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Submission Guidelines

Submissions: All manuscripts should be submitted as a Microsoft Word file attached to an email message. **Articles** should be no more than 6000 words in length (inclusive of keywords, abstract, notes, and references) and sent to Paul Lewis at lewis_pa@mercer.edu. All submissions will be sent out for blind peer review. **Book reviews** should be no more than 1000 words in length and sent to Andrew Grosso at atgrosso@icloud.com.

Spelling: We recognize that the journal serves English-speaking writers around the world and so do not require anyone's "standard" English spelling. We do, however, require all writers to be consistent in whatever convention they follow.

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CF *Contempt of Freedom*

KB *Knowing and Being*

LL *Logic of Liberty*

M *Meaning*

PK *Personal Knowledge*

SEP *Society, Economics, and Philosophy*

SFS *Science, Faith, and Society*

SM *Study of Man*

STSR *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*

TD *Tacit Dimension*

For example: Polanyi argues that (TD, 56). Full bibliographical information should still be supplied in the references section since many of us may work with different editions of his works.

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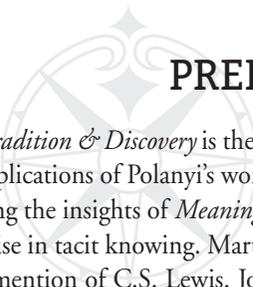
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PREFACE

This issue of *Tradition & Discovery* is the first of three theme issues this year. This issue focuses on some implications of Polanyi's work for literary criticism. Jean Bocharova opens the issue by exploring the insights of *Meaning* for the field. Stan Scott sets out how literary criticism is an exercise in tacit knowing. Martin Turkis discusses the work of Iris Murdoch, concluding with a mention of C.S. Lewis. Jon Fennell, in an essay commissioned for this issue, picks up on that cue and identifies parallels between C.S. Lewis' *An Experiment in Criticism* and Polanyi. Lindsay Atnip closes this issue with a review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. We also have an interview with Gábor István Bíró, conducted by Phil Mullins.

The first three articles in this issue originated as papers presented at the Polanyi Society meeting at Nashotah House this summer. Many thanks to the authors for the hard work on revising them so quickly for publication—and to Andrew Grosso for his assistance in coordinating this issue.

Learn more about that Nashotah House meeting, and more, in the online News and Notes.

Paul Lewis

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TOWARD A POST-CRITICAL LITERARY THEORY



Jean Bocharova

Keywords: Aesthetics, *Meaning*, Literature, Gradient, Transnatural, Rhetoric, Persuasion

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Meaning as Polanyi's statement on aesthetics. The core of his aesthetic theory emphasizes the power of art to move the imagination. I examine metaphors he uses for this kind of movement—descent along a gradient, indwelling, and transcendence—and suggest implications for literary study.

When Charles Taylor spoke to the Polanyi Society in 2015, Stanley Scott made the following observation during the Q and A session: “Polanyi’s idea of a tacit dimension strikes philosophy as a great revelation, and yet it’s sort of old news to poets, writers of scripture, prophets, who tend to speak not in what we today call the language of philosophy and science but in metaphor” (Lowney 2017, 45). He then suggested that understanding the tacit dimension “could be the very lynchpin of recognizing the point at which poetry, philosophy, and science connect” (Lowney 2017, 45). Scott’s comments struck me at the time as articulating something I had felt to be profound about *Meaning*. What follows is an extended response to Scott’s above observations.

As I see it, in connecting poetry, science, myth, and politics, the “old news” faintly echoed in *Meaning* is that art adorns human life by figuring forth, drawing out, effecting potentialities of individuals and societies. In this way, Polanyi’s thought represents a bridge between earlier conceptions of poetry and new forays into cognitive features of literary experience. At a time when some literary critics are endeavoring to articulate a post-critical literary theory that would counterbalance critique, Polanyi’s views offer a way forward. Perhaps this is because Polanyi’s theory of aesthetics in *Meaning*—as

compiled and aided by Harry Prosch—is not an isolated inquiry relevant only to those of us interested in art; rather, it extends his theory of personal knowing by examining more closely what we mean when we talk about “reality” and by more deeply engaging with the problem of arbitrating between idioms of belief as we seek to distinguish between the real and the illusory.¹ Polanyi’s contribution to the study of art in general and literature in particular is not simply that he offers additional commentary about aesthetic experience or our perception of the beautiful, but that he rehabilitates the notion that art and aesthetic experience helps us to make contact with reality. In other words, he shows us how aesthetic experience and aesthetic value cannot be separated from a tendency of the universe to evoke meaning from us.

The Problem of “Aesthetics”

One feature of Polyanian aesthetics in *Meaning* that stands out is its rejection of the common assumption that “aesthetic” is synonymous with “beautiful.” In the chapter on validity in art, he explains that the “cornerstone” of his aesthetic theory is not a beauty that merely pleases but “imaginative experience,” which we might say is a beauty that moves:

Aesthetics has spoken through the ages of the harmony and beauty that please us in the arts. But other beauty can also please us. The intellectual beauty of a scientific theory is pleasing, and so is the beauty of a sunset or a woman; and the word ‘beauty’ is used today very freely to praise an ingenious invention, an elegant combination in chess, or a supreme feat of athletics. But these beauties hardly move our imagination, except in terms of special interests of a personal or professional kind. Beauty of this kind is really too harmonious for art, which depends for its self-assertion on bridging incompatible elements by the powers of its imaginative integration (106).

The pleasure of undergoing an aesthetic experience is not mere delight at perceiving something harmonious but the pleasure of forming coherences of incompatibles: “To move a man aesthetically is to move his imagination to make such integrations” (106). The distinction here between pleasing beauty and imaginative integration is important. It shifts our orientation from aesthetics as the study of the beautiful—if by “beautiful” we mean something that evokes a particular kind of pleasurable sensation—to the study of that which moves us imaginatively. This aligns him with renewed attention to aesthetics and its recent broadening in scope from analysis of formal, sensual features of art to its embeddedness in larger sociopolitical conditions.² For literary studies, the implication of this view of aesthetics is—to echo “what poets have always known”—that literature has the capacity to move us toward (or away from) the truth. This is not,

however, a return to what some would see as the “retrograde religion of art” (Felski 2015, 165). It is instead a recognition that “being moved” entails both a recognition and commitment to something we call “real.”

Descending, Indwelling, Transcending: Three Metaphors for Being “Moved”

If the core of Polanyi’s aesthetics is the experience of being moved to make imaginative integrations, it is worth exploring what this movement entails and how it is related to our attempts to make contact with reality. In *Meaning* he relies on three metaphors for conceptualizing the epistemological significance of experiencing art: the metaphor of descending along a gradient, dwelling in an external being, and transcending time and place.

Descending: Though it comes at the end of *Meaning*, the first metaphor I wish to discuss is that of the “gradient” of meaning. In his chapter on order, Polanyi makes a claim that is central to the new mythology he is attempting to create: namely, that the universe is shaped to evoke meaning from us. Discovery, for example, is an achievement made possible “because we are guided by an intuition of a more meaningful organization of our knowledge of nature provided by the slope of deepening meaning in the whole field of potential meanings surrounding us” (178). A knower, in other words, intuits the presence of a “slope of deepening meaning” and is thrust toward it by the imagination. To illustrate what he means by this slope of meaning, he compares our position as knowers with a boulder on a hill. The presence of the hill’s slope does not cause the boulder to descend just as the presence of that which can be known—reality—does not cause us to know it. Instead the slope evokes movement from a boulder that has been pushed just as the slope of what can be known evokes meaning from us once our imagination thrusts us out of rest and guides us down its chosen path (175-176). Whereas the boulder tends toward a minimization of potential energy, the imagination seeks deepening coherences, which we may call a minimization of error or greater contact with reality.³ Thus the intuition and imagination work together to sense the presence of the gradients of meaning and to move us down their slopes and along their landscapes toward truth (178), the fullness of which is the unachievable cosmic totality—the final solution to all problems that can be thought.

There are several implications of conceptualizing knowing as this descent along a gradient. First, it suggests a nuanced view of truth and falsehood. Truth exists as a global minimum, but our material embeddedness enables us only to journey toward but never reach this final destination, even as we reach resting points in some of our problem spaces. Knowing, here, is rendered not as a matter of binary true or false but as location in relation to a low point. If you are farther up the slope and I am farther down, I might say that I am “right” and you are “wrong” even though we are both

removed from the lowest point possible. In another sense, you could be farther up the slope but imaginatively striving in a direction that will eventually lead to a steep drop while I am farther down but stuck in an ideological well that hinders my ability to move. In this way, the Azande, the Bororo, and the modern are moving toward a basin but, perhaps, from different sides of the mountain. More importantly for a study of literature, Polanyi's reference to gradients of meaning allows us to better grasp the experience of "being moved" by literature as an epistemological event. Powerful texts set loose an imaginative vision of the world which moves our imagination (104). Being moved by these texts is more than feeling a pleasurable sensation at encountering something harmonious, symmetrical, or subjectively beautiful. It is to have the imagination bring our minds to a place where some aspect of reality can be known and to chart a path toward it. Literature, in other words, is persuasive. And being persuaded is not being tricked, but being given the ability to make contact with reality. We cannot even begin the journey toward truth without a self-compelled thrust of imagination or the attractiveness of an imaginative vision that pulls us out of rest. In addition, the density of information that we encounter and process gives rise to a multitude of such problem spaces so that we exist simultaneously on different points on multiple hills, plateaus, valleys. "Truth" in this metaphor is simultaneously universal and perspectival, attained and unattainable.

Indwelling. Another metaphor for being moved imaginatively is indwelling. Two definitions appear in *Meaning*. In the first sense of the term, that which we dwell in becomes as part of our body. This form of indwelling results in what he calls "self-centered" integration because we move from that which is indwelt subsidiarily to that which is known focally (71). Thus, we "know" what is indwelt as we know other subsidiaries, and it becomes transparent as we attend to the focal whole. Language, for example, becomes transparent when it is fully indwelt; we use it as part of our body for the purpose of communication similar to how we use our eyes for perception. In the case of comprehensive entities such as living beings, we dwell in the particulars of their life—their gestures, expressions, utterances, behavior, performances—in order to know them as a whole. This is a more substantial interiorization which he calls "participation." To participate in the life of another is to know them by a kind of fusion of selves. I live the particulars of another—I interiorize those particulars subsidiarily—in order to know the whole of the other (143). This form of indwelling is also a type of surrender, for to interiorize something exterior as a means for knowing is to allow it to change an existing intellectual framework. Especially in the case of comprehensive entities, that which is indwelt changes us existentially and influences our means of distinguishing truth from falsehood by modifying our judgments about what is and is not plausible (144).

In addition to the indwelling that occurs with such self-centered integrations, a second understanding of indwelling—symbolization—involves the pouring out of

the self into that which is known. This is a different kind of fusion of self and other which he calls “self-giving” (72-5). Whereas that which is indwelt in the self-centered sense becomes transparent in its pointing to the focal whole, that which is indwelt in self-giving sense receives and embodies its subsidiaries—namely, the diffuse parts of ourselves. The focal whole becomes simultaneously that which is indwelt—for example, an artwork (80)—and the subsidiaries which we use to indwell. When our attention is carried back to them, they become a “felt unity,” a “tacit grasp of ourselves as a whole person” (75). Thus the activity of being carried away is itself an emergent novelty (87). It is in this second kind of indwelling that we come to know ourselves most fully. In the regular flow of time, our experiences exist incoherently in our memory and reverberate indefinitely in the inarticulate realms of our tacit reservoir. When a symbol moves our imagination in such a way as to convince us to pour ourselves into it, the loose and inchoate fragments of our existence cohere and find shape in the symbol. In the moment that we undergo this experience, we achieve a deeper understanding of our own existence. Though the full activity of this knowing is always temporally limited, this kind of knowing remains physically embodied in the symbol. Thus, we may return to it, and by attending to this symbol we may continue to “clarify our lives by it” (109). That is, we may again dwell in undergo the activity of knowing ourselves more fully.

Both of these senses of indwelling occur in his example of the Bororo tribesman who participate so vividly in the life of the red parrot that they “seem to think that in some ways they and the red parrots belong to the same class” (139). In this example, what begins with the first kind of indwelling—dwelling in the particulars of a comprehensive entity in order to know it as a whole—becomes the second kind—a surrender of self into the entity that now embodies and reflects back upon the knower. It is not just that the Bororo “know” the red parrot but that the red parrot embodies them symbolically. They *are* the red parrot. Similarly, modern man pours himself conceptually into the automaton, believing ourselves to be product of physiochemical laws working themselves out along purely mechanical lines (139).

Transcending. In relation to art, the second kind of indwelling produces as its emergent a moment of transcendence. This metaphor is found in his distinction between “natural” and “transnatural” integrations. Both natural and transnatural integrations require the work of the imagination. But just as some comprehensive entities are more real than others, some integrations enable us to make contact with a deeper reality. The distinction between the two is found in the relation of the integration to reality. Natural integrations correspond to our knowing of the particulars of the world; transnatural to cosmic totality. Natural integrations are formed in our interactions with our immediate surroundings. These include those coherences that contribute to the skillful navigation of our environment, including the perception of basic regularities and even basic facility with what Polanyi calls indicative language (70). Clever Hans embodies

the mode of being associated with natural integrations. Though he knows enough to seek advantages in his environment, he lives only in the present, “hedged in by [his] surroundings” (121) and “shut up in his own mode of existence” (128). This is a purely subjective mode of being.

Humans, in contrast, have the ability to form transnatural coherences which allow us to transcend our subjectivity and our immediate surroundings. Unlike Clever Hans who is trapped by the present and the immediate, we move beyond observable objects to the world as a whole in an imaginative extension beyond experience when we achieve transnatural integrations (121). In these moments we are “filled . . . with inexhaustible significance” as we experience a time outside of time and a reality beyond place (128). The distinction is thus not found in the difference between natural and artificial or automatic and imaginative. It is to be found in the distinction between those integrations that “work in our mundane world”—such as perception, indicative language, scientific precepts—and those that exist outside of material reality—such as symbols, art, and myth that carry us away from everyday existence (125). Transnatural integrations detach us from everyday existence and bring us into contact with a reality that exceeds but also permeates the particulars of our individual existence.

In distinguishing between the natural and transnatural Polanyi places the experience of the transcendent at the foundation of the initiation into the personal mode of being. We cannot engage in personal knowing without achieving transnatural coherences. What makes us fully human—what initiates us into an existence as knowers and as people committed to higher order principles—is the kind of intellectual act that occurs when we rightly contemplate art. To seriously engage with an art work is to exercise the same skill we use to understand our calling. And we know that we are doing this not simply because of any strong sensation, though that might be part of it, but by our being “carried away” in another sense—by entering a mental state whereby we can comprehend the world from a vantage point beyond immediate demands of time and space. It is also the means by which we break the spectacles of ideology.

He brings this understanding of the impermanence of transcendent experience into his theory of personal knowing in such a way as to dissolve the boundaries between the profane and sacred, involved and detached. Between these extremes is the personal. Personal knowing is here more fully reconfigured as the activity of one who has made contact with the divine but who must still live in ordinary time and who must grapple with the constraints of material existence. Such a person is not dispassionate or somehow purged of desire—in this sense he is not “detached” from that mundane existence. Instead desires are oriented toward transcendent obligations (the “echoes” [147] of transnatural experience) and appetites are harnessed in service of these higher operating principles that put us in contact with the realm of the transcendent.

Such a configuration draws attention to those occasions that bring us into transcendence. Whereas we may engage in a mystical contemplation of nature, it is our art, myth, and other articulate contributions of culture that also attract us in such a deeply moving way that we are carried away from our subjective, immediate, material experience. Such mediums can rightly be called rhetorical or persuasive as they present an attractive imaginative vision that elicits our attention and sets loose its vision. Dwelling in these frameworks enables greater contact with reality while simultaneously opening us up to error (124-124). Dwelling in aesthetic visions is deeply persuasive, influencing what we are able to judge as plausible. The experience of the transcendent—achieved through transnatural integrations—may potentially re-order our deepest commitments, but without such experiences our existence would “mean much less to us” (109) and we would have no commitments outside of a biological imperative to survive.

I have drawn attention to these metaphors to suggest that the core of Polanyi’s aesthetics is a certain kind of epistemological event: an experience of being deeply “moved” in the presence of something real. In doing so, I have shifted focus away from the sections in the text where he tries to define art and to distinguish between aesthetic objects—those objects set off by an aesthetic “frame” which embodies cognitive content. This is not to suggest that there is no place for discussing the boundaries between art and everything that is not art in Polanyi’s writing. Rather it is to resist a tendency to focus too much on such distinctions at the expense of recognizing what he suggests are continuities between various types of persuasive visions, including scientific writing, political rhetoric, poetry and narrative, ideology, and myth. If we push some of Polanyi’s more inchoate ideas in *Meaning* to their limits, the rigid distinctions between art and non-art, indicative and symbolic, “open-eyed” and political, begin to break down. Even the most indicative of texts, for example, combines a persuasive frame with cognitive content, and the all-encompassing visions in which we dwell most deeply are embodied and given shape in “loose” patterns of our daily living—everyday rituals which fail to transport us but that nevertheless work as unexamined spectacles in our engagement with our surroundings.⁴ None of us may truly be a Clever Hans living in a purely subjective mode. Yet somehow dwelling on the metaphors for knowing that Polanyi provides can help us better understand the mental oscillations that contribute to our ability to perceive reality in its many manifestations.

Implications for a Post-Critical Literary Theory

If the imagination is so central to knowing, how ought we to approach powerfully moving texts? Below are several implications for a post-critical literary theory that follow from *Meaning*. This is not an exhaustive list but a gesture toward connecting the above metaphors with critical practice. Some of these suggestions will seem retrograde

in their barest form. Understood from a Polanyian perspective, however, they bridge the gap between competing critical worlds.

First, readers must surrender themselves to powerful texts. Though many have expressed dissatisfaction with the dominant stance of critical detachment in literary studies, the fear is that losing objectivity and critical distance would mean a return to a politically naïve, quasi-religious approach to literature.⁵ Polanyi shows that critical distance in its most extreme forms prevents genuine acts of knowing. A post-critical approach to reading begins by acknowledging that the proper response to powerfully moving art is to be moved. Thus, an important aspect of literature is its ability to move a reader's imagination. This movement is not mere entertainment or pleasurable stimulation but a genuine act of knowing something that we can say is real. The act of surrendering oneself to a reading—of pouring oneself into a text—is a necessary and primary component of the post-critical approach, as is the recognition that this experience will follow us as “echoes” when we leave a text. This is not, however, to say that post-critical is uncritical. Though we must be willing to surrender ourselves to a text and though such a surrender will likely lead to existential change, a post-critical approach recognizes a plurality of commitments that complement the experience of surrender and allows us to more fully return from the reading experience. Unlike the Bororo who dwell so deeply in the life of the red parrot that their indwelling becomes all encompassing, our fusion with the world of a text is not totalizing. Literature exists within the larger cultural environment filled with other texts and messages seeking to persuade us. We recognize that everyone surrenders to something, and we see the study of literature as an inoculation against the all-encompassing totalizing frameworks offered to us by political, commercial, and religious sources. Thus, a post-critical approach to literature, would resist both extremes associated with surrendering to literature: At one end, a total fusion of the kind seen in Don Quixote, who views the world as if it were a chivalric romance, or in C.S. Lewis's students, who take from tragedy the Tragic View of life (77) and, at the other end, a clinical detachment that closes itself off from being moved by a text in order to protect itself from its shaping power.

Second, scholarly communities help individual readers in their quest to know. Although *Meaning* emphasizes the effects of an individual's encounter with a text, these points are framed within a larger discussion about the place of meaning in a free society. An individual's ability to be moved by literature depends on the supporting structures of the wider social context: namely, a government that does not have (or seek) the power “to control what people find meaningful” through propaganda, violence, or the control of communication (182). It also depends on a general respect for the kinds of spiritual ends—for example, truth and artistic achievement—that accompany the writing and reading of literature. This is how Polanyi's view of art answers the fears of those who say that shifting away from the clinical detachment of critique risk turning

literary criticism into a kind of politically disengaged, naive fandom.⁶ A community of professional literary scholars and critics would support and complement the individual reading experience by cultivating a tradition of texts that are worthy of being encountered and by teaching formal standards to students, who, though they remain lay readers, achieve the skill to enter into the world of texts that may have been too difficult without initiation into the habits and methods of literary reading. Without such a community, individuals would have a lesser ability and fewer opportunities to engage with “great” works and would instead be guided toward the superficially entertaining. Thus, a post-critical approach recognizes the necessity of training in order to engage in art in a way that resists the mere flattering of subjectivity. A post-critical approach is, thus, firmly rooted in broader aims of liberal arts tradition and recognizes that there is intense competition among mythical structures and that the variety of experiences embodied in literature helps us to continue to thrust our imagination forward so as not to remain with overly fossilized, all-encompassing myths or to be susceptible to propaganda.

Third, analysis of formal features of literary works is important and worthwhile. A post-critical literary approach would advocate the value of analyzing formal features of literature. This is not a return to an aesthetic criticism that analyzes form in isolation. Rather it is a recognition that dwelling in particulars can lead to a better understanding of the comprehensive entity that is a work of literature. It is also a recognition of the presence of an artistic problem and solution as well as a significant source of the power of a text to move our imagination. The formal approach to literature, from a post-critical perspective, is always embedded within the larger project of knowing literature and reality. In this way, Polanyi suggests an attention to form that would align with current work exploring various kinds of immersive experiences.⁷ What Polanyi adds to these contemporary accounts is a greater recognition of their continuity with every form of knowing and being, from perception and movement to the coordination of a life’s work. In this way, he points toward a view of aesthetics as itself embodied in conduct, both in the moment of encounter with art, and in performance of rituals and aesthetic gestures in everyday life. Knowing, in this model, is an attached fusion with aesthetic form. Reading immerses us in these forms and helps us to break out of them.⁸

Fourth, a wide variety of critical schools and approaches should be supported and encouraged. A post-critical literary approach might recognize, along with Polanyi, the existence of problem spaces which we discover and traverse. More deeply knowing a text is entering into the questions that it asks and allowing our imagination to be moved in the direction of the answers it presents to us in figurative language. These questions exist as particular gradients among the cosmic total of all problem spaces. Critical commentary of a text can be seen as participating in this shared endeavor. In recognizing the inherent connection to truth, post-critical literary theory does not seek

to obtain from texts propositional truth statements but to enable others to experience a text more fully and to share in its endeavor to solve an intellectual problem. Post critical literary theory would support a wide variety of approaches to the questions texts pose and a plurality methods for learning more about a text. If one function of criticism is to help us return to a text and understand it more fully in light of a variety of critical readings, the language of literary criticism need not be the language of science but may work best when it too draws on metaphor, first-person point of view, and other stylistic features to present an imaginative vision with which to return to a text.

Conclusion

From a Polanyian perspective, literature is worthy of study because it has the capacity to deeply move us; the beauty of its aesthetic achievement draws us into a transcendent experience and sets free an imaginative vision which may have significant, lasting effects on how we make sense of the world and understand our place in it. We ignore this capacity at our peril. Nor should we guard too closely against it—for hardening ourselves against literature is not to close ourselves to all influence; it simply opens us up to other, more systematized or simplistic accounts of what it means to be human and how we ought to live. To achieve a deeper, more enriched understanding of ourselves, it is worth the risk of surrender. A post-critical approach to literary study recognizes the persuasive powers of literature as well as the possibility of a reader both to surrender and dissent, to enter and return. It also recognizes that public support of the study of literature in the university is central to our shared commitment to the pursuit of truth.

ENDNOTES

¹For debates about the extent to which *Meaning* deviates from Polanyi's other work see the March 1982 issue of *Zygon* 71/1. All citations to *Meaning* will occur in the text.

²On the recent debates in literature and art history about the return to aesthetics as both a newly broadened but potentially empty term, see Rose 2017.

³I am here importing the concept of error surface used in discussions of machine learning through gradient descent algorithms. Programmers using such models refer to a network's problem space in a manner strikingly similar to Polanyi, who envisions the intuition of a problem as landscape. As a program "learns," its progress can be mapped graphically in a kind of error landscape where temporary, but ultimately incorrect solutions are deemed as "local minima"—small wells along a path toward a "global minimum" or ultimate solution. See, for example, Elman (1999, 17-18).

⁴Consider, for example, the following sentence: "The solution was poured into four containment units." In the context of a scientific article, this would be considered to be indicative—the language not drawing attention to itself but pointing transparently to its meaning. At the same time, however, we are persuaded through the skillful deployment of this indicative frame—the "scientific"

frame—that the writer is competent, objective, and trustworthy. This message is achieved through the aesthetic choices involved in joining cognitive content with an artificial frame in a particular social context for a particular purpose. Compare the same “content” in a different “frame”: “My colleague Joe—who has, in the short time he has been in this lab, earned a stellar reputation for dexterity and overall likeability—poured the solution into four leak-proof ACME beakers.” Or the following:

With care, we poured
Equal portions—portable
In new cups of four.

Both of these alternative versions represent a change of frame, though one is prose and the other verse. Both would fail to persuade us of the writer’s competence, not because they fail to “carry us away” in a striking moment of transcendence but because the first smuggles in meanings that do not strike us as occurring in the moment that we are transported by them. The first, thus, indicates something to us while at the same time “moving” our imagination—i.e. recruiting our tacit knowledge in the formation of an imaginative coherence—without our explicit or conscious realization that we are being moved.

⁵E.g. Felski (2015, 165) and Dancer (2011, 133).

⁶On interpretation of literature and conviviality in scholarly communities in literary studies from a Polanyian perspective, see Phil Mullins. “Recovering the Veridical: Implications of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Literary Studies.”

⁷Note, for example Arthur Jacobs’ (2015) neurocognitive poetics model (NCPM), which includes foreground and background textual features. Readers, they claim, oscillate between indicative or transparent “background” features which promote the sensation of immersion and those “foreground” elements which draw attention to themselves by presenting difficulty or breaking everyday conventions. Both comprise what Polanyi would call a text’s “frame”—the textual embodiment of cognitive content—and both, in the neurocognitive model, flow from a reader’s own background (read: tacit) contribution to the text as the reader’s expectations are aroused, satisfied, disrupted, and re-configured in a temporal oscillation between familiar and unfamiliar. This lines up with Polanyi’s description of symbolic embodiment which carries us away in a transnatural integration as a reader oscillates between the between the dual focal objects of frame-content and self. Those studying the phenomenal cognitive effects of such intense experiences with a text also point to a temporal oscillation between past, present, and future. William Flesch (2001, 200), for example, describes literary reading in a way that comes close to Polanyi’s view of temporal transcendence. “At every moment in a poem,” he writes, “we are simultaneously there and ahead and behind of where we are.” Poetry is thus “a high intensification of the linguistic skill or capacity to project into the present the memories and anticipations of the whole semantic and prosodical unit.”

⁸On “aesthetic conduct,” see Macé and Jones (2013, 217-218).

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INDWELLING AND BREAKING OUT: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN POST-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE



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Keywords: metaphor, vehicle and tenor, “a voice from outside logical space,” Rorty, steno- and tensive-language, tacit knowing, self-centered and self-giving integrations, deepening coherence, indwelling, breaking out, discovery, Gulick, post-critical perspective, De Quincey, Rago, Eliot, Dickinson, Stevens, Baldwin

ABSTRACT

This essay explores how literature may be a way of educating readers in practice about the way tacit knowing works, and literary study may have an unexpected contribution to make to the larger field of post-critical thinking. I argue that literary metaphor is a manifestation of the tacit dimension of knowing and, by engaging with the dynamics of language in the text, the reader may allow himself to be educated in the workings of tacit knowing and its underlying rules. A simple image in a poem will call upon the creative imagination of the reader to search for meaning in the indeterminate referent. It will also call upon intuition to connect the dots between vehicle and tenor in metaphor, and form links with the life-world of the reader. When the reader of a literary text gets a sense of a “deepening coherence” of understanding, and intuition connects his life to the tacit dimension of language in the tenor of metaphor, the result may be discovery of some new sense of order or existential meaning.

Literature and the Tacit Dimension

From Plato to the present, some philosophers and even whole schools of philosophy have done their best to ban poets, and poetic sensibility, from their imagined republics. Most of these have been analysts pursuing their own intellectual integrity, though with little interest in imaginative or intuitive methods apart from rational argument. In present-day world conditions, and in a communications environment of instant messaging and clamor about “fake news,” it may be important to ask, can the two great powers of mind—reason and imagination, associated historically with the linguistic orders of philosophy and literature—be combined in ways that raise thinking to new levels of inquiry, and bring out new paths of discovery regarding human potentials? As one critic who works across the disciplines, Toril Moi, argues, “a philosophical reading [of a literary text] can be understood as a form of aesthetic experience in which the reader lets the work teach her how to read it. The reader must be willing to let her own experience (of philosophy, of life) be educated by the work.” And citing Stanley Cavell, she writes, “to do philosophy we have to be willing to let philosophy unsettle the ‘foundations of our lives.’”¹

This paper is an experiment in interpreting literary texts by letting them teach us how to read them philosophically, and to welcome the unsettling effects, as well as the re-settling aesthetic experience, that come from reading in this way. As conceived by Michael Polanyi,² the tacit dimension shows itself, in one of its countless forms, in the semantics of metaphor. From premises found in post-critical philosophy as outlined in Polanyi’s writings,³ we’ll explore the thesis that literary metaphor is a manifestation of the tacit dimension of language, and that by engaging with the dynamic structure of metaphor, we allow ourselves in practice to be educated in the dynamics of tacit knowing.⁴ In literary texts, a metaphor typically consists of a concrete word-image (a *vehicle*, like the word “light” in texts by Stevens and Baldwin cited below) that works as a *clue* (in Polanyi’s terminology) to an indeterminate field of referents (the *tenor*), where the tacit dimension of meaning is lodged. The tenor is often a complex idea or phase of experience that is more difficult to understand than the literal meaning of the word-image. While the vehicle in itself may have a precise denotative meaning, it will tend to have multiple connotations in the tenor. These work in the mind as leadings, calling for interpretation in the form of discovery.

But if we approach the text philosophically, that is, e.g., posing questions to the text about the nature of being and knowing, the indirect structure of meaning in metaphor becomes a part of its method of teaching us how to read. The narrator in Baldwin’s story speaks of music as “the only light we’ve got in all this darkness,” and the speaker in Stevens’ poem begins his monologue with “Light the first light of evening.” In these and other cases of metaphor, meaning is not something given. It is waiting in the tacit dimension, the penumbra of language, to be discovered by the searching

reader. To what does the clue in the word “light” lead us? To interpret it skillfully is, in a Polanyian sense, a matter of discovering in language something that we haven’t known before, and that probably can’t be known by means other than metaphor. We read by sensing intimations of some great value in the words of literature, posing along the way a problem that can only be addressed, according to post-critical premises, by interpretation which is also discovery.

The vehicle in metaphor carries us in a dynamic *from-to* movement,⁵ *from* a point of known reference, *to* a referent that is unknown or less understandable by ordinary means. We move as in a dance or musical phrase from one point to another to grasp the meaning of metaphor. Vehicle and tenor work together in an ostensibly dyadic relation. But Polanyi scholar Walter Gulick sees meaning-making as occurring in a triadic “from-via-to” format. As in the structure of signification in Charles Peirce’s semiotic theory, cited by Gulick, when meaning comes to light, a word (or sign) and that which it signifies are accompanied by a third term, *the interpreter* (Peirce’s “interpretant”).⁶ In Gulick’s words, *via* is “the interpretive element in cognition and action.”⁷ As applied to metaphor, the Peirce-Gulick view of signification confirms in a way Polanyi’s sense of the central role of the person and personal knowledge in the discovery process.

Taking a cue from Gulick’s argument, I venture to say that the making of meaning from metaphor has its own three-part structure. When the reader engages in a search for meaning, the mind takes a pathway (Latin *via* or “way”) *from* the vehicle *to* the tenor, and in circular fashion, back again to the vehicle, for further clarification of where it is leading us. The natural starting place is with the explicit meaning in the vehicle. The concrete image calls upon imagination to start the dynamic movement (on the “way”) *from* vehicle *to* tenor. Within the open field of meaning seen in imagination the reader brings what Polanyi calls “dynamic intuition” into play. It is for intuition to make connections, not only between vehicle and tenor, but between the tenor and elements in the wider field of the reader’s experience, returning, again and again, to the vehicle for grounding, before re-engaging intuition in the quest for discovery.

In post-critical perspective, based on Polanyi’s account, I would argue, discovery happens as a result of activating the same key elements, imagination and intuition—in three stages: (1) *indwelling* the particular materials of study or inquiry; (2) *breaking out* of an accepted framework of ideas and practices; and (3) the moment of *discovery* itself, when the scientist or artist experiences an integration of particulars (ideas, facts, data, words, lines and colors, musical notes, etc.) into an intelligible form, as in gestalt formation. The end product of discovery can then in the case of a scientific theory, be tested for its veracity and ability to generate further research; or in the case of an artistic achievement, appreciated for the beauty of its formal properties, and its ability to evoke discovery in the existential realm.

My interpretation of post-critical thinking, following Polanyi, involves recognizing that the Cartesian model of critical thought evolved over time into language games and logical structures that strongly valorize objective facts, but deny the truth-values of literary discourse, or treat claims about the tacit dimension of language and mind with suspicion. Here we attempt to utilize critical thought in a post-critical way,⁸ interpreting literary texts not as making blanket truth-claims nor simply as objects of analysis, but as systems of clues leading to existential discovery.

Works representing what essayist Thomas De Quincey calls “the literature of power” breed “sympathy for truth,”⁹ a tacit pre-understanding that enables the reader to catch on to undercurrents in the language that manifest “the semantic aspect of tacit knowing” (*TD*, 13). It’s the nature of metaphor also at times to offer clues to “the ontological aspect of tacit knowing” (*TD*, 13). An engaged reader, approaching the literary text less as a critic and more as an apprentice (*PK*, 269)—letting his experience be educated by the work—may learn in practice how the mechanisms of tacit knowing work in the linguistic sphere, and so get on to a path akin to the Polanyian path of scientific discovery. In this way he may with a little grace bring the two powers of reason and imagination together in creative synthesis, opening the door to heuristic vision (*PK*, 196) where unsuspected coherences in experience come to light. These may be personal revelations about the meaning of patterns in one’s own life, or disclosure of tacit meaning—within the social environment, or the ontological sphere—of a principle having universal application, like Heidegger’s sense of truth as “unconcealment.”

Indwelling Possibility: Emily Dickinson

In one of her many powerful poems, Emily Dickinson presents a speaker “dwelling” in a field called “Possibility,” breaking out of conventional constraints on perception, and in the end “gathering” (discovering) a new sense of a natural “Paradise,” free from religious (or other) dogma. She writes,

I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of Eye—
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—

The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—

As an example of De Quincey's "literature of power," Dickinson's poem displays this power here, in forms of language that enable the reader to experience the phenomenon of literary *identification* with the character of the speaker. More than a simple declaration of the author's personal experience, the verb phrase "I dwell" assumes the formal structure of metaphor, whose vehicle is the literal "I" of the speaker combined with a literal sense of living in a physical place; but the tenor is a dynamic invitation to the reader to "dwell" with the poet in the visionary experience expressed in the language of the poem.¹⁰ The phrase is a clue hinting of a tacit ontological referent: a principle of being, resembling Polanyi's *indwelling*. The ordinary words "I dwell" as vehicle point to an indeterminate, unconstrained state of mind, open to the large world of "possibility." From sensing this indeterminacy in the tacit dimension of words, each reader is implicitly invited to discover personal (or universal) applications of their meaning.

Just as ordinary nouns like "Windows," "Cedars," and "Hands," indicate in poetic context more than they can tell denotatively, we know in general more than what can be said in ordinary speech. As Polanyi explains: "The things which we can tell, we know by observing them; those that we cannot tell, we know by dwelling in them. All understanding is based on our dwelling in the particulars of that which we comprehend. Such indwelling is a participation of ours in the existence of that which we comprehend" (*PK*, Preface to 1964 ed.). Words like windows, hands, cedars, etc.—names of things we can tell—become the vehicles of metaphors intimating things we cannot tell, in the tenor of each. And the only way to know them is by dwelling in them.

In his classic study *Metaphor and Reality*, Philip Wheelwright distinguishes two kinds of linguistic symbolization. These correspond, roughly, to what Dickinson means by "Prose," and what I am calling *literary metaphor*. In "steno language" there's a one-to-one correspondence between word and thing, as with the denotative meanings of many nouns and verbs in ordinary speech. It is the characteristic of a relatively static or "closed" language game. The other type of symbolization is what Wheelwright calls "tensive language," in which there is a "semantic motion," a "double imaginative act of outreaching and combining [that] marks the metaphoric process."¹¹ This is the characteristic of a living language, and especially of skillful poetic composition.

Dickinson's "House" of "Possibility" presents "overtones of universality"¹² in the tenor of these and other metaphors in the poem. The musical term *overtones* in Wheelwright's phrase suggests the tacit (distal) dimension in the tenor, offering connotative (or hidden) implications that we are invited to integrate into our own experience, while words with concrete particular referents, like "Roof" and "Gambrels," express the proximal or empirical aspect of metaphorical speech. But readers of Polanyi may discern in terms like "Impregnable of Eye" (beyond our sight), "Everlasting Roof," and

“Gambrels of the Sky,” as well as “Possibility” a sense of “universal intent” (*PK*, 37, 48 and passim), showing a concern to articulate in tensive language a vision of “universal transcendentals.”¹³

Another poet, Henry Rago offers this relevant insight: “To be a poet at all is to be present to the ontology that is hidden in words. And what shall we say of metaphor? We might begin with the definitions we were taught as children, seeing it as a mere figure of speech rather than speech itself.” But to Rago it is more than “figure of speech.” Metaphor is “a depth of speech that is otherwise impossible.”¹⁴ His phrase “depth of speech,” like his reference to “the ontology hidden in words,” implies a tacit, less explicitly understood, dimension of language in literary metaphor. This refers to the way poetic language indicates, without telling us directly of, another aspect of being, beyond the strictly empirical, also captured in Polanyi’s term “ontological aspect of tacit knowing” (*TD*, 13).

This aspect of knowing, seen as part of the process of inquiry and discovery, in the context of this paper suggests that both poetry and philosophy at some level share a concern with the problem of being. Dickinson’s concern with the essence of being, *impregnable* (we might say) to the strictly objective eye of the logical empiricist, is shared by her fellow poet in the twentieth century, Wallace Stevens, who in “Large Red Man Reading” reveals results of his own inquiry into

The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines...¹⁵

The Greek *poesis*, from which we get the word *poetry*, originally meant *to create*. And *vatic* is Latin, meaning “prophetic,” from *vates*, “seer” or “prophet.” Dickinson and Stevens both represent a significant strand in American literature of writers interested in probing the vatic potentials of language. Seen from a post-critical perspective, these linguistic potentials are forms of the tacit dimension of knowing as it comes into expression in literature, and require the action of tacit knowing to be understood.

In her last stanza Dickinson offers a literary epiphany that declares her inner discovery of something ordinarily considered impossible—a “gathering,” not of particulars in the phenomenal world, but her own visionary experience of “Paradise.” Images of visible things (vehicles)—House, Windows, Doors, Chambers, and Cedars—are all clues to transcendental things, in the tenor or tacit meaning of each word-image. Here we are invited to *dwell* for a while. To the reader who closes some of the critical distance between herself and the text and draws near to its language to get inside it, it becomes possible to dwell in (or with) the language of poetry, as an apprentice with his master, and to be taught by the language of the poem about a hidden coherence in experience. Beginning with this moment of reading, and by joining in this effort with the poet, the reader may participate in the open frame of mind called “Possibility,” where

intimations of coherent form and meaning immanent in experience come spontaneously to light.

Breaking Out: Wallace Stevens' "First Light"

In one of his small masterpieces, a late poem enigmatically titled "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1950), Stevens writes:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

The poem reaches in imagination to uncover features in ordinary experience as elements of "the ultimate good." The start of the path is to "light first light of evening," which the metaphors do in our minds, drawing us into a semantic space in which words name a concrete situation ("in a room"), where we, along with the speaker, may "rest" and "think." The vehicle of the metaphor "light," at first an active verb, then a very concrete noun—"first light"—carries us to its tacit implication, the depth of speech mentioned by poet Henry Rago above. Unlike the lamplight of the first line, this other level of reference indicates something unseen and unknown by purely empirical means—an inner unspoken symbolic "light" which is also a "power" and a "miraculous influence" within us. Upon seeing this light, within the ambience of the poem, the reader is guided into an experience of self-surrender on the way to discovery.¹⁶

To deliver that meaning, the text offers virtual instruction in contemplation, whereby “we collect ourselves,/Out of all the indifferences, into one thing.” Having gathered our attention to a single point (“one thing”) we have a platform in pre-understanding which, releasing the power of tacit knowing, enables us to read the signs of the ultimate good within the language and conditions of ordinary life. This reading, like the post-critical reading of poetry, is a head start in leaping the logical gap from a static framework of understanding, whether objectivist or subjectivist, to a framework that embraces creative imagination and dynamic intuition, the hallmarks of tacit knowing, and a new “logic” that follows from them. Entering with the speaker the path of discovery, “Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves./We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,/A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous ...” From the platform of single-pointed attention and the holistic logic of “wholeness” that comes from it, the speaker discovers the simple but remarkable fact that “being there together is enough.”

All language works by inviting creative acts of “integration.” To understand most discursive language (Wheelwright’s “steno-language,” Polanyi’s “indication”) the reader or listener performs “*self-centered integrations*” (M, 34f). While the self makes connections between words, and between itself and the world by means of the text, it essentially remains insulated in a center of its own. But literary metaphor (tensive language, that is, language that has energy to cause tension) demands that we make intuitive connections that involve “*self-giving integrations*” between words and meanings. Here the self of the reader, perhaps a conditioned entity, undergoes some kind of mental chemicalization, drawn in and guided by the gradient of meaning in the text. “We forget each other and ourselves.” By voluntarily giving up its hardened sense of a personal self the reader moves in a more fluid dialectical *from-via-to* mode, from vehicle to tenor and back again, to arrive at new meanings.

The linguistic particulars, e.g. concrete nouns and verbs, become subsidiary to meanings emerging from the tacit dimension of language. And the task of the reader is to integrate particulars from which an intelligible discovery (Stevens’ “whole”) may come out. By adopting a standpoint of self-giving, he in effect subordinates his own self-concept to the meaning emerging from the text. He moves to a more advanced stage of the activity of interpretation, by integrating the text with the self and world outside the text. In the process, the self, taking the role of apprentice, learns from the text by a fusion of his known horizon with that of the text.¹⁷

In a moment of epiphany, the speaker utters this remarkable line, “We say God and the imagination are one....” After this the word “light” is transformed in meaning—from empirical to ontological implications. It becomes a “power,” the “highest candle” that “lights the dark” (verb). Finally the “same light” (noun) symbolizes “the central mind” discovered by the poet and transmitted by what critic David Bromwich calls “the language of power”¹⁸ to the receptive reader. By this grammatical and semantic

progression, the words of the poem initiate us into “a knowledge” of what the metaphor of “the central mind” can tell us. By its tensive language, stretching words beyond ordinary meanings, the work discloses the poet’s own discovery that “God” is nothing supernatural, but a light, a power, a miraculous influence immanent in what we call *imagination*.

In a seminal essay of 1966, “The Creative Imagination,” Polanyi argues that in pursuit of discovery the scientist is engaged in a “quest” for hidden order in the natural world. In such a quest, the imagination “sallies forth,” in search of meaningful patterns, “guided throughout by feelings of a deepening coherence.” The creative scientist, like the writer (and reader) of literary texts, begins by deeply indwelling the particulars of his search. And here we may recognize, says Polanyi, “the powers of a dynamic intuition” to connect the dots, so to speak, in a way that produces intelligible meaning in literature, or convincing theory in science.¹⁹

“Physics speaks of potential energy that is released when a weight slides down a slope. Our search for deeper coherence [in science as well as the arts] is likewise guided by a potentiality. We feel the slope toward deeper insight as we feel the direction in which a heavy weight is pulled along a steep incline. It is this dynamic intuition which guides the pursuit of discovery.” We have powers to perceive “a coherence bearing on reality with its yet hidden future manifestations” (CI, 98). The creative impetus that leads to scientific discovery is due “in one part to the imagination which imposes on intuition a feasible task, and, in the other part, to intuition, which rises to this task and reveals the discovery that the quest was due to bring forth. *Intuition informs the imagination which in its turn, releases the powers of intuition*” (CI, 104). The interweavings of the powers of dynamic intuition with those of creative imagination, are the animating features of tacit knowing that make discovery, in both the arts and sciences, possible.

“Freedom Lurked Around Us”: James Baldwin on the Way of Discovery

In his great story, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957), James Baldwin gives us an extraordinary account of the creative process among jazz musicians, including a vivid narrative of discovering the liberatory power of music for the listener. The story is about a black kid growing up in 1940s Harlem, struggling with drugs and the violence of the culture, going off to the army, all the while playing piano, and becoming a great jazz artist. At its climax, Sonny’s brother, the narrator of the story who is a more stable person, a high school math teacher, and not a musician, comes to a club in Harlem at Sonny’s invitation, to hear him play. At the end of the story this is part of what the brother tells us about the happenings at the club:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it.
And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within,

and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air...Creole [the elder master, on bass] began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, and it's the only light we've got in all this darkness...Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others...It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.

Baldwin's implied parallels between jazz improvisation and writing, and between listening to music and reading literature, are noteworthy. While Sonny makes the music "his" by a "burning" intensity in improvising, we, his virtual audience, must go through similar burning intensity of listening to the music of language in the text to make its promised discoveries "ours." In order to enter with the artist into the realm of discovery, the reader enters the language event occasioned by reading with a parallel burning intensity, comparable in a way to Polanyi's account of indwelling as an "act of ecstatic vision" when the astronomer on the verge of discovery abandons himself in "contemplation of the stars" (*PK*, 196).

The "lurking" of freedom in Sonny's performance is a tacit intimation of possible discovery from listening. In jazz, the performer is also a composer, discovering new forms in process of performance. To the novice listener, jazz consists of notes and rhythms. But the engaged listener hears something, a voice, behind the notes and rhythms. By entering into the event of Sonny's performance, his listeners and the narrator sense tacitly a potential discovery of a new freedom of thought and feeling. As readers, we get it in the words: "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen." By reading between the lines of literature, we hear the tacit dimension of language as a kind of music, with tonality, cadences, and rhythms of its own, that opens possibilities like Baldwin's transcendent "freedom" within the moment of artistic expression.

Conclusion: Metaphor, “a Voice from Outside Logical Space”

While metaphoric expressions in *non-literary* contexts sometimes work only to transmit information, *literary metaphor* emphasizes what one scholar calls “the primacy of participation over information.”²⁰ The critical method invented by Descartes was over time widely “ontologized” by our culture, so that its framework of epistemological dualism, with subject severed from objective reality, because of its power as an analytical tool, came in time to be regarded as the basic structure of being. Widely believed to be simple common sense, the framework of dualism was incorporated as a fundamental assumption into many schools of literary criticism in modern and contemporary times.²¹ The post-critical approach to poetic language in this paper involves a breaking away from standards of criticism that see words as standing at a distance from the things they signify, and that require readers to hold themselves at a distance from texts in order to make proper (objective) assessment of them.

In post-critical perspective words are not simply re-presentations, in a dualistic framework, of objects and events outside the text. From this perspective we find relevance in terms like Heidegger’s metaphor for language as “the house of being,”²² and the practice of “dwelling” in language. Once we have come to inhabit metaphor, i.e., when we’ve “experienced it from inside itself,”²³ imagery like Dickinson’s “fairer House than Prose” makes a different kind of sense than before we have had the contemplative experience of indwelling. Afterwards it may evoke, rather than tell us of, a new vision of the coherence and order of existence. To get “inside” this metaphoric “House” in poetic context is not entering something imaginary in the weak sense of fantasy. It is to immerse oneself empathically and contemplatively in the language of metaphor, to allow it to teach us how to get onto the path of discovery, by going behind the words into the “depth of speech”—the tacit dimension in poetic discourse.

Richard Rorty claims that metaphor is one of three primary ways of “reweaving the fabric of our beliefs,” the other two being, in his view, perception and inference. If reweaving the fabric of our beliefs means discovery of a new platform of belief, such discovery will likely happen by breaking out of an older framework of understanding (like Cartesian duality) and adopting a new framework of understanding (e.g., post-critical philosophy). To these ends, literary metaphor can be another powerful tool. “A metaphor [according to Rorty] is a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one’s language and one’s life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize them.”²⁴

As a voice from outside logical space, literary metaphor makes little appeal to reason as commonly conceived, but speaks in a way that can break through the boundaries of existing logical systems. If read as the depth of speech, and not just dispensable ornamentation, metaphor can redefine what is meant by logic, by providing sets of

premises that persuade us of unsuspected coherences in the existential realm. But it does this by diverging from existing logical criteria.

Every form of logic derives its rules from the conceptual framework within which it works. If we live and form logical sequences within a mechanistic framework like scientism, logic will be expressed in language games that strictly preserve the separation of subject and object, as in fields like radical behaviorism and logical positivism.²⁵ Into such logical space the voice of literary metaphor may call, with intimations of deeper coherences in experience that conventional logic can't reach. As a counter to such logic, we find "the poet...occupied with frontiers of consciousness, beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist."²⁶ The metaphor *frontiers* in this passage from T.S. Eliot's great essay, "The Music of Poetry" (1942), points to the tacit dimension of language and mind. It implies a "raw diffuse matrix"²⁷ below the surface structures of art and literature, bringing news from outside logical space. Here the boundaries of consciousness are open to the powers of intuition and imagination in the process of tacit knowing. But the indeterminacy of the stream of consciousness when outside logical space is an inner signal of emergent coherence that the poet attempts to capture in words. Eliot's sense of *occupying* this tacit frontier describes the poet's access to the "tacit coefficients" or semantic background of words. It's just here that we as readers, in our acts of occupying (indwelling) literary language, sense "feelings of deepening coherence" (CI) in the work. Through the "power of anticipation," or "premonition" (*PK* 103) we sense that something new, lurking in metaphor, is waiting to be realized in the process of tacit knowing. From a post-critical perspective we see how the aesthetics of poetic language may break out of existing logical space, with a voice that instructs us about possibility and potential coherences in the existential realm as well.

ENDNOTES

¹Toril Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir." *Literature and Theology* (2011) 25/2: 125-140.

²Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Penguin, 1966). Hereafter cited as *TD*.

³Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, orig. publ. 1958). Cited hereafter as *PK*.

⁴Charles W. Lowney II, *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See my "Question" p. 45, re: the tacit dimension as link between poetry and science.

⁵Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 34-42, and passim; cited in text as *M*.

⁶Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), vol. 5, para. 264 and passim.

See also my *Frontiers of Consciousness: Interdisciplinary Studies in American Philosophy and Poetry* (New York: Fordham U Press, 1991; paperback edition, 1994), pp. 26-33.

⁷Walter Gulick, "Polanyian Biosemiotics and the From-Via-To Dimensions of Meaning," *Tradition and Discovery*, 39/1 (2012-2013), p. 24. Special thanks to Eric Rustad for insight on applying the Peirce-Gulick triadic theory of meaning to metaphor.

⁸Dale Cannon, "The Post-Critical Turn: How and Why Post-Critical Inquiry and Criticism is Different" (Nashotah House Conference paper, 2018), <http://www.polanyisociety.org/2018Nashotah/2018-Nashotah-Papers/Cannon-2018-NashotahPpr-6-4-18.pdf>. Accessed June 1, 2018.

⁹Thomas De Quincey, "The Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power" (1848) <https://supervert.com/elibrary/thomas-de-quincey/th-literature>. Accessed May 3, 2018.

¹⁰For an in-depth phenomenological study of the idea of "dwelling" in language from a Heideggerian point of view, see Lawrence J. Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language: Dwelling in Speech* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

¹¹Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 35-53.

¹²Wheelwright, p. 55.

¹³Lowney, pp. 34, 45-47.

¹⁴Henry Rago, "The Vocation of Poetry," *Poetry*, 110:8 (August, 1967), pp. 328-348.

¹⁵Wallace Stevens, "Large Red Man Reading," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (New York: Knopf/Vintage), pp. 320-321.

¹⁶On Polanyi's view of "self-abandonment" in contemplative experience that leads to breaking out of "all fixed conceptual frameworks" in the process of discovery, see *PK*, 196-197.

¹⁷See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004; orig. publ. 1975), pp. 299-306.

¹⁸David Bromwich, "The Language of Knowledge and the Language of Power" in *Literary Matters* (The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers) <http://www.literarymatters.org/1-3-the-language-of-knowledge-and-the-language-of-power/>, June 14, 2017). Accessed February 10, 2018. Bromwich emphasizes with several examples from nineteenth-century British poetry how the language of power leads both writer and reader to existential "discovery."

¹⁹Michael Polanyi, "Creative Imagination" in *The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art*, ed. Denis Dutton and Michael Krausz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981; orig. publ. 1966), pp. 91-108; cited in text as CI.

²⁰John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (San Francisco: Harper, 1973), p. 13.

²¹A protest against the subconscious ontologizing of epistemological dualism, making it into a reality of being, instead of just a method, is lodged by Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, in their *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), chapters 1 and 2. And recent arguments by literary critics for moving beyond the limits of critical method in literary studies have been mounted by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London:

Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), and Toril Moi, in *The Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

²²Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, tr. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 189-243.

²³Crossan, *ibid.*

²⁴Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics" (1989), in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 214.

²⁵A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 11952 [1936]).

²⁶T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux/Noonday, 1973), pp. 22-23.

²⁷Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 76.

Post-Critical Platonism: Preliminary Meditations on Ethics and Aesthetics in Iris Murdoch and Michael Polanyi



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Keywords: Iris Murdoch, Michael Polanyi, Platonism, post-critical philosophy, virtue ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, phenomenology, metaphysics, attention, literature, pedagogy

ABSTRACT

This article explores intriguing resonances in the work of Michael Polanyi and Iris Murdoch, touching on ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology, as well as Murdoch's literary output. In so doing, it begins to outline a phenomenological approach to Platonist virtue ethics informed by Murdoch's work and drawing heavily on Polanyi's post-critical epistemology; it also gestures toward how such an approach might be applied in the classroom.

Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good* argues that training and practice of attention in its various disciplinary forms (but especially as oriented toward beauty as found in nature and art) is not only a form of moral training, but also itself constitutes concrete moral action. Intriguingly, her descriptions of "progressive attempt[s] to see a particular object clearly" (Murdoch 1971, 23) are nearly identical to Polanyi's explanations of the heuristics of discovery:

If I am learning...Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of

me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. *Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.* The honesty and humility required of the student...is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory... [thus] *studying is normally an exercise of virtue as well as of talent and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world* (Murdoch 1971, 89; emphasis added).

This description closely parallels Polanyi's analysis of the process of discovery, highlighting beautifully the heuristic passion that sparks our curiosity and drives us "to commit [ourselves] to the belief that [we] can fill in...gap[s in our knowledge] and make...new contact with reality" (*KB*, 194).

My aim here is to explore philosophical resonances and affinities between Polanyi's ethically motivated epistemology and Murdoch's Platonism, with its focus on attentiveness. Taken together, the two approaches affirm that an appreciation of the beauty of reality and the passion it motivates can lead us to scientific as well as moral knowledge. While in the future I hope to use this discussion as a springboard into an exploration of how Polanyi's and Murdoch's insights might be combined into a concrete, coherent, and widely communicable post-critical approach to teaching ethics, my main concern here is to begin to explore what I see as a potentially fruitful interplay between Murdoch and Polanyi in areas of ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology, with an emphasis on Murdoch's literary as well as her philosophical output.

In one sense, the existence of mutually-reinforcing contributions from and between Murdoch and Polanyi is unsurprising. After all, their shared belief in the urgent need for "a deep-seated philosophical reform...that would radically alter prevailing conceptions" about knowledge, human identity and agency, and culture (*KB*, ix) led them to participate in the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity in the 1960s. Yet while some scholars have cited both thinkers (see, e.g., Innis 2004; Waugh 2012; Crawford 2015), I have seen no scholarship on the ways in which their work is directly complementary.

Both thinkers emphasize the importance of making contact with what Matthew Crawford (2015) has called "the reality beyond [one's] head," whether that reality be a language, *Moby Dick*, some knotty problem of quantum physics, or the proper response to an ethical dilemma. Such contact will necessarily involve sustained heuristic attention to the organizing principle of a constellation of details which have not yet been grasped as a coherently integrated whole. This attention, far from being mechanistic in nature, is motivated by *love* or *passion*. So much will no doubt be readily apparent to those well-versed in Polyanian epistemology, and such reverberations will make other

similarities less than surprising. To wit, to Polanyi's well-known aphorism, "we know more than we can say" (*TD*, 4), Murdoch adds that "where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*" (Murdoch 1971, 31; emphasis in original), a remark which affirms not only the tacit dimension of moral knowledge, but also the way attentiveness to questions of virtue and interpersonal relations is critical for the development of *phronesis*.

Yet more unites these two than their interest in the skilled attention that constitutes much of knowledge. For while Polanyi is principally thought of as an epistemologist, the concerns over the erosion of various sorts of liberty that drew him from science to philosophy are ultimately moral in nature; he makes his defense of the ethical life by reconstructing the epistemological foundations that would allow for the possibility of ethical knowledge. One of his most pressing concerns is the moral inversion that results from the loss of the justification of meaning flowing from modernity's scientism. Polanyi's epistemology is aimed at attacking and supplanting this scientism in order to restore the full scope of human meaning (including morality and ethics) as rationally intelligible to modern and post-modern humanity: "To produce, in a manner akin to art, a new moving vision of the world, imaginatively richer in the scope of its integration of disparate parts than those we have heretofore been offered by our scientific myth-makers" (*M*, 107).

Murdoch's proposals for a theory and practice of virtue ethics similarly aim at revitalizing or replacing reductive outlooks by opening up space for serious consideration of virtue and the Good. She, like Plato, "assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition. Virtue...involves a desire for and achievement of truth instead of falsehood, reality instead of appearance... '*Getting things right, as in meticulous grammar or mathematics, is truth-seeking as virtue. Learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention*'" (Murdoch 1993, 39; emphasis added).

She wishes to flesh out the unity of the Good, a unity that is not perfectly articulable, but which we may nevertheless approach by means of our own phenomenal, eidetic experience. She here specifies some subsidiary details that serve as clues in a from/to sense leading to the discovery of the tacitly integrated Gestalt, affirming thereby that "to dedicate one's life to theoretic interests presupposes the virtue of *phronesis*" (Gadamer 1993, 111). She also aims to make recommendations as to how we might enact a practice of virtue ethics and approach the Good under our current cultural conditions by means of the unselfing (a term borrowed from Buddhist practice) achieved through proper attention to art and nature (Murdoch 1971), as well as the development and practice of demythologized religion (Murdoch 1993).

Her project thus fits into Polanyi's desire for cultural shifts designed to alleviate and overcome the instabilities inherent in modernity and liberalism which for both thinkers will require an openness to metaphysics.

Metaphysics and Phenomena

In addition to emphasizing the importance of passionate and personal attention to external reality, both philosophers also affirm that the structure of more obviously tangible acts of skilled knowing can act as patterns and clues to the structure of more abstract acts of skilled knowledge, such as those found in ethical life. As we will see later, Murdoch develops this shared terrain by emphasizing the role of our attraction to beauty in art as an intermediary between physical tangibility and abstract ethical reasoning which serves as an important element in the pursuit of a moral life. In addressing these common concerns, both thinkers take as their points-of-departure acts of skilled knowing that nearly all readers will recognize (bicycle riding, describing the face of a loved one, the momentary transport out of one's problems upon the experience of beauty, etc.) which they then analyze *without the intent to debunk but rather to affirm*. In this sense, "the ordinary way is the way" (Murdoch 1993, 509). This concurrence on issues of attention to surrounding phenomena loosely amount to a sort of experiential or phenomenological evidence for realist, non-materialist metaphysics. Thus, Polanyi recommends a "passionate recognition of a metaphysical reality, irreducible to material elements" (Murdoch 1975, 24) while Murdoch affirms "there exists a moral reality, a real though infinitely distant standard" (Murdoch 1971, 31). Both thus radically affirm the evidential standing of everyday phenomenal experience for metaphysical judgments.

Polanyi's and Murdoch's approaches to ontology *vis-à-vis* ordinary experience is in important respects similar to the eidetic reduction in the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Descartes's famous consideration of wax). By way of example, consider that Murdoch's explorations of the good tend to unfold eidetically, paring away intuitively in order to get at the essence of some phenomenon, as seen in her analysis of courage: "if we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness...we are bound...to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving... This may not...be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description" (Murdoch 1971, 57).

Similarly, Polanyi's approach to developing his post-critical epistemology takes actual, embodied, acts of knowing and analyzes them eidetically in order to arrive at a more adequate description of the essence of knowledge. Indeed, this might be taken as an extension of his training as a scientist: he is working to carefully examine what reality has laid before him, whether it be a quartz crystal or our noetic structure. In this sense the principles and techniques of good science and good phenomenology are one and the same.

Husserl points out that “eidetic seeing holds no more difficulties or ‘mystical’ secrets than does perception” (Husserl 2002, 272). This gentle chiding of the mystical falls neatly in with the general current of Enlightenment disenchantment, but the tables can quite easily be turned: if the phenomenal is already the metaphysical due to its existential import for the subject, then the correspondence of eidetic seeing with simple perception can be read as pointing to the primordially mystical nature of perception, placing us squarely within the Platonic/Aristotelian stance of wonder before the fittedness of world and mind as the beginning of true philosophy.

Such Hellenic wonder (with its concomitant appreciation of beauty as a source of moral awareness) is, alas, not our general cultural backdrop, not least in the world of education. What we see are rather “mechanistic methods of inquiry” which have “divorced our academic pursuits from...moral issues and made them merely ‘academic’,” leading many to “suspect our own moral motives, and [silence] our...best impulses,” potentially driving us toward “destructive forms of moral expression” by laying “the groundwork for nihilism” (*M*, 23).

One form of such destructive moral expression is overt violence, but another is a sort of apathetic moral impotence that creates a vacuum into which step individuals and institutions that control us to varying extents. Or, to invoke John Milbank’s rather salty formulation, “in a world where theoretically we don’t have a hierarchy, what we [really] have is a hierarchy of total shits” (2012).

Part of any possible solution (Sisyphean though it may be) will have to address the educational disjunct described above by Polanyi. Murdoch offers a fair few one-offs about how educators might properly take steps to close this moral gap. To wit, “what should be taught in schools: to attend and get things right” (Murdoch 1993, 179). Or, the “considerations which must be fundamentally important in education [are that] a good teacher teaches accuracy and truth. The importance of *getting things right*” (ibid., 399; emphasis in the original). Or again, but stepwise toward a more concrete pedagogy: “Every child should be taught not only how to paint but how to *look at paintings*” (ibid., 329; emphasis in the original).

Art and Morality: Looking at Paintings and Literature

This last comment about looking at paintings taps back into an important insight mentioned earlier, namely, that to attend carefully to something beyond oneself is itself an ethical act and that art, with its potential for beauty, is a deeply moral human concern. Let us allow Murdoch herself, then, to develop her view that skilled, disciplinary practice marked by passionate attentiveness is a form of participation in the life of virtue in the context of aesthetics. She argues that

Art...is not...a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*...

An understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority...evident degrees of merit...heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect. Good art, unlike bad art...is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish (Murdoch 1971, 87-88; emphasis in the original).

This external authority can be exercised by good art in Murdoch's view because she, like Plato and Polanyi, "assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition [and that therefore] learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention (Murdoch 1993, 39). Thus, "When we use...art as a clue, we may be able to learn more about the central area of morality [by examining] what are essentially the same concepts more simply on display elsewhere" (Murdoch 1971, 89). Attentiveness to art is therefore an "exercise of *detachment*" since "great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being...appropriated into the greedy organism of the self" (Murdoch 1971, 65).

Murdoch often refers to this ongoing attempt to go beyond the confines of the self, to escape from Plato's mythic cave, and to make contact with reality as *unselfing*, and she takes it as axiomatic (in contrast to Lockean and Kantian liberals) that "the good life becomes increasingly selfless through an increased awareness of, [and] sensibility to, the world beyond the self" (Murdoch 1993, 53). Such unselfing, tantamount to fuller participation in the good life, takes place significantly (though not exclusively, and only partially) through our experience of beauty.

Polanyi, I think, would likely agree, holding that "intellectual beauty...is a token of its contact with reality" (Polanyi 1962, 145). "But what, precisely, is beauty?" inquire the post-structuralist and other sceptics. Murdoch's reply is that beauty is not precise in the critical sense at all, but is rather "the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the...experience and change of consciousness" (Murdoch 1971, 84). This is one example of how Murdoch affirms that the "'essences' grasped in eidetic seeing can be fixed in definitive concepts... and thereby provide possibilities for definitive and, in their way, objectively and absolutely valid statements" (Husserl 2002, 272). The fact such statements will not be able to articulate the concepts without remainder is of little concern to her since she, like Polanyi, does not see such critical articulation as a prerequisite for knowledge.

I take this account to be fundamentally correct, and while I acknowledge that for many Murdoch's assumptions may seem highly problematic, I do not plan to argue these points here. Murdoch has herself done a more admirable job of that than I could hope to. Yet given the important role art plays in Murdoch's ethical understanding, it seems appropriate to devote some attention to her own artistic production as a novelist in light of her view that "philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and

truth-revealing activities” (Murdoch 1999, 11) that “construct...forms out of what might otherwise seem a mass of senseless rubble” (ibid., 7).

Murdoch’s Novels and Unselfing

What, then, does literary art’s truth-seeking and form-construction offer that goes beyond philosophy’s more abstract yet transparent clarification and explanation? It helps us to “imagine that which we know” (Murdoch 1999, 170, quoting T.S. Eliot), by which Murdoch means that it rounds out, shades, and concretizes the abstractions in which philosophy deals. In so doing it can shed additional light on many of the issues philosophy touches upon by getting down into the weeds, where devilish and difficult details are often found.

Murdoch’s own dialogue-driven novels are excellent examples of how this can take place. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles Arrowby, an aging playwright, retires after a successful career to a cottage on the sea to write his memoirs, “repent of egoism,” and “learn to be good” (Murdoch 2001, 2-3). The language used early on in the novel is evocative of monks and mystics meditatively pursuing virtue. A central theme, then, is unselfing and the pursuit of the Good, but the idealized image of Charles as an urbane Desert Father, fleeing the superficialities of the London scene to perform rites of purification, is soon in tatters. For Hartley, the only woman Charles ever truly loved (and who refused him marriage), lives with her husband in the nearby village. Charles’s desire for goodness becomes a renewed desire to be with his lost love, and a villainous obsession with breaking up her marriage is born.

The Sea, the Sea, then, provides a concrete example of the difficulties of transforming one’s consciousness for the better. It shows how easily counterfeits for love and the Good can be mistaken for the real thing and how far and how quickly things can run seriously awry. Charles’s idealization of his early, sexually-innocent relationship with Hartley quickly becomes a false stand-in for the Good, eclipsing all else. The real, elderly Hartley is vastly different from Charles’s idealized concept. He simplistically rationalizes that this is the result of her unhappy marriage, a characterization which justifies his abhorrent, even criminal, treatment of her: At one point, Charles goes so far as to lure Hartley to his home and hold her against her will in order to provoke a terminal marital crisis.

The novel is thus a truth-revealing cautionary tale to be taken alongside Murdoch’s more explicit ethical arguments. Yes, we do need to unself, but no, it will not be easy (try and see). How might we proceed? Cultivating attentiveness to the realities around us is one important element, but we also need to develop the moral and aesthetic *phronesis* necessary to select proper objects for our attentive powers and to draw appropriate conclusions based on *imagination*, which for Murdoch “reveals...[and] explains” (Murdoch 1999, 18), rather than *fantasy*, which is the “proliferation of blinding

self-centred aims and images” (Murdoch 1971, 66). Consider that Charles’s powers of attention are astonishing—yet they are, for much of the tale, completely misspent, guided by his deluded fantasy of marrying Hartley.

Again, then, how does one develop such practical moral wisdom? For Murdoch the process is long and continuous, for “the moral life...goes on continually.” It is not “switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial” (Murdoch 1971, 37). Is it then too late, after 60 years of egoistic living, for Charles to develop such wisdom? Not completely, for the novel ends with a somewhat wiser, partially chastened Charles leading a quiet life in London. His closing observations, fairer and more charitable to others, do indicate an increased “interest [in] seeing the real” (Murdoch 1971, 66), yet this newfound wisdom comes too late to avoid many terrible choices. Tellingly, though, the language used for some of Charles’s final reflections on this matter is identical to that of Murdoch’s philosophy: he admits to being a “fantasist,” of having tried to replace reality with a “dream text.” He reflects, “Hartley had been right when she said of our love that it was not part of the real world” (Murdoch 2001, 493). Here Charles accepts that real love involves the “imaginative recognition of...[and] respect for...the being of others” (Murdoch 1999, 216).

Charles does make some moral progress, then, but late in life and having done real damage to himself and others. In another of Murdoch’s novels, *The Good Apprentice*, Stuart Cuno, a young man who has declared himself celibate and abandoned a stellar career as a mathematician in order to become and do good, begins much earlier in life to seek moral wisdom. The youth, however, struggles in the discernment of how best to do this, and his early attempts often go awry, angering and antagonizing those he means to benefit. Yet the final pages of the novel find Stuart revealing increasing *phronesis*: he begins to work out how he might more effectively pursue the Good, proposing to devote himself to others by becoming a teacher and headmaster for young children, arguing that “thinking and morality...must be got right at the start...you can teach language and literature and how to use words so as to think. And you can teach moral values...meditation—what used to be called prayer, and give [students] an idea of what goodness is and how to love it” (Murdoch 1986, 520). Stuart’s problem has been that though he is awake and attentive to the Good, he does not know how to love it—thus the ham-fistedness of many of his early attempts to pursue virtue. His refined sense of purpose, however, indicates his imaginative improvement on this front, though potential pitfalls remain.

His father, Harry, for instance, objects to the new plan: “Stuart, you’ve opted for power, after all...you’re a power maniac” (ibid.). While Harry’s quasi-Nietzschean skepticism gives short shrift to the real love of Good embodied in the plan, Stuart himself acknowledges the potential for power-mongering, responding, “Of course the problem

is how to do it...The whole problem is in that. I'll have to learn. And meanwhile, I'm going to do some voluntary work" (ibid.). We thus see Stuart's growing Socratic self-knowledge—awareness of his limits and the humility and critical discernment that allow him to learn, even from critiques constituted by half-truths. He is increasingly exercising his imagination to fruitfully navigate reality, rather than engaging in fantasy.

Taken together, the examples of Charles Arrowby and Stuart Cuno show how Murdoch's novels complement her philosophy by imaginatively embodying philosophical abstractions in fictional form. The foregoing analysis has primarily focused on plot content and character development as non-technical guides to moral reflection (what C.S. Lewis would call the *logos* of the work; see Lewis 2012, 132). This is demonstrative of one aspect of Murdoch's conception of literature as truth-seeking and revealing. Yet there is another important element in her view of literature, namely, its existence as an aesthetic object (or *poeima*, in Lewis's lexicon; ibid.), in which role it has the potential to serve as a point of access to beauty and therefore as a direct aid to unselfing, as does the kestrel in Murdoch's classic example:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature [or art] in order to clear our minds of selfish care (Murdoch 1971, 84).

Interestingly, the beauty of birds intervene in two separate instances of particularly difficult and emotional interpersonal interactions in *The Good Apprentice*, providing additional points of reference with which to thicken our understanding of how unselfing through beauty in nature or art (taken as *poeima*) might unfold. In the first example, admiration of a kingfisher cavorting over a stream allows Edward and Brownie to begin to converse. The moment is tense, as Edward has unintentionally killed Brownie's brother, Mark, by giving him a hallucinogen as a joke, leading to Mark's deadly, drug-addled leap out a window. Both Edward and Brownie's lives have been ripped apart by this tragedy, and both feel a deep need to speak, but are not sure how to begin amidst such intense feelings of guilt, hatred (of self and other), and incredulity. They meet in a wood and silently watch the beautiful activity of the bird. "There's a kingfisher," remarks Brownie, simply (Murdoch 1986, 226).

The second occurrence interrupts a scene in which Thomas confronts his closest friend, Harry (Stuart's father), who has been sleeping with Thomas's wife. The meeting

is so rancorous that Harry is (wrongly) accusing Thomas of rummaging in his desk for a pistol, when suddenly a “providential...robin” flies into the study through an open window (Murdoch 1986, 429). Both men are immediately distracted by the unexpected appearance of the beautiful, fragile bird, and, in a moment of unprovoked love for the robin, begin to work together to help it escape unharmed. When they succeed, Harry leaves, and the two men do no further emotional harm to one another.

In both cases the birds intervene in difficult situations, serving as external points of reference whose undeniable beauty and reality break the centripetal nature of the focus of the characters. The result is an opportunity for simultaneous unselfing and an experience of unity in the midst of divisive emotional circumstances, thus opening a space in which common cause may be found. This is no simplistic salvation narrative, for the moment of unselfing is not a magical wiping clean of the slate. Real harm remains and must be dealt with. What we see in both cases is rather that beauty’s undeniable intrusion from without has served to break the spell cast by fantasy.

Conclusion

My project here is to begin staking out a phenomenological approach to Platonist virtue ethics informed by Iris Murdoch’s work and drawing heavily on Michael Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology. Such an approach might act as a catalyst for making experiential connections between beauty, passion, and truth across a range of human experience—linking appreciation of beauty with knowledge in the areas of science and morality. This suggests the development of a pedagogy focused explicitly on the experience of aesthetic phenomena as a point of entry into virtue, beginning with the recognition of beauty and moving stepwise towards more robust participation in the moral life. Murdoch’s philosophical insight serves as the ethical springboard, while her literary contributions help us to see how art functions in the development of *phronesis*. Meanwhile, Polanyi provides the epistemological grounding *vis-à-vis* his personalist theory of tacit knowledge. Such a program would therefore be grounded in the sort of post-critical Platonism that Murdoch, interpreted through a Polanyian lens, begins to unveil.

Such a program will also serve as the basis for some sketches of possible pedagogical moves which take as their starting point Murdoch’s admonition that students ought to be taught to look at paintings and get them right. What would such an approach entail? The following are some preliminary gestures in what I hope is the right direction.

First, such a popular, post-critical ethical and aesthetic pedagogy would aim to cultivate explicitly in students the sort of virtuous attention that Murdoch, along with Polanyi, practices and analyzes, both in literature and philosophy. While many schoolchildren may not spend as much time as Murdoch would have liked looking at pictures

and getting them right, nearly all students in the Anglo-American world spend a fair amount of time looking at literary texts. This means that, institutionally speaking, the cultivation of virtuous attention might be most easily communicated and widely disseminated by embedding in the English curriculum a post-critical approach to literary culture that makes explicit, wherever possible, the moral dimension of attentiveness and getting things right.

The post-critical pedagogue working in such a vein would seek to inculcate attentiveness at a variety of levels, beginning with the more detailed, first-person phenomenal awareness students experience as subjects (perhaps by introducing simple meditative and phenomenological practices) and extending and connecting such enhanced cognizance to rigorous, disciplinarily-focused attention to literature and art. In connecting these two spheres of attention, she ought to provide students with structures and vocabulary that help them to identify and describe in detail the literature they are attending to as well as their own experience of the work—that is to say, the effect wrought on their own phenomenal experience by the art as well as their process of literary indwelling (here I anticipate the usefulness of C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* as well as Polanyi's epistemology). The idea would be to help students *self* themselves through the phenomenological and meditative work so that they can be appropriately *unselfed*. Finally, the moral dimension of such attentiveness would need to be addressed explicitly (by reading and discussing philosophical ethics with an emphasis on virtue ethics).

For now, these are but threadbare sketches, yet I hope they might serve as a promissory charting-out of a course towards an ontologically satisfying and widely-communicable post-critical humanism, achievable by the merging of Murdoch's phenomenologically attentive Platonism with Polanyi's epistemological insight into the heuristics of discovery.

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AUTHOR AND READER: SENSE-GIVING AND SENSE-READING IN C.S. LEWIS'S "GOOD READING"



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Keywords: Michael Polanyi, C.S. Lewis, "good reading," *An Experiment in Criticism*, literary criticism, sense-reading, sense-giving

ABSTRACT

In An Experiment in Criticism, C.S. Lewis demonstrates why, within traditional academic circles, he is best known and most respected for his accomplishments in regard to the study of English literature. Lewis's important monograph aims to illuminate a new direction in literary criticism, and succeeds marvelously. Interestingly, Lewis's analysis is paralleled at every turn by Polanyian insights. We have therefore yet a further instance of the intersection of the thought of these two men, and we again wonder at the absence during their lives of recognition of one another.

What follows is a fragment of a much larger study that, circumstances permitting, might have been executed under the heading of "The Tacit Dynamics of Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism*." The present essay will confine itself to examination of one from a long list of pregnant themes that arise from a Polanyian encounter with Lewis's important monograph, namely, the manner in which Michael Polanyi's notions of "sense-giving" and "sense-reading" usefully illuminate both the concept of "good reading" that stands at the heart of Lewis's book and the practice of literary criticism itself. We will begin by explaining what Lewis intends by "good reading." Following that, we will review Polanyi's sense-giving and sense-reading before, finally, indicating the role

they may play in comprehending reading and criticism alike. In the process many of the themes of the now-dormant larger study will naturally appear.

Lewis's Project

So, what is the “experiment” featured in the title of Lewis’s book? In a tone perfectly reminiscent of his essays and Christian apologetic works, he states,

In this essay I propose to try an experiment. Literary criticism is traditionally employed in judging books. Any judgement [sic] it implies about men’s reading of books is a corollary from its judgement [sic] on the books themselves. Bad taste is, as it were by definition, a taste for bad books. I want to find out what sort of picture we shall get by reversing the process. Let us make our distinction between readers or types of reading the basis, and our distinction between books the corollary. Let us try to discover how far it might be plausible to define a good book as a book which is read in one way, and a bad book as a book which is read in another (Lewis 1961, 1; unless otherwise noted, parenthetical citations are to this source).

As we unpack the meaning of this opening paragraph of *An Experiment in Criticism*, we embark on a most interesting journey.

Under the terms of Lewis’s experiment, we will define “good literature as that which permits, invites, or even compels good reading” (104). What constitutes good reading? About this matter Lewis has much to say. At the most fundamental level, in the case of good reading, one is “receiving” rather than “using.” A good reader is open to the effect of the words he reads. He will be carried away. For this to occur, however, it is necessary to give oneself over to the text. Accordingly, Lewis frequently refers to the “surrender” required in order to practice good reading. Indeed, it is only in this act of allowing the impact to happen that we learn whether a text is truly worthy (32). In advance we cannot know. And, because we cannot know, a good reader suspends judgment in order to find out (116). A good reader may be enthusiastic, but, more importantly, he is open. And, vitally, the good reader is alert.

Lewis speaks of “look[ing] through the lens” of the words we read; this is the vehicle through which the impact of good reading occurs (31, 36). Here we are reminded of one of the most remarkable of Lewis’s essays, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in which Lewis, referring to a beam of sunlight shining into a dark shed, notes that we may look *at* that beam or we may *look along* it (Lewis 1970, 212-215). In the former the beam is an object of our attention. We might, for example, measure its intensity or, were one a physicist, analyze it in terms of its constituent parts. But it is the latter (looking *along*) that primarily interests Lewis. Here we remain “inside” the beam enjoying

what it reveals (in this case, “green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun,” *ibid.*, 212). Looking *at* the beam precludes looking *along* it and thus prevents appreciation of the fruits that such experience yields. The point Lewis makes through this illustration is that these are two very different experiences. And, he adds, while the modern mind is apt to dismiss looking *along* as secondary in stature, or even as a mere illusion whose true character is captured by looking *at* (after all, what ensues from looking *along* is incapable of being measured or in any way demonstrated objectively), the two experiences possess equal validity (though very different roles in our lives).

Much the same holds for good reading. One could look *at* the words of the text. At the literal end of the spectrum, the reader, for example, might be counting instances of the use of a particular conjunction. At a more sophisticated level of “use” of a literary text, the reader may be focused on the events that are related therein (that is, the narrative or literal meaning) or in descrying in a poem or story a recipe for living. In contrast, when engaged in good reading, one experiences the rewards available only through giving oneself over to the words, listening closely, yielding to their effect, and allowing to happen what may thereby occur. One in the process goes beyond his prior self (his “subjectivity”) and affiliates with something greater (93). In the passionate final pages of the book, Lewis states that through reading “we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves” (137). Lest we misunderstand, however, he closes with these words: “But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do” (141).

One wonders where the impact of such surrender takes place. For Lewis, the answer is the imagination, the domain within which literary texts “work on us” (85). Actually, a close (and good) reading of Lewis indicates that imagination is not only a location but also a faculty or power whose operation populates that location. He speaks, for example, of “the attentive and obedient imagination” employed by good reading that is absent in those Lewis describes as “unliterary” readers (33-34) whose imaginations are marked by “extreme inertia” (55). In the same vein he then refers to “the fertile imagination which can build...on the bare facts” (34). But, while good reading depends on the operation of such a faculty, the reward of that activity is the resulting condition. In receiving an author’s words during good reading, we “go through and beyond them to an imagined something which is not itself verbal...Let us call this ‘imagined something’ the *content*” (88-89). Lewis adds, “The ‘recipient’ wants to rest in it. It is for him, at least temporarily, an end. That way, it may be compared (upward) with religious contemplation or (downward) with a game” (89).

Though Lewis never in his book employs the term, it is apparent that in good reading one is acting as an apprentice. In permitting the imagination to operate, we give ourselves over to, and thereby enter “into the opinions, and therefore also the attitudes, feelings, and total experience, of other men” (85). In doing so the good reader elects to act under the authority of the author (and that which is described). As a good reader, “We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own” (137). Lewis observes, “One of the things we feel after reading a great work is ‘I have got out.’ Or from another point of view, ‘I have got in’; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside” (138). This “is the specific value or good of literature considered as Logos; it admits us to experiences other than our own” (139). The good reader is driven by the conviction that “My own eyes are not enough for me. I will see through those of others” (140).

If there is good reading, then there must also be bad. And, indeed, much of *An Experiment in Criticism* is an account of what Lewis refers to as the “nonliterary” reader who would use the text to serve his egoistic purposes rather than surrender to it and welcome the always somewhat unpredictable resulting impact on the imagination. It is worth noting that in returning to a literary text through good reading, the riches keep coming. It is possible indefinitely to return to the well. Each encounter is “a fresh immersion in what it is” (85). The immediate point, however, is that an important objective for Lewis in writing his book is to preserve the understanding that there is such a thing as excellence (and thereby the converse) both in the reading and writing of literary texts. The purpose of the experiment, after all, is to establish the stature of pieces of literature through noting the sort of reading to which they give rise. There are different kinds of readers because there are different sorts of people. Not all perspectives, and hence not all manners of reading, are of equivalent value. There is in Lewis a persistent respect for people of every sort (see, for example, 76). But to possess such respect is not to extend equal regard to everything people say and do. In writing a book on good reading (and the superior literature that compels it), Lewis acknowledges the existence of excellence and expertise while standing foursquare against both the spirit of levelling and any related impulse to erode real qualitative distinctions between various instances of human expression and experience.

A Polanyian Dimension

Early in *The Study of Man* Polanyi states, “the sender of the message will always have to rely for the comprehension of his message on the intelligence of the person addressed” (*SM*, 21-22). A moment later he adds, “This holds, of course, also at the point from which a statement is issued” (*ibid.*, 22). We then receive a clarifying summary: “nothing that is said, written or printed, can ever mean anything in itself: for it is only a *person* who utters something—or who listens to it or reads it—who

can mean something *by* it. All these semantic functions are the tacit operations of a person” (ibid.). These words are a portal to fruitful, even life-changing vistas on a wide number of subjects, not the least of which is the dynamics and rewards of “good reading” as well as those of literary criticism itself. Before moving on to these, however, let us dwell on two concepts—“sense-giving” and sense-reading”—employed by Polanyi to better explain what is taking place in the delivery and receipt of meaningful written communication.

In 1967 Polanyi published an article (republished two years later in *KB*) which articulated at length the meaning of these two concepts. Writers are in the business of sense-giving. This is achieved via selection of words, the order in which they are expressed, etc. In drafting a message or reporting an experience (factual or fictional), the writer is simultaneously struggling to capture a meaning (that, intriguingly, emerges precisely through that struggle) and shape the imagination of the reader. Among the chief factors involved in sense-giving is “*conceptual subsumption*” through which the writer challenges the reader to understand in terms of common nouns or universals (Polanyi 1969, 190; cf. Fennell 2013). Polanyi emphasizes that the author, in originally experiencing that which he intends to relate in his writing, was himself groping for meaning. This groping consists of the well-known Polanyian triad of (first) a personal integration of (second) incoming clues resulting in (third) a focal result. What makes writing a particularly interesting phenomenon is that the author engages in a second instance of integration of clues as he works to provide “a verbal account of this experience” (Polanyi 1969, 186). This is “the performance of a practical skill” (ibid.) in regard to which human ability varies markedly. Strikingly, Polanyi refers to the first of the integrations as sense-reading and the second as sense-giving. During the latter, when the author puts words to paper in order to affect the envisioned reader, those words are selected to serve as subsidiary clues to a meaning that the author intends to communicate (“subsidiary” because, while vital to the reader’s arriving at the meaning, the clues are, during the reading at least, tacit in their operation and not themselves the object of his attention).

That the words are in fact separate from the meaning that, through personal integration, they yield is made clear by Polanyi by reference to his habit of reading correspondence at the breakfast table. Polanyi is fluent in several languages, but his son, who joins him at the table, understands only English. Periodically, Polanyi finds a letter sufficiently noteworthy that he wishes to share it with his son. Passing the letter to him is sometimes all of a sudden arrested by the realization that the missive is written in a language other than English. Clearly, then, the meaning of the letter, though relying for its conveyance on the words employed by it, is independent of those words. The same meaning, it would seem, could have been communicated by the subsidiary clues afforded by the words of other languages.¹ To employ the terms used in Polanyi’s

last book, *Meaning*, words typically serve as “indicators.” Under the “from-to structure of language,” words receive their meaning from that to which they refer. Significantly, however, while this is the norm for “[t]he most elementary use of language,” the matter is quite different in the case of metaphor (*M*, 69 ff).

There is, of course, yet another instance of sense-reading in this account. This is the one that occurs when the author’s words have their impact on the reader. When words, written or spoken, serve their purpose, we do not observe them focally but instead permit them to act subsidiarily, the result being that “*we look through the word at its meaning*” (Polanyi 1969, 184). Polanyi emphasizes that the reader in sense-giving is making decisions through use of his “powers” (ibid., 188). Central among these powers are intuition and imagination, the integration of which defines the process of discovery (ibid., 201-206; cf. Polanyi 1966, 85-93). What appropriately occupies our mind at this point is the role of imagination. For example, where, as noted above, the writer employs “*conceptual subsumption*,” the reader exercises “*conceptual exemplification*” (ibid., 190). Thus, while reading in a novel or poem of a bloodied horse in a daze wandering through a field of dead and wounded soldiers, the reader achieves understanding through allowing the words via their “interiorization” to summon up images of the objects intended by the writer.² That is, the writer presupposes and capitalizes upon prior experience on the part of the reader. Due to that prior experience, the reader is able to understand the writer’s description in terms of the categories through which that experience exists and carries forward. Polanyi, drawing on Piaget, elsewhere refers to this process of *seeing as* or *seeing in terms of* as “assimilation” (Polanyi 1974, 102-105; cf. Fennell 2016; Broudy 1988). Exemplification, however, consists of more than confirmation of existing categories. Assimilation is often, especially in response to powerful new experience or in an encounter with masterful literature, accompanied by what Polanyi labels “adaptation” (Polanyi 1974, 105). Here the categories of prior experience, initially inadequate, are extended. The result is properly understood as “education,” the consequence being not only a dramatic moment of realization but also an enhancement of the store of concepts and images in terms of which subsequent experience may be understood.³

At the heart of a discussion of “the tacit dynamics of tacit knowing” (itself based on his well-informed analysis of scientific discovery), Polanyi highlights the role of the “questing” or “striving” imagination. Here the term refers to an active faculty that, in the grips of an end in view, “evokes” the subsidiaries that are “the means of its own implementation” (Polanyi 1969, 200). He states, “the striving imagination has the power to implement its aim by the subsidiary practice of ingenious rules of which the subject remains focally ignorant” (ibid.). In this discussion Polanyi is referring not only to the practical achievement of learning to ride a bicycle but also to the capacity of children to learn to speak a language which, it turns out, is an equally practical

challenge (the organism, situated in a problematic environment, needs to make sense of its surroundings in order to thrive and, indeed, to survive). Here we receive a glimpse of Polanyi's philosophical anthropology. Humans share with other organisms the challenge of coping successfully with challenging conditions. Given human intelligence, this activity in the case of man consists to a considerable degree of exercising control over those conditions. It is in the nature of the human being to possess the capacity to imagine a suitable outcome as well as to execute a mechanism to arrive at that end (typically without focal awareness this is occurring). In appreciating the grandeur of this activity, it is important to remember it consists of adaptation as well as assimilation. As noted above, in making sense we often successfully accommodate that which is novel. In the case of a story, for example, the reader may strive to recognize what counts as a moral action or what appropriately ranks as a (plausible) outcome of such action. It is possible, however, in an encounter with an extraordinary literary work, for our existing store of images of moral actions and outcomes to be insufficient to grasp that which is recounted. While some readers will in this case reject the story and regard it as bizarre or flawed writing, others, possessing a "roaming vision" of possibilities (ibid., 201), will more receptively modify and extend their store of images, thereby making available a richer (or at least expanded) store of images in terms of which to understand subsequent literary (and, incidentally, real-life) encounters in the future. Reading confirms our grasp of the world; but it also at times extends it. A comparable analysis exists for poetry.

The Tacit Dynamics of "Good Reading" and Literary Criticism

In the closing section of this brief encounter with *An Experiment in Criticism*, our objective, drawing upon Polanyi's *The Study of Man* and relevant chapters from *Meaning*, is to elucidate and apply relevant observations from those works in order usefully to further illuminate Lewis's portrayal of good reading as well as the meaning of literary criticism itself. Let us begin with the former.

We have already made some progress in outlining a Polanyian understanding of Lewis's "good reading." This advance consisted of recognizing the role played in writing of conceptual subsumption and in reading by conceptual exemplification, as well as in discerning the "education" that occurs in the latter when engaging with superior literature. We have also begun to more fully appreciate the critical role played in good reading by the successful appeal to the reader's imagination. Above all, we have come to see how words tacitly operate in pointing to a meaning beyond them. This, however, is only the beginning.

Within a survey of living things, Polanyi in *The Study of Man* observes that "man alone can command respect, and in this sense we humans are the top of creation" (*SM*, 59). He adds, "The distinctive qualities of man are developed by education. Our

native gift of speech enables us to enter on the mental life of man by assimilating our cultural heritage. We come into existence mentally, by adding to our bodily equipment an articulate framework and using it for understanding experience” (ibid., 59-60). In this statement we see what an author, through prompting Lewis’s good reading, makes possible. The author of such literary work is an agent of Polanyi’s “education,” for such an individual is engaged in illuminating “the top.” The significance of this service cannot be overstated. Insofar as the author of superior literature is a creator of our cultural heritage, by appreciating such work we participate in this creation and thereby become a vehicle of its transmission. Through our personal participation we carry out the author’s intentions. To say it somewhat differently, the creative artist (Polanyi in *Meaning* directs our attention to music, drama, painting, sculpture, etc. as well as literature) via “the gratification of [his] mental passions creates objects destined to gratify the same passions in others” (ibid., 60). Such works, as well as acts of discovery and noble actions (that is, exemplars), “enrich the mind of all humanity” (ibid.). The result is a “cultural firmament” (ibid., 61) in and through which, both as individuals and a species, we find meaning. Authors of literary works, through promotion of good reading, make possible “participation in timeless and ubiquitous things” (ibid.; cf. *PK* 374-379; see also Fennell 2014). Indeed, it is through such participation that those things unfold. In such instances, we are, for Polanyi, such meaning coming to understand itself. Good reading, therefore, assumes the greatest significance imaginable.

Through the appreciation of literature that good reading makes possible, the reader enters a “fellowship” defined by acknowledgement “that we share with [the author] the same firmament of obligations” (*SM*, 66). In this relationship, artists are “our masters,” for it is they who articulate and thereby set standards, the concerted attempt to live in light of which constitutes what Polanyi widely refers to as our “calling.” As Lewis forcefully argues in *The Abolition of Man*, it is precisely such an effort that defines “man.” We are therefore not surprised to find Polanyi referring to “the particular calling of literate man in the universe” and then stating, “a supreme trust is placed in us by the whole creation, and it is sacrilege then even to contemplate actions which may lead to the extinction of humanity” (*SM*, 69). Through the joint efforts of author and reader, which is to say, through sense-giving and sense-reading, such extinction is forestalled (cf. Polanyi 1959, 97-99; see also Polanyi 1974).

Let us, as promised, close our abbreviated study of Lewis’s monograph with a Polanyian account of literary criticism itself. In *The Study of Man* Polanyi asserts that “the craving to understand actuates the whole mental life of man. This craving is satisfied most fully when it grasps an idea which promises yet to reveal large, still unfathomable, implications” (*SM*, 84). And, earlier, he states “that every act of understanding somewhat rectifies our being and...that a conversion to a truer way of *being a man* will induce a better *understanding of man*” (ibid., 82-83). As we consider literary

work in light of this framework, two questions that inevitably arise are the degree to which the author succeeds in promoting such an outcome, and how it is possible to know whether that judgment is true. In a chapter from *Meaning* titled “Validity in Art” Polanyi addresses these questions head-on. Our discussion will integrate what Polanyi has to say there with additional relevant observations from *The Study of Man*.

As the critic assesses a literary text, he is acting, as earlier did the author, both as a representative and on behalf of standards above and beyond himself.⁴ While writing, the author attempted to act responsibly in light of his grasp “of truth and rightness” (*SM*, 90). The critic’s task is to determine, *under that very same authority*, the degree to which the author succeeded. In its purest form, literary criticism consists of an “encounter” (*SM*, 95) between author and reader in which clarity of judgment is made possible by the light afforded by the standards of the literary enterprise. Given the existence of such standards, it is possible to test the work to see how well it fares. Just as is the case for evaluation of claims made in science, the question at the heart of literary criticism is whether the work successfully yields coherence—that is, does it provide the subsidiary clues as well as the necessary stimulus to provoke, via the imagination, a meaningful coherent whole? As Polanyi notes, “To move man aesthetically is to move his imagination to make such integrations” (*M*, 106). But, he warns, “there can exist no strict criterion for coherence, our judgment of it must always remain a qualitative, nonformal, tacit, personal judgment” (*M*, 100). Of course, standards are always to some degree in flux, and we ought to expect disagreement both about their nature and the manner in which they are applied. Further, the understanding of standards as well as their application is unavoidably personal. But they are not, Polanyi emphasizes, arbitrary or subjective. He anticipates the predictable objection by asking, “But who is to assess this value?” (*M*, 100). Polanyi, already conceding the absence of strict criteria, adds that “[t]he pursuit...is obviously fraught with value judgments, and by doubts about how to exercise such value judgments” (*ibid.*). The very existence of the enterprise, however—whether it is science, literature, music, drama, or visual art—exists only in light of some consensus regarding its nature and how it is to be judged. As Polanyi states,

The scientist, applying nonstrict criteria to the evaluation of scientific merit, does so in the conviction that these criteria are universally valid, and the scientific opinion of the time endorses this claim. It requires such value judgments to be “objective” and relies on them to be so. Accordingly, their validity is attested to by the authority of scientists *as a body*—not simply by the authority of the personal judgment of the contributing scientist. This success of science in universally imposing such self-set standards of value lends support to a similar practice in the life of the arts (*M*, 101).

There are periods in which disagreement about criteria for evaluation is deep and fundamental. But if the conflict were irresolvable or boundless we would no longer have a subject about which to disagree.

Ideally (and in fact typically), the nature of the standards underlying criticism is not deeply controversial. In the case of literature, careful and more informed readers to a considerable degree share a notion of profundity and excellence. They recognize greatness in writing when they see it. This in turn gives rise to an experience of reverence for the truth thereby revealed. In this moment, Lewis's surrender within good reading becomes "submission to greatness" and, in an instance of the education noted earlier in regard to such reading, "we are now looking *up* to our object, not down" (*SM*, 97). In assessing the literary text, and in electing to respond in this fashion, it is always possible we are wrong. But that possibility, so to speak, comes with the territory. "That [the] grounds of artistic creation [and evaluation] are ultimate does not mean ... that they are infallible" (*M*, 103). To refrain, however, for this reason from aesthetic judgment is equivalent to refusing to permit literary work its full expression and thereby from having the impact it was intended to produce. Moreover, any rejection or modification of a critical judgment is possible only in light of alternative self-set standards. And none of these, neither those originally forwarded nor those offered in their place, are deliberately chosen (*M*, 103-104). Rather, they are taken from the setting in which the critic was formed, to which he is committed, and for which he stands. This is a setting that, in the case of art, is especially influenced by the creative individual. Yet, to a considerable degree it is inevitably the product of tradition. Coherence, strictly speaking, can never be a purely private affair. Making sense, even in the most avant-garde dimensions of the arts, is a community enterprise informed and animated by a sense of a truth that has yet to be fully grasped. Thus, the author, no less than the reader, remains an apprentice acting in submission to that which is greater and he can only hope wholly to understand.

It would be seriously misleading, however, to leave it at this. In *Meaning*, as throughout his many writings, Polanyi finds in science both the epistemology and the human dynamics that serve as a penetrating model for other, quite diverse, activities. But, in a vital respect that largely defines the endeavor, art differs from science. While the artist, as does the scientist in regard to a prediction, "sets forth a claim that [his creation's] value is universally valid...[,] the maker of a work of art claims more than this" (*M*, 102). For Polanyi, "the artist detaches his product from his personal life, but by this very act he includes his own unique artistic problem and his solution of it in the frame that demarcates the property he offers to the public" (*ibid.*). He adds, "It is only the artist who detaches himself as an artist from himself as a private individual and embodies *this* artistic person in his work. Scientists cannot do this. But therefore all art

is intensely personal *and* strictly detached; and it must...claim universal validity for the *personal* self-set standards it obeys” (ibid.).

This feature of art has profound consequence for literary criticism: “Art has no tests external to art. Its making and acceptance must therefore be ultimately grounded on the decision of its maker, interacting, it is true, with both tradition and the public’s present inclinations, but nevertheless interacting by and through the maker’s own judgments” (*M*, 103). Still, Polanyi emphasizes, we see here the operation of self-set standards, and the artist, in bending to their authority, understands himself to be serving a reality that exists independent of him. In a fascinating summary, Polanyi, while noting the indispensable guiding role of such universal standards, states that the artist “may be the first ever to recognize them, yet he feels himself bound by them, not superior to them; for to him his innovation of standards appears to be a discovery” (ibid.). Because this is precisely what occurs also in science, Polanyi’s conception of scientific discovery reassumes its primacy. In the case of art the model offered by science has not been supplanted or overruled but instead is extended to accommodate aspects of artistic creation that do not exist for the scientist. In short, art (including, of course, literature) is even more personal than scientific discovery. Due to this fact, literary criticism must in its operation pay respect to a degree of personal idiosyncrasy that would, at best, be irrelevant in science. Practically speaking this means that the critic must be prepared to learn from the writer. In the end, however, even the artist is to be evaluated in terms of what our standards indicate to be the truth. But in the case of literature, as well as for the arts in general, the critic is open in a manner that is not appropriate for science itself.

The greater complexity of art and literature does not, however, alter the central point: the creative offering is to be judged in terms of the consequences resulting from giving ourselves over to it. The essential question is whether the literary work gives rise in the imagination to novel instances of integration that the reader experiences as meaningful. This is the fruit of good reading. It is the job of the literary critic for both Lewis and Polanyi to determine whether the work in question bears such fruit. Where Polanyi dwells on the outcome, Lewis in *An Experiment in Criticism* directs our attention to the sort of reading that makes that outcome possible. There is good reason to believe that Polanyi, in appreciation of the role played by sense-giving and sense-reading, would be intrigued by Lewis’s experiment and would have no objection to it.

ENDNOTES

¹This is true at least in the simplest cases. Although Polanyi does not himself make the observation, surely he would grant that in the more sophisticated uses of words, differing languages communicate shades of meaning that are not comprehensively translatable. Polanyi in fact cites such

an example: French offers two words of quite different meaning (*savoir* and *connaître*) where English has just one (“to know”).

²“The relation of a word to that which it denotes is established by a tacit integration in which we rely on a subsidiary awareness of the word for directing out attention to its meaning...this integration deprives the word of its existence as an observed body and makes it in a way transparent” (192). Such integration, it is important to note, is both a “performance” (193) and an achievement which can be executed more or less well.

³“Our education is largely based on absorbing communication about experiences that are novel to us and are recorded in a language we don’t understand” (Polanyi 1969, 188). Polanyi adds, “An unintelligible text referring to an unintelligible matter presents us with a dual problem. Both halves of such a problem jointly guide our minds towards solving them and will in fact be solved jointly by the understanding of the objects referred to and the words referring to it. The meaning of the things and of the terms designating them is discovered at the same time. I have said that this dual act of sense-reading is the paradigm of the educational expansion of our mind; it also bears on the process by which a child learns to understand speech” (ibid., 189).

⁴Let us make an important distinction that will frame the discussion of literary criticism. It is possible, of course, to *talk about* literary criticism, referring to it as an object. But, as we will see, to *practice* literary criticism in the manner described by Polanyi, one would have to be open to the literary text in order to be able to discern its impact (and subsequently to judge the text on the basis of the presence or absence of such impact). That, in turn, would depend on Lewis’s good reading. It is true, however, that under Lewis’s “experiment” an observing critic might, strictly speaking, be able to judge a work on the basis of whether it prompted good reading in others. That is, the critic would not himself need to have that encounter with the work (though it might be risky as well as suspect to trust reports from those others). For Polanyi, genuine assessment of the work is a personal experience that can take place only directly. While something useful might be learned by the critic through noting the quality of the reading of the text on the part of others, for the critic himself to know whether the work is superior and whether the author has truly met the standards in light of which he endeavored, the critic would need on his own to surrender to the text and experience the consequences of it for himself.

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INTERVIEW WITH GÁBOR ISTVÁN BÍRÓ

[Editor's Note: Gábor István Bíró recently completed his Ph. D. in the Philosophy and History of Science Department (HPS doctoral program) at Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BUTE). BUTE has long been affiliated with the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association (MPLPA) and graduate students in HPS at BUTE often undertake some study of Polanyi's writings. The MPLPA is a central European Polanyi group similar to the Polanyi Society; *TAD* periodically reports on MPLPA activities and BUTE events. Bíró's recent dissertation is a careful, historically-oriented study of Polanyi's fifteen years of work on economic literacy and his diagrammatic film *Unemployment and Money: The Principles Involved* (1940). His work, like some other things recently published in *TAD*, suggests the rewards of examining more closely Polanyi's early ideas. He is interviewed by Phil Mullins, editor emeritus of *Tradition & Discovery* and current president of the Polanyi Society. This interview invites Bíró to summarize topics explored in his dissertation.]

Abstract

This interview with Gábor István Bíró reviews topics explored in his 2017 Budapest University of Technology and Economics dissertation on Polanyi's work in economics education and on his diagrammatic film.

Mullins: *Your recent dissertation has a provocative title, "Projecting the Light of Democracy: Michael Polanyi's Efforts to Save Liberalism via an Economics Film, 1933-1948." Your abstract identifies your research as "historical micro-analysis" which focuses on what you call Polanyi's early "sociotechnical" vision which is manifested in his effort to make his economics education film. Please unpack all of this for us.*

Bíró: I feel particularly lucky to get involved with not only one but two Polanyi groups (the Polanyi Society and the MPLPA) from the first days of my Ph.D. I can recall one of our early discussions in 2014 about Polanyi and economics which reinforced my interest in the topic by suggesting that this is a little-studied area with a lot to discover. Scholars at BUTE affiliated with the MPLPA, particularly Márta Fehér, Tihamér Margitay, and my thesis supervisor, Gábor Zemlén, were very influential for me in

shaping how to approach the topic and in how to read and review what has been already mined from the archival Michael Polanyi Papers (MPP) from the 1970s. I was also fortunate enough to get very early Hungarian and German fragments, some related to Polanyi's graduate years in Budapest, from scholars cultivating a historical interest in Polanyi's physical chemistry.

My initial aim was, due to my background in economics and history of economic thought, to study barely known or unknown Polanyi materials related to economic matters and economics. Then, as I delved into the ten thousand pages of the Michael Polanyi Papers, mostly into his published and unpublished writings, correspondence, and lecture notes of the studied decades, I realized that my research can reveal something even more interesting for those not so much interested in Polanyi, but very much interested in the entanglements of knowledge, power, democracy, and visual (re)presentation. These topics converge around what I call Polanyi's sociotechnical vision of "democracy by enlightenment through the film" (Polanyi 1935b, 1) which summarizes his efforts to save liberalism and Western civilization through centres of economics education (using his film) in the thirties and forties. This succinct phrase "democracy by enlightenment through the film" (ibid) was used by Polanyi himself in a letter of 1935 to John Grierson who seems to have been a collaborator who immediately grasped the social objective of Polanyi's film project.

The focus of my research was less on how the grand-scale economic, social, and political events (e.g., the Great Depression, World War II) of the era influenced Polanyi's thought, and more on how Polanyi intended to reform liberalism and launch a campaign for the epistemic empowerment of the masses through certain visual and verbal practices. I gave a special emphasis to Polanyi's visual method and made a detailed comparison with the visualizations and the imagined societal effects of similar projects to educate the general public in the 1930-40s.

Mullins: *You are very interested in the literature of the contemporary interdisciplinary area called science and technology studies (STS). Some of Polanyi's work in the forties and fifties influenced the development of STS, according to figures like Nye. What your dissertation does is deftly employ certain interesting concepts in recent STS discussions (e.g., "boundary crossing," "boundary object," and "sociotechnical imaginary") to conceptualize Polanyi's work over 15 years on economics education and his film, as well as his own transition from a research chemist to an economist and social philosopher. Please comment on these STS concepts and outline how they can be used to understand Polanyi's early work as someone intensely interested in improving economic literacy.*

Bíró: Imre Lakatos wrote that "history of science without philosophy of science is blind, philosophy of science without history of science is empty" (Lakatos 1970, 1). I did not want to write blind history of science so to speak and I decided to get my

eyes crafted through the lenses (or with the blood) of science and technology studies. I specialized in STS during my doctoral program since I thought that its interdisciplinarity and the multiplicity of approaches STS scholars cultivate makes it an appropriate niche for my research. By writing a couple of reviews on recently published STS books, I also realized that there is a growing interest in STS circles in the three defining pillars of my research: social sciences, visual (re)presentation and the relation between science, technology and democracy.

The fourth edition of *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (2016) defined STS as a field exploring the “transformative power of science and technology to arrange and rearrange contemporary societies”(1). Polanyi was tinkering with such transformative power as he sought to rearrange, in a sense, society through economics education based on his film and economics. But this similarity was not the only reason.

I sought to show Polanyi’s sociotechnical vision in these two decades from different angles. I wanted to show how the different pieces, which could be grasped by different STS concepts, can be made to fit together in a thorough, fine-grained historical analysis. I hoped that by doing this my work could bridge some gaps in the STS literature. I argued that Polanyi’s disciplinary shift from physical chemistry towards social sciences is not to be separated from his vision of “democracy by enlightenment through the film” or his unique way of rendering Keynesian economics visible. Changing his discipline was not unrelated to his efforts to change what economists do and how they do it, or to change the common practices of seeing and knowing the economy. I relied on certain STS concepts (boundary work, boundary shifter, etc.) to explain what Polanyi was doing and how. Other concepts (boundary object) helped me to understand how others saw his efforts and how this perception affected the realization of his agenda. Jasanoff’s “sociotechnical imaginaries” (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015) is an insightful concept which offered a well-suited framework to set some of these strands together and to show how elements from different micro-social worlds were entangled to make societal macroeffects together. Jasanoff’s concept was particularly helpful for explaining the evolution of Polanyi’s film project and for analyzing why it failed to produce the large-scale social impacts Polanyi envisioned.

Mullins: *Part of your research focuses on how Polanyi very creatively rendered Keynesian liberal economics visible with his film, which is recognized in film studies as an early “diagrammatic” film. You compare what Polanyi did with visuals with similar projects which aimed to make economic processes visible for non-economists in the 1930 and 1940s. You also show how Polanyi’s illustrations draw on laboratory experience in physical chemistry. Please sketch for us what you think was particularly innovative about Polanyi’s effort to make a diagrammatic film which would, to paraphrase some of Polanyi’s writing, eliminate common fallacies about economics and render Keynesian ideas a matter of common sense.*

Bíró: In studying archival materials, I discovered that Polanyi was aware of at least three similar projects focusing on visualizing economic phenomena for non-experts: Norman Angell's *The Money Game. How to Play It. A New Instrument of Economic Education* (1928), Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE (1936), and James D. Mooney's (president of General Motors Overseas between 1922 and 1940) patents for apparatuses illustrating economic laws with physical analogies (1934-1949). Polanyi was informed about the Nobel Peace Prize (1933) winning economist, Angell's game by Oscar Jaszi (Polanyi 1935a), a Hungarian liberal social thinker and politician who, like Polanyi, fled from continental Europe due to the rise of dictatorial regimes. Neurath's method was widely known as well as his related efforts to induce social reform through the *Mundaneum Institutes*. In January 1937, Charles V. Sale, an official of the Rockefeller Foundation, sent Polanyi a letter he had received from James D. Mooney which contained a status report on Mooney's project and his further plans about making a moving picture on the working of his physical apparatuses illustrating economic laws (Polanyi 1937). Quite unexpectedly, on the back of a page of Sale's letter, I discovered a sketch by Polanyi which is probably the first visualization of his film plan with economic factors and a formula. He was probably prompted to make the diagram by what he had just read in Mooney's account. It must be noted here that there is clear evidence that Polanyi had already been tinkering with his film project since 1929, so these letters might have influenced him in the years of development, but he did not borrow the very idea of making an economic film from these contemporary efforts.

Polanyi's visual method had similarities with, as well as differences from, the visualizations of Angell, Neurath, and Mooney. Cartoonish style and fluid-like motions were common traits in these four visual regimes. What made Polanyi's method unique was the shifting symbols and the multi-level learner-centered unfolding of the visual argument. Both were driven by educational considerations. Polanyi used shifting symbols to promote a kind of visual and economics literacy. He used different representations or symbols for the same represented element; this was not present in Angell's and Mooney's visualizations, and was explicitly forbidden in Neurath's method. How symbols followed each other is even more interesting than the multiplicity of symbols. It was not simply that Polanyi stopped using the first and started using another. He portrayed a process of revisualization, a liquid-like shifting of the first symbol into another before the eye of the viewer, usually accompanied by an audible explanation. Polanyi gradually replaced the cartoonish and common representations (based on the visual similarity between the representation and that which was represented) with abstract ones (based on a recently learned relation between the representation and that which was represented) to help his viewers understand the material. Probably the same considerations led him to rotate between micro-, meso-, and macro-perspectives, emphasizing what an individual economic agent does and why in certain parts of his

film, and explaining how the whole monetary sphere of a national economy works in others.

My dissertation argued that the essence of Polanyi's visual regime was not that he forged ISOTYPE and moving picture technology together, and not the way he portrayed fluid-like economic realms. Polanyi's approach focused on the central role of transitions—and transitions had already played an important role in many of his chemistry illustrations (e.g., on potential energy surfaces). This interest in transitions can be seen in several decades of his work when he was crossing borders, topics, fields, and disciplines. It was a key to his genuine technical virtuosity to solve research problems in the laboratory of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes in the twenties, and was also the key to his sociotechnical imagining which aimed to save liberalism and Western civilization through economics education in England in the 1930-40s.

***Mullins:** You suggest that Polanyi was particularly wary about and careful in his work on economics literacy in UK during and just after World War II. He was a foreigner who had arrived from Germany in 1933. He believed that he should not be perceived as a policy advocate; however, a program to improve economic literacy was likely to be generally inoffensive to lifelong British citizens.*

Bíró: Polanyi knew that he was a stranger from illiberal soil in the eyes of the British public, and knew that he should adapt to this perception in his efforts to realize his sociotechnical vision of “democracy by enlightenment through the film” (Polanyi 1935b, 1). In a letter of 1942, he wrote that “I must be very careful not to appear to intervene in public affairs. During a crisis of this kind the nation's family feelings are stronger than ever and they are anxious to listen undisturbed to the voice of their own tradition” (Polanyi 1942a, 2). Polanyi did not want to be seen as an outsider intervening in public affairs, but he did want to realize his sociotechnical vision.

His solution can be unpacked from another letter of 1942. In this letter, Polanyi emphasized the dichotomy of thought and action (he even underlined the two words to emphasize them); he described what he meant by both words and how he thought these were likely perceived by the English: “No contributions to thought are resented by our English friends, however widely they may roam; but I think our friends would resent any contributions by us to public action, unless these are demanded by strict professional responsibility” (Polanyi 1942b, 1-2). He thought that the English would receive gladly the outsiders' intellectual efforts, even those related to “the most decisive questions of international and economic life,” but would be hostile to “a comparatively small active participation in public life” (ibid). Polanyi thought that opposing the government would likely be perceived as an intrusion. He could have easily packaged his economic ideas as a set of interrelated economic policies, but decided to “keep to the abstract fields of thought” instead (Polanyi 1942a, 2).

Mullins: *In his Manchester years, Polanyi became a sophisticated but maverick economist. Although he had great admiration for Keynes, he did not agree with many Keynesians, but he fervently desired to explain basic Keynesian insights. Nevertheless, he maintained good relations with figures like Hayek and was a charter member of the Mont Pelerin Society. Polanyi also apparently wished to reform the way in which academic economists worked and thought about their profession. Can you shed further light on what seems Polanyi's odd stance as an economist in the thirties and forties?*

Bíró: Polanyi was among the few who managed to maintain good relations with members of both the laissez-faire and the Keynesian camp. He corresponded with John Maynard Keynes, Friedrich von Hayek, Lionel Robbins, Joan Robinson, Richard Hicks, Gottfried Haberler, and a few other leading economists. Interestingly, Polanyi did not achieve this by being overly laudatory or unreflective. He was indeed a maverick very critical of orthodox economic liberalism and yet he did not embrace “standard” Keynesianism either. This posture was risky—especially for someone who wanted to launch a large-scale social reform based on Keynesian ideas. Polanyi drew boundaries between his Keynesian-inspired economic thought, socialist planning and extreme liberalism; he heightened the contrast between them. Polanyi thought that during economic hardship the outcome of the disciplinary rivalry will be primarily decided by which camp's responses are more plausible for the masses in relation to one defining question: how can we end the economic downturn without inducing collateral damage to freedom and democracy?

Polanyi knew that what works for experts does not necessarily work for the “common layman” and he needed to reach out to the latter. He urged economists to change their sophisticated disciplinary practices; he accused them of carrying “a [chess] board [of economics] in their heads” while the public “watches [their] admirable feat[s] with puzzled in-attention” (Polanyi 1936, 2). Instead, according to Polanyi, their task would be to present economic phenomena and economics comprehensibly. In *Full Employment and Free Trade*, Polanyi emphasized that he “is not concerned with elaborating the Keynesian theory further, but with its conversion into a matter of common sense” (Polanyi 1948, v). He drew a parallel to the atomic theory of chemistry of John Dalton (1809) and the work of Cannizzaro (1858) who “set out the whole matter once again—without any important addition—in a new, more straightforward fashion” (ibid). He sought to become the Cannizzaro of Keynesian economics through his film project and economics book. Unfortunately, Keynes was too busy to embrace his parallel Cannizzaro. One could only imagine how Polanyi's sociotechnical vision of “democracy by enlightenment through the film” would have transformed the public realms of Western civilization if Keynes had supported his initiative.

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BOOK REVIEW

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp 232 + vii. ISBN-13 978-022-629-403-2. \$22.50

Grand narratives may be passé, but we can't yet seem to get by without them. This one goes: once upon a time, critics approached literary works with loving attention bordering on reverence, treating the text as a font of wisdom or an autonomous crystal to be appreciated in all its luminous and refracting facets. Then, in the mid-twentieth century, critics began recognizing the ideological entanglements of these approaches to literature, as well as of the works themselves, and began a multi-fronted assault of deconstruction and critique. Decades later, some scholars in the humanities begin to feel that the new dominant paradigm leaves nothing left to love, and now the task becomes one of articulating, as Lisa Ruddick has put it, a “non-fuzzy” theory of literature that sees it not as symptom but as a *sui generis* form of human expression that speaks to fundamental and legitimate human needs and questions.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski takes up this challenge, first attempting to make way for the new paradigm by challenging the ascendancy of the old, analyzing what Ricoeur dubbed the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as it pervades

the academic humanities, and then suggesting an alternative to this “spirit of disenchantment” (2). She is not *against* critique and acknowledges its value and her own intellectual formation in the crucible of critical theory. What she wants is for her fellow academics to recognize that it is not the only intellectually defensible stance toward literature—where “intellectually defensible” means, on the one hand, rigorous, and on the other, politically correct, opposing dominant and oppressive structures of power. As Felski puts it, “the aim is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—therefore freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument” (3).

Felski's method is redescription. While critique fancies itself as the objective approach to literature—seeing it for what it really is, and correspondingly seeing society for what it really is—Felski shows that critique in fact depends on its own adoption of a particular attitude—suspicious, detached, “cool”—and that it has its own conventions—interpreting literary works as symptoms, “trac[ing] textual meaning back to an opaque and all-determining power” (152).

The bulk of the book is dedicated to this project of redescription (one might

say “the critique of critique” or “unmasking of critique” though Felski explicitly resists such a characterization of her project because of her desire to escape the potentially infinite regress of critique). Still, the book also has a positive moment. With reference to Michael Polanyi’s “post-critical philosophy,” which seeks a way to affirm, against skepticism and logical positivism, those human realities we actually experience in our everyday lives as real (ethical, aesthetic, spiritual or religious), Felski urges us to imagine forms of “post-critical reading” in which “[r]ather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (12).

Specifically, she calls for “rethinking context”—seeing critique as resting on a picture of society in which actors’ thoughts and behavior (and literary expressions) are determined by a monolithic ideology whose purpose is to preserve existing power relations. Failure to do so leaves the discipline stuck in the irresolvable argument between the “contextualists,” who insist on the necessity of recognizing the social determinants of literature but fail to recognize its degree of freedom, and the “formalists,” who insist on the irreducible value of the work as *art* but fail to see its worldly entanglements. As an alternative she turns to Bruce Latour’s action-network theory, which sees society and culture as “not a preformed being but a doing, not a hidden entity underlying the realm of

appearance, but the ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between multiple actors” (158), including intertemporal connections, connections to past and future. Doing so treats texts not as products of a walled-in past with present critics peeking over the ramparts from a place of privileged observation, but rather still present and in communication with the present. Felski argues for a form, or forms, of literary criticism that recognize this and are consequently open and attuned to the two-way interplay between reader and text.

Felski’s argument is convincing—even, it seems to me, indisputable. The one thing that is troubling is her apparent relinquishment of the ideals of objectivity and reality. She does not exactly leave these terms to the reductionists, who, she is at such pains to show, are also seeing through a particular *Blick*, but she does not claim them for her imagined new regime either. Felski calls herself a pragmatist—“different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism” (9). She is also a pluralist; she wants literature to be able to be a source of “inspiration, invention, solace, recognition, reparation, or passion” (17)—but “truth” is (strikingly, to me) absent from this list. Truth does appear elsewhere, but both Felski and the critics and theorists she holds up as models tend toward the language of attachment and affect, a language which reinforces the idea of literature as the realm of feeling, with reality being elsewhere. For instance: “Emotions are not mere icing on the cake...affective

engagement is the very means by which literary works are able to reach, reorient, and even reconfigure their readers” (177). Literature can effect *transformation*, it can “estrangle [us] from ordinary consciousness” so we can “slip free, for an instant, of well-worn habits of thought” (177)—but the distinctively literary basis of the transformation (for instance, what distinguishes reading literature from having other kinds of unfamiliar experiences) is left undertheorized, or perhaps one-sidedly theorized. Felski wants to give “a better answer to the question ‘Why is literature worth bothering with?’” (5) and her answers tend to be some version of “because it moves us.” This is true, and essential. But the complement to the capacity of literature to move us is its revelatory power, and often it is the sense of revelation that moves us. The humanist critics of the first half of the twentieth century had no problem asking what we come to *know* through literature—or assuming this was the question—and another way of formulating the current problem is how to recover that tradition in light of all we have learned about its distortions and limitations.

Earlier in the book, Felski devotes some time to another entrenched habit (as she sees it) in the discipline, that is, seeing literature *as* critique, as critical of “everyday forms of language and thought” (16). That is, if the literary work escapes the critic’s reductionist critique, it is only because the work itself is doing that work of critique on society already. Even though this approach ostensibly

values literature more highly than reductionist approaches, treating it as a partner in critique, Felski sees in it, too, a rigidity to be resisted to the extent that it finds in literature only the affirmation of the socially critical views the critic already holds. While that is surely right, I would suggest that literature earns its status as literature as opposed to mere entertainment or propaganda by virtue of the fact that it does challenge some aspect of the social conventional views of things. That is, while Felski (and Latour) rightly wish to blur the sharp line between “modern” and “past” or “the critic” and “the work,” they could use one more distinction within the social—a retooling of the distinction between the forces that obscure and those that reveal, between everything in the social that is functionality masked and legitimizes the unjust, everything in our own psyches that sees through the lens of its own narcissism, on the one hand, and on the other everything that enables a vision of something, dare I say, objective. It is not just that literature enables new construals of the world and our selves, nor even that it enables more meaningful and satisfying ones, it is that it enables *better* construals. The project of saying in what precisely that “better” entails is still to be completed, but Felski and her allies at least open the way for us to ask the question again.

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