

What Makes a Poem Philosophical?

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I Introduction

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche tells us that “Mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is, they are not even shallow.”¹ The line acts as a humorous reminder of a risk we run when making ambitious claims of any sort, mystical, metaphysical, aesthetic or otherwise. The risk is that of producing an explanation that claims for itself depth yet is not even trivial; that is, an explanation that in fact says nothing and so fails not just the test of profundity but that of registering any insight at all. Wittgenstein’s work on nonsense is one such way of exposing how endemic this risk is to philosophy, though Wittgenstein would add that under the heading of “mystical explanations” we must place much of what Nietzsche himself, an ethicist and aesthete at heart, liked to talk about.² This might seem an insult to those of us who work in ethics and the philosophy of art, but for Wittgenstein it implies no slight to our objects of interest. Ethics and aesthetics are the areas of philosophy charged with exploring the nature of the two most basic kinds of human value; and while much of what we know of Wittgenstein reveals that he was committed to both the ethical life and the place of art in it, he thought that philosophy could say little of importance about their nature and the great significance they hold for us. If “ethics and aesthetics are one and the same,” as Wittgenstein claims in the *Tractatus*, it is in part because he thought both areas of philosophy are bound to fail even the test of shallowness when they attempt to justify in the space of a theory the items we place in the realm of value.

The failure to be even shallow is a risk one particularly runs when trying to find a way to explain what might make a poem—or any form of art, for that matter—*philosophical*. It is very easy to churn out apparent depth but equally easy to say almost nothing, at any rate nothing more than that ideas and concerns also familiar to the philosopher can inform a poet’s work, or that poems can inspire philosophizing, and this is hardly news. But what more might we mean when we call a poet or her poems philosophical? It may be the case that describing poems as philosophical can at times seem a natural way of explaining the experience of depth and insight they can provoke in us. But exactly why does it strike us as interesting or apt to describe this experience in these terms? When considering artistic modernity and all those fabled difficult poems it produces—poems that often strive to unburden language of its usual representational and sense-producing responsibilities—we can feel ourselves ever more drawn to attributing to a poem a clandestine intellectual project, an implicit critique, or a heady stock of unspoken points, just so we can state that thing of cognitive value we think we find hiding beneath a poem’s opaque surface. But when is it reasonable to call these projects or points “philosophical”, and why should we think that in doing so we say something illuminating or flattering about a poet’s

¹ Nietzsche (2001), §126.

² The primary argument for this is given in 6.4-6.421 of the *Tractatus*: “The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists [...] So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics [...] Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)” (6.421) All references to the *Tractatus* are to Wittgenstein (2001).

labor?

I will use a discussion of Wittgenstein to stage an exploration of the idea of a philosophical poem. While Wittgenstein would not approve of such an endeavor, I trust that the wholly skeptical conclusions I will draw about its existence will be in line with the spirit of his thought, both early and late. I will not be taking the standard approach, at least in philosophy, of considering positive arguments in favor of the idea I wish to challenge and then attacking them one by one. Rather, I want to explore what happens to the idea of a philosophical poem if considered in the context of an author who forces one to think about it in an unorthodox yet, one hopes, productive and generalizable manner. What Wittgenstein has to offer this discussion is a vantage point from which the issue appears both important and misguided: important because we should wish to explain the encounter with depth and insight the often apparently “meaningless” modern poem gives us, and misguided because it offers the wrong framework entirely for making sense of the encounter. And while I shall focus on just one kind of modernist poem, what I say about it will imply something damning about the urge to cast poetry of nearly any sort as philosophical. If my reflections on Wittgenstein will necessarily fall short of saying all that can be said about, or on behalf of, the idea of a philosophical poem, they will perhaps suffice to fashion a sense of the oddness of the desire to cast the poetry we wish to celebrate as a form of philosophy-by-other-means.

My discussion will help to clarify, in a small way, something else: what it means to describe Wittgenstein as a kind of philosophical modernist. It will turn out that the particular sense in which Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be called modernist implies a unique view concerning the relationship between the two parties to the ancient feud. Wittgenstein’s modernism is of a surprisingly anti-philosophical sort, and to this extent it offers at best cynicism in respect to the grand philosophical claims modernist criticism at times makes on behalf of poetry since Yeats, especially, though not exclusively, in the lineage that runs, in one way or another, from Eliot through Stevens to Ashbery. Seeing this will provide purchase on the kind of philosophical modernism one can get away with ascribing to Wittgenstein. It will be a modernism that is, in Richard Gaskin’s words, “not an outright rejection of realism, but an attempt to achieve it in purer form.”³ It is the strangeness of what Wittgenstein offers us by way of a sense of what this “purer realism” looks like that makes his modernism, such as it is, novel and of potentially wider interest to philosophy and poetics.

II A Problem of Worldliness

I will pursue my point with constant reference to Wallace Stevens. Stevens is something of a darling to philosophers with an interest in poetry, and one hopes it isn’t simply because Stevens’s poetry is brimming with lines about “the magnificent cause of being” or which proclaim that “things merely are.”⁴ More charitably, it is because Stevens’s late romantic entanglements with modernity seem so often to be an entanglement with the same problem that is at the heart of a good stretch of philosophy from the mid 19th century to the present. The problem is what one might floridly but accurately call “the modern problem of worldliness.” Let me explain.

Strictly speaking, philosophy has always concerned itself with what amounts to the problem of worldliness, and the endless debates on realism, idealism, constructivism, relativism

³ Gaskin (2013), 12.

⁴ From, respectively “Another Weeping Woman” and “The Plain Sense of Things”.

and the like each offer distinct accounts of how thought, language and culture succeed or fail to connect us to something beyond ourselves. This “beyond” can be reality, truth, other humans, our pasts, what’s happening in Cleveland right now: those bits of the world to which we wish to be brought closer, whatever they may be. What must we do if we are to vindicate our sense that the world and the various features of it we wish to know are in fact real, are *there*, and are more or less as we take them to be? There isn’t a philosophical tradition that fails to address the problem of the relation between the world and the subject, thought, or language, which is the most basic form the problem of worldliness takes. But in a good amount of modern philosophy since Schopenhauer, there is a sense not merely of separateness between ourselves and the world but of rupture, a distancing of the real that registers as loss. How one conceives of this rupture, and one’s cynicism about the chances that we can repair it, mark one way of distinguishing many of the philosophical and aesthetic stances that have developed since romanticism.⁵ What is distinctive about many of these stances is that the work of art is given an almost sacred role in confronting this sense of rupture: art comes to be seen as a site of renewal or, failing that, of escape. It is called on either to restore us to our prelapsarian glory, if only partially and in the imagination, or to create, as Adorno would insist, a realm of freedom, of autonomy, inside of which we can escape a lot of the junk the romantics were right to tell us we should despise.⁶

The kind of modernist stance I am concerned with here inherits the problem of worldliness at roughly the same moment much art loses faith in representation and the broadly mimetic powers of art. This itself is not quite news, but it becomes interesting when we add to it an urge still to hold on to kind on realism.⁷ In a poet or philosopher who has such a desire, we find a struggle to understand how language or thought might nonetheless place us in contact with something *worldly enough*: with something that suffices to present a sense of engagement with real, even, or especially, in the face of the anxieties and doubts that animate the very sense of rupture. In both Stevens and the Wittgenstein, for instance, this at times will consist in exploring how certain forms of essentially *imaginative* experience allow us to encounter an elusive and often extraordinary everyday world (more on this below). To a certain kind of philosopher, Stevens is philosophical because his poetry seems to speak so directly to the problem of worldliness, and he does so in a way that many readers of Wittgenstein—those who are called, perhaps unfortunately, “New Wittgensteinians”—will at moments recognize as intensely familiar. As Wittgenstein said, “philosophy really ought to be written as a kind of poetry,” and, to some, Stevens can seem the poet who is best able to do this.

There are two broad ways in which Stevens can be made to seem a kind of Wittgensteinian poet, and these correspond very neatly to two broad respects in which Wittgenstein has been of interest to scholars concerned with art. The two approaches divide along the lines scholars have traditionally distinguished the early from the later Wittgenstein: the difference one finds when one moves from the apparent positivist who wrote the *Tractatus* to the ordinary language philosopher who wrote *Philosophical Investigations*. The first approach grows out

⁵ For excellent philosophical studies of romanticism to which I am indebted here, see Beiser (2003) and, especially, Eldridge (2001).

⁶ See, for example, Adorno (2004), and the discussions of Adorno’s aesthetics in O’Connor (2012) and Zuidervaart (1991).

⁷ Here and elsewhere “realism” is used in a philosophical rather than literary sense. To put it perhaps too romantically, it indicates a kind of metaphysical longing for the real and obviously not a commitment to verisimilitude and the like.

of a reading of nonsense in the *Tractatus*; the second, the *Investigations*' conception of philosophy, once properly reformed, as attempting to lead "words back from their metaphysical to their everyday uses."⁸ Each can seem a promising foundation on which to construct an account of the philosophical significance of poetry in general and of Stevens in particular, and in both cases with something that can fairly be called the modern problem of worldliness as the guiding concern.⁹ My strategy will be one of feigned charity. I will attempt to make each of these approaches seem reasonable, and then I will produce a knife. I discuss each approach in turn.

III Tractarian Nonsense and Poetic Opacity

It is little surprise that scholars interested in poetic modernism and the avant-garde can take interest in the *Tractatus*'s insistence that all of its lines are nonsensical and that the work makes its point precisely on account of this. I will explain what I take this point to be in a moment, but the allure of such a work is obvious. It promises to offer a way of explaining exactly how we experience depth of insight in the intentional opacity of much modernist poetry. It is true that there are many forms of modernism, and it would be irresponsible to claim that intense opacity is the fiber that runs through all these forms. But the charitable reader will grant that any story we tell of the cultural and philosophical significance of poetic modernism must reckon with the radical and willed opacity characteristic of many of its brightest achievements. Whatever else this opacity consists in, it is in good part to be explained in terms of the opacity of poetic *language*: its refusal to be made easy sense of, its semantic and syntactic promiscuity, and all the respects in which it we are made to feel utterly naive if we set out to "precisify," as a philosopher of language might put it, its various lines. This opacity can place great pressure on us to explain how these poems can offer an encounter with meaning at all, so much so that it often shakes our confidence in thinking that "meaning" is an apt term for describing what poems function to produce. We know that there are powerful aesthetic, cultural, and political reasons poets might pursue such opacity—think of Paul Celan writing poetry in German in the wake of the Shoah—but the philosopher of literature must *explain* just how such poems can show us something, anything, when it is none too clear what they are even saying. The Tractarian use of nonsense can seem to turn the ostensible meaninglessness of the difficult modern poem into a quick virtue, revealing a way to acknowledge both the absence of sense and the presence of insight in a poem. The question for our purposes is when is it reasonable to use the notion of Tractarian nonsense to explain what a poet is attempting to achieve, and whether this can tell us anything of interest about how a poem might be philosophical?

First, what is the Tractarian notion of nonsense? The *Tractatus* itself is a series of highly condensed propositions that cumulatively offer an account of the relationship between language (and so thought) and reality. The text offers a theory of meaning, and meaning is made to be a matter of how sentences, as vehicles of propositions, can have cognitive content: can be genuinely revelatory of the extra-linguistic world we presumably use language to navigate. This, in turn, is explicated in terms of how the logical structure of well-formed empirical sentences enable

⁸ *PI* §116. All references to *Philosophical Investigations* are to Wittgenstein (2003).

⁹ I hope this manner of framing the discussion makes it clear that my interest in Stevens extends well beyond his late poetry, which critics at times lament as compromised precisely on account of their apparent philosophical heavy-handedness. These poems play no privileged role in most of the accounts of Stevens's philosophical significance I am concerned with here (indeed his earlier poetry is often preferred in these accounts). For an excellent study, and partial defense, of Stevens on this matter, see Joshua Kotin (2015).

language to mirror the structure of reality, and it is for this reason often called a “picture theory” of meaning. However pithy this account is, one can see the problem. If the theory lays out the conditions under which an employment of language can be meaningful, and if *this* is said to consist in the ways in which a sentence, by virtue of expressing a proposition, *picture* reality, the work that states this theory will fail to satisfy the very conditions of meaningfulness the theory articulates. It is language about language, second-order descriptions of what must be the case rather than first-order descriptions of what actually is the case, and only the latter use of language can satisfy the conditions of meaningfulness the *Tractatus* defends. The propositions of the text, then, literally *say* nothing: the theory it constructs implies that they are in effect dummy propositions: they are empty, contentless. To this extent, if Wittgenstein’s theory is sound, then the very attempt to offer a philosophical statement of it becomes a kind of performative contradiction. Wittgenstein of course sees this and concludes the *Tractatus* with what are likely the most famous last words in modern philosophy:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (6.54-7)

This makes it clear that even if the “propositions” of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, the work cannot be regarded as a mad ludic exercise, producing jabberwocky simply to shame the reader who thought it had something to teach her. Wittgenstein tells the reader that it is a work of nonsense *and* that this nonsense can get one *to see the world aright, to elucidate* something about our relationship to reality, and in doing so prompt a form of *understanding*. This is all serious business. The question for the reader is just how the *Tractatus*’s use of nonsense can be so productive: what, exactly, does it show us, and how? One cannot excise the final passage from the text and take the work to offer a theory which, while implying something unflattering about the possibility of *stating* how language can bind itself to the world, more or less tries to get away with doing precisely that. The final passage contaminates all the prior propositions with nonsense, and it is according to the very letter of the theory that this be so. Almost all contemporary commentators agree on this point, and they divide according to how they fill out the story of the manner in which Tractarian nonsense is productive.

What is often called the “irresolute reading” takes this nonsense to be *philosophically* productive: it is nonsense of a technical sort which functions to *show*—to make manifest— what one necessarily cannot say. This special sort of nonsense prompts a positive philosophical insight into the relationship between language, meaning, and reality, an insight presumably along the lines of, though obviously not identical to, the theory the text itself appears to elaborate. There are serious problems with this reading, and criticisms of it tend to be much more sophisticated ways of putting Frank Ramsey’s well-known riposte, “but what we can’t say, we can’t say; and we can’t whistle it either.”¹⁰ The so-called “resolute” reading takes points like Ramsey’s seriously and Wittgenstein’s final words literally: the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, and nonsense is just that: it neither says *nor shows* anything positive about its great topic. It is the

¹⁰Ramsey (1931), 238.

everyday notion of nonsense, of words that idle, of statements that produce no cognitive content at all, we are left with. If the irresolute reading argues that the *Tractatus* uses nonsense to establish its apparent thesis obliquely, the resolute reading urges that the confession of nonsense reveals its apparent thesis to be nonsense, too. We can take from the work no theory at all, whistled or otherwise.

Since the irresolute conception of nonsense is very likely incoherent, if not obviously as an interpretation of Wittgenstein then as an independent philosophical position, I will focus on the resolute reading, which has the virtue of making sense. But the resolute reading does present a very obvious problem, and it is worth pointing it how one might handle it, since this will eventually lead us to something interesting about poetry. It must explain exactly what kind of understanding, what form of insight, nonsense resolutely interpreted can yield. It must explain, in a word, why Wittgenstein would put such work into writing a masterfully argued theoretical treatise only to pull the rug out from underneath the entire enterprise. What could remain of value in a work that so condemns itself to simple nonsense?

A possible answer to this begins to appear if we ask not what the text shows us but how Wittgenstein intends it to work on the desires and expectations that a certain kind of reader is likely to bring to it. This reader will be, of course, a philosopher who desires to have the relationship between language, meaning and reality explained to her *in logical, metaphysical terms*. Thus the confession of nonsense at the conclusion of the work functions to disenchant the reader burdened with such expectations and desires. It must be granted that the *Tractatus* does a remarkable job of enticing this reader. Wittgenstein produces an apparent theory that is of sufficient brilliance and clarity that it can be expected to strike its implied audience as coming very close to fulfilling its promise to explain how language achieves connection to the world beyond it. That is, what sets the stage for the confession of nonsense is the production of what very much looks like to be *a solution* to a set of issues that have animated philosophy since Plato and which were at the heart of the positivist movement of his time. This is no mean feat. If one asks, “why bother if it all turns out to be nonsense?” the most plausible answer is that Wittgenstein wishes to show this entire metaphysical enterprise to be nonsense. Nonsense of this sort is still immensely productive, but it would appear to be productive in a way that is better called liberatory than philosophical. Nonsense so conceived tries to emancipate us from the desire to offer—the trick is to discern just what, exactly—metaphysical theories, philosophical justifications, an *account* of how language and thought acquire worldly content: to *think* about our cognitive and linguist predicament in a certain way, namely, in a way that would lead one to do in earnest what the *Tractatus*, read naively, appears to be doing.¹¹

If this is so, then it is wrongheaded to see Tractarian nonsense as philosophically productive, since its very function is to free us from the urge to do philosophy, surely in the form of which positivism is emblematic but perhaps even philosophy *tout court*.¹² As Michael Kremer

¹¹Zumhagen-Yekplé argues that the *Tractatus* is a text whose philosophical and ethical points are made through what is not in it, a text “marked by absence” which leaves “it up to their readers to figure out how to learn something from those absences (of answers, explanations, resolution, or straightforward teaching) by turning it into something transforms our understanding of the problems and mysteries of language and life.” (2012, 431-2)

¹²If it seems unlikely that Wittgenstein could harbor views so hostile to philosophy, note that Wittgenstein’s relationship to philosophy was notoriously conflicted and ambiguous, abandoning it as he did for long stretches of time and turning much of it into an object of ridicule in so many of his writings. A recurring theme of the *Philosophical Investigations* is that philosophy creates the very conceptual messes it prides itself on cleaning up and that this is because misuse of language is endemic to the abstractions of philosophy. In other words, the resolute reading

puts it, “here is the ultimate solution to the ‘problems of philosophy’ promised in the Preface. There are no such problems, and coming to realize this frees us from the burden of feeling that we must solve them.”¹³ In doing so, the *Tractatus* presumably also helps us to return to the rough ground of ordinary language and the orientation to the world offered there, a theme that will become central to the later Wittgenstein. Tractarian nonsense, then, does not offer a roundabout way of doing philosophy, except of a wholly negative, destructive sort. This helps explain what Wittgenstein meant when in a private letter he insisted that ethical value is the only value the *Tractatus* really bears.¹⁴ It is ethical, in a word, because it frees us to achieve a sense of being right with the world in thought and language, now in a way that our erstwhile search for philosophical explanations made impossible.

It is easy to see how a resolute reading nonsense might open up interesting ways of speaking of the project of the difficult modern poem. It is a vision of nonsense as productive in a way that is strikingly similar to ways in which philosophers and literary theorists have at times described the cognitive gains of modern art and the manner in which it is most apt to engage our worldly interests. Consider, for instance, Bernard Harrison’s theory of “dangerous knowledge.” The language of literature, he argues, helps us achieve a clearer view of our epistemic and ethical condition not by adding to our store of worldly knowledge but by disrupting the “knowledge” on which we conventionally rely, shaking the self’s confidence in “its natural but mistaken conviction that the terms in which it habitually construes the world are the only terms in which the world is capable of being construed.”¹⁵ This is a kind of cognitive insight, even a form of knowledge, and its liberatory potential is obvious enough. Tractarian nonsense—from this point on I shall use “nonsense” only in its resolute sense—might be seen as a philosophical extension of not uncommon ways of explaining how literature tends to confront the problem worldliness, but now in a way that is especially well-suited for the poetry in the wake of modernism. That is, Tractarian nonsense might seem to offer us a framework for explaining how opacity and apparent meaningless might be productive: might offer insights, even a kind of understanding. My repetition of “might” in the last two sentences betrays my hesitancy to endorse any of this, but I want to follow this Tractarian possibility a bit further.

Rupert Read is an example of a philosopher who explicitly uses Tractarian nonsense to argue for poetry’s philosophical significance, and he does so with Wallace Stevens as his guide. We should consider where it leads him. His argument unfolds in a book with sections that bear titles such as “Wittgensteinian Poetry,” “Wallace Stevens as ‘Wittgensteinian,’” and “Invitations to Nonsense: Poetry Considered as a Therapeutic Tool,” and so the connection to our problem is obvious. For Read, poems such as Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and

attributes views to Wittgenstein that we have independent evidence—independent, that is, of the final lines of the *Tractatus*—he held. I acknowledge that what I say in this essay falls short of demonstrating the adequacy of the resolute reading over the irresolute. Proper defenses of it can be found in Conant (2000), Diamond (2000), and Kremer (2001).

¹³Kremer (2001), 56.

¹⁴In a letter to Ludwig von Ficker, for example, Wittgenstein urges that the *Tractatus* “consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely the second part that is the important one. My book draws the limits of the ethical only from the inside as were, and I am convinced that this is the *ONLY rigorous* way of drawing those limits[...]I have managed to in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.” As quoted in Zumhagen-Yekplé (2012, 430). See Friedlander (2001) for a reading of Tractarian nonsense which offers an account of the ethical significance of the production of nonsense resolutely interpreted.

¹⁵Harrison (1991), 50.

“Anecdote of the Jar” use the appearance of sense only to play a Tractarian trick on the reader, to lead her to endless impasses in her attempts to render meaningful what is said in these poems. Stevens is an example, in Read’s words, of “literary philosophizing,” an “educative poetry of the absurd” which “encourages us to form a kind of belief about what we can succeed in imagining, and then facilitates our learning from the collapse of that belief under its own weight.”¹⁶ Read, like most New Wittgensteinians, highlights the therapeutic value of such an encounter with self-annihilating language: it points us back to the limits of language and thought and thereby allows us to feel a sense of release in knowing where those limits are.

To see what this amounts to as a way of reading Stevens, consider the stanzas of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” to which Read primarily attends:

IV

A man and a woman
 Are one.
 A man and a woman and a blackbird
 Are one.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon
 It was snowing
 And it was going to snow
 The black-bird sat in the cedar-limbs

Read works through lines such as these to show that the imagination is inevitably defeated if it attempts to cull from them a coherent image or a determinate meaning. Note that even an innocent-seeming line such as “It was evening all afternoon” will defy any such attempt, embodying as it does a category violation. If it strikes us as mere figuration for a dark afternoon, one should recall that *philosophical* problem is to explain how the line can yield this impression in terms of a theory of *meaning*, and if we considering the early Wittgenstein, one must grant Read that it cannot.¹⁷ But it is not just the content of individual lines that raises the specter of nonsense in this poem. It is a matter of the connection between lines and the manner in which thought progresses through them. It would seem utterly amiss to try to understand the *logical* contribution of each line to the *proposition* they jointly express or to ask what *cognitive content* the lines, singly or conjunctively, generate. For Read, Steven’s syntax ultimately should not be seen as distributing anything that can be called “meaning” across phrase, line, sentence, and stanza. We are called on to work through Stevens’s language, but Read claims that what we find at the end of our

¹⁶The quotations are found in Read (2007) 42, 47 and 44, respectively.

¹⁷ I thank V. Joshua Adams for pointing out the need for this qualification.

struggles is that all the lines, even those which bear a facade of sense, draw us in only to lead us to a place of darkness, perhaps a dazzling sort of darkness but nonetheless a place in which no coherent image, idea, or claim is made visible. Stevens's language turns out to *say* nothing at all, since on inspection it subverts the very representational and imaginative instructions it issues to the reader. If the poem draws us in with a familiar neo-romantic promise to offer us a vision of a bit of great nature, it intentionally refuses to deliver on its promise. Thus for Read there is nothing that could constitute *understanding* these lines. What we learn from Stevens, we learn only contrastively: his poetry "*discloses* the sensical *through violating the limits of language*."¹⁸ By exulting in language that violates our sense, as it were, of sense, it instills in the reader an awareness of the limits of sense, indeed of the human imagination and understanding.

I find this all interesting, and I endorse wholeheartedly the dull point that in Stevens—and in much poetry besides—thought and feeling unfold in a manner that defies common logical or “rational” expectations of continuation. But Read falls short of providing us with a reason to believe in the existence of the philosophical poem, and seeing this will lead us to our first point of general interest. We know that Wittgenstein demanded sensitivity to linguistic context and to the varieties of language use in a form of life (this may be the implied point of the *Tractatus*; it is the explicit point of all of his later writings). And Read's handling of Stevens should strike one as failing to take this in account in respect to poetry. There is something very odd about how Read reads Stevens. He goes through the various lines and asks what they mean. And in doing so he treats the language of the poem as one would treat any chain of descriptive sentences whose business it is to describe some real or imaginary state of affairs. For Stevens' verse to work its Tractarian magic, we must, as Read does, approach each line in an incredibly literal manner and then find it surprising that they fall apart if so approached. Few informed readers of poetry at this stage in the development of modernism would be inclined to approach a poem of any cultural or artistic significance as Read does. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” was written in 1917, some 60 years after *Les fleurs du mal* was published and the French symbolists set the poem down the path of great modernist abstraction; and when poetry reaches Stevens's generation, no *au courant* reader could be expected to work through a lyric that promises originality in such a way. The sort of audience on whom Read's Tractarian might trick work would not have been reading Stevens, nor would Stevens have expected it to be.

Stevens himself tells us that this poem “is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas but of sensations,”¹⁹ which, whatever else it means, makes it clear that we should not read it *discursively*: as an attempt to produce meaning as, say, a work on ornithology would when informing readers of what a real blackbird looks like. Read does see the significance of Stevens' painterly abstractions and interest in imagistic and associative modes of presentation. This is presumably why he places so much emphasis on whether we can imagine or visualize what the poem seems to be saying. But we would not call a work of cubism *nonsense* just in case we cannot form a clear concept, a distinct image, of its subject, for example of the poet in Picasso's *The Poet*. We should be similarly reluctant to do so when we approach what is effectively just another kind of abstract art. It is naive to assume that since a poem, unlike a painting, is a linguistic creature, then it must in some way be constitutionally open to the evaluations of sense and nonsense. Surely the question lyrics like Stevens raise is whether language in the register of poetic modernism is *using* language in such a way as to make such an evaluative mode appropriate. Read's argument

¹⁸Read (2012), 44.

¹⁹Stevens (1966), 47.

works in effect only on the assumption that it should be surprising to find that we cannot elicit from Steven's language the precision of a proposition, and it is a very peculiar way to approach a poem of this sort. As an interpretation of the point of Stevens's poetic project, as a way of approaching poetic language in the context of high modernism, it is unconvincing.

This leads to a serious general point. It is a confusion of terms to label poetry "nonsense" just because its language refuses to terminate in a clear proposition or a coherent declaration. This is not to say poetry can never produce nonsense—after all, we do have Nonsense Poetry—but it is to say that the grounds for claiming that a poem is nonsensical cannot merely be that its language behaves as Read claims Steven's language does. The *Tractatus* is entitled to call its propositions nonsensical *precisely because it presents them as propositions*, conveyed by sentences that are assertive, that have a definable logical function, and that are taken to delineate the boundaries of an "idea": a concept, a claim, a philosophical *point*. The notion of Tractarian nonsense applies to a use of language charged with the task of making sense, and sense of a precise sort: *whatever* form of sense-making is demanded when one is attempting to articulate a *theory*. The resolute reading requires that we see in the language of Wittgenstein's work both a promise of meaning and the want of conditions that could produce this meaning. Absent this promise, absent this kind of language use, it is unclear what would even invite the notion of nonsense. Tractarian nonsense is intelligible *as* nonsense against a certain backdrop: language produced in a metaphysical register; *this* is why the nonsense it produces can be said to offer a despairing insight into the nature and limits of philosophy itself. If the language of a poem is in no obvious way produced in this register, we are being very liberal with our analogies, and likely guilty of the sin of ambiguity, to apply the concept of nonsense to it, especially in such a way that makes us think that it is a *philosophically significant use of nonsense*, as Read's "literary nonsense" clearly intends. This is not to claim that one must be doing philosophy to produce nonsense; surely this is not the case. But Stevens' task as a poet is partly to *create* new conditions for the poetic employment of language, and Read fails to offer a reason to think that the sense/nonsense distinction is an appropriate framework for making aesthetic sense of these new conditions. As Wittgenstein writes in *Zettel*, "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."²⁰ We might take issue with the anti-cognitivist implications of Wittgenstein's view of poetry, but it does make clear that he would find it astonishing to approach Stevens, or any poet for that matter, as Read does.

The *Tractatus* does open up a very interesting way of thinking about the relationship between poetry and philosophy, though it is very unlike Read's "educative poetry of the absurd."²¹ The *Tractatus* critiques a specific way of confronting what we are calling the problem of worldliness. It does not conclude by delivering us to a form of skepticism or anti-realism. It speaks assuredly in its final passage about the prospect of being right with the world in thought and language, and it takes itself to have shown us that metaphysics, logic and perhaps philosophy itself are not where this rightness will be achieved. The final passage, in other words, holds out the possibility of alternative routes to this desired destination. The reader concerned with poetry's way with worldliness should take from this a call to see poetry, at least on occasion, as delivering what philosophy, because of its particular way with language and thought, cannot. Even if one is not sold on a resolute reading of nonsense and its apparent anti-philosophical point, the

²⁰Wittgenstein (1967), §160.

²¹ Read (2012), 27.

possibility it opens up for thinking about poetry is intriguing and independent of scholarly quarrels about the *Tractatus*. Non-philosophical employments of language, especially, perhaps, the poetic, might provide the site for a distinct kind of engagement with the issue of worldliness. I will return to this idea.

IV Poetry as The Perfection of Philosophy

There is a way of stating the project of Wittgenstein's later writings that is very useful for thinking about why a poetic rather than philosophical employment of language stands the best chance of overcoming—note that I did not say “solving”—the problem of worldliness. Assuming either a resolute or irresolute reading of the *Tractatus*, philosophy of the traditional metaphysical variety looks to be an odd affair, defying in its very attempts at philosophical self-expression the possibility of expressing anything at all. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein sees this as arising from the fact that philosophy of the traditional sort is usually radically unaware of the nature of its own activity. He argues that most philosophical problems—problems concerning the nature of mind, the self, language, reality, and truth—are not, as it were, *discovered* by philosophers but *made* by them. These “problems” turn out to be generated by the very machinery of thought and language that is engaged to resolve these problems. There are many reasons for this, but chief among them is that, for Wittgenstein, philosophical language abandons the everyday contexts of speech and so the common criterial grounds for meaningful language use that ordinary language alone can provide.²² When we abandon these contexts, as Wittgenstein thinks philosophy often does, language “goes on holiday”, ripping words from their everyday contexts and placing them in a space in which they are bound to baffle, to inspire a sense of conceptual queerness and so a sense of something that stands in need of a philosophical explanation. For Wittgenstein, the way to rid oneself of a philosophical problem is to find an employment of language that *dispels* the very sense of wonder that rouses the philosopher to offer a metaphysical theory in the first place. In respect to the problem of worldliness, this would be to find an employment of language that somehow vanishes the sense of rupture from that to which we wish to be brought closer; it would dispel, rather than answer, the worries that give rise to our sense of the problem of worldliness as a uniquely *philosophical* problem.

For Wittgenstein, philosophy, once properly reformed, must shun metaphysical theses and must refuse to invoke anything theoretically occult, anything “hidden”, when attempting to bring to clarity those features of our epistemic, linguistic, and psychological situation with which philosophy tends to be concerned. In fact, philosophy, when done properly, explains nothing:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.²³

The question, then, becomes how do we identify those features of our worldly condition which are open to view but which philosophy, again of a traditional metaphysical sort, occludes? How do we make manifest what the naive mind thinks we need a metaphysical thesis to identify and explain, for example, the world and our place in it? Wittgenstein puts it in the following way:

²²For example, see the series of remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* running from §106 to §133.

²³*PI* § 126

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous presentation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate cases* ... The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It earmarks the forms of the account we give, the way we look at things.²⁴

This notion of a “perspicuous presentation” is as close as we get in the later Wittgenstein to a statement of philosophical method. Note that perspicuous presentations are not representations of anything real at all, and it is striking that Wittgenstein’s most famous examples concern pictures of steaming teapots (§297), a shopkeeper who enlists color charts and counting methods when asked for five red apples (§1), workers whose language consists of just five masonry terms (§2-21), and an odd thing called a beetle box (§293). To this extent, perspicuous presentations offer what an aesthetician would call an essentially *imaginative experience*, yielding typically artificial, fictionalized scenarios the appreciation of which helps us to turn back to the real world and see it aright. In other words, Wittgenstein’s ordinary language philosophy is not concerned with simply cataloguing actual instances of “what we say when,” which would just be another way of privileging the empirical and so leading us back to the problems exposed in the *Tractatus*. Perspicuous presentations rather act as “intermediate cases” in the sense that in them we see presented a picture of what once seemed problematic, only now without the attendant sense of wonder, only now without the sense that something stands in need of explanation. We thus see suggested in a perspicuous presentation a possibility for achieving the kind of rightness with the world in thought and language that the *Tractatus* promises.

Though more needs to be said about Wittgenstein to get this view on its feet, I hope one can detect how it opens up a very interesting role for poetry. Unlike the *Tractatus*, the *Investigations* allows us to identify points of continuity with certain late romantic sensibilities, more less of just the sort we can seem to detect in Stevens. The residue of romanticism we can detect in Stevens’s poetry is the sense of somehow achieving alignment with the world in lines that, much like Wittgenstein’s perspicuous presentations, proudly bear their abstraction and artificiality. While the suggestive queerness of Wittgenstein’s perspicuous presentations can call to mind Kafka or Beckett, they offer, as Stevens’s poetry does, a promise of *a kind of* return to a state of naturalness in thought and language, which is one way of putting what remains of the romantic impulse in modernism. And this presents us with a very interesting possibility. To one concerned with the relationship between poetry and philosophy, the *Investigations* can seem to invite us to see certain poems as prompting forms of imaginative experience that effectively act as perspicuous presentations, creating environments of thought and feeling that offer us the sense of now seeing the world aright. More generally, the possibility this opens for us is that of seeing poems, on rare but wondrous occasion, as a way of arriving at the destination philosophy sets for itself but without the limitations Wittgenstein claims make philosophy incapable of actually getting there. In other words, a poem rather than a philosophical work will be the most likely place to find the most perfect testament to how one who feels the problem of worldliness can overcome what ails her: a sense of how words, perceptions, and feelings might succeed in reaching out to a common

²⁴*PI* § 122

world, in placing us in contact with something beyond ourselves, perhaps not Reality but, again, something at least worldly enough.

There is a great temptation to hear in Stevens an essentially later Wittgensteinian project, certainly when he writes lines such as these, from “Repetitions of a Young Captain”:

If these were only words that I am speaking
Indifferent sounds and not the heraldic-ho
Of the clear sovereign that is reality

Of the clearest reality that is sovereign
How should I repeat them, keep repeating them

Which later in the poem resolves to the following plea:

Secrete us in reality. It is there
My orator. Let this giantness fall down
And come to nothing. Let the rainy arcs

And pathetic magnificence dry in the sky.
Secrete us in reality.

Again, for the later Wittgenstein there is no privileging of literal or propositional employments of language, so there is no need to worry about the abstraction and figuration of Stevens’ language, or of the great importance of its “materiality” in effecting its particular enchantment. What does matter is the partical sense Stevens’s poems can create of inhabiting a space in which what we wish to possess can feel to be brought nearer, and that a poem, and not a kind of theory, is what makes this feeling possible. The sense of arrival offered by a poem that “secretes us into reality” is not the sort we get when we find a solution to a theoretical problem. It is the sort we get when we find that somewhere under the sun there is a string of words that can give us *this* experience, say a poem that seems to deliver us into world, in fact secrete us into it. We hear the world, at any rate the “sea”, in “secretion” (the sea is one of Stevens’s tropes of the real). And then we note the lovely ambiguity, that “see-cre-ted” is just a vowel away from “secret-ed”, as if to tell us that explanations that seek conceptual clarity shall die upon the experience of sheer worldliness his poems can seem to offer: that it is, for one who hopes for metaphysical grasp of this matter, bound to remain a secret.

Consider now a very early poem, “Fabliau of Florida,” and note, for want of a better phrase, the perceptual and affective attention of the speaker.

Barque of Phosphor
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,
Into the alabasters
And night blues

Foam and cloud are one
 Sultry sea-monsters
 Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull
 With white moonlight

There will never be an end
 To this droning of the surf

The poem is an early example of the Stevens who was at times interested not in “ideas about things but the thing itself.” And it strikes the reader, at least one sort of reader, as celebrating a powerful, though perhaps ultimately inscrutable, way of taking in a stretch of sea on a particular evening. The poem is expressive a rather remarkable way in which this might register to one beholding it: in this case, I assume, an expanse of water receding into something like a felt expanse of eternity and achieving a kind of nocturnal, untroubled unity with it (“foam and cloud are one”), though of course this makes it seem silly whereas in the poem it is not silly at all. There is a sense of the objects one witnesses as illuminated, and so touched, by something like the world beyond us (“Fill your black hull/With white moonlight”), a thought that would have been deeply felt by Stevens, who spent much of his poetic life wondering, in one form or another, whether the poetic imagination constituted or revealed reality, as a poetic expression of what philosopher would describe as the tension between constructivism and a kind of realism. The sound of the surf is described as a “drone”, to which “there will never be an end,” but, as positioned at the end of the poem, this comes off as reassuring rather than a complaint and the reader is made to feel as though the great world can at moments present itself, even in Florida. Stevens, certainly at this early point in his career, is a kind poet of the everyday,²⁵ and he takes solace in the repetitions of the world around him, its “droning” as a kind of insistence that it is there, too.

Now what, precisely, is the point to be drawn about the potential relationship between poetry and philosophy these Stevensonian encounters with worldliness, and this reformed later Wittgenstein, seem to offer? Before answering, let me say add few words about Simon Critchley’s remarkable discussion of Stevens, since it amplifies features of my line of argument here. Critchley takes seriously and literally what I said above about the possibility of seeing poetry of a certain stripe as the perfection of philosophy’s own project. What makes Critchley’s account of Stevens so elegant is how well he tells the story, from Kant to Heidegger, of what I have been calling the modern problem of worldliness. He makes a powerful case for seeing Stevens’ struggles to understand the imagination and its relation to the real as placing him squarely in this tradition, adding that his poems almost succeed—“almost” because poets can fail, too—in making available the kind of experience of the world the great phenomenological traditions urges as a response to the problem of worldliness, one that is material, concrete, object-oriented, and, in the grand Heideggerian sense, at home in it. For Critchley, “Stevens is philosophically significant because his verse recasts the basic problem of epistemology in a way

²⁵ For an excellent study of Stevens’s poetics of the everyday, see Siobhan Phillips (2009).

that perhaps allow the problem to be cast away,” for Stevens shows us that the world “is phenomenologically disclosed or reflectively transfigured as a world not in philosophy but through the poetic act.”²⁶

Critchley offers an interesting account of the philosophical provenance of Stevens’ poetry, and it strikes me as very helpful in showing us how certain concerns which animate philosophy also animate Stevens. And I find at least instructive, if bombastic, Critchley’s claim that Stevens’ poetry allows us nearly to overcome the problem of worldliness because Stevens is a poet and not a philosopher. The issue I wish to raise is whether this story should lead us to conclude that Stevens is *philosophically* significant, that his poetry is, as Critchley leads us to believe, a kind of perfection of philosophy’s labor? Something inside of us feels that it is a compliment to do so. But I think we need to be careful here, or we will find that in paying this compliment we have asserted the very ground of the ancient quarrel; the privileging of philosophy over poetry.

Critchley correctly sees that the poet and the philosopher can be concerned with the same material, the same issues, and that the difference is really just a matter of whether one opts to give philosophical or poetic form to the this basic, common content (I use “content”, however ugly, because it is sufficiently neutral). But what should we call this common content? Critchley asks us to think of this content as essentially philosophical, and then he sets himself the task of showing that Stevens makes it his own, revealing, to this extent, a poet to have skin in a game that really belongs to philosophy. This interprets the sense of philosophical liberation Stevens at times offers to be a liberation of philosophical thought, an ability to think freely and successfully about the philosophical problem of worldliness. The position my discussion of Wittgenstein and Stevens leads us to is very different. It implies that we should characterize this sense of liberation as not *of* but *from* philosophical thought, and that the compliment to be paid to Stevens is not that he has perfected the philosopher’s labor but rather shows us how to avoid engaging in it ourselves. In other words, if we wish to praise poetry’s accomplishments in respect to the problem of worldliness, we do so most accurately by asserting its autonomy from philosophy.

There is a perversion in calling this common content “philosophical” and thinking of a poet as “philosophical” because she too is interested them. To do so, again, just affirms the ground of the quarrel. Why, one wonders, does it get to be called philosophical? That is not to say it should be called poetic, which would be to take cards from philosophy just to stack them in favor of poetry. It is much more sensible to think of this content—the content that, say, gets interpreted as the modern problem of worldliness—as a kind of common cultural property that belongs to neither the poet nor the philosopher, as a shared sense of worries, wonders, anxieties, and puzzles. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche suggests that it is a great, and disastrous, accident of history that what we call philosophy became associated with the labor of Socrates rather than Sophocles, that, so to say, the logician rather than the tragedian gets charged with the production of “sophia”. Whatever one may think of this as a historical claim, it should give pause when calling *however* we put that which both Stevens and the philosopher are equally concerned “philosophical” and intend it in a way that establishes a lineage with what gets taught, say, in a History of Modern Philosophy course. To put it in a point, the skepticism we should have about calling a poem “philosophical” is that the label can profoundly misconstrue the poet’s relationship to the mass of common cultural material that informs her work, material that may also inform the work of the philosopher, the musician, the theologian, the novelist, and many

²⁶Critchley (2005), 30.

others besides. Even if we grant that calling a poem “philosophical” is just a way to ascribe a significant degree of substance or profundity to it, this line of argument should make us very reluctant to indulge this habit uncritically.

If we take seriously Wittgenstein’s reformed vision of philosophy, it would seem that the compliment we to be paid to poetry is that it can perfect philosophy’s project in the quite limited but still significant sense that it can help us to see that there are *other* routes to worldliness than the search for philosophical explanations and theories makes possible. To call Stevens a poet who repays our philosophical interests is, on this picture, is to praise the power of his verse in allowing us not to hear the problem of worldliness as a theoretical problem, in allowing it to register otherwise, perhaps as poetic problem but then one that calls for the tools of art and not theory to be analyzed. Like Tractarian nonsense, the reputedly “philosophical poem” is not actually *philosophically productive*. It is productive, but not of a point, a claim, or insight that would feel at home in a traditional philosophical work. In this Wittgensteinian sense, Stevens’s importance to philosophy would be to remind us that there is an alternative to philosophy itself, another way of working through the same cultural material. If we wish to lodge a claim on behalf of Stevens’s success, it would be that the experience of worldliness his poetry provides is exemplary in a very precise way: it permits us, at least for a few moments, to think that no other employment of thought and language than his could so fully present that to which we wish to be brought nearer. It is perhaps also to say that a theory could never produce such an experience, and this shouldn’t come as a surprise.

One will have noted how little I actually took from Stevens, how far my general remarks have fallen from *establishing* that his poems offer anything like an insight into how we might become right with the world. In an important sense, either you feel the poems succeed in presenting an encounter with the real, in overstepping for a moment the space between mind and world, or you do not. And if you do not, there is no *independent* reason I can possibly offer you that will convince you. But Wittgenstein helps us see that it is utterly silly to hear this as a limitation, as a confession that poetry can justify nothing, that the form of imaginative experience of the real it offers is incapable of demonstrating something about the world. To feel anything of this sort is silly because it reveals the foolishness of taking a philosophical stance toward a poem, as though we expected a poem to provide us with that elusive premise that will finally *show* the world and our connection to it to take this form or that. What Wittgenstein provides is a vantage-point from which we see that none of this is a limitation but is, in fact, a potential form of cognitive liberation. To repeat again an obvious point, this is not to say that poets cannot aspire to illuminate, even in some manner to constitute, reality: consider Stevens’s desire to create a “supreme fiction.” The point I am making is that, should a poet achieve this, the terms with which we specify the accomplishment should be poetic. At any rate, for a Wittgensteinian, we should neither expect nor desire the terms to be in any interesting sense philosophical.

All I have done here is show what follows if we look at Stevens on worldliness through the lens of Wittgenstein. Such a narrow field of analysis is ill-suited for yielding general conclusions. But if I have not *shown* that it is always a category error to call a poem philosophical, I hope that I have motivated a sense that, even when the concerns of a poet and a philosopher intersect, we should wish to emphasize the distinctiveness of the approach of each. That is, we should expect that it is by insisting on the space between poetry and philosophy that we will find the proper terms for acknowledging what the poet contributes to our capacity to think and feel about the world. And perhaps for acknowledging what the philosopher contributes, too. If one does not

share Wittgenstein's unflattering view of traditional philosophy, the basic point still stands.

V CONCLUSION

Even if Wittgenstein leads us to skepticism in respect to the idea of the philosophical poem, it does no disservice to the poet. The terms his work offers for discussing the issue allow us to praise the poet in ways that are impossible if we are held captive by the image of poetry, at least on occasion, as a rather artistic and figurative way of doing philosophy. And it should not be a surprise that Wittgenstein offers productive grounds on which to address some of the challenges of the opaque modern poem. It should not surprise because Wittgenstein's great works raise in effect the very same problems many of the "difficult" works of poetic modernism do. If there is a great question as to just what the point, the insight, *the meaning*, of these poems are, this is precisely the question the *Tractatus* raises in regard to the propositions which constitute it. And like the opaque work of poetic modernism, we know that, whatever the *Tractatus's* secret is, it is likely worth knowing, not a joke or an empty promise but an achievement of insight we are perhaps too crude, too beholden to unreformed habits of appreciation, to grasp fully. If in much modernist poetry, especially of the sort typified by Stevens, the world is felt to be made present though never really *shown*, yielded but never quite represented, the *Investigations* and its perspicuous presentations do essentially the same. And perhaps this is the most we can mean when speaking of Wittgenstein's work as implying a kind of philosophical modernism. His would be a modernism of the real, but of an elusive real, and of a merely implied everyday as its home. The "purer" realism, again in Gaskin's words, is what reality looks like when both the poet and the philosopher come to believe that it can no longer be represented, either artistically or theoretically, and thus demands the forms of abstraction Stevens and Wittgenstein, each in their own way, perfected.²⁷

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