thus points to a different form of memory from mere recollection: a rhythmic tempo of memory rather than an epistemological reappropriation. If Nietzsche's work places the focus of such rhythm on the 'free spirits' and great men he looks to for inspiration, for me there are far more banal – but no less important – aspects to this, which relate to the mechanisms by which such rhythms emerge through the 'sites' discussed earlier: the organisational and institutional flows of practice. This is explored, albeit briefly, in Derrida's essay *Che cos'è la poesia?*, when he writes of poetry requiring an '*economy of memory*': 'A poem must be brief, elliptical by vocation, whatever may be its objective or apparent expanse', in order to speak to '*the heart*', by which he refers initially to a 'story of "heart" poetically enveloped in the idiom "*apprendre par Coeur,*"', or to learn by heart.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the heart in Derrida's account is not simply an economy of learning (and, therefore, knowledge acquisition; learning as an institutional form), but also invokes the natural rhythmic beat of the heart's circulation (learning as living within, and sometimes in spite of, such institutions). As for Nietzsche, for Derrida poetry provides (or perhaps 'pumps') a particular life to the mechanistic trudge of the everyday. Rhythm does not simply imply the regular beats of iambic pentameter, but a more complex arrangement whereby, first, the necessary reduction of language into a poetic form – as opposed to Nietzsche's historian, who simply collects everything as it is – requires it to fall in with a particular rhythm of mood; and second, such rhythm allows the sense of the words to become amplified, whether by volume or by commitment to memory. The performance at work in the remembering of the poetic,

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<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*. Trans Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995), 291.

historically linked to the repetition of dictation, necessarily includes rhythm and speed as well as figure and tone. It is this, as Nietzsche wrote, that philosophy has forgotten as its own basis, leaving truth as a worn and defaced coin obscuring the ‘mobile army of metaphors’ that upholds it.<sup>32</sup>

The manner of this performance is, as Derrida reminds us, unattached to the question of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> In this sense Nietzsche’s infamous army of truth is best read not as a truth-claim in itself (as his equally infamous note that there are no facts, only interpretations might be), but rather as an expression of the logistical operation involved in supplementing the figures of meaning with the propositional concept of truth. After all, a ‘mobile army’ needs supply lines; it has territorial limits; it has itineraries and registers and stock checks; it marches on stomachs and hearts and minds. The key is not just that truth is originally a form of metaphor, and by extension philosophy is premised on forms of poetic expression, so much as truth is an effect of organisational habits typically unnoticed, or at least seen as unexceptional relative to the achievements of truth itself: the rhythm and tempo that dictate our everyday interaction with the truths presented to us.<sup>34</sup> It is here, I think, that the relationship between the poetic and the philosophical brings something to the post-truth debate that goes beyond the worn currency of epistemology: in performing an economy of memory, and undertaking the curating this involves, it also brings forward the *logistics* at stake.

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<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

<sup>33</sup> On the separation of poetry from knowledge in Derrida’s essay, see John Phillips. ‘The Poetic Thing (On Poetry and Deconstruction).’ *Oxford Literary Review*, 2011, 33:2, 231-243, 233.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche’s accounts of such ritual organisations and their effect on defacing values are consistent across his work: ‘institutions’, Nietzsche is still writing much later in his career, are essentially a form of ‘levelling’; even if such levelling now refers to mountains and valleys rather than the surface inscriptions on a coin. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 213.

#### IV

How does such an account of poetry and philosophy relate, then, to the work of rumours? It is, I think, such logistics that the rumour problematises, a point illustrated in perhaps the best example of rumour at work in philosophy: Aristotle's *On Marvellous Things Heard*. The Loeb Classical Library edition of *Aristotle's Minor Works* introduces the text with a short note:

This curious collection of 'marvels' reads like the jottings from a diary. All authorities are agreed that it is not the work of Aristotle, but it is included in this volume as it forms part of the 'Corpus' which has come down to us [...]. Some of the notes are puerile, but some on the other hand are evidently the fruit of direct and accurate observation.<sup>35</sup>

This combination of the 'puerile' and the 'evidently accurate' makes the work both forgettable (in the context of Aristotelian scholarship) yet strangely timely. For sure, few philosophers will be gripped by the news that goats in Cephellenia drink by inhaling air coming from the sea, that the hedgehogs in Byzantium perceive when north or south winds are blowing, or that the penis of the marten is constantly erect. However, what is in *On Marvellous Things Heard*, unlike other treatises which take up an object of study and analyse it, is the *performance* of the rumour.

As a paradoxography the text provides a glimpse into a world in the grip of becoming rational, politicised and territorialised, yet remains puzzled over the mythical aspects of its culture. These are not the myths of Heracles or Perseus, though, with Gods and monsters fighting heroic battles for the future of the world. Instead, all of the Marvellous Things take

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<sup>35</sup> See [https://www.loebclassics.com/view/aristotle-marvellous\\_things\\_heard/1936/pb\\_LCL307.237.xml](https://www.loebclassics.com/view/aristotle-marvellous_things_heard/1936/pb_LCL307.237.xml)

place through fundamentally banal aspects of life. While the media ecology of post-truth is far removed from the world of the pseudo-Aristotle, both nevertheless stand within a dynamic transformation of how knowledge is circulated, and how once-established modes of proof are disrupted. The treatise is simply a list of things that are said to happen, without any sense of how the philosopher should relate to them, *other* than to marvel. It thus sits in a constant tension between the knowledgeable and the nonsensical, the rigorous cataloguing that forms the Aristotelian process and bizarre cryptozoological fascination.

What makes this distinct from other examples of Classical paradoxography is that the text is placed in Aristotle's canon; even though it is almost certain that he didn't write it. This means that the book itself is effectively a rumour of Aristotle. And while, as I have just suggested, it offers a kind of historical insight into the Classical world, it also resists being a fully historical text because, while there may be theories as to who the pseudo-Aristotle might be, it's not quite clear who wrote it, or when. Nevertheless, it still carries the detailed numbering system of the Aristotelian library's registry. These reference numbers are one of the oldest unchanging forms of cataloguing still in existence. In this way, even though the text is *not* Aristotle's, it still forms an essential part of his archive, because its numbering must necessarily be included in any collection of Aristotle's work. Ironically, though, one of the key anomalies of the text (and, indeed, others that are likely not authored by Aristotle, such as *Questions*) is precisely that they *do not* possess the relentless typological ordering which Aristotle, the great observer of the world, drives forward in his more famous works. For sure, it is somewhat thematically arranged (entries about mice, for example, are grouped together), but there is no argument here, and no detailed systematic explanations such as we find in the *Rhetoric*, the *Nicomachian Ethics*, and so on. The success of Aristotle's influence on both the Western European and Islamic traditions lie for the most part in his copious organisation of



thought: his arguments are built on a systematic archiving of the world according to rational principles. But *On Marvellous Things Heard* possesses no careful structure of argument based on astute observations of the subjects in question. Instead, it is, quite literally, a seemingly random list of marvellous things the author has heard. In this way, *On Marvellous Things Heard* is essentially *both* archival, in that its inclusion is necessary for the Aristotelian registry to make sense, *and* non-archival, in that it resists or refuses any registry of its own making.

What preserves the work is precisely a rhythm and a tempo: embedded within the ‘tick tock’ (as Nietzsche puts it) of institutional catalogue, as sure as one number follows the next. *On Marvellous Things Heard* provides a kind of pointless inversion of the cultural archive in this sense. The corpus of Aristotle is left in place, but with a minor disruption: not to any grand schema or particular end, but by rendering absurd that medial form which usually establishes the truth from fiction, and the canon from dispersed fragments of Ancient Greek hearsay. In this sense, the rumour is a form of mis-fired poetry, which lays bare any claims to the seriousness of truth, and leaves only an anomalous structure behind.

## V

Aristotle – the real one – declared that poetry ‘is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.’<sup>36</sup> The salient term here is ‘express’; for while the content of poetry imitates the philosophical more than the archive of history, its medium renders it different. *Fama* is the Latin translation of the Greek *Pheme*: a name related to φάσσει ‘to speak’ which can mean both ‘fame’ and/or ‘rumour.’ Of course, before the rise of print media, speech was wholly intertwined with fame, and by

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<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*. Ed. Ingrato Bywater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1451b5-7.

extension, with gossip and rumour.<sup>37</sup> Philip Hardie notes that the term is often positioned as a site of contrast; in particular between the transient uses (including ‘rumour’ and ‘hearsay’) and the more fixed and preservative sense of cultural memory or individual fame. But, Hardie goes on to point out:

that contrast is unstable in various ways. The presentation of fame as a free-standing and lasting monument is a mystification of the fact that praise of outstanding men is itself part of a system of exchange. What is perceived as a fixed tradition may crystallize out of a more fluid circulation of words. Folklorists see no sharp distinction between rumour and legend: legend may be defined as a rumour that has become “part of the heritage of a people”. On the other hand, the preservation of a tradition depends on the repeated reuse of words within a social group.<sup>38</sup>

*Fama* is therefore both an ‘unattributable’ and ‘unreliable’ word from the streets, and the word of the poet to assert ‘his uniqueness and authority within a poetic tradition.’ This is played out in the short passage of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, where the reader is invited into the House of Fama, the goddess of rumour. The house emerges from a climactic storm, and is situated between the heavens, Earth and the skies; from its position at the top of a tower is able to view all three realms. The house itself, the seat of rumour’s power, consists of ‘numberless’ windows and doorways that are always open, allowing a ‘flowing tide’ of ‘fresh reports’ to rush in and out of the structure. The house itself is made of brass, which disperses the sounds that enter; ‘the better to diffuse/The spreading sounds, and multiply the news.’ Rumours collide and echo with each other, creating a low hum of constant noise which is described as:

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<sup>37</sup> In this sense, one might note the similarities between *fama* and Foucault’s famous use of the term *parrhesia*: ostensibly, it is to speak or express everything in an open manner, to commit to fearless speech. But telling the truth was only the second characteristic of the Greek term: the first characteristic consists of ambiguous proclamations, ignorant outspokenness for the sake of itself; in other words, simple chatter or gossip.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3-4.

A thorough-fare of news: where some devise  
Things never heard, some mingle truth with lies;  
The troubled air with empty sounds they beat,  
Intent to hear, and eager to repeat.<sup>39</sup>

Of the many ambiguities around Ovid's representation of the rumour is his use of *turba*, 'throng', to describe what enters and circulates Fama's house; a term which may mean a general disturbance or noise, or a crowd of people. Indeed, the poem is never clear on whether the occupants of Fama's house – the 'some' who 'devise things never heard', for example – are corporeal people or merely noises; enhanced by the verb *uagantur* which may mean to roam and wander (as Raeburn translates it), or to diffuse (as Garth-Dryden has it).<sup>40</sup> While such ambiguity may cause problems for translators, the dual sense is entirely pertinent to the material manifestation of the rumour itself, particularly in the contemporary world where diffusion and 'the crowd' are perhaps more easily aligned.

Indeed, the paradoxes of what Ovid presents provide a somewhat timely account of the rumour at work; an account which is derived from the figure of Fama herself. It is notable that, unlike other poets before him, and in particularly stark contrast to Virgil's description of Fama as a monstrous creature, Ovid does not describe Fama herself at all. Kelly comments:

By choosing to deliberately ignore Virgil's depiction of Fama, Ovid creates a discourse between his text and the *Aeneid*. The reader immediately wonders: "Why is Fama [not] here?" Her absence generates an unspoken, invisible, presence lurking beneath the surface of the text. The monstrous prequel of Virgil's hyper-physical Fama haunts Ovid's house; she is the loudest echo in the room.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 12.53-7.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Annes Brown, *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Peter Kelly, 'Voices within Ovid's House of "Fama".' *Mnemosyne*, 67:1, 2014, 65-92, 75.

Fama's appearance, then, is also a rumour: not *quite* there, embedded instead within the literary memories of Hesiod, Homer, and Virgil. Indeed, just as the rumour is fundamentally constituted by its own circulation (rather than its reference to an objective state of affairs), the goddess is diffused into her own diffusive structure: the house of rumour is, while certainly not a personification of Fama, the structure by which the goddess is manifested, which is the reflection of noises across surface.

There are a series of allusions in the passage from the *Metamorphoses* that indicate that Fama's house is indirectly bestowed with the same sensory organs that characterise Virgil's depiction of Fama's body: "from which place [the house] whatever is anywhere, however many regions apart, is looked upon, and every voice penetrates its hollow ears". Everything is seen from this place, yet it is the house that performs this seeing.<sup>42</sup>

If Fama is no longer an actual monster, but a 'wandering of noise', this raises the question as to how we discern the poet's narration from the echoes surrounding it. How is the reader to navigate a house that is also a rhetorical concept, which hollows out the meaningfulness of any communicative action? Not to mention the curiously non-functional figures at work in surroundings: a house with 'hollow ears', emitting 'a deaf noise of sounds', apparently without 'silence' or 'expression'? Safe passage, it seems, is only guaranteed by the rhythm of poetic language: the regularity of its pace and the curation of poetic memory (specifically with regards Virgil) allows the reader to consider the 'troubled air' in figurative terms rather than nihilistic pollution.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.77

## VI

These two examples are both ‘untimely’ in their own way. Both depend upon forms of rhythmic tempo, in the Nietzschean sense, for both their own preservation, and their own sense. They rely on an amplification via a combination of internal rhythms, organisational habits and historical cataloguing. At the same time, the work of rumour in both serves to echo and reflect much of that ‘sense’ into ambiguity. Both texts are marked by the banality of such ambiguity, as well: in the context of either the Aristotelian corpus as a whole, or the *Metamorphoses* as an epic, both *Marvellous Things Heard* and the House of Fama are short places to pass through; after all, the pseudo-Aristotle’s book has no impact on the better known works, and Fama’s only *action* is, ironically enough, to tell the truth (reporting to the Trojans that a Greek fleet is approaching).

In the case of Aristotle’s text, the absurdity of the rumours listed – reports without any attempt at philosophical reasoning or evidence – is carried by nothing less than the rhythm of the archive; it’s numbering, its solid pace that refuses to allow the rumours of *On Marvellous Things Heard* to disappear. In Ovid, meanwhile, the poetic rhythm allows rumour to be envisioned as a municipal space that is held up only by the circulation of aimless noise: the poetic economising of language draws upon the rhythm of Fama’s previous representations, channelling the work of rumours themselves.

I draw on these examples because they illustrate what I earlier suggested was a longer-standing concern, underling the contemporary ‘post-truth’ debate, between poetry, philosophy, and the work of rumour. Returning to the problem this paper began with, I conclude by suggesting that this notion of rhythm as a utility of amplification and memory allows us to sidestep the more conventional accounts of poetry as a slower, stiller and quieter

form of truth. This latter definition leaves intact too many assumptions that in fact perpetuate the post-truth malaise: that stillness and quietness may lead to more authentic forms of knowledge, for example,<sup>43</sup> or that implementing pauses into the flow of competing information will have a profound effect; that we should look to poetry in much the same we might look to ‘gatekeepers’ of the media, or to the rejuvenation of expertise in the face of fake news.<sup>44</sup>

Instead, poetry and philosophy alike will be alert to the ways in which the fable of post-truth highlights different dimensions of rhythm at work in the culture surrounding us: one which is no longer the regular beat of the printing press as it was in Nietzsche’s time, but rather the habits and rituals of a culture keen to curate its past; which involves the tempos of algorithms, of scrolling and clicking, and of all the ways in which ‘the flow’ of medial information is negotiated. If such rhythms have defeated epistemological attempts to resolve the real-world problems they are perceived to create, perhaps the poetic provides a more substantial frame for philosophical investigation into this effective and powerful fable.

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<sup>43</sup> On this, see Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>44</sup> A more nuanced argument for this call for more scrupulous attention to information than I am able to give here can be found in Susan Haack, “Post ‘Post-Truth’: Are We There Yet?” *Theoria* 85, 2019, 258-272.

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