Essay

Wittgenstein and Poetry: A Reading of Czeslaw Milosz's "Realism"

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Abstract: In this paper I hope to cast light on Wittgenstein enigmatic remark, "one should really only create philosophy *poetically*". I discuss Wittgenstein's ambition to overcome metaphysics by way of an appeal to ordinary language. For this purpose I contrast "realism" in philosophy (i.e., metaphysical realism, particularly its modern scientific version) with "realism" in poetry. My theme is the capacity of poetry to provide a model for Wittgenstein's resistance to the inhumanity unleashed in metaphysics—exemplified by two distinct forms of skepticism—which obliterates the ordinary world under the guise of discovering its true nature. The poem I shall use to illustrate the difficulty in maintaining our grip on reality, hence our grip on our humanity, is Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Realism".

Keywords: skepticism; nihilism; Wittgenstein; poetry; metaphysics; realism

1. Introduction

In this paper I hope to cast light on Wittgenstein enigmatic remark, "one should really only create philosophy *poetically*" [1] (p. 28)[1]. Call this, for ease of reference, Wittgenstein's *proclamation*. In order to elucidate the proclamation I will discuss the ambition of Wittgenstein's philosophy to overcome metaphysics by way of an appeal to ordinary language. I shall contrast realism in philosophy (i.e., metaphysical realism in its modern scientific version) with realism in poetry and show that, somewhat paradoxically, whilst the first is an attack (according to Cavell, a skeptical attack [2])[2] upon the ordinary, the second is a recovery of it.

To understand the specific ways in which poetry can counter two forms of skepticism about reality arising from reflection upon metaphysical realism: the epistemological *problem of the external world* famously raised by Descartes in his *Meditations*, which threatens to undermine the possibility of justification for knowledge claims about the external world. And, secondly, *nihilism*, which involves a more radical and disorienting skepticism about meaning and value—the skeptical imagination conjuring up the threat of a meaningless world devoid of human value. This semantic and existential threat arises as on the basis of an ontological problem that the ordinary human world of appearances (i.e., the manifest image) is denigrated as unreality if we accept that the world is nothing but the scientific image of the world. Poetry sidesteps the problem of the external world through its non-assertoric mode of address which puts it out of reach of the question of justification; and it counters nihilism by evincing a faith in everyday language and the everyday world which it makes available to us anew through identification, a point I will elaborate on below. My theme is the capacity of poetry to provide a model for Wittgenstein's resistance to the inhumanity unleashed in metaphysics—exemplified by these two distinct forms of skepticism—which obliterates the ordinary world under the guise of discovering its true nature. The poem I shall use to illustrate the difficulty in maintaining our grip on reality, hence our grip on our humanity, is Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Realism" [3].

2. Scientific Metaphysics and Skepticism

Metaphysics is an a priori exploration of reality which purports to show how the world *really* or *essentially* is. The quest is for the true nature or essence of reality; or, as it

is sometimes put, the world as it is *in itself*. A key motivation for this investigation is to distinguish the world as it really is from the world as it appears to us, as if there were a fundamental gap between these. In modern philosophy, the metaphysician purports to express truths about the essence of things in a manner akin to the scientific description of sub-atomic particles. After the rise of mathematical science in the C17th, metaphysical realists have tended to identify the world in itself with the scientific image of the world, particularly the unobservable realm of physics. On this physicalist conception, the world becomes a version of what Democritus called "atoms and the void", consisting of nothing but the posits of current physics e.g., atomic and subatomic particles, fields, space and time. The problem that we are then confronted with is this: if the scientific image of the world is all that there is then what becomes of the familiar or ordinary world of appearances—which Wilfrid Sellars famously called "the manifest image of the world"? [4] (p. 5).

Since the scientific image provides a conception of how the world *really* is—which has come to mean what it is essentially and mind-independently—then the manifest image must be unreal, an illusion, and so, not the realm of human habitation that we take it to be. And what becomes of the *human* in this vision? A representative cognitive scientist, V. S. Ramachnadrun, writes, "we are nothing but a pack of neurons". Even as he goes on to admit difficulty in fully affirming this reductive and "dehumanizing" view, he cannot hide a triumphant tone of sarcasm when he concludes that it confronts us with "far-reaching philosophical, moral and ethical dilemmas" [5] (p. 23). Our grip on our humanity and the reality reflected in human experience is lost, or under serious threat.

The threat to ordinary human reality takes two main forms. Scientific metaphysics presents itself as something that we know to be true by way of reason and argument. It aims to win conviction on the basis of sustained philosophical reflection on science, our best empirical theory of the world. Consequently, the identification of the world-in-itself with the scientific image of the world purports to be something we know on the solid grounds of experiment and reason. So, too, the claim that ordinary human reality—what is revealed in ordinary experience, "the appearances"—is not part of the world-in-itself. The threat to human reality is that it is revealed as, in some sense, unreal; and, from the scientific perspective, our only knowledge of it is through its causal effects upon us. The latter idea leads to the general epistemological problem of the external world: if the causal effects of the world could have been produced in us in some other way (say, dreams or hallucinations or being a brain in a vat) then how do we know what the external world is like or whether it exists at all? What is at stake is the reality of 'reality': whether we can know there is a world external to the mind?

The second skeptical threat to human reality associated with scientific metaphysics is consequent upon its power to undermine ordinary language. This form of skepticism is existential, a matter of semantics not epistemology. If the world is nothing but the posits of physics (perhaps, also chemistry and biology) described in the vocabulary of physics (etc.) then what becomes of ordinary language, and so, the world that is imagined by way of it? Under threat are such familiar concepts and realities as colour, chair, rose, river, person, artwork, promise, blame, praise, belief, desire, justice, love and so on. We might call this skeptical problem the threat of *nihilism*, the threatened loss of the meaning and value of (the concepts of) everyday life [6].

With this philosophical stage-setting in place let us now consider Wittgenstein's philosophy and its relation to the skeptical problems engendered by metaphysics. Then we will turn to exploring Wittgenstein's proclamation concerning poetic philosophy.

3. Wittgenstein on Bringing Word Back to Their Everyday Use

Ramachnadrun rhetorically asks, "What is so sacred about "real" reality?"—that is, "the real world you [think] you live in now" [5] (p. 23–24). Clearly, for the scientific metaphysician there is nothing sacred about ordinary human reality. The scientific image either reduces or replaces the manifest image; or renders it a *false* image without any grounding in reality. To show the sacredness of ordinary human reality, by way of fidelity

to ordinary language, is Wittgenstein's abiding mission throughout his writings. To free oneself of the grip of metaphysical theories is to free oneself of the need to deny or denigrate ordinary language and the form of life with which it is bound up. Overcoming metaphysics, in Wittgenstein's thought, is an attempt to resist what Cavell calls "the human drive to the inhuman" [7] (Preface). At stake is nothing more or less than our humanity.

In explaining his task in philosophy Wittgenstein distinguishes the metaphysical use of a word—say, "know" or "object"—from its ordinary use. And alongside this distinction he distinguishes the traditional philosopher or metaphysician who engages in metaphysical system building—hence metaphysical thought and talk—from his own kind of philosopher (addressed collectively as "we") who appeals to the ordinary use of language to test and criticise metaphysical claims:

> When philosophers [metaphysicians] use a word—"knowledge", "being",
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> "object", "I", "proposition/sentence", "name"—and try to grasp
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> the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word
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> ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at
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> home?—
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> What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their
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> everyday use [8] (§116).

The point of the embedded question—"Is the word ever actually used this way in the language in which it is at home?"—depends upon the fact that the metaphysical use of words is an imagined extension or projection from ordinary language, e.g., "knowledge", "being", "object" "I" etc. The metaphysical projection employs familiar language in an unfamiliar (or extraordinary) way which abstracts away from the ordinary conditions of use and so strips these words of the contextual circumstances required to understand the "work" they do. Since our words get their meaning from their use within our ordinary practices, the question becomes whether the metaphysical use (which imposes various inflexible demands and requirements) can be regarded as a reasonable, or even intelligible, projection.

The issue I want to consider concerns Wittgenstein's idea "that one should write philosophy only *as one would write poetry*". How can poetry—which is, let us say, an extraordinary displacement or defamiliarization of ordinary words which thickens or intensifies their meaning[3]—achieve Wittgenstein's philosophical aim of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use?

As a first step it is important to ask what Wittgenstein means in saying that one should write philosophy only *as one would write poetry*; or more simply, that one should only write philosophy *poetically*. An important remark of Wittgenstein's to read in connection with this is, "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" [11] (§160). Poetry is, predominantly, assertoric language in the indicative mood, the linguistic form which we typically use to communicate information. However, even though poetry is largely composed from indicative sentences, in poetic contexts these do not function to transmit information. We might say poetry does not express truths within the space of reasons as Plato imagined philosophy to do, but thoughts within the realm of the imagination—which invite a spirit of play rather than assertoric determination. On this way of seeing things the indicative sentences of which a poem is made are not employed to say how things are in the way that indicative sentences in a newspaper or scientific article do. In a poem one is aware that assertoric sentences are being put in service of imaginative and emotional ends. Frege, a powerful influence on Wittgenstein's thought, put it like this,

> In poetry we have the case of thoughts being expressed without being actually put
> forward as true, in spite of the assertoric form of the sentence; although the poem
> may suggest to the hearer that he himself should make an assenting judgment.
> Therefore the question still arises, even about what is presented in the assertoric

sentence-form, whether it really contains an assertion. And this question must be answered in the negative if the requisite seriousness is lacking [12] (p. 330).

Seriousness seems the wrong criterion, however. Poetry, as a form of literature, can be as serious or frivolous as one likes. The important point is that nothing is "actually put forward as true". A poem works through its imaginative power to provoke, stimulate, suggest, intimate, arouse, evince, show or reveal but not to state, claim, assert, declare or say[4].

To write philosophy poetically is to write it in such a way that it is clear to the reader that its assertoric form is being not used for assertoric or truth-stating purposes. It is an attempt to slow the reader down, to avoid the temptation to literal-mindedness [1] (p. 40). In Wittgenstein's hands, the purpose of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts, for which the question of truth can be set aside. A poetic philosophy might then be understood as a kind of philosophy that did not mislead us into thinking that it is in the business of communicating information or factual statements about the world. However, I take it that when Wittgenstein goes on to acknowledge that he "cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do" he is admitting failure to achieve this goal [1] (p. 28). Certainly, most readers and commentators have taken Wittgenstein to be offering theoretical truths about the world in spite of the unassertive style of his writing—its multiple divergent voices, the fragmentary character of his remarks which constantly breaks the train of thought, their open-endedness, the frequent appearance of metaphoric and figurative language etc.—*and* in spite of his insistence that he is not engaging in metaphysical theorizing:

> And we must not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear and description alone must take its place [8] (§109).

In this context, "description" does not mean description of ordinary empirical states of affairs, but *description of grammar*, the logic of language: a kind of conceptual cartography, which he calls "sketches of landscapes" [8] (Preface).

Part of the skill or delicacy of what Wittgenstein is trying to do is his realization that there is no point attempting to fight metaphysics with more metaphysics; to counter a metaphysical assertion with its negation would, of course, be self-defeating. The point is to recover the ordinary which is called into question by metaphysics.[5] In the twilight of metaphysical "truth" about reality (i.e., the mythology of a world-in-itself), our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking become mysterious and strange, apparently unhinged from the world as it really is; and so, must be recast or revised or done away with.

It is important to realize that it is by way of recovering ordinary language that Wittgenstein recovers ordinary human reality. On Wittgenstein's vision, to reflect on the logic (or grammar) of ordinary language is to reflect on the world, what we mean by "world":

> But now it seems to me too that besides the work of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured *sub specie æterni*. It is—as I believe—the way of thought which as it were flies above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its flight [1] (p. 6).

Language ("the way of thought") captures the world *sub specie aeterni*. To think in language is to reflect upon the world that it is inextricably entangled with. So we explore the world by exploring the grammar of our language, our concepts of 'objects' and their conditions of application. This helps to explain Wittgenstein's remark, "Theology as grammar" [8] (§373). To explore the logic of language is to explore God's creation, the human reality that He, as it were, made for us.

What is at stake in the battle between metaphysics and ordinary language is our ability, or inability, to accept the everyday lifeworld as we experience it rather than treat it as a realm of illusion or make-believe. Wittgenstein's method for undoing the pretensions of metaphysics to reveal the one and only TRUE REALITY is to recall us to our ordinary practices of using language to do various kinds of "work" in our lives. This is an important motivation for his adoption of a linguistic starting point in his philosophy. Even if we

cannot agree about what a table or plant or person *really* is, metaphysically speaking—and let us not assume at the outset that we know what "really" means in this context—we can at least agree about how we use the words "table", "tree", "rain" and "person" in everyday circumstances. As Wittgenstein puts it, "it is in their *language* that human beings agree. And this is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life" [8] (§241). We agree in how words are used in our interactions and commerce with each other; but this is not to be understood in terms of agreement on a specific set of common opinions or knowledge claims about how things are. Rather, what can be brought to agree on, after investigation, is how things *possibly* are: "our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards '*possibilities*' of phenomena" [8] (§90). That is, we have to agree in our meanings—on what it makes sense to say or think, under various conditions; that is, on what is possible—in order that we can even have true or false opinions about how things are. Truth presupposes meaning and one can philosophise at the level of meaning without concerning oneself about what is actually true or false.[6]

Wittgenstein's aim is to earn the right not to have to take sides in metaphysical disputes, by sidestepping or undercutting such disputes, and so avoiding any demand that we *must* use language which purports to state truths about how things *really* are, or which purport to reveal the existence of a hidden realm of metaphysical "objects" (universals, sense-data, monads, disembodied minds, etc.). In that way Wittgenstein undermines any question of there being something in the order of 'metaphysical truth'. The fundamental reason for writing philosophy poetically, then, is to re-imagine philosophy, to move it away from its traditional conception as a battle of competing ontological theories of the world which present themselves in the form of necessary truths about the essence or nature of things. Since Wittgenstein's method in philosophy is "to brings words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" [8] (§116) we may understand the proclamation as saying that poetry, pre-eminently, is that use of words that achieves the philosophical aim of returning to, or recovering, the everyday use of language—even if this is achieved, paradoxically, through the extraordinary defamiliarized and intensified uses to which words in poetry are put.

4. The Antiskeptical Powers of Poetry and Painting

Let us now consider the way in which poetry can recover ordinary language, hence human reality, in a philosophical context through its powers of calling attention to words and the work words do. For this purpose I will consider the poem "Realism" by Czeslaw Milosz, a poem that explicitly takes up the skeptical problems arising from scientific metaphysics and pledging trust in the skepticism-defeating power of art—here represented by realistic painting and poetry:

REALISM

We are not so badly off, if we can

Admire Dutch painting. For that means

We shrug off what we have been told

For a hundred, two hundred years. Though we lost

Much of our previous confidence. Now we agree

That those trees outside the window, which probably exist,

Only pretend to greenness and treeness

And that the language loses when it tries to cope

With clusters of molecules. And yet, this here:

A jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon,

Walnuts, a loaf of bread, last—and so strongly

It is hard not to believe in their lastingness.

And thus abstract art is brought to shame,

Even if we do not deserve any other.

Therefore I enter those landscapes

Under a cloudy sky from which a ray

Shoots out, and in the middle of dark plains

A spot of brightness glows. Or the shore

With huts, boats, and on yellowish ice

Tiny figures skating. All this

Is here eternally, just because once it was.

Splendor (certainly incomprehensible)

Touches a cracked wall, a refuse heap,

The floor of an inn, jerkins of the rustics,

A broom, and two fish bleeding on a board.

Rejoice! Give thanks! I raised my voice

To join them in their choral singing,

Amid their ruffles, collets, and silk skirts,

One of them already, who vanished long ago.

And our song soared up like smoke from a censer.

—Czeslaw Milosz [3]

The title of the poem suggests a book of philosophy until one realizes with a shock of recognition that "realism" is a word in everyday use for accepting things as they are. The word also has more specific aesthetic, legal and political meanings. In art criticism "realism" is a rejection of conventional art forms and techniques in favour of a truthful or unidealized depiction of contemporary life in all its ugly or messy detail. In traditional philosophy it stands for a well-known and widely held doctrine, metaphysical realism, which denotes a conception of a mind-independent world-in-itself.[7] However, in its most popular common or garden use within everyday speech, "realism" stands for "the quality or fact of representing a person or thing in a way that is accurate and true to life" [14]. Paradoxically, realism in this ordinary sense contrasts with, and opposes, philosophical "realism". The metaphysical realist holds that the manifest image of the world—the everyday world of "appearances"—is an illusion. Since, according to contemporary metaphysics, the world is nothing more or less than the scientific image of the world—in its most reductive form, the image of physics alone—the ordinary world is replaced by something along the lines of "clusters of molecules". The scientistic vision of things as they really are is at the expense of being true-to-life, true to human experience, true to the appearances.

We enlightened moderns have supposedly learnt from contemporary philosophy—which is largely in thrall to natural science (or physics)—that the existence of the external world is not assured. Metaphysicians take for granted that there is a deeply problematic metaphysical gap between mind and world that requires bridging. In the scientific image this is the gap between the mind and world as distinct causal entities in so far as the mind can be described in scientifically respectable terms. The tree outside the window that is the emblem of the world in the poem, only "probably exists". Moreover, its manifest features, such as greenness, are unreal; for in the scientific image nothing is, properly speaking, green since colour is not a concept employed in fundamental physics. At best there are material things which absorb and reflect electromagnetic radiation to varying degrees in the visible spectrum. Indeed the very trees themselves do not exist, at least not as we ordinarily think of them, being replaced, in the scientific image, by molecules or atoms of various sorts which give rise to tree-like effects in the mind.

In order to specify the philosophical work the poem achieves or aims at, I want to first contrast it with a famous misfiring attempt to solve a Cartesian skeptical problem that this scientific vision gives rise to. G.E. Moore memorably attempted to prove that the ordinary

external world existed in the face of external world skepticism by claiming that he (and by analogy, everyone) knows, for certain, many common sense propositions to be true of which the following are representative:

> There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now. Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar sense in which it has), from which it has been at various distances (in the familiar sense in which it is now at a distance both from that mantelpiece and from that bookcase, and at a greater distance from the bookcase than it is from the mantelpiece); also there have (very often, at all events) existed some other things of this kind with which it was in contact (in the familiar sense in which it is now in contact with the pen I am holding in my right hand and with some of the clothes I am wearing). Among the things which have, in this sense, formed part of its environment (i.e., have been either in contact with it, or at some distance from it, however great) there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies, each of which has, like it, (a) at some time been born, (b) continued to exist from some time after birth, (c) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist. But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born; and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had, at every moment, been alive upon it; and many of these bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born [15] (p. 107).

This lengthy, bizarre and scholastical description of what are, ostensibly, "obvious truisms" is surreal; as if it were a performance of high seriousness and scrupulousness played for laughs at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.[8] For present purposes, I want to focus on the curious status of these claims. We might say that Moore is employing a skeptical paradigm or model since he sees the proof of common sense propositions as a refutation of, or proof against, the Cartesian skeptical conclusion that we do not know that there is an external world (including one's own body) – which, of course, means Moore accepts a version of the Cartesian mind. In other words, what Moore provides is a skeptically inflected philosophical *theory* of the ordinary (interpreted as a matter of common sense) constituted by an indefinitely large set of propositions each of which he takes us to know, with certainty, to be true. The metaphysical character of this theory is clear from its unobviousness and dogmatism[9]–features are tied to Moore's conviction that these 'common sense' propositions constitute certain knowledge even though he admits to being unable to provide any evidence or justification for them:

> We are all, I think, in this *strange position* that we do know many things, with regard to which we know further that we must have had evidence for them, and yet we do not know how we know them, i.e., we do not know what the evidence was [15] (p. 118, italics added).

The striking problem with this theoretical defence of common sense reality against the threat of external world skepticism is that it does violence to our ordinary practice of using the concept of knowledge. Having claimed that common sense propositions are known for certain to be true, Moore is unable to meet a basic responsibility of any claim to know: namely, if the question "How do you know?" is posed, one must provide an objective justification, or else one's claim lapses. However, despite remaining certain that he *does* know, Moore admits that he cannot say *how* he knows. Moore concedes that this is a "strange position". It has a name, *dogmatism*. What is strange is that he endorses this dogmatism as a rational position. But as far as meeting the ordinary responsibility

of claims to knowledge goes, his claim is irresponsible and so fails to carry conviction in its argumentative or dialectical setting. The problem for Moore is that this questionable "knowledge" is the only thing standing in the way of the loss of the external world.

Moore's failed attempt to prove the Cartesian skeptic wrong explains why Wittgenstein criticises Moore for using knowledge in this context with "a metaphysical emphasis" [16] (p. 482)—a mode of usage that robs it of any effective employment. As Wittgenstein remarks, "realism can't be proved by means of it" [16] (p. 59). Moore's claim to know that there is a mind-independent world fails.

Milosz's poem "Realism" does not attempt to refute external world skepticism, as Moore tried to do, by arguing for a counter-assertion to the skeptical conclusion. Instead of that, the poetic voice "shrugs off" scientific metaphysics and its claim that we lack justification for our ordinary thought and talk about trees and greenness and so on. The Moorean attempt to justify that the external world exists presupposes a metaphysical (hence: skeptical) gap between mind and world that is apparently unbridgeable; hence Moore's dogmatism and his willingness to beg the question against the skeptic. Realistic art rejects any such skeptical gap and instead calls our attention to the myriad ways in which we, and the language we use, are part of, and bound up with, reality. From this perspective the problem of the external world does not so much as get off the ground. On the contrary, we are reminded of our ordinary relation to human reality—the reality manifest in human experience—by being reminded that the source of the meaningfulness of words is reality. The realism of poetry is not a theory or doctrine—in particular, not a *metaphysical* theory or doctrine—but an *attitude* to reality.

To connect this to Wittgenstein's proclamation we might note that this poetic attitude is more or less equivalent to what Cora Diamond has called "the realistic spirit" in Wittgenstein's philosophical writings [17].[10] Wittgenstein's aim in philosophy is to not to provide a metaphysical argument to the anti-skeptical conclusion that the ordinary human world exists; rather, he aims to recall us to the fact that we are *already* at home in the world by coming to see we are already at home in the language we use (—except, of course, that we have a tendency to go into exile, to speak outside "language-games" [8] (§8)). Language is the ground of this conflict between philosophical realism (or skepticism of the ordinary) and ordinary realism (or having a realistic spirit). In Wittgenstein's work, language is both the cause and cure of philosophical disorientation.

The poem reminds us of, and celebrates, something that, but for the distorting lens of metaphysics, we would not need to be reminded of: that language, including the language of the poem itself, is bound up with our form of life as it finds expression is the details of human activities emblematized by skaters on a frozen lake, or patrons at a local inn, or a church choir singing hymns. The poem is a reflection on realistic paintings in the old Dutch tradition—paintings of mundane human realities—because these partake of the realism of poetry, which is also the realism of Wittgenstein's philosophy (i.e., the realistic spirit).

Realistic art has the imaginative power to convince us of the reality of people and things "so strongly/that it is hard not to believe in their lastingness"—even if they are, in fact, long past. Notice how closely this down-to-earth quality of the poem echoes or rhymes with Wittgenstein's remark,

> We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth. This order is a super-order between—so to speak—super-concepts. Whereas, in fact, if the words "language", "experience", "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door" [8] (§97).

Here, too, we find the idea that reality ("world") used in philosophy (i.e., metaphysics) to refer to a "super-order between super-concepts" is an "illusion". If the word "reality" (or "world") is to have a legitimate use it must be one that can stand the humble test of

being part of our form of life in same manner as everyday concepts such as "table", "lamp", "door"; or, to return to the poem, "floor", "broom", "fish".

In saying that the trees outside the window only "probably exist" the poetic voice acknowledges that our justification for accepting that we *know* what we take ourselves to know about the external world is tenuous from a scientific point of view. But the poetic voice does not attempt to defend the claim that we know that the external world exists or that it has such and such features on scientific grounds. In place of a theoretical argument that aims to prove the world is real from premises acceptable to the external world skeptic—premises put in place by scientific metaphysics[11]—the poem reminds us of what we have lost in accepting the scientific 'wisdom' that the world is nothing but atoms and the void. By responding appreciatively to realistic art—as represented by C17th Dutch genre painting—we discover, or re-discover, that our intimate and highly complicated relations to the real are not dependent upon any theoretical argument. The Cartesian skeptical problem depends for its force upon misconstruing our relation to the ordinary world such that we feel we must find an intellectual argument capable of bridging a metaphysical gap between our minds and a mind-independent external world. The poem aligns with Wittgenstein in thinking that the best response to skepticism is to shrug it off. By ridding ourselves of a false intellectual obligation to prove reality exists, the poem opens a space in which we can be reminded of our place in the world, and so, recover our lost confidence.

From Wittgenstein's perspective perhaps the most fateful reason to write philosophy poetically, or to write poetry philosophically, is that it has the power to confront and resist nihilism, the form skepticism takes in the confrontation between metaphysics and ordinary language, in particular.[12] The poetic voice defines the problem succinctly: "the language loses when it tries to cope/With clusters of molecules". Ordinary language, the language in which we live and express ourselves, and the ordinary world with which it is intimately bound, are lost in the attempt to accommodate to scientific metaphysics (i.e., the currently dominant form of metaphysical realism). If the world is restricted to the scientific image of the world—in its most extreme form, the unobservable world of fundamental physics—then the appearances of things, including ourselves and our ordinary modes of thought and talk, would be eradicated or replaced by physicalist proxies described in the language of fundamental physics.[13] We would lose the ordinary world and its features such as "green" and "tree"; as well as "jar", "plate", "lemon", "walnuts", "bread", "fish", and "skating" and so on. By elevating the world of molecules above the world of human experience, metaphysical realism is revealed as a radical skeptical attack upon ordinary language, and so, a denial and rejection of the everyday world which ordinary language is about; the world in which we eat, drink, work, play and sing.

In order to counter this philosophical repudiation of ordinary human reality for metaphysical reality (i.e., the world-in-itself, the scientific image), Milosz invokes the artistic realism of C17th Dutch painting, the golden period in which flowered the still-life and, especially, genre painting—the panoramic depiction of ordinary scenes of domestic and social life.[14] Realistic art has the power to remind us of the reality—the solidity, density and detail—of ordinary things such as a table laid for a (partially eaten) meal: "a jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon, walnuts, a loaf of bread"; or scenes of common folk at work or play, "the shore/With huts, boats, and on yellowish ice/Tiny figures skating".

Even if scientific philosophy has stripped us of our confidence in the manifest world, realistic painting and poetry has the power to restore and celebrate the ordinary world of human experience. The poem's anti-skeptical vision of C17th Dutch genre painting depends ultimately upon a spiritual act ("our song soared up like smoke from a censor"): namely, *the act of identification with the dead*. The voice of the poem "enters those landscapes" which is our world spread out before us in space and time. In a fitting irony, by bringing the dead to life in a painting we bring ourselves to life—that is, returned from the confused relation to reality sold to us as scientific 'wisdom'. Having been invited to identify with the thoughts and feelings of the poetic persona by way of the 1st-p plural "we", the reader is

invited to partake of this spiritual identification with tiny figures in a northern European landscape from long ago.[15] The voice of the poem joins with the dead in a chorus seeing itself as "one of them already", one who lives and dies in a common human world of familiar human activities and objects. This identification, which seems incomprehensible from a theoretical point of view, is in fact a recognizable part of our lives as the poem attests. That is what it is to accept or trust in the reality of the past—a past that cannot be proven in all its detail and density and humanity on scientific grounds. And through this acceptance, the tree and its greenness are restored to the lived experience we participate in here and now. Humanity, imagined as a choir not bound to any particular space or time, sings once more.

5. Koethe's Skeptical Reading & the Argument of the Ordinary

Nothing in realistic art forces one to recover reality through a renewed sense of the meaningfulness of words or through an act of identification with the long dead, however. Since art does not preach or proselytise it is open to countervailing reactions and interpretations. Consider, for example, the antithetical understanding of Dutch genre painting adopted by the poet and philosopher, John Koethe, who writes,

> Sometimes I think that the emblem of both [metaphysical] realism and romanticism is that representation of tiny figures in a vast landscape characteristic of Chinese and Dutch landscape painting, in which the human person, externalized and reduced to objective terms, is swallowed up and dwarfed into insignificance— for the very experience of such a representation contains the idea of a subjective position outside that landscape, from which it can be apprehended [19] (p. 57).

Old Dutch painting, in Koethe's eyes, presents an externalized and objectified conception of the world which accepts and projects a metaphysical gap between mind ("subjectivity") and a mind-independent world. Koethe takes such painting to be—paradoxically from the point of view we have been exploring—the very "emblem of [metaphysical] realism". According to this reading the "tiny figures" of these paintings are seen as "swallowed up and dwarfed into insignificance". Human value and meaning, indeed humanity itself, are expunged from the world of these works. Koethe accepts that metaphysical realism is nihilism. Where he disagrees with the poetic vision manifest in "Realism" is the role of realistic art in relation to this particular skeptical vision. He sees the world of these paintings as something radically independent and set over against the self as opposed to the claim that it makes imaginative space available for an identification of the viewer with the human world that these figures inhabit.

These alternative responses to C17th Dutch painting—skeptical and anti-skeptical—make evident a central theme in the thought of Wittgenstein, that our relation to the ordinary is fragile and open to repudiation.[16] According to the reading defended here, the poetic voice of "Realism" sees realistic art as capable of undoing the sense that mind and world come apart in philosophical reflection; particularly reflection on the discoveries of modern science. As we have seen, Koethe develops a contrary reading in which realistic art expresses a metaphysical gap between mind and world. Koethe's reading thus takes up one side of what Cavell calls "the argument of the ordinary"—the struggle between the skeptical attack upon the ordinary (resulting from metaphysical realism) and the seemingly hopeless attempt to justify the ordinary in theoretical terms (typified by Moore) from within a skeptical position that accepts the metaphysical mind-world gap.

It is part of the point and power, as well as the difficulty, of Milosz's poem to avoid taking up the either side of this argument. In adopting this almost invisible option of realism as *an attitude of acceptance* towards reality—its messy details, variety and sublime (hence incomprehensible) complexity—Milosz's poem realizes an ambition that Wittgenstein hopes for from philosophy as he practices it. The metaphysical realist is "shrugged off" by recovering or reimagining the meaningfulness of words in a poetic context where matters of truth and justification are set aside. As in Wittgenstein, recovering or reimagining our relation to language is not to be distinguished from recovering or reimagining our

relation to the human lifeworld—in this case, a world of people who lived long ago, their food and utensils, their shelters build against the cold, their boats to fish or cross a lake in and their children at play ["a jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon,/Walnuts, a loaf of bread. . . or the shore, With huts, boats, and on yellowish ice,/Tiny figures skating"]. Poetry joins with Dutch painting (and realistic art in general according to the poetic voice of this poem)[17] in calling our attention to the human world, against the countervailing tendency to see the human (or subjectivity) as something radically distinct from reality, which thus becomes alien, inhuman, dead—all its myriad relational features drained from it. An artistic identification with people who lived long ago restores us and our world to life.

Notes

1. This translation is owed to Carl Godfrey. Peter Winch's revised translation runs, "philosophy ought really to be written as a *poetic composition*". The full passage in the German original reads: "Ich glaube meine Stellung zur Philosophie dadurch zusammengefaßt zu haben, indem ich sagte: Philosophie dürtfe man eigentlich nur *dichten*. Daraus muß sich, sicht scheint mir, ergeben, wie weit mein Denken der Gegenwart, Zukunft, oder der Vergangeneheit angehört. Denn ich habe mich damit auch als einen bekannt, der micht ganz kann was er zu können wünscht".

2. Cavell writes of "tracing both the ordinary language philosophers as well as the American transcendentalists to the Kantian insight that Reason dictates what we mean by a world, as well as in my feeling that the ordinariness in question speaks of an intimacy with existence, and of an intimacy lost, that matches skepticism's despair of the world" [2] (p. 4).

3. Marjorie Perloff said, "What makes it poetry rather than just a replica of the news is its defamiliarization of words we hear everyday" [9] (p. 151). And Ezra Pound writes, "Literature is language charged with meaning" [10] (p. 28).

4. Of course, what it imaginatively suggests (etc.) for a given reader, may be taken to be *true*.

5. This use of the term "the ordinary" for ordinary language and the form of life into which it is woven, in both its ethnological and biological dimensions, is owed to Stanley Cavell [13].

6. This is not to deny the connection between meaning and truth. Meanings are often, although not always, a matter of truth conditions.

7. It is widely thought that such a conception is required by a correspondence theory of truth.

8. Moore's explanation for the oddity of the common sense propositions he claims to know that they are simply "not worth stating" is incredible. Is it obviously true, for instance, that we *believe* that we have bodies? That would suggest that it is possible to doubt it. Or, to give another example, it is obviously true that we *believe* that live on or near the surface of the earth? How might it be otherwise? So, too, if it is said that we *believe* that the earth has existed for many years past. In each case we want to ask, as opposed to what? If we didn't have a body what would we be? If we didn't live on the earth where would we live? If the earth had no past history then would it exist now?

9. Of course, Moore takes himself to be presenting the most obvious truths imaginable; but what he achieves is something astonishing, almost completely lacking in obviousness.

10. Wittgenstein's philosophical practice is realistic in so far as he sets himself against "a fantasy of what it is for a term to mean something" [17] (p. 50). This, of course, includes Moore's use of the term "knowledge" in his 'proof' of an external world.

11. It is scientific metaphysics that suggests that we do not perceive the world as it really is but simply sensory effects caused in our brains by external objects; a thesis that plays into the skeptic's hands. Here, skeptical scenarios (e.g., the brain in a vat) are alternative causal hypotheses capable of explaining all of our sensory effects.

12. I follow Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's vision of language according to which ordinary language is open to skeptical repudiation. Cavell goes out further out on a limb in seeing his mission as one of keeping philosophy open to skepticism, and to write in light of this openness: "I came to the idea that philosophy's task was not so much to defeat the skeptical argument as to preserve it, as though the philosophical profit of the argument would be to show not how it might end but why it must begin and why it must have no end, at least none within philosophy, or what we think of as philosophy." [2] (p. 5).

13. Wittgenstein describes the demise of ordinary language at the hands of metaphysics in these terms: "When. . . one disapproves of the expressions of ordinary language (which, after all, do their duty), we have got a picture in our heads which conflicts with the picture of our ordinary way of speaking. At the same time, we're tempted to say that our way of speaking does not describe the facts as they really are. As if, for example, the proposition "he has pains" could be false in some other way than by that man's not having pains. As if the form of expression were saying something false, even when the proposition *faute de mieux* asserted something true. For this is what disputes between idealists, solipsists and realists look like. The one party attacks the normal

form of expression as if they were attacking an assertion; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being." [8] (§402).

14 Influential Dutch genre painters include Peter Breughel the Elder (1525–1565); Henrick Avercamp (1585–1634); Isaac Van Ostande (1621–1649); Jan Steen (1626–1679); Pieter de Hooch (1626–1684); and Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675).

15 Anna C. Riberio, reflecting on the way the 1st-p voice of lyric poetry facilitates reader identification writes, "In the lyric poem there is an implicit, perhaps even implied, invitation to the reader to identify with the poetic persona." [18] (p. 70).

16 This interpretation and its detailed elaboration are central to the work of Stanley Cavell. See note 12.

17 Here it is worth briefly commenting on Marjorie Perloff's manifesto "against realism" [9] (p. 167) which is of particular significance in the context of the Wittgensteinian poetics she has developed [20]. It is unclear to me whether her position could be brought into alignment with realism as an *attitude* rather than a doctrine or theory since what she opposes is "realistic poetry that details some petty reaction to petty events" [9] (p. 95). If we extend Perloff's critique to realistic painting then the resulting reaction to Dutch genre painting would be akin to Koethe's: namely, seeing humanity being cast into insignificance. But according to the present paper, the uneventful or insignificant human activities detailed in Dutch painting allow for an imaginative identification that counters a skeptical withdrawal of the world. That reaction is anything but petty.

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