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Essay

'Show Don't Tell': What Creative Writing Has to Teach Philosophy

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Abstract: Poetry and philosophy have had a close but uneasy relationship in the western tradition. Both share an eschewal of the discovery of novel facts, but are somewhat opposed in that discovery is a central aim of poetry, but not at all the aim of philosophy. Through a close reading of W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' and a versification of part of G.E. Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense', I argue that what poetry shows corresponds, in a broadly symbolist sense, to Wittgenstein's understanding of the miraculous nature of the world. In this regard, poetry can offer philosophy clarity, in the form of its tonal architecture, value, and ethics, and may also constitute a perspicuous representation. Poetry remains in a perpetual mode of potential, as well as being possessed of a vatic autonomy.

Keywords: creative writing; poetry; ordinary language philosophy; Wittgenstein; W.H. Auden; G.E. Moore; Robert Duncan; symbolist poetics

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1. Discovery versus Recovery

One of the well-worn dictums of creative writing, which every student of it encounters at some stage, is to 'show, don't tell'. While this dictum is usually aimed at jolting budding writers out of their instinctive usage of words, it has at its core a fundamental conception of literature as something which cannot be taught, or which cannot say what it is. Northrop Frye is aware of this when he writes, 'Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb' [1] (p. 4) and 'The axiom of criticism must be, not that the poet does not know what he is talking about, but that he cannot talk about what he knows.' [1] (p. 5). This recalls Wittgenstein's insistence on "what can be shown, cannot be said" [2] (p. 45), a distinction which Pulido maintains 'explains how the basis of logic is in propositions' logical form' [3] (p.30). It also recalls the idea that 'the unutterable will be—unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered' [4] (p. 83). From this point of view, poetry has much to offer philosophy, not as its unutterable complement, but rather as a mode of showing, to which Wittgenstein aspired when he wrote,

> I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do [5] (p. 24e).

In this article, I will examine some aspects of the difference between what is said and what is shown in the poetry of W.H. Auden and in a 'found poem', a versification of G.E. Moore's attempt at a defence of common sense. Reading Moore's attempt as a poem illustrates what poetry can show us, and leads back to a new understanding of Wittgenstein's aspiration from the point of view of poetry, conceived of as a tonal structure. I will also argue for another kind of 'showing' at the level of the poetic corpus, which bears some relation to the perspicuous image.

According to Wittgenstein, philosophy does not aim for any sort of discovery at all [6] (p. 52e); poetry aims at discovery in a number of ways, but not of the kind that science, for example, seeks, such as 'novel facts' [7] (p. 77). Rather, in the first instance, poetry seeks the discovery of new poetry, but it does not seek to establish truth propositions. This has been understood for a long time: 'Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false' [8] (p. 52). The relationship between poetry and philosophy would therefore seem, from Wittgenstein's perspective, complex insofar as they share an eschewal of the discovery of novel facts, but are somewhat opposed in that discovery is central to poetry but not at all the aim of philosophy.

'Discovery' can be taken to mean more than just the creation of new poetry. A distinction that was important to the poetics of Robert Duncan is useful to begin illustrating what else discovery may mean: 'its [sic] discovery, not recovery that touches the living thing for me' [9] (p. 112). Discovery, for Duncan, is the process of engagement with the universe:

> Our engagement in language is active only as long as we are finding the universe. When we cease to find the universe, then actually we cease to have the occasion of language. That great proportion of modern poets who have suffered shipwreck in language are really no longer engaged in finding the universe. Language has in a way grown sufficient to them. But we have a searching psyche, a searching mind or simply a longing or a need for language to continue in the universe. Language for me is an engagement in which we are finding the universe [10] (p. 81).

Such an engagement is understood by some poets as a pathway to wonderment, and recalls Wittgenstein's simultaneous exhortation to the wonderment and excoriation of science: 'Man has to awaken to wonder—and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again' [5] (p. 5e). For other poets, such an understanding is unfashionable to the point that in 'an unsupportable generalization' Nichols maintains that 'the 1950s and' 60s represent the last moment in recent cultural history when a serious poet could write the word *cosmos* without irony or quotation marks and expect serious intellectual attention [11] (p. 12). In this paper, I will therefore resist universalising claims as to what poetry does or should do. Rather, I will restrict myself to some comments on Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' and the found poem 'Ode to the Manifest Image' and attempt to explain how poetry may complement, assist, or serve as philosophical therapy.

In the first instance, poetry is deceptive to the initiate, for much poetry appears to be the expression of a poet who is taken to 'have something to say'. Yet poetry, as poetry, can only show. We can take [and often do] poetry as an utterance, and we can thereby extract a phrase or a line and treat it as though it has been said by someone, or use it as evidence in order to help prove an assertion. We can include poetry in what we say. But this, of course, is no longer poetry, but something which is being said about, using, incorporating, paraphrasing, or quoting poetry. The poetry itself remains dumb. The same can be said of all the arts, but in the case of literature, the distinction is all the more difficult to maintain, because of the ways in which literary artefacts can be incorporated into the ordinary language we use every day, and often is, but also because of the way in which literary artefacts themselves make use of or incorporate ordinary language, sayings, into themselves. In fact, this difficulty can be taken further: literature cannot be studied, only literary criticism. Literature can only show or be shown.

One of the most famous lines of poetry in English is from W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats': 'For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives' and from this line is often extracted, like a motto or legend, the non-executive nature of poetry as described by the first five words. Yet Auden's poem goes on to develop a conceit of poetry as a kind of river in a strange, possibly American landscape, which is animated by its persistence in this landscape and its symbolic, possibly allegorical journey south until the section concludes with the apparent revelation that it 'survives,/a way of happening, a mouth'. According to Wasley, for Auden this conceit of poetry serves 'as a path, a conduit, a "way," for his reader, and himself, to come nearer to that place of ideal personal, moral, and aesthetic order' [12] (pp. 28–29).

It is worth reproducing the second section for a closer look:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Some of the things which the poem shows us, and which criticism can, to a certain extent, articulate, is the transition from a first section which is in the third person, and depicts the dead poet as an unnamed, disembodied presence, to this more familiar, perhaps even affectionate mode of second person address, before moving onto a final Blakean, oracular third section. The word 'survived' appears in the first line and is repeated as 'survives' in lines five and nine. Such repetition in a relatively brief section of ten lines draws attention to itself as significant. The enjambment which occurs with the first instance of 'survives' makes it immediately clear that poetry's survival should only be understood as metaphorical; to put it another way, the enjambment does not enact the mere persistence of poetry, but transmutes that survival into the figure of a river, returning to the pastoral themes of the first section, which suggests poetry's closeness to the natural world, in a symbolic sense. It evades the world of 'doing', the 'raw towns' in which human life is largely carried out, and it remains in a figurative zone that evades the desires of 'executives'; most significantly, for a northern hemisphere poem, it flows south, indicating that it is drawn to warmth [or away from cold] and that in the north–south division in America, which is signified by the 'ranches of isolation', it flows from rich to poor, from victory to defeat. Other meanings are possible. The second instance of 'survives' is not enjambed, but is separated from the next line by a comma, which suggests that the last line is returning the notion of poetry's survival to a non-figural sense, as it is now being qualified by two clauses, one of which is existential ['a way of happening'], while the other is a return to the metaphorical, poetry as 'a mouth', which can be read in any number of symbolic, even mythic ways: the mouth of a river, the mouth of one who utters, the symbolic mouth of prophecy. It is clear, though, following the poetic logic of this section, that poetry is many things other than something which makes nothing happen. We could essay rolling its theme up into a two-word phrase: vatic autonomy.

This is, of course, only one way of looking at what poetry is [and does], but it is one way which is useful to bear in mind when returning to Wittgenstein's distinction between showing and saying. What this part of 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' shows is that poetry remains, stubbornly perhaps, in a mode of potential. If poetry has a task [such a post-utilitarian way of conceiving of it], it is to renew itself. From its renewal of itself come many possible things: ugly beauty, perhaps, in myriad aesthetic categories, delight and bewilderment, and, inevitably, more poetry. What interests me is the spillage of poetry. If a poem not only places words in new relations to each other, but creates or discovers entirely new poetic ideas, poetic propositions about the world, then these will inevitably stick, in some manner, to those things which encounter it. If philosophy's task is to remove confusion, one of the resources it has is the clarity offered by poetry. This is not necessarily solely the clarity of description or sense, for such clarity may be found in ordinary language. Rather, it is in the ethics and value of the poetry itself that such clarity may be found. I have already written elsewhere how poetry can serve as a useful focaliser of myth [13]; it can also be a useful focaliser of the good, in and of itself, and it is in the disinterested manner in which value shows itself that poetry avails itself to philosophy. When Wittgenstein writes

'*Philosophy* must be *written* only as one would *write poetry*', one way in which this can be understood is that the [poetic] value of the unsayable is manifest in the words [3] (p. 13), and therefore this value, or these values, must be engaged with through close attention to the words themselves as well as those aspects of the poem that are either non-verbal or not merely verbal, such as certain repetitions, the organisation into lines and stanzas, the enjambments [or end-stopped lines], the patterning of sound, the figures of speech, the inter-textual allusions, and the mythic references, to name a few.

2. Ode to the Manifest Image

An example of philosophy written as a poem is the versification I have undertaken of part of G.E. Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense', which he introduces as a 'list of truisms, every one of which [in my own opinion] I *know*, with certainty, to be true':

> 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 Finally [to come to a different class of propositions], I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born, had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds: e.g., I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies; I have not only perceived things of this kind, but have also observed facts about them, such as, for instance, the fact which I am now observing, that that mantelpiece is at present nearer to my body than that bookcase; I have been aware of other facts, which I was not at the time observing, such as, for instance, the fact, of which I am now aware, that my body existed yesterday and was then also for some time nearer to that mantelpiece than to that bookcase; I have had expectations with regard to the future, and many beliefs of other kinds, both true and false; I have thought of imaginary things and persons and incidents, in the reality of which I did not believe; I have had dreams; and I have had feelings of many different kinds. And, just as my body has been the body of a human being, namely myself, who has, during his lifetime, had many experiences of each of these [and other] different kinds; so, in the case of very many of the other human bodies which have lived upon the earth, each has been the body of a different human being, who has, during the lifetime of that body, had many different experiences of each of these [and other] different kinds [14] (pp. 106–107).

Addis represents Moore's propositions as

> belonging to the common-sense view of reality. These are propositions which he claimed to know with certainty to be true, but which could not be justified, Propositions belonging to the common-sense view of reality are those which are held by all mankind [7] (p. 136).

Notwithstanding that these propositions may indeed form a set according to these criteria, this passage initially seemed to me to have an element of the absurd or quixotic, insofar as it seems to be arbitrarily selective in terms of what it allows to be known. What of the aftertaste of tea, or the desire to urinate? Ultimately, it does not serve to prove what Moore asserts, and Wittgenstein remarks, "Moore does not know what he asserts he knows . . . it stands fast as part of our method of doubt and enquiry" [15] (p. 151); [14] (pp. 107–108). My later responses to re-reading this passage were different from my initial amusement: I noticed a tone that was detached, more detached than I could ever be in my world, and that detachment was accompanied by a certain obsessive repetition which, I noticed, was quite regular, or rhythmic.

My decision to organise Moore's passage into verse accords with a tradition that sprang up in the mid-twentieth century: poets such as Charles Reznikoff took testimonies from court cases and 'turned' them into poems [16]; Ezra Pound incorporated letters from American presidents and other documents into his *Cantos* [17]; and Laurie Duggan included reportage in his long work *The Ash Range* [18]. As Marjorie Perloff reminds us, 'it is important to remember that the citational or appropriative text, however unoriginal its actual words and phrases, is always the product of choice—and hence of individual taste' [19] (p. 169). The found poem operates, according to Annie Dillard, 'By entering a found text as a poem, the poet doubles its context. The original meaning remains intact, but now it swings between two poles' [20]. In the case of my 'found' poem of G.E. Moore, the two poles are those of philosophy and poetry, and the existence of the passage as a poem is a product of my taste.

In organising this passage into lines of poetry, I discovered that, with very little effort, iambic pentameter became the dominant metre, albeit with variations, such as the second line being iambic pentameter but with an inverted initial foot, typical of many skilled poets such as Shakespeare and Yeats. I could not help but make minor edits, insertions, and deletions to make the 'found' poem accord with my poet's ear. I named it after Wilfred Sellars' term for the image of the world which includes intentions, thoughts, and appearances, and is opposed to the 'scientific image' of the world.

Ode to the Manifest Image

found poem from G.E. Moore

There exists at present a living human body.
Mine. This body was born at a certain time
in the past, and has existed continuously
ever since, though not without undergoing changes.
It was much smaller when it was born.
Ever since, it has been either in contact
with or not far from the surface of the earth.
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, at some time been born,
continued to exist from some time after birth,
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.
Finally [to come to a different class of propositions],
I am a human being, and I have,
at different times since my body was born,
had many different experiences, of each
of many different kinds: I have often perceived
both my own body and other things
which formed part of its environment,
including other human bodies; I have
not only perceived things of this kind, but have also
observed facts about them, such as, for instance,
the fact which I am now observing, that
that mantelpiece is at present nearer to my body
than that bookcase; I have been aware
of other facts, which I was not at the time
observing, such as, for instance, the fact, of which
I am now aware, that my body existed yesterday
and was then also for some time nearer to that
mantelpiece than to that bookcase; I have
had expectations with regard to the future,
and many beliefs of other kinds, both true
and false; I have thought of imaginary things
and persons and incidents, in the reality of which
I did not believe; I have had dreams;
and I have had feelings of many different kinds.
And, just as my body has been the body of a human
being, namely myself, who has, during
his lifetime, had many experiences of each
of these [and other] different kinds; so,
in the case of very many of the other
human bodies which have lived upon the earth,
each has been the body of a different
human being, who has, during the lifetime

of that body, had many different experiences
of each of these [and other] different kinds.

There are a number of features to which I would like to draw the reader's attention. Organisation into lines exaggerates the strangeness of Moore's list, but it is a strangeness that is not identical to the strangeness of the original passage. The strangeness is one of point of view, something upon which Wittgenstein has remarked:

> Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes,—surely that would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself—But then we do this every day without its making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view' [5] (p. 4e).

Moore's list-as-poem shows us the strangeness of his selectivity and reveals an obsession with returns to the origin, to the moment of birth, by regularly placing the verb 'born' at the end of several lines. Further to the organisation into lines, such structural features [there are others an attentive reader may discern] show a curious intention at work. Why is the world of this poem the way that it is? Why is the unfolding of banal truisms oddly humorous, isolated as separate lines which appear to wander away from and towards each other with little sense of purpose, except for the occasional moment of involuntary humour [It was much smaller when it was born]?

3. On Tone

Other found poems can have varied tonal effects, a good example being the moving 'The Man in the Moon' 'by' Phil Rizzuto [21]. What is clear is that tone in poetry is not merely a by-product of the interplay of connotation and denotation; it is also structural. In this regard, it may be useful to suspend the habitual analogy of poetry and music, both characterised as durations of sound, and instead explore the similarities between poetry and architecture. Wittgenstein understands well that a poem is first and foremost something which is built:

> 'You must say something new and yet it must all be old.
>
> In fact you must confine yourself to saying old things—and *all the same* it must be completely new!
>
> Different interpretations must correspond to different applications.
>
> A poet too has constantly to ask himself: 'but is what I am writing really true?'—and this does not necessarily mean: 'is this how it happens in reality?'.
>
> Yes, you have got to assemble bits of old material. But into a *Building*'—[5] (p. 40e).

The 'trueness' of a poem is a matter of its being well made, and the indication of a poem being well made is the effect it has on us, our experience of it, which we may then attempt to put into words [words other than that of the poem itself]. We often return to good poems because we cannot experience the effect of them in paraphrase, and it is the array of non-verbal structural elements as well as the words themselves which constitutes the full force of the aesthetic and intellectual experience of a poem. This is what C.K. Williams recognises when he remarks of Emily Dickinson's poem 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain' that, 'The ambiguities are as crucial as the precisions: the layering of meaning and potential meaning in the poem are the very layers of consciousness . . . this is not the product of

mind, this is mind, and emotion and the human soul alive to itself' [22] (p. 11). Such a power is at the heart of Wittgenstein's desire to write philosophy as if he were writing poetry, yet how to do this remained a puzzle to him: 'For I was thereby revealing myself to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do' [5] (p. 24e). This is a confession of failure by someone who understood full well the force with which an intellectual point needs be made ['An observation in a poem is overstated if the intellectual points are nakedly exposed, not clothed from the heart' [5] (p. 54e)], yet who often felt that he fell short of that aspiration, or had wasted effort in attempting to do so ['I squander untold effort to make an arrangement of my thoughts that may have no value whatever [5] (p. 33)]. Even though this is framed as a failure, it is also an articulation of the truth that all poets who are honest with themselves know, that there are usually only a handful of poems, maybe up to a dozen in a lifetime, which are the ones by which they are to be remembered. Wittgenstein's admissions of failure merely serve to emphasise the importance of trying again, or of using an initial failure as a pathway from error to truth.

Wittgenstein's poetic skill is not negligible, and his awareness of the potential of poetry is one of his more tantalising observations, yet it fits with an understanding that what is shown to us in poetry does not necessarily accompany a specific mental state, nor is it an ordinary usage of words, but it is a sentience which surprises us by the fact that we recognise it. Stanley Cavell's observations that

> How does he know such things? I mean, apart from any philosophical claim into whose service he would press such findings, how can he so much as have the idea that these fleets of consciousness, which is obviously all he'd got to go on, are accurate wakes of our own? And the fact is, so much of what he shows to be true of his consciousness is true of ours [of mine]. This is perhaps the fact of his writing to be most impressed by; it may be the fact he is most impressed by—that what he does can be done at all [23] (p. 20).

could well be a description of an encounter with the sentience of a poem. In this regard, I could venture the generalisation that Wittgenstein's desire to write poetry is predicated on a general symbolist poetics whereby an encounter with the sentience of a poem corresponds to the miraculous nature of the world.

There may be a sense in which a poem, or a poetic body of work, constitutes a different world picture, suggesting the possibility of alteration or change in our world picture. An example of this might be the totality of William Blake or Wallace Stevens' poetic achievement. Here, it is not the propositions or otherwise of individual poems but the totality of the mythopoeic world, in the case of these strongly Romantic poets, or the totality of the voice, which may be the case in a poet who is characterised more by viewpoint and/or technique, such as Les Murray or John Ashbery. 'When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions' [15] (p. 225). The world picture either provides the framework for inquiry, from a philosophical point of view, or a mythopoeic framework by which the world can be reimagined: the mythopoeic world picture is the element in which poetic arguments, if you will, have their life.

However, not all poetry allows for such a discovery and there are other ways we may conceive of poetry's relation to philosophy. Poetry may be a way of introducing conceptual confusion, which it is philosophy's task to fix; but it is also a way of introducing new grammatical rules, and to that extent what may appear as philosophical puzzlement in one instance may well be clarification in another. Another way of looking at the relation between philosophy and poetry is that writing a poem can be viewed as a set of grammatical rules which instantiate a particular, rather than a general truth. That is, the poem is not taken to be a proposition or an assertion as such, but rather is its own case rather than a generalisable one. In addition to this, the usage of words in a poem is different from the usage of words in ordinary language. It is a poetic usage, by which the ordinary is made strange. What the word's usage in a poem can show is 'A perspicuous representation', which is 'any way in which the similarities and differences between the uses of words in

a language is shown' [7] (p. 86). However, here we are in the realm of literature more generally, rather than in the realm of the poem. What the poem may possess in addition to its perspicuous representation is the tonal architecture which makes the full force of its showing possible.

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