

## Polanyian Poetics: Commentary on *The Monster Within*

### A Poem by B. Austin, Air Force

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Polanyian insights into the way meaning is created provides a coherent perspective for understanding why and how the arts are useful in ameliorating the devastating effects of trauma.

Out of the *subsidiary* inchoate experience of Austin's traumatic wartime service, with its "needle thin" memory traces of terror filled sights and sounds, a *focal* metaphor emerges of a "self/land" (tenor) which has been invaded and captured by a "monster" (vehicle). The monster has stolen part of Austin's self/land and now lives permanently "within" controlling Austin's actions and moods prompting terrifying thoughts and images of the past. Through his *imagination* Austin *indwells* this metaphor. With his feelings of terror, rage, guilt and grief he fuels its passionate cry. In Polanyian terms, Austin simultaneously "surrenders" himself to and is "carried away" by this metaphor thereby creating a "wholistic imaginative achievement of meaning" (M 73)

Austin places this metaphor within the larger context of a poem which is composed of formal *subsidiary* elements including rhyme, rhythm, sound and grammar which, when integrated with its prose content, becomes the meaning of the *focal object*, the poem itself considered as a whole.

Why does the experience of reading/hearing this poem not trigger flashbacks and terror overwhelming Austin or fellow traumatized veterans? And, alternatively, how does it become instead a part of the healing process? According to Polanyi the *pattern* of the *subsidiary* elements of the poem such as rhythm, rhyme and sound set a poem apart from ordinary speech, *detach* it from ordinary life making its 'story' no mere recitation of facts but a 'story' set apart, and heard by the *imagination*. Further states Polanyi "... whenever our powers of integration produce a coherence, they do so by cutting off the subsidiaries of this integrated body from connection with other experiences." (M 85) Polanyi supports this point by quoting the work of I.A. Richards, an influential English literary critic, who says that in a poem "metre" produces a *frame* effect which isolates the poetic experience from every day existence which "would be too *personal*" (M 81, italics mine). Therefore, says Polanyi, a work of art does not affirm any fact of experience. Instead, it represents certain 'facts' of the *imagination* in a *form* to which we respond "... by surrendering from our own *diffuse* memories of moving events (in this case *traumatically* moving events) a gift of ... resonant *feelings* (M 88, italics mine).

[Noteworthy is the fact that the name of the website on which I found this poem is giftfromwithin.org.]

A poem avoids triggering a flashback because it is not “too personal”. It is effectively “cut off” from direct recall of traumatic experience. This is true for the poet as well as the poem’s readers. Polanyi maintains that “... the integration of subsidiaries produces a *perception* differing both in appearance and content from its constituents.... We live in this meaning rather than the meaning these events would have for us in our ordinary ... lives” (M 87).

Psychologically, Austin’s poem, in Polanyian aesthetic perspective, is a “safe” way to ‘speak’ about the “unspeakable” which is a crucial step in the healing process. Traumatized veterans by imaginatively indwelling the poem, simultaneously surrendering themselves to it and being carried away by it, begin to feel understood as they resonate with the feelings evoked by the poem.

In larger perspective the meaning of this poem is that from its tacit beginnings to its articulation by the poet into a work of art it is an affirmation of an incipient self-knowledge and a longing for a shared, and therefore healing, response of understanding from those who read or hear it.

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