

The Tacit Victory and the Unfinished Agenda

[**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *On April 11, 1991 at the Kent State University conference celebrating the Polanyi centennial there was a panel discussion which bore the title listed above. The panel included nine persons whose interest in Polanyi's thought is longstanding; panelists were asked to comment on the relevance of Polanyi's thought to issues and discussions current in their interests. Sam Watson's remarks were a part of this session at Kent State. A similar panel discussion involving three other persons occurred at the Polanyi Society banquet in November 1991 in Kansas City. Volume XVIII, Numbers 1 and 2 contain "tacit victory" articles from both these gatherings.*]

Polanyi and Rhetorical Studies

Sam Watson

What relations might there be, between someone's act of speaking (or of writing) and that same someone's act of knowing?

Students of Polanyi's thought will recognize that as a *complex* question: Given the presence of the tacit, no articulation is ever exhaustive; no act of articulation is ever complete. On the other hand, it is possible (though it may hardly ever be desirable) to engage in articulation without any act of knowing at all; words used mindlessly may signify nothing, but words *can* be used mindlessly.

Students of speaking and of writing will recognize the question above as an *important* one. However, though many of them are increasingly familiar with Polanyi, they still often miss much of the question's complexity. The question reasonably "frames" Polanyi's influence among these scholars, and it suggests the direction of an agenda as yet unfinished.

It is a question as ancient as it is contemporary. On its basis Plato (*Gorgias*) condemns rhetoric as "mere flattery," while Isocrates insists, "With this faculty [of speech] we both contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown" (*Antidosis*, 256). Beginning with Aristotle, who defines rhetoric as "the faculty of *discovering* in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric*, I.2, emphasis added), the foundation of ancient rhetorical theory and practice was an art of invention largely consistent, I think, with Polanyi's thought. In the age of science, however, this art dissolved; instruction in speaking and writing came to be seen as merely "managerial," a matter of making good use of the knowledge derived

independently, via “scientific” method. This merely “managerial” view of rhetoric finally gave us the mindlessness of rote drill and the purposelessness of the five paragraph theme.

Among scholars and teachers of speaking and writing, the second half of the twentieth century has been a time of recovering ancient rhetorical theory, of reinventing it within and for the contemporary world. Central to those efforts have been attempts to formulate some distinctively rhetorical art of invention. For instance, members of the “good reasons” movement see rhetorical invention as a matter of discovering “reasons for” (or against) particular courses of action, in the absence of compelling fact. And these scholars, such as Chaim Perelman and Wayne C. Booth, have read Polanyi -- partially. They often enthusiastically embrace his “critique of doubt” while, ironically, they continue acritically to accept an essentially Cartesian epistemology, failing to acknowledge the epistemological reorientation which Polanyi offers us.

While scholars of rhetoric have been articulating new (and renewed) theory, they tend not yet to have come to grips with issues of epistemology. Teachers of writing have not done so either, directly, though they *have* been articulating pedagogies and understandings of writing that seem deeply harmonious with Polanyi’s thought and that often draw upon him directly. Thus James Britton cites Polanyi in calling our attention to the importance of “shaping at the point of utterance,” the sort of meaning-making which takes place *within* an act of articulation. Polanyi is present in the title of Janet Emig’s “The Tacit Tradition,” a study of the intellectual forebears of contemporary writing instruction. Polanyi informs much of Peter Elbow’s work, and he is one important guide for Louise W. Phelps, in her programmatically and philosophically important work, *Composition as a Human Science*. Rather than review the varied citations and uses of Polanyi in the current literature, I would like to point to two areas of current thought, two especially sensitive ones, which are resonant with his work.

Among many extremely influential writing teachers today, a central term is “voice.” (It would repay serious study, to determine just why and how teachers of writing have adopted the “vocal” metaphors of speech, while teachers and theorists of speech, with their complex printed schemata and “lines of argument,” seem unconsciously to have adopted the metaphors of -- writing!)

“Voice” is an elusive concept, which indeed has meant various things to various teachers of writing. “Voice” is most easily identified with essentially “personal” narrative (and indeed that is one source of the caution and sometimes the disdain these teachers meet in academic circles). In such writing, one may most easily sense the presence (or the absence) of some “person” within the words; for many teachers, “voice” has come to represent the presence of the authenticating personal, in a written text, a sense of some real person taking a stand within (or “behind”) the words of the text. I believe that Susan Hilligoss has said it best: “Voice [is] the reader’s sense of how the writer knows what she knows -- not by analyzing the argument, but by the degree to which the reader can participate in the re-creation of that knowledge.” Indeed, it seems to me reasonable to take Susan one step further: “voice” may be the sense that a text provides of its writer’s authority, not as determined prior to and independent of the text, but as established *within* the writing of the text itself. “Voiceful” texts are ones which seem to embody traces of their own creation; they seem to be the acts of some person’s coming to know, *within* that person’s acts of articulation.

Among writing teachers a similar and kindred concept is “writing to learn,” a notion which is, at the least, a needed complement to the “writing to communicate” which has become the academy’s stock in trade. Traditional instruction, focused ostensibly on “communication” (though often more concerned, really, with matters of propriety in language and citations) presumed that “knowledge” is to be garnered, somehow, prior to and independent of any

act of writing. Writing is a matter simply of transcribing what someone already knows -- often, someone quite other than the writer herself or himself. Student writing becomes student transcription of what student has read in books or heard in lectures -- a recipe for mindless tedium on the part of students and of terminal frustration and boredom for their instructors. (Should we wonder that, whether intended or not, the result often is plagiarism?)

“Writing to learn” is quite a different orientation; not, I think, finally a competing one but certainly a complementary one. Here the emphasis tends to be on relatively short bursts of essentially *informal writing*, in a variety of modes. Through the writing, students find themselves (partially) articulating the relevant experience and knowledge they are bringing to a new subject of study; they pose questions; they seek out new and tentative connections. Through their written language, they are becoming more active learners. Such writing, as it becomes habitual, should deepen and extend learning; it should also improve students’ abilities in “writing to communicate.” I am confident on both points, though we do not yet have research studies which demonstrate either. Meanwhile the anecdotal reports, from students and from teachers, characteristically are enthusiastic, sometimes to the point of embarrassment. Needless to say, theoretical treatments of “writing to learn” are yet to be written. When they are written, James Britton and Janet Emig will be seen to have played key roles. And, in even more overarching ways, so will Michael Polanyi; I am fully confident of that.

Polanyi’s thought already is a significant source for a direction of work that, on the face of it, might seem to have little to do with speaking and writing. In work that is increasingly influential in educational circles, Donald Schon and others have been developing an understanding of “*reflective practice*,” through which practitioners effectively act -- and learn -- in complex and problematic situations. Central to this “professional artistry” is the practitioner’s reliance upon the tacit knowledge s/he brings to the situation.

Central, also, are uses of language quite different from the traditional delivery of whatever was already known. Language becomes tentative, speculative, exploratory. In important senses language becomes *conversational*, as the medical doctor works toward an accurate diagnosis or the architect considers the varied constraints on a building’s design. Education also needs to partake of this conversation, Schon insists, if our students are to become effective practitioners rather than merely technically knowledgeable.

“Conversations,” taken seriously, entail “communities,” convivial forums within which persons come together to explore. In terms of organization and prevailing attitudes, our schools and universities today tend to encourage neither conversation nor community among the expert practitioners we call “teachers.” The “teacher research” movement, through enabling teachers to become reflective practitioners, is offering a promising alternative. However, as Donald Schon says, such teachers “pose a potential threat to the dynamically conservative [school] system in which [they] live” (1983, 332). Louise W. Phelps (1991), drawing upon both Schon and Polanyi, describes one university’s writing program within which reflection is central, and she confronts questions of epistemology of practice squarely, articulating the place of “practical wisdom” within the sorts of knowledge that characterize composition studies.

The question with which I began this overview is philosophically complex and politically charged: when we acknowledge, as Polanyi invites us to do, that persons’ acts of articulation may contribute essentially to those persons’ acts of knowing, new vistas become possible. One organized movement within which teachers are exploring those vistas is the National Writing Project. There, teachers of writing write; they discuss and share the effective classroom practices they have developed; they become teachers of other teachers. In short, they draw on their own knowledge, within a

convivial community; often, the classrooms to which they return also become communities of learners. And, collectively, they have established a reputation as being the most effective writing teachers in the nation, a reputation which for the first time this year has earned Congressional funding for their continuing efforts.

As we continue quietly to ask that question about the possible relations between persons' acts of articulation and their acts of knowing, we just may be able to transform American education.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. *The Rhetoric*. Tr. Lane Cooper. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932.
- Booth, Wayne C. *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Britton, James. "Shaping at the Point of Utterance." *Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle. Urbana: NCTE, 1984, 61-66.
- Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Emig, Janet. "The Tacit Tradition." *Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle. Urbana: NCTE, 1984, 9-18.
- Hilligoss Susan. "Ethos and the Teaching of Writing." Carolinas Speech Conference, Clemson, September 29, 1984.
- Isocrates. *Antidosis*. Tr. George Norlin. Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1962.
- Perelman, Chaim, and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise in Argumentation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969.
- _____, _____. "Polanyi's Interpretation of Scientific Inquiry." *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. Ed. Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat. Durham: Duke University Press, 1968.
- Phelps, Louise W. *Composition as a Human Science: Contributions to the Self-Understanding of a Discipline*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- _____, _____. "Practical Wisdom and the Geography of Knowledge in Composition." *College English* 53 (Dec. 1991), 863-885.
- Plato. *Gorgias*, tr. W. C. Helmbold. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952.
- Schon, Donald. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- _____, _____. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- _____, _____. ed. *The Reflective Turn: Case Studies in and on Educational Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991.