Nordic Wittgenstein Review 11 (2022) | DOI 10.15845/nwr.v11.3646 | [epub ahead of print]

Wittgenstein's Artillery: Philosophy as Poetry by James C. Klagge

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James C. Klagge, *Wittgenstein's Artillery. Philosophy as Poetry*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2021, 258pp.

> I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem. (CV, 28)

This remark from *Culture and Value* might sound counterintuitive to anyone approaching Wittgenstein's philosophy insofar as his thought is usually related to language, logic, mathematics, or even psychology rather than to poetry. James C. Klagge's *Wittgenstein's Artillery* is an insightful exploration of the reasons that brought Wittgenstein to express such an idea. In this book, Klagge thoroughly analyses Wittgenstein's views on and uses of poetry and argues that this artform is central to his way of doing philosophy. The title of the book refers to Wittgenstein's task during World War One—where he was a spotter for an artillery division—and metaphorically describes his way of doing philosophy. The use of such a metaphor already illustrates the philosophical necessity of metaphors to express thought, as Max Black already noted that "a prohibition against their use would be a willful and harmful restriction upon our powers of inquiry" (1955, 294). This review is structured around the two fundamental and intertwined ideas of the book: first, that Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy changes in function of his concern for his audience, that Klagge coins in terms of *esotericism* and *evangelism* (chapters 1 to 4); second, that this change is underlined by an increased importance of the role of poetry in his philosophical thought (chapters 5 to 7).

I. From Esotericism to Evangelism

Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy has changed through time, not only between the *Tractatus* and the later works, as the traditional division considers, but also during the later works. Klagge's view therefore shows a different and more nuanced mapping of Wittgenstein's shifts that originate in a change in his concern for his audience:

> Until this point, which I date to roughly the first half of 1931,

> Wittgenstein was relatively unconcerned with his audience; afterward he is more concerned. He becomes a sort of philosophical "spotter," concerned with the effectiveness of his philosophical barrage. Soon he begins to think about what philosophical artillery would work best. (p. 17)

Klagge calls the first attitude *esotericism*, in the vein of Aristotle's *esoteric* works, and the second *evangelism*. He considers that Wittgenstein progressively becomes more concerned with his audience and how to reach it in his *evangelic* moment.

Klagge further argues that this way of thinking changes again around 1947, when Wittgenstein stops teaching and returns to his previous *esoteric* attitude (the one he held in the *Tractatus* and in the works of the early 1930s). What is crucial in this change is the effect that philosophy can have: *esotericism* reduces the effectiveness of philosophy to the selected few who can understand, while *evangelism* moves towards a philosophical dialogue that brings people to change their minds. As Klagge argues:

> An esotericist leaves it to the audience, if there is one, to discern the pressures the poet is engaging; the evangelist wants the audience to be able to discern those pressures, and indeed wants to engage pressures that the audience experiences or is susceptible to. (p. 148)

Klagge illustrates this point by meticulously analysing the way Wittgenstein teaches, looking at the increase of interventions in the transcriptions and at the effects these interventions have on Wittgenstein's thought.

Although this distinction between *esotericism* and *evangelism* is germane and makes sense of Wittgenstein's changes in his ways of doing philosophy, the term *evangelism* sounds strange. Klagge mentions the problem of the religious connotations of the term but dismisses it without great discussion (cf. p. 19). However, it seems to me that it cannot be left aside so easily, especially in a book on the poetic dimension of philosophical writing. Indeed, connotations are key to metaphorical expressions and a more neutral term might have been more appropriate. That we are discussing these connotations, however, reveals the importance of the poetic dimension of language and the second part of Klagge's book (chapters 5–7) focuses on the way this dimension affects philosophy.

II. The Role of Poetry

Klagge underlines the role poetry plays in the shift from *esotericism* to *evangelism*: it is through a greater concern with poetry that Wittgenstein comes to change his way of doing philosophy. The poetic—or at least literary—dimension of Wittgenstein's philosophy has been discussed at length, but Klagge adds important elements to this line of investigation. He insists on Wittgenstein's use of the word *Dichtung*, that not exactly covers the same expanse as poetry and rather involves the ideas of fiction and invention. In this sense, Klagge can characterise Wittgenstein's scenarios as poems: "Wittgenstein is well known for presenting imaginary sce-

narios in his later works. They have the fictious character of *Dichtung*" (p. 81). These imaginary scenarios include famous ones such as the speaking lion, the fly bottle, the beetle in the box, etc.. To a broader extent, we can think of thought experiments as poetic in the sense of invention. These scenarios are central to Wittgenstein's philosophy and Klagge argues that they reveal the performative character of poetic means in philosophy:

> What is interesting about all these stories is that they do not just claim or argue that inquiry should stop; they in some sense try to bring it to a halt. This is what Wittgenstein wants to be able to do, by "poetic" means. (p. 99)

These "poems" therefore aim at performatively stopping the inquiry in a way an argument could not. In this sense, they are not mere tools for clarification or explanation, but are central to the philosophical investigation as they prevent the inquiry from going on further and further.

These imaginary scenarios are short and sometimes obscure, as Klagge argues, "they are just the sort of vignettes that could have been elaborated into a memorable, affective, and psychologically effective 'poem'" (p. 115). In chapter 6, "Wittgenstein's poems", the longest of the book, Klagge elaborates on these vignettes, by calling on other literary works, poems, or fictional scenarios he invents. He thus pursues the literary dimension of Wittgenstein's philosophy by making it explicit. This elaboration shifts the focus from poetic invention to didactic explanation. These two moments are, however, of very different nature: while poetic invention is performative and effectively shows a different way of doing philosophy, didactic explanation aims to translate this poetic invention into more conventional discursive means. In this respect, his "imitation" of Wittgenstein's style in the conclusion shows an interesting way of doing philosophy inspired by Wittgenstein but lacks the performative dimension of the poetic that is at play in that style. Indeed, Klagge's imitation of Wittgenstein often makes explicit the connections between the remarks. Number 698 is exemplary of this difference:

> 698. Well, suppose we try to answer the question. Someone might suggest, following Russell, that the definite description "the meaning" implies (or at least presupposes) that there is one and only one meaning of life. This makes it seem as though there is some single deep truth, perhaps concerning the unity of all being. "Doesn't this require a mystical insight?" (p. 154)

I will point out three elements to make explicit the difference between Klagge's imitation and Wittgenstein's style. First, the opening sentence of this remark is a descriptive one that lacks performativity. Rather than describing what he is doing, a poet like Wittgenstein does it without metalanguage. Second, the reference to Russell, although Wittgenstein sometimes mentions other philosophers, is much more didactic than his poetic style. Third, the question Klagge raises at the end sounds strange in respect to what is said before, being this time not explicit enough in how it is

connected to what precedes it. These three points show that Klagge's imitation of Wittgenstein catches something of the spirit of the text but remains at a didactic and descriptive level that prevents it from entering the performative dimension that is specific to Wittgenstein's poetic style.

And this is the point where Klagge's book could have gained more precision: although he discusses the notion of *Dichtung*, the distinction between poetic, poetry, poem, is not always clear. Is everything that is poetic a poem? Can Wittgenstein's scenarios really be considered poems, or do they just have a poetic dimension? Is doing philosophy as poetry a matter of moving from one literary genre to another or is it concerned with something different? Although it leaves these questions open, Klagge's book offers an extensive and insightful overview of Wittgenstein's relation to poetry. Poetry is not a mere object of study, but an essential component of philosophical research and writing. This book will therefore be of great use to anyone interested in Wittgenstein and poetry and, to a wider extent, in Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy.

References

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