

Polanyian Hermeneutics?

Meaning in Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur

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Introduction

While Michael Polanyi touched upon issues around textual interpretation at various points in his career,¹ his most extensive hermeneutical explorations happened in his “Meaning: Lost and Regained” lecture series, delivered in Chicago, IL, and Austin, TX, in 1969-70.² The intent of this paper is to unpack the main arguments of those lectures, and to bring them into conversation with the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, to see what Polanyi might have to offer the contemporary hermeneutical conversation in particular.

Discussion of the Chicago and Austin lectures amongst Polanyians has especially focused on Polanyi’s stance on religious knowledge, in part because of the process surrounding the lectures’ publication, in the co-authored (with Harry Prosch) book, *Meaning*.³ The questions posed in the debate around *Meaning* are various. Does the book represent Polanyi’s views, or is it Prosch’s voice that sounds louder?⁴ If we can identify Polanyi’s views in the book, are they markedly different from his earlier work? In particular, does he posit a basic divide between ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ knowledge, which his earlier work did much to overcome? And should Polanyi’s failing health at the time of writing the book change our opinion of its contents?⁵

¹ See, e.g., Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 90–99; idem., “Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading,” in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 181–207; idem., “What Is A Painting?,” in *Society, Economics & Philosophy: Selected Papers*, ed. R. T. Allen (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 347–59.

² For biographical information, see especially William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 272–77.

³ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977). An important contribution came with the publication of a special issue of the journal *Zygon*, exploring Polanyi and religion; see the various articles in *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 17.1 (1982). See also the extensive bibliography and further analysis in Andrew T. Grosso, *Personal Being: Polanyi, Ontology, and Christian Theology*, American University Studies 258 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007), 171–172 n. 11.

⁴ See further Grosso, *Personal Being*, 9–10 and the references there.

⁵ Phil Mullins and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., “Harry Prosch: A Memorial Re-Appraisal of the Meaning Controversy,” *Tradition & Discovery* 32.2 (2006): 10. Cf. Esther Meek: “Marjorie Grene strongly advised me to steer clear of this book of Polanyi’s since “he was senile when he wrote it.” (Personal conversation, ca. 1979.)” Esther Lightcap Meek, *Contact With Reality: Michael Polanyi’s Realism and Why It Matters* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 236.

Such questions have been debated exhaustively by successive generations of Polanyi's followers and heirs; this paper will leave most of that well-trodden ground alone. An opportunity to sidestep at least some of the knotty problems around *Meaning*, however, is presented by the original manuscripts from Polanyi's Chicago lectures, located in his archives at the University of Chicago and published by the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association in its periodical, *Polanyiana*, in 2006.⁶ These manuscripts present what are assuredly Polanyi's own views; accordingly, the first task of this paper (section I) will be an exposition of Polanyi's arguments as the manuscripts grant us access to them. Those familiar with Polanyi's work may choose to jump ahead to the second and third sections, where Paul Ricoeur is introduced as a hermeneutical dialogue partner (section II), and Polanyi's insights are then brought into specific conversation with Ricoeur's concept of a hermeneutical arc (section III). There, it will be argued that Polanyi and Ricoeur enjoy a remarkable level of agreement around the nature of the hermeneutical task. It will also be suggested, however, that each man's work can inform and enrich the other's. Specifically, the embodied and integrated nature of Polanyi's thought offers something of a 'phenomenological grounding' to Ricoeur's ideas around the role of the imagination in the interpretative task, while Ricoeur's more developed understanding of texts offers a 'course correction' to Polanyi's less mature hermeneutical reflections – and might also offer a fresh perspective on the particularly thorny question of Polanyi's understanding of religious knowledge.

I. An exposition of the Chicago Lectures

We begin, though, with an exploration of the main arguments of "Meaning: Lost and Regained". The series' stated aim is to "establish a theory of meaning broad enough to comprise in the structure of meaning both feats of the imagination and of observation."⁷ Polanyi begins with his well-established ideas concerning the subsidiary-focal structure of scientific knowledge, and then asks how far such a structure applies to knowledge beyond the scientific domain. Accordingly, simple visual perception is his starting point. Mirroring the central arguments of *Personal Knowledge*, he shows how even the simplest act of acquiring

⁶ Michael Polanyi, "From the Polanyi Archives: The Lecture Series: Meaning, Lost And Regained," *Polanyiana* 15 (2006): 65–162 (cited henceforth as "MLR", with the individual lecture number, where appropriate, and corresponding journal page number following). The periodical's editors made various decisions as to which versions of the manuscripts to publish, as well as which of the supplements in the archives to include with them. These are detailed at the start of each lecture manuscript; see MLR, 69, 84, 101, 116, 128, 137, 155, and also the editors' introduction (MLR, 67–68). The editors' decision in general to publish the fullest manuscript available (e.g. including Polanyi's handwritten corrections) gives us confidence that we are working as closely as possible with what Polanyi actually said in Chicago.

⁷ MLR 1, 70.

knowledge – looking at a landscape – involves an inherently personal, participative, and imaginative element: our eyes take “a series of snap-shots” of the scene, which our brains then integrate into a single image.⁸ This is his platform to consider how participation works in language: as with a landscape, so also, when we read a sentence, our imagination searches for its meaning through the integration of its various elements (phonemes, lexemes, syntax, etc.) – and this meaning is our focus and concern. We attend *from* the sentence’s elements *to* the message of the whole.⁹

The crucial move Polanyi then makes is to show how this ‘from-to’ structure of linguistic meaning works differently in different contexts. There are, first, instances of linguistic “indication” – for example, naming an object, where we attend from the word to the object named, the former having an essentially ostensive function.¹⁰ Second, Polanyi identifies ‘symbolisation’.¹¹ When we look at a national flag on a solemn occasion, our focus, strictly speaking, is the flag itself – yet our “intrinsic interest” is not usually the physical object, but rather a host of things of which we are really only subsidiarily aware: the nation’s history, our experience of belonging to it, and so on.¹² These two “types of semantic relations” are “inverse to each other”: while both exhibit a from-to structure, in the former our interest is in what we’re attending *to*; in the latter, it is in what we’re attending *from*.¹³

There is, however, a third type of meaning relationship, in which “there is no clear difference between the intrinsic importance of subsidiary matters and the focal object on which they bear.”¹⁴ Thus Polanyi notes how a poem’s “rhythm, rhyme, sound, grammar and all [its] other more subtle formal aspects” bear upon its meaning.¹⁵ The actual act of reading a poem involves only subsidiary awareness of such features; focusing on them “inevitably bedims and may even efface” its meaning.¹⁶ Yet such features are what gives poetry its power to

⁸ MLR 1, 71.

⁹ Or, to put it in terms of the question of meaning, “words and sentences *have* a meaning in the message which *is* their meaning.” Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹¹ “We have then so far two types of semantic relations ... indication and symbolising”. Ibid., 78.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 77. Polanyi recognises that such a use of ‘semantic’ “is an extension from the usual subject of semantics as used for the meaning of language”, but suggests that “this is merely to sanction the way I expand the structure of language to include all meaning contrived by man.” Ibid., 77–78.

¹⁴ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82, drawing especially upon I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1995). This aspect of poetry is further explored through a Polanyian lens in Graham Dunstan Martin, “The Tacit Dimension of Poetic Imagery,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19.2 (1979): 99–111.

¹⁶ MLR 1, 82.

move us, distinguishing it from ordinary speech.¹⁷ Thus, with a poem, our ‘interest’ is not only in its focal aspect – its meaning – but also the subsidiary features that are integrated to create that meaning.

The same is true of a specific aspect of poetry: the use of metaphor. Here, Polanyi shows how I. A. Richards’ ‘interaction’ theory – that a metaphor’s ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’ work together to create a new meaning – is grounded in something like a subsidiary-focal integration: “the two constituent parts of a metaphor are made to bear on a joint novel meaning of them. We are aware of them subsidiarily in their joint focal appearance.”¹⁸ Polanyi’s structure of knowledge thus shows how even two “disparate matters” can be successfully integrated into “a single novel meaning.”¹⁹ And precisely because a metaphor’s two terms are ‘disparate’, their integration is a feat of the imagination far beyond that of the other ‘semantic relationships’.²⁰

These insights ground Polanyi’s exploration of the arts more widely.²¹ Across drama, sculpture and painting, he shows how subsidiary-focal integration is part of the process of meaning creation in each, allowing him to draw broad conclusions about artistic meaning in general. Two of these are especially important: the ‘frame effect’ found in all art, and the imaginative effort that art demands of its audience.

The former is rooted in another insight of Richards – that works of art are ‘framed’ by the media of their production and their internal structure,²² and that such framing is integral to

¹⁷ Polanyi suggests that Shakespeare’s 18th sonnet, for example, would sound like “a piece of callous self-adulation” if translated into prose. MLR 2, 84.

¹⁸ MLR 1, 82. This, Polanyi suggests, answers Max Black’s concern that the ‘mechanics’ of Richards’ theory had not been adequately demonstrated; see *ibid.*, 79. Polanyi’s insights might also answer Janet Martin Soskice’s concern with Paul Ricoeur’s articulation of a theory of metaphor, which, she suggests, sees metaphors as constructing a dual reference; Soskice contends that the ‘is not’ reference is never actually constructed at a literal level. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 84–90. Dan Stiver’s response to Soskice is to argue that we should not press Ricoeur’s wording too literally; see Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 107. However, perhaps a view of metaphorical reference as (in part) inherently tacit helps us to appreciate both Ricoeur’s and Soskice’s points: metaphor does involve a split reference, but not wholly at the focal level.

¹⁹ MLR 1, 81.

²⁰ Polanyi argues that even apparently nonsensical sentences (such as Chomsky’s famous example, “colorless green ideas sleep furiously”), can be imaginatively integrated to discern meaning. *Ibid.*, 79.

²¹ On the general relationship between Polanyian epistemology and the arts, see Doug Adams and Phil Mullins, “Meaning with the Arts: The Implications of Polanyi’s Epistemology for the Arts,” *Studia Mystica* 1.2 (1978): 28–48.

²² Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 112. For the development of this idea of meter-as-frame, see Annie Finch, *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 3–12.

how we approach them.²³ Richards suggests that poetry's formal features (which we attend *from* when we read a poem) function as a 'frame', "isolating the poetic experience from the accidents and irrelevancies of everyday life" and so 'managing' the way a poem connects with us emotionally.²⁴ Polanyi notes a similar phenomenon with visual art: using trompe l'oeil paintings as a point of contrast, he shows how, usually, we subsidiarily integrate a painting's 'frame' (the material frame itself, but also the canvas, brush strokes and paint, along with the painting's physical placement on a wall) with the 'story' the painting tells, in order to grasp its meaning.²⁵ We do not think that the *Mona Lisa* is, say, a window, behind which a living woman is sitting very still; the 'frame' guides us to view the *Mona Lisa* as a representation, radically changing our engagement with it.

The relationship between a piece of art's 'frame' and its 'story' is central to Polanyi's hermeneutical theory. He especially notes how the frame and story are usually "incompatible" with each other.²⁶ People do not communicate in "rhymed and metrical speech" in everyday life; thus, when we experience such a phenomenon in poetry, our imagination is forced to ask why – to bring the frame (the poem's formal features) and story (its prosaic message) together to work out what meaning is being conveyed.²⁷ One consequence of this framing, though, is to isolate the art from its surroundings. Just as the physical frame of a painting separates it from the wall on which it hangs, so the 'frame effect' operative in all art lends it "a distinctive artificial quality".²⁸ As Polanyi argues, "we realise instantly to what abysmal triviality a still-life by Cézanne would be reduced, were it made to convey the illusion of real fruits and vegetables offered for sale in a recess of an exhibition's wall."²⁹ A piece of art's frame separates it off, prompts our imagination to effect the

²³ For example, we do not witness a staged murder in a play and think to call the police; rather, having integrated certain subsidiary aspects of the dramatic production, we know that the *meaning* of the murder is different – calling for our emotional engagement rather than our physical action. MLR 2, 85.

²⁴ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 112.

²⁵ Andrea Pozzo's fresco on the ceiling of the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome is the important trompe l'oeil comparison for Polanyi here. Pozzo's fresco, applied to a flat ceiling, gives the appearance of a domed roof when viewed from a particular angle; thus, in the right circumstances, the painting's 'canvas' seems to disappear, and we are deceived into thinking that what the painting represents *is* what is really there. This example functions, as many of Polanyi's do, as an exception that proves the general rule. By showing us the exceptional case (here, when art effectively loses its frame and thus seems 'real' to us), he helps us see how things normally work. See MLR 2, 89. Polanyi explores very similar ideas in "What Is A Painting?"

²⁶ MLR 2, 99.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

integration that acknowledges that it is *not* ‘abysmally trivial’, and allows it to speak to us in a more profound way.

This leads to the question of imaginative effort in the apprehension of art. What is the more profound way in which art speaks to us? Towards the end of the lectures, Polanyi spells it out:

A set of more diffuse experiences may be immersed in a more sharply circumscribed experience, bearing some resemblance to that more diffuse experience – as a result of which the former, which can be the vehicle in a metaphor – or else a painting, or a play, or a poem – absorbs our original diffuse experience and becomes a strikingly revealing, emotionally charged interpretation of ourselves.³⁰

Just as a metaphor forces us to seek out an imaginative integration of its tenor and vehicle, so also does a piece of art, with its frame and story; and, as we seek this integration in our own experiences, life-history, and understanding of the world, the best art shows itself to be speaking profoundly about some aspect of those things – our very being-in-the-world – thus connecting with us at the deepest level. Indeed, Polanyi suggests that great art becomes “immortal” when its author demonstrates the most penetrating understanding of certain “unchangeable aspects of human experience”, such that our imaginative engagement with their work compels us to “make it ours and clarify our lives by it.”³¹

Art, then, communicates meaningful truth, connecting deeply with our whole person – but bracketed off from the rest of our lives. The 1969 lectures thus develop a complex theory of interpretation, taking seriously both the object of interpretation – a piece of art as frame and story – and the subject – one who imaginatively integrates the two to discern the work’s meaning.

II. Interlude: Polanyi and Ricoeur in Dialogue

In order to assess what contours a “Polanyian hermeneutic” might take, I next propose to bring Polanyi’s explorations in the Chicago lectures, outlined above, into dialogue with the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. The benefits of such a strategy are not immediately obvious: what would a British-Hungarian polymath and a French postmodern

³⁰ MLR 6, 141.

³¹ MLR 3, 102.

philosopher have to say to each other? On closer inspection, however, certain similarities between Polanyi and Ricoeur make a dialogue between them an attractive enterprise. At the most general level, both pursued their academic interests into areas beyond their original specialization. This gives each man's work a certain 'transcending' quality, speaking more generally to epistemological concerns that touch upon quite widely diverse domains of human knowledge – and also making for broad points of contact between them. Moreover, there is a clear affinity between Polanyi and Ricoeur in the specific area of hermeneutics. Indeed, we might say that the 'direction of travel' of Polanyi's arguments in the Chicago lectures is microcosmic of Ricoeur's own, more developed hermeneutical work: just as, for Polanyi, metaphor is a sort of paradigm for general artistic meaning, so Ricoeur discerned metaphor to be "the hermeneutical key, so to speak, to hermeneutics."³²

A further advantage of bringing Polanyi into conversation with Ricoeur has to do with how developed each man's thoughts were. Polanyi only arrived at extended reflection on hermeneutical issues late in his career; almost inevitably, then, the 1969 lectures have a certain introductory feel to them. Polanyi paints with a fairly broad brush, moving through domains of knowledge and interpretation quite quickly, and does not explore the significance of his ideas especially thoroughly.³³ By contrast, Ricoeur's hermeneutical work is voluminous, highly developed and suggestive of a line of thought that unfolds richly and deeply over his career.³⁴ For our purposes, Ricoeur's more mature position therefore offers something of a conceptual framework, into which we can attempt to place Polanyi's insights. Accordingly, in what follows we will use Ricoeur's concept of a 'hermeneutical arc' – an image that captures his understanding of the entire interpretative process – as a heuristic tool, to see how Polanyi's ideas in the 1969 lectures fit with a broadly Ricoeurian hermeneutic. As will be seen, in a number of areas, Polanyi and Ricoeur are in close agreement; there are also

³² Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 105. Thus "Ricoeur suggests that the nature of explanation in metaphor should be a guide to explanation in hermeneutics in general." Ibid., 109.

³³ The very process of the lectures' publication emphasizes their somewhat underdeveloped nature. Given his declining health, in order for his work to reach book form Polanyi had to seek the assistance of others (notably, Harry Prosch), while the versions of the lectures that I have been working with include documents in note form rather than full prose, lecture manuscripts with hand-written annotations, and various appendices and diagrams that, at times, make it difficult to reconstruct Polanyi's main themes.

³⁴ Thus it is no surprise that he has been described, along with Hans Georg Gadamer, as one of "the most important hermeneutic philosophers of the twentieth century." Francis J. Mootz III and George H. Taylor, "Introduction," in *Gadamer and Ricoeur: Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (ed. Francis J. Mootz III and George H. Taylor; London: Continuum, 2011), 1.

important points of tension between the two men, the exploration of which suggests that neither had a fully worked-out understanding of the hermeneutical task.

III. A Polanyian-Ricoeurian Hermeneutic

1. Naïve Understanding

Ricoeur emphasises ‘naïve understanding’ as his arc’s first moment, in which a first reading of a text involves “a wager or guess” at its overall meaning.³⁵ “As a totality, the literary work cannot be reduced to a sequence of sentences which are individually intelligible”; thus “the presupposition of a certain whole precedes the discernment of a determinate arrangement of parts”.³⁶ Crucially, such a ‘wager’ is “a dynamic, imaginative conception of meaning that can be tested, as opposed to a carefully worked-out notion that is at the outset founded strictly on the evidence.”³⁷

There is a tension between Ricoeur’s early construal of the hermeneutical arc and his later development of a ‘mimetic’ narrative arc. Dan Stiver suggests that the former’s moment of ‘understanding’ can be combined with the latter’s ‘prefiguration’ – “the preunderstanding that one brings to writing or reading a text” – thus strengthening the Gadamerian emphasis upon “the way in which we are constituted ... by tradition”, and how this shapes our approach to the text.³⁸ However, a first reading will also involve ‘configuration’ – “the reader’s construal of the narrative world of the text” – even if this is only guessed.³⁹ The tension suggests that Ricoeur is somewhat underdeveloped in his analysis here.⁴⁰ Polanyi,

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 175.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 58.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 66, 67, 70–71, 73; cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 278–318.

³⁹ Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 68.

⁴⁰ This contention appears to be supported by Saulius Geniusas’s analysis; see Saulius Geniusas, “Between Phenomenology and Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Imagination,” *Human Studies* 38 (2015): 223–41. Ricoeur’s as-yet-unpublished lectures on the imagination might shed further light, and such details from them as are currently available could be interpreted as chiming with our Polanyian development of Ricoeur here. In particular, George Taylor, who is editing the lectures for publication, comments on “the nexus between Ricoeur’s work on productive imagination and metaphor. Metaphor arises to cross the gap between terms that present a lack of literal fit or common identity. To characterize something metaphorically as “like” something else is, says Ricoeur, “to see the same in spite of, and through, the different.” This metaphoric creation of resemblance across difference is also an act of imagination. “Imagination,” Ricoeur writes, “is this ability to produce new kinds of assimilation and to produce them not *above* the differences, as in the concept, but in spite of and through the differences.” The imaginative interrelation across difference creates new metaphoric resemblance.” George H. Taylor, “Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Imagination,” *Journal of French Philosophy* 16 (2006): 99, citing the lecture manuscripts. Apart from these lectures, Ricoeur comes closest to exploring the mechanism of imagination in “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” *Critical*

however, can flesh his thought out – especially with insight about the nature of the ‘first guess’. In Polanyian terms, ‘naïve understanding’ is our imaginative integration of a text’s frame and story. We make such integrations on the basis of our traditioned pre-understandings; if we begin with a simplistic understanding that ‘all poems must rhyme’, for instance, then the framing features of a non-rhyming poem might lead us to read it as ‘bad poetry’. Nevertheless, the way in which art forces our imagination to make an integration in the first place will cause our engagement with a text, necessarily, to be a self-giving act of our whole person. Perhaps this offers a corrective to some ways of thinking about the ‘traditioned’ nature of hermeneutics; while it is true that “in interpretation we are not initially in control”, finding ourselves “seized by meaning rather than being the ones doing the seizing”,⁴¹ this does not leave us as merely passive receptors. The text draws us to engage with it in such a deep way, but the engagement is certainly ours to make, and it happens in our embodied, imaginative integration of frame and story.⁴² In any event, our contention here is that Polanyi’s insights can enrich Ricoeur’s hermeneutic significantly, by offering what we might call a ‘phenomenological grounding’ to Ricoeur’s concept of the imagination.

At the same time, we can also see Ricoeur’s more developed theory of texts as usefully supplementing Polanyi, especially by problematizing the latter’s opposition between poetic and prosaic speech.⁴³ Ricoeur draws a dividing line, not between prose and poetry, but between speech and writing – the latter being not “the mere material fixation” of the former, but rather a “*work*”: “the shaping of discourse through the operating of literary genres such as narration, fiction, the essay, etc.”⁴⁴ In Polanyian terms, Ricoeur therefore sees almost all written discourse as an integration of frame and story, and so, in a Polanyian sense, *poetic*. Ricoeur’s conviction that such poetic discourse “suspends [its] *descriptive* function” – that “it does not directly augment our knowledge of objects” – fits well with Polanyi’s notion that a piece of art’s frame isolates it from the rest of reality.⁴⁵ Ricoeur’s more mature theory of

Inquiry 5 (1978): 143–59, which is usefully explored, and also brought into conversation with Polanyi, by Matthew Peckham, in “The Heart of Matter: Exploring the Epistemic Significance of Aesthetics for Orthopathological Formation” (MA diss., University of Middlesex, 2017). I am grateful to Matthew for passing his work on to me.

⁴¹ Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 59.

⁴² Cf. Mark T. Mitchell, “Michael Polanyi, Alasdair MacIntyre, and the Role of Tradition,” *Humanitas* 19 (2006): 97–125.

⁴³ In the lectures, this sometimes approaches a quasi-Romanticist deification of the artist’s creative genius. See, e.g., MLR 3, 101–102.

⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Hermeneutics*, trans. David Pellauer; Writings and Lectures 2 (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 135, emphasis original.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

texts, however, sees such a suspension happening almost everywhere that speech becomes writing. This re-drawing of the line makes for a considerably more expansive place for interpretation in the act of discovering textual meaning: Polanyi's frame-story integration happens wherever speech becomes writing, not just in relation to Polanyi's concept of 'poetic' discourse. As will be seen later, such a contention also has significant implications for the question of Polanyi's understanding of religious discourse.

2. Explanation

Although we could leave the Polanyi-Ricoeur dialogue here, doing so would ignore arguably the fundamental feature of Ricoeur's philosophy – the notion of 'detour and return'.⁴⁶ Having begun with naïve understanding, Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc "detours through a moment of critical distancing" – 'explanation' as opposed to 'understanding' – before "returning to a deeper involvement in the text".⁴⁷ This critical detour chiefly involves, for Ricoeur, the application of structuralist analysis to a text. He was convinced that structuralism in and of itself reduces to "a sterile game, a divisive algebra," thus a structuralist approach ought only to be "a stage ... between a naive interpretation and a critical interpretation."⁴⁸ The value of this stage, though, is to bring critical tools to bear on the text, to test our first guess at its meaning.

Limiting these tools to those associated with structuralism seems anachronistic, especially given structuralism's eclipse by post-structuralist approaches in the twentieth century.⁴⁹

Polanyi, however, offers a basis for a much richer explanatory moment than this. Noting how a shift in attention from the focal to the subsidiary – from, say, the meaning of a word to the individual letters that make it up – can destroy the subsidiary-focal integration which is the feat of knowledge (we saw earlier, for example, his contention that focusing on a poem's frame can "efface the meaning of the poem"),⁵⁰ he also grants that a *temporary* switch in focus might *deepen* our understanding:

⁴⁶ Ricoeur himself called this "the rhythm of my philosophical respiration." Charles E Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 133.

⁴⁷ Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 217, 218.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., the analysis in Gary Gutting, "French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2010), 829–41.

⁵⁰ MLR 1, 82.

The meticulous dismembering of a text, which can kill its appreciation, can also supply material for a much deeper understanding of it ... the detailing of particulars, which by itself would destroy meaning, serves as a guide to their subsequent integration and thus establishes a more secure and more accurate meaning of them.⁵¹

A Polanyian critical detour, then, might involve a temporary switching of attention from a text's frame-story integration to the particulars of each – with a view to a subsequent re-integration at a deeper imaginative level.

An expansive understanding of a text's frame makes this hermeneutical move especially appealing. In the Chicago lectures, Polanyi works with the metaphor of a painting's presentational frame; more recent explorations in genre theory have also deployed this image, using "the frame structure of genre" to explore the complex relationship between any genre and the specific texts that participate in it.⁵² Such a construal understands genre as "neither a property of (and located 'in') texts, nor a projection of (and located 'in') readers; it exists as part of the relationship between texts and readers ... It is a shared convention with a social force."⁵³ Because of its 'mediatorial' position, genre thus exerts a wide-ranging influence on both writer and reader, as John Frow's schematisation of specific generic features – incorporating formal, rhetorical and thematic concerns – demonstrates.⁵⁴

If all of these aspects of a text's production and reception come under the heading of genre, and if they can all thus be understood as aspects of the text's frame, then the concept of frame-story integration becomes even more important hermeneutically. For one thing, we can further see how our initial, 'naïve' integration will be working tacitly with a wide array of ideas about what the text we're reading *is* – in which genre(s) it participates. And while much of our engagement with generic questions will be tacit at this point, a 'thick' understanding of genre-as-frame makes the *critical* moment, where we switch our attention to the frame, even more crucial, offering valuable resources to discern the text's meaning "more secure[ly] and

⁵¹ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, rev. ed. (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 19.

⁵² John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed., *The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2015), 117. This finds affinity with Ricoeur's definition of a "work", noted above: "the shaping of discourse through the operating of literary genres such as narration, fiction, the essay, etc." Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation," 135.

⁵³ Frow, *Genre*, 112.

⁵⁴ Formal organisation concerns "the repertoire of ways of shaping the material medium in which it works and the 'immaterial' categories of time, space and enunciative position", rhetorical considerations have to do with "the way textual relations between the senders and receivers of messages are organised in a structured situation of address", and thematic concerns develop "the shaped human experience that a genre invests with significance and interest." *Ibid.*, 81, 82, 83.

more accurate[ly].” At the same time, however, both Polanyi and Ricoeur lead us to conclude that situating a text generically is *not* the interpreter’s final task: as important as it is, the “more secure and more accurate meaning” comes only when we return to a frame-story integration.

3. Appropriation

This ‘appropriative’ return, the final moment in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical arc, is, in a sense, a recapitulation of the first. The crucial addition is “the claim of a text to describe, or better, redescribe, reality.”⁵⁵ Ricoeur sees this redescription working through the distended relation between a text’s sense – “the ideal object that is intended” by it – and its reference – its “claim to reach reality.”⁵⁶ Whereas in oral discourse, “reference is *ostensive*”, the act of writing involves an “obliterating” of such an immediate referential function, opening up a “more originary” one – which is, for Ricoeur, the truly “poetic function” of discourse.⁵⁷

My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that *participation-in* or *belonging-to* an order of things that precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. The function of poetic discourse is to bring about this emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse.⁵⁸

This closely parallels what Polanyi thinks is happening when art communicates to us – not at the level of ostensive, first-order description of the world, but as “a strikingly revealing, emotionally charged interpretation of ourselves.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Ricoeur’s philosophical route from metaphor to the suspension of first-order reference is so similar to the moves Polanyi makes in the 1969 lectures that it is extraordinary that they do not appear to have interacted with each other at any point in their lives.

Recognition of these similarities is especially helpful in correcting a problematic aspect of Polanyi’s thought – and, here, we come to the question of Polanyi’s understanding of religious language. We noted earlier that one facet of the ‘*Meaning* controversy’ concerns

⁵⁵ Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 63.

⁵⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace; trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 42.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text,” 201, emphasis original; idem., “Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation,” 136, 137.

⁵⁸ Idem., “Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation,” 137, emphasis original.

⁵⁹ MLR 6, 141.

whether or not Polanyi thought religious language, as a subset of poetic language, could actually convey truth; to suggest otherwise appeared to return to the objective-subjective division which Polanyi's earlier work had sought to overcome. While the Chicago lectures do not settle the matter definitively, they do tend towards downplaying religious truth claims. Polanyi speaks, for example, of "the depth of my whole life being expressed by the words, spoken by the congregation on their knees, "Our Father, which art in heaven," even though literally I do not believe the Lord's prayer."⁶⁰ Similarly, considering the topic of death, he cites verses from 1 Corinthians 15 – "Corruptible puts on incorruptible," "Death, where is thy victory?" – before commenting, "I now realise how revealing such words are of our destiny even though there is no information given by them."⁶¹

If claims such as these do amount to a denial of a referential function to religious language,⁶² Ricoeur's better developed ideas around discourse perhaps give us the resources to question it. For Ricoeur, poetic and religious language *can* refer to extra-textual realities – not through 'pure' ostension, but via the 'second order', imaginative reference of the discursive 'work'.⁶³ Ricoeur understands such reference as the projection of "a world I may inhabit ... wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities."⁶⁴ How this world is both like and unlike the world of our immediate perception is how the text opens up "new possibilities of being-in-the-world" – through "the imaginative variations that literature works on the real."⁶⁵ It is not the case, then, that only that form of language which Polanyi calls 'poetic' experiences the complicating distension of sense and reference; for Ricoeur, this distension happens whenever speech becomes writing. Furthermore, it is clearly a *distension* of sense and reference – not a complete severing. At least in the case of religious knowledge achieved

⁶⁰ MLR 6, 143.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² It may not be such a denial; it is possible, for example, that Polanyi had not explored this point sufficiently, such that we are reaching a conclusion he never did. The brevity of his comments here calls for further investigation.

⁶³ Interestingly, Ricoeur's explorations here have a distinctly Polanyian flavour: "the liberation of a more originary referential function" which happens in all written discourse "may be called second-order [as against first-order, ostensive reference] only because discourse that has a descriptive function has usurped the first rank in daily life, assisted, in this respect, by science.". Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred*, 222. Poetic language involves a complication of reference, not its complete absence; it is the hegemony of scientific discourse, with its claims to pure objectivity, that has led us to view the poetic as problematic. Henry Jansen also argues that certain genres of discourse are more suggestive of a more direct referential function than others. This is a useful addition to Ricoeur's ideas that would certainly be worthy of further study. See Henry Jansen, "Poetics and the Bible: Facts and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 41 (1999): 22–38.

⁶⁴ Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation," 138.

⁶⁵ Idem., "Philosophy and Religious Language," 43.

through Scripture, Polanyi's contention that "there is no information given" by a text such as 1 Corinthians 15 is therefore too simplistic.

Conclusion

There may well be, then, something problematic about Polanyi's understanding of religious knowledge, quite apart from any influence that Harry Prosch apparently exerted upon the shape of the final, book-form version of *Meaning*. Our comparison of Polanyi's thought with Ricoeur's suggests, though, that Polanyi's problem is not a simple return to a division between 'scientific' and 'artistic' knowledge; rather, it is rooted in his misunderstanding (from a Ricoeurian perspective) of how speech and writing relate. It must also be emphasised that the underdeveloped nature of Polanyi's thought makes such a conclusion necessarily tentative, and also quite specifically defined. The lectures certainly evidence a direction of travel towards the downplaying of religious knowledge; they lack, though, the fuller exposition of this thought which we find in the 'final form' of *Meaning*. As such, those who find a tension between *Meaning* and Polanyi's earlier work may be justified in doing so. And they may justifiably see the tension as partly the result of Prosch's hand, and partly the result of Polanyi's failing health. They must also, however, reckon with the seeds of the tension present in the Chicago lectures themselves.

Moreover, we have tried to show that bringing Polanyi into dialogue with Ricoeur offers a viable way forward in appropriating Polanyi's thought in the contemporary hermeneutical conversation – a way that takes this issue of extra-textual reference seriously, but is not derailed by it, precisely because Ricoeur's more mature hermeneutic offers a corrective to the way Polanyi's ideas seem to have been developing. And indeed, more broadly, a 'Polanyian-Ricoeurian' hermeneutic – one conceived against the backdrop of Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc, enriched by Polanyi's insights – attractively holds together a range of issues which often become hermeneutical thorns in the side if ignored. We do not approach texts with a blank mind, but our readings are inherently traditioned. This traditioning involves our minds and our bodies – and here, we reaffirm just how much Polanyi's rich, embodied philosophy adds to Ricoeur's understanding of the imagination. Our readings thus work with tacit ideas of every text's frame and story, imaginatively integrated in a first, naïve reading. While we may stop here, there is value in detouring through a critical moment, asking deeper questions of our text's frame and story. And both Polanyi and Ricoeur would urge that we do not stop at this point, either. Rather, in their own ways, they call us to return to Ricoeur's famous

‘second naïveté’ – where we explore the text’s projected world, hear its “strikingly revealing, emotionally charged interpretation of ourselves”, and then appropriate it for ourselves “and clarify our lives by it”.

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