

hilosophy 480.001, Spring 2025, University of New Mexico

**Philosophy *and* Literature:  
Thinking Philosophy and Literature Together**

**Professor Iain Thomson**  
2–3:15 PM, Tues./Thurs.

What is the relationship between philosophy and literature? How should we understand the border between these two domains? In order to answer those questions rigorously, we would first need to know both: What *is* “philosophy”? and: What *is* “literature”? Hasn’t “philosophy” been understood, since Plato, as that discipline (or meta-discipline) responsible for asking (“ontological”) questions of the form, “What *is* X?” — including not only “What *is* literature?” but also “What *is* philosophy?”? If so, then wouldn’t it be a kind of philosophical apostasy to imagine that literature could illuminate philosophy about itself? Is it obvious, however, that the question “What is philosophy?” can be answered from entirely within philosophy? If not, if addressing this “purest” of philosophical questions actually requires stepping outside or beyond philosophy (so as to be able to get the whole domain in view), then would not “literature” be one of the names for this outside? But, then, what form would the answer take? Would it be literary? Or philosophical? Or would it not rather be — in some yet to be clarified sense — *both*?

Of course, those philosophers who like to imagine philosophy as a science rather than an art will tend to envision the domains of philosophy and literature as dichotomous categories or complementary sets (sharing no intersection). Such philosophers *might* admit that literature can be philosophically interesting, but they will also suspect that a work which attempts to be *both* philosophy and literature is likely to succeed at neither. And yet, didn’t the first philosopher to exclude the poets from his philosophical realm do so while writing in the *literary* form of a dialogue? Plato himself was not unaware of the paradoxes entailed by his literary-philosophical exclusion of literary philosophy. It is rather, perhaps, as if Plato realized that literature could only be banished from philosophy by a literary philosophy, a philosophy which implicitly undermines the very exclusion that helps define it by establishing its borders (while thereby also opening these alleged borders to policing, crossing, undermining, blurring, and so on). As if externalizing this struggle, the recent history of philosophy — from Kierkegaard and Heidegger to Derrida and Irigaray and beyond — is full of important philosophical works written in a seemingly “literary” style (whatever that might be, or not be, and perhaps it means nothing more than having any *style* at all), *styles* (always in the plural) coexisting unhappily alongside the persistent suspicion that literary philosophy remains

hopelessly (or permanently) dilettante, if not simply oxymoronic, at best a productive confusion, waiting to be sorted out by clearer heads (as it were), as if a perfectly clear head were the ideal style (a kind of impossible superegoic injunction or regulative ideal of having no style at all, no subjective idiosyncrasies that cloud or distort one's thinking—as if *one* could think, as if the unthinking prejudices of “the herd” were thought itself rather than the prejudice of all prejudices).

In order to question this philosophical prejudice *from the side of philosophy* (but without thereby taking philosophy's side), to explore it by seeking to understand one of its most powerful (and undeniably *dangerous*) answers, our course will focus on the self-described *greatest work* of the most influential philosopher between Hegel and Heidegger, namely Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche self-consciously situates his own “greatest” work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, at the intersection of the philosophical and the literary, and thereby calls this border profoundly into question — and with it the entire post-Platonic philosophical (or metaphysical) order it both presupposes and reinforces. Our simple yet ambitious goal will be to learn to *read* this book, a book which seeks to teach its (real or true) readers *how* to read it (by requiring us to learn what Nietzsche calls “the art of slow reading,” an open and yet composed method or style of reading sensitive to and capable of doing justice to poetic *polysemy*). This will be our experimental way of seeking to understand—both from within and without—what it can mean to think philosophy *and* literature together (as well as what dangerous explosions such a collision may cause, and how we might think through such real dangers today, perhaps even as “today,” as the very *current* that continues to drive our current, late-modern age, which (as Heidegger will argue) has yet to find its way beyond Nietzsche's deepest and most dangerous insights. Since *we are all Nietzscheans* (for good and for ill), this course will seek to understand what that means.

**Course Requirements:** The sheer quantity of reading should not be onerous (this is a course in “the art of slow reading,” after all), but this course will require us to grapple almost constantly with some surprisingly dense and difficult reading and re-reading. As we will see, *Zarathustra* is a book that can only be read by being re-read, which means students should endeavor to read it more than once over the course of the semester. The course is thus intended for careful, diligent, and ambitious students capable of grappling creatively and open-mindedly with a famously challenging and influential text. To facilitate your understanding of this work, attendance is required. (If I conclude, unhappily, that class attendance needs to be enforced, that will be done with brief and unannounced in-class quizzes on the assigned reading. These may be made up only in the cases of medical or other emergencies. To be clear, I truly hope not to have to give such “pop quizzes” at all, but that will depend on student attendance.) Final course grades will be based on any such quizzes (10%) and (much more significantly) on one in-class presentation (10%)

with two short but carefully composed and highly polished papers making up the rest of the grade for undergraduates, with an in-class presentations (10%) plus one final research paper determining the grade for graduate students). I will explain and facilitate the in-class presentation requirement in the first few classes of the semester, but it will ultimately be students' own responsibility to make sure they get on the schedule to do such a presentation on a chapter of the book (beginning with the graduate students) and, in the likely case that we fall behind the syllabus, it will of course be your responsibility to be in class on whatever day we actually reach that chapter), or else to arrange an alternative, written assignment. But, put simply, *the assignment will be to explain—as clearly and precisely as you can—what you take to be one (and only one!) of the main ideas, themes, tropes, claims, figures, arguments, etc., in one chapter and then raise has a question about it for discussion.* You should *not* try to present or explain *all* (or even a lot) of the ideas in a chapter but instead explain what just one of them means and show why it is significant and how understanding it leads to further questions, with the entire presentation lasting no longer than 10 minutes.)